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**Brands as Means of Self-expression:
A Cross-cultural Comparison**

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Abstract

This study investigates the self-expressive function of brands in four countries that represent different cultural dimensions. Survey data collected in France, Germany, South Korea, and the US support the proposition that cultural dimensions influence customers' motive to use brands as means of self-expression. Additionally, in masculine countries it is more important for customers to use brands to express their ideal self-concept. Furthermore, in countries where power distance is high customers choose brands to show their desired social status. From the empirical results the authors derive implications for global brand management. They suggest the creation of a consistent brand personality across countries while – at the same time – allowing brand management to emphasize particular personality facets corresponding to different cultural orientations.

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1. Introduction

Driven by the ongoing trend in globalization of markets and marketing activities as well as Levitt's (1983) convergence hypothesis claiming global homogenization of consumer preferences and behavior, many international companies have moved to a global marketing approach including global branding strategies (Bauer/Exler/Bronk 2007; Erdem/Swait/Valenzuela 2006; Schuiling/Kapferer 2004). This implies a standardization of the brand's positioning, advertising strategy, brand personality, etc. across countries (Aaker/Joachimsthaler 1999; Quelch 1999). A positive relationship of international brand standardization and success is expected and substantiated with significant cost advantages and prominent company examples (Rosen/Boddewyn/Louis 1988; Sandler/Shani 1992). However, empirical studies addressing the success of brand standardization fail to show a clear positive impact, but rather provide contradicting results (Özsomer/Prussia 2000; Zou/Cavusgil 2002). Alashban et al. (2002), for instance, provide evidence for a positive influence of brand name standardization on revenue and costs. Likewise, Cervino, Sanchez, and Cubillo (2005) detect a positive relationship between international brand standardization and brand success. In contrast, Roth (1995a, b) shows that culture has a significant impact on the performance of brand image strategies in terms of market share. Hence, a further investigation of the influence of culture on the effectiveness of international brand standardization is warranted.

In this regard, scholars of psychology and marketing research question the convergence hypothesis (e.g., Craig/Douglas/Grein 1992). It is argued that countries similar in terms of economic development are not necessarily similar with respect to the consumption behavior of their inhabitants (Sriram/Gopalakrishna 1991). Indeed, cross-cultural research shows that although countries might converge at a macro level (i.e., ownership of products per 1,000 inhabitants), countries differ with respect to *how* people use these products (De Mooij 2000). Moreover, no empirical evidence has been generated that shows this suggested homogenization of tastes or the appearance of universal consumer segments (Usunier 1996). Apparently, cultural differences between countries impact customers' brand preferences as well as their purpose of using them (Erdem/Swait/Valenzuela 2006; Usunier 1994). Consequently, it is a key challenge for international brand manufacturers to know to what degree a branding strategy or components of branding such as positioning or communication should be standardized across countries. This in turn raises the question if brands fulfill the

same functions or needs in different cultural settings or if the purpose to choose a particular brand is influenced by cultural aspects and should therefore be addressed by local adaptation.

In marketing research customers' brand choice is explained by two basic functions that brands fulfill from a customer's perspective (Wallin/Coote 2007). Information economics explains how customers use brands as signals to assess the quality of goods and services, decrease the perceived risk, and reduce search costs (Erdem/Swait 1998; Wernerfelt 1988). The other basic function can be derived from brand equity literature, which describes how a brand's personality offers a self-expressive benefit for the customer (Aaker 2002). Thus, brands allow customers to satisfy their needs for personal expression and social approval (Keller 1993).

For an empirical investigation of brand signaling Erdem and Swait (1998) assessed the impact of brand signals on expected utility. Their brand signaling model has already been cross-validated in seven countries and the authors observe moderating effects of cultural dimensions such as uncertainty avoidance and collectivism (Erdem/Swait/Valenzuela 2006). The authors find that the effect of 'brand credibility' on 'brand preference' mediated by 'less perceived risk' and 'information costs saved' is relatively larger in countries that show high uncertainty avoidance. However, in collectivist countries the effect of 'brand credibility' on 'brand preference' mediated by 'perceived quality' is relatively larger. Interestingly, Erdem, Swait, and Valenzuela (2006) do not find a significant moderating effect of the power distance dimension, but point out the need for further research on the influence of this dimension by including perceived brand prestige as a new construct. Therefore, there seems to be scope to investigate the self-expressive function of brands across countries as well. This leads to the question of whether the use of brands as means of self-expression differs across countries and if possible observed differences might be explained by cultural dimensions.

The self-expressive function of brands is mainly discussed in the consumer behavior and psychology literature (Thorbjornsen/Pderson/Nysveen 2007) establishing research streams such as self congruity research (Dolich 1969; Grubb/Grathwohl 1967; Sirgy 1982), symbolic interactionism (Solomon 1983), consumers' materialism and possession (Belk 1988; McCracken 1986), and attitude formation (Shavitt 1990). It is argued that consumers hold preferences for consumption symbols such as brands to express aspects of their selves, while aiming for self-verification or self-enhancement (Prentice 1987; Shavitt 1990). The use of brands as means of self-expression is possible because brands are associated with personality

traits (Aaker 1997; Shavitt 1990), which may be related to an individual's personality. Hence, the self-expressive function of a brand is supposed to be a determinant of intention and behavior (Johar/Sirgy 1991; Richins 1994a, b).

Moreover, psychological research affirms an impact of culture on an individual's self-expression (Aaker/Maheswaran 1997; McCracken 1986; Singelis 1994). It is argued that every individual in any country has at least two self-concepts: an independent and an interdependent one (Markus/Kitayama 1991). However, culture influences the importance of either the independent or the interdependent concept of self-expression (Markus/Kitayama 1991). Aaker and Schmitt (2001), for instance, find that Chinese prefer brands that enable them to indicate membership of a certain peer group, whereas Americans chose brands to differentiate themselves from others. Therefore, the authors conclude that attitudes towards a brand based on self-expressive reasons differ across countries (Aaker/Schmitt 2001). In a similar vein, Phau and Lau (2001) demonstrate that individualistic consumers tend to transfer aspects of their personality on their preferred brand more frequently than collectivists. Thus, their research again indicates an influence of culture on the relationship between individuals and their preferred brands.

Hence, the aim of this study is to investigate how well the self-expressive function of brands explains brand preference formation in different countries. For this purpose, a model of brand self-expression with 'prestige' as a central construct was developed following the suggestions of Erdem, Swait, and Valenzuela (2006). To the authors' knowledge, the existing literature does not provide such a holistic model of the self-expression function of brands that also allows for the investigation of different facets of self-expression. The proposed model was tested in countries that represent different cultural dimensions in order to address the impact of culture. Differences were explored in the way customers use brands as means of self-expression and linked to customers' cultural orientation. As Hofstede's (1980) framework is suitable to explain most of the variation of consumption and consumer behavior across countries (De Mooij 2000), it can be proposed that three of the Hofstede dimensions (individualism, masculinity, and power distance) may particularly affect the way individuals use brands as means of self-expression and social approval. This study contributes substantially to the existing research in cross-cultural branding, since different motives of the self-expression function of brands are assigned to cultural differences. Consequently, implications for international brand management can be derived.

This paper is organized as follows: First, hypotheses regarding consumer self-expression on the basis of theories from social psychology will be developed. These hypotheses will then be displayed in a structural relationship model explaining the self-expressive function of brands. On the basis of Hofstede's (1980) framework, hypotheses of cultural effects on the proposed relationships will be derived. Next, the method used to test the developed hypotheses will be introduced followed by a discussion of the results. Finally, this work ends with an interpretation of the findings, its research issues, implications for global brand management, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Model Development: Brands as Means of Self-Expression

2.1 Hypotheses on Main Effects

Self congruity theory indicates that customers will prefer and choose brands that are congruent with their self-concept (Sirgy 1982, 1986). The self-concept has been defined as the sum of individuals' thoughts and feelings that have reference to themselves as an object (Rosenberg 1979). The phenomenon comprises mainly psychological attributes "and interacts with the various roles a person must take on" (Mehta 1999, p. 82). It is argued that the self-concept is multidimensional reflecting more than one type of self-perspective (Sirgy 1985). As a consequence, the actual self-concept, which refers to how a person actually perceives itself, and the ideal self-concept, which denotes the ideal image held by an individual of itself, or in other words, the image of oneself as one would like to be (Rosenberg 1979), should be distinguished. Furthermore, Sirgy (1980) refers to a social self-concept, which relates to the image that individuals believe others hold of them, and an ideal social self-concept, seen as the image that one would like others to hold.

Brand image has been defined as the stereotypic image of the brand user who can be described by personality attributes (Sirgy 1982). In this regard, Sirgy (1982) alludes to the "personalizability of the product" (p. 288). Consequently, the concept of brand personality defined as „the set of human characteristics associated with a brand“ (Aaker 1997, p. 347) may be applied directly to the construct of self congruity. In this sense, brand personality corresponds to the particular facet of the brand image that encompasses only personality attributes. Hence, three types of self congruity are conceptualized as follows: *Actual Self Congruity* relates to the congruence between brand personality and actual self-concept. *Ideal Self Congruity* refers to a comparison between brand personality and ideal self-perception. *Ideal Social Self Congruity* results from a similarity between brand personality and the ideal social self-concept.

There are at least two motives to strive for self congruity: self-consistency and self-esteem (Sirgy 1982). The self-consistency motive relates to the need to act and behave according to one's self-concept (Sirgy 1982), whereas self-esteem is defined as the proximity of the actual and the ideal self concept (Rosenberg 1979). According to the theory of self-enhancement (Shrauger 1975), individuals seek to preserve and enhance their self-concept by purchasing certain products (Braun/Wicklund 1989; Wicklund/Gollwitzer 1981). Since brands serve as

social symbols that have a shared meaning, individual consumption behaviors contribute substantially to the preservation and enhancement of customers' self-concepts through the use of brands (Grubb/Grathwohl 1967).

The theory of self-enhancement (Shrauger 1975) highlights the significance of self-image for individuals, and considers the influence of the social and cultural surroundings on customers' self-concepts. People are basically motivated to think well of themselves, that means, individuals are anxious to preserve and enhance their self-concept (Deeter-Schmelz/Moore/Goebel 2000). The self, however, does not develop independently, but it evolves through an interaction process of social experience, and develops from the reactions of others (Grubb/Grathwohl 1967). In this communication process between individuals and their social surroundings brands serve as symbolic communicative devices because they have been established within a certain cultural context by the respective society, and bear a learnt and shared meaning for the individual and significant others (Elliott/Wattanasuwan 1998; Solomon 1983). Consequently, the consumption of symbols can be seen as a mean for self-presentation and self-enhancement. In other words, the consumption behavior of individuals will be directed towards the expression and enhancement of their self-concept through the purchase and use of brands as symbols (Johar/Sirgy 1991; Richins 1994a, b).

In order to investigate how well the self-expressive function of brands explains the formation of brand preference, a closer look at the theory of consumption values is called for. Accordingly, consumer's choice is determined by multiple consumption values (Sheth/Newman/Gross 1991), which contribute to a given choice situation in different ways. Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991) postulated five consumption values that influence customer choice behavior: 1) functional value, 2) social value, 3) emotional value, 4) epistemic value, and 5) conditional value. Although choice may be influenced by all consumption values, certain values are usually more salient to customers than others (Sheth/Newman/Gross 1991). In recent years, many studies have examined the significance and impact of consumption values on customers' actual behavior (e.g., Long/Schiffman 2000; Del Rio/Vazquez/Iglesias 2001). All share a distinction between functional and symbolic values. In particular, Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986) presented a precise differentiation between functional and symbolic benefits. Within their framework termed brand concept management (BCM), functional benefits are linked to product-related attributes that allow customers to solve consumption related problems. In contrast, symbolic benefits relate to the

brands' role to fulfill the need for self-enhancement, role-position, group membership, or ego identification (Park/Jaworski/MacInnis 1986). Within a symbolic communication process brands can represent intrinsic values (e.g., self-expression) or extrinsic values (e.g., prestige), depending on whether the individual is communicating with itself or with its social surroundings (Grubb/Grathwohl 1967). Intrinsic value dimensions develop from an intrinsic need to behave appropriately and favorably towards one's self-concept and to identify with brands similar to the self. Extrinsic values, such as prestige value, allow customers to present themselves to their social surroundings and to demonstrate their social position. Since self-expression value and prestige value serve as central variables in this study, a more detailed description and conceptualization of the constructs will be provided.

Self-Expression Value: It is widely agreed that consumption comprise self-expressive behavior, which means that customers strive to communicate their self concept (e.g., Schau/Gilly 2003). Indeed, expressing one's thoughts and feelings may be accomplished, for example, through choices and actions (Kim/Sherman 2007). In this regard, a brand's self-expression value relates to the ability of brands to allow customers to express their needs, thoughts, and feelings, and to validate their own self-concepts (Tan/Ming 2003). Belk (1988) suggests that individuals are what they consume and conversely, one can state that customers consume what they are (Schau 2000). That means, brands do not only enable customers to communicate their actual self concept, but also help to create and define their personality (Schau 2000). As discussed before, brands serve as symbols for confirming and enhancing one's self-concept (Johar/Sirgy 1991; Richins 1994a, b). The intrinsic value of the brand thereby exerts influence on the identity of individuals, and allows a transferal of its symbolic meaning onto the customer's personality (Grubb/Grathwohl 1967). As a result, it can be stated that the self-expression value of brands is a way for customers to express their self-concept due to an intrinsic need for self-definition, self-affirmation, self-actualization, and self-enhancement.

Certainly, the self-expression value of brands does not only refer to customers' actual self-concept, but it also allows customers to express an image that they would like to have (Braun/Wicklund 1989; Wicklund/Gollwitzer 1981). In this respect, brands serve to achieve a self-esteem motive by approximating the actual and the ideal self-concept (Rosenberg 1979). Indeed, self-expression as a symbolic benefit represents the desire for brands that fulfill needs such as self-enhancement (Park/Jaworski/MacInnis 1986). Therefore, one can propose:

H₁: The greater the congruity between brand personality and actual self-concept (actual congruity), the greater is the self-expression value of the brand.

H₂: The greater the congruity between brand personality and ideal self-concept (ideal congruity), the greater is the self-expression value of the brand.

Prestige value: Apart from intrinsic values, such as the self-expression value, brands also offer extrinsic values, which are directed outwards, towards customers' social surroundings (Grubb/Grathwohl 1967). The concept of prestige value is mainly understood as the ability of a brand to help customers to achieve social prestige and recognition (Nagashima 1970, 1977). Brands thereby serve as commonly shared symbols that allow individuals to signal their status, power, and wealth as well as their association with specific social groups (Long/Schiffman 2000; Sheth/Newman/Gross 1991; Vigneron/Johnson 1999).

First of all, it can be stated that prestige "has always been designated as constituting a basic symbol of one's social standing or status" (Eisenstadt 1968, p. 67). Status relates to a person's rank or position within the social hierarchy of one's complex cultural and social environment (Bacharach/Bamberger/Mundell 1993). Moreover, it represents the social appreciation that other individuals show towards the person in question. People may achieve a certain status either through assignment, that is social inheritance, or through personal achievement (Eastman/Goldsmith/Flynn 1999). As a further possibility, customers may show their social class or status through the consumption of goods (Eastman/Goldsmith/Flynn 1999; Vigneron/Johnson 1999). This stands in close connection to Veblen's (1899) idea of conspicuous consumption, which refers to the "practice of using products to signal social status aspirations to other consumers" (Eastman/Goldsmith/Flynn 1999, p. 42).

The prestige value of brands does not only allow customers to communicate their desired social standing, but it also has a marked influence on the need to define one's self-concept in connection to social groups (Vigneron/Johnson 1999). The prestige value is closely connected to the social value determined by Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991). They define social value as "the perceived utility acquired from an alternative's association with one or more specific social groups. An alternative acquires social value through association with positively or negatively stereotyped demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural-ethnic groups" (Sheth/Newman/Gross 1991, p. 161). Individual behavior is always influenced by the social surroundings of a person, and in particular by societal groups. From a socioeconomic

perspective, the desire to be part of a certain group relates to the so-called bandwagon effect, which represents the desire of people to act, behave, buy, and consume like their peers (Leibenstein 1950). Hence, brands are not only used to confer status on its owners, but also to show their affiliation to certain social groups (Vigneron/Johnson 1999).

As a consequence, it can be stated that customer behavior and in particular brand choice can be deeply influenced by the individuals' longings for prestige, acceptance, and the affiliation or alienation to certain social groups. Individuals interested in social approval will prefer those brands that benefit from a favorable image among their peer group (Del Rio/Vazquez/Iglesias 2001). It is stated that customers assign meaning to brands because this meaning is shared by significant others (Grubb/Grathwohl 1967). In return, this helps customers to confirm and enhance their self-concept in the eyes of their social surroundings. In other words, it is suggested that individuals experiencing a strong need for prestige will purchase brands according to their symbolic benefits. This is explained within the context of symbolic consumption that characterizes brands as means to demonstrate a desired social status (Deeter-Schmelz/Moore/Goebel 2000).

As the self-esteem motive is closely linked to the need for social approval, which in contrast evokes a motivational tendency to approach one's ideal social self-image (Sirgy 1986), there seems to be a positive relation between ideal social congruity and the prestige value of brands. The ideal social self-concept relates to the image that individuals wish others to have of them. Thus, it can be stated that if brands show a high congruity with customers' ideal social self, customers can use these brands in order to demonstrate their prestige and power, and affiliation to certain social groups. One could therefore propose:

H₃: The greater the congruity between brand personality and ideal social self-concept (ideal social congruity), the greater is the prestige value of the brand.

A considerable amount of studies in consumer research has stated that consumption is motivated by self-expression (e.g., Belk 1988). Since intention as opposed to attitude towards the particular object reflects better the probable behavior and offers better and more precise prognosis (Albrecht/Carpenter 1976), it will serve as the key dependent variable in this study. It has been argued that the more congruent a brand's personality is with the customer's actual or ideal self-concept, the higher the internal benefits and similarly, the more congruent a brand's personality is with the customer's ideal social self concept the higher the external

benefits. This will consequently have a positive effect on brand preference and will lead to a higher behavioral intention.

H₄: The higher the self-expression value of the brand, the higher is the behavioral intention.

H₅: The higher the prestige value of the brand, the higher is the behavioral intention.

The conceptual development is depicted in the structural equation model in Figure 1. One can observe that in this model of brand self expression behavioral intention is the key dependent variable, which is determined by the self-expression and the prestige value of the brand. Whereas the self-expression value is influenced by the congruity between the brand's personality and the actual and ideal self of the customer, the prestige value is affected by the congruity between the brand's personality and the ideal social self of the customer. Due to the consideration of internal and external brand values as mediators, the model at hand is adequate to explain different motives of self-expression.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

2.2 Hypotheses on Cultural Effects

Similar to Erdem, Swait, and Valenzuela (2006) one can expect a moderating effect of culture. Hofstede's (1980) framework is argued to be appropriate for cross-cultural studies (Soares/Farhangmehr/Shoham, 2007). In this particular study the cultural dimensions individualism (IND), masculinity (MAS), and power distance (PD) are considered as relevant constructs.¹

IND is the most prominent and most researched cultural dimension. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) define this concept in the following way: "Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (p. 76). Although both tendencies exist in all countries, cultures will be predominantly either individualistic or collectivistic (Gudykunst/Lee 2002). In societies that are high on IND,

¹ Hofstede conceptualized a fourth dimension, uncertainty avoidance, and later added time orientation as a fifth dimension. However, this study did not focus on uncertainty avoidance as this dimension turned out to be of major importance for the brand signaling function. Similarly, no evident expectation about how long-term orientation might affect self-expression could be generated

people focus on their own interests and only on their closest social surrounding, for example, the immediate family or selected friends. Children learn from early on that some day they will stand on their own feet and that their behaviors should reflect their independence and personal opinions (Hofstede 2003). In general, western countries such as the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy rate high on IND. In contrast, individuals in collectivist cultures feel a strong interdependence with in-group members (Hui/Triandis 1986). Hence, they are expected to behave in accordance with group peers. Conformity and loyalty are much valued and even expected. Thus, expressing personal opinions or interests must always be balanced with the values and beliefs of the group. Typical collectivist cultures are Asian and South American countries (Hofstede 2003).

With regard to self-expression, Western European and American cultures hold a primarily independent view of their selves, and view a person as an independent, self-contained, and autonomous individual who can be seen as an entity that is separate from its social surrounding (Cousins 1989; Monga/Lau-Gesek 2007). In contrast, Asian cultures have an interdependent view of their selves, and lay more stress on the relationship between their self and others (Cousins 1989), thereby showing a pervasive attentiveness to relevant others in the social context (Markus/Kitayama 1991). The interdependent self is “fundamentally connected and influenced by its social surrounding” (Kim/Sherman 2007, p. 6).

Due to a feeling of individuality and separateness, members from individualist societies have a need to express their internal attributes in order to demonstrate their individuality and distinctiveness (Triandis 1989). For individuals from collective cultures, however, the expression of internal attributes is seen as elusive and unreliable since they are viewed to be situation specific (Markus/Kitayama 1991). Personal opinions and characteristics do not need to be overtly expressed since the interdependent members of a society are defined by their roles and relationships to others. Thus, self-expression and self-assertion are not valued as being authentic, but instead are seen as being immature. In fact, studies have proven that the need or desire for self-expression through brands is higher in the US than in East Asian countries (Aaker/Schmitt 2001). As a consequence, one can state the following:

H₆: The effect of actual congruity on self-expression value is stronger when IND is high.

Consequently, as customers in individualistic countries focus on their own interests, the purchase of brands that allow them to express themselves is of major importance. The choice

that they make concerning particular brands is deeply related to their actual attributes, their inner feelings and their commitment to the brand. The brand must be able to represent them including their values and personality. In contrast, individuals from interdependent cultures are expected to restrain their inner needs and desires, and particularly the overt expression of their inner feelings. Brand choices do not have to mainly express their true actual selves, but they are to demonstrate conformity and appropriateness. As a consequence, one can state that customers from individualistic cultures rather form preferences for brands that represent their actual self concept and are more likely to purchase these brands. The following hypothesis shall satisfy this notion.

H₇: The effect of self-expression value on behavioral intention is stronger when IND is high.

Analog to the discussion regarding *individualism/collectivism*, *masculinity/femininity* can be seen as opposite poles of the MAS dimension. In masculine cultures “emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (Hofstede/Hofstede 2005, p. 120). Countries that rank high on MAS are, for instance, Japan, Italy, Germany and the United States. Examples of feminine cultures are South Korea, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, and France (Hofstede 2003). MAS can furthermore be described as fostering individual decisions as well as being independent and ego-oriented (Hofstede 2003). According to Hofstede (2003), masculine societies are oriented towards earnings, achievement, and recognition as well as focused on material success. As a consequence, it can be stated that members from masculine cultures have a need to overtly display important aspects of their selves (De Mooij 1998). This relates in particular to the ideal self since customers from masculine cultures have a need to enhance their self-concept, and to provide a boost to their ego by aiming at their ideal self-concept (De Mooij 2004). Self-enhancement and ego boosting go hand in hand with a need for performance. This can be best fulfilled through the self-expression value of brands, and choosing brands that relate strongly to one’s ideal self-concept. As a consequence, one can propose:

H₈: The effect of ideal congruity on self-expression value is stronger when MAS is high.

PD relates to the basic problem of human inequality and can be defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede/Hofstede 2005, p. 46). The concept

of PD does not solely refer to the hierarchical organization of companies, but can be transferred to societal norms, political and educational systems, and even understandings of religion and ideology within a country (Hofstede 2003). Members of large PD cultures tolerate and even foster social inequalities resulting in the condition that everyone has its rightful place in a social hierarchy (De Mooij 2004). In these countries people are vastly motivated by status (Roth 1995a) as interpersonal relationships are organized hierarchically (Erdem/Swait/Valenzuela 2006). France, Belgium, Italy, and most Asian and Latin American countries belong to high PD societies (Hofstede 2003). Low PD cultures tend to be more egalitarian. The use of power should be legitimate because inequalities among people should be minimized (Hofstede/Hofstede 2005). Examples of low PD countries are the United States, Germany, Great Britain, and Scandinavia (Hofstede 2003).

As shown, prestige value belongs to the more extrinsic values because it allows customers to demonstrate their social position towards others. As mentioned before, this causes individuals to choose those brands that are close to their ideal social self-concept, i.e. the view that they wish others to hold of them. Particularly in high PD cultures, people have a need to demonstrate their social position in society as well as their rightful place in the social hierarchy (De Mooij 2004). Individuals' social status is crucial and people are even expected to overtly demonstrate their position due to an approval of social inequality. Thus, customers in high PD cultures will choose brands that are close to their ideal social self-concept in order to demonstrate their social position. Accordingly, one can posit:

H₉: The effect of ideal social congruity on prestige value is stronger when PD is high.

As the prestige value of brands allows individuals to demonstrate their wealth, power, and social status, it is very likely that they develop strong preference for these particular brands. This applies in particular to customers from high PD countries since they have a need to demonstrate their social position in society. Individuals are likely to see themselves in relation to others and chosen brands serve as status symbols that allow customers to demonstrate their prestige and position in the societal hierarchy. Low PD cultures promote rather equality and do not have the need to indicate a hierarchical position. Brands do not need to serve as pure status symbols. As a consequence, one can formulate the following hypothesis:

H₁₀: The effect of prestige value on behavioral intention is stronger when PD is high.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

To test the proposed model (see Figure 1) across countries, comparable samples of respondents in France (n = 126), Germany (n = 104), South Korea (n = 115), and the United States (n = 110) were collected as these countries differ with regard to IND, MAS, and PD (see Table 1). For this purpose, Hofstede's (2003) work to quantify cultural differences was applied as it explains most of the variation of consumption and consumer behavior across countries (De Mooij 2000). In accordance with Erdem, Swait, and Valenzuela (2006), matched samples of undergraduate students in the four countries with demographics representative for the respective countries were recruited. The selection of matched samples on the basis of a set of characteristics of interest has been identified as one way to achieve sample comparability (Sekaran 1983). Furthermore, as the differences in sociodemographics were small it seemed justifiable to attribute the observed differences among countries to their cultural differences.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

A questionnaire was developed in the respective language of the country and administered to the student samples in closed cooperation with universities in the four countries. The questionnaire presented the following scenario: The students were invited to imagine that their parents ask them to choose a wristwatch brand in the value of up to US\$ 200 as a present for their university graduation. The price limited was necessary to prevent a bias through selection of luxury brands. The students could indicate any brand they desired as a present from their parents from a larger set of available international brands. When providing this set of international brands, it was assured that brands had relatively high levels of consumer brand recognition as well as a sufficient degree of heterogeneity regarding the brand. Participants then responded to closed questions referring to this particular brand.

3.2 Measure Development and Assessment

Measure development: All of the constructs in this study were measured by using adapted existing multi-item scales. Sample items as well as the original sources are provided in the appendix. The scales of Sirgy et al. (1997) were adapted to assess the self congruity constructs. Furthermore, the perceived congruence between the brand personality and the self-concepts was measured directly as Sirgy et al.'s (1997) findings demonstrate a higher

predictive validity of this measurement method compared to calculating Euclidian distances of the two constructs.

The questionnaire was first designed in English and then translated into German by a bilingual native speaker. To ensure translation equivalence the complete German questionnaire was then back-translated into English by a second person as proposed by Douglas and Craig (1999). Next, the original English version was compared with the back-translated version, checked for conceptual equivalence and translation errors, and refined where necessary. In a second step, the German questionnaire was translated into French and the English one into Korean by native speakers and also checked for conceptual equivalence.

Assessment of measures: Statistical procedures used to validate the measures included assessments of items and scale reliability, uni-dimensionality, and convergent validity (Anderson/Gerbing 1988). Measurement validity for the pooled data ($n = 455$) was assessed by confirmatory factor analyses using LISREL 8.7 (Jöreskog/Sörbom 1993). The confirmatory factor analyses were conducted separately for each construct as well as for the whole measurement model consisting of all six constructs. The summary statistics for the measurement scales of the sample are shown in Table 2, which reports reliability measures. The coefficient alphas range from .808 for behavioral intention to .898 for ideal self congruity (see Appendix for sample items measuring each construct) exceeding the threshold value of .7 recommended by Nunnally (1978). The item-to-total-correlations displayed in the appendix also yield very high values. With regard to the local reliability criteria, the indicator reliability (Bagozzi 1982), the t-values of the indicator-construct relationships, and the factor reliability (Bagozzi/Baumgartner 1994), the values in the measurement model do all exceed the recommended threshold values. Furthermore, the global fit measures (goodness-of-fit index [GFI], adjusted goodness-of-fit index [AGFI] and root mean square of approximation [RMSEA]) for constructs measured by more than three items indicate a very good fit.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Convergent and discriminant validity: Convergent validity was indicated by all paths from the individual items to the latent constructs being statistically significant ($p < .01$). With regard to discriminant validity the Fornell/Larcker criterion was applied. This test demands the average variance extracted of a factor to be larger than the squared correlation of this factor with every other factor (Fornell/Larker 1981). Two critical construct relationships were identified (ideal

self congruity with ideal social self congruity and actual self congruity with self expression value). Therefore, we analyzed a series of models to explore differences when constraining the covariances between these constructs to 1.0. The chi-square difference between each constrained model proved to be statistically significant from the respective unrestrained model thus, indicating discriminant validity.

Measurement invariance: Since the purpose of this study is to examine structural relationships of latent constructs across countries, first metric invariances of these constructs was analyzed as recommended by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998). Then, to enable a comparison of path coefficients of the SEM, factor variance invariance was also tested (Pedhazur 1982). Measurement invariances across the four different countries was analyzed using multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis with LISREL 8.7 (Jöreskog/Sörbom 1993). By comparing the country samples one with the other, a large extent of metric equivalence between the four countries as well as partial factor variance invariance was observed. Furthermore, rather similar reliabilities across the four countries were found so that measurement artifacts did not affect any conclusions. In the following data analysis and results will be discussed.

4. Data Analysis

Having found support for the measurement model, the fit of the SEM was assessed with pooled data, too. Then, to test the hypotheses, multiple-group analysis with LISREL 8.7 was conducted (Jöreskog/Sörbom 1993). First, the proposed SEM was estimated on the country-level by specifying the various countries as different groups of the data set. Next, the differences between the four countries were analyzed while culture was considered as a moderator. Therefore, two countries were stepwise compared at a time with respect to one of the model's path coefficients. This parameter was restricted to be equal across both countries followed by a comparison of the chi-square (χ^2) with the χ^2 value of the unrestricted model that allows this parameter to vary across the two groups. As the unrestricted model has one degree of freedom (d.f.) less than the restricted model, the significance of the difference of the respective path coefficient was assessed on the basis of the χ^2 distribution with 1 d.f.

4.1 Results of Overall Model

The overall fit measures (goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = .96, normed fit index [NFI] = .97, and comparative fit index [CFI] = .98) of the SEM display values that exceed the threshold value of .9, which is usually recommended (Bagozzi/Yi 1988; Baumgartner/Homburg 1996). In addition, given the ratio of the χ^2 and d.f. (2.74) as well as the value of the RMSEA (.062), it is reasonable to conclude that the model provides a very good fit for the pooled data. Table 3 presents the standardized coefficients for the country specific SEMs.

4.2 Results on Main Effects

The country specific SEMs reveal that of the 20 hypothesized structural relationships 15 are supported. The γ -parameter estimates of these relationships are significant on a .05 or .01 level (see Table 3). Thus, it is observed that brand preference is explained by the brand's self-expression function. In this regard, brands are used to express one's actual self, to enhance the self-concept by choosing brands that are congruent to one's ideal self-concept, and for social approval in the respective social surrounding.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

A few relationships were not supported. The effect of prestige value on behavioral intention in France, Germany, and South Korea, and the impact of ideal self congruity on self-expression value in France and South Korea are insignificant ($p > .05$). However, for the

majority of these relationships the missing significance is consistent with the proposed cultural differences and will be discussed in the following sections.

4.3 Results on Country Effects

Having found support for the main hypotheses, one needs to have a look at the hypothesized impact of the cultural dimensions in order to gain deeper insights into the self-expressive function of brands across countries. Therefore, the estimated country specific SEMs of the LISREL multi-group analysis (see Table 3) were used to test for significant differences of the γ -parameters. For this purpose, two country specific models were stepwise compared at a time with respect to one of the five γ -parameters that was proposed to be influenced by cultural dimensions. Thereby, one of the five γ -parameters was restricted and the constrained model was compared with a more general model, which allowed these parameters to vary freely across subgroups. The significance of the change of the χ^2 -value with regard to one additional d.f. when moving from the restricted model to the more general model together with the parameter estimate indicate whether the two country samples vary, to what extent they vary, and whether the moderating effect is significant. The results of the multiple group analysis partly support the hypothesized cross-cultural effects. In this regard, one could neither observe a stronger impact of actual self congruity on a brand's self-expression value nor a stronger effect of self-expression value on behavioral intention for the individualistic countries as compared with the collectivist country South Korea (H_6 and H_7). Obviously, also people in collectivist societies feel the need to express their actual self concept through brands. This observation will be reconsidered in detail in the discussion section.

On the other hand, the pair wise comparisons of two countries with respect to one of the model's path coefficients reveal that the effect of ideal self congruity on self-expression value (H_2) is significantly stronger in the US than in France ($\Delta\chi^2 = 12.11$, $p < .01$) or South Korea ($\Delta\chi^2 = 28.64$, $p < .01$), since the US score high on the MAS dimension thus, supporting H_8 . Similarly, this effect is also significantly stronger in Germany than in France ($\Delta\chi^2 = 24.27$, $p < .01$) and also stronger than in South Korea ($\Delta\chi^2 = 10.49$, $p < .01$). Therefore, these results provide a strong support for the proposition that in masculine societies people use brands to enhance their self concept as they are more oriented towards earnings and achievement.

Furthermore, the effect of ideal social congruity on prestige value is significantly stronger for France that scores high on PD than for Germany ($\Delta\chi^2 = 39.93$, $p < .01$) and higher than for the

US ($\Delta\chi^2 = 26.51$, $p < .01$) since both countries show rather low PD scores. Likewise, the effect is significantly stronger for the high PD country South Korea than for Germany ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.13$, $p < .05$). However, as the respective path coefficient in the US is not higher than in South Korea, the results only partly confirm the hypothesis that in countries where PD is high people are vastly motivated by prestige and use brands to demonstrate their intended social position (H_9). Similarly, the effect of prestige value on behavioral intention is significantly stronger for the high PD country France than for Germany ($\Delta\chi^2 = 26.99$, $p < .01$). However, all other comparisons did not show the hypothesized direction. Even more interestingly, a moderate effect of prestige value on behavioral intention was only found for the US, although PD is low here. These observations are contrary to the stated hypotheses (H_9 , H_{10}) and need to be discussed in the following section.

5. Discussion

The results of this study offer a number of important implications for international marketing and management. First of all, empirical support was found that brands function as means of self-expression in all of the four countries. It was observed that preferences for a particular brand serve self-verification and self-enhancement purposes, both for an independent and an interdependent self-concept. In the latter case, brands are used as a social symbol in order to obtain a desired social acceptance. However, the importance of these different motives varies between these countries – thus indicating that significant differences between cultures exist that should be considered carefully. A discussion of the implications for research, managerial implications, as well as limitations and directions for future research follows.

5.1 Implications for International Marketing Research

A SEM explaining the self-expressive function of brands was developed. The model structure holds in four countries that differ in important cultural dimensions. In this regard, empirical evidence was found that customers use brands for self-verification by choosing brands that are congruent with their actual self-concept. Moreover, individuals seek to enhance their self-image by purchasing brands that are congruent with their ideal self-concept. Finally, brands carry extrinsic values such as prestige that enable customers to approach their ideal social self-concept thus, gaining social acceptance. However, it is found that especially the cultural dimensions MAS and PD influence the relevance of these different motives. In this study it was proposed that the motivation for self-verification to be highest in individualistic countries, whereas the self-enhancement purpose to be more important in masculine countries. In addition, it was hypothesized that in countries where PD is high extrinsic values of brands are of major importance to gain social approval.

In France and Germany the differences of the path coefficients were observed as expected. Therefore, evidence was found for the proposition that cultural dimensions influence customers' motive to use brands as means of self-expression. However, in South Korea some of the effects found were not in line with the hypotheses. In this collectivistic country the effect of actual self congruity on a brand's self-expression value is as important as in countries where IND is high. A plausible explanation of this observation might provide the concept of 'modern collectivism' that "presupposes individualism by viewing societies as mere aggregates of like individuals" (Murphy 1990, p. 293). Consequently, people in

collectivistic societies may indeed feel the need to differentiate themselves from other peer groups and at the same time appreciating interdependence within their own peer group. However, this explanation requires further research with regard to the motive of differentiation by using certain brands and the consideration of other collectivistic countries in the data set.

Moreover, also contrary to the stated hypotheses, a strong effect of ideal social congruity on prestige value and a moderate effect of prestige value on behavioral intention for the US was observed, although PD is low here. These findings indicate that in the US brands are also intensively used for social approval, which has to be explained by other variables than IND and PD. Another explanation for cultural difference is provided by Schwartz (1999) in his theory of cultural values. One of his three dimensions is named mastery, which refers to the self-perception of individuals in the respective culture as being able to assert control over the natural and social world in order to support personal or group interests (Schwartz 1999). Although some studies found a correlation of the mastery dimension with Hofstede's (1980) dimensions, such as power distance (Smith, et al. 2002), other authors conclude that Schwartz's (1999) values include additional elements of culture (Steenkamp 2001). In this regard, Penz, and Stöttinger (2008) recently showed that the mastery dimension is adequate in explaining cultural difference in preferences for counterfeits. Hence, the relatively high mastery score of the US in comparison to the other three countries (Schwartz 1999) might provide an alternative rationale for the moderate impact of prestige value on behavioral intention in the US. In addition, the US-specific brand personality scale provides another possible explanation for this observation, which is consistent with the first line of reasoning. The US brand personality scale encompasses the dimensions sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker 1997); whereas the first three dimensions are also present in human personality scales "sophistication and ruggedness capture more aspirational images associated with wealth and status" (Aaker/Benet-Martinez/Garolera 2001, p. 494). Taking into account that brands are consumption symbols and, therefore, also carriers of culture (Aaker/Benet-Martinez/Garolera 2001), one might conclude that wealth and status are dominant values in US-society and have to be explained by other cultural peculiarities than the PD dimension.

5.2 Implications for International Brand Management

From a managerial standpoint, the findings of this study have important implications for global brand management. First, the confirmed model is appropriate to explain how brands serve as means of self-expression. This may help brand manufacturers in formulating USPs and defining brand personalities. Second, one can identify culture-specific consumption motives that can then be targeted adequately.

With regard to brands as means of self-expression, this model shows that customers evaluate brands according to their brand personalities and relate them to the various dimensions of their self-concept. Accordingly, brand managers have to identify favorable personality traits of their target group members when defining brand personalities. Subsequently, the brand represents symbolic benefits for individuals, either because it allows them to express their independent self or it enables them to position themselves in their social context, and to express their prestige, wealth, and status. Thus, brand management can form customers' preferences by emphasizing intrinsic and/or extrinsic values of the brand and relate them to a distinctive brand personality.

Furthermore, the results of this study show managers of global brands that the convergence hypothesis must be questioned. Global brands have been characterized as highly standardized regarding positioning and marketing mix (Aaker/Joachimsthaler 1999; Levitt 1983; Quelch 1999). However, the study findings suggest that global brand management has to take into account that brands as means of self-expression are used for different purposes. Whereas in masculine countries brands that show high ideal congruity are used for self-enhancement and means for achievement, customers choose brands for social approval mostly in countries where PD is high. Consequently, international brand manufacturers need to create a global branding approach that establishes a consistent brand personality across countries while – at the same time – allowing brand management to emphasize particular facets of this brand personality according to the cultural orientation of the country of interest. Moreover, these findings point out the need for formulating country-specific communication and selling propositions within a global branding approach.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study addresses the important issue of whether the self-expressive function of brands differs in countries that show cultural differences. Hofstede's (1980) framework of cultural

dimensions was applied to formulate hypotheses on cultural effects. Although these dimensions were derived some time ago, they have been confirmed by many subsequent studies, and remain valid until today (De Mooij 2004). Culture as a complex, multidimensional construct can never be fully grasped, yet, Hofstede's (1980) framework offers a "simple, practical, and usable shortcut to the integration of culture into studies" (Soares/Farhangmehr/Shoham 2007, p. 279). Even more important, it explains most of the variation of consumption and consumer behavior across countries and enables marketing executives to quantify the effects of culture (De Mooij 2000).

For the empirical design matched samples of undergraduate students were recruited in the four countries to control for demographic factors. Although the selection of matched samples has been identified as one way to achieve sample comparability (Sekaran 1983), this non-representativeness is a limitation of this study and points out avenues for further research with samples comprising different customer groups. This would help to enhance the generalizability of these results.

Similarly, one could argue that this sample encompasses only four countries that are all economically well developed. Thus, comparing the results at hand with data collected in emerging markets and developing countries is an interesting and challenging area for future research. In this regard, one could propose that people in less developed countries point a different importance to brands' consumption values than customers from highly developed countries and explain these disparities with different consumption requirements on part of the customers. In this context, the study should encompass additional consumer product categories and allow for a comparison of high and low involvement products or product domains seen as more or less symbolic of identity, as recently shown by Berger and Heath (2007).

Latest research has shown that customer's expertise affect the relationship of self-image congruence on satisfaction judgments (Jamal/Al-Marri 2007). Thus, a possible extension of this research may be the inclusion of personality traits such as the need for uniqueness, extroversion, etc. as additional moderators in the model at hand in addition to the cultural dimensions considered here. It may be reasonable to assume that personality traits determine the motives to use brands as means of self-expression. This extension would also help to understand to what extent the observed differences of the country specific SEM can actually

be attributed to cultural differences.

Finally, this model was constrained to one extrinsic and one intrinsic consumption value of brands. With regard to the findings that customers from the collectivistic country South Korea use brands to express their actual self-concept in the same way as customers from individualistic countries, one could include other consumption values such as uniqueness value in the model and further investigate the modern collectivism phenomenon.

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Appendix

Table A1: Measurement and Item Reliability

Construct name and sample item ^{a)}	Cronbach's alphas and range of item-to-total correlations
<i>Actual self congruity</i> (3 items): E.g., this brand is consistent with how I see myself. Items adapted from Sirgy et al. (1997)	Cronbach's $\alpha = .894$.757 $\leq r \leq$.824
<i>Ideal self congruity</i> (3 items): E.g., this brand is consistent with how I would like to be. Items adapted from Sirgy et al. (1997)	Cronbach's $\alpha = .898$.770 $\leq r \leq$.823
<i>Ideal social self congruity</i> (3 items): E.g., this brand is consistent with how I want others to see me. Items adapted from Sirgy et al. (1997)	Cronbach's $\alpha = .852$.672 $\leq r \leq$.780
<i>Self expression value</i> (4 items): E.g., this brand allows me to express myself. Items adapted from Knox and Walker (2001)	Cronbach's $\alpha = .852$.681 $\leq r \leq$.715
<i>Prestige value</i> (5 items): E.g., with this brand I can make good impressions on others. Items adapted from Sweeney and Soutar (2001)	Cronbach's $\alpha = .870$.664 $\leq r \leq$.743
<i>Behavioral Intention</i> (3 items): E.g., it is very likely that I will buy this brand. Items adapted from Bone and Ellen (1992) and Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal (1991)	Cronbach's $\alpha = .808$.616 $\leq r \leq$.710

^{a)} All items were measured using 5-point Likert scales anchored „strongly disagree/strongly agree“.

Tables

Table 1: Country Rating by Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede 2003)

Country	Individualism (IND)	Masculinity (MAS)	Power Distance (PD)
France	71	43	68
Germany	67	66	35
South Korea	18	39	60
United States	91	62	40

Table 2: Summary Statistics for Measurement Scales

	Reliability range of indicator variables	Range of t-values	Reliability of factors
Actual Self Congruity	.65 / .82	20.09 / 23.70	.79
Ideal Self Congruity	.68 / .81	20.63 / 23.59	.79
Ideal Social Self Congruity	.54 / .82	17.08 / 22.25	.71
Self-Expression Value*	.57 / .64	17.56 / 19.00	.68
Prestige Value**	.53 / .67	16.95 / 20.03	.72
Behavioral Intention	.48 / .73	15.30 / 19.20	.76

* GFI = 1.00, AGFI = .98, RMSEA = .04

** GFI = .98, AGFI = .94, RMSEA = .08

Table 3: SEM Estimation Results by Country

Path	Standardized Coefficients (γ)			
	France	Germany	South Korea	United States
AS \rightarrow Self-Exp	.87**	.57**	.70**	.60**
IS \rightarrow Self-Exp	.02	.30**	.16	.39**
ISS \rightarrow Prest	.78**	.62**	.66**	.76**
Self-Exp \rightarrow BI	.52**	.46**	.47**	.49**
Prest \rightarrow BI	.10	.00	.00	.25*

* γ is significant at $p < .05$; ** γ is significant at $p < .01$

Figures

Figure 1: Hypothesized Structural Equation Model

