Main differences in Body Image (BI) perception between American and Chinese consumers: selected research results

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an observably increasing interest in one’s own body appearance. We never perceive our own body in isolation; in evaluating our body, we tend to compare it with other bodies, especially bodies in advertisements (physical appearance is emphasized in an attempt to sell products). In addition, we take into account existing feminine and masculine stereotypes, and stereotypes of beauty and youth, which are culturally conditioned. The perception that we create about our own body (body image) combines the relationship between body (physical) and soul (mental) (Grogan, 2000). This perception of our own body, which is subjective to our human wishes on the one hand and is limited by its possibilities on the other hand, is conditioned by the specifics of a particular cultural environment. By attempting to identify the main differences in body image perception within two culturally different backgrounds (the US and China), the research explores a relationship between the way consumers perceive (ideal) body image in a particular culture, and the way body image is portrayed in advertising in such culture. Therefore, Chinese and a comparable American version of Harper’s BAZAAR magazines (issues 1 – 12/2009) examine differences in main body image parameters portrayed in advertising. Furthermore, the research findings enable the examination of the impact of body image and its main parameters on consumer behavior in respective countries. In addition, the research results represent important information for consumer marketing orientation in a variety of product categories.

Methodology

Primary research was carried out using an online questionnaire. Two relatively different cultural backgrounds, American and Chinese consumers, were examined in order to uncover the projection of ideal body in the two respective cultural backgrounds, including particular physical parameters of a human body, ideal beauty perception, skin tone and various means of body decoration, and body part alterations such as plastic surgery.

The questionnaire was thematically divided into three parts. The first section consisted of questions concerning body perception. The second section consisted of questions inquiring about self-body evaluation. The third section of the questionnaire asked respondents about their body perception in advertisements. The last section was devoted to socio-demographic questions.

The online questionnaire was conducted by using the online survey tool called SurveyGizmo at www.surveygizmo.com for the period of three months (September 2009 to
November 2009). With respect to a relatively long questionnaire consisting of 28 questions plus socio-economic questions, the number of received responses was satisfactory. There were 112 valid responses collected from American respondents and 109 valid responses collected from Chinese respondents. The American respondents consisted mainly of students of Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois whereas the Chinese questionnaire research was carried out mainly on students of Tongji University in Shanghai. The ratio of men and women was 31% to 69% in the US, and the ratio of men and women in China was 45% to 55%.

The aim of this research is to uncover dissimilarity in body image perception among consumers in two relatively different cultural backgrounds – the US and China, and based on the findings to identify main differences in body image perception and its influence on consumer behavior. The research is carried out as part of the grant project “Marketing importance of Body Image” (GACR 402/09/0311).

**Body Image (BI) perception comparison between US and Chinese consumers**

Based on the online questionnaire followed by results analysis of the main parameters of body image perception, we can compare the results of both countries, the US and China.

The following graph (Graph 1) compares the attractiveness of eye size in the above mentioned countries. 70% of American respondents consider medium sized eyes the most attractive. On the other hand, a little less (55%) of the Chinese respondents consider medium sized eyes the most attractive. The research uncovered an interesting finding: larger eyes are considered to be attractive in both countries. However, in China, this attractiveness was measured at 14% more of respondents than in the US. A surprisingly low percentage (about 3%) of Chinese respondents preferred smaller eyes in women, as well as almond shaped/Asian eyes. What is even more surprising is the finding that American respondents consider almond shaped/Asian eyes more attractive than their Chinese counterparts. The research results indicate dissatisfaction of Chinese consumers with their (Asian) eyes and show a preference for medium sized or large eyes.

**Graph 1: Considering eyes, what kind of eyes do you consider the most attractive on women?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>big eyes</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>almond shaped/Asian eyes</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium sized eyes</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own data processing (results of primary research)
A somewhat different situation has resulted in relation to lip size. Approximately the same percentage of respondents in both countries considers medium sized lips to be beautiful in women. However, considerably more American respondents consider full and visible lips as beautiful. In addition, an interesting fact should be pointed out: none of the American respondents consider narrow lips as beautiful. On the other hand, a small number of the Chinese counterparts do consider narrow lips as attractive in women, but perhaps not to the extent that we would have expected (only 10%).

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 2: Considering lips, what kind of lips do you consider the most attractive on women?

![Graph 2: Considering lips, what kind of lips do you consider the most attractive on women?](source)

Regarding the question whether respondents believe that people with rather fair or rather suntanned skin look attractive, the cultural difference in skin tone perception was confirmed in both countries. The research findings show that more than half of American respondents are indifferent towards the skin tone. Considering the fact that the US represents what could be seen as a „melting pot“ of ethnicity, this finding is not surprising. It is said that the United States is one of the most tolerant countries in the world in relation to the population origin. On the one hand, research results on Chinese respondents confirm another culturally conditioned parameter of body image perception. Almost 65% of Chinese respondents believe that people look attractive in rather fair skin. On the other hand, American respondents believe that people look attractive in rather suntanned skin. Perhaps, a bit surprising is a relatively high percentage (32%) of Chinese respondents, who are indifferent to skin tone. This finding may indicate the apparent shift from the traditional Chinese fair skin look towards the more accepted Western, rather suntanned look. Nevertheless, the research confirmed the above stated cultural difference: the lowest percentage of American respondents believe that people look attractive in rather fair skin and at the same time, the lowest percentage of Chinese respondents believe that people look attractive in rather suntanned skin.
Graph 3: Do you believe that people with the following skin complexion look attractive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rather fair</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>the skin tone does not matter 32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rather suntanned</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>rather fair 65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the skin tone does not matter</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>rather suntanned 3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own data processing (results of primary research)

What is your opinion of tattoos?

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.

What is your opinion of piercing?

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.
What is your opinion of plastic surgery?

In the United States, plastic surgery is not considered to be a new trend and has been used for a relatively long time. More than one quarter of American respondents consider plastic surgery as necessary only in exceptional health cases (36%) and a relatively high percentage of American respondents (20%) believe that plastic surgeries help people. From the total number of American respondents, 7% (only women aged 19 to 53 years) have already undergone a plastic surgery. A relatively small percentage (8%) believes that plastic surgery fits in with a modern lifestyle and 10% perceives its use as more of a fashion matter. A relatively high percentage of American respondents (13%) believe that plastic surgery is against nature. On the other hand, in China, Chinese respondents perceived far most often (35%) plastic surgery as something that fits in with a modern life and 13% of respondents consider the use of plastic surgery as more of a fashion matter. However, 19% of respondents believe that plastic surgery is against nature and 13% of respondents believe that plastic surgery is necessary only in exceptional health cases. Relatively low percentage of respondents (6%) believes that plastic surgery helps people. Only 3% of respondents have already undergone a plastic surgery.

In addition, satisfaction of respondents with their body shape was also analyzed as part of the research. More than half of the American respondents would like to lose weight (56%), which was expected considering the prevalent obesity problem in the United States. On the other hand, the results by the Chinese respondents were more than surprising. The research findings indicated that the percentage of Chinese respondents (61%), who expressed their dissatisfaction with their body weight, respectively with their overweight, was higher than it was in American respondents. It should be mentioned that more than half of the Chinese respondents (52%) described their body as round shaped. The research results show that the way of one’s own body perception in Chinese consumers is very much different. A relatively large number of American respondents (37%) are satisfied with their body shape (they do not wish to lose or add weight) whereas the satisfaction of the Chinese respondents with their body shape is much worse (only 23%). However, only 7% of respondents in America would like to gain weight, whereas in China it is more than 16% of the respondents.

**Graph 4: Are you happy with your body shape? Would you like to:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lose weight</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>add weight</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neither</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: own data processing (results of primary research)*
Furthermore, body shapes portrayed in advertising and their consumer perception was another objective of the research. The findings show that almost 60% of American respondents believe that body shapes in advertising are „rather“ far away from achievable look. When we take the Chinese counterparts, the percentage is somewhat lower (48%). Rather big difference was revealed between American and Chinese respondents in relation to the answer „yes certainly“. More than 27% of American respondents believe that body shapes portrayed in advertising are usually „certainly“ too far away from an achievable look. The number of answers of the Chinese respondents to the same question was much lower (almost 13%). Only 10% of American respondents believe that respondents in advertising are „rather“ not too far away from an achievable look whereas Chinese respondents scored 36%. Only small percentage (3%) of respondents in both countries believe that body shapes in advertising are „certainly“ not too far away from an achievable look.

**Graph 5: Do you think that body shapes in advertisements are usually too far away from an achievable look?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, certainly</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, somewhat</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, certainly</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, somewhat</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: own data processing (results of primary research)*

There is no doubt that consumers’ body image perception plays an important role in consumer behavior. As a result many product categories such as cosmetics, clothing and services are influenced by the way consumers perceive their own bodies. Therefore, the research also explored what kind of cosmetic, clothing and automobile brands consumers use and like most often while looking for a connection to the culturally conditioned body image perception. For example, Graph 3 shows that almost 65% of Chinese consumers reported that they believe that people look attractive with “rather fair” skin complexion, while only a small percentage of Chinese consumers reported that they believe people look attractive with “rather suntanned” complexion. When we look at the Chinese consumers’ brand preference for cosmetics, brands such as Nivea, Freplus, Avon, The Body Shop, L’Oreal, YAYANG and Garnier were most frequently reported in the questionnaire. While comparing these answers with content analysis of the Chinese version of Harper’s BAZAAR magazines (issues 1 – 12/2009) we find advertisements of cosmetic brands such as Avon, Clinique, La Prairie, Lancome, L’Oréal Paris, Dior. Out of these brands, L’Oréal Paris (L’Oréal White Perfect Transparent Rosy Whitening Face Cream), Dior (Christian Dior Sublissime Whitening Moisture crème) and Lancome (Blanc Expert NeuroWhite X3 Ultimate Whitening) offer facial whitening creams promising beautifully fair skin. Another example considers the perception of ideal size of lips by Chinese consumers. Graph 2 shows that Chinese consumers consider medium sized and full and visible lips as most attractive in women, although the lips of Chinese women are, by nature, narrow. Again, when we look at content analysis findings
of the Chinese version of Harper’s BAZAAR magazines (issues 1 – 12/2009), Western women with full and visible lips are shown in advertisements more often than Asian women. The findings suggest a tendency of Asian women to look a bit more like Western women, in some cases undergoing a plastic surgery. It is interesting to notice that although Chinese women have a tendency to look more like Western women in terms of lip or eye size, the phenomena does not hold for skin complexion.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the results of the first stage of the research identify the main differences in body image perception in particular cultural backgrounds, in this research the differences between American and Chinese consumers. Body 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 also portrayed 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.

**Literature**


Hlavní rozdíly ve vnímání Body Image (BI) mezi americkými a čínskými spotřebiteli: vybrané výsledky výzkumu

Dagmar Skokanová

ABSTRAKT

V poslední době zaznamenáváme zvýšený zájem spotřebitelů o vlastní tělo, zejména o jejich vzhled. Tato studie na základě primárního výzkumu postihuje hlavní odlišnosti ve vnímání body image spotřebitelí ve dvou relativně odlišných kulturních prostředích - USA a Čína. Způsob, jakým spotřebitelé vnímají (ideální) body image v dané kultuře hraje důležitou roli v jejich nákupním chování. Výzkum dále postihuje vazbu mezi timto idealizovaným body image a produktovými kategoriemi výrobků inzerovaných v médiích, které mají spotřebitelům pomoci k dosažení ideálního body image. Z analýzy vyplývá i trend smazávání rozdílů mezi kulturami díky globalizaci a i v tak tradiční kultuře, jako je Čína dochází k ovlivňování spotřebitelů západními ideály krásy.

Klíčová slova: Body Image (BI), vnímání Body Image (BI), reklama, kulturní odlišnosti.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an observably increasing interest in one’s own body appearance. By attempting to identify the main differences in body image perception within two culturally different backgrounds (the US and China), this paper examines the relationship between the way consumers perceive (ideal) body image in a particular culture, and the product categories advertised in media helping consumers achieve the ideal body image. Furthermore, these findings enable us to examine the impact of body image parameters on consumer behavior in respective countries. Analysis also shows an emerging trend of cultural convergence and increasing influence of Western ideal body image in such a traditional culture as China.

Key words: Body Image (BI), perception of Body Image (BI), advertising, cultural differences.

JEL classification: M30, M31, M37