

# **MARKETING IMPORTANCE OF BODY IMAGE: THE CULTURAL INFLUENCES OF BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN CONSUMERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Relationship between consumer behavior and cultural environment is studied through essential marketing elements such as values, symbols, language, rituals, and also body image. The influence of cultural environment on the way people perceive ideal body image cannot be denied.*

*Perception of ideal body image differs culture from culture. Former research shows that Western countries value the cult of slenderness even though, recently, a visible inclination towards more rational approach can be observed; good example is an initiative of not having too slim models in fashion presentations. Unfortunately, young women still compare their body shapes with the body shapes of models and try to achieve the so called "Twiggy" look. Asian and especially Chinese cultural environment, on the other hand, historically promotes fuller shapes as a sign of fertility and richness. However, by opening Chinese market to Western countries, it brings new styles and ideas to the traditional Chinese culture, including a tendency to adopt Western ideals of body image.*

*This paper deals with media images portraying men and women in the selected print media and the influence of body image portrayal on consumer behavior. Two relatively different cultural backgrounds (the US and China) are examined in order to capture that culture's ideal body image, including the particular physical parameters of a human body such as size of eyes, lips, skin tone and various means of body decoration. By attempting to identify the main differences in Western and Chinese ideal body image perception, the distinct way in which body images are portrayed in American and Chinese print media are examined. Furthermore, these findings enable us to examine the influence of Western ideal body images in the selected Chinese print media on Chinese consumer behavior.*

## INTRODUCTION

While the French may regard cultural preferences in a spirit of ‘vive la difference!’, marketing professionals tend to try to find similarities in cultures in an effort to streamline the need to create separate forms of marketing among the countries where the product or services may be sold. Obviously, creating a different advertising campaign in each culture adds to the expense of marketing; yet, cultural differences cannot be ignored nor fail to be taken into consideration.

The entire area of body image perceptions of cultures has become a bigger issue than ever before to marketers. The prevalence of teenage obesity in the United States and the corresponding concerns of anorexia and bulimia are often blamed on the media; in addition the glorification of surface beauty is blamed on the advertising and marketing of clothing companies, cosmetic companies, and others.

Have American influences had much of an impact in Chinese society? Conversely, as the number of Chinese moving to the United States for study and to work for our major corporations had a major influence on American society?

The entire area of consumer behavior is influenced by the consumers’ perception of body shapes, and the values of beauty are reflected by the purchases made by the members of society. While cultures tend to change over the years, the influences of the past will have a major impact on the basic cultural make-up of the society.

It is important to look to the past and see what research already exists on the differences between societies. Does this research tend to explain why cultural differences in perception of body image exist today?

## 1 WORK OF GEERT HOFSTEDE

The basis of our work on Body Image preferences of students in China and in the United States has as its genesis the work of Dutch social psychologist and anthropologist Geert Hofstede from his writings on cultural dimensions theory.

In his landmark book, Culture’s Consequences, Hofstede states that there are national and regional groups whose opinions play a large part in influencing behavior of societies and organizations. His work claims that this behavior tends to remain consistent over time.

He distinguishes between national character and national culture by saying that earlier studies of national character tended to form stereotypes and unfounded biases. In his work, he tries to eliminate these bias issues. He studies five independent problems of society, scores each country, and then ranks them in descending order. The basis for Hofstede’s work comes from 116,000 questionnaires given to IBM employees in seventy-two different countries. The questionnaires, translated into twenty different languages, were administered and recorded between the years of 1967 and 1973.

Hofstede defines culture as the collective programming of the mind; the values, symbols, heroes, and rituals of the people in those societies. His work from the questionnaires clearly shows there are differences, in some cases very large differences, between citizens of different countries.

Clearly, Hofstede’s work must be studied by any student or professional interested in marketing a product or a service internationally. His work is very relevant to the discipline of marketing.

The first area of Hofstede’s work is measuring the tolerance of Power Distance in several different countries. He defines Power Distance as the tolerance of human inequality in a society. Differences among citizens depending upon wealth, power, race, beliefs, laws, rights, and rules tend to rank human beings in a ‘pecking order’ of sorts. He uses the statement from George Orwell’s book, Animal Farm,

that “all animals are created equal; some are more equal than others” to demonstrate this inequality among members of a society.

The scoring from various countries is listed below. A higher score shows the country to be tolerant, even expecting, large amounts of inequality in a society. A lower score shows less tolerance of citizens within a society to be accepting of societal inequality:

Guatemala	95
China	80
Mexico	81
India	77
Spain	57
United States	40
Austria	11

There is very clearly a huge distance between the tolerance for inequality levels of Austria and Guatemala. China’s score of 80 is above the Far East countries average of 60 and the world’s average of 60.

The second dimension of Hofstede’s work studies Uncertainty Avoidance. Hofstede associates Uncertainty Avoidance as the inability to tolerate large amounts of anxiety when faced with uncertainty in government, law, schools, employment, and society in general. He points out that “time only goes one way”, and that “the stronger the tendency to avoid uncertainty, the stronger [a society’s] the need for rules.” One again, the higher the score, the higher the country’s fear of uncertainty:

Greece	112
Guatemala	101
Spain	86
Austria	70
China	60
Australia	51
US	46
Singapore	8

One could also associate Uncertainty Avoidance with the tolerance for taking chances and the corresponding levels of entrepreneurship in various countries.

A third dimension of Hofstede’s work studies Individualism vs Collectivism. Using the parallel from the world of animals, he refers to wolves as being gregarious while tigers tend to be solitary. He labels humans as gregarious, but to different degrees. In short, this is a measurement of how people tend to view themselves: are they members of a larger more important group and being graded as such? Or are they individuals measuring their own contributions?

The higher the score, the more likely the citizens of the country are more individualistic:

United States	91
Italy	76
France	71
Austria	55
Mexico	30
China	20
Guatemala	6

The next area is Hofstede’s research is on Masculinity vs Femininity. In this case, Hofstede is measuring masculinity on the basis of assertiveness, competitiveness, and toughness; femininity on the basis of cooperativeness, security, caretaking, and friendliness.

A country with a high score perhaps could be construed to be more concerned about accomplishments while a lower scored country might be more concerned with safety and security.

Japan	95
Austria	79
Germany	66
United States	62
China	51
Spain	42
Guatemala	37
Sweden	5

The fifth area of comparison is the area of Long Term Orientation vs. Short Term Orientation. A country with a high Long Term Orientation will tend to be composed of people who put a high value on thrift and perseverance. This dimension was found in the answers of student samples from twenty - three different countries from the mid-1980s. The ‘Chinese Value Survey’ was developed by Michael Harris Bond in Hong Kong from values suggested by Chinese scholars. It is believed that it is derived from the early teachings of Confucius.

Scores in this area are high toward Long Term Orientation in eastern Asian countries.

China	118
Hong Kong	96
Japan	80
India	61
United States	29
Nigeria	16

Within these five dimensions, it is interesting to compare two countries to draw some conclusions about the general attitudes of those countries. For our example, let’s compare the United States to Guatemala.

When comparing Americans to Guatemalans, Americans appear: to be bigger risk takers, more interested in attaining success than attaining security, more concerned with individual accomplishment than being part of the group, and less tolerant of inequality.

The United States has long been the land of opportunity, affording its citizens a lot of chances to succeed or fail in an environment that encourages risk taking. Guatemalans, however, have endured a thirty to forty year civil war, many dictators, much poverty, and have only had free elections since 2007. Knowing the differences in the history of the two countries, one could predict the citizens of each country would be very different in the beliefs and attitudes of its citizens.

When comparing the United States to China, we see that the Chinese score much higher in the long term orientation category, the countries have similar scores when it comes to Masculinity and Uncertainty Avoidance, Americans are much more individualistic than the Chinese, while the Chinese appear to be much more tolerant of inequality in society.

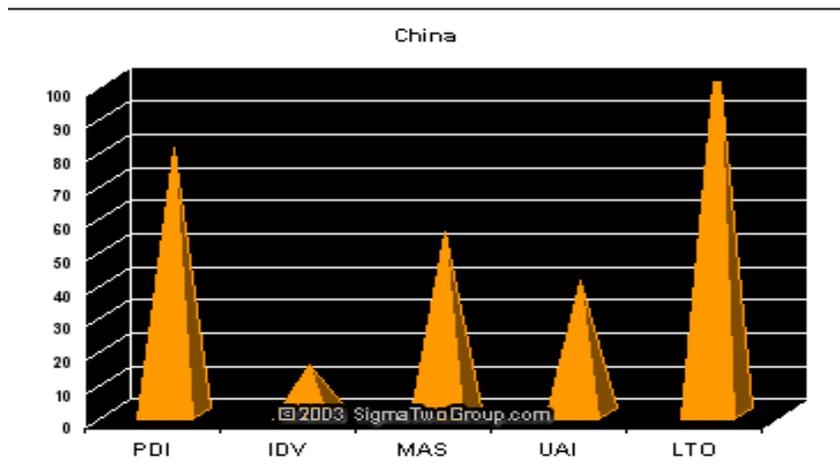
In fact, when commenting on the Power Distance score of China, Hofstede says that inequality in government and society is part of the heritage of the Chinese society.

The major area of note, however, are the comparison of scores of China versus the United States in Individualism versus Collectivism, and Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Orientation. Once again, the differences in the history of the two societies would tend to predict what the scores would be in this area.

To summarize the scoring of the United States and of China individually, note Graphs 1 and 2. The conclusions from studying the work of Hofstede show that, loosely stated and in general terms, Americans are more concerned about their individual selves and want satisfaction in a hurry, while the Chinese are more patient will tend to act in the best interests of the group when making decisions.

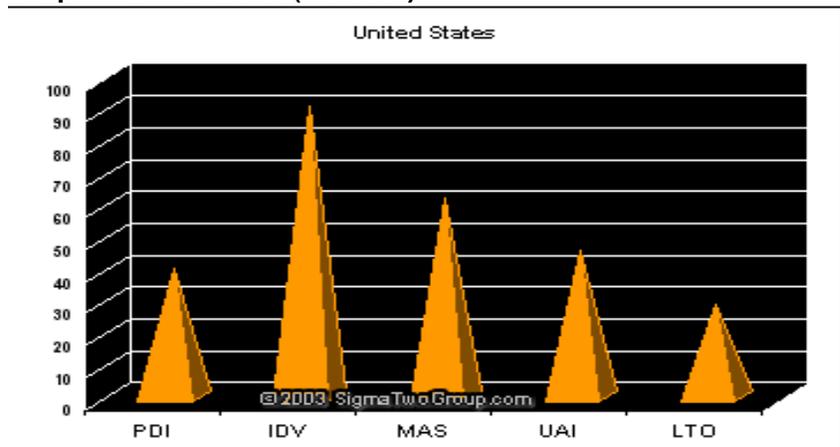
Do these generalizations hold true in the realm of body appearance perceptions?

**Graph 1: China (Hofstede)**



Source: <http://geert-hofstede.com>

**Graph 2: United States (Hofstede)**



Source: <http://geert-hofstede.com>

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research was conducted through a questionnaire survey. The original version of the questionnaire in the Czech language was created in the Department of Marketing, at the University of Economics, in Prague. For international comparative analysis, the original questionnaire was translated into English and Chinese (see Appendix). The content of each question was preserved because of the comparability of results of national research.

The selected target segments of this quantitative research are university students of Western and Eastern cultures. Western culture is represented by the United States of America, then China Eastern culture. The survey was conducted over the Internet on a sample of 200 students from Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois, and 200 students from Tongji University, Shanghai, China.

To ensure validity of data, the online survey was conducted anonymously. Questionnaires completed by the foreign students are continuously evaluated automatically by using WordPress Survey Plugin in the content management system web site of the Marketing department of the University of Economics.

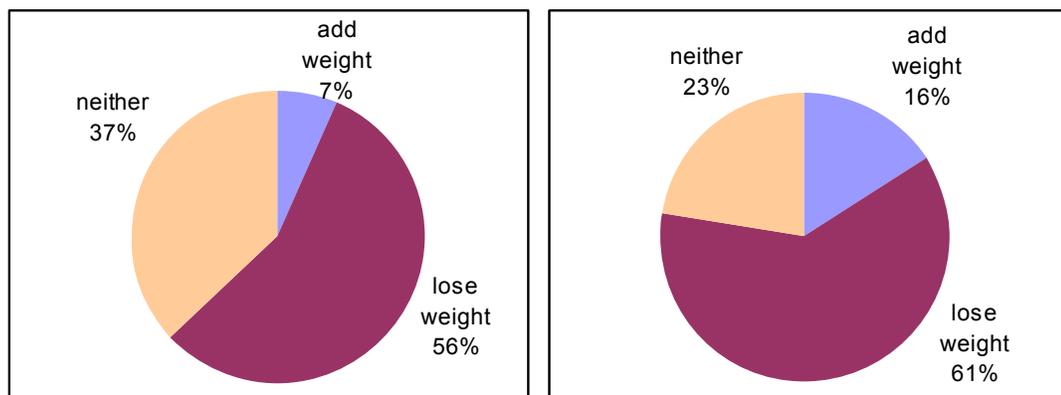
The survey consisted of a total of forty-two questions. Most of the questions were multiple choice, while a few were open ended.

## 3 RESEARCH RESULTS

Not unexpectedly, there was a difference between what Chinese students found to be appealing and what American students felt to be appealing when it came to body shape and appearance.

Perhaps the first area of study, however, should be on the issue of happiness with current body shape. Graph 3 shows the results for the American students queried (left) and the results for the Chinese students queried (right):

**Graph 3: Are you happy with your body shape? Would you like to:**

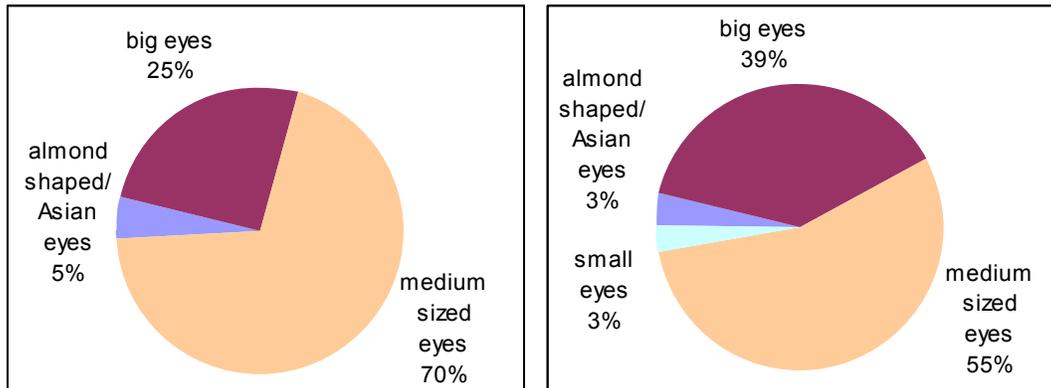


In this question, we see that well over half of each group of respondents felt as though they needed to lose weight. Perhaps the influences of advertising and media are reflected in the responses. It is also of note that the number of American respondents who were happy with their body shape was over 50% higher than the Chinese respondents. And while over twice as many Chinese felt they needed to gain weight than Americans, the percentages were small in the ‘adding weight’ category for each culture.

Both groups were asked about the attractiveness of size and shapes of eyes in the above mentioned countries. Alarmingly, in both cultures, respondents were not favorable toward almond shaped Asian

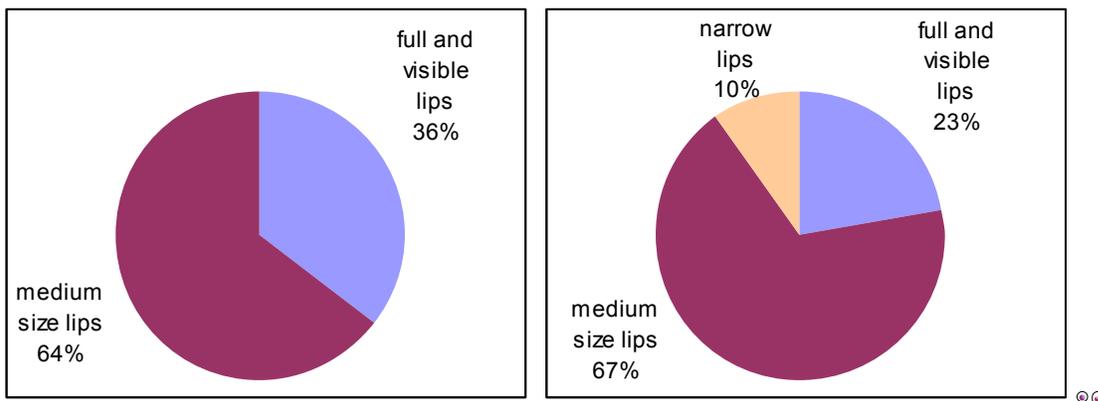
eyes. What is even more surprising is the finding that American respondents consider almond shaped/Asian eyes more attractive than in the Chinese counterparts. In addition, both groups were overwhelmingly in favor of eyes that do not tend toward being small or large. Graph 4, with Americans on the left and the Chinese on the right as before, reflect these preferences.

**Graph 4: What kind of eyes do you find most attractive on women?**



Survey takers were also asked about the size of lips. None of the American respondents were fans of thin lips, while nearly one in ten Chinese students felt those kind of lips to be most attractive. In this question, nearly 2/3 rds of the Americans and a fraction over 2/3rds of the Chinese were fans of medium sized lips. The research results indicate a certain degree of dissatisfaction of Chinese consumers with individual parameters of their own body (such as eyes and lips) and their preference towards medium sized, full and visible lips.

**Graph 5: What kind of lips do you feel to be most attractive on women? (Americans left ; Chinese right pie chart)**



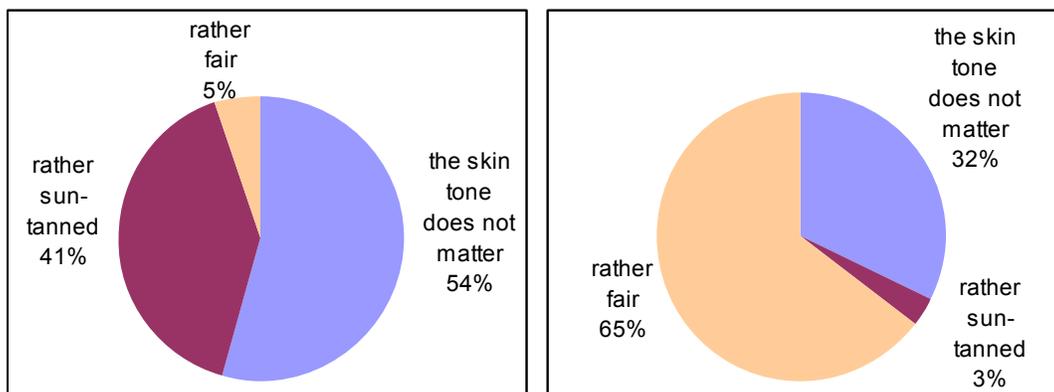
The issue of skin tone and health was another question posed to both the American and Chinese students. It has long been accepted that Americans spent millions of dollars every year on skin tanning salons, skin tanning products, and trips to warm sunny climates in order to build a deep tan. In other words, Americans are known to be ‘sun worshippers’. In addition, the research findings show that more than half of American respondents are indifferent towards the skin tone. Considering the fact that the US represents the so called „melting pot“ of national minorities, this finding is not surprising. It could be claimed that the United States is one of the most tolerant countries in the world in relation to the population origin.

The Chinese, on the other hand, are known for their alabaster skin and their tendency to avoid tanning. This is confirmed by the research result as more than half of the Chinese respondents believe that people look well in rather fair skin. Perhaps, a bit surprising is a relatively high percentage (32%) of Chinese respondents, who are indifferent to skin tone. This finding could indicate the apparent shift from the traditional Chinese fair skin look towards the more accepted Western rather suntanned look.



The question posed on the questionnaire to both American and Chinese students was “Do you believe that people with the following skin complexion look healthy?” Nearly 2/3rds of the Chinese respondents favored fair skin with forty per cent of the Americans chose ‘rather sun-tanned’.

**Graph 6: Do you believe these skin types look healthy? (Americans left; Chinese right.)**



Perhaps the overwhelming attraction of fair skin to Chinese students shows that the Chinese culture feels more strongly about the healthiness of certain skin shades than Americans do. Accordingly, the small percentage of 'rather sun-tanned' respondents for the Chinese reflects the lack of attractiveness of deep tans in that culture.

### **3.1 BODY DECORATIONS – TATTOOS AND PIERCING**

The trend of having tattoos is perceived in both countries rather differently. The research results indicate that in the United States, having tattoos is perceived much more positively than in China, which is, in addition, supported by the fact that almost one fourth of the American respondents already have tattoos and 17% of respondents do consider getting a tattoo in the future. Another fourth of respondents stated that they do not consider getting a tattoo in the future and at the same time they do not mind tattoos on others, and 10% of American respondents do not like tattoos on others. Only one fourth of American respondents perceive tattoos as negative. On the other hand, the attitude of Chinese respondents towards tattoos was found to be much more negative and explicit: 42% of Chinese respondents stated that they do not like tattoos, almost half of the respondents do not consider getting a tattoo in the future, but at the same time they do not mind tattoos on others. 7% of Chinese respondents do not consider getting a tattoo in the future, although they do like it on others. Such a negative attitude of the Chinese respondents towards tattoos is supported by the fact that none of the Chinese respondents has a tattoo.

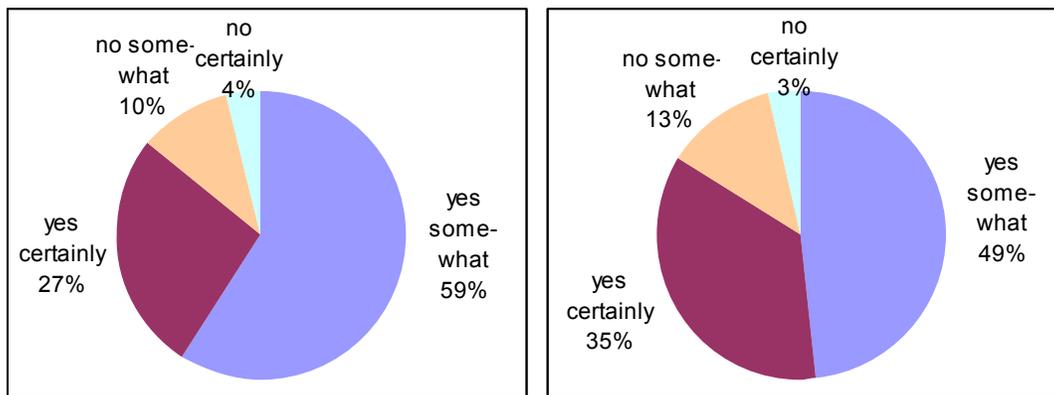
Regarding another trend of body decoration, piercing, research results prove to be, once again, very contradictory in both countries. Piercing was much more favored by the American respondents than by the Chinese respondents. Almost three quarters of American respondents already have a piercing; only a small percentage of respondents do not consider getting a piercing in the future, but they like it on others; 15% of American respondents do not consider getting a piercing in the future, but they do not mind it on others; 14% of American respondents do not like piercing. The attitude of Chinese respondents towards piercing is, to a large extent, similar to their attitude towards tattoos. The research results indicate that piercing is not a favorite and usual effect among the Chinese consumers. Almost half of the Chinese respondents state that they do not like piercing; 42% of the Chinese respondents do not consider getting a piercing in the future, but they do not mind it on others; and only 7% of the Chinese respondents do not consider getting a piercing, but they do like it on others. None of the Chinese respondents considers getting a piercing in the future and only 3% of respondents already have a piercing.

### **3.2 INFLUENCE OF ADVERTISING**

Of interest to marketers in both American and Chinese cultures is the influence of advertising and media on the tastes and preferences of its citizens.

Survey takers in both cultures were asked, 'do you think that advertisements influence others of your age group in how they would like to look?' American respondents are reflected in the left pie chart with Chinese respondents in the right pie chart.

#### **Graph 7. Influence of advertising on your peer group.**



Both cultures agreed to a consensus of ‘somewhat to certainly’ at about three out of every four in answer to the influence of advertising.

### 3.2 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

As an additional research, a number of Chinese students living in the United States for an extended period of time (more than 2 years) have been interviewed in order to find out whether their perception of ideal body image has changed by living in the different cultural environment.

The research results showed interesting findings. It shows that the tradition of pale color has been deeply rooted in the Chinese consumers, and has not been changed even by living in the American environment for some time. On the other hand, Chinese consumers seem to like well-developed proportions, big eyes and medium sized lips in women.

Regarding body ornamentation, a long stay in the US has not changed the Chinese reluctance towards tattoos and piercing. Although, the Chinese consumers like piercing on others, they do not consider having one themselves.

In terms of lifestyle changes, Chinese consumers report an eating habit change, when they did not used to eat anything after 7pm in China, while eating normally after 7pm in the US. However, the Chinese consumers believe that American people are healthier than the Chinese people, as they drink less alcohol and exercise more in comparison to the Chinese.

The findings of self body evaluation are also interesting. Although, the Chinese consumers do not consider themselves as overweight they wish to lose weight. The question is to what extent they are influenced by the media as they feel that peoples shapes in advertisements are usually too far away from an achievable look.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of the first stage of the research identify the main differences in body image perception in particular cultural background, in this research the differences between American and Chinese consumers. Bodily appearance and the perception of ideal beauty in both respective countries are culturally conditioned. Such traditional cultural tendencies concerning body image parameters such as weight, size of lips or eyes can be seen from the questionnaire results. In many instances such traditional

body image parameters are portrayed also in advertisements. However, the research results suggest that some culturally conditioned parameters of body image have a tendency to change. For example, there is an apparent tendency of Chinese consumer behavior towards changing particular body parameters due to the presence of Western body image parameters in Asian advertisements. Such results are important for consumer marketing orientation in a variety of product categories.

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\*\*The research is carried out as part of the grant project "The Marketing Importance of Body Image" (GACR 402/09/0311)

**APPENDIX**

Body image questionnaire

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PERCEIVING THE BODY

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1. Please state names of actresses, female singers or other famous women who are, in your opinion, very attractive, very beautiful:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. As in the previous question, please state names of actors, male singers or other famous men who are, in your opinion, very attractive, very handsome:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What shape of body do you like in women?

- very slim
- slim
- slim with well-developed proportions
- plump
- round shape
- athletic shape

4. What shape of body do you like in men?

- very slim
- slim
- plump
- round shape
- with developed muscles (bodybuilding)
- athletic shape

5. Considering eyes, what kind of eyes do you consider the most attractive on women?

- small eyes
- almond shaped/Asian eyes
- medium sized eyes
- big eyes

6. Considering lips, what kind of lips do you consider the most attractive on women?

- full and visible lips
- medium size lips
- narrow lips

7. Do you believe that people with the following skin complexion look well:

- rather suntanned
- rather fair
- the skin tone does not matter

8. In order to get more fair skin, I use whitening products:

- Yes
- No

9. If yes, please state Name/Brand:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- 10. In order to get more tanned skin, I use tanning/self-tanning creams:
  - ( ) Yes
  - ( ) No

- 11. If yes, please state Name/Brand:
  - \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_\_\_

- 12. Do you remove hair from any parts of your body?
  - ( ) Yes
  - ( ) No

- 13. If yes, please state from which part:
  - \_\_\_\_\_

- 14. Which method(s) to remove hair do you use? Choose from the following answers and write the brand of the product:
  - Shaving \_\_\_\_\_
  - Tearing, waxing \_\_\_\_\_
  - Permanent depilation (laser) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

- 15. What is your opinion of tattoos?
  - ( ) already have one
  - ( ) am considering getting one
  - ( ) am not considering having one, but I like it on others
  - ( ) am not considering having one, but I do not mind it on others
  - ( ) do not like it

- 16. What is your opinion of piercing?
  - ( ) already have one
  - ( ) am considering getting one
  - ( ) am not considering having one, but I like it on others
  - ( ) am not considering having one, but I do not mind it on others
  - ( ) do not like it

- 17. Do you know other ways of body ornamentation?
  - Please name: \_\_\_\_\_

- 18. What is your opinion of plastic surgery?
  - ( ) helps people
  - ( ) have already undergone one
  - ( ) its use is more of a fashion matter
  - ( ) is against nature
  - ( ) is necessary only in exceptional cases
  - ( ) it fits in with a modern lifestyle
  - ( ) other

- 19. If other, please state:
  - \_\_\_\_\_

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SELF BODY EVALUATION

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20. Please, describe your body shape:

- very slim
- slim
- slim with well- developed proportions (for women)
- plump
- round shape
- with developed muscles, bodybuilding (for men)
- athletic shape

21. Are you happy with your body shape? Would you like to:

- add weight
- lose weight
- neither

22. How important is it for you to look well, to be attractive?

- very important
- rather important
- rather unimportant
- absolutely irrelevant

23. Please mark what applies in your case:

"I want to look good and therefore I:"

- do sports
- eat healthy
- go to a fitness center
- consider the possibility of plastic surgery
- am sometimes on a diet
- visit a beauty salon
- use skin whitening products
- go to a tanning salon
- do not have to do anything for it
- do not plan to do anything for it
- would like to do something for it in time
- does not apply to me - appearance is not the most important thing in life, appearance does not matter in life
- other

24. If other, please state:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

25. Sometimes people talk about ideal beauty. How do you imagine an ideal beautiful woman?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

26. And how do you imagine an ideal handsome man?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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ADVERTISEMENT

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27. Do you believe that women in advertisements are usually:
- unhealthily slim
  - too slim
  - nicely slim
  - normally slim
  - other

28. If other, please describe:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

29. Do you feel that advertisements influence others of your age group in how they would like to look?

- yes certainly
- yes somewhat
- no somewhat
- no certainly

30. Do you think that peoples shapes in advertisements are usually too far away from an achievable look?

- yes certainly
- yes somewhat
- no somewhat
- no certainly

31. Do you recall an advertisement, which would captivate you because of the appearance of the people presented?

- No
- Yes

32. If yes, which one?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

33. What cosmetic brand do you use most often? State one to three most favorite brands:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

34. What clothing brand do you like the most?

\_\_\_\_\_

35. What automobile brand do you like the most?

\_\_\_\_\_

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SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

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36. Sex

- male
- female

37. Age

State: \_\_\_\_\_

38. Education

- high school without a diploma
- high school with a diploma
- university/no degree
- university/degree

39. Marital status:

- single
- married
- divorced

40. Size of town, in which you live (population):

- up to 1 000
- 1 000 - 4 999
- 5 000 - 19 999
- 20 000 - 99 999
- 100 000 and more

41. Name of the town where you live:

\_\_\_\_\_

42. Please fill in:

Nationality \_\_\_\_\_  
 Citizenship \_\_\_\_\_

=====  
 Thank You!  
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