An Innovative Investigation of the Congruence of Brand Image and Consumer’s Self-Image in Retailing Industry: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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An innovative investigation of the image congruence of global consumer brand and consumers’ self-image: an international cross-cultural perspective

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Abstract
In current consumer behaviour research, self-congruity is a crucial concept for scholars and retailing marketers. Empirical studies have determined that self-congruity plays a significant role in the evaluation of global brands. It has also been observed that cultural issues significantly impact brand image and self-image. Studies have shown that culture can be one of the potential entry barriers to the retail industry. Hofstede’s (1983b) cultural framework has been applied extensively, but a number of limitations have been identified with this framework in terms of its use for assessing cross-cultural issues. Most recent empirical studies regarding cross-cultural issues are based on different image congruence models within a few countries, resulting in difficulty in generalising the findings. Hence, this study attempts to establish a new conceptual model of self-congruity based on a literature review of three areas: brand image, self-concept, and culture. Viot’s (2003) brand image framework is applied as it can be more comprehensive for measuring global consumer brand image. In order to discover a way to minimise the limitations of using Hofstede’s (1983b) cultural framework, this study adopts Hoyer and MacInnis’ (2009) cultural framework, which will be more applicable to consumer behaviour research regarding cultural issues. This working paper will demonstrate relevant conceptual frameworks and processes, as well as possible outcomes.

1. Introduction
Sirgy (1982, 1985) demonstrated the importance of the self-concept theory to consumer behaviour research. He showed that consumers who perceive a product image as being consistent with their self-image are likely to feel motivated to purchase the product. Many researchers have examined the relationship between consumer self-image and product/brand image in certain product categories (Ekinci & Riley, 2003; Ericksen, 1996; Graeff, 1996; Heath & Scott, 1998; Jamal & Goode, 2001; Litvin & Kar, 2004; Quester et al., 2000; Sirgy et al., 2000). The symbolic aspects of consumer products are associated with product image and consumer personality attributes (Aaker, 1996; Fournier, 1998), attributes that coincide with the consumer’s ideal self (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Quester et al., 2000). Self-congruity, a combination of self-image and product/brand image “links the psychological construct of an individual’s self-concept with the symbolic value of goods purchased in the marketplace” (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967, p. 22). Retailers need to understand and position their brands in a manner that enhances the probability of self-congruity in order to improve consumers’ attitudes towards the products and brands within the target market (Ibrahim & Najjar, 2008). Given that Sirgy et al. (2000) indicated that there were different self-concept dimensions, there should be different corresponding types of self-image congruities (Ibrahim & Najjar, 2008). However, generalising research findings in this area is a difficulty that appears frequently due to cultural differences, product categories, brand positioning and differing methodologies.

Another important factor to this study is culture. Many researchers have investigated self-image congruence models across countries and cultures (e.g. Kuester et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2007; Quester et al., 2000; Thomas et al., 2000). Hofstede’s (1983b, 1984b; Hofstede & Bond, 1984) cultural framework has been broadly applied in cross-cultural studies of self-congruity. However, there are certain limitations associated with applying Hofstede’s model to consumer research and certain product categories. Smith and Bond (1998) discovered that studies regarding value differences provided the best conceptual frameworks to guide cross-cultural research.
Consequently, it seems as though the consumer culture theory of Hoyer and MacInnis (2009) provides a reasonable and acceptable framework for the current study.

Several arguments for self-congruity research can be made. First, no overall brand image dimensions that can be applied to global consumer brands have been evaluated. Second, most self-congruity studies have employed Hofstede’s (1983b) cultural framework as a tool to examine cross-cultural issues, despite its limitations. Third, no researchers have integrated the three sets of dimensions in terms of brand image, self-image and culture. Therefore, this study aims to overcome the aforementioned limitations in the relevant research and develop a model to measure self-congruity toward global consumer brands in different cultural contexts. The research question involves how the congruency of brand image and the consumers’ self-image can be measured in different cultural contexts. The question is analysed in regards to global consumer brands that are distributed through retailers.

Hence, this study aims to discover a way to overcome limitations and develop a model to measure self-congruity toward global consumer brands in different cultural contexts. The research question is as follows: how can the congruency of brand image and the consumers’ self-image regarding global consumer brands that are distributed through retailers be measured in different cultural contexts? This paper reviews the key literature up to the present; it then establishes a conceptual model and discusses possible areas of future research. The potential methodology design will be illustrated according to the study to date. At the end of the paper, the possible outcomes will be discussed as well.

2. Literature review
The purpose of this literature review is to look for gaps in the three areas (i.e. brand image, self-concept, and culture), and determine how to choose the industry sectors that are appropriate for the current study. The major questions have been carrying out through the process of the literature review. They are: (1) How is brand image measured in relevant studies? (2) What is the role of self-concept in consumer behaviour research? (3) How does culture serve as a source and relate to the symbolic meaning of products and brands? (4) How do these three subjects work and influence each other? The literature review also focuses on the methodologies used in the relevant research in order to guide the current study. The following sections will describe the key issues addressed in the previous literature.

2.1 Brand image
Kotler (2003) defined brand image as the perceptions of brand traits or prototypical buyers, that is often represented by qualities to which the consumer relates, such as reputation. It is difficult to change once it is established (Kotler, 2003). Brand image is a perception about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in the consumer’s memory (Keller, 1993). Creating an image is a common method that firms use via advertising by employing the marketing mix, which is “the set of controllable tactical marketing tools that the firm blends to produce the response it wants in the target market” (Kotler et al., 2005, p. 282). Animated images give free expression to imagination (Hussant-Zebian, 2004). Further, a cognitive approach was always used to understand attitude formation (Hussant-Zebian, 2004). However, brand image is not always easy to built for service intangibility and variability (Kotler, 2003), which also take time to develop and prevents duplication by
competitors. Therefore, from this perspective, brand image is significant to all marketers. Nevertheless, Wood (2000) stated that it was impossible to quantify.

2.1.1 Symbolic or functional

Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006, p. 19) state that “brand names serve as abstract symbols for attributes of products”. In addition, a number of researchers recognise that products have symbolic images that are often more important to a product’s success than its actual physical attributes and characteristics (Aaker, 1991; Graeff, 1996). The current study started with the brand concept developed by Park et al. (1986) who proposed brand concept management (BCM), which states that a brand concept can be either symbolic or functional. They suggested that a brand concept should be remain for the brand’s life in order to maintain its consistency once the concept is selected for the brand (Park et al., 1986). Their conceptual framework directly relates to the current study, because brand image is one of the two essential components of self-congruity theory. However, during their study, the assumption made by Park et al. (1986) was based on brand concepts being unidimensional. There was no empirical research to examine their assumption. Thus, how to measure and scale whether a specific brand is functional or symbolic is the problem and needs to be solved. Furthermore, there is another problem here. Park et al. asserted that brands should be positioned to appeal to being either functional or symbolic; otherwise, they could not clearly relate the brand to either their functional or their symbolic need. Is this really so nowadays?

The research of Bhat and Reddy (1998) might give a clarification to Park et al. (1986). They suggested that consumers saw a brand’s functionality and symbolism as separate phenomena. However, they continued to say that consumers accepted brands that had both symbolic and functional meaning (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). This statement is quite different from the argument of Park et al (1986). Additionally, the current research notices that Bhat and Reddy (1998, p. 40) state, “if the associations representing the different brand concepts do not fit well, the resulting confusion among consumers can result in a brand being perceived as neither functional nor symbolic and thus not really useful to consumers”. Therefore, from the above points of view, that can help the present research to pay more attention on the relationship between the two aspects of a brand. It also significantly influences on the consistency of self-image and brand image. What is more, Bhat and Reddy (1998) conducted an empirical study to measure BCM. They used focus groups to generate the items used in the questionnaires. The measurement scales are not based upon any conceptual framework, which might cause problems with generalising knowledge.

2.1.2 Brand personality

The symbolic use of brands often involves consumers’ perceptions of endowing brands with human personality traits Aaker (1997). Plummer (1984) declared that personality of brand itself is one of the components of brand image. He characterises brand with such attributes like “youthful,” “colorful,” or “gentle”. Those attributes could also reveal emotions induced by brand (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1997, p. 347) formally defined brand personality in his paper formally as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”. She cited Sirgy (1982) to designate the elusiveness of how and when brand personality could develop a relationship with the consumer’s personality and then influence consumer preference. Aaker is the first one to explore the effect of the “Big Five” dimensions into consumer behaviour –
sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness - on brand personality. She reviewed numerous studies regarding the “Big Five,” which were first documented by Digman (1990), and brought it to the highest organisational level by citing Goldberg (1993). Aaker provided a systematically generalisable scale across product categories that can measure brand personality. She also developed a theoretical framework of brand personality. Aaker’s framework has a far-reaching impact on future studies. It is essential to the current study, because it could also help to build up the scales for measuring self-congruity. Moreover, the contribution of Aaker’s research can also provide a general understanding about the symbolic use of brands. It partially filled in the gap in the work of Park et al. (1986). The variables Aaker analysed made a huge impact on brand personality, which would link brands’ symbolic meaning to consumers’ self-image.

However, Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) have criticised the brand personality scales by challenging the conceptual validity of Aaker (1997)’s framework. They do not agree that brand personality scales actually measure brand personality but, rather, brand identity. In fact, brand personality is one of the dimensions of brand identity (Kapferer, 1992, 1998). Hence, Aaker might have combined different levels of brand identity and mixed all the aspects into brand personality only (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). On the other hand, Aaker (1997) recognised the difficulties of applying the scale of measuring brand personality in different cultural contexts. Those dimensions might not all be valued across cultures, which remind us to carefully choose the measurement scales in the current study.

### 2.1.3 Consumer and brand relationship

According to Park et al. (1986), a framework of brand image management can be created by summarising brand personalities based on the relationship role perceptions among consumers as well as understanding those perceptions in the relationship articulated earlier. A recent study of the relationship between consumers and consumer brand indicated that the brand-consumer relationship influenced brand image (Rindell & Strandvik, 2010). Relationship can be created between consumers’ personalities and the perceived personalities of brands, once brand associations from any aspect linked to consumers’ memories (Martinez & de Chernatony, 2004), which could directly or indirectly relate to brand image. Fournier (1998) developed a framework for characterising and understanding the types of relationships consumers form with brands, he inducted from the data the concept of brand relationship quality, a diagnostic tool for conceptualising and evaluating relationship strength. Fournier (1998) also used the method of cross-case research to enhance the validity of the relationship premise at the level of consumers’ lived experiences with their brand.

### 2.1.4 Brand image dimensions

According to above review, it seems that brand personalities and the brand-consumer relationship significantly influence brand image. However, there is no consensus on how to measure brand image (Martinez & de Chernatony, 2004). In the brand identity literatures, researchers have used different methods to measure brand image from the variable angles of the brand (e.g. Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Hsieh, 2002; Aaker, 1997; de Chernatony, 2001; Kapferer, 1998; Keller, 2001). Hsieh (2002) argued that image dimensions as consistency with consumers’ various desires were represented as members of the higher-order category, which served as the foundation of brand
associations. Therefore, identifying brand image dimensions is critical for the current study.

Viot (2003) developed a set of brand image dimensions from the brand identity concept to explain the effect of brand image of consumers’ brand. In his framework, there are four components to define brand image dimensions: brand personality, brand values, brand-consumer relationship, and consumer image. The components of Viot’s (2003) definition of brand image dimensions are consistent with Kapferer’s (1992, 1998) brand identity prism. Viot’s (2000, 2003) chose those dimensions carefully and parsimoniously to generate a scale that was accessible and acceptable to practitioners and theorists. Viot’s (2003) also used a second-order factor analysis to demonstrate how the four modules related to inner and social dimensions of brand image (see Figure 1). The brand personality and brand symbolic values are two features of the inner dimension, whereas the brand-consumer relationship and user image are related to the social dimension of brand image.

**Figure 1 Brand Image Dimensions**

This framework of brand image dimensions could be the most comprehensive model regarding brand image dimensions located in the literature thus far. The author used this framework to examine the relationship between brand and brand extension by testing four sportswear brands. However, the user image dimensions that Viot (2003) applied are more closely related to self-image. Moreover, no other scholars have used this framework. Nevertheless, the characteristics of sportswear that Viot (2003) used as global consumer brands do fit the current study. In addition, Martinez and de Chernatony (2004) contended that Aaker’s (1996) approach based on measuring brand equity might be appropriate for use for brands in different product categories to applied to a general brand image. However, Aaker’s (1996) study included organisational associations and differentiation, which might not be useful in the current research. Hence, although the current study could partially adopt this
framework of brand image dimension, it will require more consideration during the literature review in the future research.

2.2 Self-concept
Self-concept is defined as “the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 9), but it is treated in variable ways. Previous research has identified that consumers’ purchasing is based on products and brands' symbolic values as well as functional properties (Aaker, 1997; Kwak & Kang, 2009; Adam, 2005; Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Dennis et al., 2002; Hsieh, 2002; Kapferer, 1998; Levy, 1959; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Sheth et al., 1991). Brand name capture the symbolic value connected with a brand or product, as well as the realisation of the symbolic value represented by consumers’ consumption of those products or brands (Kapferer, 1998). Hence, brand image can ensure favoritism and purchase intention when it comes to match consumers’ self-image. This is called self-congruity defined by Sirgy (1985, 1986).

The problem of self-congruity theories is that those analyses cannot be generalised across all categories of products (Sirgy, 1982). Sirgy (1985) actually brought self-concept into practice later on. His hypothesis test indicates a significant relationship between self-congruity and ideal congruity towards purchase motivation. Sirgy (1985) used 30 personality images as attributes to measure the products’ image and the participants answered the questions in the form of questionnaires. This approach could inspire the current research in how to measure product image and link it to consumers’ self-image. Sirgy’s (1985) study shows that self-congruity mechanisms may have greater influence on consumers than ideal congruity dynamics. He also assumed that purchase motivation may be differently affected by self-esteem and self-consistency motives. It brings notice to the current study that differences in individuals’ personalities can affect purchase motivation regarding self-image/brand image congruity. However, Sirgy’s (1985) work still has the same problem as his another work (Sirgy, 1982). The result might not be able to apply in broader areas. The outcomes might be different to apply Sirgy’s assumption into different product categories, although they proposed a new method later on to measure self-congruity that could minimise some of the limitations of the traditional method (Sirgy et al., 1997). Moreover, the samples have limitations as well.

The study of Graeff (1996) links considerably to the two papers published by Sirgy (1982, 1985). He argued that consumer’s product evaluation and buying intention could be significantly influenced by the degree of the congruence of brand image and the consumer’s self-image (Cowart et al., 2008; Graeff, 1996; Walchli, 2007). However, a question is also raised by Graeff (1996) regarding whether the result can be applied to both public and private brands. The limitation could also be a single choice of product, which means the result might not be suitable for products with different natures from those studies. Another contribution is that the result of his research is extrapolated into managerial implementation. Graeff emphasised the effect of advertisements on consumers’ purchasing evaluation. Thus, it means that marketers could influence the purchase intention of consumers whose self-images are quite different from brand images via advertisements that focus on functional product quality.
Sirgy et al. (2000) have also developed an integrative model of self-congruity and retail patronage that involves retail environment, retail patron image, self-congruity, and retail patronage. Retail patronage actually involves such key concepts as brand image, store choice, and frequency of visits (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). It is crucial to understand this concept for retail managers who intend to identify and attract their target customers (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). The model illustrates that the degree of self-congruity is determined by the retail patron’s image, which is evaluated in terms of the consumer’s self-concept (Sirgy et al., 2000). The significance of this model for the present research is to demonstrate the importance of self-congruity to the retailing industry and give the inspiration of how to develop the model in light of self-congruity and retail brands.

2.3 Cultural issues
2.3.1 Hofstede’s framework
Most studies regarding cultural issues cited Hofstede’s (1983b, 1984b) work. Hofstede (1983b, 1984b) developed a conceptual framework for culture dimensions as a theoretical basis or justification for the choice of countries in many studies. The original four cultural dimensions were labelled as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus femininity. Later, he proposed a fifth cultural dimension: long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1991). This typology sufficiently describes the main aspects of culture (Lu et al., 1999; Nakata & Sivakumar, 1996). In addition, it has been widely used in a number of different marketing and management contexts. Hofstede’s (1983b, 1984b) cultural dimensions provide a common ground for cultural comparison studies including the current study. Further, Hofstede’s work increased the understanding of cross-cultural issues across nations. As Sinkovics et al. (2007, p. 230) stated, Hofstede’s cultural framework “may be useful as a tool above and beyond the mere operationalisation of cultural value depiction”.

However, (Smith & Bond, 1998) argued that Hofstede (1983a, b, 1984a) was particularly careful to emphasise that his core values applied to national cultures rather than individuals. The significant limitations were obvious in Hofstede’s (1983a, b, 1984a) studies. They included the target sample and the scales of individualism. Therefore, the current study must not only consider Hofstede’s (1983a, b, 1984a) framework, but also integrate the recent studies of cross-cultural issues.

Roth (1995) has actually developed a conceptual framework that can be applied in foreign markets by identifying a variety of cultural and socioeconomic environmental characteristics. One precondition that must be mentioned here is that those characteristics hypothetically affect brand image performance. Roth (1995) connected Hofstede’s (1984b) influential work to brand image evaluation. Roth discovered three culture dimensions linked to brand images and consumer needs, which are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism. However, Roth (1995) does not quite clearly indicate a specific situation, such as how to make distinctions between nations in which there exist high power distance and low individualism cultures like France or other European countries, and vice versa. Moreover, with the trend of globalisation, a fusion of eastern and western culture has been taking place. The impact of cultural change has been more readily accepted in countries with a long history, such as China. More and more people are accepting western culture and its way of thinking. On the other hand, Roth (1995) also realises that regional culture
within countries has exerted considerable influence on brand image performance. Thus, cross-cultural issues appear to be significantly important, especially for international enterprises.

2.3.2 Cultures as systems of shared meanings: a value-oriented theory
From another perspective, culture is a system of shared meanings (Smith & Bond, 1998). Smith and Bond (1998) asserted that the studies of value differences provided the best conceptual frameworks to guide cross-cultural research. They stated that consistency across cultures could be shown by the structure of individual values (Smith & Bond, 1998). (Hofstede & Bond, 1984) Value differences across countries was crucial when the selected values were different both within and across countries, which could help to explain cultural differences (Smith & Bond, 1998). They also categorised the levels of cross-cultural studies as culture-level and individual-level comparisons. Hence, it is fundamental to recognise the differences between as culture-level and individual-level in any cross-cultural research.

The values classifications are in the two different levels: culture-level and individual-level (Smith & Bond, 1998). It seems Hofstede’s (1983b, a, 1984a) cultural framework was more closely related to culture-level. Consequently, it could demonstrate a limitation of Hofstede’s (1983b, a, 1984a) framework to some extent. However, Schwartz and Sagiv (1995) found that the problem of establishing criteria from sample deviation for separating actual cultural differences was rarely addressed by previous cross-cultural researchers who conducted studies of values. Schwartz and Sagiv (1995) claimed that indexes of value types could be constructed from single values, the meanings of which were reasonably similar across cultures, if scholars wanted to compare value priorities across cultures (Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995).

In fact, Hoyer and MacInnis (2009) provided a more reasonable and appropriate framework for consumer behaviour research regarding cultural. They defined a type of culture named as the consumer’s culture which yielded four principal culture-categories: consumer diversity, social class and household influences, psychographics and social influences (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2009). Any of them would influence the making decisions process and eventually result in symbolic consumer behaviours as outcomes of consumer behaviour. Therefore, from this perspective, the consumer’s culture is congruent with the symbolic functions of the brand image, which is consistent with the previous literature review.

Hoyer and MacInnis (2009) stated that ideas or values as cultural principles were the implication of cultural categories (e.g. time, space, and occasions), which could transfer meanings to the product and the consumer respectively. As Figure 2 clearly indicates, cultures and individuals create product meaning, as well as product use defines the consumer as a group member or an individual. Hence, consistent with the contentions of Smith and Bond (1998), cross-cultural research can take place at the cultural or individual level. Hoyer and MacInnis (2009) argued the emblematic function that meaning derived from culture allowed consumers to use products to symbolise their membership in different social groups. For instance, Hogg et al. (1998) investigated symbolic consumption among young consumers and found that a sportswear brand could fulfil emblematic functions because of the attachments of symbolic and emblematic meanings to the brands. Hoyer and MacInnis (2009) also explained role acquisition functions that serving as emblems of group membership
can hasten the process of entering into new roles for consumers. The most important point is that these functions could help to define the consumer’s self-concept (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2009). So far, this framework seems to be more integrated than the previous studies.

**Figure 2 The Sources and Functions of Consumption Symbols**

![Diagram showing the sources and functions of consumption symbols](source from Hoyer and MacInnis (2009, p. 452))

### 2.3.3 Self-congruity and cross-cultural issues

Quester et al. (2000) empirically put the self-congruity theory into different cultural contexts from the perspective of market behaviour; the current research might use a similar approach. Quester et al. (2000) noticed that two determinants of market behaviours, consumer behaviour and the managerial decision-making process, can be influenced by culture (Tse et al., 1998; Usunier, 1996). The impact of culture should also be considered, as it exercises a powerful influence on consumer behaviour in the purchase, evaluation and perception of products and brands. It actually provides a clear understanding of how to conduct such research regarding self-congruity with cultural issues. Nevertheless, an analysis of Quester et al.’s study reveals the difficulties of generalising and predicting such results. Through this paper, the present study understands that the role of the self-congruity concept in consumers’ choices in cross-cultural contexts still needs to be further investigated. How to generalise such knowledge is the crucial matter the current study needs to consider.

Moreover, due to the complexity of self-congruity, self-image congruence models include the actual self-congruity model, the ideal self-congruity model, the social self-congruity model, the ideal social self-congruity model, and the affective self-congruity model (Sirgy et al., 1991). The nature of this complexity might make it difficult for the current study to evaluate self-congruity across different retail product categories. Aside from involvement in cross-cultural issues, this difficulty would be a significant hurdle to overcome.

### 2.4 The conceptual model

After the literature review, this study will integrate a conceptual model to measure the self-congruity toward global consumer brands from a cross-cultural perspective (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3 The Self-congruity Model**
3. Research approach

To present, this study has identified the general problems of the concepts and frameworks regarding brand image, self-concept, and cross-cultural issues. In view of the complexity of these subjects, it is impossible to generate a universal model that measures self-congruity across all product categories in all cultural contexts. Many studies have considered self-congruity, but they used limited product categories in only two specific countries. The problem with such findings is that they are difficult to generalise, creating a gap to be explored for the current research. Assuming that culture can be measured, this study will seek a way to discover how to evaluate self-congruity in a certain industry. Considering that global consumer brands are one of the most common industries in the international retail business, the project will focus on examining self-congruity among those brands that are distributed through retailers.

The future study will be divided into several steps. For the in-depth literature review, the literature on the three subjects will be continually carried out. In order to formulate additional ideas and inspiration, the literature review will focus on finding cultural dimensions that are suitable for the current study. Second, the study will focus on how to provide more comprehensive brand image dimensions to measure global consumer brands and investigate the extent to which self-congruity influences the brand positioning of global consumer brands. This study will prioritise the literature regarding self-congruity toward global consumer brands, such as fashion products, electronic goods, foods, and beverages. The purpose of this approach is to determine whether it would be possible to generate a set of attributes in order to evaluate self-congruity across most of the common global consumer brands. The study aims to be more precise than findings in previous self-congruity research. Third, this research will investigate how cross-cultural factors impact self-congruity regarding those brands. Based on what has been discovered so far, it is difficult to generalise the findings of previous studies on self-congruity with cross-cultural issues. It remains unclear which factors create those difficulties. Moreover, it is unclear whether studying one particular industry is possible in terms of the research questions.
It is also ambiguous which angle the researchers should use to examine self-congruity regarding global consumer brands. The fourth step is to investigate how to integrate the three sets of dimensions (i.e. brand image, self-concept, and culture) into global consumer brand. The literature review will contribute to the examination of the conceptual framework of this study. The following chapter will describe the proposed research methodology to follow the literature review and the research schedule.

4. The suggested research methodology
After the aforementioned literature research approaches are carried out, the goal is to undertake an empirical study in three countries: China, the UK and the Netherlands. These three countries were chosen due to the nature of their markets and the possibility of data collection. The UK is separated from mainland Europe. Although British culture was influenced to a large extent by the European mainland, the diversification of British culture from that of the mainland is significant. Studying this market can capture more cross-cultural factors than studying mainland Europe and provide easy access to data, considering the author’s current capabilities. In comparison, the Netherlands is a traditional European mainland country. China has been broadly recognised as the fastest-growing economy in history since reform began in the 1980s, and Chinese culture is reflected in the market. Chinese culture has a huge influence on most Asian countries as well. This study will reflect upon the acceptability of the selected countries during the literature review in order to ascertain if these countries will provide enough data to assure the acceptability and accuracy of the proposed model.

The research design process is illustrated in Figure 4. This study will primarily utilise quantitative methods. Nonetheless, there is a qualitative method employed at the beginning of the research process in order to generate hypotheses and help design the questionnaire.

Figure 4 Graphical Representation of Research Design

After a comprehensive literature review has been completed, a qualitative approach will be used: focus groups will be conducted and individuals will be interviewed in order to clarify the scales for measuring self-congruity. Using a focus group methodology, researchers can gather several respondents at the same time and initiate a discussion on a certain topic. It is one of the most popular methods in marketing
research, as well as the most frequently used qualitative technique (Stewart et al., 2007). Bryman (2004) also argued that a specific theme or topic could be explored in depth and representatively emphasised by a focus group. Moreover, the flexibility of the interview make it attractive for qualitative data collection (Bryman, 2004). It is also important to speak to people to obtain information about their opinions (Finlay, 2002), and the questions will be focused on the entire global consumer brand rather than on specific products or brands. After analysing the results, a hypothesis will be generated. Although the hypothesis would normally be generated after the literature review, the qualitative approach could help to test the validity and reliability of the hypothesis and improve the correctness and effectiveness of the results.

Surveys are widely used in consumer marketing research because of their characteristics, including data form and analysis strategy (Vaus, 2002). Groves et al. (2004) asserts that surveys are frequently used to measure customer attitudes and options, such as satisfaction and expectations regarding quality. Surveys may also be used to measure the degree of customer expectations during transactions. Salant and Dillman (1994) stated that four reasons to apply the survey method in social research include a sufficient sample, equal chances for each individual, willingness and accuracy of answering questions, and similarity of participants’ characteristics and other individuals within the target population. Moreover, a survey design can provide a quantitative description of a population’s trends, attitudes, or opinions by studying a sample of that population (Creswell, 1998). Accordingly, it is feasible for this research to use a survey method.

Malhotra (2004) summarised the process of selecting a data analysis strategy. As According to Malhotra (2004), data analysis is not an ends in itself; its purpose is to produce information that will help to address the problem at hand. The selection of a data analysis strategy must begin by considering earlier steps in the process: problem definition, development of an approach, and research design (Malhotra & Birks, 2005). In terms of the characters of the present study, the tools of statistical techniques should be viewed as data analysis processing (Malhotra, 2004). Several computing programmes are available to support data preparation. Many researchers (e.g. Malhotra & Birks, 2005; Pallant, 2005; Parasuraman et al., 2006) suggest using SPSS and Amos, which are statistical software packages that aid in analysing descriptive statistics and factor structures. These packages are useful for handling responses and for statistically adjusting the data (Malhotra, 2004). Moreover, some additional computing software, such as Microsoft Word and Excel, an be used. The results will guide an exploratory investigation of a conceptual model to measure self-congruity toward global consumer brands in different cultural contexts.

5. Conclusion
This study has reviewed some of the significant features of the three subjects in terms of brand image, self-concept, and cultural issues. Consumer researchers have recognised that product/brand image is intertwined with self-concept. That is, the congruency of self-image and product/brand image influences the consumer’s buying behaviour and brand performance (e.g. Adam, 2005; Kressmann et al., 2006; Kuester et al., 2007). Sirgy et al. (2000) report there are different self-concept dimensions. Thus, this study should include different types of corresponding self-image congruitites (Ibrahim & Najjar, 2008). Moreover, studying value differences could lead to the development of a better conceptual framework to assist cross-cultural
researchers (Smith & Bond, 1998). In hopes of achieving these aims, this study has critically reviewed relevant research investigating this issue at both the culture and individual levels. The most suitable cultural model for the current study is the consumer culture framework developed by Hoyer and MacInnis (2009).

Theoretically, the most significant outcome of this study will be the development of a model to evaluate self-congruity toward global consumer brands that are distributed via retailers across different cultural contexts. This research will be based on both the consumer culture model (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2009) and Hofstede’s framework. With regard to academic research to date, there is a gap in this area, given that there is no research that integrates brand image, self-image, and the consumer culture dimensions comprehensively. Thus far, there is no overall conceptual framework that could examine self-congruity in relation to global consumer brands in various cultural contexts.

In practice, the framework that this study will develop can help brand managers to understand the differences between the congruence of their brand images and consumers’ self-image in a cross-cultural context. They can utilise this information both in their home country and in a number of culturally diverse nations. Brand managers need to understand the crucial role of self-congruity in predicting consumers’ intentions (Ibrahim & Najjar, 2008). The model will help them to establish and implement strategies in order to enter into new countries and build their market share in different cultures. The managers will also be able to evaluate and amend their current marketing strategies using the framework, thereby maintaining and enhancing their compatibilities and market shares.

Based on the literature review thus far, this study has proposed a conceptual model to measure self-congruity regarding the research topic. The methodology and research approach are proposed in terms of the previous literature research. SPSS will be used as a statistical tool to analyse the data, whereas Amos will be utilised to validate the model. In the future, during the literature review, the proposed model might be amended.
References


Hoyer, W. D. and MacInnis, D. J. (2009), *Consumer Behavior*, 5th edn, USA: South-Western.


