Dutch identity in fashion: Co-evolution between brands and consumers
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We all like to think of ourselves as unique and creative personalities with their very own interpretation of fashion. Arguably, there are a number of individuals who stand out from the crowd with their clothing choices. But how many of us are actually part of that group? After all, one of fashion’s paradoxes is the dialectics between a basic instinct for collective belonging and our desire for differentiation. This book studies the relationship between ‘individuals’ and their clothing choices by exploring the different facets people wish to express through their clothes. On the one hand, it contributes to an understanding of the ways in which these choices are connected to certain brands. On the other hand, it means to give insight into the value systems that govern the relationship between brands and their main audience groups. Researching those aspects in the context of the Dutch fashion industry, this study raises the question whether we can actually speak of something like a Dutch fashion identity and whether this is reflected in a country-specific consumption attitude.

‘The truly fashionable are beyond fashion’
— Cecil Beaton

‘Fashion must be the most intoxicating release from the banality of the world’
— Diana Vreeland
DUTCH IDENTITY IN FASHION:
CO-EVOLUTION BETWEEN BRANDS
AND CONSUMERS

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT
ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam op gezag van de Rector Magnificus prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties ingestelde commissie, in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit op woensdag 12 juni 2013, te 11:00 uur door Constantin-Felix Freiherr von Maltzahn, geboren te Hannover, Duitsland.
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- University of Amsterdam
- Radboud University Nijmegen

The design and printing of this book have been made possible through the generous support of the Amsterdam Fashion Institute.
When I was young I was considered some sort of oddball, out of place and out of sync with the children at kindergarten, prep school, and high school. The problem was not so much my behaviour (although it probably contributed to the confusion) but my looks: while my friends wore jeans and T-shirts or jumpers I strutted the streets in purple velvet trousers, crisp white shirts, and silk vests with colourful flower prints. At the time, I did not realise that my style set me apart in a certain way — all I wanted was to have it my way and dress the way I liked, or so I thought. With time, however, my experiences taught me that clothing is not only a means of self-expression but also a collective signifier, signalling time and place (or a certain zeitgeist, for that matter), affiliation with particular groups or social classes, common lifestyles (e.g. punk, Goth), or professional environments (e.g. banker, consultant, architect, artist). One of fashion’s most fascinating qualities is its dialectic nature: it signifies individual and collective identity simultaneously.

Ironically perhaps, after I made my peace with the fact that I was ‘different’ from my peers, I have never desired to actually belong to any but one group: the group of people who like to think of themselves as innovative. What might sound like a silly schoolboy’s wish is actually an almost impossible social condition: the truth is that most of the time our clothing choices are governed by subtle processes that do not surface in any conscious way when we are buying our clothes or when we are assembling our wardrobe for the next day. That goes for me just like for everyone else. So, even though I would like to believe that my fashion picks are fairly unique and not in any way related to a specific group, that is actually not the case. Each of us is part of something larger, simply because we all have a history and a particular background. Whether we choose in favour or against a popular style — it all ends the same: there is no escape from identifying with someone or something. At the end of the day we all want to belong, somehow.

Identification takes place between individuals and groups. In a fashion context, this process also bears a relation to clothing brands and their branding strategies. The question is how this relation is defined and how entire collectives of idiosyncratic individuals connect to their preferred styles and related brands. What values systems govern the relationship and to what extent do they differ between brands? My research seeks to provide answers to these questions in the context of the Dutch fashion landscape. Moreover, next to understanding the dynamics between brands and their consumer groups, the goal of this dissertation is to explore whether there is something typically Dutch about these relations.

This research would have not been possible without the assistance and generosity of a lot of people. First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor Dany Jacobs from the University of Amsterdam, ArtEZ, and HAN for his sharp advice, relentless support, and most of all — for giving me the chance to actually participate in this project in the first place. Originally I applied for another PhD position within the NWO project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’. During the interview there was this one guy sitting in the commission, all grumpy face and arms folded, who would not say a word until the talk was almost finished. At long last, he interrupted me with three poignant questions and he would not let go until he knew what he wanted to know. Later I learned that the man with the grumpy face was not grumpy at all, but sharp-witted, affirmative, and critical to the very last bit. Against all odds, he entrusted me with a fascinating task and I am forever grateful to have been given the chance to work together with him on this project.

Academically speaking, I come from a background that is alien to empirical research. What Dany has taught me is to look closely at the world around me, and with time I have come to understand that what at first glance looks rather banal — i.e., the ordinary life surrounding us — is one of the most fascinating areas of study. Time and again, he has put my feet back on the ground when I was lost in fashion lingo (‘hyper’, as he used to call it), and he showed me that hard work and fun are not binary oppositions but complementary parts. In my view, one of his strongest points is his openness to debates and I have enjoyed every single one of them, primarily so because they were interesting and productive and brought me a step further, not only in my research but also in my personal development.

I would also like to thank the research group that I have been fortunate to be part of. Joseph Teunissen for his helpful suggestions and great support in teaching activities, Anneke Smelik for her critical commentary and feedback as well as for steering the NWO project in such a flawless manner, and Michael Scheffer for his extensive knowledge of the textile and fashion industry. Furthermore, I am indebted to the group of fellow PhDs who have been involved in the project. I suppose it makes a big difference whether you go through a period of four years in solitude or together with a number of people who share the same office space, face similar problems in their research, and experience a similar learning curve. I would like to thank MaaIke Feitsma for her insight and support. She made the project fun all the way and helped me to stay focused. Also, she has been of great assistance in all matters concerning the organisation of events — admittedly, not one of my strongest points. For her kindness and consistently interesting point of view I would like to thank Danielle Bruggeman. We have had many discussions and I have been a pleasure to learn about her opinion and profit from it. I would like to thank Anja Koppchen for taking a critical stance towards my work, which I have greatly benefited from. Also, she has helped me out countless times when I was once again unable to manage the slippery slope down Word, Excel, or PowerPoint.

I am highly indebted to all the organisations that made this project possible in the first place. The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for funding a large-scale operation concerned with a subject that many still consider superficial and unworthy of academic scrutiny. I would like to thank the Koetser Foundation, Premesla (The Netherlands Institute for Design and Fashion), and the Opleidings- en Ontwikkelingsfonds voor de Confectie-industrie (Educatio nal Fund for the Dutch Clothing Industry) for the financial backing and interest in the project. Further, I would like to thank the Radboud University Nijmegen where I have had my office and which has always been a pleasant working environment. My thanks to ArtEZ for the warm welcome when I started my teaching activities as well as for the flawless organisation of the group seminars. I would like to thank the University of Amsterdam and Saxion, University of Applied Sciences Enschede, for their support. Also, I would like to thank the Amsterdam Fashion Institute for their generous support to finance the design and printing of this book. The result, at least in visual terms, would have been a far lesser one, if it was not for the courtesy of Souraya Bouwmans-Sarraf and the artistic skill of Marcel Stoopen of Studio Marcel Stoopen.

The case studies are an essential part of this dissertation and I would like to express my gratitude to those who allowed me to have insight into their business or even encouraged my research activities on their companies. The experience with those firms that agreed to collaborate became all the more valuable, because when I was approaching them to cooperate during my first year, it became apparent that certainly not all of them were willing to. I would like to thank everybody at CoraKempferman for their warm welcome and assistance during my research. It was an absolute pleasure to work with the entire team. I am indebted to Michael Hulzebosch of Vanilia, who despite initial doubts allowed me to study his brand from all different angles and gave permission to conduct field work in the out- lets. Furthermore, I would like to thank Truus and Riet Spijkers for their time and energy. They facilitated great insight into their work and helped make the trip to lasi an unforgettable experience.

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Dutch Identity in Fashion
1.1 INTRODUCTION

We all like to think we are unique and creative personalities. Playing on this theme, the Amsterdam Fashion Institute even created the somewhat paradoxical brand name ‘Individuals’ for the in-house collection of its design students. On the streets we certainly see quite a few people who dress very much in their own way — but how many are truly individuals in relation to the total? Even in fashion schools, supposedly a hub of creativity, it is remarkable to what extent most students can be subsumed under only a few categories of possible style groups: some follow the minimalist black, white and grey theme à la Maison Margiela; others are more expressive, resembling the look of Vivienne Westwood or John Richmond; and yet another group is comprised of long-haired blondes with a chic but fairly non-descript stylistic repertoire.

The question is how unique we actually are in our clothing choices and to what extent we not only try to express our own identities but also that we belong to certain groups. My dissertation studies the relationship between ‘individuals’ and their clothing choices, exploring the different facets people wish to express through their clothes and the ways these are connected to specific brands and the value systems that govern the brand-consumer relationship. More specifically, my study looks into those aspects in the context of the Dutch fashion industry and raises the question whether we can actually speak of something like a Dutch fashion identity and whether this is reflected in a country-specific consumption attitude.

1.2 A RENEWED INTEREST IN FASHION

By accident, I recently came across a review of Gilles Lipovetsky’s ‘L’empire de l’éphémère. La mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes’ (1987), a classic in the field of fashion research that looks into the phenomenon from a sociological perspective by sketching the historical progression from the beginning of the 20th century through to postmodernity. French philosopher Luc Ferry (whose critique, originally published in L’Express, was cited as an endorsement on the book’s back cover) wrote about the book: ‘Like all books that really count, Lipovetsky’s possesses the virtue of breaking the commonplace consensus. ... It is a savory analysis of the infinite detail of the meanderings in the ephemeral.’ Ferry touches upon a sensitive point: the ephemeral and frivolous nature of the subject that has earned fashion a somewhat dubious reputation. It is certainly true that in recent years the phenomenon has received a little more attention in the academic world. Still, the fact remains that in academia (and outside of it) it is not uncommon to look at fashion as something peripheral and slightly bland (Brydon and Niessen 1998; Kawamura 2005, 2011; Lipovetsky 1994; McNeil 2010; McRobbie 1998, Palmer 1997, Tseëlon 2001a, 2001b). That is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, there is no denying that it is a flippant phenomenon in many ways. In my eyes, however, this rather adds to the fascination instead of detracting from it, mostly so because its sheer presence and malleable nature provide ample opportunity for academic analysis.

While the historical roots cannot be clearly pinpointed, social-scientific fashion research started to gain more momentum at the end of the 19th century with Thorstein Veblen’s ‘The Theory of the Leisure Class’ (1899) that in bits touches on the phenomenon. Shortly after, Georg Simmel published his essay ‘Fashion’ (1904). In 1930, J. C. Flüeget’s ‘The Psychology of Clothes’ was published, followed by Richardson and Kroeber’s ‘Three Centuries of Women’s Dress Fashions’ (1940) and later on, for instance, Roland Barthes’ famous ‘The Fashion System’ (1967). During the past decades the subject has become increasingly accepted in academic discourse, with more and more studies being published. Lipovetsky’s book, which I introduced at the beginning of this section, is a sociostorical analysis of modern fashion, starting with the early days when global trends were largely determined by the ruling styles emerging from Paris as the world’s fashion capital, through to what he calls fashion’s ‘democratic revolution’ (1987: 88) when anti-fashions started to gain momentum and the masses began to define their own style. Others followed. To name but a few: Elizabeth Wilson’s ‘Adorned in Dreams’ (1985) sketches the complex history of fashion in relation to modernity, Anne Holland’s ‘Seeing Through Clothes’ (1993) is an examination of the representation of the human body and clothing in Western art, Caroline Evans’ ‘Fashion at the Edge’ (2003) scrutinises the bleak fashion of the 1990s, and Solomon and Rabolt’s ‘Consumer Behaviour in Fashion’ (2004) takes a multicultural perspective on consumption patterns.

While the above publications merely present an overview of topical research, it is surprising that when we look at the larger body of academic work, only very few studies1 are concerned with the fashion of a specific country. Some publications analyse national styles of dress but hardly any scholars approach the subject of fashion, defined as seasonally changing clothing styles, in the context of a particular national context. The project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’, of which this study is the first major publication, is the first larger scale study that explores national fashion in relation to modernity, of which this study is the first major publica-

industry by exploring to what extent there is something like a Dutch fashion identity and by trying to identify in what ways it possibly becomes manifest.

1.3 DUTCH FASHION IDENTITY

Arguably, every nation has its own rites and rituals, its own cultural history, its own traditions, and its own way of living. Some of these factors are intangible and have to do with the people’s mentality or a country’s political situation; others are straightforward like, for instance, local weather conditions or the topographical situation. The question is to what extent those factors have an impact on the way people dress in one country or, more precisely, whether there actually is something like a local fashion identity and in what ways it shows.

In its capacity to equip wearers with a flexible vocabulary to illustrate different facets of their identity, fashion needs to be interpreted as both a cultural artefact and a tool for negotiating identity (Lipovetsky 2002: 145). Kellner (1994: 160-161) extends that argument, stating that ‘fashion is an important constituent of one’s identity’, helping to determine how one is perceived and accepted. Fashion offers choices of clothes, style, and image through which one could produce an individual identity. The symbolic function of clothes hence facilitates a sort of cultural vehicle or ‘a short-hand way of signalling place and identity as well as a way of performing social intercourse’ (Craik 1994: 9).

Solomon and Rabolt (2004: 6) define fashion as ‘a style that is accepted by a large group at a given time’. However, style can also refer to a specific way of expressing oneself. It can be individual and personal or connected to larger collective entities. In certain cases groups can be identified by a specific dress code, which is enmeshed with local traditions and climate as well as the country’s day-to-day reality (Rubinstein 2001: 14:15). On the other hand, there is a fashion business (national and international), that responds to the demands of local audiences and changes with the seasons. It is an interplay of tradition and innovation, or about assimilating current international trends and their adaptation to the underlying stylistic repertoire that guides the way Dutch people dress, their consumption attitude, and even the way they carry themselves.

Countries like Italy or France have long been recognised as ‘fashion countries’. In the Netherlands, however, it has only been since a few decades that people have started to develop an interest in local fashion (Teunissen and van Zijl 2000). The main hypothesis so far has been that Dutch fashion is intimately connected to the country’s modernist tradition (e.g. De Stijl), Willem M. Dudok, de Haagse School, de Amsterdamse School), which derived its rationale from clean and sober aesthetics and a graphic approach to design and art. It is the ambition of this project to advance the existing body of knowledge towards a broader and more comprehensive perspective. My own study is concerned with the purchase behaviour of Dutch consumers in relation to group and brand identities. My goal is, on the one hand, to understand the different value systems that connect select audience groups to their preferred brands and, on the other hand, to explore to what extent these values can be related to Dutch culture at large.

1.4 DUTCH CONSUMPTION MENTALITY: POINTS OF DEPARTURE

We all choose a certain type of clothing because (we believe) it reflects who we are or, at least, the person we would like to be. Our desire to express ourselves through our clothes and other aspects of our identity is the driving force behind our fashion choices. People use clothes to convey a message about who they are, what they stand for, and what they believe in. In this respect, fashion is a way of communicating our personal identity and our social relationships with others. It allows us to expressourselves and to interact with others in a meaningful way. Fashion is not just about what we wear, but also about how we wear it and in what context we wear it.

The question about a Dutch fashion identity oscillates between these two poles. On the one hand, there may be a stylistic code of a national integration, which is enmeshed with local traditions and climate as well as the country’s day-to-day reality (Rubinstein 2001: 14:15). On the other hand, there is a fashion business (national and international), that responds to the demands of local audiences and changes with the seasons. It is an interplay of tradition and innovation, or about assimilating current international trends and their adaptation to the underlying stylistic repertoire that guides the way Dutch people dress, their consumption attitude, and even the way they carry themselves.

The underlying questions are whether it is possible to extrapolate from similarities in the way people dress to: a. the value systems that govern the relationship between brands and consumers; b. the relation between individual and collective identity and their impact on purchase behaviour; c. the nature of the relationship between brands and their main audience groups.

Taking a multidisciplinary approach, my research integrates the supply perspective as well and looks at the different ways Dutch fashion firms try to create or reflect a specific identity. Focusing on the mechanisms through which fashion brands seek to distinguish themselves, my study explores the interactive relations between supply and demand and tries to identify the extent to which Dutch fashion firms co-evolve with their audiences. The relation between supply and demand is always defined by a certain degree of reciprocity. Firms need to warrant stable sales levels as, in most cases, their products are directed at a specific target market. The effort traditionally involves the value proposition: the way products are branded and marketed or compare to competitors in the same segment, the service provided inside the shops and the extent to which a company is exclusive. At the same time, there is an implicit dress culture in most countries that local fashion firms need to account for in some way. The Dutch, for instance, are not exactly known for scintillating, elegant looks or great panache when it comes to their clothing choices. At the same time, they are certainly not fashion averse either. There is a correlation between brands and consumers, then, materialises in a rather subtle way: it is an approximation to, and accounting for, the specific demands in the country.

Directing the scope of analysis to the Dutch national level, my research seeks to unravel the type of relationship between Dutch fashion firms and their consumers and tries to identify the factors that in my research are understood as loose communities that are inspired by similarities in style. Based on Michel Maffesoli’s concept of ‘neo-tribes’ my study set out to study the audience groups of a select number of Dutch fashion brands. While Maffesoli’s approach is very much based on the idea of fluid and temporary formations of people ‘that favour appearance and “form”’ (1996: 98), I have adapted his idea to a fashion context with a strong emphasis on style preference, purchase behaviour, brand preference, and the life-worlds of consumers. ‘Style groups’, as I call them, are loose groups of people whose mentality is expressed through similar lifestyles and stylistic preferences. The basic idea is that style groups are formed by a part of consumers and a number of brands that are situated in a similar segment and exhibit common features. The underlying questions are whether it is possible to extrapolate from similarities in the way people dress to: a. the value systems that govern the relationship between brands and consumers; b. the relation between individual and collective identity and their impact on purchase behaviour; c. the nature of the relationship between brands and their main audience groups.

For the demand perspective similar questions apply. Here, I am asking the question about similarities in the consumption patterns of different audiences. Do Dutch consumers relate to their preferred brands based on similar value connections? Is it possible to single out certain characteristics that distinguish the Dutch fashion landscape from other countries? Is there something like a Dutch fashion identity and, if so, how can we define it?

My goal with this dissertation is not so much to find definitive answers to these questions but to point out tendencies which may possibly distinguish the Dutch fashion industry from other countries. Just like in every other country, the national narrative is defined by the interplay of cultural heritage and the present social situation. I set out along these lines to explore how Dutch identity can be interpreted in a clothing-consumption context and to what extent certain facets of local culture are reflected in the local fashion landscape.

1.5 STRUCTURE

To reveal some of my conclusions: this study will show that the relation between Dutch fashion brands and their main audience groups is diverse and based on different points of connection. Contrary to the common perception that the Dutch are unfashionable and somewhat dowdy, my study will show that many of them have a pronounced interest in clothing products and purchase a comparatively large amount of...
products at a time. From a demand perspective, my results will demonstrate that, across the firms I studied, the relation between consumers and brands is defined by similar value connections. From a supply perspective, the study is going to show that none of the companies I researched incorporates their Dutch national background as a marketing ploy or retention fix. Instead, Dutchness shows in the way the brands respond to the ruling demands and fashion mentality or the way tribute is being paid to the Dutch lifestyle. Working with a joint approach of quantitative and qualitative research methods, each of the case studies will start with a description of the companies and how they are positioned. The type of product and the organisational set-up are described in greater detail as are the marketing and retention strategies. This will be followed by an analysis of the results of the consumer research. I will compare the views and opinions of designers, marketers, and shop assistants with the in-depth interviews I conducted with patrons of the respective firms. Those findings will be complemented by a quantitative analysis of questionnaires that I completed with consumers over a period of three to four months inside the outlets of the different brands.

The structure of the book is as follows: CHAPTER 2 will introduce different terms and conceptions of identity and will present the conclusions of this research. In an attempt to define (an assumed) Dutch fashion identity, the chapter discusses this subject from different points of view. First, different aspects of personal identity are going to be explored, with a focus on the process of identity construction and how the relations between individual cultural agents and larger collective entities are defined. Furthermore, Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ (1983) will be explained in order to show that collective identities are not necessarily based on face to face interaction but can also take shape as an imaginary concept. Introducing a number of basic assumptions, the chapter will also discuss the hypothesis of a national fashion identity in relation to the question in what way fashion can constitute a carrier of different cultural and collective identities. Lastly, brand identity will be introduced as a concept illustrating the relation between Dutch fashion brands and their consumers.

CHAPTER 3 will discuss different models of socialisation and will show how in the previous century we have progressed from rather narrow to more open and diverse social structures. The aim of the chapter is to develop a sound theoretical framework and facilitate an understanding of the different variables at play in the context of my study. Introducing a sound theoretical framework and facilitate an understanding of the different variables at play in the context of my study is actually about the relation between individual and group identity and their relation to a consumption context, I will introduce the term self-concept in order to show by what processes purchase behaviour is motivated. In the same context, consumer involvement will be defined as a measure for the difference of relations that consumers establish and maintain with brands. Furthermore, the chapter will define ‘style groups’ as a model to account for the dynamics between individuals and groups in a fashion context. Based on an assumed link between clothing style and identity construction, the ‘style group’ concept provides a tool to analyse consumer collectives and their purchase behaviour in a fashion context. As a last point, the concept of co-creation will be discussed to provide a marketing approach that embraces market knowledge as a means to build long-term relations. The theories fleshed out in this chapter provide analytical tools that help us come to terms with the way different brands and their audience groups relate to one another.

CHAPTER 4 will introduce the methodology that was used across the case studies and will explain the different concerns that were taken into consideration to define the set-up of the research. In an effort to respond to the questions I raised in the previous section and to explore the relation between brands and consumers, my research is based on a complementary perspective. Working with an explorative approach, my research is built around mixed-methods research strategy. The consumer perspective was examined by using a combination of questionnaires and in-depth interviews in order to facilitate an understanding of the general value connections at play and provide insight into the consumers’ experiences. Those insights were compared with interviews I conducted with people in different functions at each of the firms I researched, in order to develop an understanding of the organisational structure and marketing strategies.

CHAPTER 5 addresses the question of a Dutch fashion mentality head-on in the form of an expert panel I conducted together with my supervisor, Prof. Dany Jacobs. In an attempt to explore the question in what way Dutch fashion can constitute a carrier of individual and collective identities. Lastly, brand identity will be introduced as a concept illustrating the relation between Dutch fashion brands and their consumers.

CHAPTER 6 through CHAPTER 9 will present the findings of my research on a number of Dutch fashion brands. CHAPTER 6 will discuss the relation between Corakemperman, an example of ‘wild design’, and its main audience group. CHAPTER 7 will present the findings of my research on Vanilla, an example of what I called ‘Stylish Mid-Market’. CHAPTER 8 will analyse the development of Spijkers en Spijkers, a case of ‘Modernist Design with a Twist’, while CHAPTER 9 is going to reveal how the relation between G-Star, an example of ‘Sophisticated Casual’, and its consumers is defined.

CHAPTER 10 will present the conclusions of this research with respect to a number of theoretical concerns. Showcasing a synthesis of how the different fashion brands I researched co-evolve and forge ties with their audiences, this chapter responds to the main questions of the study and highlights basic elements of the Dutch fashion identity in the confines of my own field of research.

This dissertation belongs with the larger research project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’, which was part of the NWO (The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) programme ‘Cultural Dynamics’. The four senior researchers involved in this venture were: project leader Anneke Smelik, professor of Visual Culture at the Radboud University Nijmegen; Dany Jacobs, professor of Industrial Dynamics and Innovation Policies at the University of Amsterdam and professor of Art, Culture & Economy at the universities of applied science ArtEZ & HAN in Arnhem; Michel Scheffer, professor of Fashion and Material Design at Saxion University of Applied Sciences in Enschede; and José Teunissen, professor of Fashion, Design and Theory at ArtEZ Institute of the Arts in Arnhem and visiting professor at the London College of Fashion.

The Radboud University Nijmegen hosted four Ph.D. students for this programme. My fellow Ph.D. students were: Danielle Bruggeman, whose dissertation is entitled ‘The Performance of Identity through Fashion’; Maaike Feitsma, with a dissertation in Dutch ‘Nederlandse mode? Een verkenning van mythes en betekenis’ (“Dutch Fashion? An exploration of myths and meanings”); and Anja Köppchen who wrote ‘Dutch Fashion Industry in a Globalised Market’. Together with the book Dutch Fashion in a Globalised World edited by Anneke Smelik, these publications are the result of the research project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’ that was performed between 2008 and 2013.
CHAPTER 2

THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In an early comparative study about cross-cultural differences in fashion consumption (Tigges et al. 1980) found that Dutch consumers showed higher levels of involvement with fashion and lifestyle industries than, for example, consumers in the United States. Trying to explore cultural differences in fashion and clothing consumption on a global scale, the report suggests that Dutch consumers put a premium on attributes like ‘fashionable appeal’, ‘comfort’ and ‘individuality’ (ibid. 19). Although the results are dated, the general ambition of that study was similar to the goals of this one: trying to account for the relative positioning of Dutch fashion (brands) and consumption behaviour in the face of an increasingly globalised economy.

The consumption of products reaches beyond the actual purchasing act. As a consequence, common interests around brands and products have the potential to forge a link between people who identify with one another on the basis of symbolic attributes (Cova 1995; Cova 1997; Cova and Pace 2006; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Ostberg 2007). In its capacity to transmit socio-cultural messages, fashion by definition is about signification. As it is understood here, fashion is about signification. as it is understood here, transmission of meaning. In this chapter, section 2.2 will explore the term defines seasonally-changing clothing styles that are subject to both international and country-specific trends. On the one hand, fashion is a means of individual expression. On the other hand, it often embodies certain codes of recognition for one or more groups of people. Consciously or not, consumers may use clothing as a medium to illustrate their identity and relation to other individuals or groups. According to Stone (1962: 128), ‘a person’s appearance announces his identity, shows his values, expresses his mood, or proposes his attitude’. Accordingly, clothing functions as a repository for negotiating self-identity and the multiple ways individuals wish to give meaning to their persona. At the same time, it is imbued with a host of different and sometimes conflicting messages. Some people want to make specific statements about themselves (e.g. ‘I am sporty, elegant, extravagant, educated etc.’); others wish to show affiliation with particular social groups (e.g. punk, establishment); and still others simply abide by the modesty principle (Fluegel 1930: 58 ff.).

As presented in the previous chapter my research attempts to find answers to the question what value constructs play a role in the relationship between consumers and brands, how the retention strategies of different brands are structured, and what value connections play a role in the construction of consumer identities. In that way, the research deals with three central questions:

1. What are the different value systems that govern the brand-consumer relationship and is there something typically Dutch about them?
2. What level holds strongest when it comes to the purchase behaviour of Dutch consumers: individual identities, group identities, national or international sites of identification?
3. How do different audiences relate to their preferred brands? Do those ties have an impact on the buying behaviour of Dutch consumers?

The following two chapters present and explain the theoretical framework of my research. CHAPTER 2 will discuss critical aspects concerning individual, collective, and national identity and the relations between these different layers, whereas CHAPTER 3 takes a more consumption-oriented perspective and connects questions about identity to individual and collective sites of identification and their relation to consumption behaviour. In this chapter, section 2.2 will explore different aspects of personal identity. Pointers will be put to the process of identity construction and how the relations between individual cultural agents and larger collective entities are defined. Section 2.3 discusses Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ (1983) to provide an example of how identity is not always based on face-to-face interaction but can materialise just as well as an imaginary concept. Section 2.4 explores the possibility of a national fashion identity and introduces a number of aspects that need to be taken into consideration. Section 2.5 is an excursion into how fashion facilitates a carrier of individual and collective identities. As a last point in section 2.6, brand identity will be discussed to create a basis for exploring the relation between brands and consumers in CHAPTER 3.

2.2 PERSONAL IDENTITY: A TWO-SIDED AFFAIR

When we speak of identity the concept itself is not without its problems. Nowadays, the term is used rather loosely and seems to signify many things at the same time. As a result, it has become a kind of catch-all word whose definition is somewhat ambiguous. The aim of this section is to present a sketch of the topical discussions in the field and outline how identity has been defined by different scholars.

Many authors have claimed that during the past couple of decades we have progressed towards a sociality of plural identities (Huysseun 1986, 1988, Jameson 1998, MacGuigan 1999, Muggleton 2000; Sarup 1996, Wilson 1990). Personal identity is treated as fragmented and multireferential, polyvalent and diversified. It is assumed that every day we are confronted with a plethora of economic and cultural offerings from which we ‘borrow’ fragments to build our social identities. Bauman (2000: 80-82) equates this manner of constructing our social selves to a ‘supermarket of identities’ where we can shop around and mix and match different parts to come up with an authentic combination. Jacobs (2011: 5) adds to the argument that
quite often this supermarket of identities is related to supermarkets of fashion, as many people want to show off their social identity. The claim that about plurality are certainly true to the extent that the way we construct our identity nowadays is not altogether uniform as we draw on a plurality of different sources. In my eyes, however, it is questionable to what extent we can actually speak of ‘fragmented’ or ‘multi-plural’ identities. In fact, the majority of cases people after a certain age have a relatively consistent self-image, so that the amplitudes between different ‘social representations’ of ourselves are not all that strong. Instead, we would prefer to speak of gradual shifts in certain directions depending on different social framework works (e.g. formal/casual, work/friends, professional/private) that we operate in.

The discussion about authenticity that Bauman hints at is a rather common one. Personal identity is not only built around displaying uniqueness but signifies belonging to bigger collective entities. As Raab (2009: 227) argues, ‘[t]he trail is forked: one path ends in commonality and in identity shared by the person with others as members of certain categories or collectivities; the other ends in individuality or uniqueness, differentiating one person from another.’ We are thus faced with two opposing forces: the quest for authenticity and singularity and the desire to belong. The ‘split of identity’ is two-directional: we both send signals to our social environment as well as receive them from others. On the one hand, our self-understanding says ‘I am witty, good-looking, and intelligent’. That sense of self may or may not be congruent with the way others see us. On the other hand, we are shaped by experiences, influences, and a host of stimuli that are external to our selves and largely beyond our control. We receive them from our direct or indirect social environment, the media, and even fictitious sources like novels or films. The sum of these bilateral model ultimately makes up the way we de-

We refer to a particular social terrain only with a certain number of people. As she states, ‘our personal identity makes us different from other people. Our identity identifies us as the same as particular others’ (Heckman 2004: 9). In short, our identity is built around the poles of individuality and commonality. We construct our identity in relationship to specific groups and develop a sense of self within (or against) their inclusive powers.

2.3 IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

To be sure, group identity and a sense of belonging are not necessarily based on face to face interaction. Benedict Anderson (1983) developed the concept of ‘imagined communities’ whose members will never meet in the flesh in the majority of cases. Below such a community is based on mental images of affinity that are shared by its members – sometimes at a concrete, sometimes at a more abstract level. Following his argu-

ment, they are socially constructed entities, based on public imagination. Anderson himself builds his theory around the example of nationalism: although most citi-

izens share a sense of national identity, only the small-
est fraction will ever have contact with each other. To some extent they feel part of the community in spite of the fact that there is no interaction at a superordinate level. While people will mostly take their direct social environment as a referential frame, their sense of national identity is usually connected to common goals and value systems that are not pertinent to this immediate social network.

On this account, national identity has little to do with emotional proximity, but is usually developed as a mental concept that most citizens share, regardless of whether they are directly confronted with it or not.

A famous example comes from the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. As he recalls, he never paid much attention to his national identity until his Polish nationality was cast in doubt during an anti-Semitic wave in his home country in March 1968 (Bauman 2004: 12). By exten-

sion, the argument also works for specific groups. According to Bauman (ibid: 228), a person’s individ-

ual identity may be asserted, and accepted or rejected by others; it may be attributed to the person by others, and accepted or rejected by the person. Likewise, our shared identity may be that which we adopt as group members, and is accepted or rejected by others; it may be assigned as a category by others and accepted or rejected by ourselves. The two forces that shape our ‘core identity’ are therefore interdependent. Heckman (2004: 7) specifies this argument by making a distinc-
tion between personal and public identities. The former distinguishes us from others based on the sum of ex-
periences that have shaped (and keep shaping) our character. The latter is enmeshed with cohesive powers that integrate us in a specific social and cultural context. This one, too, is unique in the sense that we share

The quest for identity, then, is not an easy matter. While Anderson bases his theory on national identity the gen-
eral notion applies to other areas as well. Social bonds that are based on mutual recognition and identifica-
tion can be imagined or direct, mediated or interactive. Topically, social media are a case in point. For example, someone who is part of a Facebook group might identify with its members in spite of the fact that he has not met them in real life (Acquisti and Gross 2006: 3; Pitta and Fowler 2005: 266). Was Mr. Browne into a particular brand, was part of the firm’s Facebook community or participated in a brand-specific forum, he would be likely to share some sense of identification with the firm and other participants on the site. The same goes for brand communities that emerge around specific products (e.g. Apple). Some one who imagines himself to be part of that community will familiarise and identify with other devotees, based on shared rituals and common markers of identity (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001: 415). Anderson himself points out that belonging to an imagined community can be triggered or even reinforced by all kinds of public media that shape public imagination and help cre-
ate specific narratives. Marketing messages or particu-
lar company profiles may therefore contribute to the emergence of communities and sustain their existence across various media channels.

Belonging to a certain brand community can be an imaginary experience that does not require sharing di-

rect contact with other aficionados. As a devoted con-
sumer of upscale fashion labels, Mr. Browne may wish to buy into a specific social group. He believes that by dressing in a smart way and buying clothes from an established brand he will automatically become part of the group. While this is not necessarily the case (if, for instance, his manners are inadequate) the underly-

ing principle still holds true. It is actually unimportant whether his clothes and attitude fit a certain estima-
tory code or whether those ‘in the know’ approve of it. The majority of people are indeed ignorant when it comes to specific fashions, and they also use a specific look. Mr. Browne’s sense of belonging is not based on the same ground as the brand community. It is a mutual relationship or not. What the example is supposed to show is that belonging is not automatic-
ly connected to direct interaction or personal relations. It may be distant and imaginary during all the time we feel that we belong, but it is still there.

Further on, in CHAPTER 3 the notion of superlight communities and style groups will be discussed in more detail.

2.4 NATIONAL FASHION IDENTITY?

We have now seen how the processes of individual and group identity are interrelated and how we are directly or indirectly influenced by different sites of identification. Due to its malleable character national identity is a phenomenon that is hard to grasp. At the same time, there is a trend to advertise and play with the idea in a number of ways. Stereotypes like clogs and tulips in the Netherlands or Bratwurst and ‘Deutsche Grundli-

chichten’ in Germany, are cues that immediately trigger not only a familiar sensation but also a relationship be-
 tween a given culture and its constituents. To a certain extent these are tired clichés, we might say. That, how-
ever, does not mean that we should not take them seri-

ously. Beller and Leerssen (2007), for instance, present an extensive summary of popular national stereotypes. On the one hand they claim stereotypes are not static and thus open to some variation. On the other hand they stress the fact that stereotypes are practically im-

mune to revision, as otherwise they would lose their function. Stereotypes have their relevance and most of us use them to distinguish ourselves from others by means of more general concepts. Whether we like it or not, they are staples in the national narrative with his-
torical roots and contemporary bearings.

In a fashion context, too, we find back the notion of national identity in a number of ways. Events like the Dutch Fashion Award or Amsterdam International Fashion Week, buzzwords like the ‘Belgian’ or ‘Scandinavian’ school of design, all attest to the fact that fashion in its variations is not cut loose from certain constrictions of national identity. At the least, it is used as a distinguishing feature or an attribute of uniqueness that is meant to differentiate one fashion industry from the other. As this project is concerned with the relation between Dutch fashion firms and their audi-
ience groups, the guiding question is whether it is actu-
ally possible to speak of a Dutch collective identity on a more abstract level. In other words, can we derive from the research a set of core values or factors that are per-
tinent to the Dutch rather than any other national con-
text? Since Georg Simmel’s ‘Fashion’ (1904a), it is un-
derstood that dress-body relations are enmeshed with

FIG 2.1 THREE LEVELS OF IDENTITY
the dynamics of individualisation-socialisation and self-identity-group identity. On the one hand, we want to express ourselves in a way that distinguishes us from others. On the other hand, we wish to belong to one or more groups and connect our personality to a bigger social entity. As FIG 2.1 demonstrates, we are presented with at least a tripartite relationship between individual identity, group identities, and national identity that may influence and at times even cross-fertilise one another. None of them exists independently, so there is always a kind of interplay between these dimensions. The extent to which one of them is more strongly pronounced is therefore gradual rather than absolute.

It is assumed that group identities – or the feeling to belong to bigger social entities, for that matter – take precedence over individuality. After all, a developed personality is always the product of discourse and interaction with other people, so there is a constant dialogue with the social environment that shapes and deflects, moulds and adjusts our persona. Having said that, the construction of identity is also an ongoing process, so we do not necessarily belong to one group, but we are attached to a plurality of groupings that change over the course of our lives – or, from a more contemporary perspective, even during the course of the day. Both individual and group identity are in some way related to the national identity. In this connection there can be obvious (e.g. immigrants) or subconscious, mostly when a cultural reality is experienced on a daily basis and taken for granted to a certain extent. Indeed, many people only become aware of their national ‘identity’ when they travel abroad or emigrate to another country (Jacobs 2011c: 8; Leerssen 2007: 337; Meier 2007: 488–489). Identity, then, is not a fixed concept. It is in flux as it is constantly reproduced and redefined by our direct and indirect social environment.

Ellemers et al. (1999: 372–373) distinguish between three different levels of identification: cognitive, evaluative, and affective. The cognitive level refers to self-categorisation and awareness of one’s membership of a group (e.g. ‘I am an artist and part of the creative community of my town’). The evaluation of membership can be either positive (e.g. ‘I am proud to be part of that group’) or negative (e.g. ‘In order to sell my art it is important to be part of the group, but actually I don’t like it’). The affective level may imply a strong emotional concern and show little attention to detail, which often results in a rather unstylised and coarse appearance. Furthermore, it is said that the Dutch have a predilection for ‘humerous’ (sometimes even frivolous) frills, like flower prints in the lining of the cuffs and collar of most shirts, quite simple trousers and jackets, hats with lederhosen or helmets with bull’s horns on their faces or colour-coordinate their outfits, the Dutch are infamous for putting together outrageous and wild outfits that celebrate the occasion and add a witty, sometimes even bizarre, edge to the game.

Earlier I referred to different levels of identification: cognitive, evaluative, affective, and conative. If we now extend this knowledge to the idea of a national fashion identity we might say that there is awareness of a distinct local style, as evidenced by a growing interest from the media within the country and from abroad. Furthermore, to a certain extent at least, an evaluation of that style takes place (e.g. ‘What is good, bad, or special about the Dutch way to dress?’). The common idea that the Dutch are poorly dressed is part of that evaluation, too. In exceptional cases with, for instance, Dutch fashion enthusiasts, it might even be the case that people develop an affective relationship with certain Dutch fashion designers or brands. The most extreme form of this identification would be the case that, if the fashion enthusiast would decide to exclusively focus on clothing products from the Netherlands. The question is to what extent these different levels actually apply to the Dutch population at large. Is the fashion enthusiast who breathes (and wears) Dutch fashion an extreme case and we should not expect that there are many of them – if any. When we look at local fashion consumption more in general it is far more likely that people identify with their environment, so the concept of ‘Dutch fashion’ or ‘Dutch style’ is more an abstract idea that materialises in terms of symbols and rituals. We can therefore question to what extent Dutch identity with a local style of dress and Dutch fashion brands, is actually a conscious process or rather the product of social discourse. In the previous sections we saw that personal identity is developed in relation to our direct and indirect social environment. Sometimes this convergence with certain dutch fashion designers or brands. The most extreme form of this identification is not uncommon, but not less refined actually. Due to trading relationships with the Nordic countries, the Baltic states, Northern Germany, England, and America – all of them countries that were converting to Protestantism with its accent on restraint and a rather minimalist aesthetic at the time – the Dutch style of dress spread to other countries. Following Jacobs (2011c: 11), ‘it is probably no coincidence that for a long time more modern and casual styles of dress have been more popular in precisely these countries’.

The second (and more negative) storyline about local fashion culture states that the Dutch way to dress is somewhat dull and unrefined. The common charge is that the Dutch have a rather formal and somewhat rather the product of social discourse. In the previous sections we saw that personal identity is developed in relation to our direct and indirect social environment. Sometimes this convergence with certain local fashion consumption more in general it is far more likely that people identify with their environment, so the concept of ‘Dutch fashion’ or ‘Dutch style’ is more an abstract idea that materialises in terms of symbols and rituals. We can therefore question to what extent Dutch identity with a local style of dress and Dutch fashion brands, is actually a conscious process or rather the product of social discourse. In the previous sections we saw that personal identity is developed in relation to our direct and indirect social environment. Sometimes this convergence with certain local fashion consumption more in general it is far more likely that people identify with their environment, so the concept of ‘Dutch fashion’ or ‘Dutch style’ is more an abstract idea that materialises in terms of symbols and rituals. We can therefore question to what extent Dutch identity with a local style of dress and Dutch fashion brands, is actually a conscious process or rather the product of social discourse. In the previous sections we saw that personal identity is developed in relation to our direct and indirect social environment. Sometimes this convergence with certain Dutch fashion designers or brands is more unconscious and at times even more implicit or tacit. My research zooms in on the connection between the different levels of identity encountered in FIG 2.1 and tries to explore the question how the fashion-purchase behaviour of Dutch consumers is related to individual and group identities and to the Dutch national context.

Above I summarised a number of ideas concerning Dutch fashion (with a more cultural reading of the term). The examples I used are only approximations of what the Dutch fashion identity might (possibly) look like and they are not in any way meant to be conclusive. Defining the field of Dutch fashion from a socio-historical perspective, these ideas are a preliminary framework and hint at a number of culture-specific characteristics. In that way, they provide a comparative measure for the results of this study that might either support or refute the findings. A national fashion identity is a complex affair and involves a myriad of different aspects. This study focuses on the socio-economic side of things and tries to respond to the question what features distinguish the fashion-consumption behaviour of the Dutch from other countries, as well as what mechanisms brands employ to build loyalty. Can we identify a set of characteristics that are original to the Dutch national background? And if so, to what extent are these actually related to a Dutch fashion identity?

2.5 BRAND IDENTITY

In the preceding sections we have learned how individual and collective identities are constructed, as well as how the two are connected. As my study deals with the interrelation between brands, consumers, and identity constructions the following paragraphs present a short overview of the concept of brand identity. Also, brands are not only market entities, but they represent possible sites of identification – again, from the cognitive to possibly the conative level – that are based on a distinct set of brand associations. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000: 134) argue that unlike brand image, which describes a firm’s current market profile, in many cases brand identity is an aspirational state, thus implying the direction towards which the image should
be taken. Chodswar (2008: 5) maintains that brand identity implies a promise to consumers that is built around a core identity. “Core identity is the central, timeless essence of the brand that remains constant as the brand moves to new markets and new products. Core identity broadly focuses on product attributes, service, user profile, store ambience and product performance. Extended identity includes brand elements organized into cohesive and meaningful groups that provide brand texture and completeness, and focuses on brand personality, relationship, and strong symbol association.”

If we accept these two dimensions, core identity is the bedrock of the brand proposition that remains largely unchanged, even when, for instance, communication and branding strategy take a new direction, or the range of product is extended to other markets. A firm’s extended identity, by contrast, is more flexible and provides visual and emotional points of connection. In other words, the former is more concerned with the material dimension of the organisation, whereas the latter is built around immaterial, symbolic attributes. In order to be effective an organisation’s image needs to resonate with customers, differentiate the brand from competitors, and present consumers with a credible idea of what the brand can and will do over time (Akera and Joachimsthaler 2000). That goal can be achieved by developing a set of aspirational triggers (i.e., brand associations) that help define a distinct market profile. If implemented successfully, those associations are emotionally charged and activate cues that induce a short-term — rather than need-based consumption interest (Workman and Studak 2005: 77).

In a competitive market environment emotional value can help elevate the brand above others and create a competitive advantage. According to Sherrington (2003: 23), emotional and personality traits are the most effective ploys to retain consumer loyalty. Furthermore, if those traits are truly the hardest to achieve or implement into an existing brand proposition (ibid: 21). Another variant is brand persona or brand personality. Here, the focus is on developing personality attributes that distinguish the firm, based on non-intrinsic product features. As a rule, personality attributes form an integral part of a product-related one. In turn, they can provide sustained competitive advantage over a longer period of time (Chodswar 2008: 5). An important challenge in this regard is to present a consistent communication strategy combined with credible consumer marketing to the market (Wee and Ming 2003). By extension, brand personality plays a role in consumer ties by appealing to values shared by consumers. Firms with a consistent and suitable brand identity can add value to products and ask higher prices (Schmitt and Simonov 1997: 39). Knapp (2000: 36) argues that brand identity is a long-term project that requires attention at all times and throughout all phases of building and nurturing an organisation. Not only does it need to be well planned and cultivated, but it is equally important to synchronise and adapt the image to changing consumer interests or different market climates. Consequently, a brand’s identity grows with the organisation. For example, fastening on an argument put forward by Elias and Bourdieu, she argues that national identities not only refer to an unconscious cultural code, but also to a common mode of expression that corresponds to the conditions under which “a national ground-tone in behaviour, institutions and standards emerge” (ibid. 6). Fashion’s quality is that of a vehicle that structures and defines these cultural processes based on its capacity to produce meaning in the form of social signifiers. The fashion system, therefore, embodies a cultural language that equips the wearer with a kind of shorthand for ‘signalling place and identity as well as a way of performing social intercourse’ (Craig 1993: 9). The language of fashion can not only help negotiate different subject positions across various cultural settings, but it endorses a vocabulary of particular codes of conduct within these settings (Featherstone 1991: 174). Social identification, then, works in dress-body relations that reflect the wearer’s identity with a certain extent. In short, it is an intermediary tool that, based on its visual qualities, articulates markers of identity across different social scales (Barthes 1990: 210-2).

Barthes (ibid: 27 ff) defines fashion as a material surface that articulates meaning on two levels. First, the level of language defines its objective qualities. Second, fashion works by a ‘vestimentary’ code that either points to an external reality (which in most cases is pre-defined at the level of language) or is directed at the fashion system itself. According to the argument, fashion works by the processes of denotation (1) and connotation (2). Barthes (ibid: 235) describes this relation as follows: “The fashion (as such) is defined in terms of cultural qualities (e.g., shape, fabric, tactility) and descriptive qualities (e.g., rhetoric). Identity is consequently enacted within the confines of commonly-shared value attributions (e.g., business, casual, chic, gothic, punk, avant-garde) and the possibility to ‘play’ with them to create a certain ambivalence, thus, to fashion system allow one ‘to be oneself, and to have this self be recognized by others’ (ibid: 255).

Based on these insights I suggest that the cultural meaning of clothes develops across four levels. First, meaning is given to a garment at the stage of its conception and/or production by a designer or marketing agency. Second, the wearer of the garment perceives the meaning (which may or may not be similar) is produced and disseminated by the fashion press. Third, both of them become subject to change once the clothes enter the social circuit. Here, specific connotations are attached to a garment by particular social groups. For instance, when in the mid-1980s hip-hop artists started wearing clothing from the US preppy-chic brand Tommy Hilfiger, the garments took on a different cultural meaning that alienated the brand’s traditional white middle-class audience. By the same token, Lonsdale, a stronghold in boxing sports since 1891, is primarily associated with skinhead culture rather than the brand’s original usage as symbols of subcultural identity. Fourth, at the individual level meaning may be altered a second time. While cultural meaning is frequently produced in collective contexts, individuals may just as well define them and attach symbolic and emotionally-charged value to their garments.

2.7 CONCLUSION

The chapter set out to define the different positions of identity that inform our research. We saw that personal identity is always a combination of an individual mode of self-expression and a way of responding to our environment. While many authors have argued in favour of multiple and fluid identities, my own research is grounded in the view that, overall, personal identity is a fairly stable construct that is adapted bit by bit to different circumstances and social environments. From there, I went on to sketch out four different positions of communities in an attempt to demonstrate that identification — or even identity — is not necessarily based on face-to-face interaction. The idea is crucial to understand how, in a fashion context, consumers (can) identify with a firm or its image based on an imagined sense of belonging. It is not necessary to actually be part of a group as long as consumers identify with a spirit or sentiment. More often than not, they ‘buy into’ a consumption experience and belonging to a specific group. Introducing the central themes and considerations, I sketched out how to make sense of the idea of a national fashion identity and frame it adequately against the background of my own research. Brand identity was introduced to show how firms actually define a corporate and product identity, and the extent to which they are entwined with consumer perceptions and developments in the market. I outlined the primary aspects that are critical in this regard, thereby providing an understanding of brands’ role in the context of brand positioning, target market, and consumer appeal. Lastly, I defined fashion as a carrier of identity. As I argued, clothing not only provides us with a canvas to express ourselves, but it also represents a medium that connects us to collective entities. Fashion, as it is understood throughout this dissertation, connects the individual to the broader canvas of the social fabric that equips him with a surface to define different subject positions.

Chapter 2 •
CHAPTER 3

CONSUMPTION AND FASHION IDENTITIES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter different facets of identity construction have been outlined. We went from individual and group identities to brand identity and fashion and dress as means of expressing identity. This chapter broadens the theoretical scope towards different models of socialisation. First, I will introduce a number of critical parameters in the context of consumption behaviour. After that, I will explain how, in recent decades, we have moved from more narrow to relatively diverse and pluraliform social structures, and in what way this development has had an impact on contemporary (clothing) consumption behaviour. In sections 3.2 and 3.3 self-concept will be introduced as a variable which negotiates individual and group identities and their linkage to purchase behaviour. In close connection, section 3.4 will introduce consumer involvement as a measure for the different types of relations consumers establish and maintain with their preferred brands. Section 3.5 will specify the different goals and aspirations of ‘fashion’ and ‘clothing’ and relate them to some of the currents that were introduced in the preceding sections. Section 3.6 will explain different models of socialisation and group behaviour in an effort to demonstrate how they can be instructive to recognise the forces that govern consumption behaviour. After defining the field, section 3.7 and 3.8 will introduce the concept of style groups as a model to account for the dynamics between individuals and groups in a fashion context. By establishing a link between clothing and identity, the concept helps us to develop an understanding of how style can facilitate a site of group identification. Section 3.9 extends that knowledge by describing how the model informs different degrees of consumer involvement. Lastly, in section 3.10 I will expound the concept of co-creation in order to present a marketing approach which embraces marketing knowledge by describing how the model informs different levels of consumer involvement for different types of brands.

3.2 SELF-CONCEPT

Since my study explores the different factors governing purchase behaviour and patronage it is important to understand the relation between individuals, collective structures, and brands. One key concept in this regard is self-concept. Rosenberg (1979) defines the term as the total amount of an individual’s emotions and ideas about himself as an object and the relation to other objects. Loudon and Della-Bitta (1984, cited in Evans 1989: 10) specify this proposition, stating that ‘although a consumer’s motive structure varies over time due to changes in situation, roles and lifestyles, there remains a central theme or organisation to the structure. One factor influencing this organisation is the individual’s self-concept’. The argument suggests that the self-understanding of consumers constitutes an important variable in the purchase decision-making process as well as in terms of post-purchase evaluation. Consumption is determined by the extent to which goods are perceived as a match or a complementing factor in the construction of personal identity. Specific product preferences are explained by their use value as well as by their symbolic congruence with the identity concepts of consumers. The more a product is considered a manifestation of the self, the more consumers will be involved with it. Similarly, the more a product is perceived as an affirmation of the self (through post-purchase evaluation), the higher product and brand loyalty will be in the long run (O’Cass and Julian 2001).

Although, after a certain age, our social identity is more or less developed and fairly consistent, we tend to emphasise different facets while we traverse changing social contexts. In other words, our identity is situated in, and enacted across, different social environments (Gordon and Gergen 1968; Tomlinson 1990; Laverie et al. 2002). The production of self, then, is subject to circumstances and requires different kinds of social performances. By way of example, a football match is a different social terrain than a formal dinner, so both are subject to different behavioural codes. Similarly, the way people dress, behave, and socialise at work tends to differ from a convivial environment among family and friends. In other words, different occasions usually call for distinct repertoires due to behavioural and stylistic conventions. Fashion products, in this reading, are appropriated to specifically emphasise those differences and help enact social performances (Shields 1992: 11), so we slip in and out of styles in an attempt to give meaning to ourselves or to create the impression of being professional, seductive, creative, or inconspicuous.

3.3 SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION: ENHANCING THE SELF-CONCEPT

One widely-used model to research self-concept in relation to brand-specific purchase behaviour is Dolich’s self-congruity theory (1969). Simply put, the theory suggests that consumption interests are precipitated by individuals comparing their self-concept with the general image they attach to a brand, as reflected in the stereotype of a typical user of the brand (Mulyantagara and Tsarenko 2009: 358, cf also Birdwell 1968). Early research in this field produced two important findings. First, it is assumed that the prevalent image
consumers associate with a brand, allows them to express and enact different dimensions of their self-concept. This helps to illustrate how identity construction takes place. Aaker (1997) emphasized that consumers start to develop a relationship with a brand once they identify consistencies between their identity constructs and the primary characteristics of a brand (Aaker and Fournier 1995: 39).

As an extension of the self-congruity theory, Allen (2002) implemented a brand-congruence model which assumes a positive relationship between certain values endorsed by individuals and the values symbolised by a brand. This model finds further application in Azoulay and Kapferer’s concept of ‘brand personality’ which is defined as ‘the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands’ (2003: 115). In this connection, Grubb and Malter (2004: 253) indicate that self-concept has a strong influence on brand-related behaviour when it comes to clothing consumption. By examining potential connections between brand personality and different consumer types, this research seeks to contribute to an understanding of fashion-purchase behaviour and the moderating role of personal and/ or group values as variables of brand-specific consumption interests.

The idea of brand personality and brand values is useful to understand the symbolic function of fashion products across different social spheres. Tucker (1957; cited in Sirgy 1982: 280) proposes that in a consumption context, the different performances of self can be accounted for in terms of product choice and product use. As he maintains, ‘there has long been an implicit concept that consumers can be defined in terms of either the products they acquire or use, or in terms of the meanings they assign to them or their attitudes towards products’ (ibid.). Consumer goods, then, are not only defined by material properties but represent stimuli for cuesing and strengthening the self-concept of consumers. Identification with specific products or brands is therefore not exclusively based on functional attributes, but it creates symbolic connections that transcend the use value. In this way, fashion consumption becomes means to cause desired reactions from the individual consumer; i.e., the extent to which ‘the product and its connotations come into being has to do with individual product perceptions. On the other hand, the socio-cultural context plays an important role in defining the symbolic value of products for different audiences. In other words, product connotations are contingent upon different situations and social or professional contexts.

At work, Mr. Browne wants to look professional, so he dresses in smart and formal clothes. In his free time, however, he expresses his personality in a different way and feels more comfortable wearing an unbuttoned shirt and a pair of jeans. The two different images he presents of himself do not necessarily imply a qualification or preference. There is of course a chance that Mr. Browne might prefer the casual variant as he considers it closer to his ‘real self’. However, it might just as well be the case that he likes both equally well and enjoys switching between them.

As the example makes clear, different facets of the self-concept are enacted in different social contexts and consumer goods can play an important role in moderating those differences. Their symbolic value stretches to different dimensions, whereby the purchase act and possession of products are turned into symbols of both symbolic identification and interaction. As Grubb and Grathwohl (1967: 25) point out,

> ‘Purchase and consumption of goods can be self-enhancing in two ways. First, the self-concept of an individual will be sustained and buoyed if he believes the goods he has purchased is recognised publicly and classified in a manner that supports and enhances his self-concept. [...] Because of their recognized meaning, public symbols elicit a reaction from the individual that supports his original self-feelings.’

Self-enhancement can occur as well in the interaction process. Goods as symbols serve the individual, becoming means to cause desired reactions from other individuals.

Self-concept, then, is negotiated in a tripartite relationship between products, individual consumers and their reference groups. A product’s symbolic value is the sum of its brand and marketing elements and the value perceptions attributed by individuals and their reference groups. Consequently, buying motivation is dependent on product and brand image and on the ways in which they work within different social contexts. Following Zaichkowsky (1985: 342), the appeal of different brands/ products can be linked to their level of relevance for the individual consumer; i.e., the extent to which ‘the receiver is personally affected, and hence motivated, to respond’. For example, Mr. Browne buys a suit by Paul Smith ‘just because he likes it’. This is true to the extent that his purchase is a confirmation of how he sees himself, and would like others to think of him the same way, he will most likely develop a positive attitude towards that brand. Congruity with his desired self-concept is key in that regard: the connection can be either positive (‘I want to present the image of a fashionable understated Englishman...’) or negative (‘I do not want to present the image of a fashionable understated Englishman...’). On the one hand, the way those connotations come into being has to do with individual product perceptions. On the other hand, the socio-cultural context plays an important role in defining the symbolic value of products for different audiences. In other words, product connotations are contingent upon different situations and social or professional contexts.

Mr. Browne’s suit purchase is an endorsement of his self-concept since it reaffirms his own self-image and is connected to a particular audience he aspires to. The symbolic value of brands or products, then, is produced across different sites of identification. Their relation can be visualised in the following way:

As we can see in Fig. 3.1, a product or brand has intrinsic and extrinsic value, both of which enhance the self-concept. The intrinsic value is indicated in the figure by arrow a while the extrinsic values are represented by the arrows b, c, and d. Intrinsic value is the symbol (1986) identifying a product or brand and represents the self-concept. Through a goal-directed product purchase Individual A wishes to enhance his self-concept and emphasise certain facets of his identity. Even though the values attached to the product are to some extent subjective and personal they are nevertheless based on discursive meanings which are collectively produced. Individual A presents the purchase to Audience B the value becomes extrinsic. In this case the symbolic function is no longer limited to the meanings Individual A communicates to himself. The arrows b and c indicate how both Individual A and Audience B attribute symbolic value to the product. If Symbol X has a commonly understood meaning, brand X becomes meaningful and can take place. Individual A is able to communicate with Audience B and deliver the desired message. As arrow d indicates, self-enhancement takes place based on the fact that Audience B shows the desired reaction to Individual A (cf. Grubb and Grathwohl 1967: 25). Symbolic communication between the individual and his reference group is consequently based on a shared set of meanings. To be fair, the process described here is somewhat theoretical. In actuality we do not know whether our purchases evoke the desired reaction in others. For my part, that is, I will hardly talk about my clothing purchases with friends or colleagues and whether they attribute the same values to them as I do. In effect, it is an imaginary mechanism which leads us to believe that we have a common perception of a brand or product.

3.4. THE INFLUENCE CONSTRUCT

In the previous section we have seen how individual and collective identities are interrelated in a consumption context and which different drivers play a role in the purchase decision-making process. To make this knowledge compatible with my study’s original research questions, the following pages will define the influence construct as a measure that enables us to account for different consumption patterns and develop an understanding for different types of relationships between brands and consumers. Involvement enables us not only to look into the general nature of attachment and to identify markets and understand what factors play a role in the process. This, in turn, provides helpful insights when trying to identify different style groups, their level of attachment, and buying motivations.

Most generally speaking, the term describes the ways brands have relevance for different audiences in terms of their aesthetic nature, in other words, the extent to which they match the consumers’ self-concept and outlook on life. Furthermore, involvement defines the degree to which certain brands or product groups...
constitute engaging and focal activities (O’Cass and Julian 2001: 2), thus signalling ‘a person’s perceived relevance of activities on inherent needs, values, and interests’ (Zaichkowski 1985: 342). In literature, the concept is mostly referred to as consumer involvement which can be classified according to four different dimensions (ibid: 345-8; Laurent and Kapferer 1985: 45 ff.). Product Knowledge refers to the extent to which consumers know about the product; they evaluate, purchase, and show high levels of interest in the actual product. As a rule, the more knowledge consumers are eager to obtain about a given product group, the higher their involvement and connection with it. Alternative Evaluation refers to the extent to which consumers search for competing alternatives in the same market segment. The more consumers are involved with a product, the more likely they are to compare different brands and products prior to the buying act and make them subject to post-purchase evaluation. Perception of Brand Differences refers to the extent to which consumers actually perceive differences between brands and turn them into dependent variables of the purchase decision-making process. In this case higher levels of involvement are tantamount to greater scrutiny and stronger beliefs in specific brands within a given product group. Brand Preference refers to the likelihood and degree to which consumers are inclined to purchase a particular or buy a larger number of goods from one and the same label. The higher level of involvement is, the stronger the level of brand patronage will be.

Rothschild (1979: 25) further distinguishes between three different types of involvement: situational (SI), response (RI), and enduring involvement (EI). Unlike SI and RI, which reflect temporary states of involvement, EI is cognitively based and intrinsically motivated. As this research aims at exploring different levels of brand loyalty and buying behaviour, the only one last is of importance and it will be used synonymously with the general terminology in the following. Enduring involvement is defined as a difference variable representing the general, long-run concern with a product that a consumer brings to a situation’ (Richins, Bloch and McQuarrie 1992: 143). The concept describes how consumers connect personal needs, aspirations, and value systems to goods as stimulus objects. Celsi and Olson (1998) add this axis needs to a consumer’s level of involvement with an object, situation, or action is determined by the degree to which s/he perceives the concept as relevant. (...) The personal relevance of a product is represented by the perceived linkage among an individual’s needs, goals, and values and their product knowledge. According to this view, a product is a stable characteristic which reflects and sustains values over time.

However, even alternative buying patterns eventually reflect and confirm the general value system of individual consumers or even entire groups for so long as the system as a whole remains unchanged.

Added to that, a distinction is made between two variants of consumer involvement: brand involvement and product involvement. While the former defines a brand-specific kind of involvement the latter describes involvement in product characteristics (e.g. retailing, computer games, cars). Theory tends to treat them individually, whereas in a day-to-day context they can sometimes overlap. More often than not, product involvement is connected to brand involvement. If, for example, Mr. Browne is deeply involved with fashion clothing, it would be rather unlikely for him to not have any favourite brands. On the other hand, however, the principle does not apply so easily. Mr. Browne might very well have a preferred jeans brand because he likes the fit of a specific model or the price/ performance ratio. Yet, this does not automatically entail that he has a vested interest in fashion in general. In this case, traditionally the use value of a branded product takes precedence over its symbolic function (Kim 2005). According to Perez Cabanero (2006: 75), involvement is connected to an assessment of the importance of the stimulus but it also produces certain types of behaviour and agency. The concept mediates between self-image and product image and constitutes a relational factor for predicting purchase motivation (Evard and Auer 1996: 128). Brand and product involvement, then, refer to motivational states of interest and arousal which are evoked by internal factors (e.g. values, ego) and external factors (e.g. product design, situation, communication). The argument assumes that consumers will be more involved with a brand, service, or product in a specific use situation than in another. The higher the level of involvement, the more likely they are to compare different brands and products prior to the buying act and make them subject to post-purchase evaluation.

In the previous section the involvement construct was discussed according to its main constituents. Peculiarly, when it comes to product involvement, it is necessary to make an additional distinction in a fashion context: clothing involvement and fashion involvement. In CHAPTER 2 we learned about the dynamics of fashion and its function as a carrier of identity. I argued that it can signal time and place in a given cultural context, as well as represent a flexible medium for expressing individual and collective identities. The following section specifies these insights and extends the scope of analysis towards the difference between fashion and clothing, in relation to product involvement.

In popular discourse the terms clothing and fashion are frequently used interchangeably. In actuality, however, it is not quite correct to attach one and the same meaning to both words. While the term clothing primarily refers to covering the body, the term fashion is more style-specific and emphasizes personal attributes. Fashion not only serves the purpose of covering the body or looking right for a certain occasion. The concept describes seasonally changing looks that resonate with popular taste and it usually involves the production of meaning through magazines, blogs, and other media (Lyons and Smith-Palmer 2004). In other words, whereas clothing is more stable in character (Wilson 2003) fashion has a kinetic persona and changes its face according to circumstance and temporary whims (Barnard 2002: 38).

A further exploration of the phenomenon, Jacobs (2010) makes a division between two purchase motivations: they can be either based on the objective to ‘look good’ or to ‘be fashionable’. The former primarily corresponds to the functional attributes of clothes (e.g. tried and tested fit, reliable quality, durability, and affiliation with specific occupational or social groups).

In this case purchases are not so much driven by the ambition to follow the latest trends, but rather by a desire to look appropriate for a certain occasion or to purchase products that flatter the shape of the body. For example, Mr. Browne tries to find the right fit and suits a wide variety of situations because the model has a timeless cut and looks good in various combinations. To him, it is largely unimportant whether his pair of jeans follows the latest fashion. It does what it is supposed to do, namely cover his body and make him look good in an uncontroversial way. ‘Being fashionable’, by contrast, describes the ambition to synchronise one’s wardrobe with national or international trends. Here, the focus is not actually on decent looks alone. Clothing purchases are driven by the desire to reflect contemporary taste. Whether or not the clothes actually look good is a different question altogether. The term clothing is used when dealing with ready-to-wear, whereas fashionable clothes are symbolic of one’s identity in this case. In the former case the purchase decision-making process is largely driven by product-intrinsic features; whereas in the latter case purchases are prompted by the ambition to conform to commonly shared tastes within a specific cultural group.

A further exploration of this in regard, namely that of branding, resp. the meaning some brands take on within certain groups. The fact that brand-specific values are connected to certain firms, cuts across the other two dimensions and influences the way consumers relate to brands and products. For example, one of Mr. Browne’s favourite brands is a fashion firm that tries to distinguish itself by promoting the exclusive use of sustainable and eco-conscious yarns and fabrics. It is possible that this aspect influences Mr. Browne’s level of attachment,
Dutch IDentIty In FashIon

based on this model Jacobs (ibid.) identifies what he calls three extreme ideal-type consumer groups:

- First people for whom the functionality of clothes is the most important aspect. In a way they don't bother too much about how they look and they also don't want to spend too much money on it.
- Another extreme are the people who just want to follow the latest fashions. It does not matter whether clothes are functional or 'wearable', as long as it is clear that they are in sync with the prevailing style code.
- The third group is constituted by strong brand fans. For these fans the most important element of their clothes is the brand label.

As it is presented here the separation between the different consumer attitudes is rather straightforward. Unlike the example above, in reality the differences are not as clear-cut however. While extreme cases where only one dimension applies do exist, a hybrid which emphasises one dimension more strongly than the others is much more common. Arguably, that does not lessen the fact that certain combinations are more usual than others. Provided that Mr. Browne puts a premium on the wearability and functionality of clothes, it is rather unlikely that he will purchase cutting-edge fashion pieces. That, however, does not make him immune to the lure of brands. If a certain outdoor brand has proved to be a good choice in terms of quality, wearability, and functionality, he is likely to buy other products from the same brand rather than choose for a no-name private label. Turning the argument around, if Mr. Browne is heavily involved with fashion and wishes to always look smart or dress with great panache, the functionality of his clothes is probably not the first thing he looks at. That does not mean that his clothes would be unbearable. It rather indicates that his priorities are different. Applied to a branding context, the difference between the two examples is significant when it comes to branding preference. If functionality is key, consumers will first and foremost make a brand-related decision depending on inherent product qualities. In case an outdoor brand produces garments of superior quality and with an exceptionally comfortable fit, these are the characteristics consumers will look for because they help to improve their performance. True fashion brands, by contrast, are above all recognised for a certain signature style and look. The clothes might still be of great quality and good fit. Nevertheless, these constitute additional incentives rather than the main drivers in the purchase decision-making process.

The distinction between looking good and being fashionable helps us to understand different buying motivations that define choices for certain brands and products. FIG 3.3 shows the different dimensions of brand value and clothing and fashion and fashion. The middle axis represents the distinction between looking good and being fashionable. The closer brands are to the middle axis, the more they are hybrid; the further they are removed from it, the clearer they belong to only one category. Going counterclockwise: top left we find Zegna (or any other expensive brand, for that matter) as an extreme case of utilitarian clothing. People who source their clothes from this firm will hardly pay attention to either the symbolic meaning of their clothes or the branding messages. A brand like C&A can be considered utilitarian in the sense that it is neither heavily branded nor extremely fashionable. Still, these are surely clothes that make the average wearer look good.

Further down, on the left we find brands like Just B. which are slightly more fashionable than the average highstreet brand but not actually valuable brand names in their own right. Further to the right, Onson+Bodil represents an almost couturier-driven fashion house in the sense that it is neither advertised nor branded. The primary ambition of consumers who shop there is to look fashionable while the brand name itself is of not too much importance. Moving on further, we find brands like Yamamoto or Dior. They, too, are fashion companies in a rather pure sense. At the same time, they are commercialised enterprises whose leverage is monetised through distribution lines, collaborations, licences, and perfumes. Also in the middle, further up are brands like Armani or C-Star, whose brand image is defined by a combination of use value and reasonably fashionable looks. Here, the emphasis lies on product-brand and advertising-related aspects. In other words, brand name, signature look, and value use are in good balance.

On the right-hand side we find the strongest ‘brand tribes’ – i.e., style groups with high levels of involvement and loyalty. The brands inside the circle all are defined by a recognisable signature style and high recognisability and branding profiles. On the fashion side, the Paul Smith label is known for quirky Britishness, Diesel for the use of denim and its trademark oddball advertising campaigns, and Burberry for more sophisticated Britishness like the trenchcoat and the ‘Burberry check’. Across the middle axis, a rather utilitarian firm with a cult following is Lonsdale that has been discussed shortly earlier. In various countries the brand is known as a symbol for skinhead culture, so functionality is a rather abstract concept in this case. Obviously, the clothes are functional in the sense that they cover the body. In the subcultural context where they traditionally surface, however, brand history and original purpose are largely irrelevant. Instead, involvement pivots on the company’s brand name and logo which represent markers of identity for a particular social group. In other words, the level of involvement is based on symbolic attributes that do not belong to the brand. Ralph Lauren or Marlburo Classics stand for a casual and versatile type of clothing with rather high recognition value and a well-known brand identity. Still, they occupy a middle position: both brands have loyal consumers but it is doubtful whether their level of involvement is of an emotional kind. Lee and Levi’s are jeans brands that are known for classic cuts and a largely uninnovative product portfolio. Most of the products are tried and tested formulas and the brand name reflects this market position. Purchasing one of their products is a safe bet rather than a fashion statement because they stand for timelessness rather than the latest fad. Lastly, we find companies like Gaastra or The North Face. While both are originally outdoor brands, nowadays they can be considered hybrid enterprises that cater to the sportwear segment as well as to the everyday leisure-wear consumer. These are neither heavily branded nor exceptionally fashionable, but stand for a type of product that functions in a casual-wear context as well as in their original outdoor domain.

It is obvious that the brands mentioned here are just examples of a more general image that we probably find in most countries with a well-developed fashion culture. Details apart, worth remembering are the differences between the three dimensions and how the concepts ‘fashion’ and ‘clothing’ are related to brand identity. Based on these insights we will be able to develop an understanding of the ways consumers relate to their preferred brands and to identify what value connections produce different degrees of involvement. What level of identification is the strongest? How is the relation between consumers and brands constructed? What are the aspects consumers are most attracted by? Can we identify different degrees of involvement in different segments?

3.6 NOT NEO-TribES.

For many decades the primary sources of identification were families and ideologies, and maybe working environments. Nowadays, however, citizens (in the Western world, that is) have become more emancipated, which prompted the model(s) of socialisation to become more open, diverse, and flexible. It is not

1 NB: The brand name in this case is not that important insofar as the design value takes precedence over the actual name. Still, for those ‘in the know’ it is a valuable asset. Precisely because it is a small niche firm it might be considered a more avant-garde choice compared to the big fashion houses with a high-profile brand identity.

2 NB: These days Lonsdale tries to get away from the skinhead image and reposition the brand based on its heritage in boxing sports.
necessarily the case that we find orientation by one or two primary sources of identification. Just like we build our sense of self through our social interactions, the way our social behaviour is dependent on different contexts and life-worlds. In recent years scholars have suggested a number of approaches to account for the changes and they offer possible explanations for the current state of affairs. One of them is Michel Maffesoli’s concept of ‘neo-tribes’. He defines them as small agglomerations of people whose meeting ground is shared social, economical, or political values, similar tastes (e.g. sports, clothing, music), or lifestyles. Neo-tribes can be seen as taste or interest communities in the sense of affinity-based subcultures. People can become members and withdraw from a group at any moment, which increases their flexibility and ease to participate in different communities. It is possible for communities like this to take the form of a collection of expedient alliances. In that sense they can be seen as interest groups for which engagement rather than shared affinity is a prerequisite. In other words, they emerge as a result of commonly shared values and may or may not disband once the ambition is realised.3

A similar concept, dubbed ‘communities lite’, is suggested by Duyvendak and Hurenkamp (2004). While Maffesoli’s ideas are mainly based on hands-on, practical observations of people, this theoretical approach is realised through the sum of multiple temporary identifications which are based on, for example, ‘wearing particular types of dress, exhibiting group-specific styles of adornment and espousing the shared values and ideals of collectivity’ (ibid: x-xi). The group setting creates a sense of ‘commonness’ that needs not to be limited to the level of outward characteristics, but might just as well pertain to similarities in the value systems and self-understanding of people. In short, neo-tribes are socially heterogeneous groups that are bound by shared interests or a passion for a specific activity or product type. Crucial to note is the aspect of plurality, as people participate in a variety of these communities throughout the day – for a shorter or longer period of time and with stronger or weaker connections to its members. For instance, Mr. Browne meets the same people at the bus stop every morning. Over time, he might sympathise with some of them. He and his remote acquaintances who stick up for smoking prevention, the safety of the neighborhood and Woes, The Small Faces, or The Smoke) as well as the scooter as a symbolic object. Nonetheless, their attitude was largely non-ideological. The aim was not to actually subvert existing norms, but connect to a different social class and lifestyle by means of a flamboyant outward appearance.

As the two examples demonstrate, resistance alone does not qualify as a mark of distinction. The difference between subcultures and neo-tribes and communities lite is that, according to theory, subcultures usually encompass an entire world-view, comprised of value systems, political views, a certain taste in music, an attitude toward alcohol for underaged persons have a common objective. Duyvendak and Hurenkamp (ibid: 219) argue that those ‘weak ties’ to a certain extent have replaced ‘strong ties’ that last for a lifetime. At the same time, they conclude that the emotional intensity of communities lite is not comparable to traditional settings like the family or a religious community. In their view, the main difference is pluri-formity and variation, i.e., citizens are enabled to become temporary members of a number of loose networks where participation is not binding. People can become members and withdraw from a group at any moment, which increases their flexibility and ease to participate in different communities (ibid: 230). It is true that the general idea, to a certain extent, resembles that of neo-tribes, with the very important difference, however, that affinity is only to a lesser extent a necessity for their emergence. It is possible for communities lite to take the form of a collection of expedient alliances. In that sense they can be seen as interest groups for which engagement rather than shared affinity is a prerequisite. In other words, they emerge as a result of commonly shared values and may or may not disband once the ambition is realised.3

In each of their own way, those positions are distinguishable from subcultures. According to Hedige (1999), one of their primary features is the subversion of normalcy. In other words, the value systems within the group differ from those of the social majority or a received, unquestioned world-view. At least in theory, members of a subculture will take an antagonistic stance towards the system of expedient alliances. In that sense they can be seen as interest groups for which engagement rather than shared affinity is a prerequisite. In other words, they emerge as a result of commonly shared values and may or may not disband once the ambition is realised.3

The study of the book ‘Keizers voor de Kudde’ was limited to the Dutch national context. Still, I believe that the conclusions which the contributors arrive at apply to other contexts as well.

3 The study of the book ‘Keizers voor de Kudde’ was limited to the Dutch national context. Still, I believe that the conclusions which the contributors arrive at apply to other contexts as well.
professional groups and comes to represent a signifier of collective life-worlds. That, in turn, allows for the possibility to explore consumption contexts and identify the drivers that motivate purchase behaviour. Most brands do indeed stand for a certain type of clothing. Some are more versatile than others, but most of them are connected to some kind of trademark look. Consequently the question is whether a 23-year-old male who used to wear skate clothes is追逐 for the same reasons? do they try to express the same message with the product? My account differs from neo-tribes and communities quite when it comes to the basis of their existence. Style groups do not mean shared sentiment or agency. They are based on common style and brand or product preferences. To be sure, none of that rules out the possibility of emotional attachment between consumers. Still, the primary ambition is to study fashion as a carrier of audience-specific meanings, which allows for the possibility to study the relation between consumers and certain brands. To some extent style groups are an arguable virtual concept and I freely admit that in day-to-day fashion retail it would be impossible to make such clear-cut distinctions. Audiences are hardly ever entirely uniform, so we need to think in terms of degrees rather than cut-and-dried categories.

Provided, for instance, Mr. Browne has an expensive taste in clothes and spends substantial amounts of money on formal items like suits, ties, shoes, and accessories it is not very likely he will buy his leisure wear from a random cheapskate shop on the high street. He would presumably not even dare to enter. Instead, he might be partial to a style like 'smart casual'. Products in this category are part of the leisurewear register but they exhibit features that are distinguished from sportswear-related casual clothing in terms of fabric, manufacturing quality, and message. Also, they come in a style and are inscribed with meanings (e.g. stylish, understated, upmarket, exclusive) that make them attractive for a more conservative clientele. Mr. Browne’s preferred clothing style, then, stretches from formal to casual. While formal attire and casual clothing by default are subject to different stylistic conventions, his choices are linked by a similar stylistic register (and perhaps even in the same store). He is attracted to a similar product proposition.

Mr. Browne’s sense of attachment to a certain brand that prides itself on the exclusive use of sustainable and fashionable evening wear. Diversity notwithstanding, his decision is strongly marketing driven (e.g. sexy, outgoing, provocative, slightly extravagant) and they are likely to attract an audience that shares certain commonalities. Depending on how narrow or broad the scope of consumers actually is, their common ground will be more or less uniform. Therefore, I shall use the concept throughout this dissertation as follows: A style group is a frame for studying purchase behaviour in connection to the life-worlds of a number of audience groups. I will investigate to what extent consumers have a number of aspects in common, like social and professional background or even lifestyle-related activities. As indicated before, style groups can be seen as a theoretical framework that leaves room for variation. In that way, it is an analytical tool to cluster consumer types in a certain way and develop an understanding for their consumption interests.

3.9 FASHION CONSUMPTION: INVOLVEMENT ACROSS THE CONTINUUM

In an attempt to account for the multiple ways consumers express themselves and enact their identities, this research suggests a relation between brand identification, buying behaviour, and involvement. The underlying assumption is that purchase behaviour can be accounted for in terms of brand identification and different degrees of commitment. The higher the level of attachment with a firm, the stronger the brand loyalty and consumption behaviour will be. The question is what factors contribute to their emergence and whether they are intrinsic or extrinsic. We remember the example of Mr. Brown’s choice to buy from brands that share and reflect his own style.

Seeking to develop an understanding of the complex processes underlying brand-related consumption in connection with fashion clothing, style groups are seen as consumer communities that correspond to different experiential contexts in the life-worlds of consumers. Within this research a complementary perspective is adopted that takes into account both the subjective aspects of perception and consumption and their role in the experience of the consumer. I draw here on Holt’s model of market-place cultures, which treats social collectives as being not formally organised but constituted and sustained through social interaction, and in which membership is not necessarily conscious (Holt 1995: 348). By adopting a big and contextually informed perspective this study tries to develop an understanding of consumption experiences that connects individual behaviour to a wider contextual framework. An exploration of the relations between Dutch fashion brands and their main audiences, the research adds to the existing body of knowledge in the field of consumer research and goes beyond the retail concept to study the nexus between individual and collective consumption patterns.

In order to study variations and points of convergence between different case studies, and find out whether they are caused by the same factors, the research is based on a number of case studies, my study seeks to explore different kinds of relationships between brands and consumers and tries to develop an understanding for different kinds of interaction. The
continuum in this context is a model which defines different levels of involvement. Paired with the concept of style and fashion, the term ‘light communities’ to ‘tight communities’ or ‘brand fans’. In an effort to conceive of different conceptual frameworks that can be related to the ways Dutch fashion firms appeal to, and interact with, their audiences, my research seeks to explore gradual differences between different audiences and their respective level of brand identification.

3.10 CO-CREATION BETWEEN BRANDS AND CONSUMERS

In a study on fashion innovation and self-concept, Goldsmith et al. (1999: 9) suggest that consumers choose particular brands (or their brand persona, for that matter) based on assumed congruence with their self-concept. Also, the research points to the fact that, when it comes to purchase behaviour, self-concept is not only a crucial variable, but it serves as a critical reference point for the way ‘consumers view advertising, brands, salespeople, and the ways they interact with these stimuli’ (ibid.) as well. Similarly, Phau and Lo (2004: 402-3) suggest that the loyalty of fashion consumers is largely dependent on a quick response to emerging trends and the degree to which these responses are capable of incorporating the consumers’ identity constructs. The study claims that especially consumers who show high levels of fashion involvement (‘fashion innovators’ or ‘tastemakers’), primarily define and communicate image(s) of themselves through the codes of fashion. According to the findings, self-concept not only transmits individual and collective values but also determines interaction with firms. Seen thus, it represents an interactive relay that moderates between brands and individual and collective belief systems. In its capacity to interactively and collectively shape relations, self-concept involves a sense of agency: since congruence with consumers’ identity constructs represents a decisive factor in the purchase decision-making process, consumer collective transmission into active forces in the market with the power to exert influence on companies and their product and marketing strategy. According to Disney (1999: 491), ‘organisations become increasingly customer focused, which, driven by customers’ demands, [so that] the need to meet the customers’ expectations and retain their loyalty becomes more critical’.

The more consumers are loyal towards a certain brand, the more critical are they towards it. As a rule, the higher the level of involvement is, the more influence a group will have and the more prone it will be to actively take action. By way of example, when in October 2010 American casual wear brand The Gap introduced a new logo, it was immediately met with general disdain and resulted in numerous complaints from consumers across the firm’s Facebook site and Twitter account. It took less than a week for The Gap to rescind the logo and revert back to the old look. Beyond the media buzz it created, the incident resulted in sardonic acts of agency by angry consumers who used the old and new brand aesthetics to ‘redefine’ the logos, using the word ‘Crap’ instead of Gap (PICTURES 3.1 & 3.2).

One of many examples, the case makes clear that consumers nowadays have moved from the position of passive recipients towards collectives that sometimes take an active stance. Provided they are sufficiently involved, consumers are actively engaged with their favourite brands and have a collective voice that has the power to actually influence or change market performances. In their attempts to forge ties with their desired target market, one result of this is that companies have started to create multiple points of connection and added value in the form of shared life-worlds. ‘Lifestyle brands’ represent much more than just products or brand images because they embody experiences that reach beyond material aspects towards brand-specific and commonly shared symbolic values.

The bilateral relationship between between consumers and companies is often referred to as ‘co-creation’. Generally speaking, the term describes the multiple ways companies try to account for interests or mechanisms they employ, to what extent they are used, and how feedback loops can produce competitive advantages and trigger product innovations that follow the actual needs of consumers. Practically speaking, an effort could involve explicit methods like interviews, questionnaires or open-content marketing, each of them aimed at exploring the identity, general interests or emotional drivers governing the consumption behaviour of one or more groups of consumers (goldsmith and Ramaswamy 2002: 3-4).

Importantly, though, not many consumers are actually willing to collaborate unless they get something in return. Therefore, a more likely method of data collection would be an implicit approach in the form of tapping into internet fora or web 2.0 technologies, where consumers freely share and exchange opinions about the benefits and weaknesses of certain brands or products (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004: 7). It might also be the case that brands actively seek contact with key consumer groups and reward their input with either financial allowances or payments in kind (e.g. beta versions and early access to programmes and case studies of this strategy). Being able to base their strategies on consumer-specific insights and actual needs, the desired outcome for brands is to be able to cut back on expenses for marketing and advertising budgets. For consumers satisfaction is likely to increase, on the one hand because their opinion is respected or even integrated into developing new products and services, on the other hand because they feel the brand values are closer to (or, ideally, congruent with) their own.

It is claimed that competitive advantage can be improved by high-quality interactions that allow consumers to co-create ‘unique experiences’ (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) and Mascarinas et al. (2004: 532) found that the involvement of consumers can be used as an effective strategy in substantiating the goal of the marketing concept by turning consumer input into the ‘central and primary concern of an organisation’.

By providing tailored experiences like exclusive music events, sports competitions or leisure-time activities, firms strive to create emotional bonds and added value beyond the point of value exchange during the act of consumption (Rowley et al. 2007: 140-41). An interesting example in that regard comes from the sports brand Salomon before it introduced a new series of online skiers to their French market. In contrast to direct competitors like Fila or Puma, whose market approach was based on traditional marketing strategy (i.e., starting to penetrate the market with direct product offers), Salomon approached its desired target group by providing experiences. During the start-off phase the firm engaged in ‘ethnomarketing’, i.e., en-countering the market by learning about the audience, and being present at important events (e.g. contests). During the following phase the brand sought direct contact with opinion leaders to work on the ‘design of products in collaboration with skaters; work on the distinctive features of products with skaters [as well as] product tests by a team of skaters ‘supported by Salomon’ (Cova and Cova 2002: 20). By introducing and sponsoring group-related activities and passions, the brand finally turned into an engaged actor with the skating community during the last phase. In so far as the company had forged direct interaction with its main consumers, they successively became part of the company network (ibid.). In the end, Salomon’s efforts were rewarded by giving the firm direct advantages over competitors and establishing the brand as a market leader in the lifestyle sports sector.

Clearly, the Salomon case is a rather sophisticated example of co-creation in the field of product development. Having said that, it shows how a well-considered appeal to consumer values and their successful integration into a market approach can help forge bonds with consumers and sustaining a comparatively stable buying behaviour. Moreover, the case demonstrates how feedback loops can produce competitive advantage and trigger product innovations that follow the actual needs of consumers.

Within the framework of this research, the question is what mechanisms Dutch fashion firms use to appeal to the identity concepts of their desired audience groups or, rather, to what extent they actually succeed in doing so. Some firms might pay less attention to marketing and focus on service or quality control instead. Others might have a very clear image of the world of their consumers and try to appeal to values and lifestyles through marketing strategies and sales promotions. Here the questions are, what mechanisms they employ, to what extent they are used, and how shared knowledge is integrated into the brand and value proposition.

Across a number of case studies, the ambition is to look into the retention strategies of Dutch clothing brands and identify similarities and differences in the way brands and audiences interact with each other. In the next two chapters I will clarify that the case studies were chosen with the aim to study the Dutch fashion landscape in its diversity, i.e., across different segments and consumer types. Do high-street brands work with a different set of retention strategies than small and exclusive ones? In what way do they integrate consumer feedback and what are the effects thereof? Are consumers more strongly attracted by product-intrinsic aspects? To what extent are brand persona and marketing strategy of importance?
3.11 CONCLUSION

CHAPTERS 2 and 3 summed up the main currents and concepts that inform my research and its practical components. I started out discussing the notion of identity in different ways. Next, the concepts identity and fashion were linked in an effort to explain how the term is understood throughout this study and to what extent it can function a.) as a carrier of individual and collective meaning in the wider cultural circuit, and b.) represent a site of symbolic identification. We have seen that the function of clothing in many cases reaches beyond covering the body, thereby turning it into a signifier of individual and more collective value attributions. The very way clothing items get their meanings is not a unidirectional process. Collective meanings are actively produced, shaped, and altered between groups and individual agents. In that way, they are neither stable nor universally defined. Although certain brands and clothing products may have similar meanings in different cultural contexts that is not necessarily the case – more often than not they are country- or even group-specific.

To develop an understanding of these interplays in a consumption context the concept of style groups was defined as a virtual consumption collective whose members consciously or unconsciously share similar values and life concepts based on their stylistic preferences and consumption interests. Since my research attempts to explore the value constructs that govern purchase behaviour in the Dutch fashion industry it is important to understand how the processes of identification and buying preferences are interrelated. Self-concept was fleshed out as a critical component governing the dynamics between the symbolic value of consumer goods and individual and collective values. We saw that consumer goods can take on the function of intermediaries between different levels of identity, in that they reinforce belonging to, and acceptance by, relevant groupings.

Next, the involvement construct was defined as a measure to explore buying behaviour in relation to consumer values. The concept represents a critical variable for this research because, on the one hand, it stretches to a number of dimensions that are to do with the material and symbolic function of clothing and, on the other hand, it defines their value in relation to other brands or even entire segments. When researching consumer loyalty in the Dutch fashion industry, involvement represents a variable to measure different degrees and develop an understanding of the material and immaterial values consumers connect with a brand. We saw that product involvement in a clothing context can either signify clothing involvement or fashion involvement. Each defines different ambitions and desires. Added to that, each defines a different purpose the clothes are supposed to serve (looking good / being fashionable). One ambition of this project is to find out how these different levels interconnect and what role clothing plays in different style groups.

With the term co-creation I specified a marketing approach that makes active use of consumers’ intelligence. The idea is important for this study, in order to understand in what ways a company tries to retain loyalty and to find out about the factors that connect them with their audience groups. The majority of clothing firms are branded nowadays and employ various retention strategies to bind consumers in the long run. Co-creation adds an interesting dimension to the research, as it envisages consumer communities as active agents in the market who interact with their preferred brands in such a way that they actually can exert an influence on their economic performance.

In an effort to explore the connection between consumers and brands and look into buying motivations and consumer loyalty, this research will explore the relationships between a number of Dutch fashion brands and their audiences. The ambition is to define different degrees of involvement and illustrate the relation between consumers and a number of Dutch fashion firms on the basis of four case studies. Needless to say, my research cannot claim to be exhaustive in any way, simply because it is impossible to research the field in its entirety. Making a foray into Dutch fashion culture with respect to consumer values and branding/retention mechanisms, my research will focus on the following questions:

- What are the different value systems that govern the brand-consumer relationship and is there something typically Dutch about them? My research attempts to connect the question to the co-creation of values between brands and consumers, seeking to explore what different value systems govern the connection between supply and demand.
- What level holds strongest when it comes to the purchase behaviour of Dutch consumers: individual identities, group identities, national or international sites of identification? Are collective identities such as style groups relevant and what do they tell us about the consumption mentality (or habitus) of Dutch consumers?
- How do different audiences relate to their preferred brands? Do those ties have an impact on the buying behaviour of Dutch consumers?

In the next chapter I will precisely clarify how the research is structured and on the basis of what methodological framework it was carried out.
4.1 INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades research on the interactive relations between brands and consumers has increased. In the context of consumer studies co-creation and co-evolution have been critical terms in academic debate (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar 2007). Fashion studies, however, have barely concerned themselves with the question how supply and demand are connected, and what factors are involved in the relationship. This study contributes to an understanding of the dynamic processes that govern the relation between clothing firms and their audience groups and is aimed at providing an understanding of how both parties co-evolve. To this day, there are still comparatively few guidelines to understanding the interactive component of the relationship. This chapter provides an overview of the methodological set-up of the study and explains the different reasons that motivated my choices.

Section 4.2 explains why a case study-based research design was the most suitable approach to realise the goals of this study. This section describes the method by which the individual cases were chosen and focuses on the process of data collection and the qualitative criteria of the study (internal/external validity). In section 4.3, an overview of the used methods is presented to understand the dynamic relationship between consumers and brands.

4.2 A CASE STUDY-BASED RESEARCH APPROACH

Yin (1994) outlines five much-used approaches in the social sciences: archival analysis, experiments, surveys, history and case studies. Each of them has a different focus and produces a different kind of knowledge about the research subject. By the same token, each of them responds to a different type of research question and requires a different degree of control over behavioural or situational events as part of the research process. Yin argues that studies were chosen for several reasons as the most appropriate form of data collection. In section 4.1 I indicated that in a consumption context the majority of fashion publications deal with either the behaviour and attitudes of consumers (Azvedo et al. 2008; Beaudoin, Moore and Goldsmith 2008; Hjort and Sjöblom 2008; Shim, Morris and Morgan 1988) or the economical and organisational structure of brands (Djelic and Aninari 1990, Moore and Britwistle 2004; Moore and Fionda 2009; Newman and Patel 2004). Hardly any publication, however, addresses the question how supply and demand relate to one another.

My own study is concerned with the question in what way and to what extent the attitudes of consumers intersect with the strategic positioning of firms. In other words, it targets the interactive component of fashion consumption and seeks to identify critical drivers in the relationship between consumers and brands. Furthermore, my aim was to explore some of their explorative characteristics. In my study, case studies are not suited to provide conclusive knowledge that has the potential to stand on its own and allow for generalisation. According to Dogan and Pelassy (1990: 121), ‘one can validly explain a particular case only on the basis of general hypotheses. All the rest is mere rhetoric so to look into the subject that is neither fair nor correct. In fact, it is a somewhat dated argument built upon the assumption that it is impossible to make inferences from the micro to the meso or macro level. It is certainly true that every single study needs to be approached as a case in its own right. Still, it is questionable whether the argument is appropriate and productive in social research, considering that the position of the main is mostly context-dependent. Following Flyvbjerg (2006: 223), ‘there does not and cannot probably exist predictive theory in social science. Social science has not succeeded in producing general, context-independent theory and, thus, has in the final instance nothing else to offer than concrete, context-dependent knowledge’. As a case study-based research design relates to a specific context and generates knowledge that is not always readily transferable. At the same time, it would be wise to assume that a setting that is built around a number of cases, does not allow for cross comparisons. Yin considers an understanding design using multiple points of view and rich data on a variety of sources. Also, they make it possible to frame and study a phenomenon over time, which can be of great advantage in a comparative analysis between past and present states of development.

My research is mainly concerned with what Yin (1994) identifies as ‘why’ of situations and states where it is hard to retain full control over behavioural patterns. In their capacity to investigate processes within a certain context, case studies lend themselves to a detailed and exhaustive analysis, whereas alternative approaches such as surveys or archival analysis, whose aim is to study a small set of variables, are usually based on a clear separation between the object of study and its context. Case study research is multi-layered and involves data collection from various points of view and at various levels. Exploring the dynamics between supply and demand, a case study-based research design yields an understanding design using connections that govern the relationship on the one hand, and allowed me to make a foray into a largely uncharted field of study on the other.

Positivist science argues that because of their practice-dependence case studies are best understood as a hypothesis-generating tool while the generation of knowledge and generalisations thereof are best left to quantitative studies (Mays and Pope 1995; Sandelowski 1986). In this context case studies do not represent an autonomous research strategy, but a means to generate preliminary insights that are being used for the design of ‘real’ (read: quantitative) studies. Qualitative research is nevertheless an indispensable part of the research process. Yin also states that case studies are exclusively suited to interpretative research because of their potential to analyse a subject in greater detail, and produce knowledge based on experiences and interaction. While both approaches coexist legitimately, it seems reductionist to look at them as binary opposing categories. For one, how can we have variables and hierarchies in a methodologically sound framework? Generally speaking, we can distinguish two different types of case selection: random selection and information-oriented selection. Random selection is divided into two categories: extreme/deviant cases and paradigmatic cases. Extreme/deviant cases are used to obtain information about unusual phenomena, which may be either particularly good or problematic. Maximum variation is a method used to obtain information about the importance of diverse circumstances pertaining to a phenomenon (e.g. choosing a number of cases which differ in one dimension: size, location, organisational set-up, and budget). Critical cases are a sampling method that is used to obtain ‘logical information of the type, “if this is (not) valid, then it applies to all (no) cases”’ (ibid: 230). Paradigmatic cases help to develop a certain scientific thought or make an example of a specific subject.

For my own research maximum-variation selection was chosen as the most appropriate form of case selection. Since the selection of cases is critical for the external validity of a study and because only a limited number of cases can actually be studied in the framework of a dissertation, it is all the more crucial that the individual case studies are well chosen and representative of the field they are supposed to cover. In this respect Yin (1994) makes a distinction between theoretical and literal replication. Following Yin’s argument, cases should be selected either to strengthen the qualitative results which can later be explained with the help of theory (theoretical replication), or to highlight similarities (literal replication). With the aim to explore one specific phenomenon across different dimensions – i.e., consumption dynamics in the Dutch fashion industry – a virtually undeveloped field, the cases in this dissertation are supposed to reflect Dutch fashion in its diversity, and facilitate an understanding of the value connections at play across different dimensions of the local fashion landscape (theoretical replication). To get an idea of what the Dutch fashion industry looks like and what aspects play a part in it, my supervisor, Prof. Dary Jacobs, and I conducted an expert panel prior to the selection of cases. As will be explained in Chapter 5, we approached experts with a longstanding history in Dutch fashion, with the request to make a list of ten fashion firms that, in their view, best reflected the Dutch fashion landscape and to provide an explanation of their choice. From these interviews I distilled different brand categories and a list of features characterising the local fashion industry. The four brands I studied in this dissertation are the product of this foray, and are intended to present an idea of the dynamics between brands and consumers in each of the categories.
Generically speaking, the research period was divided into four different phases:

1. Development of a theoretical framework
2. Development of the case study design
3. Execution of the case studies in the Dutch fashion industry
4. Analysis and conclusion drawing

PHASE 1 • Development of a theoretical framework
With the aim to define the field and form an understanding of the different aspects that had to be taken into consideration for the actual research, I first developed a theoretical framework. During this phase the aim was not only to create a suitable theoretical basis for the research but to find out as well what direction it was to take. It was supposed that this PhD is based on a proposal originally not written by myself. I had to find my way into the subject, position myself in the field, and identify key areas that appeared suited to the subject and interesting enough to study. My work during this period consisted of an extensive literature study and a number of talks with experts in the field. From this I distilled a number of critical aspects that later formed the point of departure for the case study research and data analysis.

PHASE 2 • Development of a case study design
After defining the field and building the theoretical foundation of the study, the second phase consisted of developing the case study design. During this period the general setting of the research was established, with the aim to develop a conclusive and sound method for studying the dynamics between brands and consumers in the Dutch fashion industry. As indicated above, the expert panel was used in this context to define the choice of cases and to allow for a high degree of variation. The goal of the research was to look into the relationship between brands and consumers and explore the question whether there are typically Dutch characteristics involved. The research setting was designed to reflect the ambition and cover the different facets of the Dutch fashion landscape.

PHASE 3 AND 4 • Execution of the case studies in the Dutch fashion industry, and analysis and conclusion drawing
These phases were interrelated to a certain extent, the boundaries were not as clear-cut as between the preceding phases. The case studies were executed one by one, while the phase of analysis went mostly hand in hand with it. During the entire period case study protocols served to control the research. Tentative conclusions were already drawn during the research phase, which includes all relevant data. I have audiotaped all the interviews of the study, except for one in which I was not given permission to use a tape recorder. In this case I had to rely on taking notes.

4.2.1 DATA COLLECTION WITHIN THE CASES
The number and selection of case studies discussed above primarily refer to the external validity of my study and the extent to which it is possible to generalise and make inferences from findings. By contrast, the choices that I made during the phase of data collection have an impact on the internal validity, construct validity, and reliability.

CONSTRUCT VALIDITY
Pundits of case study research have variously argued that the method falls short of guidelines on how to objectify data and make the research process transparent and reproducible. It is claimed that the data collection of case studies is based on subjective judgments and that it lacks empirical precision. In this regard, Perry (1998) suggests ‘data triangulation’ as a method to improve the reliability of the results. Most generally speaking, the concept advocates the use of at least three different sources of evidence rather than relying on a single one. In an effort to improve the construct validity of my study, I have drawn on multiple sources including interviews and websites, shop visits and observation protocols. Attempting to integrate evidence from a variety of sources, the qualitative data was enriched with questionnaires in order to facilitate an alternative view and complement the findings with data that indicate tendencies and patterns in the consumption behaviour of Dutch fashion consumers (see section 4.3.2 for further details). Added to that, the decision to work with case studies gave me the chance to cross-validate the concepts and research strategy throughout the study, and test the concepts in different economic environments.

INTERNAL VALIDITY
The cases I studied all present an idea of how audiences and brands relate to one another at a specific point in time. Due to the fact that a research setting based on multiple case studies does not lend itself to a longitudinal study of the Dutch fashion consumers (see section 4.3.2), I had to rely on qualitative data triangulation. For my study I chose data triangulation, theoretical triangulation, methodological triangulation, and observer triangulation as possible strategies to structure the process of detecting emerging patterns. When describing events and phenomena the risk is that the data set is incomplete or not accurate enough. Robson (ibid.) therefore suggests audio and video taping as a method, which includes all relevant data. I have audio taped all the interviews of the study, except for one in which I was not given permission to use a tape recorder. In this case I had to rely on taking notes.

Furthermore, I kept a daily research protocol for each of the cases in order to keep track of the general events and decisions that led to the external validity of my study and the extent to which it is possible to generalise and make inferences from findings. By contrast, the choices that I made during the phase of data collection have an impact on the internal validity, construct validity, and reliability.

When it comes to interpretation, Robson (ibid.) notes that the biggest risk is to ‘make up’ a framework in advance of the data collection (rather than following the same or very similar) results would have been obtained if another researcher had conducted the study. For my study I relied on qualitative content analysis, a guided method of data analysis that is presented in section 4.3.1. In addition, I have kept a detailed case study database to organise the results and access them in a structured way. Following Davis (2009) the quality of a database is evaluated by the extent to which other researchers are able to understand how the collected data support claims made in the final case study report through perusal of the database. Furthermore, Yin (1994) suggests developing a detailed code book to structure the data and keep track of the research process and changes taking place as the research progresses. According to the criteria of qualitative content analysis (section 4.3.1) structured the data with the help of a code book and a guided scheme for the analysis.

Next to the approaches mentioned above, the interpretation of case studies and case selection as well as the final results have been extensively discussed with the group of fellow PhDs and professors who constituted the NWO project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’. Opening up the preparations and results to discussions with an informed group of scholars allowed a plurality of different views and opinions. Arguably, not every kind of input is equally valid. In an effort to avoid an eclectic treatment of the results, my supervisor Prof. Dany Jacobs and I therefore followed up the group discussions with brief reviews integrating and analysing the main points.

RESEARCH SET-UP
Prior to the actual period of research I worked out a scheme for the different brands in order to guarantee that the research was going to take place according to the original criteria. The scheme included a detailed list of each of the firms’ outlets and the actual retail settings, as well as preliminary studies of each of the stores in order to get a first insight into the organisational set-up, media profile, and range of products. Furthermore, the research plan was drawn up in what way, in what locations, and during what periods of time the research was supposed to take place. To ensure that there was a yardstick for comparison between the consumers I was going to interview, I signed a contract with all the shops, agreed on multiple case studies and questionnaires, and was allowed to conduct the research in cities where each of the firms had outlets. Each of the cases in this dissertation has been studied.
over a period of three to four months, depending on the progress rate and the extent to which I was able to gather a sufficient amount of data.

During the period of data collection I actively participated in the retail setting, which included helping out with minor tasks when the stores were empty, and asking questions to the shop assistants in order to better understand the process of value exchange with consumers. By doing so, I have been able to develop an understanding of different types of consumer approaches as well as the different manners in which the brands I studied interact with their audiences.

I completed the questionnaires together with the consumers in order to avoid possible misunderstandings concerning the items and to make sure that no items were being skipped and the forms were completed outright. Only consumers who had actually completed the act of purchase were approached. This choice was motivated by the fact that I wanted to make sure the sample was comprised of actual consumers rather than passers-by. I admit that this decision produced a smaller data set compared to a set-up where every person coming into the shop is approached. However, in keeping with the goals of the study, it seemed more sensible to focus on actual consumers than on potential ones.

For the in-depth interviews I relied on the shop assistants who convinced regulars on my behalf to participate in the study, as well as on my own judgment. Whenever the answers, given during the process of completing the questionnaire, indicated that the respondent visited the shop on a regular basis and purchased larger quantities, I approached them with the request to participate further in an in-depth interview in the company’s back rooms. The interviews usually took between 20 and 30 minutes, depending on progress and the amount of time respondents had at their disposal.

As far as the interviews I conducted with employees from the companies are concerned, I did not have a fixed interview target regarding the number of people I wanted to interview. Rather, I attempted to cover all the relevant functions within each fashion company (marketers, PR assistants, designers, sales assistants, visual merchandisers) to get a complete picture of how the firm as a whole is organised, and detect patterns in the way different brands use and execute their brand philosophy. Most of the interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes, in a few cases they took between one and a half and two hours.

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACHES: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE

Consumer behaviour in fashion is studied primarily in two ways. One strand of scholars relies on qualitative research methods and an anthropological approach (Banister and Hogg 2004; Bovone 2006, Kawamura 2006, 2011; Piacentini and Maier 2004) whereas others typically use quantitative research methods and statistical analysis including data mining of sales figures (Birtwistle and Freathy 1998, Birtwistle and Shearer 2001; Goldsmith, Flynn and Moore 1996; Kim 2000; O’Cass 2000; Smith and Brysonfson 2001). The former is traditionally related to studying consumption habits as a social phenomenon, whereas the latter analyses the relationship in a psychological or commercial context. Both approaches have their benefits and drawbacks. Qualitative research is often claimed to be impressionistic and based on personal accounts that do not reflect ‘the facts’, hence suggesting that the findings, even when discussed by a group of experts/formed scholars, remain subject to individual interpretation. On the positive side, the method permits an explorative treatment of the subject: by not starting from a fixed set of assumptions the method allows for an open and informed in-depth analysis and leaves the potential for unexpected findings and insights (Byram and Bell 2003). By contrast, quantitative research relies exclusively on statistical analysis and pre-formulated hypotheses, which exclude new theoretical insights as the research question determines the outcome to some extent. By definition positivist research confirms or refutes one or more pre-formulated hypotheses, which limits the scope of analysis to a specific set of variables and a rather narrowly defined area of research. The great benefit of this approach is that it produces fairly exact statistical data that allow for comparisons between different economic environments.

For many years scientists working on the basis of statistical models have argued that qualitative research lacks methodological precision and cannot be quantified properly (Sandelowski 1995). One of the main reasons for this argument was that the method fell short of structural criteria to actually define the process of data analysis and conclusion drawing. In other words, the replicability of findings was at stake, due to an absence of clear and binding principles (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Avoiding the dilemma traditionally faced by qualitative research, Glaser and Strauss published their famous ‘The Discovery of Grounded Theory’ in 1967, an approach which practically starts from a reverse set of assumptions. Rather than starting from a theory-driven research set-up, the first step is a data collection. According to the original theory, data can come from a variety of sources including more obvious ones like interviews and observation protocols, but also informal ones like newspaper reports. After a first viewing of the material a coding scheme is being developed that at a later stage translates into a number of concepts that guide the research as well as the data analysis. In turn, these concepts form the basis of a set of categories that inform the process of theory building. Theory is consequently developed as a function of a specific research model or, in other words, it is ‘grounded’ in the phenomenon that is being studied. Instead of examining one precise phenomenon, Grounded Theory looks at separate incidents, the sum of which represents the basis of the theory-building process and analysis. The relevance of categories is constantly challenged by what Glaser and Strauss call fit. As a result, ideas and concepts that emerge from the research are subject to an ongoing process of comparison between different incidents and old and new data, leading to a continuous refitting and adaptation of categories (Glaser 1978).

4.3.1 QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Over the years the Grounded Theory approach has been met with both praise and criticism (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Robrecht 1995). More recently, a number of scholars have broadened the perspective in an attempt to define guidelines explaining how to analyse data and frame them against the background of the complete research setting (Ritzert 1972; Wiktowski 1994; Altheide 1996). In this context Mayring (2000) has developed qualitative content analysis (‘qualitative Inhaltsanalyse’ and ‘Leitfaden-Interviews’), a practice which prioritises a content-based approach and includes formal aspects in the process of data collection. Following Krippendorff (1969: 103), ‘content analysis [is] the use of replicable and valid method for making specific inferences from texts to other states or properties of its source’. The underlying idea is to use the guiding principles of quantitative content analysis as developed in communication studies, and advance them in the field of interpretative research. Fuelled by Becker and Lissmann’s (1975) model which emphasises ‘layers of content’, qualitative content analysis not only looks into the manifest contentual matter of transcripts, protocols, and documents, but makes a distinction between ‘primary content’ (main reason- ing or chain of thought) and ‘latent content’ that only becomes apparent from either the contingent context of the transcript or the larger body of the interview. In that way it is a technique that breaks down the material within its communication context, based on a set of given criteria.

Mayring (2000: 4) defines a set of principles guiding the analytical process:

- Placement in a communication model: Defining the aim of the analysis with respect to the
Co-evolution between brands and consumers. The analytical process was developed. At this stage it was crucial to find a suitable theoretical framework and develop the guiding concepts of my research. As clarified in my abstract, it is not realistic to attempt an all-encompassing treatment, but this is the way I want to look. This dress is an extension of how I feel about myself.” (CKCI, 17’). Coding Rules: All aspects need to apply and surface during the interview. Otherwise: moderate involvement.

The process is structural and analytical at the same time. Starting from a subject or research question, in the first step main and sub categories are defined on the basis of theory. Next, definitions and coding rules are established, again with reference to the theory guiding the research. The third and fourth step are evaluation stages. Leading back to the initial question and categories, the third step is a formative evaluation during which the categories and coding scheme are being reworked. In a summative evaluation of the material, the data set as a whole is revisited in the fourth step. The final analysis integrates this process and builds the foundation for future implications and changes or adaptations of the general research strategy.

Applied to my own research, the process was structured as follows: the question of my study was the dynamic relationship between Dutch fashion consumers and their preferred brands. The first phase of my research was the development of a literature review study to find a suitable theoretical framework and develop the guiding concepts of my research. As clarified in Chapter 2 and 3, during this phase a number of relevant categories were defined (e.g. involvement, style groups, self-concept). For example, when ‘involvement’ was the main category, the subcategories dealt with involvement (low and high), the flow and the aspects through which involvement becomes manifest. Next, the definitions and coding rules guiding the analytical process were developed. At this stage it was important to clearly define when a test passage would fit the criteria and in what way it helped to provide an answer to the research question. The final coding scheme exploring brand involvement, for instance, looked as follows:

C1 HIGH LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT • DEFINITION: Emotional relationship with brand and product. Consumer sees brand/clothing as extension of his own identity. • Consumer is enthusiastic about firm/clothing. • High relevance in social/professional environment • STANDARD EXAMPLES: “Whether I consider myself a fan of the brand? Oh yes! I come here at least once a week and most of the time I don’t leave empty-handed.” (CKCI, 17’). Of the lived in the field, it’s not really my interest, but this is the way I want to look. This dress is an extension of how I feel about myself.” (CKCI, 17’). CODING RULES: All aspects need to apply and surface during the interview. Otherwise: moderate involvement.

C2 MODERATE LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT • DEFINITION: Only partially identifying with firm and product. • Moderate relevance in direct social/professional environment • STANDARD EXAMPLES: “No, clothing is not part of my self-identity. I do of course choose clothes that I like, but that’s something different.” (VGI, 17’). CODING RULES: C2 applies when not all the criteria indicate ‘high’ or ‘low’ involvement.

C3 LOW LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT • DEFINITION: Non-emotional relationship with brand and product. Clothing mainly fulfills utilitarian function. • STANDARD EXAMPLES: “You see, I’m not very much into clothing or anything. I dress like this because I have to. It’s part of my job. But whether it’s this or another brand... I really don’t care.” (SE). CODING RULES: All aspects indicate a low degree of involvement.

During the research in the progress categories were being revised and adapted to new insights obtained with a larger data set, while eventually all interviews were coded according to one final scheme. The formative evaluation of research categories and coding schemes was reworked back to the original research question and theoretical framework, in order to control fit and applicability and make sure that the categories were still in sync with the original claims of the study. During this phase key concepts like ‘brand/product involvement’, ‘identification’, or ‘co-creation’ were framed against the categories and definitions. By extending the analysis, the approach would have been indeed sufficient – but to show how certain consumer groups relate to their preferred brands – a goal for which an interpretative approach would have been indeed sufficient – but to also facilitate an understanding of the value constructs governing the purchase behaviour of Dutch fashion consumers in general. The reasoning behind this approach was to present an idea of the value connections and general purchase behaviour for each brand, thereby establishing a comparative measure between the different cases. To arrive at this goal I complemented the qualitative data from the in-depth interviews and observations with quantitative data obtained through the questionnaires that were completed together with consumers.

My reasoning in this regard is informed by Bernd (2000) who advocates a less clear-cut distinction between the different approaches, arguing that ‘while the boundaries between the disciplines remain to some extent those boundaries are no longer about method – if they ever were. Whatever our epistemological differences, the actual methods by which we collect and analyze our data belong to everyone across the social sciences’ (ibid: xviii). His approach is interesting in so much as it does away with the classical divide between qualitative and quantitative research. By extending the analysis, the approach has come to be known as mixed-methods research. In recent years this approach has gained more and more currency, mainly due to its (supposed) potential to facilitate insights into research areas where a single-method approach falls short of covering the full spectrum of research.

Instead of staging them as binary oppositions, mixed-methods research has been advertised as ‘the natural complement to traditional qualitative and quantitative research’ (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004: 14) while others have promoted it as the latest approach in social research due to its supposed epistemological benefits of both traditions (Giddens 2006: 195). Perhaps, there is some truth to these arguments – in spite of their apparent hyperbole. When framed in such a simplistic way, however, there is a danger of methodological eclecticism, because the unquestioning combination of interpretative and statistical approaches negates the fundamental differences and research traditions. Both quantitative and qualitative models are ‘based on a particular paradigm, a patterned set of assumptions concerning reality (ontology), knowledge of that reality (epistemology), and the particular ways of knowing that reality (methodology)’ (Sale et al. 2002: 44; see also Guba 1990). Quantitative research aims at measuring and analysing causal relationships between a number of variables within a value-free, unbiased setting (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). By contrast, qualitative research is to a certain extent based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed. Epistemological speaking, investigators and the object of study are intimately connected, which turns the findings into a direct product of the circumstances and framework the research has taken place in.

As the juxtaposition makes clear, mixed-methods research may involve a structural quandary, which has to do with the fact that the two models stem from a different phenomenological basis. In itself this is not necessarily a problem. Indeed, it can be beneficial to combine different frameworks. Qualitative methods can be used to add more detailed insights to a quantitative analysis, while statistical data can form a sound basis to contextualise interpretative analysis (Howe 1988). I agreed with the argument that epistemological differences do not have to be a disadvantage in a research setting that, next to an interpretative-explanatory treatment, calls for statistical evidence that allows for a different kind of generalisation. In order to apply such an approach successfully, however, both models can be used as complementary frameworks that cross-fertilise each other while they cannot be used for cross-validation purposes.

For my own research, the implications of this approach are critical. Sale et al. make a clear distinction between the phenomena studied by each method and suggest clarifying this distinction by labelling the phenomena that each approach is best suited to examine. Table 4.2 shows in what way the individual research paradigms are used throughout my study. Quantitative methods are used to indicate potential to facilitate insights into research areas where a single-method approach falls short of covering the full spectrum of research.
tendencies in consumer behaviour and describe the way consumers perceive and connect to the different brands under scrutiny. The goal is to establish a measure for the value connections that define the relationship and make the criteria identifiable that play an important role in the consumption patterns and during the purchase decision-making process. Qualitative methods, by contrast, are employed to study the dynamics between supply and demand. In-depth interviews and observation protocols are used:

a. To explore the lived experiences of consumers to develop an understanding of their life-worlds and identity

b. To provide insights into the way brands seek to connect with their audiences and lay open the strategies used to retain consumer loyalty

In short, although the phenomenon 'consumption and co-evolution in the Dutch fashion industry' may appear the same across the methods of analysis, the distinction between 'measure' and 'lived experience' reconciles the phenomenon to its respective method and paradigm (see also Sale et al. 2002: 50)

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**QUALITATIVE**
- Consumers' life and experience worlds
- Dynamics between brands and consumers
- Branding and retention strategies
- **QUANTITATIVE**
  - Consumption patterns
  - Purchase frequency
  - Value connections
  - Brand perception

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**TABLE 4.2 QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE APPROACHES AND THEIR RESPECTIVE PURPOSE IN MY STUDY**

The questionnaires (*APPENDIX I*) consisted of 16 items in total, including:

- 10 items using statement-based questions and a 5-point Likert scale to measure general consumer behaviour and subject-related areas
- 2 items using a 3-point scale with predefined response options for measuring visiting frequency and the number of items purchased at a time
- 2 open-ended questions for measuring brand perception in relation to the firms' Dutch national background
- 1 multiple-choice item (choice rate: 3 out of 15) to measure brand-specific consumer values

It was decided to show the results in the form of percentages. This choice is motivated by the fact that throughout this study the quantitative data is not meant to respond to (or even create) binary oppositions like 'significant / insignificant' or 'correct / incorrect'. Instead, it was my ambition to indicate tendencies and directions concerning the purchase behaviour of different groups of Dutch fashion consumers. In keeping with the exploratory nature of the study, the research did not start from a fixed set of assumptions but sought to develop an understanding of the ruling demands in the field. While confirmatory approaches traditionally produce knowledge that is conclusive and axiomatic, the aim of my study was to create a measure illustrating a general idea of the demands and purchase dynamics at play. In line with the dynamic nature of the study, the goal was to develop a way of showcasing the studies side by side and to be able to compare the findings according to identical dimensions.

### 4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the study’s methodological set-up to give insight into the way the research was structured and executed. I started out discussing case study-based research at a general level, in order to explain why I considered case studies the most appropriate form of data collection for this research. Next, I discussed the external and internal validity of the study and clarified in which way the research was structured and what different steps it has taken from start to finish. After discussing the general distinction between interpretative and statistical research methods, Mayring’s approach of qualitative content analysis was introduced as the main method by which I kept track of, and analysed, my data sets. Finally, I clarified my reasons to enrich the interviews with quantitative data.

In the appendices I and II the questionnaires are presented and an example of the questions in the in-depth interviews with consumers.
CHAPTER 5

DUTCH FASHION THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: AN EXPERT VIEW
and approached a number of cognoscenti in the field to share their view on what they consider as ‘typi- 
cally Dutch’ (brands) and what criteria they used as leading question they were asked to respond to was: ‘If you had to name but five brands to cover the full spectrum of Dutch fashion – what companies would you choose? Please explain each choice in one or two sentences.’

In methodological terms a successive two-tier strategy (two rounds of five questions each) was opted for, in order to first identify the ‘hard core’ (those representing Dutch fashion the best/strongest) and in the second assessment allow for a broader view on the subject. A second reason to split the question was to avoid overwhelming the respondents with the task of enlisting the full number of ten brands in one go, which might have discouraged some from collaborating.

With the aim to think in terms of value attributions and to develop an understanding for the relays running back and forth between clothing-related proper and cultural values, the desired outcome of this experiment was twofold. On the one hand, I tried to gather a pool of opinions connected to Dutch fashion from an expert point of view with the goal to get an idea what people ‘in the know’ actually mean by Dutch fashion and whether there are overlaps in their choices. On the other hand, by asking the respondents to indicate the motivation behind their picks, I sought to distill a number of underlying values and connotations that run in sync with what is referred to as being Dutch at a more general level. It goes without saying that if it is possible to identify defining features of Dutch fashion, they will become manifest not only in visual or aesthetic terms but also in terms of local cultural marketing.

Every country has its peculiarities – in terms of clothing culture and otherwise. The way we relate the Dutch mode of dress (but also the North American and Scandinavian, for example) to more casual and relaxed styles, is not an arbitrary occurrence, but a produ- cutive result of the historical model of work and culture. A national style or fashion identity is not only a reflec tion of what a country’s inhabitants look like but has recourse to a specific mentality as well: a link between the implicit cultural values and their explicit material expression in the form of national (sometimes even regional) fashion styles. Instead of local fashion mate rials as part of a country-specific attitude or lifestyle it is something that can be analysed and looked into as part of the cultural discourse. Dutch fashion, therefore, is understood here as part of the country’s visual retailory, representative of the wider circuit of values and ideas on both the national and international level. By the way: many of the experts who were invited to participate in the research did so because they were approached a number of experts was meant to produce a fast and hard defini tion of what Dutch fashion is – or could be. Rather, the aim was to develop a general understanding of:

- a number of brand names which are considered typically or really Dutch;
- an (assumed) number of defining features of Dutch fashion;
- possible connections between the cultural sphere, Dutch citizenry and, by extension, how both these currents relate to clothing culture.

In an effort to present a set of possible criteria the selec tion of respondents was based on experience and an informed view. Each of them was selected for com petent knowledge and a longstanding history in the field of fashion, in particular seeking experts who could represents Dutch fashion the best/strongest) and in the second assessment allow for a broader view on the subject. A second reason to split the question was to avoid overwhelming the respondents with the task of enlisting the full number of ten brands in one go, which might have discouraged some from collaborating.

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

Before moving on to the actual research, there is one question to be answered first: what does actually qualify as Dutch fashion in the first place? How is it distin guishable from other countries? What are its defining features?

It is commonly known that a number of Dutch designers were among the first, if not the first, to gain international recognition for their unique design style. One of these designers was Lucas Osseindriyer, head of menswear at Lanvin, who has substantially contributed to the brand’s success by introducing some of the most critically acclaimed men’s collections of the past decade. Similarly, Wilbert Das, creative director at Diesel for almost two decades, has been responsible for the success of Diesel since its inception in 1986. Other notable designers, such as Pierre Morisset, former Dean of Design at ArtEZ Institute of the Arts (Arnhem), have been influential in shaping the Dutch fashion industry and have helped to define the typical Dutch fashion aesthetic.

Can we actually say the design is Dutch? And if so – what are the properties that can be referred to as Dutch national fashion style? When we approach the question from a different angle we are confronted with a set of different, but no less important issues. For instance, Dutch denim brand G-Star, a trailblazer in the use of unwashed, raw denim cloth in the 1990s, has been a continued succes

5.2 THE SET-UP

Seeking to define which elements loom large when we speak of Dutch fashion, I set up a virtual expert panel composed of a number of experts from various fields. The panel consisted of twelve experts from different disciplines in the Dutch fashion world (economists, stylists, journalists, recruiters, trend watchers, independent retailers, academi
cics... see list for details below) were contacted by email with the request to enlist a number of fashion firms the panel agreed on. In other words, the leading question they were asked to respond to was: ‘If you had to name but five brands to cover the full spectrum of Dutch fashion – what companies would you choose? Please explain each choice in one or two sentences.’

In methodological terms a successive two-tier strategy (two rounds of five questions each) was opted for, in order to first identify the ‘hard core’ (those representing Dutch fashion the best/strongest) and in the second assessment allow for a broader view on the subject. A second reason to split the question was to avoid overwhelming the respondents with the task of enlisting the full number of ten brands in one go, which might have discouraged some from collaborating.

With the aim to think in terms of value attributions and to develop an understanding for the relays running back and forth between clothing-related proper and cultural values, the desired outcome of this experiment was twofold. On the one hand, I tried to gather a pool of opinions connected to Dutch fashion from an expert point of view with the goal to get an idea what people ‘in the know’ actually mean by Dutch fashion and whether there are overlaps in their choices. On the other hand, by asking the respondents to indicate the motivation behind their picks, I sought to distill a number of underlying values and connotations that run in sync with what is referred to as being Dutch at a more general level. It goes without saying that if it is possible to identify defining features of Dutch fashion, they will become manifest not only in visual or aesthetic terms but also in terms of local cultural marketing.

Every country has its peculiarities – in terms of clothing culture and otherwise. The way we relate the Dutch mode of dress (but also the North American and Scandinavian, for example) to more casual and relaxed styles, is not an arbitrary occurrence, but a productive result of the historical model of work and culture. A national style or fashion identity is not only a reflection of what a country’s inhabitants look like but has recourse to a specific mentality as well: a link between the implicit cultural values and their explicit material expression in the form of national (sometimes even regional) fashion styles. Instead of local fashion materials as part of a country-specific attitude or lifestyle it is something that can be analysed and looked into as part of the cultural discourse. Dutch fashion, therefore, is understood here as part of the country’s visual

1 The question what does or does not qualify as an expert is a central question of the research, which aims to define which elements loom large when we speak of Dutch fashion.

2 C&A is owned by Swiss-based holding company C&A Group (owned by the C&A founding family Brenninkmeijer). Viktor & Rolf is owned by Italian superbrand Diesel’s parent company, Exor.

3 Elke Konings, Fashion designer and journalist, former director of fashion magazine Fashion Press (now called Setting the Stage).


5 Rolf de Vries, Chief Executive Officer of the ArtEZ Institute of the Arts.

6 | ZEGNA, 2009.

7 | JOHN DEDE, 2009.

8 | MARINDE HOITINK, 2009.


10 | MICHIEL SCHEFFER, 2009.
Table 1: Results Expert Panel (in number of mentions)

1. **G-Star**: #10 **VALUES** Mass product with a distinct brand identity, clearly defined marketing/branding strategy, international orientation; (hy)percommercial, business-driven, streetwise, innovative, product quality; ‘sophisticated casual’, ‘Dutch denim’

2. **SANDWICH/TURNOVER**: #8 **VALUES** Quick response to emerging trends/market climate; open-minded; commercially driven; international; feminine; no-nonsense design; mid-market; versatile; care-free and good quality; broad consumer profile; value for money; representative

3. **VIKTOR & ROLF**: #5 **VALUES** Conceptual, coherent design/branding strategy; artistic; headstrong; design-driven and somewhat unrefined

3. **ALEXANDER VAN SLOBBE**: #5 **VALUES** Minimalist and modernist design approach; clean shapes; conceptual; academic; intellectual

3. **MARLIES DEKKERS**: #4 **VALUES** International entrepreneurship; emancipated image of women; no-frills aesthetics; geometry; dashing and original product

3. **JUST B-**: #4 **VALUES** Innovative; smart brand communication; recognisable style and marketing; mid-market with a twist; strong commercial drive; feminine

4. **IMPS EN ELFS**: #4 **VALUES** Trailblazer in design-driven children’s wear; freethinking and creative; trendsetting; sustainable; practical; conceptual; no-nonsense

4. **KLAVERS VAN ENGELEN**: #4 **VALUES** Conceptual; refined; minimal; focused on construction and inner structure(s) of garments

5. **IRIS VAN HERPEN**: #3 **VALUES** Craftsmanship applied to cutting-edge fashion; driven by technical and material experimentation; influenced by industrial design; uncompromising; conceptual

5. **BAS KOSTERS**: #3 **VALUES** Colourful, free; ‘maladjusted’; non-commercial; visionary; freedom of creation; inspiration; in-your-face patterns and colours; theatrical; labour-intensive product

5. **OILY**: #3 **VALUES** Colourful; informal; freethinking; recognisable

5. **MART VISSET**: #3 **VALUES** Commercial, design for the masses; mass premium; Dutch couture; media pulley; uninnovative; commercially successful; traditional

5. **C&A**: #3 **VALUES** Affordable ready-to-wear clothing; accessible; in-house collections; relatively fashionable; wide reach; mass product

5. **GAASTRA**: #3 **VALUES** Dutch sportswear; quality; functional

5. **CLAUDIA STRATER**: #3 **VALUES** Consistent representative style; unique position in women’s ready-to-wear market; luxurious appearance; yet affordable; business basics; good price-performance; clear trademark look (cut/use of colour)

5. **VANILLA**: #3 **VALUES** Commercial; premium mid-market women’s wear; representative; recognisable signature style; good price-quality performance; fabric quality; easy-care; basics; colours

5. **HANS UBBINK**: #3 **VALUES** Innovative; commercial; geared to the Dutch menswear market

5. **SUIT SUPPLY**: #3 **VALUES** Commercial ambition combined with a feel for fashion and clever marketing; value for money; tasteful style for the common man; Dutch business; good service; entrepreneurial

6. **GSUS**: #2 **VALUES** Distinguished by creativity; international; unique take on contemporary streetwear

6. **ZENGGI**: #2 **VALUES** Femininity; pioneer in smart online retailing concepts; good design paired with fairly aggressive e-commerce; for the fashion conscious and well-to-do woman

6. **SASKIA VAN DRIMMELEN**: #2 **VALUES** Conceptual; moulage; craftsmanship; minimalist; collaboration with many different designers

6. **MACHA HUSKES**: #2 **VALUES** Conceptual; restrained

7. **OTHERS**: #1 **VALUES** Aaiko, Pauw, McGregor, Kattenburg; Stijlgroep Groningen; Van Gils; Berg; Haus; Frans Molenaar; Soap Studio; The Sting; GishaJeans; Cool Cat; Rags Industry; Anna Scott; Bandolera; Expresso; Brunotti; Protest; Falcon; Hema; Sissy Boy; Wouters & Hendrix; Humanoid; Shoebuy; Francisco van Benthum; Jeroen van Tuyll; Puck & Hans; Monique van Heist (Helly Fashion); Fong Leng; State of Art; AGU Sport; Jan Taminiau; Puck & Hans; Monique van Heist; Helly Fashion); Fong Leng; State of Art; AGU Sport; Jan Taminiau; Combinations in a cluster of six. Each of the subgroups stands for a combination of clothing style and business approach (that free for all). So, the trends listed below are grouped according to visual and stylistic cues but also include a commercial point of view (segment, pricing, retail concept, company size, level of business expansion).

**TYPES OF BRANDS**

- Alexander van Slobbe, Klavers van Engelen, Viktor & Rolf, Iris van Herpen
- Sandwich, Turnover, Stills, Vanilia, Claudia Strater, Bandolera, Expresso, Just B., Aaiko, State of Art
- G-Star, Cus, Scotch & Soda
- Bas Kosters, People of the Labyrinth, Fong Leng, Cora Kemperman
- Imps & Elfs, Oillly, The Rag & Bone, Brunotti, Protest, Falcon, AGU Sport

**Table 2: Results Clustered by Subgroups and Brand Types**

In group we find labels like Viktor & Rolf, Alexander van Slobbe, Klavers van Engelen and Iris van Herpen, all of which represent the local fashion scene in its purest and most pronounced form. Other notable examples include Spijkers en Spijkers, Pascale Catzhen, Jan Taminiau, or Saskia van Drimmelen’s collaborative project ‘Painted’. Across the total sum of responses we can identify commonalities like craftsmanship, commercialism, and conceptuality. Consistently developing designs based on a single idea, the common point of departure is the elaboration of one specific theme that surfaces across the entire collection in different forms. Viktor & Rolf, for instance, are well known for their coherent corporate signature (e.g. show invites, perfumes, and the now-defunct Milan store) and artistic take on contemporary fashion design. Alexander van Slobbe’s imprint, by contrast, focuses on the material aspects of clothing design by incorporating constructivist principles as conceptual properties of the design process. Iris van Herpen and Klavers van Engelen’s designs, with elements of conceptuality, commercial ambition, colours, or price-quality performance surfacing with some regularity. Interestingly enough, not a single respondent connected Dutch fashion to stereotypical folkloristic themes like clogs, windmills, or tulips that at times, somewhat incorrectly, are said to represent distinctive features of the local clothing culture. It is certainly true that a number of Dutch designers – notably Alexander van Slobbe, Francisco van Benthum, and Truus and Riet Spijkers – have used these and similar themes to add an ironic twist to their designs in more than one instance, but it would be wrong to conclude that they are the defining features of the Dutch fashion landscape as a whole.

Seeking to summarise these aspects in a more comprehensive manner, TABLE 5.2 presents the findings in a cluster of six. Each of the subgroups stands for a combination of clothing style and business approach (that free for all). So, the trends listed below are grouped according to visual and stylistic cues but also include a commercial point of view (segment, pricing, retail concept, company size, level of business expansion).
The firms in Group 2, amongst them Vanilla, Sandwich, Claudia Strater, and Just B., all cater to the established (women’s) middle market with a mix of refined and eclectic looks. Versatility is key to the product proposition, i.e., clothes that are at once representative and business-like, fashion oriented and easy to combine. Some of the companies seek to distinguish themselves as suppliers of more fashion-forward clothing styles. Just B. tries to fortify this ambition through a project called ‘Turning Talent into Business’ that allows up-and-coming designers to intern at the brand and design a six-piece capsule collection that is later retail in the shops. Claudia Strater opted for a similar approach when collaborating with high-end designers Spijkers en Spijkers and Jan Taminiau. Aaiko, too, recently teamed up with young Dutch designer Mattijs van Bergen under the exclusive label ‘Aai Ko loves Mattijs’. Each brand in this category is defined by an approach that is consistently mid-market in scope and a range of products that is partly devoted to genteel and up-to-the-minute fashion pieces and partly runs a more understated and business-oriented style. Commercially speaking, entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen form crucial ingredients of the formula, with retail concepts that are geared towards diverse audiences and age groups.

In Group 3 we find firms for who branding and product diversification form key aspects of the market appearance. G-Star, Cos, or Scotch & Soda are all suppliers of mid-market denim products and casual wear. At the heart of the brand proposition are accessibility, clever marketing puffery, and international franchising agreements. Scotch & Soda, for example, has been expanding rapidly in recent years and now maintains multiple outlets in 30 countries and an even larger number of franchise and shop-in-shop concepts across the globe. Cos and G-Star are distinguished, not only by a product range that cleverly negotiates between innovative, trend-savvy no-nonsense street styles and up-to-the-minute fashion pieces, but also by their distinct marketing strategies. Next to international scope and ambition, defining features of this company type are entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen for a type of clothing that is described by the experts as freethinking and creative, colourful and practical, innovative and playful. Also important are the firms’ branding concepts. Oilily was a trailblazer in exploring consumer intelligence in the early 1980s, when they established a customer club and customer magazine and turned their audience into a key ingredient of the brand’s strategic and operative set-up. Immps en Elfs, from a different angle, innovated the market for kids fashion by making children’s physique and proportions the fulcrum of the branding formula and combining it with a playful and inspired market appearance.

Group 6 covers the wide variety of sportswear labels in the Dutch fashion industry. For labels like Gaastra or Falcon, functionality is key to the brand proposition. Critical to their market approach are the use of innovative (techno) fabrics and a detailed composition of the garment, as well as the ability to merge sports clothing with a casual trendy look, thereby elevating the products from functional to lifestyle items. Conceived for a wide range of purposes, versatility forms a key ingredient to success as it broadens the scope of possible target audiences. For example Protest, a staple in the international winter sports scene, boasts a product range that stretches from technically driven boardwear to a collection of street fashion items, complete with sweaters/hoodies, T-shirts, jackets, jeans, and accessories, representing a mainstream appeal that the intersection of two oftentimes separate domains, these companies bridge the gap between leisure wear and functional, goal-oriented attire products.

The four faces of Dutch fashion

5.4 Connecting the dots

Based on the experts’ descriptions, the previous section sought to synthesise the findings according to different segments and types of product. Across the complete range of responses a number of common features were identified, amongst them entrepreneurialism and international market orientation, conceptuality, colour, innovation, and product originality. It goes without saying that the brands listed here are merely examples of certain tendencies that prevail in the Dutch fashion industry, with each of them representing a smaller or greater number of enterprises operating in the same segment with roughly the same variables.

In order to access the information in a more global way, I shifted the main focus from individual units towards emerging patterns in the next step, with the aim to identify a number of tendencies in the wider ballpark of the subject. My goal was to put into perspective the pool of expert opinions and present a possible reading of different aspects brought up during the discussion. Methodologically speaking, the full range of responses was coded according to recurrent aspects such as ‘minimalist’, ‘conceptual’, ‘denim’, ‘commercial’, ‘colourful’, or ‘innovative’. These keywords, in turn, functioned as indices for overarching themes concerning Dutch fashion, which in many instances also have a connection to Dutch culture at a more general level. By clustering the findings into different categories, a thread of common features was created for each category in order to show points of connection in the overall response pattern. From the analysis four subcategories emerged that are indicative of different, in some cases overlapping, characteristics of Dutch fashion. These are distinguished from the six types of brands discussed earlier in so much as each of them illustrates a different side of Dutch fashion, while their very sum represents a general image of the Dutch fashion landscape as a whole. The categories take their cues not so much from an industrial or brand-related point of view but assume a more comprehensive and encompassing vision. FIG 5.1 presents an approximation of the findings according to four dimensions.

Starting clockwise at the top, a commercially marginal yet important part of the Dutch fashion industry is Modernist Design with a Twist, which roughly equals Group 1 of the previous paragraph. As we have seen, there are three determining themes in this category: conceptuality, modernist heritage, and craftsmanship. Furthermore, it is characterised by an approach that seeks to innovate through re-invention and re-conceptualisation. What we find is that high fashion in the Netherlands oftentimes works by re-appropriating the well-known to great effect through experimentation and creative freedom. The result is a pared-down type of ‘garment with a twist’, i.e., deceptively simple items with an edge, realised either through technical features

FIG 5.1 The four faces of Dutch fashion
or a conceptual take on design (or a combination of the two). The Netherlands cannot compare their own luxury labels like Gucci, Armani, or Hermès. With a lesser commercial impact, their relevance is vindicated by artistic accomplishment, independence, and high levels of creative freedom, which all inform the Dutch fashion industry as a whole, so it reflects and articulates seminal aspects of the industry.

Wild Design (Group 4+5) takes its name from an alternative tradition in Dutch fashion that is characterized by a colourful and outgoing register. The word ‘wild’ refers not only to an alternative take on Dutch fashion, but connects it also to a sense of playfulness and irreverence that are characteristics of Dutch culture in general. The market is a vast assemblage of sources, such as Dutch folklore and costume, hippie culture, postmodernity, or the country’s colonial past, wild design is experimental and at times haphazard, plays with volumes and shapes, dashes of colour and pattern. The combination of these aspects produces a dialogue between tradition and innovation, the well-known and the foreign, polyvalence and creative freedom.

Sophisticated Casual (Group 3+6) stands for a part of Dutch fashion identity which combines innovative (street) fashion-inspired looks with entrepreneurial spirit and brand savoir-faire. A distinguishing feature of this group is that all these companies are positioned in the market: frequently accomplished by a combination of these aspects produces a dialogue between sober and inspired looks is adopted and converted into a mass-market product for the high street. The same applies to Sophisticated Casual that in certain instances takes on a number of characteristics we also see in the high-end market, such as a very distinct look, attention to detail, and unexpected combinations – a ‘twist’, as it were. Similarly, Stylish Mid-Market and Sophisticated Casual have a number of features in common: both are driven by commercial ambition and a diverse and innovative product catalogue, both gear their products to a large and heterogeneous audience group. In fact, all brands might cross-pollinate and pick certain hints of a season or style from each other. Consequently, the main difference is that target audience and retail profile are different in their constituents and focus.

In another category there is but one criterion which connects all four dimensions: above all, the Dutch put premium on comfort and versatility when it comes to their preferred clothing choices. Regardless of price or segment, garments need to feel comfortable, allow for maximum versatility, and should be easy-care. On a more general level it comes down to what might be referred to as the ‘bicycle factor’. A piece of clothing needs to qualify all at once for easy bike rides through the city, picking up children from school, meeting friends at a local bar, or a working day at the office.

Perennially striving for product innovation and new approaches to fabric treatments, the Netherlands have a longstanding tradition of fashion that resonates with attributes like spirit, humour, relaxed manner, and a ‘blue’ lifestyle (Fetsma 2012a). As a last category, Stylish Mid-Market is defined by a combination of representative and innovative looks that is showcased and brought to the market in an integrated manner. All these points come together in a special approach to the market. The combination of these aspects produces a dialogue between sober and inspired looks, as well as between stylish and casual looks.

The example is telling if we want to understand how Dutch fashion culture distinguishes itself from other countries in terms of supply and demand. Coming Soon is arguably an upscale retail concept stocking mostly high-end products, and it is understandable that blue-chip fashion pieces (probably also in other countries) are not the first choice to do groceries in at the market. The general principle, however, applies to virtually every area of fashion retail in the Netherlands, regardless of segment and pricing: first and foremost clothes have to be casual and low-maintenance. That, to be sure, does not rule out the possibility to look fashionable or be up-to-date. Rather, it is a matter of priorities. Unlike a few decades ago when many local fashion designers did not work with a clear target audience in mind, nowadays a number of young designers take the ruling demands of Dutch consumers into account. Chananja Baars (ibid. 36; my translation) in this context uses the bicycle metaphor as a reference to explain how many designers have come to understand the local penchant for comfort as a constraint, but as a way to devise a certain style. ‘For instance, they (i.e., the designers) design a dress whose upper part is made of silk whereas the skirt-part is made of tricot fabric, so it allows consumers to cycle in it.’

5.6 up to the case studies

As we have seen, the local fashion landscape is defined by a number of common values. All of them surface in different ways across segments, market approaches, and target groups. Therefore, the four faces of Dutch fashion not only represent a summary of the industry’s hallmark features, but they also informed the choice of case studies in this research. In an attempt to cover the local fashion landscape in its diversity, the cases I am studying are an exploration and analysis of each dimension.

1. To form an understanding of the workings at play in Modernist Design with a Twist Spijkers en Spijkers was chosen as an interesting and internationally successful company. A study in conceptuality, colour, form, and visual experimentation, the firm is marked by a number of critical aspects that surfaced during the discussion in the chapter.

2. Based on the results from the expert panel G-Star was chosen as an obvious (but less interesting) example of Sophisticated Casual. I considered the brand’s combination of fashion-forward designs on the one hand and mass denim/casual products on the other an interesting case in the context of market orientation and consumer appeal within the Dutch fashion market.

3. Wild Design will be explored with the example of Corakemperman, a company that is defined by a dashing colourfull signature style, as well as by a special approach to the market. The combination

Chapter 5: Dutch Fashion in the Netherlands

5.5 conclusion

What has this account delivered? At the beginning of the chapter, the project’s main constituents were explored with the provision of summaries of the premises and main points of departure. These, in turn, were to provide the background for an intimation of Dutch fashion in the form of an expert view. The reason to opt for this strategy was to present an idea of what Dutch fashion means within the context of this study. The definitions were not by no means exhaustive or definitive: the main goal was to throw a bone for further discussion and present a sketch of a number of aspects connected to Dutch fashion.

Expounding the problems of (an assumed) Dutch fashion identity, the effort produced three main results. First, the enquiry defined eleven brands that are considered typical for the Dutch fashion industry. Here, the aim was to single out a number of critical players who, in sum, reflect the local fashion landscape in its diversity. Second, pointers were put to typically Dutch values that are connected to these brands, which were then categorized according to six distinct groups. Third, the combination of brands and values was synthesized and clustered according to four dimensions with the aim to summarise the findings and present the Dutch fashion industry’s main constituents in an integrated manner. All these points come together in what I called the ‘bicycle factor’: irrespective of segment or style, in the majority of cases Dutch clothing is a compromise between comfort and practicality, as well as between stylish and casual looks.

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of a recognisable and outspoken product and an interesting brand proposition illustrates certain aspects brought up in the discussion over the previous sections.

4. Vanilia was chosen as an example of the Dutch Women’s Mid-Market industry. With a history in basics and business wear, the firm has increasingly developed into a lifestyle brand during the past couple of years, with a distinct product range and customer profile. Facilitating an understanding of seminal aspects in the brand proposition, the firm’s product mix of fashion-forward signature styles and understated business clothing stands for a wide range of Dutch mid-range women’s wear.

As explained in CHAPTER 4, each of these cases has been studied extensively. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the research opportunities were quite different for each of the individual studies. CoraKemperman and Vanilia both readily volunteered to collaborate on the project and they both deserve my appreciation and respect for allowing me access to their shops, scheduling longer and shorter interviews, and contributing to a pleasant way of working in general. The same is true for Truus and Riet Spijkers of Spijkers en Spijkers. However, due to the fact that the designers do not have an outlet of their own and most of their business takes place abroad, I had to approach the firm from a different angle. Not being able to do participant observation or interviews with consumers, the research is based on a two-hour in-depth interview with the designers, field work together with the designers in Iasi (Romania), interviews with shop owners stocking their products, an extensive literature study (articles and interviews), and the monograph Spijkers en Spijkers (Teunissen and Van der Voet 2011). Sadly, G-Star refused any kind of cooperation. Due to the brand’s international renown and interesting market position I decided to approach it from outside and do questionnaires with consumers in front of the shops rather than inside. In this case as well, the results were complemented by an extensive literature study in order to put the findings in perspective and arrive at a nuanced understanding of the relationship between brand and consumers.

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3 As part of the Organza Project, I was fortunate to travel to Iasi in Romania with Truus and Riet Spijkers and some other designers. The goal of the trip was to explore new manufacturing opportunities and get a first-hand experience of the different parameters that play a role in the assessment of quality when selecting manufacturers to which one could outsource the production of (high-quality) fashion products.
CHAPTER 6

CORAK KEMPERMAN: A CLASS OF ITS OWN
6.1 INTRODUCTION

Somewhat surprisingly, Cora Kemperman turned out to be a rather special case. For one thing, the research shows that the company capitalises on a comparatively large number of very loyal consumers who worship the firm’s strong visual identity. For another, the sales approach inside the retail outlets proved to be a key aspect of the value proposition. Seemingly effortlessly, the firm has developed a set of practices and organisational routines that guarantee an individualised sales pitch that extends the point of value exchange from a purely material to a personal level.

Established in 1995 by designer Cora Kemperman and businesswoman Gloria Kok, Cora Kemperman is a Dutch high-street firm with a distinct value proposition. Due to the fact that company and founder go by the same name, the research chapter analyses Cora Kemperman’s relation with consumers and looks into the way the firm is profiled in the Dutch fashion market. As the results suggest, the firm attracts a rather special audience, whose relationship with the brand is based on product uniqueness, exclusivity, and individuality. The fact that it is a comparatively affordable high-street firm, the manufacturing quality and the products’ price-performance ratio constitute crucial aspects in this respect as well. In order to make sense of the firm’s relevance within its particular consumption context the following paragraphs are devoted to the brand’s structural set-up that is built around three key aspects: a personalised consumer pitch, an exclusive value proposition, and a distinct product identity.

6.2 VOICES FROM THE PAST

Before delving into Cora Kemperman more specifically, we need to take one step back to the period before the business was established, which is essential to understand some of the defining features of Cora Kemperman’s business approach. From 1976 till 1994 Cora Kemperman worked as a buyer and designer for the Peek & Cloppenburg offshoot Mac & Maggie. When P & C started the new fashion line in 1976 Kemperman took her post as head of buying womenswear. Pairing a distinguished vision of the brand’s identity with business acumen, she positioned Mac & Maggie as a vanguard fashion enterprise with an attractive price proposition. At the time, the concept was inspired and innovative: to make catwalk fashion from Paris, London, and Tokyo accessible to the wider public, both in terms of wearability and pricing policy (Meeuwissen in Bakker 2010: 77). The look – fashionable extravaganza mixed with ethnic elements – took its cues from high-ticket designer fashion as well as from Kemperman’s own penchant for India and the traditional garments of Rajastan.

During the 1980s Mac & Maggie turned into an enormously successful concept. In its heyday the brand boasted 38 shops in four countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, England, and Germany), 244 employees, and an annual turnover of 38 million guilders – 25 per cent of Peek & Cloppenburg’s annual turnover at the time (Van den Brand 1995). In the early 1990s, however, the firm’s star began to wane. Threatened by international players like Hennes & Mauritz or Miss Selfridges, which followed a similar business strategy, the company’s direction decided to alter its course, introducing a different product philosophy and hiring a host of young designers to realise that ambition (Schenk 1995). Befitting with different ideas about the brand’s visual identity, the result was a mishmash of conflicting voices that did not bear Kemperman’s stamp anymore and failed to meet the demands of consumers. Held accountable for the increasing losses, Kemperman eventually left the firm in 1994. P & C closed Mac & Maggie down one year later.

Interestingly, the main constituents of the brand’s business model were all transferred to her new venture with Gloria Kok. The style, the concept of ‘borrowing’ from international trends from the catwalks, as well as a certain ‘team spirit’, which constituted an important driver in Mac & Maggie’s success story, are also the founding pillars of Cora Kemperman. At the same time, the designer also learned from some mistakes. Mac & Maggie’s downfall was partly owed to the fact that the firm had become the victim of its own success. With more and more stores opening, the business had become harder to control and eventually lost its competitive edge. The following sections will analyse each of these aspects more in depth and explain in what way they have influenced the firm’s business profile.

6.3 TRADEMARK STYLE

Marked by a consistently individual style, Cora Kemperman’s product range is sold under one name and in one single clothing line: “cora kemperman. Including basics like long-sleeves, leggings, and scarves, as well as more complex garments like skirts, dresses, blazers, and coats, the product style is characterised by a combination of neutral (black/white) and dashing colours,
versatile shapes and wide-cut silhouettes. With the ambition to offer unique garments that are artful and wearable the world over, Cora Kemperman’s price proposition is fairly moderate. Dresses cost between 50 and 100 Euro, coats range from about 100 to 250 Euro, blouses cost between 30 and 70 Euro, and basics like leggings or scarves have a price tag of about 20 Euro. The result is a type of product with a distinctiveness that visually and attractively. As claimed in the brand’s mission statement, ‘We want to dress women in a distinguishing, unique, creative way. To achieve this, we translate the most outstanding fashion trends into reasonably priced fashion, while we bring in our own perspective on fashion. This results in an “individual style”’ (Cora Kemperman 2002: 1).

Just as Maggie, the firm’s signature style takes cues from two main sources. On the one hand, Cora Kemperman’s aesthetic universe is largely autobiographical. Designing ‘for herself and friends’, the product catalogue is inspired by the designer’s own lifestyle and experience world. In addition, travels, foreign cultures, and local paraphernalia influence her work. In between 50 and 100 euro, coats range from about 100 to 250 euro. The result is a type of product with a distinctive character, encouraging consumers to mix and match and build up a wardrobe comprised of various collections.

One peculiarity is the clothes’ versatility. By adjusting straps or turning the clothes inside out many garments can be worn in a variety of ways. During the period of observation of the firm’s products, it became apparent that across the different functions concur with Ankoné’s view insomuch as there is an exceptional degree of internal coherence through the firm that also affects the people who work for the company. From my observations and interviews it became apparent that across the different functions there is a similar mindset and sense of commitment to the firm, translating into the way Cora Kemperman is distinguished in the market, as well as into the actual sales performance on the shop floor. Through careful choice of staff and socially responsible conduct within the company Cora Kemperman capitalises on a strong team spirit and long-term relations with employees. Counting a mere 1600 fans’ (Status: October 2012), the Facebook page is regularly updated with photos and personal stories and features updates about the firm’s followers. The account is used to make status updates and keep consumers informed about the latest collections, news around the brand, or extended opening hours on certain days. The Twitter account, by contrast, is updated only sporadically and, with merely 136 followers (Status: October 2012), fails to deliver in promotional terms.

Chapter 6 •
The orientation towards the salespeople is crucial when it comes to the relationship many consumers maintain with brand and products. Although perhaps a slightly exaggerated term, Cora Kemperman’s staff members create some kind of ‘family feel’ that elevates the retail experience from an individual to a social or even collective activity. Consumers and assistants chat and laugh about any subject, from the economic crisis to their family situation or their plans for the evening. The brand profits from this type of individual sales pitch in that they provide an extra incentive in the purchase decision-making process and foster long-term buying relations. Asked about her relationship with the brand, 46-year-old Judith Arts states: ‘Very close. Very close, really. (…) What is truly important to me is that I know the girls in the shop very well. In the majority of cases one and the same assistant helps me since she knows what I already have in my closet. And I find that quite convenient. I have to say that I am always advised very well and in a nice way. They know my taste and I find that important. For me, that’s the primary reason to come here, really.’ (Interview CkCv)

It is important to note that the personal bonds between consumers and staff are not actually a by-product of the sales team’s direct actions but are created and endorsed by the company founder, Cora Kemperman, and her general manager Marjolein van Rooy. Kemperman herself takes a very clear position in this respect. According to her, creating a welcoming and familiar environment that promotes some kind of emotional relationship between consumers and salespeople is actually an integral part of the value proposition. As she states: ‘I always used to say “I design for me and my friends”, and that’s also what I tell my assistants in the shop. You have to help your customers as though they were friends or peers.’ (Interview CkCv)

6.6 IT’S A SYSTEM

The sales approach constitutes a stronghold in the firm’s strategic positioning. During the period of observation and support by internal documents (e.g. the deseasonalising strategy explaining sales pitch) became apparent that brand image, retail environment, and the experiences provided for consumers are subject to rigid systematisation and a whole apparatus that guarantees their well-functioning. The sales assistants are trained on the materials used in every collection and how to maintain them in order to provide accurate service and advise the proper order of products. These specifications are summed up in a 12-page manual each employee is asked to study carefully and sign after completion at the beginning of every new season. Moreover, the company’s approach involves a number of policies concerning the corporate look of the shops and presentation of items. For example, in the downstairs common room of the Rotterdam shop several sheets of paper are pinned to the walls detailing ‘codes of conduct’, a checklist concerning the look of the personnel, and a task list. The aspects included in the list range from outward appearance (‘neat haircut’, ‘proper manner’, ‘clean clothes’, ‘correct organisation’ (e.g. each of the shop girls has one specific task, like cleaning or administration, she needs to carry out every day/week/month), to the actual sales approach (‘Greet every customer with a smile, be attentive and guide her through the purchasing process’).

Ensuring that salespeople and consumers connect and that staff members are actually ‘on brand’, candidates need to undergo a rather rigorous selection procedure. First, a letter of motivation is requested next to the CV. After that, an interview with the store manager and a colleague takes place in order to get an idea of the candidate’s personality and character. In the next step candidates have to prove their fit during a one-day acceptance trial, followed by a debriefing by the store manager. If a candidate shows promise two or three more trial days will ensue ‘so we can see whether they really fit into our team’ (B. van der Hout). By the same token, a lot of attention is paid to what applicants make of the release they are asked to handle and their outfit for themselves for the first time. As Rotterdam store manager Boy van der Hout explained to me, ‘If that doesn’t work, we really have a problem and can’t take her in. I mean, you can’t train them. Either you have that feel for Cora’s clothes or you don’t.’ (Informal conversation on the shop floor)

The brand devotes a lot of attention to these details to ensure a coherent brand image and guarantee a ‘match’ between the different characters in the shop and the company’s different consumer types. As Mrs van der Hout told me during a trial with a candidate, ‘We have to be convinced that they really fit into our team’ (ibid.).

Working with a strategy designed to deliver good and intimate service in the shops, Cora Kemperman seeks to create an atmosphere of personal relevance for its consumers. Apart from product-specific attributes, which play an important role in the relationship with the firm, its customised sales pitch helps to forge bonds beyond the product proposition.

6.7 EXCLUSIVITY

To a great extent Cora Kemperman capitalises on long-term relations with consumers. These are partly based on the service provided in the shops, partly related to the products’ unique appearance, and partly have to do with a number of policies endorsed by the firm to retain an exclusive edge.

As explained in section 6.4, Cora Kemperman and Gloria Kok decided to open just a small number of outlets and to keep a low business profile on the high street. Keeping control over the product cycle, the decision to minimise the number of outlets was also a strategic move in order to retain a certain degree of exclusivity. With the goal to devise individual and outgoing products that appeal to a rather specific clientele, the firm nurtures a non-mainstream attitude and seeks distinction through both a limited number of sales points as well as limited order numbers (i.e., few items per size and colour). According to the direction, there are ‘weekly requests’ to expand the business and open retail destinations in places ‘like New York or Israel’, which are consistently turned down. As Cora Kemperman explains, ‘You really have to like our style. And – fortunately – there are quite a few people who don’t like what we do. And that’s what I like. I certainly wouldn’t feel comfortable with my clothes being available in many places. For me it’s just fine to have nine outlets. If we have discovered us they also have to make some effort to get the clothes. In return, we give them the opportunity to wear somewhat exclusive pieces.’ (Interview CkCv)

The way Kemperman presents the case might be exaggerated to some extent. For one thing, there are nine shops spread over the country, so the company is exclusive only to a certain extent. For another, it is debatable whether the interest from other countries is really as big as the brand claims. Nevertheless, we can assume that the general argument actually holds. The fact that the firm receives much attention from other countries, in spite of its relatively limited size, is possibly owed to the fact that a) Cora Kemperman offers a one-of-a-kind product with a strong visual identity, and b) the firm consistently refuses to broaden its scope of retail channels. With no webshop or external merchandising, the product is the exclusive privilege of those living in, or travelling to, Belgium.

In addition, the strategic decision to keep the supply down leads to a certain covetousness of the products. As US expat Jerritna Hairston explained to me, ‘My friends are just as mad about the stuff as I am. Sadly for them, I’m the only one who can buy it. I mean, they live in the States…’ (Interview CkCvi)

When it comes to the visual merchandise inside the shops, every product is displayed in only one size per colour in order to have better control over which items sell well and which ones need further attention from the assistants. As indicated in section 6.3 the company has a steady supply of new items every week, which keeps the collection up to date and the face of the shops fresh and interesting. Receiving new arrivals on a regular basis actually requires keeping down the order numbers in order to avoid stocking obsolete. A side effect of this system is that it produces a ‘first come, first serve’ mentality. Due to the fact that only a limited number of pieces is available per shop, size, and colour, many of the firm’s patrons have developed almost a ‘collector’s attitude’, as Marjolein van Rooy describes it, treating the pieces like hard-to-get and must-have items. As she states, ‘Every week we get new items in our shops. So, if you’re really crazy about clothes (…) you can actually buy a new piece every week. We really have clients who we need to dissuade on certain garments and say “You really don’t need this anymore because you have five others in the same style already”. It’s almost like they’re afraid to miss something.’ (Interview CkCv)

Closely connected to this, the brand keeps a ‘log book’ featuring every piece of the current collection, complete with descriptions of available colours, fabrics, washing instructions and the week or date in which they will arrive at the shops. According to the consumer, the log book is mainly used as a strategic device directed at patrons. As Rotterdam shop assistant Denise Nieuwenhout told me, ‘[T]he book is great to keep them busy, you know.’ During the period of observation either regulars themselves requested to leaf through the book or they were referred to it with reference to specific pieces they expected to arrive at a certain week. The effect of this strategy is that many regulars shortlist products and place (non-binding) orders. By giving regulars the opportunity to ‘cherry-pick’
and reserve favourite pieces from the collections before they go on regular sale. Cora Kemperman offers a certain privilege to its most regular consumers and, albeit unintentionally, creates in- and out-groups. As 52-year-old patron Tine Krebsburg told me, ‘Why Cora? When I come to the shop there is always something that I like and that immediately fits well. But the salespeople also know what I like and what suits me as they keep me informed about your new arrivals. I even know: in week X or week Y this and that new item will arrive and I think that will look very good on you’. So I do take that into account.’ (Interview CKCIII)

To some extent exclusivity is a property that is simulated and actively sold to consumers. For patrons it feels like they receive a special treatment and obtain something extra that others do not have access to. For all the other consumers, the margin of available items is relatively small, so that many designs come in an edition of only one or two per size. In that way, an ‘early-bird’ mentality is created that adds a boost to the purchase behaviour of consumers. Extending the point of value exchange from the material properties of the clothing to charging them with emotional relevance, Cora Kemperman employs a number of strategies that augment and nourish this effect.

6.8 PRODUCT UNIQUENESS

Exclusivity is a property that is stimulated by keeping a small stock and minimising availability of the products on the one hand. On the other hand, it is an attribute that hinges on the product proposition itself. As described in section 6.2 Cora Kemperman offers a clothing style that is unique in a number of ways. First, the garments are cut in a special way that gives them a flowing, organic shape. Second, the choice of colour is peculiar. Using a range of bright blues, reds, greens, yellows, and purples that are contrasted with blacks and whites, the firm has a strong visual appeal and high recognition value. Third, the clothing is given an interesting twist by the use of special types of buttons, belts, or other kinds of subtle unexpected additions. As Marijolein van Rooy describes the product philosophy, ‘You certainly have to like our style. We sell a type of clothing that has a certain allure. People come to see around you. The garments really have their own “swing”; their own twist, their own... you know, a “Cora thingy” attached to it: a fold, a buckle, a different type of ethnic border.’ (Interview CKIII)

When we look at the way consumers perceive the brand, the majority of respondents claimed to appreciate that ‘extra something special’. This observation is supported by the results of questionnaire item 14 (‘Please try to name three characteristics you associate with the clothing of Cora Kemperman’) that sought to identify the primary value connections of consumers. Based on the different responses the item was designed to measure attributes consumers spontaneously associate with Cora Kemperman’s range of products. After typing out the full amount of responses the results were coded, clustered, and analysed according to Table 6.1.

**PRODUCT UNIQUENESS** Unique; expressive; original; special; different; surprising; extravagant; distinct; creative; recognisable; USE OF COLOUR (Beautiful) colours; colourful; COMFORT (Good/perfect) fit; fits nicely; beautiful and comfortable; fabrics; correct fit; ease of wear; QUALITY (Good quality); fabric quality; durable; fine materials; OTHERS Easy to combine; feminine; affordable

**TABLE 6.1 CODING SCHEME FOR ITEM 14 VALUE CONNECTION FOLLOWED BY ATTRIBUTES**

Following Table 6.2, the mental concepts and attitudes consumers develop towards the brand are defined by four variables: product uniqueness (I), use of colour (II), comfort (III), product quality (IV).

**RESPONDENTS 34 • PRODUCT UNIQUENESS 94.11% • USE OF COLOUR 38.23% • COMFORT 29.41% • QUALITY 26.47% • OTHERS 26.47% • RESPONDENTS 83 • PRODUCT UNIQUENESS 87.95% • USE OF COLOUR 43.73% • COMFORT 49.39% • QUALITY 38.55% • OTHERS 40.96%**

**TABLE 6.2 ‘PLEASE TRY TO NAME THREE CHARACTERS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE CLOTHING OF CORA KEMPERMAN’ (ITEM 14) AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM**

Following these characteristics, the primary driver in the relationship between brand and consumer is the actual appearance of the product. Product uniqueness is a more general term characterising the clothes according to a number of distinguishing features (as discussed in section 6.3). Use of colour, by contrast, specifically refers to the firm’s stark use of vivid and lurid, yet distinctive hues. The style is characterised by a certain audacity and personal identification, plain with graphic patterns, which gives the pieces an appearance that is playful and matter-of-fact at the same time. Both attributes relate to product uniqueness and a desire for differentiation, highlighting the fact that Cora Kemperman’s products allow consumers to dress ‘different from the rest’. Comfort relates to the wearability of the clothing as well as to Cora Kemperman’s ability to create an interesting and flattering silhouette for more voluminous body types. Product quality is connected to the price/performance ratio of the clothes and their durability. During the interviews consumers also stated variously that the collections can be combined active casual. Consumers who are interested in the possibility of different responses the seasons. These responses are not to identify similarities/differences between the variables tested by item 14 and a number of standard brand values, consumers were asked to pick 3 out of 15 options presented to them. As FIG 6.1 shows, both locations the items are distributed rather evenly. In Amsterdam we can identify peaks (i.e., more than 30%) for the attributes recognizable (47.04%) and special (61.76%). In Rotterdam we can identify peaks for the attributes authentic (45.28%), stylish (31.32%), recognizable (46.98%), and special (47.37%). Regardless of location, all those aspects are in different ways linked to the brand’s outspoken and distinguishing signature style. Describing the firm as recognisable, stylish and special, consumers put emphasis on the fact that the clothes have a fairly unique look. Authenticity probably refers more to the integrity of brand and product, and points to the fact that the firm has not changed in any major way throughout the 17 years of its existence. A straightforward and unpretentious company, Cora Kemperman offers an honest, no-frills product. Starting out by more or less the same premises the brand still adheres to nowadays, 46-year-old Monique states, ‘Well, perhaps that’s quite a strange thing to say but “congenial” [might be the best way to describe the brand]. She [Cora Kemperman] keeps on doing what she has always done, you know.’ (Interview CKCIV)

Juxtaposing the results from the questionnaires with the consumer approach discussed in section 6.3 and the way the brand is positioned in the market, product uniqueness and exclusivity are two of the main drivers in the purchase decision-making process. First, consumers relate to the product based on an aesthetic register that is hard to find anywhere else. Second, the skilfully orchestrated sales pitch of the firm helps to establish a strong bond between the person and the product, foregrounding the consumer and her needs. Third, by keeping a low supply of items and outlets a sense of exclusivity is created or even augmented. In different ways all these aspects actually cross-fertilise each other, with each of them adding to a feeling of desirability and individuality.

6.9 PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR AND BRAND INVOLVEMENT

In the preceding sections it was said that Cora Kemperman is positioned in the Dutch fashion market as a low-profile business, capitalising on a distinctively styled sales approach and a unique product proposition. Furthermore, we have seen that product uniqueness and exclusivity are two of the main drivers in the purchase decision-making process, thereby connecting the firm’s value proposition to a desire for differentiation. This section broadens the scope towards analysing the level of consumer involvement as well as their purchase behaviour.

The firm claims to neither make a difference between consumers nor to have a specific clientele in terms of age or body size. While Cora Kemperman tries to make the brand attractive for a younger clientele as well, at present, the group is in the age bracket of 40 to 60 years. The firm’s audience is heterogeneous to the extent that consumers come from a variety of backgrounds. At the same time, the actual type
of consumer is largely similar. The majority has a similar attitude towards clothing consumption and looks for similar features when it comes to clothing purchases. With a desire to express themselves through their clothes, the product is understood as an extension of personal identity and a means of self-expression. Says Jemira Hairsom, ‘Of course, it’s not really my identity, but this is the way that I like to look. [Points to her dress] This dress is an extension of how I feel about myself. And if it just so happened that Cora Kemperman’s stuff matches up with how I feel about me.’ (Interview CkCi)

When we now look at the interaction between individuals and the company, consumers relate to the brand based on an out-of-the-ordinary type of product that they use to ‘dress’ their identity. Says 33-year-old Vanessa van Berkum, ‘All in all, I find it very... “different” from all the others. It’s just different from what you generally see on the streets, you know. I always look for something that’s one step ahead of the average stuff [and] I find it very nice to wear the clothing from Cora because then I feel special myself.’ (Interview CkCi)

Identification and interaction with the brand, then, hinges on the product proposition and the extent to which it reflects the consumers’ self-perception and desire for self-expression. The products provide a stage that embodies meanings or ideas that consumers wish to communicate about themselves. Clothing certainly is no identity fix but it helps to transmit a certain image of the person.
brand persona or congruencies between brand- and product-related attributes. FIG 6.4 shows that the majority of consumers agrees with the statement.

Both the results from the questionnaires as well as the in-depth interviews indicate that the level of involvement with the firm is comparatively high. From the interviews I learned that in particular the brand’s regulars show high levels of awareness and emotional attachment to the brand, with many of them hardly sourcing their clothes from any other brand than Corakemperman. The reasons they gave were connected to two main points. First, the value proposition (i.e., product, service, brand values) represents a warrantor in the relationship between brand and consumers, connecting the consumers’ personal identity to the brand’s identity constructs with the brand’s identity. Second, based on the fact that the firm’s signature style has been very consistent throughout the years and because items from older and newer collections can be easily combined, consumers enjoy the possibility to complement their existing stock of clothes.

6.10 FASHION INVOLVEMENT

With a strong visual identity, the question is whether the firm’s fashion cachet actually represents a significant driver in the purchase decision-making process. In this section I will look into these aspects with respect to the variables fashion and media involvement. With the first purpose is to test to what extent the purchase behaviour of consumers is subject to fashion trends. The latter looks into these questions more from an information-based angle, exploring whether consumers make use of different media channels to stay abreast of developments in fashion.

Item 2 (‘I like to dress according to the latest fashion trends’) was designed to measure the level of fashion involvement and define the degree to which current trends have an impact on the purchase behaviour of consumers. As FIG 6.5 demonstrates, we can identify a negative tendency. In Amsterdam, 49.88% disagreed with the statement. In comparison, 23.52% responded in a neutral way while 26.50% agreeing. According to these results, the actual fashion value of the clothes is not of paramount relevance for Corakemperman’s consumers. This finding is further supported by the results from Item 3 (‘I am among the first in my circle of friends to buy a new fashion trend when it appears’) which sought to determine to what extent consumers are early adopters of new fashion trends, and whether their purchase behaviour is actually trend-driven. Following FIG 6.6, Corakemperman’s consumers do not have a pronounced interest in adapting their wardrobe to the latest fashion trends and neither does early adoption of fashion trends have a strong influence on their choice. In Amsterdam, 38.23% disagreed with the statement while the same number of people adopted a neutral attitude and 19.64% agreed. In Rotterdam we can identify a slightly more balanced distribution. 33.33% disagreed whereas 30.12% indicated to neither agree nor disagree and 31.31% agreed. Remarkable in this context is the rather large number of people taking a neutral stance. Following my own observations in the shops and the in-depth interviews with consumer, the most probable explanation is that fashion in general is not actually relevant for the brand’s audience. Trend consciousness or the adoption of new fashions, then, play a rather secondary role in their life-worlds and consumption behaviour.

Comparing these insights with the results from Item 5 (‘I regularly buy fashion-related magazines’), which was constructed to measure the level of media involvement and interest in current developments in fashion, this tendency becomes even more pronounced. As FIG 6.7 makes clear, Corakemperman’s audience does not have a vested interest in keeping up to date with fashion trends through fashion magazines. In Amsterdam, almost 79% disagreed with the statement while only 20.59% agreed with it. In Rotterdam a similar picture emerged, with 71.07% disagreeing with the statement compared to 18.06% who agreed.

Item 6 (‘I regularly check the Internet for the latest clothing trends’) was designed to determine to what extent consumers use the internet to keep track of fashion trends. Therefore, fashion involvement and fashion consumption are connected to new media channels. Again, Corakemperman’s consumers showed a considerably low interest in following recent fashion trends on the Internet. As we can see in FIG 6.8, in Amsterdam 61.70% disagreed with the statement, compared to 20.58% who agreed. In Rotterdam 15.65% agreed with the statement, whereas 75.52% disagreed.

6.11 CLOTHING AND PRODUCT INVOLVEMENT

As the results demonstrate, Corakemperman’s clientele does not exhibit high levels of involvement in fashion or media. At the same time, however, Corakemperman is a brand with a strong visual identity, thus bearing further witness to the fact that the brand’s trademark style constitutes a key component in the relationship between consumers and the brand. In Amsterdam, almost 95% of the sample agreed with the statement while in Rotterdam it was 86.74%.

When we look at Item 4 (‘Compared to my friends I buy fewer new clothing items’), a reverse item constructed to test the involvement construct from a different angle, this tendency is further supported. In FIG 6.10 we can see that Corakemperman’s consumers estimate their clothing-consumption behaviour as rather high in comparison to their direct social environment. In Amsterdam, the majority of respondents (61.75%) objected to the statement. In Rotterdam we find a similar result, with 59.03% disagreeing with it.

Juxtaposing clothing involvement (Item 7) with the level of brand involvement (Item 8), we can identify a slightly irregularity. FIG 6.11 shows the two items with the summarised scores of both locations next to each other. While the results suggest that consumers identify with clothing products based on their expressiveness, the degree of brand involvement is somewhat lower. One explanation for this asymmetry might be that the company is not actually strongly branded or marketed and that the product takes precedence over the firm’s brand name or value. Brand identity in that sense would be less important than product identity.

Another factor might be that consumers are generally interested in clothing products with a strong visual identity, irrespective of the actual brand name.

6.12 DUTCH, ACTUALLY?

The question remains to what extent Corakemperman is actually perceived as a Dutch brand by consumers, or whether there are attributes we might call typical for the Dutch cultural landscape. Item 11b (‘Corakemperman is typically Dutch’) sought to develop an understanding of these aspects by confronting the respondents with a statement-based item. As FIG 6.12 shows, in both locations we can identify a slightly negative tendency. In Amsterdam, 47.05% disagreed while 26.46% agreed. In Rotterdam, 28.90% agreed with the statement compared to 33.68% who opposed it. Although the overall distribution is fairly mixed and does not allow for a final answer, we can at least conclude that for the majority Corakemperman does not represent a typically Dutch clothing brand.

Item 11b (‘Why is/isn’t Corakemperman typically Dutch? Please explain your opinion in a few words’) sought to deepen the scope of analysis, and give consumers the opportunity to substantiate their opinion and reflect on their views. Sadly, the majority of respondents left the question open, indicating that they had troubles pinpointing what ‘typically Dutch’ actually means. From the few respondents who actually completed the item, the most common explanations referred to the product’s style and use of colour. Says 33-years-old Jacinta Hessels, "Yes, I think it’s quite [a] Dutch [brand]. The colours… I really don’t know why, but certainly the colours. I mean, I can’t remember that I’ve even seen this kind of style when going on vacation, for instance. (…) Simply because I know it I’d say it’s Dutch, but it’s hard to explain."
Ironically perhaps, the very same reasons were given by those stating Corakemperman is not representative for Dutch (fashion) culture. As Judith Arts explained to me, ‘Well, as far as I’m concerned the brand is not typically Dutch at all. (...) Dutch, for me, is usually… simple... boring colours… quite basic, you know.’

In some way, this outcome reflects a more general tendency that emerged from consumers’ assessments across the different case studies. As it appears, it is hard for people to determine what attributes reflect ‘Dutchness’. Either the respondents had difficulties to answer the question at all, or they were troubled by articulating what effectively made the firms Dutch, other than being their country of origin. One possible explanation for that might be that cultural identity is a too complex and multidimensional phenomenon to boil down to a sheer number of attributes – perhaps even more so in a fashion context, as the majority of respondents had difficulties to differentiate cultural and individual aspects, as well as between the company and its products. As it were, that distinguishes Corakemperman from many other brands. Resisting expansion, franchising, and marketing abroad, the company is highly entrepreneurial on the one hand, but it defies global expansion, while on the other hand the company is highly entrepreneurial and well-organised – perhaps a quality the Dutch have cultivated in more than one respect. Corakemperman

6.13 CONCLUSION

The chapter started out by describing that the basic concept and product philosophy of Corakemperman are rooted in the designer’s earlier career as a buyer and - as it were, that distinguishes Corakemperman from many other brands. Resisting expansion, franchising, and marketing abroad, the company is highly entrepreneurial on the one hand, but it defies global expansion, while on the other hand the company is highly entrepreneurial and well-organised – perhaps a quality the Dutch have cultivated in more than one respect. Corakemperman

is small and powerful, stylish and creative, and those are precisely the qualities consumers identify with. The firm sells a special kind of product that is distinguished by appearance rather than price: it is expressive, accessible, and exclusive – all at the same time. It is a brand and product style we find in different variations across the Dutch fashion landscape, summed up in what I called ‘Wild Design’ in CHAPTER 5.

CORAKEKEMPERMAN: A CLASS OF ITS OWN

...
7.1 INTRODUCTION

The Dutch womenswear brand Vanilia was originally a supplier of business clothing with a range of products focusing on twin sets, trouser suits, blouses, and a number of basics such as sheer tops in muted colours, belts, and vests. Since the current owner, Michel Hulzebosch, took over the brand in 1991, it has undergone a transformation towards ever more stylish clothing styles and a broader target market. Covering all major Dutch cities, Vanilia boasts 17 mono-brand stores across the Netherlands and is retailed in about 100 fashion boutiques across the country (Lampe 2011: 1).

The development from business-wear to fashion brand has had important consequences for the firm’s market position and retail strategy. Increasingly focusing on a younger and hipper audience, Vanilia has made great efforts to distinguish the company as a lifestyle brand with more serious fashion cachet in recent years. My research on the company started at a time when most of these developments were just starting to come into full effect. This chapter traces the different steps the brand has successively undertaken. Probably as a result of the recent shift, the company targets two different consumer groups at present: young and middle-aged (business) women and older consumers with a stake in fashion clothing and lifestyle activities. As the results suggest, the relationship between consumers and the brand is defined by a stylish and high-quality product proposition that effortlessly negotiates between classy business clothing and chic leisurewear.

7.2 TRADEMARK STYLE

The brand boasts three different and seasonally changing clothing lines and one line of NOS (i.e., never out of stock) items. The eponymous first line, Vanilia, features a large quantity of fashion-forward, loosely elegant pieces, suited for slightly less formal business contexts or as chic leisure clothing. Although conceived as a flexible and compositional type of clothing, many of the pieces are inspired by vintage finds, rich with details such as ruffled appliqué, denim shirts, or lace.

Vanilla’s second line, VNL, is composed of casual and street style-oriented items, featuring more loose cuts and original combinations of fabrics, denim, leather, and knitwear. Reintroducing, for example, bib trousers, flared legs, or compound fabrics like rexine and mesh, the collections take their cues from various sources and seek to cater to a type of woman that effortlessly combines work and casual wear, current fashion pieces with a more classical wardrobe. According to the company board, the VNL trademark style – fashionable but not too outspoken, sporty and chic, innovative and retro-inspired – should become the brand’s projected new focus. Slowly shifting the collection’s size and target group from Vanilia to VNL, the brand for the future seeks to embrace a different direction to add more diversity to its portfolio.

1 There is also a German fashion label of the same name. However, no relation exists between the two.
The company’s third line, Vanilla Elements, is composed of chic and business-oriented clothing. Here, shirts, blouses, trouser suits, and behind dresses dominate, most of them combine muted colours with textured fabrics and detailed stitching. Integrating elements of the two other collections, Vanilla and VNL, the emphasis is on eveningwear and fashion styles that blend understated chic with restrained trendy formality.

The brand’s fourth collection, Business Basics, is a small selection of business evergreens like trouser suits, blazers, blouses, twin sets and ladies’ suits. These items undergo only marginal alterations (cut, colour, fabric) to adjust them to the brand’s current portfolio. All items are NOS pieces that are sold year in year out, subject only to minor changes based on either summer or winter season.

### 7.3 Changing Faces: Towards a New Brand Identity

During the past few years, Vanilla has increasingly sought to establish the image of a trend-oriented quality fashion brand, thereby extending its former focus on business wear to up-to-the-minute fashion clothing. The current separation between the different lines reflects this progression to the extent that Vanilla Elements and Business Basics are contemporary takes on business wear while the main lines, Vanilla and VNL, are focused on chic, comfortable leisure clothing. According to interview with the firm’s PR manager, Tatiana StriekWelk, Vanilla tries to restructure and reposition the brand at present, by introducing a new corporate identity to give the firm a more contemporary edge (Interview VIII). The goal is to further improve the firm’s retail profile and shift the brand identity from ‘a mere clothing firm to a lifestyle brand’ (Interview VIII).

Restructuring the retail strategy under the guiding theme of ‘affordable luxury’, Vanilla seeks to open the firm’s profile towards a wider audience (Interview VIII). In doing so, the brand intends to stimulate relations with a younger audience group and consumption mentality. According to StriekWelk, the aim is to try to loosen up the firm’s predominant image of a traditional fashion retailer and gradually turn it into a trendy fashion brand. As she states, ‘Just now, the women who come to the shops on average are older and “tutuiger” (roughly this translates into “frumpy” but doesn’t quite catch the meaning) than we would actually like. Alas. (...) So, my task is to change that by means of PR and the like. (...) We are now trying to make a conscious effort to connect Vanilla’s name and brand image to a different kind of audience group – so, basically all things the company stands for or is being associated with.’ (Interview VIII)

In spite of the projected changes, the aim is not to sever the ties with the firm’s established clientele. Originally targeted at women of 35 years and older, Vanilla now likes to draw in a younger public as well, with a different consumption attitude – (business) women combining work and free time, family and social life (Interview VI). The leap forward constitutes an extension of the existing product range, trying to emphasize more of a personal touch in the design and execution of the collection whilst sticking with the brand’s trademark assets of good fit, tailored yet comfortable proportions, quality materials, and original style.

So much for the argument in general. Still, there is a certain edge to the idea of “going younger” when it comes to the appreciation of the firm’s current customer profile. During interviews with a number of people at the firm’s HQ in Wormerveer, my impression was that the firm’s elderly customers are more than welcome to leave their money at the sales counter while the brand, if possible, would like to make a complete shift towards a young and hip public. As the head of Vanilla’s Visual Merchandise team, Birgit Groot, states, ‘Our clientele is quite mixed, that’s true. We really have this “wallflower” type of consumer, but we also have a lot of younger ones (...) I certainly don’t want to lump them all together or generalise... also, I’d find it strange to say that older women cannot actually wear our clothes. Some look great, really. But then in Bergen, for example... Jesus, they seriously have walking frames and that’s just not nice, so everybody feels thoroughly ashamed of what’s going on there. Then again, those women will also walk into an even hipper shop next door, so they just terrorise the whole town actually’ (Interview V).

This, to be sure, is just one of a few new voices and my intention is certainly not to paint a bleak picture of the way the firm perceives its consumers. Rather, I mean to take a somewhat critical stance towards the rejuvenation process the company has embarked on and, in its slipstream, the changing relation between brand and consumers.

### 7.4 Concentrating Strengths

Trying to extend the brand’s portfolio to other areas, Vanilia largely relies on a number of long-time assets in the brand proposition. Most interesting about the development, especially when it comes to attracting and establishing relations with a younger clientele, is the firm’s chosen approach. In the past Vanilla has largely refrained from making active use of customer profiles or involving consumers as agents in the brand proposition. According to the firm’s director, Michel Halzebosch, the recent leap forward is motivated by the fact that the current market climate, specifically within the firm’s desired target group, calls for a different, more consumer-conscious approach (Interview IV). To accomplish that goal, Vanilla tries to make more efficient use of the Internet as a tool for engaging with consumers and get a better insight into their actual needs. Furthermore, the firm’s new strategy seeks to augment extant properties of the brand proposition, such as the retail environment and socially-responsible, eco-conscious production policies in the company-owned factories in Turkey. With them the firm sees the integral parts of the marketing approach and corporate profile, a number of new developments have been set in motion.

#### 7.4.1 Retail Space and Consumer Experience

The first assets in this regard are the firm’s retail outlets and staff. The company has a history of preserving and restoring monumental buildings. With the exception of one, all the firm’s retail destinations are located in exquisite spaces, rich with period details and antique furnishings, and decked out with vast groupings of plants and flowers. Seeking to foreground a kind of ‘boutique atmosphere’, a number of shops are currently undergoing restyling/refurbishment in order to create more contemporary and distinguished retail spaces. By doing so, the goal is to make the shops resemble concept stores, where the products are presented shoulder to shoulder with mid-century vintage furniture, art works, earrings, and objets d’art (Interview VI).

In an effort to highlight pertinent aspects of the retail environment, Vanilla opts for a highly systemised approach for presenting items in the shops, the decoration of shop windows, and the outward appearance of the staff. The emphasis is on producing a coherent brand image across all stores, thus attempting to create a recognisable store image and familiar atmosphere and to synchronise the season’s overall concept with the individual circumstances and spatial layout of each shop. To realise that ambition each shop receives a detailed brief from Vanilla’s Visual Merchandise (VM) team on how to arrange the shop and window displays. These instructions include photographs of a model scenario, directions which flowers to buy, how to dress the windows – even to the point of which clothes will be hung in the display windows and shelves. In addition to that, the VM team visits each of the 16 outlets at the beginning of each season to fine-tune the seasonal theme and make adjustments if necessary. The rationale behind this systematic approach is to create one particular feeling inside the shops that corresponds to a seasonal theme (e.g. ‘New Year, New Wardrobe’ for S/S 2011), complete with flowers, objects, and styling accessories that are arranged to complement the presentation of items in the shops. Birgit Groot further specifies this notion when she expounds on how service and a homey feeling are meant to distinguish the brand from competitors. As she explains, ‘For some time now we have worked with the theme of cosiness and a homely atmosphere. A place where people simply like to spend time. So, we have all kinds of paraphernalia like old trunks, huge planters, ladders, sailing houses, and whatnot. Also, the coffee corners we are now trying to install in all shops...”
are part of that approach). Consumers can sit down, have a cup of decent coffee, take a rest. There's no rush, no crowd for price. I believe that our consumers appreciate that a lot because it makes them feel welcome.’ (Interview VII)

This concerted approach, however, is not limited to the presentation of products, but also pertains to the staff’s (i.e., the salespeople’s) dress. Following the styling of the retail environments, the VM team puts together a number of assemblies for each individual sales assistant, in an attempt to a) match the different types of assistants (i.e., hair colour, type, body size, body height etc.), and b) creatively present the season’s different looks across all of Vanilia’s lines. In addition, the fitting sessions are documented with photographic footage and later evaluated in consultation with the company’s two retail managers, the design team, and the director. The desired outcome of this effort is to endorse a holistic strategy behind the styling of shop and staff. Says Groot (Interview VII), ‘In a way, the assistants are a kind of advertisement inside the shops. And, ideally, they should be an inspiration for our consumers, so they get an idea how certain items can be combined, how to create an interesting, maybe unexpected look. Our job is to make sure they all look proper and dress in a way that matches their personality and body shape. In some cities we hardly have any work because, quite intuitively, they do it very well. In others, we need to help them along. The girls then have to take pictures of each other every day for two weeks, so we can monitor if and how they progress.’

By means of this ‘role-model policy’ – dressing the salespeople in a specific manner, creating a specific, coherent atmosphere inside the shops – the firm seeks to address a particular kind of consumer identity. Following interviews with four of Vanilia’s store managers, atmosphere and service constitute a linchpin in the retail environments, the VM team puts together a number of assemblies for each individual sales assistant, in an attempt to a) match the different types of assistants (i.e., hair colour, type, body size, body height etc.), and b) creatively present the season’s different looks across all of Vanilia’s lines. In addition, the fitting sessions are documented with photographic footage and later evaluated in consultation with the company’s two retail managers, the design team, and the director. The desired outcome of this effort is to endorse a holistic strategy behind the styling of shop and staff. Says Groot (Interview VII), ‘In a way, the assistants are a kind of advertisement inside the shops. And, ideally, they should be an inspiration for our consumers, so they get an idea how certain items can be combined, how to create an interesting, maybe unexpected look. Our job is to make sure they all look proper and dress in a way that matches their personality and body shape. In some cities we hardly have any work because, quite intuitively, they do it very well. In others, we need to help them along. The girls then have to take pictures of each other every day for two weeks, so we can monitor if and how they progress.’

7.4.2 OWN FACTORY / OWN MENTALITY: WE’RE ONE OF A KIND!

Trying to make sure the fashion trends into the company’s very own design vocabulary, the brand has an in-house design team, comprised of four people who are regularly sent to places like New York, London, Paris, or Hong Kong with the aim to find inspiration for their collections and model their own collections on the season’s latest clothing styles. Moreover, the firm owns a factory in Turkey where most of the garments are manufactured. The combination of these two factors allows Vanilia to supply well-made fashion products at an affordable price.

In January 2011, Vanilia introduced a new system to the overall workflow and design process. Practically speaking, the company has departed from designing the collections about a year in advance. Instead, Vanilia currently introduces 12 collections per year, with an almost weekly supply of new items in the shops (Interview VII). In doing so, the brand seeks to establish a system that responds more directly to upcoming trends and allows for a quick adaptation to the demands of the consumers. Says Vanilia’s director, Michel Huibroek (cited in Lompe 2011: 3, my translation), ‘We are now able to respond to trends much quicker. Of course, I don’t mean to just copy trends – the fashion world is full of that anyway. At the same time, I don’t want to be stubborn and call one and the same folklore print for over 20 years. I just have a keen eye on current developments.’

Two key components of Vanilia’s trademark style are the elaborate use of printed fabrics and the rich detailing of clothes. In this context, the firm’s QA (Quality Assurance) labs, located at the headquarters in Wormerveer, are a crucial component in the firm’s structural set-up. By means of labour-intensive testing and testing the company tries to assure, for example, that the stitching inside the garments stands the test of time or that colours do not bleed in washing. In section 7.3, we will see that this aspect is crucial in the relationship between brand and consumers who put a premium on the manufacturing quality and durability of the clothes. It is even one more reason to justify retail prices that are slightly higher than other high-street brands like H&M, Mango, or Zara.

More recently, Vanilia started to turn its production plant in Turkey into a more integral part of the firm’s marketing approach. For example, the company added feature films about the brand’s production facilities into its online marketing for years, in favour of retail-based offline concepts. According to the company’s former head of communications, Eva Beekholt, Vanilia used to develop its image not so much from a consumer-centric point of view in the past, but by following the fashion circuit at large (e.g., advertisement campaigns, fashion shows, events). As she explains, the decision to exhaust the possibilities of new media was a recent move, resulting from the insight that to an extent the brand’s new direction was out of tune with the demands of its desired target group (Interview VI).

Practically speaking, platforms à la Facebook and Twitter are now used as strategic tools to establish and nourish consumer ties. With the goal to make proper use of feedback relay and consumers’ opinions, the integration of state-of-the-art media portals is meant to personalise the brand and make it more accessible. Within a year’s time Vanilia has built up an audience of Facebook followers and a smoothly working system of consumer response. The site is buzzing on a daily basis; news and links are posted, recommendations are given and questions are answered. Over a period of two years, the developments in this regard are a crucial component in the relationship between brand and consumers because for the company it allows insight into consumer profiles and for consumers a kind of ‘members-only’ treatment is being created.

Vanilia also has a history of collaborating with other companies in the fashion industry. For example, the firm has repeatedly offered its regulars subscriptions to fashion magazines at discount rates, which were combined with branded give-aways. Teaming up with the Dutch fashion glossy Glamour, for instance, the firm designed a leather bag that accompanied each subscription to the magazine. Generally, the promotion became such a success that, according to Arnheim store manager Eveline Otten, consumers essentially got more interested in the branded object than the actual subscription. As she recounts, ‘There was such a run to get one of the bags that a lot of customers even called in at the shop asking...’

7.5 WELCOME TO THE CLUB! ARE YOU IN... OR OUT?

‘It’s more like a party and what you do see happening is that other consumers also start filling in one of our customer cards, so they can become “members of the club.”’ (Eva Beekholt, regional manager)

While the developments described above are fairly recent, Vanilia does also have a longstanding tradition in organising special events for consumers. Attempting to create an atmosphere of belonging and personal relevance, the brand has established a firm registry for sales promotions over the years. Regulars are solicited with special events or promotions they receive information about via e-mail1 on an almost monthly basis (8–10 times per year). For example, they get invitations to pre-sale days where they can purchase items at discount prices before they go on regular sale. The same goes for the sample sales where designs that did not end up in the final collection are sold for a bargain. Also, patrons are regularly invited to so-called ‘15½-days’ where they can shop through the current collection at discount rates of 15 per cent off the regular retail price.

In this way, the firm tries to create a kind of club mentality as all promotions are by invitation only. In effect, only members of the brand’s internal customer registry are regularly invited to receive information about the events and are allowed to participate in them. Arguably, it does not take more than filling in a registration form to become part of the mailing list. That, however, does not alter the fact that both registry and events serve as platforms for interacting with consumers and binding them closer to the brand. The latter constitutes an important tool in the relationship between brand and consumers because for the company it allows insight into consumer profiles and for consumers a kind of ‘members-only’ treatment is being created.

1 Pinterest is a photo sharing website that allows users to create theme-based collections of images and attach short references and additional data to them.
The most interesting bit of this consumer-oriented model, however, is the firm’s special night-time events like the ‘vanilia Champagne night’ (‘champagne avond’). During these sessions, a number of events are organised around the collection in order to involve consumers more directly and thoroughly with the brand and its products. For example, during the ‘Champagne Night’ a team of stylists and make-up artists were hired, to do the hair and make-up of the customers (interview VI). Getting the brand identity to a younger and more fashion-conscious audience made it necessary to alter Vanilia’s public profile and think of alternative approaches concerning the relation between brand image, sales people, and consumers.

When we look at Vanilia’s latest forays on their website, for instance, we can see how the firm tries to create the image of a fashion brand that is hip and modern, but also socially and environmentally responsible. In other words, we can identify certain features that are supposed to tell a story about the brand and highlight the distinct features of the brand identity. Furthermore, the decision to move the brand online and actively engage in web 2.0 technologies, like Facebook or Twitter, have as a goal to a) make better use of the consumers’ opinions and feedback and b) to person-alise the company and make it more accessible. By the same token, the way the firm is working to create a kind of ‘members’ club’ can be regarded as a means to establish a more intimate relationship with consumers. When we look closely at the different steps, a certain pattern emerges: it becomes apparent that an exclusive and consumer-oriented approach is insufficient to reach the desired target market. Vanilia’s embrace of a consumer-oriented model for example, was rewarded with a discount voucher of 21% discount on all Vanilia items) plus after-party, and a publication in the Marie Claire shopping guide ‘think about a piece of Vanilia’s clothing of vanilia’) sought to identify the primary value connections. The accounts of the company’s area manager, Eva Bij- waard, and the shop managers and sales staff I talked to all stated that Vanilia has a rather nondescript consumer profile, in the sense that it attracts a variety of different consumer types. This concurs with my own observations, the results of the questionnaire (that included enquiring after the participants’ age after completion of the forms), and my tally sheet (divided by categories of age and estimated body size). Vanilia’s audience is, indeed, fairly heterogeneous in terms of age distribution and consumption interests. To some extent, the current situation might be owed to the fact that Vanilia has been in a transition phase during the past couple of years. Retaining old consumer groups, while seeking to attract new ones is, if done successfully, a traditionally slow process that requires a careful balance between the different interest groups. Time will tell whether the firm’s current efforts are indeed successful and in what way its audience will develop.

### Table 7.1 Coding Scheme for Consumer Responses - Value Connection Followed by Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Quality/Price</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Comfort/Wearaibility</th>
<th>Others</th>
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<td>G1</td>
<td>G1</td>
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<td>294</td>
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From the full amount of responses, the results suggest a connection based on three variables: quality/price (I), style (II), and comfort/wearaibility (III).

As Table 7.2 indicates, for Vanilia’s younger consumers the characteristics quality (in relation to purchase price) and style are the strongest value connections. Following these results, the brand’s average consumer puts a premium on fashionable appearance and high quality of clothes. As a third variable comfort emerged.

7.7 CONSUMER VALUE CONNECTIONS

Starting out as a supplier of business attire, over the years the product range has been extended towards more fashion-oriented styles. Since 2008, in particu-lar, the brand has been moving into a direction where casual chic has taken precedence over the firm’s earlier focus on fashion products with a trendy but less outspoken look (interview VI). To an extent, this develop-ment has produced different consumption interests and consumer types. At one end, we find women who source their businesswear from the firm and, at the other end, there is a growing number of consumers who are attracted to the brand for its versatile and un-derspoken pieces. These interests are certainly not mutually exclusive. Rather, they reflect the shift the company has undertaken throughout the years.

The firm’s audience can be divided into two age groups. The first group is comprised of women be-tween approximately 30 and 45 years of age (Group 1), often with a business background, who look for a fashion-able pared-down type of clothing that is suited for a wide variety of contexts. The second group are women of over 45 years old (Group 2) who can be categorised as chic, slender, upper-middle-class women with a stake in fashion products and lifestyle activities. Offer-ing distinct fashion styles across the different clothing lines, the scale of consumption interests is also re-flected in Vanilia’s range of products. As Anna Maatje van der Veen (Interview VX), designer of the firm’s VNL line, explains,

> “Certainly, we do have a certain target group. These are women between 30 and 40 [years], independent, with a working background and their own income. Still, the idea is to reach a rather large group of different people. That’s why we have the [four] different labels. I mean, there is a reason behind that strategy.”

The accounts of the company’s area manager, Eva Bijwaard, and the shop managers and sales staff I talked to all stated that Vanilia has a rather nondescript consumer profile, in the sense that it attracts a variety of different consumer types. This concurs with my own observations, the results of the questionnaire (that included enquiring after the participants’ age after completion of the forms), and my tally sheet (divided by categories of age and estimated body size). Vanilia’s audience is, indeed, fairly heterogeneous in terms of age distribution and consumption interests. To some extent, the current situation might be owed to the fact that Vanilia has been in a transition phase during the past couple of years. Retaining old consumer groups, while seeking to attract new ones is, if done successfully, a traditionally slow process that requires a careful balance between the different interest groups. Time will tell whether the firm’s current efforts are indeed successful and in what way its audience will develop.

7.7.1 STYLE...ON THE SAFE SIDE

Despite its mixed clientele a rather straightforward pic-ture emerged concerning the main value connections of Vanilia’s consumers (interview I). Those try to name three characteristics you associate with the clothing of Vanilia’) sought to identify the primary val-ue connections. The item was created based on three response options, measuring certain characteristics spontaneously associated with Vanilia’s range of prod-ucts. After tying up the full amount of responses the results were coded, clustered, and analysed according to Table 7.1.
Although this aspect surfaced with some regularity, the overall results do not suggest a strong relationship. In Group 2 we can identify all three values as well. In Rotterdam all turns out to be largely insignificant. In Amsterdam 13.51% of consumers did not account. In Arnhem 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strong.

Of fashionable and stylish clothing. In Group 1 the variance of standardised brand values, consumers were asked to pick three out of the 15 options to characterise the brand. Interestingly, across all three locations an almost identical pattern emerged. As FIG 7.1 and FIG 7.2 demonstrate, consumers see Vanilia as a supplier of fashionable and stylish clothing. In Group 1 the variables stylish (Amsterdam: 85.15%; Arnhem: 95.65%; Rotterdam: 93.84%) and fashionable (Amsterdam: 54.52%; Arnhem: 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strongest, while in Amsterdam also reliability (Amsterdam: 34.56%; Arnhem: 12.5%; Rotterdam: 21.53%) proved important. In Group 2, we can identify a more even distribution across the different items. Nevertheless, unlike Item 14, which sought to extract spontaneous associations (or mental concepts) from consumers, Item 15 (‘Which three of the three following attributes are most suited to describe Vanilia as a brand?’) presented them with a multiple-choice question comprising 15 pre-conceived response options. In an effort to identify similarities/overlaps between the independent variables tested through Item 14 and a number of standardised brand values, consumers were asked to pick three out of the 15 options to characterise the brand. Interestingly, across all three locations an almost identical pattern emerged. As FIG 7.1 and FIG 7.2 demonstrate, consumers see Vanilia as a supplier of fashionable and stylish clothing. In Group 1 the variables stylish (Amsterdam: 85.15%; Arnhem: 95.65%; Rotterdam: 93.84%) and fashionable (Amsterdam: 54.52%; Arnhem: 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strongest, while in Amsterdam also reliability (Amsterdam: 34.56%; Arnhem: 12.5%; Rotterdam: 21.53%) proved important. In Group 2, we can identify a more even distribution across the different items. Nevertheless,
The combination of chic and versatile clothing has particular relevance for consumers between 30 and 50 years old, who search for understated products that impart feminine and sophisticated traits without overpowering, or conflicting with, a professional appearance. Providing maximum flexibility, the possibility to mix and match the company’s products is an interesting option. Vanilia’s products allow consistently for a wide variety of combinations across its own four lines, as well as with other fashion labels. Alternately, the firm’s consumers search for a type of attire that supports or even enhances their performance of social roles, regardless of the occasion. Fashionable and professional attire are not considered disparate but complementary entities. As 31-year-old Jessica Jetten explains, ‘It’s a nice brand because it fits both leisure and business contexts. That suits me well because I’d rather have clothes that work well in both parts of life. I’m a lawyer and it’s just very handy. It’s a style that does not look dowdy but stylish and fashionable. I like this combination a lot because it allows me to express myself within certain frameworks’ (Interview VCI).

Vanilia’s elderly consumers, too, look for a fashionable type of product. While their purchase behaviour is rather motivated by aesthetic concerns, we saw that the drivers in Groups 1 and 2 are largely identical. In this case, the combination of stylish and restrained looks simply has a different function. The clothes allow them to dress in a chic and fashionable way without going down the slippery slope of overly fashionable looks (which at a higher age can easily be regarded as inappropriate or avoidance). As a 58-year-old patron explained to me, ‘The thing is this: I like fashion and I like to dress in a feminine, trendy way. Nevertheless, I’m 58 years old now and there are limits to what I can wear. Certain pieces – however beautiful they might be – just don’t work. They would look ridiculous on me because they are made for girls who are much younger. Vanilia is a great option because the clothes are trendy and understated. They look decent on me. You know, fashionable but not hip.’ (VCVI)

The in-depth interviews and the results from the questionnaires suggest that Vanilia’s consumers have a keen interest in clothing products with an articulate look. However, the type of garment they aspire to is defined more by subtlety and attention to detail than a committed fashion-forward message. In fact, the largest part of Vanilia’s collections are fashion products ‘in translation’: interpretations of international fashion trends for the Dutch market. According to designer Anna-Maartje van der Veen (Interview VA), the clothing is ‘fashionable but surely not too extravagant because that is never going to work [in the Netherlands]’. The interviews with the brand’s regional manager, stylist, public relations manager, and the store managers and sales personnel, reflect a similar attitude.

772 STYLE OR FASHION?
Exploring to what extent the buying behaviour of Vanilia’s consumers is motivated by current fashion trends, Item 2 (‘I like to dress according to the latest fashion trends’) sought to measure the level of fashion involvement as a potential driver in the purchase decision-making process. In Group 1, we can identify a balanced distribution between trend-following consumers and trend-averse or neutral ones. As FIG 7.3 demonstrates, one segment of the respondents (Amsterdam: 32.09%, Arnhem: 26.08%; Rotterdam: 29.82%) exhibited consistently modest to low levels of fashion involvement, while others appear more involved with the latest fashion trends (Amsterdam: 30.86%; Arnhem: 36.89%; Rotterdam: 26.30%). The most remarkable result, however, is the rather large number of people that took a neutral stand, which indicates that for many of the firm’s consumers trends are largely irrelevant. In FIG 7.4 we can identify a similar distribution. The number of respondents taking a neutral stance is also rather pronounced in the second group. In Amsterdam 26.31% disagreed while in Arnhem it was 46.4% and in Rotterdam 32.25%. Similarly, in Amsterdam 42.04% agreed while in Arnhem it was 17.84% and in Rotterdam 12.90%. When we look at the connection between trend adoption and purchase behaviour the results of Item 3 (‘I am among the first in my circle of friends to buy a new fashion item when it appears’) support the
conclusion that fashion trends do not play a significant role for many of Vanilia’s consumers. While FIG 7.5 and FIG 7.6 show that some of the younger consumers tend to connect their consumption choices to current developments in fashion, the overall distribution suggests a neutral or a negative attitude towards trend-motivated clothing purchases.

In line with the somewhat mixed distribution regarding trend-driven purchase behaviour the average level of media involvement is comparatively low as well. The results from Item 5 (‘I regularly buy fashion-related magazines’) indicate that Vanilia’s consumers do not have an overly pronounced interest in following the latest clothing trends on the basis of topical magazines. The results from Amsterdam prove exceptional in this regard as the distribution is fairly uneven. Here, we can identify a pattern where consumers, almost in equal measure, either confirm or contradict this tendency, with a relatively large number of respondents showing a critical awareness of current developments in fashion (Group 1: 27.16% / Group 2: 28.94%). Again, particularly with respect to the firm’s older consumers, this finding is interesting and raises the question what caused the regional variation compared to the other two locations.

In a similar way, Item 6 (‘I regularly check the Internet for the latest clothing trends’) sought to look into media involvement with respect to the Internet and web 2.0 technologies (blogs, websites of magazines) as means to stay abreast of recent developments in fashion. As FIG 7.9 indicates, in Group 1 we can identify a split distribution. A rather large part of the sample (Amsterdam: 60.48%; Arnhem: 52.16%; Rotterdam: 42.10%) does not use the Internet as a channel to keep informed about fashion trends, while a smaller number of people (Amsterdam: 25.91%; Arnhem: 41.29%; Rotterdam: 31.57%) does make use of the Internet to keep in sync with developments in fashion. Perhaps not altogether surprising, amongst the elderly consumers in Group 2 the level of involvement in new media is comparatively low.

On the previous pages we saw that the level of fashion involvement of Vanilia’s consumers is not very pronounced. Item 7 (‘I like buying clothes with an outspoken look’) sought to explore the level of clothing involvement that is distinguished from fashion involvement insomuch as it relates to an interest in clothes or a specific style (which can, but does not have to be, connected to current fashion trends). As FIG 7.11 and FIG 7.12 demonstrate, the absence of an explicit interest in cutting-edge products and fashion media does not actually rule out a strong interest in clothing more in general. Consumers in both groups have a critical awareness towards the clothing products they purchase and the degree to which they attach meaning to them. In Group 1, in Amsterdam 65.42% agreed, in Arnhem it was 71.29% and in Rotterdam 68.41%. In Group 2, in Amsterdam 65.13% agreed with the statement while in Arnhem it was 65.22% and in Rotterdam 70.95%.

7.3 BRAND INVOLVEMENT AND PURCHASE FREQUENCY

Item 8 (‘I like to purchase clothes from brands I can identify with’) sought to explore the level of brand identification and the degree to which consumption behaviour responds to not only product-specific features but also company-specific attributes. As FIG 7.13 shows, in Group 1 we can identify consistently high levels of brand involvement across the three locations. In Group 2, however, the distribution is not as clear. While in Amsterdam we can identify a slightly positive relationship (44.29% of consumers agreed with the statement, compared to 36.84% who disagreed), in Arnhem and Rotterdam purchase behaviour appears to relate to a lesser extent to the level of brand identification. As the results indicate, identification with brands represents an important variable for Vanilia’s younger consumers, while for its older consumers it is a less significant driver for consumption behaviour.

A similar pattern emerged for Item 12 (‘How often do you visit one of Vanilia’s stores?’), which sought to determine the average visiting frequency. In Group 1, consumers in Amsterdam visit Vanilia’s shops less than once a month, while in the two other locations we can identify an almost balanced distribution across response options 2 and 3 that suggests an average frequency of near-monthly visits (FIG 7.15). In Group 2, by contrast, the results indicate that in all three locations consumers visit the stores less than once a month (FIG 7.16).

While Item 12 was constructed to determine the average visiting frequency, Item 13 (‘On average, how many items do you purchase per visit?’) sought to identify the average number of purchases per visit. As FIG 7.17 and 7.18 demonstrate, consumers in both groups on average buy about one item per visit.

7.8 FUNCTIONAL AESTHETICS

The interviews indicate that Vanilia’s consumers see the brand as a supplier of affordable quality clothing. They use to complement and enhance their existing wardrobe. With a rather diverse consumption attitude, the audience is not ‘owned’ by the brand, but sources clothes from a wide variety of brands with a stylistic repertoire ranging from sporty to elegant and from smart-casual to business-oriented. Considering the multiple contexts in which garments need to function and influence appearances, a very specific requirement profile emerges: largely irrespective of age, Vanilia’s consumers aspire to a clothing style that is restrained and subtle, wearable and adequate across a wide variety of different social and professional contexts. That combination of stylish and functional clothing is important to understand the relationship consumers maintain with the brand. In the previous section we saw that the level of brand involvement is rather high among the firm’s younger consumers and somewhat lower in the second group. Purchases are made on a regular basis but on average not in high frequency or large quantities. With rather low levels of fashion involvement, Vanilia’s audience has a functional attitude towards clothing consumption. While this attitude does not lead to a very close or emotionally charged relation-ship with the brand, loyalty is guaranteed through attributes like reliability, product quality, comfort, and versatility. In other words, the ties are relatively loose in terms of fashion and brand involvement but closely bound to functional qualities.

Functionality not only plays an important role in terms of product features but also in the way key components of the brand’s trademark style attract consumption interests. Markedly modern in character, the majority of consumers can be classified as young or middle-aged (working) women with career ambitions and/or a family life, as well as an interest in lifestyle activities and cultural offerings. From the period of observation and the insights gained through the questionnaires and interviews it appears that Vanilia’s audience tends to opt for a type of clothing that is chic and understated, flexible and discreetly distinctive in terms of details. At the same time, they appreciate design qualities: a signature style that is fashionable and edgy without unnecessary pomp or loud and conspicuous details. The firm’s structural set-up, encompassing four different fashion lines, and the recent shift towards introducing 14 individual collections per year seeks to take into account this demand from different angles. By establishing the company as a consummate supplier of diversified and distinguished fashion products Vanilia capitalises on a nuanced range of products, offering ample choice and encouraging a wide variety of combinations.
7.9 DUTCH OR INTERNATIONAL?

To what extent can Vanilia actually be considered typically Dutch? The most interesting aspect in this context is the dichotomy between signature style and business model. In a way, the firm’s trademark style is not typically Dutch. It neither ties in with a modernist, minimal aesthetics, nor does it run the gamut of the folklore-influenced, colourfully, and more outgoing range. As regional manager Eva Bijwaard (Interview VII) contends, ‘It’s not a typically Dutch brand. The sizes are typically Dutch in a way... but the look and feel really aren’t. It’s more a mixed bag of what the top brands show on the catwalk at a certain moment, infused with some personal inspiration from our designers.’

Item 11a (‘Vanilia is typically Dutch’), which sought to explore the perception of consumers in that regard, reflects a similar tendency. As FIG 7.19 and FIG 7.20 demonstrate, a rather mixed picture emerged. In Group 1, in Amsterdam 27.15% disagreed and 14.24% agreed, while in Rotterdam 34.56% disagreed and 24.04% agreed. In Arnhem, 32.60% disagreed and 15.78% agreed. In Group 2, in Amsterdam 12.89% disagreed and 19.35% agreed, while in Rotterdam 33.32% disagreed and 21.72% agreed, while in Arnhem 27.15% disagreed and the same number of people agreed. In all cities, the percentage of people who strongly disagreed and strongly agreed was approximately 10%.

In the ensuing analysis, we saw that the relationship between consumers and brand is defined by values like functionality and stylishness, product quality and comfort. With rather moderate levels of fashion and brand involvement, consumers build a relationship with the brand predominantly based on product-intrinsic features, rather than on lifestyle concepts or on a shared outlook on the world. Vanilia’s audience is not owned by the brand. Many of the brand’s consumers maintain a rather diverse consumption attitude and source their clothing from a variety of brands with a similar aesthetic register. As such, the purchase act primarily satisfies functional and aesthetic interests rather than emotional ones. To some extent this is little surprising, because the firm’s more generalist consumer approach does not focus on a specific clientele. Clothes need to look good but they also should be practical without requiring too much care to maintain. For many consumers the diversity of styles offered by the brand holds the promise to find products that they like and that look good on them without spending too much time in the retail outlets. Vanilia is right on the money with a product that is fashionable and eclectic, affordable but not cheap or underpriced.

When we look at the above value connections between consumers and brand, it is apparent that most of them are more universal than typically Dutch. More pertinent to the Dutch context is the brand’s market approach. Vanilia is structured around a diverse and multi-layered business model that is meant to target a varied consumer base. With a market approach that seeks to integrate multiple consumption interests, Vanilia in general stands more for many successful Dutch fashion enterprises. The combination of stylish and distinguished fashion products is crucial in this context. The Dutch, arguably, are not in the vanguard of the international fashion. Instead, they prefer a type of product that is a compromise between stylish and comfortable, casual and elegant. Neither daring and avant-garde nor dowdy and old-fashioned, Vanilia’s products are a safe bet in the best sense of the word: not ahead of fashion but not lagging behind either. Or, in the words of famous Dutch fashion journalist Bregje Lampe (2011: 3, my translation), ‘Vanilia certainly is not overly progressive. The clothes are modest, elegant, feminine and in some cases sporty or a bit coarse. In other words, it is a type of product that is eminently suited for the Dutch market.’

The brand’s recent expansion towards more fashion-oriented styles is no contradiction in that regard. Vanilia consistently develops within a certain framework: with a view to the market, the firm carefully seeks to accommodate different consumption interests and adapts the brands proposition accordingly. In so doing, the company assumes a position that negotiates between stylish and understated, exclusive and accessible products. In short: just about right.
8.1 Introduction

When the Dutch fashion duo Spijkers en Spijkers celebrated their ten-year anniversary with the exposition ‘The Mirror Has Two Faces’ at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst in Arnhem in May 2011, the event was proof of a development the brand had undergone over the preceding decade. Starting as a small two-women operation, the firm has gone from strength to strength with a mix of market adaptation, idealism, and firm belief in the brand’s signature style and relevance. Despite the fact that the exposition came as a sort of accolade, paying tribute to the designers’ growing popularity in their own country, most of their business and the biggest share of revenues comes from sales abroad. In fact, in the Netherlands the duo has been mostly treated as an insider tip until recently, while in the U.K., Japan, and the Middle East their collections have been thriving on positive reviews and successful sales for many years (Interview SSI; Bern 2011: 79; Husslage 2011: 3).

While this is an interesting aspect in itself, it also posed a number of challenges for my research. For one thing, the brand does not have its own stores, but sells its products exclusively through select retailers across the globe. For another, the fact that the mainline, Spijkers en Spijkers, is being retailed in only two outlets¹ in the Netherlands meant a low consumer frequency, which ruled out the possibility to follow an approach comparable to those used for the other case studies in this research. Instead, I had to rely on an in-depth interview, knowledge obtained during a 4-day research trip with the designers to Iasi (Romania), which served the purpose of exploring new possibilities in manufacturing, and an interview with Coming Soon’s store manager, Chananja Baars. The qualitative data was supported by an extensive literature study in the form of various articles and interviews in magazines, as well as a recently published monograph. While at first it seemed like a drawback to work with this approach, the fact that I could study the relation between brand and consumers from a less consumer-centric perspective allowed me to adopt a company-specific perspective and develop an understanding for the firm’s implicitly consumer-oriented market approach.

Admittedly, Spijkers en Spijkers is a rather small label compared to luxury heavyweights like Prada or Louis Vuitton whose operative set-up is integrated in, and backed by, large conglomerates. For my own research this aspect proved remarkably beneficial, as it facilitated an intriguing perspective on the largely unexplored subject of managing target audiences of small-scale luxury fashion brands.

8.2 The Spijkers en Spijkers Signature

Effortlessly combining influences from Art Deco and modernism with a daunting use of patterns and graphic elements, the clothes are deceptively simple in appearance, yet rich in construction and attention to detail (Teunissen and Van der Voet 2011: 12). The Spijkers en Spijkers signature look might be described as a play of colour and form that foregrounds the garment and instils a subtle sense of sophisticated sensuality in the wearer. As the designers claim, there is no specific target audience in terms of age or social and professional background. Rather, they try to appeal to a certain spirit and mindset – or pronounce it more strongly through their work. Some authors have argued that their understanding of femininity involved the challenging of gender stereotypes, such as eternal youth, sexual objectification, or the industry’s almost exclusive reliance on

¹ Coming Soon, Arnhem; Margreeth Olsthoorn, Rotterdam.
Traditionally, most small-scale fashion labels operate on a small-order basis. This is also true in the case of Spijkers en Spijkers. With average production runs of no more than a 100 pieces per design (in some cases the limit is even 10 to 20 pieces) the brand consistently works with orders of small calibre. This has important consequences for the set-up of the company. First, substandard order sizes mean that most of the production can only be done in specialised factories and/or workshops. Second, small production units lead to relatively high manufacturing costs per piece, which in turn leads to a rather tight gross margin. Unlike many competitors, Truus and Riet Spijkers deliberately chose against collaboration with an investor since, in their view, that would have curtailed their creative freedom too severely. As Truus recounts:

'We've had quite a number of talks with potential investors, but the people we spoke to asked unreasonable things. I'm realistic in my thinking and I understand that collaborating with a partner means they will ask something in return. What we don't want is someone who thinks: I want to get as much money out of this as possible in the shortest amount of time, or who wants a majority holding in our company. That's just not interesting for us [since] we have been building this [brand] for the past ten years.'

(Truus Spijkers cited in Huislage 2011: 3; my translation)

By not working with an investor, the designers chose to develop the brand independently and free from liabilities. Over the past decade, they have successfully implemented this strategy and managed to strengthen their position as a fixture in the international fashion scene. With the help of two permanent employees, three people on a zero-hour contract basis and a handful of interns, the operation is run by an exceptionally small team considering that the products are sold in no less than 12 countries across the world. Although small in size, by gradually building their business the two sisters have turned into entrepreneurs themselves. Says Truus (ibid: 2): 'We really had to get into the whole business side of things ourselves. At times that was rather tricky as we did not have any training in that regard. At the academy, the focus is purely on creativity, not entrepreneurship'. Since the two sisters have established their brand they have stepped up their game not only as successful fashion designers, but also as proper entrepreneurs who operate their brand with business acumen and a good intuition for interpreting and integrating signals from the market into their collections. The following sections will provide a more detailed account of their activities and how they have built their business.

8.3 THE DESIGNERS AS ENTREPRENEURS: CREATIVE FREEDOM

Unlike many competitors, the Spijkers en Spijkers brand does not work with adverts or other explicit forms of consumer marketing. According to the designers, the first priority is product development, with the majority of resources going into fabrics, pattern-making, and manufacturing. From this perspective it might seem that a sheer reliance on skilled design and a sophisticated product slate could outweigh large-scale campaigns with top models and blue-chip photographers. Indeed, their resolutely marketing-averse stance is credible to the extent that the Spijkers en Spijkers brand has come a long way during the past ten years and keeps being relatively successful. This being said, it is equally true that the chosen approach, to some extent, is an imperative dictated by economic means and financial scope. When compared to the large multi-label corporations that rule a good deal of the high-fashion industry (e.g. Pinault-Printemps-Redoute, Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy, Prada Group, Gucci Group, Compagnie Financière Richemont) there is a striking difference in budget, leverage, and economic reach, but also in the determining variables of a collection’s success or failure. A company like Prada, for example, launches its products with the help of an enormous marketing apparatus, including large-scale advertising in all important magazines, million-dollar budgets for fashion shows, costume designs for blockbusters, or – as happened in July 2011 – renting five floors of Park Hyatt Shanghai to stage a three-day fashion-show-cum-exhibition for MiuMiu’s Fall/Winter 2011-2012 collection. The Spijkers en Spijkers imprint, by contrast, has no other choice than to rely on a comparatively implicit approach.

To be sure, it does not take million-dollar budgets and glamorous advertising campaigns to position a fashion brand in the market. Still, a substantial financial backing certainly helps to achieve that goal. Truus Spijkers (Interview SSII) sums up the situation the following, rather laconic way: ‘Brands like Prada are our direct competitors. And you just can’t compete with them. It’s impossible. You see, these are mega teams and mega budgets...’. From an early point in their career the designers understand that by choosing not to work together with an investor, they would require an alternative strategy to advance their business and develop the brand: building the brand through creating awareness and devising a brand narrative that plays with notions like high design, modernist aesthetics, and individualism (Interview SSII; cf. Teunissen and Van der Voet: 58).

Clearly, awareness is what all brands, regardless of size and turnover, strive for and profit from. Also high-profile advertising, artist sponsorships, or ritzy locations for fashion shows are nothing but means to raise awareness. In the case of Truus and Riet Spijkers, then, the notion mostly pertains to increased visibility, which they achieve by exploiting two principal assets of the brand proposition: signature style and their status as identical twins, which over time has made them ambassadors of their brand and product. In a sense the sisters are their own best models. All creations are made to their own liking; the proportions of garments are modelled on their own physique. Despite the fact that they do not advertise explicitly through spreads in magazines, for instance, they do capitalise on the presence they have as designers and their increasingly iconic status in their home country. As Truus remarks, ‘We build publicity ourselves. We are good crowd pullers actually and you shouldn’t underestimate that. If you consider the enormous amount of attention we got through the exhibition [at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem], it’s quite incredible, really’ (Interview SSII).

8.3.2 SISTER ACT

As a consequence of their growing awareness of market demands, a crucial addition to their business portfolio was made in 2010 with the introduction of the diffusion line SIS, which at present counts 11 points of sale in the Netherlands. Originally, the collection made its debut at the Amsterdam International Fashion Week as an extra precollection with the aim to test the firm’s potential in the home market. However, due to the fact that it became an instant commercial success with critics and buyers, the idea quickly turned into a mainstay of business operations. As the designers state, SIS was partly the result of a development during the course of which the main line – but also the twins as a brand in their own right – had finally started to receive more media attention in the Netherlands.

‘At the time, we were getting more and more requests for affordable clothing from Dutch retailers. With our main collection it was impossible to satisfy that demand, so we introduced a “little sister”. Actually, SIS was developed specifically for the Dutch market because we wanted to be able to also sell our products in stores close to where we live’. (cited in Elke 2010: 1; my translation)

From the initial idea to establish SIS as an exclusive line for the Dutch market, it was only a small step to extend it to other countries as well, with large parts of the production now going to Japan, Russia, and the UK (Teunissen and Van der Voet: 65).
Apart from creating a more accessible product for the home market, the brand expansion was aimed at exploring new possibilities and steering the brand into a different direction. The financial crisis between 2008 and 2010 had left a deep mark on the mainline’s sales volume, with rather alarming economic discharges in the firm’s markets in Russia and the Ukraine. Lower purchasing quantities and a changing consumption mentality meant a change of direction for the company in order to prevent floundering and to keep the business sustainable (interview ss1; cf. teunissen and van der voet: 57-8). Consequently, the introduction of SIS was as much the result of the designers’ desire to develop a new market as it was a means to guarantee more reliable sales in their established ones.

The difference between the main collection and the commercially more viable distribution line is basically twofold. First, SIS is produced in higher quantities and retailled at lower prices. Second, the label features more accessible looks, which makes it attractive for a bigger audience. By turning the products into more every day items, the designers did quite directly respond to audience. by turning the products into more every accessible looks, which makes it attractive for a bigger target market and, in a rather implicit manner, takes consumer needs and their (changing) consumption habits into account. For the future the projected goal is to pursue similar projects, using their reputation to advance their skills in different areas (Interview ss5; cf. Teunissen and Van der Voet: 61).

8.3.4 PRIVATE AFFAIRS

Another way in which the designers respond to consumer needs is a bespoke service for made-to-measure clothes they offer to private clients. Translating the individual wishes and ideas of consumers into a custom-made clothing piece, they claim each garment is the product of a dialogue between them and their clients. During a fitting session, Truus and Riet seek to channel their own aesthetics in consultation with the client. Says Riet, ‘We work a lot with private clients and there you get a first-hand experience of what clothes can do to the person who wears them. You see that, of course, only where you’re actually one on one with a client.’ (Interview ss5)

In a sense, this way of working goes back to the heyday of the couturier who dressed socialites in his studio rather than designing collections for a wider audience. Unlike the previous approach, however, for Truus and Riet Spijkers a sole reliance on private clients – even if it did not mean venturing into the extravagant fashion pieces that attract most media attention in section 8.3.2 we saw that the label does actually venture into the extravagant fashion pieces that attract most media attention in section 8.3.2 we saw that the label does actually venture into – rather than designing collections for a wider audience. (interview ssi)

According to the designers, clothes can exert an influence that reaches beyond modesty towards a sense of self-assuredness. While their vision is not entirely free from idealism, there might be some kind of truth to it, after all. As 34 year-old consumer Lisa T. (private conversation May 18, 2011) told me, ‘[Well, that whole notion of empowerment I’m not sure about. Still, the clothes are certainly powerful. I own quite a few of their dresses and when I put them on they certainly do something to me.’

8.4 ODDITIES OF THE LUXURY MARKET

While the made-to-measure service is more of a sideline in their business, the biggest share of creative output comes from the Spijkers en Spijkers main collection. With prices of 800 Euros for one of their trade-mark jumpsuits and between 700 and 1200 Euros for a dress, the brand is clearly situated in the luxury segment. In section 8.3.2 we saw that the label does actually grow but fails to establish a loyal customer base in one or more of its (foreign) markets. Part of the firm’s difficulties can be explained by the actual product proposition, which is fashion-forward and fairly uncompromising when it comes to the designers’ aesthetic vision.

Although more elusive, the luxury market is neither distinguishable from the high street and other retail environments in terms of clothing style nor in terms of the principal demands consumers make on products. In fact, it is the inherent dynamics that are somewhat different. It is a popular fallacy to believe that the big luxury houses take the main share of revenues from the extravagant fashion pieces that attract most media attention. Those eye-catchers are primarily integrated in the collection to manifest the status of an innovative...
to find its own way to compete with the industry’s big players. For obvious reasons only the smallest few high-fashion brands will specialise in business wear, simply because it is hard to make a mark and attract media attention. In this respect there is no difference between big and small enterprises since also the established names will feature in magazines with the season’s showstoppers rather than with business basics. The very difference is actually that the established brands are mostly integrated in corporate networks with strong financial support, which allows them to create both extravagant and understated fashion pieces without having to choose for either approach.

8.5 Dutch Luxury fashion?

Above it was mentioned that the Spijkers en Spijkers label enjoys great, albeit unstable, popularity abroad while in the Netherlands it could never really catch on. SIS, by contrast, turned out to be a success in both home and foreign markets. This asymmetry requires some clarification if we want to understand how the company relates to consumers and adapts to different markets. Also, the difference tells us something about the Dutch fashion landscape and local consumers’ predominant consumption mentality.

One explanation for the difference in interest and sales volume is the income distribution across different national contexts and, as a result, different buying mentalities. Comparing the brand’s key markets in the Middle East or Russia with the European ones, we can identify a principal difference in spending activity between Western countries and the (moneyed) nations of the Middle and Far East. According to the International Monetary Fund (accessed on November 9, 2011), the Netherlands rank number three in the European nations, with the highest purchasing power parity per capita (PPP), after Luxembourg and Norway. So, the country’s relatively high gross domestic product goes together with a fairly democratic income distribution. On the (small) scale of Qatar (1), Brunei (2), and the United Arabian Emirates (4) rank at the top four of countries with the highest gross domestic product per capita. In this case, however, the figures are partly produced by the high density of the super-rich rather than a demographic overall income distribution. One effect of the rather high average amount of discretionary money in the Netherlands is that the country has a well-established and economically strong middle market. At the same time, the demand for luxury products is somewhat lower because the super-high income groups are fewer as well (Jacobs 2011b: 12a). Seen thus, it is probably not altogether surprising that Dutch consumers are not so different in style, actually does) is mainly that Dutch consumers are not willing to spend large amounts on clothing that can only be worn for special occasions and requires intensive care. In CHAPTER 5 we learned that the local audience puts a premium on comfort and easy-maintenance materials – the bicycle factor, as I dubbed it. A dress or jumpsuit, entirely made out of delicate silk, like they regularly feature in a Spijkers en Spijkers collection is simply at odds with the day-to-day requirements of the local audience. Says Chananja Baars, store manager of Coming Soon, “[The clothes are difficult to sell, actually. Here in the Netherlands it’s not so easy to find consumers for this type of clothing. It’s not practical – and expensive. That combination... well... it doesn’t sit very well with the local audience.” (SSII). To be sure, comfort and easy maintenance are not anathema to any Western or European country. Even in so-called ‘fashion countries’, like France or Italy, the average consumer puts a premium on these and similar aspects. The difference is rather that in the Dutch context these attributes are more pronounced.)

8.6 Dutch fashion: Here and there

In CHAPTER 5 we saw that in the past Dutch fashion was viewed mainly in conceptualist terms, or as a continuation of the country’s modernist heritage (Teunissen and Van Zijl 1996). Whereas more recent research suggests more than one predominant fashion narrative and at least two ‘fashion identities’ (Feitsma 2011a; Jacobs 2010, Jacobs 2011a). The first
type – Modernist Design with a Twist, as I called it – is linked to sobriety and aesthetic restraint, with a foothold in the national traditions of art and architecture, graphic and industrial design (Teunissen and Van Zijl 2000), while the other – Wild Design – is defined by colour, pattern, and playfulness. According to Jacobs (2010: 20), the former can be found mostly in the upper-middle and high segment, while the latter is mainly connected to the more popular ranges of the fashion market.

The work of Truus and Riet Spijkers takes its cues from both realms, merges them, and gives a new twist to it. Many of their products are inspired by modernist aesthetics on the one hand, especially when it comes to graphic composition, use of patterns and fields of colour. On the other hand, the vibrancy and edgy appearance of the collections are more akin to Wild Design and the way the Dutch fashion narrative is inflected by various cultural influences. Merging elements of both traditions into a new whole, the garments resume conceptualist roots in terms of proportion and graphic composition, while a predilection for animal prints and metallics evidences a playful and upbeat stance. Much of the clothing is about achieving the right balance between two poles: symmetry and asymmetry, colourful and colourless, exposed and hidden, patterns and planes.

In a country like Italy, for instance, we find a clear opposition between companies catering to either end of the spectrum. At one end there are brands like Armani or Prada, whose aesthetic signature is sleek and pared down. At the other end, houses like Versace, Cavalli, or Dolce e Gabbana stand for a style that can be dubbed ‘dirty chic’, i.e., a classy yet aggressive and erotically charged type of fashion. Along the general lines, the former reflect the kind of understatement we also find with many Dutch upmarket fashion labels like Orson+Bodil, Saskia van Drimmelen, or Marcha Hüskes. In the spot of the lascivious panache of the latter, however, we find designers like Bas Kosters whose work is a smorgasbord of colour, pattern, and frivolous exuberance. Interestingly, the work of Truus and Riet Spijkers occupies a space that combines these two extremes. The brand is typically Dutch in the sense that it blurs the boundaries between reprised conceptualism and playfulness, graphic composition and edgy looks, it juggles with different disciplines and aesthetic repertoires and merges them into a new whole.

8.7 CONCLUSION

Spijkers en Spijkers had to find their own way to establish a position in the market. A small enterprise without major financial backing to support the brand, which allows for greater entrepreneurial freedom, the brand is peculiar in the sense that it successfully operates its global business with an exceptionally small team. Rather than riding the branding wave, Truus and Riet Spijkers have made their own face and signature style the figurehead of the brand. The brand’s marketing approach is rather implicit in the sense that brand awareness is created by a number of different strategies that, on the face of it, might seem just remotely related to a consumer-centric approach. On closer inspection, however, many steps the firm has taken since its inception are tacit ways to bring the clothes closer to their consumers and integrate their needs into the brand proposition. When there was a demand for more affordable clothes, SIS was created as a more accessible alternative in the designers’ trademark style. The moment Truus and Riet Spijkers understood that their own media profile was a marketing tool in its own right, they put themselves more into the limelight and started to connect their name to well-known high-street brands. The same is true for their fashion designs. On the one hand, these are resolutely built around what the two sisters call ‘high design’. On the other hand, they do consider the products’ wearability (despite their sharp looks). Spijkers en Spijkers are creative with an eye to the market; exclusive, but not out of reach; conceptual in its way of working, yet playful in appearance. In short, the brand is typically Dutch in the sense that it is not either… or, but and… and.
CHAPTER 9

G-STAR: A GLOBAL PLAYER FROM HOLLAND
9.1 INTRODUCTION

Started under the name Gapstar in 1989, G-Star is recognised as one of the most successful Dutch fashion enterprises worldwide nowadays. Boasting steady double-digit growth over the past twenty years and annual turnovers of over a billion dollars (since 2006), the brand works with an intriguing mix of brand savvyness and clever marketing tactics, product innovation and commerce (TextilWirtschaft 2010: 16). Worthy of attention is the company’s strategic positioning. First, since the mid-1990s G-Star has become known for a product mix of innovative denim pieces at one end, and fairly commercial, casual designs at the other. Second, the company boasts an interesting marketing mix, composed of traditional billboard advertising, product placement, and more advanced branding strategies. Third, the firm embraces a consistently commercial market approach stretching to all areas of the business model. The sum of these thoughts produces an interesting (and occasionally contradictory) brand identity with global appeal.

Within this chapter the brand’s Dutch clientele will be examined, based on a one-month period of research at different outlets across the country. As the results suggest, G-Star attracts a wide range of consumer types. Some are fashion-conscious and searching for sales rates and a counter assurance for more experimental designs (Querfurth 2006: 14; TextilWirtschaft 2005: 48). Under the motto ‘Just the Product’ the firm started to pioneer the use of raw and dark denim in the mid-1990s, and during the following years extended its scope of products towards a variety of styles. The product slate is composed of nine individual clothing lines nowadays. Seasonal is a regularly changing collection, composed of basics and cutting-edge pieces, an integrated approach navigating between leisure wear and fashion-forward looks. Corning in limited quantities with the goal to assert the firm’s position in the upscale denim segment, RAW Essentials is entirely made from Japanese and Italian selvage denim, rich with innovative cuts, authentic details, and functional attributes. On a similar level, the Correct Line and New York RAW are programmes designed by Michiel Keuper (formerly of high-end fashion duo Keupr/Van Bentrim). RAW Sustainable seeks to tap into the current desire for sustainability while Laundry Army is a collection inspired by military apparel, featuring not denim but techno fabrics and utility-focused detailing. G-Star RAW by Marc Newson is an ongoing collaboration with Australian product designer Marc Newson. The collection is something of an outlier: featuring bright colours and an alternative take on the product philosophy, the collection is congruent with the house-style in terms of industrial clean aesthetics while the choice of colours and patterns or prints is distinguished from the company’s other products (Elle 2006: 122; Van Den Storm 2006). Added to that, the brand devotes individual collections to knitwear, jackets, and shoes (in collaboration with Stephen Palmer of Overland Shoes).

In all their diversity the interesting part is the product mix as a whole rather than the individual components. Coordinating a variety of styles, G-Star keeps a tight reign on its company and design philosophy, which holds together all the different threads. Product development in this context is turned into a collective play of creative design, marketing, promotion, and a smoothly running sales apparatus. According to CEO and stakeholder Jos van Tilburg, G-Star primarily acts as a supplier of what he calls ‘jeans casual’, seeking to tap into mid-range and upmarket customer bases alike (TextilWirtschaft 2005: 48). Geared towards a variety of consumption interests, brand identity and products are at once fashion-oriented and accessible, commercial and exclusive, innovative and traditional.

9.2 (JUST) THE PRODUCT: BETWEEN HIGH STREET AND HIGH LINE

Since the mid-1990s G-Star has become known for its varied use of denim cloth. Credited with the first ever trousers created as a 3D design, head designer Pierre Morisset introduced the now classic ‘Elwood’ in 1996 as a wearable experiment in form and function, at once comfortable and fashionable, accessible and forward-thinking. Sold over 10 million times worldwide, the design was inspired by a water-soaked biker pant. With a shape based on a three-dimensional fit following the proportions of the human body instead of a pair of symmetrical trouser legs, the design meant a radical break with the traditional 5-pocket jeans (TextilWirtschaft 2007b: 96). To this day the model remains one of the brand’s top-selling items, warranting steady

9.3 RETAIL CONCEPT: MONOLITHIC HOUSE-STYLE

Anno 2012 G-Star is established in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK, USA. Maintaining 300 monobrand stores across the globe, all of which are run by franchisees, and over 5500 points of sale in 65 countries (multi-brand jeans stores, individual retailers) G-Star keeps expanding globally, with...
Ensuring a consistent brand image, G-Star has its own in-house design team, comprising more than 40 people who are responsible for outfitting the shops and creating the ‘rough’ trademark look and atmosphere. Casual and stylish, functional and pure, the look and feel of the stores is supposed to capture the driving design ideals of the brand. In all its creative output, G-Star looks for coherence across the different facets of the brand proposition, with the same values (sober, neutral, rough, functional, no-frills, casual) resurfacing in a number of variations.

9.4 MARKETING/BRANDING: ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

With a distinct brand proposition across segments and lifestyle groups, G-Star’s market orientation and scope are largely mid-range, consistently international, and geared towards different target audiences. Working according to a thoroughly designed marketing strategy, the branding formula is a mix of signature style, interdisciplinary projects, and media savviness. Retail environments, advertising campaigns, and products all follow the same look in grey scales and muted colours, featuring a seamless transition from one to the next. Until a few years ago the campaigns were all conceived in a white cube setting, exuding airiness and a sense of intangibility (Hoogervorst 2011: 28). Since G-Star’s S/S 2009 campaign, renowned Dutch photographer Anton Corbijn – by his own account ‘not a natural choice for fashion’ – took over the creative direction of the firm’s adverts and introduced the current house style. The choice of models in his images can be somewhat unorthodox at times – but no less memorable, at that. Mostly shot in black-and-white, the campaigns feature rather obvious choices like Hollywood actresses Liv Tyler or model Elettra Wiedemann, as well as more unexpected ones like independent-cinema icon Vincent Gallo, chess grandmaster Magnus Carlsen or actress Clémence Poésy.

Next to PR activities directly linked to commercial interests, the company has a history in alternative branding concepts. Every new shop opening is accompanied by so-called ‘guerilla promotions’, resulting in women flaunting baroque-inspired denim dresses on the streets of Milan for instance, or models lounging by a pool in Dubai dressed in swimsuits made of untreated denim (Hintz 2006: 29). Similarly, the RAW Chess Challenge was organised in 2010 as an event following the unprecedented hype around the campaign featuring Magnus Carlsen. Staged in the penthouse of the Cooper Square Hotel in New York City, the 19 year-old was placed alone in one room, while three of the world’s best chess players (Judit Polgár, Hikaru Nakamura, and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave) were seated in an adjacent room to advise an Internet community of players on what and how to play.

The CROSSOVER project is an ongoing series of one-offs that apply the brand’s greyscale signature look to fashion-unrelated types of products. Together with Landrover the RAW Defender off-road vehicle was conceived, with Cannondale they created the RAW Cannondale mountain bike, with Hennessy the RAW cognac (‘magic’), and together with Vitra the brand worked on the Prouvé RAW series of furniture re-editions of French mid-century architect and designer Jean Prouvé. The RAW Ferry D1 was developed as a project directly linked to the city of Amsterdam. As a fully refurbished old canal barge in trademark charcoal-grey, the ferry can be rented as a water taxi to traverse the city’s canals or serve as an informal venue hosting up to 25 people.

According to the firm’s global brand manager Shubhankar Ray, the crossovers are primarily meant as ‘experiments for our designers... inspiring new and interesting approaches for our interiors and clothing collections’ (cited in Hoogervorst 2011: 29). That stance deserves some critical requalification, though. It might be true that these creative ventures inspired some of G-Star’s commercial projects. At the end of the day, however, they are clever cases of product placement rather than brand extensions in their own right.

9.5 ‘G-STAR IS A MACHINE’

What is the importance of all this? Why is it crucial to go to greater lengths to explain G-Star’s product philosophy, retail concept, and branding strategy? If we want to understand how the company manages the ex- tensions from mass-market to more sophisticated styles, from New York Fashion Week to run-of-the-mill jeans outlets, it is critical to take the interlocking of all three dimensions into account. For one thing, the brand proposition is driven and defined by a strong sense of coherence. More importantly, though, the system behind these different dimensions is organised in a rigorous and professional manner with little left to chance. Indeed, the fact that virtually every area of operation – from advertising to logistics, from shop design to online retail – is dealt with in-house, attests to the fact that the company wants to retain complete control over the value-creation chain. By all accounts, G-Star comes across as an almost hermetic structure: whatever information is available seems carefully edited, while any more detailed requests are fended off by a well-trained communications department.

While G-Star undoubtedly works according to a set of innovative ideas, this position is clearly not warrant- ed by creative chaos, informality, or a spontaneous and protean business approach as is occasionally suggested (TextilWirtschaft 2005: 48, Hintz 2006: 29). Driven by top-down dynamics rather than by a corporate culture of equal partners, the brand model is fairly tradi- tional, with an informed and well-monitored business approach that ties the individual domains together. Every area of business is taken care of, every step is coordinated by a well-oiled business apparatus. Each shop opening follows a ‘global roll-out plan’ (TextilWirtschaft 2010: 16), franchises and retailers are bound to clearly defined (and relatively high) order limits (TextilWirtschaft 2009: 33). In other words, the seemingly playful attitude around which part of G-Star’s image is built, is commensurate to the business acumen and strong commercial drive.

One consequence of this self-contained and closed-in approach is that researchers are not granted access to the company.1 If G-Star is a machine, it is a fairly closed one. Employees are not allowed to release any internal information. Requests for further information are met with polite but explicit refusal. In fact, there is a distinct lack of transparency about the company model and the way the brand communicates information to the outside world.2 This begs the question to what ex- tent the firm might have something to hide. The company made the headlines after information had leaked concerning G-Star’s involvement in a scandal around child labour and degrading working conditions at one of the firm’s main manufacturers in India in 2007. G-Star of course discontinued further collaboration with its Indian partner and tried to dispel doubts about cog- nisance (FEM Business 2008). While from a legal point of view the firm could not be taken to justice the case was never fully resolved, casting reasonable doubt on G-Star’s integrity (Van der Lught 2007).

9.6 WHO ARE G-STAR’S CONSUMERS?

Following the predominant brand narrative, the goods are not geared to one or more specific target audi- ences. Instead they claim that the main activities are focused on product development and accessibility. If we ignore the marketing puffery behind these allega- tions for a moment, the underlying idea helps us to understand how the company negotiates a set of di- verse consumption interests. To an extent, the stretch-1 Jos van Tilburg, cited in TextilWirtschaft 2007a: 31.
2 Over a period of about 6 months supervisors and researchers of the project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’ tried to stimulate research activities and encourage G-Star to collaborate in the project. To our dismay, each of these at- tempts was turned down on the grounds that the company, as a policy, does not allow external research in any kind of way.
3 A case in point. I just had a talk with someone who recently started working for G-Star. During the conversation the work- ing environment was described as a ‘bubble’ with little, if any, information going in and out. Furthermore, the talk revealed that G-Star’s corporate culture was streamlined and highly uniform.
between inhomogeneous audience groups is explained by the fact that attention is divided between product profile and brand profile and the highly commercial in scope and style and others that are directed at a comparatively small target market.

In the best possible sense there is an air of ambivalence to G-Star’s brand identity. The somewhat conserved reputation of a supplier of cutting-edge denim wear helps to sustain a philosophy that first and foremost targets a fairly average clientele. One glance at the product policy makes clear that the main collections are mid-range, both in terms of pricing and of market approach. The bigger share of revenues rolls in by the fact that attention is divided between product profile and brand profile and the highly commercial in scope and style and message. Global presence and diversification across different retail concepts (franchising, multi-brand jeans stores, haberdashers) help reinforce this position. At the other end, the firm’s upscale collections (New York Raw, Correct Line, Raw Essentials), presences at New York Fashion Week, and the forays into art and design help to pitch the profile to more distinguished and demanding types of consumers as well.

G-Star consistently builds its brand identity on a set of distinct yet unequal pillars. Some might be higher than others, but all are defined by a set of common characteristics. Head designer Pierre Morisset calls this approach ‘democratisation of luxury’ (Textilwirtschaft 2002: 96). As a good Frenchman, he might have picked up that idea from Gilles Lipovetsky’s books that describe the increasing democratisation of the fashion and luxury-goods market. The bottom line, however, is that the brand successfully supplies a mass-market clientele with interesting and edgy products at affordable prices. According to Jos van Tilburg, much of the firm’s branding strategy is about promoting a certain mentality (Textilwirtschaft 2009: 33). As he claims, it’s about a specific attitude. Dividing the market into new york fashion week, and the forays into art and design help to pitch the profile to more distinguished and demanding types of consumers as well.

The period of research produced a total of 120 questionnaires from various types of consumers. The comparatively small number had to do with a variety of factors. First, despite the fact that the research was scheduled during the summer months the weather conditions proved anything but conducive. (The simple truth being that no one is prepared to fill in a questionnaire in the driving rain.) Second, many consumers were reluctant to collaborate, which might have had to do with the fact that I was not able to function in an officially appointed position inside the shops. Third, for me as a researcher the new setting took time to get used to as well. Irritated by the fact that the results did not come as swiftly as desired, I was hard-pressed to think of better ways to approach consumers and convince them to participate in the project. In short, the research was not without its difficulties. In the end, however, it delivered a representative sample and pertinent results.

In an attempt to substantiate the results during the following months, I spent time inside the shops on the group being a consumer. The effort was guided first and foremost by the thought to get a better image of the consumers G-Star generally attracts and whether they were similar to those contained in my sample. As the visits made clear, the questionnaires were completed by largely the same types I would spot during my visits. These estimates, of course, are not quantified, but a plurality of lifestyles. As a result, G-Star’s identity appears at once kinetic and narrow, open to a wide range of interest groups and distinguished by a strong corporate style.

9.7.1 METHODOLOGY

9.7.2 ONE CONSUMER GROUP OR MORE?

In the previous sections we have seen that G-Star presents a complex and intriguing case based on the fact that product profile and brand DNA are at once flexible and rather straightforward. It is sometimes said that the brand’s strategy is to make an effortless stretch possible between different consumer groups and their consumption preferences. While this might be true to some extent, such statements are never fully unbiased and contain a certain level of marketing lore and puffery. In the context of my own research I was therefore curious to find out to what extent the assumption of a homogeneous clientele would hold true, and based on what factors consumers actually connect with the brand.

### TABLE 9.1 CODING SCHEME FOR CONSUMER RESPONSES - VALUE CONNECTION FOLLOWED BY ATTRIBUTES - GROUP 1 GROUP 2

From the period of observation and the results from the questionnaires, the age variable appears an interesting one to look into. The findings do support the claim that G-Star attracts a wide variety of consumers from all kinds of social, professional, and cultural backgrounds. For the most part they were male, which is congruent with the brand’s general customer profile (Textilwirtschaft 2005: 47, Textilwirtschaft 2003: 32). Some were teenagers, others students, others professionals, and very few even retired. That variety notwithstanding, across all four locations a relatively uniform pattern emerged when it comes to the brand’s main group consumer profile. One of the reasons, the forefront result, the forrest result, the market consists of consumers younger than 30 years (71.7%) (Group 1). Next to this, a much smaller group (28.3%) between 30 and 50 years was identified (Group 2). An interesting observation in this regard is that the few female consumers I was able to interview, with the exception of two from one group, all of the women were in their early 20s. One thing of significance is that the consumption profile – judging by consumers’ outward appearance, that is – can be assigned to the two groups in a rather clear-cut way. From my own observations and personal enquiries about the purchases of each respondent, consumers in Group 1 did mainly shop for basic items such as T-shirts, sweatshirts, or loose fit jeans. In Group 2, by contrast, the majority of consumers chose for more outgoing and fashion-oriented pieces. This observation is supported by the results of questionnaire item 10 which sought to identify consumers’ primary value connections. The item was created based on three representative mở concepts: openness, autonomy, and community. As Table 9.2 indicates, for consumers in the first group the properties tough, innovative, and denim were the most prominent associations. For consumers in Group 2 the attributes fashionable, product quality, and tough proved important. The difference in brand perception is congruent with a different requirement profile, as reflected by purchase behaviour and product preference. The younger consumers on the one hand put an emphasis on a down-to-earth and no-frills product, straightforward looks and a strong message. On the other hand, they demonstrated an interest in an edgy and forward-thinking product proposition. In short, they aspire to a clothing style that is casual and not too outerw, while at the same time, they look for something extra: an added value that distinguishes their purchases from competing brands.

In Group 2, we can identify a slightly different relationship. Here, above all consumers placed an emphasis on the fashionable qualities of the garments and stressed product quality as an important variable. Considering that the attribute touch is common to the firm’s older consumers as well, it seems reasonable to assume a connection with the firm’s products, irrespective of age or consumption pattern. Despite the fact that the brand’s older consumers put a stronger emphasis on the fashionable qualities, of the garments, of the brand, of the brand’s clothes, in the end they do look for similar aesthetic properties, i.e., an understated and grounded look.

### TABLE 9.2 PLEASE TRY TO NAME THREE CHARACTERISTICS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE CLOTHING OF G-STAR (ITEM 10) - GROUP 1 GROUP 2

While Item 10 sought to make an understanding of the product-related mental concepts consumers had developed, Item 11 was conceived as a multiple-choice question, comprising 15 pre-conceived responses.
options. In an effort to identify similarities or differences between the variables tested through Item 10 and a number of standardised brand values, consumers were asked to pick 3 out of the 15 options presented to them.

As FIG 9.1 shows, in both groups we can identify a rather even distribution across the items. In Group 1 we find peaks (i.e., more than 30%) for the attributes reliable (32.5%), stylish (32.02%), fashionable (32.34%), cool/hip (33.72%), and recognisable (38.37%). In Group 2 we can identify two peaks for the characteristics fashionable (32.35%) and recognisable (35.29%).

9.7.3 PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR AND BRAND INVOLVEMENT
In the previous section we have seen that by consumers across the two different age groups G-Star is perceived in slightly different ways. Further it has been said that different characteristics were assigned to the range of products in both groups, thus indicating different drivers in the purchase decision-making process. With these insights in mind, this section broadens the scope of analysis towards the purchase behaviour of G-Star's consumers and their involvement with the brand.

The study's most remarkable finding is the average buying behaviour of G-Star's consumers. Item 9 ("On average, how many items do you purchase per visit?" (Item 9) Group 1 / Group 2) sought to determine the average number of purchases made per visit. FIG 9.2 shows that the respondents in both groups tend to buy between 1 and 3 pieces per visit (Group 1: 72.09% / Group 2: 79.41%), and only one person in each group bought more than three pieces at a time. This result is interesting in two respects. For one thing, it makes clear that the sample contains few, if any, truly committed consumers who buy products in high quantities. For another, the fact that the vast majority of respondents frequent the stores on a less than weekly basis (11.62%) indicates to come to the shops about every week. In Group 2, by contrast, we can see that the majority of respondents frequent the stores on a less than monthly basis (60.64%) while about one third (32.35%) indicated to visit an outlet about once a month. These findings concur with a number of aspects that have been discussed above: just like the consumption behaviour is moderate but steady, the visiting frequency is not exceptionally high but permanent. Furthermore, the results reflect a more general tendency in clothing retail, i.e., younger consumers will buy a larger number of basic pieces whereas the older ones might purchase on a less frequent basis but spend more money on the individual items.

4 There is an interesting dimension to this aspect in the context of interactive online technology. Counting almost 46,000 members, G-Star's Dutch Neth account, on the one hand, is proof of the brand's popularity, but, more importantly, on the other allows insight into the fashion preferences of mainly young consumers. What we find there is that a.) most of them own quite a substantial number of items, and b.) that most of them opt for basics like T-shirts, jeans, jackets, or sweaters.
These findings are relevant in the context of brand identification and the degree to which name and image of the company have an impact on the purchase decision-making process. Item 6 (‘I like to purchase clothes from brands I can identify with’) meant to look into this dimension with respect to the question to what extent the purchase behaviour of G-Star’s consumers was influenced, not only by product-intrinsic properties (e.g. colour, style, cut, fit), but also by brand-specific attributes (e.g. brand identity, brand name, iconography). As FIG 9.4 makes clear, in Group 2 we find a split distribution between 35.29% indicating they do not make their clothing purchases dependent on brand-specific attributes and 47.05% who confirmed the statement. In Group 1, by contrast, there is a positive relationship between purchase behaviour and brand involvement. 61.62% agreed with the statement whereas only 16.27% objected to it.

9.7.4 Clothing and Fashion Involvement

Looking at the results from item 2 (‘I am among the first in my circle of friends to buy a new fashion item when it appears’), which related to the level of brand involvement to the purchase behaviour of consumers, we find an almost equal distribution in both age groups. As FIG 9.5 shows, the results suggest a slightly negative tendency in Group 1, 31.83% disagreed with the statement, while 24.11% agreed. In Group 2, 44.11% disagreed, while 29.40% agreed. The level of brand involvement is consequently not connected to trend-driven buying behaviour. In other words, while G-Star’s consumers demonstrate high levels of brand awareness and a vested interest in clothing products, they do not qualify as early adopters in their peer groups (and otherwise).

These results are strongly supported by the findings from Item 3 (‘I regularly buy fashion-related magazines’) which sought to test the level of media involvement. In literature a close connection is suggested between early adopters in fashion and the study of fashion magazines and related media (Phau and Lo 2004). Above we have seen that G-Star’s consumers qualify as followers rather than fashion innovators. Congruent with this assumption, the level of media involvement, as measured by the number of fashion magazine subscriptions, is considerably low. As FIG 9.6 makes clear, the results indicate that journalistic writings and/or coverage of fashion-related topics constitute an insignificant referential framework for G-Star’s consumers.

Surprisingly, however, part of the brand’s audience uses websites and other Internet media to stay abreast of developments in fashion. As FIG 9.7 demonstrates, in both groups we find a split distribution between one segment of the sample that appears largely uninvolved with web-related activities (Group 1: 47.67% / Group 2: 38.22%) and, at the other end of the spectrum, a number of consumers (Group 1: 38.22% / Group 2: 44.11%) who use the Internet as a means to stay up to date with recent developments in the clothing sector.

In an effort to measure the level of fashion involvement as a potential connector in the consumer-brand relationship, the concept of interaction with fashion-related magazines (item 6), as part of the latest fashion trends’) sought to explore the dimension of trend-motivated purchase behaviour. While part of the sample took a rather non-articulate stance, FIG 9.8 shows that the majority of respondents synchronise their wardrobe with current trends in fashion. By and large, then, G-Star’s Dutch clientele has a vested interest in conforming to the latest developments in fashion. Rather than adopting a trend-averse attitude the respondents showed eagerness to keep in step with the times and compose their wardrobe in an adequate way.

There is an interesting dimension to these results as we consider the way G-Star seeks to distinguish itself as a producer of clothes that are timeless and individual – and thus largely independent from global fashion trends. Rather than looking at general developments in the market the company claims to focus on producing ‘classics’ (Querfurth 2006: 15). Marketing lore aside, this ambition is questionable, to some extent. By developing a clear-cut and recognisable signature the firm has arguably carved out a market position in its own right. In a similar vein, it is not far-fetched to call an item like their ‘Elwood’ design a contemporary classic, seen that it still proves to be one of the brand’s most successful (and much-copied) products. The question is how many other products of similar quality the firm has been able to design and/or produce ever since.

Considering the brand’s sheer size and/or global expansion and product diversification, it seems rather unlikely that G-Star feeds the market with designs that are not in some way coordinated with current consumer demands and the firm’s global market orientation. We might therefore speak of timeliness in the sense that the majority of items suit the tastes of a global customer base, irrespective of national styles or a strong embrace of temporary fads. That, however, does not take away the fact that the firm in one way or another does assimilate global trends along general lines by translating them in the firm’s corporate style.5

Interesting in this context is the fact that, among the younger consumers, we find a similar distribution across the dimensions of fashion involvement and

5 A potent example of this is again the Elwood jeans. Originally designed in 1996, for its 10-year anniversary the model was offered in a baggy fit as well as with slim legs under the name ‘Elwood 10’, thus adapting the design to ruling taste.
brand involvement. As Fig. 9.9 makes clear, fashion involvement (Item 1) and brand involvement (Item 6) are distributed in an almost identical manner. In view of the fact that we can identify almost equally high levels for both variables, we can conclude that G-Star is understood by its younger consumers as a fashionable and up-to-the-minute clothing brand.

Item 5 (‘I like to buy clothes with an outspoken look’) was constructed in an attempt to measure the level of clothing involvement that is distinguished from fashion involvement in the sense that it incorporates all kinds of clothing-related properties rather than exclusively fashion-specific ones. As we can see in Fig. 9.10, G-Star’s consumers showed considerably high levels of clothing involvement. 13.9% in Group 1 and 17.64% in Group 2 disagreed with the statement. 27.90% (Group 1) and 23.52% (Group 2) were neutral. With scores of 59.29% in Group 1 and 58.80% in Group 2 the vast majority agreed with the statement. In both groups we can consequently identify a critical awareness towards clothing products and the degree to which meaning is attached to them. In this context outspokenness is probably understood in terms of recognisability rather than of a striking appearance. The combination of identifiable pared-down looks with big logo prints, as well as the firm’s somewhat loutish branding strategy adds to the recognition value of the products, which in turn has consequences for the consumer perceptions of brand and product proposition.

9.8 TYPICALLY DUTCH?

In the context of Dutch fashion and its pertinent features G-Star is a somewhat peculiar case. On the one hand, the brand does not aim to distinguish itself as a Dutch company. In fact, the primary association with the firm is that of internationality, if not neutrality. On the other hand, we saw in Chapter 5 that, from an expert point of view, hardly any fashion brand is considered more Dutch than G-Star – arguably, not so much in terms of style or brand image, but with respect to the company’s business approach. One of the main points in this regard was that G-Star offers innovative and distinct products that are international and mass-market in scope and style, brought to the market with a strong commercial drive. Marrying smart design and fresh ideas with business acumen, the combination adds to the recognition value of the products, which in this context outspokenness is probably understood in terms of recognisability rather than of a striking appearance. The combination of identifiable pared-down looks with big logo prints, as well as the firm’s somewhat loutish branding strategy adds to the recognition value of the products, which in turn has consequences for the consumer perceptions of brand and product proposition.

9.9 CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this chapter we have seen that G-Star is built around a detailed, well-edited, and heavily controlled company model. Branding and product philosophy are remarkable in the sense that they display a clear-cut and recognisable image, locally as well as globally. At the same time, it was shown that the firm’s image is by far not as innovative and experimental as is often claimed. In fact, we can assume that the majority of G-Star’s consumers are unaware of the firm’s more leffield marketing strategies such as the Raw Chess Challenge or the Crossword project discussed in section 9.4. Instead, its recognition value mainly depends on traditional approaches like large-scale billboard marketing and a well-defined visual identity.

In the ensuing analysis we have seen that both these aspects have critical relevance when it comes to the value connections of consumers and their identification with firm and product. G-Star’s Dutch consumers can be divided into two different groups. On the one hand we find a clientele younger than 30 years, on the other consumers between 30 and 50 years old. Although subject to variation, respondents from both groups make regular purchases from the brand. The younger consumers tend to choose the firm’s ‘innovative basics’, i.e., casual items with an interesting and somewhat edgy look. The older consumers demonstrate similar consumer preferences, but tend to include some of the more outspoken and fashion-oriented products in their consumption profile. With modest but steady purchasing rates, we can hardly speak of brand fans in the sense of strong emotional involvement. At the same time, G-Star’s logo prints and high profile are crucial components in the consumer-brand relation, so we can conclude that there is at least a passive sense of identification with the firm.

When we look at typically Dutch values, G-Star is a case in point as it supplies a mass-market consumer base with a product that is at once midrange and fashionable, stylish but not extravagant. On average, the company is more fashionable than many competitors in the same segment (e.g., Lee, Wrangler). At the same time, G-Star strikes a good balance between casual and more outspoken products. In that way, the firm assumes a hybrid position between street fashion and more understated styles: supplying the market with tasteful and interesting products at affordable prices, G-Star is attractive for people who wish to look up to date without making a committed and strong fashion statement, who trust to find products they like and that suit them. Nothing too fancy. But nothing drab or uninspired either. In other words: typically Dutch.
CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSION: CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT IN THE DUTCH FASHION INDUSTRY

10.1 INTRODUCTION
Throughout this research I sought to explore the relationship between a number of Dutch fashion brands and their consumer groups. Studying the aspects that define each of these relationships, the goal was to present an idea of the value connections that govern purchase behaviour and consumer loyalty, and put forth an understanding of what a Dutch fashion identity—within the confines of my frame of research—might look like. This foray is in no way meant to be conclusive—nor could it ever be. It is a first attempt to define the field; a basis for future research, perhaps; a possibility to see what distinguishes the Dutch fashion landscape from other countries, in terms of buying patterns and product preferences. With a focus on consumption behaviour, my research tried to gain insight into the relays between supply and demand.

The goal of this chapter is to synthesise the findings of the study and respond to the main questions it was meant to explore. Studying the relationship between different kinds of Dutch fashion brands and their consumer groups, the three central questions guiding my research were:

1. What are the different value systems that govern the brand-consumer relationship and is there something typically Dutch about them?
2. What level holds strongest when it comes to the purchase behaviour of Dutch consumers: individual identities, group identities, national or international sites of identification?
3. How do different audiences relate to their preferred brands? Do these ties have an impact on the buying behaviour of Dutch consumers?

Structurally speaking, in this chapter I will move from concrete to more abstracts results. I will first discuss the concept of consumer involvement introduced in CHAPTER 3. By facilitating an understanding of the different types of relationships between brands and consumers, the goal is to provide insight into the predominant value connections and to develop an understanding of the purchase behaviour of different Dutch consumer groups. After that, I will look into the notion of identity discussed in CHAPTER 2. Here, the focus is on individual and group identities with respect to the concept of style groups and national identity.

10.2 THE FOUR FACES OF DUTCH FASHION
The expert panel discussed in CHAPTER 5 produced four dimensions of Dutch fashion, each of which represented a combination of a certain style of fashion and a business approach. The panel was intended as an attempt to structure and define the local fashion landscape in its diversity and stimulate critical debate about the different factors that play a role across the spectrum. As a reminder, the four dimensions were:

1. Modernist Design with a Twist
2. Wild Design
3. Sophisticated Casual
4. Stylish Mid-Market

Modernist Design with a Twist covers the high or higher segment of the Dutch fashion industry, with a focus on brands like Orson+Bodil, Spijkers en Spijkers, Saskia van Drimmelen’s ‘Painted’ or the now-defunct Klavers van Engelen. The emphasis is on a conceptual and no-frills type of product that usually comes in limited editions and is retailed in select, exclusive boutiques. The Dutch top-end market is characterised by a high degree of creative freedom and experimentation, so the addition ‘with a twist’ refers to the fact that it is a type of product that usually incorporates unexpected, and sometimes contradictory, elements. Although Dutch high fashion does not have significant leverage in economic terms, it is an important part of the Dutch fashion industry. On the one hand, it spearheads a type of fashion that – in mitigated form, to be sure – percolates also into the Dutch high street. On the other hand, the labels in this category are largely responsible for putting the Netherlands on the international fashion map and garner interest from press and buyers abroad.

Wild Design refers to the more outgoing and rebellious strand of Dutch fashion. Taking its cues from a wide variety of sources, in this category brands like Bas Kosters, CoraKemperman, People of the Labyrinths or Oily loom large. The result is a type of product that is colourful and slightly irreverent, sometimes even frivolous and daunting. The attribute ‘wild’ consequently refers to a casual mix and match of inspirations that range from pop culture to comics and from paisley prints to Indian folklore. While the Netherlands, until now, has been primarily associated with a more restrained and conceptual approach to fashion, it is a common goal of the research project ‘Dutch Fashion in a Globalised World’ to recognise this alternative tradition as well.

Sophisticated Casual targets street-style brands like G-Star or Gsus, which are characterised by the combination of commercial and cutting-edge fashion styles as well as a marketing-savvy business approach. The word ‘sophisticated’ relates to the way these brands are positioned in the market: although firmly established on the high street they offer that extra bit of fashion cachet that distinguishes them from many competitors in the segment. With their innovative marketing strategies and a well-defined trademark style, these firms usually have a reach beyond the national borders and target a rather diverse consumer base.

Stylish Mid-Market represents the large number of Dutch womenswear brands that operate in the crevices between inspired fashion design and more stately
and business-oriented looks. Characterised by a rather broad range of clothing styles, brands like Just B., Vanilia, CoraKemperman or G-Star are geared towards fashion-consciousness or professional settings. Taking your child to school on a bike, doing groceries, going to work, and having dinner with friends at a restaurant – all that has to be manageable with just one set of clothes. As a result, Dutch fashion design is not only stylish, but it also suits the functional requirements for everyday use, versatile enough to move from social or professional settings.

None of the categories exists in isolation. In fact, to a greater or lesser extent there are overlaps and junctions, clashes of different elements, and even collaborations between, for instance, more minimalist high-end designers and high-street firms (e.g. Spijkers en Spijkers for Claudia Sträter or Antoine Peters for G-Star. In their diversity, all brands have one element in common: the bicycle factor. By this I mean that clothing in the Netherlands needs to be practical, so it can be worn throughout the day and function effortlessly in different social or professional settings. Taking your child to school on a bike, doing groceries, going to work, and having dinner with friends at a restaurant – all that has to be manageable with just one set of clothes.

As I explained in Chapter 3, we can distinguish between three different types of involvement: clothing involvement, fashion involvement, and brand involvement. Clothing involvement relates to the functionality of clothes or to a specific signature style that may or may not be fashionable. The more stylish a firm’s clothes are perceived, the closer it is to the centre line. The more functional the attitude towards firm and product, the further it will shift to the upper left in the figure. By contrast, fashion involvement corresponds to the degree to which trends and a firm’s fashion cachet have an influence on the purchase decision-making process. The more consumers wish to look fashionable, the less their purchase behaviour is motivated by functional or practical concerns. The axis of brands cuts right across these two dimensions. Brand involvement corresponds to the degree consumers make a company’s identity part of their considerations. But when purchases are purely driven by practical considerations (e.g. a private-label white T-shirt) or when a fashion aficionado buys products from an innovative but unknown designer, then we look at functionality may be of hardly any importance. While these extremes certainly exist, it is more common that either dimension is to a greater or lesser degree connected to a certain brand.

In the following sections I will deal with each of the four dimensions in order to explore the Dutch fashion landscape in its diversity, and develop and understand the value constructs that define the relationship between supply and demand. In the following section I will look in detail into this relationship, based on a synthesis of the quantitative analysis of the three most empirically cases. For each dimension, my research sought to examine the determining factors affecting consumer involvement and, if possible, identify a connection with Dutch identity or a country-specific style of fashion.

10.3 CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT

In Chapter 3, the distinction between ‘looking good’ and ‘being fashionable’ was introduced. Each of them corresponds to a different motivational scheme and involves different factors that impact on the purchase decision-making process. As a reminder, Figure 10.1 introduces the three dimensions with the three axes ‘fashion’, ‘functionality’, and ‘brands’. In turn, these dimensions have an impact on the type of involvement that consumers develop towards a clothing brand.

CoraKemperman’s and Vanilia’s audience seems to be an aspect of lesser importance. Figure 10.2 shows the summarised results of Item 2 (‘I like to dress according to the latest fashion trends’) that sought to explore the level of fashion involvement. 54.06% of G-Star’s consumers agreed with the statement, while 14.15% disagreed, and 28.33% took a neutral stand. In Vanilia’s audience, 30.63% agreed, while 33.68% disagreed, and 35.22% neither agreed nor disagreed. With 46.58% disagreeing, 26.25% agreeing, and 27.17% taking a neutral stand, for CoraKemperman’s consumers the fashion value of clothes has the least importance. Item 3 (‘I am among the first in my circle of friends to buy a new fashion item when it appears’) sought to explore fashion involvement from a different angle. In this case, the aim was to find out to what extent consumers are early adopters of new trends, and whether their purchase behaviour is motivated by upcoming fashions. As we can see in Figure 10.3, in none of the three cases the respondents indicated a pronounced interest in picking up new trends or adapt their wardrobe to the latest fashions. In G-Star’s audience, 35.00% disagreed; while 25.83% agreed, and 38.32% neither agreed nor disagreed. In Vanilia’s audience, 56.60% disagreed, while only 17.28% agreed, and 29.15% took a neutral stand. Among CoraKemperman’s consumers, 42.64% disagreed, 25.09% agreed and 31.19% were neutral towards the statement. In sum, while at least in G-Star’s audience we could identify a moderately high level of fashion involvement, the results indicate that the consumers of all three brands are not early adopters of new fashion trends.

10.3.2 CLOTHING INVOLVEMENT

In the previous section, we learned that the fashion involvement in all three audiences is not overly pronounced. While G-Star’s consumers showed at least moderate levels of involvement, for Vanilia’s and CoraKemperman’s consumers the fashion value of clothes does not appear to play a significant role. Interestingly, when we compare these findings with the results of Item 7 (‘I like to buy clothes with an outspoken look’), which tested the level of clothing involvement in relation to a well-defined product style, a different picture emerges. In Section 10.3 it was said that clothing involvement can either relate to purely functional qualities or to what Jacobs (2010: 58) calls ‘looking good’; i.e., a style of fashion that makes the wearer look good but that is not necessarily connected to fashion trends. As Figure 10.4 demonstrates, a recognisable product style is a critical driver in the purchase decision-making process of each audience. In G-Star’s audience 59.15% agreed and 14.94% disagreed, while 26.66% of Vanilia’s consumers agreed and 13.33% disagreed. In CoraKemperman’s audience we find the most pronounced distribution, with 88.10% agreeing and less than 1% disagreeing. When we add the results of Item 14 (‘Please try to name three characteristics you associate with the clothing of G-Star/Vanilia’/CoraKemperman’), which sought to facilitate an understanding of the product-related mental concepts consumers develop towards a brand, this tendency is further corroborated. Table 10.1 shows the coding scheme including the product attributes for each firm. Rather than looking at the full set of responses, I tried to focus on attributes that are connected to the firms’ product proposition and distil elements that mark their distinctive style.

Figure 10.5 shows the results, according to the product attributes indicated in Table 10.1. In the case of G-Star 72.00% of the respondents indicated product style as a product characteristic, within CoraKemperman’s audience this was 88.68%, and for Vanilia it was 64.96%. Following these results, consumers connect...
with each of the firms, based on a well-defined and individual product proposition that is distinguished in terms of appearance and a recognisable product style.

**CORAKEMPERMAN**
Unique; expressive; original; special; different; surprising; extravagant; distinct; recognisable; **VANILIA**
Neutral; classy; stylish; original; fashionable; **G-STAR**
Tough; masculine; distinctive; recognizable identity; innovative; own style; special; new; original

**TABLE 10.1 CODING SCHEME FOR CONSUMER RESPONSES**

Rather unsurprisingly, for each audience the style concept had a slightly different meaning, which is interesting with respect to the fact that each of the case studies was meant to explore a different dimension of the Dutch fashion landscape. When comparing the above observation with the results of Item 15, which was formulated as a multiple-choice question with 15 pre-conceived respectively sympathetic choices and 48.29% (48.29%) are special, this aspect becomes even more apparent. As shown in **FIG 10.6** shows, each audience associated different values with their preferred firm, which facilitates an understanding of the relation between the respective brands and the predominant product preferences within each audience group.

For consumers of CoraKemperman, an example of what I called ‘Wild Design’, product style manifests itself in terms of product uniqueness. As **FIG 10.6** shows, the primary value connections (i.e., more than 30%) are authentic (38.3%), stylish (30.50%), recognisable (46.58%), and special (48.29%). By and large, consumers aspire to a type of product with a distinct and recognisable identity, which in this case probably pertains to the trademark layered cut of the clothes, the use of bright and vibrant colours, and the versatility of the garments (e.g. tops can be worn inside out; straps can be adjusted in multiple ways etc.).

Vanilla is a case of what I named ‘Stylish Mid-Market’. As **FIG 10.6** demonstrates, consumers see Vanilla as a brand that is stylish (81.43%) and fashionable (50.65%). Interestingly, the latter of these values clashes with the rather low level of fashion involvement discussed in section 10.3.1. One possible explanation for this discrepancy might be that the brand tries to assimilate global fashion trends and customise them for the Dutch market. To a certain extent, then, the clothes probably adopt fashion qualities. As explained in **CHAPTER 7**, however, these are not the main drivers for purchase. More important for the relationship are the company’s signature patterned fabrics and a versatile and feminine silhouette, which render the products all-rounders that work well for business and leisure occasions alike.

In the case of G-Star, an example of what was called ‘Sophisticated Casual’, consumers associate innovative stylish product proposition in the firm’s signature look with the brand. As **FIG 10.6** demonstrates, the values consumers connect with the firm are reliable (30.85%), stylish (38.33%), fashionable (38.50%), cool/hip (31.66%), and recognisable (37.50%). Consumers associate a type of clothing with the brand that is up-to-the-minute and identified by a combination of basic casual-wear items (frequently with big logo prints) and more cutting-edge denim pieces. When we look at the way consumers describe the firm’s products (**TABLE 10.1**), the most common characteristics are ‘tough’ (‘stout’), ‘innovative’, and ‘denim’. Following those descriptions, style relates to the firm’s history in a more or less innovative denim designs and its rather broad selection of street-wear products. We might also say that the word ‘tough’ is a rather peculiar choice to describe clothes. The attribute presupposes something masculine and coarse, perhaps. Taking G-Star’s marketing strategy into account, which centres on its so-called ‘raw’ image (modelled on the firm’s signature use of untreated denim), we can assume that, to a certain extent, consumers have actually assimilated the firm’s marketing strategies.

For the analysis of Spikers en Spikers, a case of what I described as ‘Modernist Design with a Twist’, I was not able to collect statistical data since the firm does not have any outlets of its own. Still, it is possible to offer a description of the company’s signature style and the extent it is recognised in the Dutch fashion-market. The firm’s aesthetic is defined by a dialogue between playfulness and restraint, thereby presenting a fusion of different elements: on the one hand, we can identify the sober and pared-down style that Dutch (fashion) design is well known for, while, on the other hand, the designers integrate exotic prints and bold chrome-like hues in the selections, which to a certain extent make them akin to ‘Wild Design’. With an emphasis on the cut and graphic composition of garments, and the use of fabrics like silk or lace, their designs combine edgy looks with contemporary elegance and cutting-edge fashion with nonchalant sophistication. According to Coming Soon store manager, Chananja Baars, in her shop the main target group for Spikers en Spikers clothes are consumers who appreciate what she calls a ‘special type of fashion’. While she admits that for many Dutch consumers the clothes are too outspoken, they attract a following among women who enjoy the combination of playfulness and sharp cuts, and who can afford to buy fashion products that are out of the ordinary.

As these results make clear, the level of clothing involvement across the different consumer groups I studied is relatively high, while in the previous section we saw that the level of fashion involvement is moderate in the case of G-Star and low in the other two cases. We can conclude, therefore, that for each of these audiences a product proposition with a distinct visual identity is crucial, whereas the fashion qualities of the clothes are far less significant. What does this tell us when it comes to the difference between ‘looking good’ and ‘being fashionable’? Following the results, for the audiences I studied at least the former is far more significant than the latter. The consumers of G-Star, Vanilla, and CoraKemperman have a far more pronounced interest to look good than to look fashionable. One weakness of my study is that I was not able to do research on the consumers of Spikers en Spikers or any other brand in this segment. A true fashion brand that is not present in the high street would have been a valuable addition to my study to examine this audience more in-depth as well.

**10.3.3 BRAND INVOLVEMENT**

The question remains to what extent brand identity plays a role in the relationship between the firms I studied and their audience groups. Item 8 (‘I like to purchase clothes from brands I can identify with’) sought to explore to what extent brand identity has an effect on the relation between supply and demand. **FIG 10.7** indicates a rather mixed distribution across the different case studies and only 46.58% disagreeing with the statement, we can conclude that for G-Star’s consumers the identity of the brand is an important driver of purchases. In Vanilla’s audience, 50.72% agreed and 33.70% disagreed, while in CoraKemperman’s consumer group 42.36% agreed and 26.50% disagreed. G-Star’s consumers prize individual product proposition that is distinguished in terms of appearance and a recognisable product style. with each of the firms, based on a well-defined and individual product proposition that is distinguished in terms of appearance and a recognisable product style. with each of the firms, based on a well-defined and individual product proposition that is distinguished in terms of appearance and a recognisable product style.
Vanilla’s audience, only 32.56% come to the shops on a monthly basis, compared to 61.35% who visit the outlets less often. If we now take into account the average purchase behaviour (Item 13), FIG 10.9 demonstrates that on the whole Vanilla’s consumers buy about one item at a time (27.43%), while CoraKemperman’s consumers purchase between one (44.58%) and two items (45.75%). In FIG 10.10 we can see that 24.16% of G-Star’s consumers purchase between one and three items at a time compared to 24.16% who do not buy a single item per visit.

As the results clarify, the purchase behaviour in the case of CoraKemperman and G-Star is comparatively high, whereas in the case of Vanilla the general visiting frequency and consumption pattern are rather moderate. Notwithstanding the differences, the study demonstrates that the average number of visits is fairly regular and the number of purchases per visit respectably, so we can say that the consumers of each individual brand invest in their wardrobe on a regular basis and spend substantial amounts of money on clothing products. One of the interesting findings of my study is that, contrary to popular belief that likes to portray the Dutch as price-conscious and rather unfashionable2, the audiences I studied spend relatively large amounts of money on clothing products. It might be true that the Dutch have a rather economical attitude towards consumption in general. That, however, does not take away the fact that the average level of expenditures on fashion products is considerable in all three cases.

Another conclusion we can draw from this study is that the level of brand involvement does not necessarily have an impact on purchase behaviour or involvement with a certain product. In the previous section we saw that CoraKemperman’s audience showed the highest level of clothing involvement whereas in G-Star’s audience group it was the lowest. The most likely explanation for the asymmetry between brand and product involvement is the different branding strategy and target market of each firm. In CHAPTER 9 it was explained that G-Star’s brand and product proposition are subject to a rigorously organised and high-profile branding strategy. Many of the products are heavily branded with big logo prints, so we can assume that at least a passive identification with the brand takes place prior to the act of purchase. Furthermore, my study showed that the firm’s audience comprises many teenagers and young adolescents – after all, an age group in which peer pressure is relatively high and brand-specific consumption behaviour no exception. By comparing CoraKemperman’s consumers are highly involved with the product but not so much with the brand. While the product itself is highly recognisable, it is not branded in any specific way. In fact, in CHAPTER 6 we saw that CoraKemperman does not work with any real marketing strategy but largely relies on the product proposition and the in-store performance of staff to distinguish the firm in the market. When we look at Vanilla’s audience, the level of brand involvement is almost identical, yet the relationship is slightly different: the firm’s consumers aspire to a type of product that is fashionable but not actually brand-oriented. The discrepancy in purchase behaviour is explained by the fact that CoraKemperman’s audience is largely owned by the brand whereas Vanilla’s is not.

If we now place the different brands in the figure introduced in section 10.3, we can get an idea how each of them is distinguished in the fashion market with respect to the dimensions outlined earlier.

Going clockwise from left to right, FIG 10.11 shows that CoraKemperman is positioned to the upper left between product and brand involvement. Although not a fashionable type of product, we have seen that the firm’s clothes are marked by a characteristic signature style. In other words, while the brand persona does not play a prominent role, there is an awareness that few other companies offer a comparable type of product. Also, the clothes allow women with a slightly bigger body size to ‘look good’ in a chic and special way. G-Star is positioned right on the centre line in the spectrum of ‘brands’. With a casual and fashion-oriented product style, and a distinct trademark style, the firm capitalises on its recognisable design identity, as well as on its ability to marry street style with up-to-the-minute fashion pieces. As we have seen, consumers relate to the product but also to the firm’s strong brand identity. Spijkers en Spijkers is clearly situated in the spectrum of ‘being fashionable’. Focusing on product development rather than on marketing and branding activities, innovative and cutting-edge fashion pieces are the company’s main selling point. Correspondingly, it can be assumed that people who purchase the products are more interested in the design value of the clothes than in the firm’s brand image. With a less explicit brand identity, Vanilla is situated right on the edge between ‘looking good’ and ‘being fashionable’.

As the analysis showed, Vanilla’s consumers are primarily interested in a stylish and good-looking product proposition. Still, the firm’s collections are modelled on global fashion trends and adapted to the local market, so the fashion value of the clothes, although perhaps not that explicitly, is not unimportant. With a rather unimposing brand persona, the focus is on functional, good-looking clothes of which the visual identity is more important than the actual brand.

In section 4 we will further investigate the relationship between the individual brands and their audience groups.

10.3.4 PRACTICALITY: THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR EVERY OCCASION

One product value that does not significantly appear from the results of the questionnaires, but that was strongly emphasised during the in-depth interviews with consumers, is practicality. The term, as it is understood here, describes two different aspects. On the one hand, it refers to a type of clothing that is easy-wearing and low-maintenance, so it does not require intensive care or a great deal of attention. On the other hand, practicality refers to clothing products that are suited to a wide variety of occasions and can be worn all day long without major adjustments. As one of Vanilla’s patrons, 42-year-old Renzke Hogness, told me: ‘When you look at aspects like... a rather simple but also fashionable and stylish look, something a bit more sturdy... these [attributes] also characterise Dutch women more in general. You know, you need to be able to cycle in it. It’s that simple. The clothes need to look good and be wearable but they also need to be practical. You need to be able to bring your kids to school and cycle to work. And if [the clothes] get wet once in a while that should not be a problem either.’ (InterviewVCIII)
That demand for practicality is not exclusively connected to product-inherent aspects, but has its roots in the cultural context in which Dutch fashion is used. In the Netherlands is it possible to visit the opera in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, an act that would be considered inappropriate in many other countries. Although rather obvious, the example demonstrates that local clothing culture is rather tolerant compared to other relationships between brands and consumers, which is more institutionalised and traditional. It is not uncommon to change clothes several times a day according to different occasions and activities. Dutch culture, by contrast, is fairly liberal when it comes to corporate or festive clothing, so garments are designed and used as all-round performers, suited for work and leisure time, going shopping or dining at a restaurant.

In section 10.2 we saw that each of the brands I studied has a different product style and their own well-defined aesthetic register. G-Star’s clothes range from basic to more cutting-edge designs. Vanilia’s clothing is rather universal, while the clothing by Cora Kemperman is fairly outspoken. What all the cases have in common is that their products casually balance functionality with aesthetics. In the introduction of this chapter I hinted at the results of the expert panel in chapter 5 that produced the ‘bicycle factor’ as one of the defining features of Dutch fashion culture. Practically, we might say, is a variation on that theme and confirms the assumption that local fashion consumers put a premium on a product proposition that is simultaneously stylish and practical.

10.4 Dress and Identity at Different Levels

In the previous sections I discussed different types of involvement and analysed the question to what extent these correspond to (or conflict with) the purchase behaviour and visiting frequency of consumers. We saw that style plays a crucial connector in the relationship between brand and consumers. Every staff member has to ensure that the brand’s image is present in its specific form, is found nowhere else, makes the brand covetable and a desirable retail destination for a certain type of consumer. A contributing factor is that the firm’s retail strategy is built around low order numbers and a restricted number of outlets. By keeping the brand exclusive, not in terms of price but of availability, the product is cherished by consumers for the fact that they are able to buy ‘something special’.

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10.4.2 Individual or Group Identities?

Above I discussed the strategies of each brand to retain the loyalty of their customers. Looking at the question from a consumer point of view and trying to identify in which way or to what extent individual and group identities are connected to purchase behaviour, I was struck by the fact that throughout the research consumers claimed to make their choices based exclusively on individual preference and independent of larger groups. In a way, this outcome is not altogether surprising, because most people wish to view themselves as individuals who express their identity in a unique way. Still, it is one of fashion’s peculiarities that no one is totally free from consumer influences, whether it is the dress code at work or the dress code at any other event. It is such an obvious and potent social signifier. So, even if we deliberately choose to buy ‘out of range’ and thus take the conscious decision not to conform to a certain standard, we implicitly refer to some sort of reference point. Consequently, in essence there is no such thing as buying according to our own standards because whatever that standard looks like, it will always be subject to external influence.

One of the critical findings of this study is that some audiences are connected, not only by a common style of dress, but also by a number of aspects that are related to shared lifestyles and experience worlds. Conciously or not, the consumer groups I studied sourced their clothing use, behaviour and vision in similar contexts and similar similarity of stimuli. Collective context made it possible to examine the dynamics from an alternative perspective of view as well, i.e., with a focus on different ‘consumers types’. The concept of style groups that I introduced in chapter 3 proved a very useful tool in this context, because it allowed me to look into the connectedness in these consumers, while allowing an encompassing and inclusive way. The results show that different consumer groups can be identified by a number of common features that help to develop an
understanding for the way brand and product choices are related to purchase behaviour.

In CHAPTER 3, style groups are formed by a segment of consumers and a number of clothing brands that show a certain level of stylistic congruence. The term defines mostly imagined communities that are not actually based on real-life encounters and interaction within a group of people. Just like Benedict Anderson's concept, which I introduced in CHAPTER 2, it is an approach that looks at social structures and their cohesiveness from an alternative point of view. The concept is a theoretical tool that allows studying consumer behaviour with the aim to find out if, and to what extent, we can identify collective patterns in a firm's audience group. Belonging to a style group, then, is not actually a conscious decision or process, but a method to find out which additional aspects play a role in the relation between certain consumer types and their preferred brands. The connection between the two positions is never static but continuously redefined by supply and demand. Brands try to get as close as possible to the needs of their audience group and consumers reward the manner in which a firm seeks to distinguish itself, by identifying and loyalty. In that way, brands and audiences co-evolve: the higher the degree of identification with a firm and the stronger the congruence in the life-worlds of consumers, the more coherent and 'tight' the style group.

10.4.3 Style Groups

Corakemperman's consumer group is a relatively tight style group with a fairly consistent look. The group's visual coherence is owed to the firm's product portfolio, which is not only highly recognisable, but also encourages a 'complete look'. With higher degrees of product identification, many of the firm's committed consumers actually hardly source their wardrobe from any other brand. Following the interviews, consumers use and understand the clothes as an extension of their identity. The degree of compatibility with the specificity of the product coincides with the consumers' self-image. Section 10.3.3 showed the average visiting frequency and purchase behaviour: with an average of monthly or nearly-monthly visits and regular purchases of one or two pieces at a time, the firm capitalises on long-term relationships with consumers rather than on passers-by and casual consumers.

The study demonstrates that Corakemperman's audience has grown together with the brand over many years. On average, the firm attracts women in the age range between 35 and 60 years old, who can be described as artistic (artsy), educated, and expressive. The interviewees' individual cohesiveness and recognition of fellow consumers of the brand. Priding themselves with being part of a niche, or at least small-scale, group, the consumers have a fairly precise idea of what the audience looks like and who the 'Corakemperman consumer' is. As a result, consumers treat the firm like some kind of a label - the market factors are chosen few. They see their clothing as an expression of individuality and a means to define their persona, which materialises in the way consumers respond to, and interact with, the brand.

When we look at Vanilia's audience a different picture emerges. Here too, it is possible to identify a certain level of uniformity in terms of appearance and shared life-worlds. However, compared to Corakemperman's Vanilia. Vanilia is more of an all-round brand: while its visual identity is well pronounced, the range of products is broader in scope and more universal. With moderate levels of brand involvement and littleational commitment, it is rather a lightweight style group that is not 'owned' by the brand. By this I mean that the audience is not closely connected to only one firm (like in the case of Corakemperman, for instance), but divided between a number of firms that operate in the same segment and according to similar stylistic properties. Section 10.3.3 showed that consumers visit the firm's outlets less than once a month on average, and purchase about one item at a time. In contrast to Corakemperman's clientele, the purchase decision-making process is less driven by a desire to express a unique personality. Rather, identification and commitment with the brand are connected to an understated and versatile product proposition.

The typical Vanilia consumer can be characterised as modern and mainstream, established and interested in offerings suited to that lifestyle. When it comes to consumers' life-worlds, we can speak of awareness in terms of age or professional background. Apart from that, however, it would be more appropriate to speak of a collective agenda concerning a specific choice of product: consumers share a similar background and seek to express a certain attitude with their clothing. In other words, despite the audience's relative heterogeneity, it is unified by a common mode of expression: choosing a versatile and adaptive type of clothing, the audience looks like and who the 'Corakemperman consumer' is. As a result, consumers treat the firm like a label - the market factors are chosen few. They see their clothing as an expression of individuality and a means to define their persona, which materialises in the way consumers respond to, and interact with, the brand.

One aspect my research was not able to study sufficiently is the connection between style groups and self-concept. In CHAPTER 3, the term was introduced as a variable of purchase behaviour. Targeting the intersection between certain brands or products, and individuals and their reference group or groups, the concept is meant to illustrate the dynamics between individual and collective structures and the role consumer goods play in moderating that relationship. To my dismay, ultimately the framework of my study did not allow me to make conclusive inferences about the nature of this relationship. The questionnaire-based interviews provided little explanation in that regard and also the in-depth interviews with consumers did not produce the necessary data to study this aspect more thoroughly. I hope that this dissertation will stimulate future research on the topic and address the question to what extent self-concept can produce interesting insights in the context of buying behaviour in the fashion industry.

10.4.4 Dutch or International?

From the level of group identification we are finally moving to the question to what extent national or international identities and how to get a grip on that question? While my research did not find a definitive answer to these questions, I was able to identify a number of characteristics pertinent to local dress culture and the way that the local fashion landscape is defined. To start with, we can certainly speak of something like a Dutch national style of dress in the sense that the way the Dutch like to dress differs from the way people in other countries like to dress. An journalist Sanne Kramer (cited in De Vogelvrijie Fietser 2012: 36; my translation) states, ‘We are women who brave the elements on our bicycles. Fortunately, many people from abroad believe
that the beauty of Dutch women shows best on a bike. Still, light skirts you need to pull up across your derrière, woolen dresses to imitate the one on a woman’s saddle (...) And rain does not go well together with high heels or panties and skirts made from deli- cate fabric.’

While Kramer’s description is pointed and oversimpli- fied, the fact remains that the Dutch cannot actually lay claim to elegance or nonchalant chic. The Netherlands is often considered a ‘jeans country’ (Feitsma 2012a) with a predilection for denim products and generally a more casual and informal style. Applied to the local fashion culture that means that clothes are usually a bit more study and made from hardwearing fabrics: they need to be practical, comfortable, and preferably require little maintenance. As I pointed out earlier, that does not necessarily mean that the Dutch are unsty- lish or staid when it comes to their clothing choices. Rather, the general template is more casual and less focused on details. A simple cotton dress is preferred to one made of silk, simply because the former can be worn effortlessly while the latter requires intensive care and does not present itself as the first choice for a variety of activities. For the same reason, in the men’s market a suit made from simple wool fares better than one made from Super 250s pure wool (i.e., the highest grade of cloth used for men’s suits). The former is good value for money, low-maintenance, and crease-resistant, whereas the latter is pricey, delicate, and requires special care to keep in a good state. The Dutch like their fashion products to be simple but expressive, neither extravagant and overstated nor drab and mean- ingless. Adaptable and stylish, they go for the middle ground, a compromise that marries style with practic- ality.

10.5 CONCLUSION

We saw that across the different case studies a different picture emerged with respect to the question how the relationship between supply and demand is defined, and what aspects of the brand or product proposition drive purchase behaviour. My study is special in that regard, because it is not limited to a specific detail of the local fashion landscape, but focuses on the bigger picture instead, in order to stimulate and enrich current debate and future research activities. The cases I studied are based on the ‘Four faces of Dutch fashion’ discussed in CHAPTER 5. Until now, the discussion was mainly concentrated on certain historic moments whereas no attempt has been made to define the field as a whole. I do not claim that in that regard my foray is final or exhaustive. Rather, it is a first attempt to develop an understanding for the field of Dutch fashion in its di- versity, and provide a perspective on certain currents that are noteworthy in the discussion about the Dutch fashion identity. It is arguably possible that the categories produced by the expert panel do not exclusively apply to the Dutch context. Pundits might argue that the life- categories could be found in many other fashion industries in the West. As this point has yet to be proven, my argument is that it is the combination of these ele- ments – rather than its individual components – that makes it unique. In other words, it is the mix that is typically Dutch.

Synthesising the findings, we saw that many of the values consumers connect to their preferred fashion brands coincide with the four dimensions of Dutch fashion. G-Star’s consumers relate to the brand based on the firm’s ‘raw’ signature style and a product proposition that is down to earth yet a smattering more innovative and distinctive. The former category is that of a suit made from simple wool fares better than the latter made from silk, simply because the former can be worn effortlessly while the latter requires intensive care and does not actually present itself as the first choice for a variety of activities. For the same reason, in the men’s market a suit made from simple wool fares better than one made from Super 250s pure wool (i.e., the highest grade of cloth used for men’s suits). The former is good value for money, low-maintenance, and crease-resistant, whereas the latter is pricey, delicate, and requires special care to keep in a good state. The Dutch like their fashion products to be simple but expressive, neither extravagant and overstated nor drab and meaningless. Adaptable and stylish, they go for the middle ground, a compromise that marries style with practic- ality.

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versity, and provide a perspective on certain currents that are noteworthy in the discussion about the Dutch fashion identity. It is arguably possible that the categories produced by the expert panel do not exclusively apply to the Dutch context. Pundits might argue that all the firms under scrutiny are relatively accessible and boast a product proposition that is slightly differ- ent from what is generally offered on the high street. At the same time, none of them takes this ambition to an extreme. Nothing is overly fashionable or minimal, over the top or demure. In fact, all the brands in this study seek to achieve a balance between certain values: merging fashion cachet with comfort, colour and pattern with basics and plains, elegant fabrics with easy-maintenance materials. Typically Dutch is, perhaps, a compromise between seemingly opposite poles; a sense of individualism that surfaces in details; an innova- tive and progressive spirit that is kept in balance with humour and a grain of salt. Or, to turn the old Dutch adage on its head: ‘Doe maar een beetje gek, dan ben je gewoon genoeg’.
1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS
In its most basic form, my research started with the question how Dutch fashion brands and their consumer groups relate to each other, from the premise that consumption is no longer a one-way road but an interactive relay where brands and consumers co-evolve. To what extent do brands try to get insight into the preferences of their individual and collective consumer groups, and to what extent are the preferences of their clientèle and consumers not merely viewed as passive recipients of what the market puts on offer (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2006). Instead, they have become active agents who can collectively exert influence, or even pressure, on their preferred brands (Brown 2001). With the advent of the Internet and web 2.0 technology, firms have been given the chance to interact and foster ties with their clientele as well as to benefit from a more accessible ‘data base’ of consumption profiles. At the same time, digital technology prompted a development towards a more active stance of consumers.

The purpose of my research was to examine the aspects that motivate the purchase behaviour of Dutch fashion consumers and analyse the value connections they share with their preferred brands. In order to develop an understanding of these different components, the three central questions of my research were the following:
1. What are the different value systems that govern the brand-consumer relationship and is there something typically Dutch about them?
2. What level holds strongest when it comes to the purchase behaviour of Dutch consumers: individual identities, group identities, national or international sites of identification?
3. How do different audiences relate to their preferred brands? Do those ties have an impact on the buying behaviour of Dutch consumers?

2. THE TROUBLED QUEST FOR IDENTITY
Being part of a larger NWO-approved, interdisciplinary research project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’, the first issue that needed to be addressed was that of identity. This concept is multifarious and not without its problems, with definitions changing according to context: national identity is a completely different concept when it comes to the dual nature of fashion; we may present our own interpretation of ‘formal’, ‘casual’, ‘sporty’ looks, but these cannot be merely viewed as passive recipients of what the market puts on offer. Instead, they have become active agents who can collectively exert influence, or even pressure, on their preferred brands. With the advent of the Internet and web 2.0 technology, firms have been given the chance to interact and foster ties with their clientele as well as to benefit from a more accessible ‘database’ of consumption profiles. At the same time, digital technology prompted a development towards a more active stance of consumers.

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In the framework of my research personal identity is viewed as a combination of two mutually dependent concepts: that of an individual way to express oneself and a response to our social or cultural environment (Raab 2009). On the one hand, we try to create a ‘unique’ personal identity that distinguishes us from others. On the other hand, we are part of specific contexts (e.g. professional environment, cultural traditions, political situation) that require certain types of consumer and related dress. Many authors have claimed that we have progressed from uniform social identities towards plural or ‘fluid’ identities (Bauman 2000; Huysssen 1986, 1988; Jameson 1998; MacGuigan 1999, Muggleton 2000; Sarup 1996; Wilson 1990). While I acknowledge that the concept can be viewed in such terms, I am more inclined to define identity as a relatively stable construct that is somewhat altered according to the context. It might be true that the quest for identity has become subject to a more diverse set of influences. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to conclude that our social identities are totally fragmented. While for certain people identity might indeed be some kind of performance, most of us adapt our social persona in a more unconscious way according to different circumstances.

Dress can be a potent means to express our identity and to give shape to our diverse social roles. Due to its kinetic and malleable character, dress equips us with a ‘tool kit’ from which we can choose components to underline different facets of our identity according to the situation (Evans 2003). As a result, fashion may function as a medium that transmits social messages or an image of ourselves. An office job asks for a different type of clothing than a football match, and we must conform to dress codes without thinking. In other words, clothing can help reinforce the images we create of ourselves, and hence the way we express our identity. As the examples show, the mental images connected to certain looks are not purely individual, but also produced by social context. In that way, fashion is a conscious and unconscious matter that is linked to the dual nature of identity: we may present our own interpretation of ‘formal’, ‘casual’, or ‘sporty’ looks, but these can only be individual in relation to a certain cultural framework (Simmel 1904).

Brand identities play their part in this game as well. Certain firms are associated with specific lifestyles or social identities. Whether the firm likes it or not, Lonsdale is reputed as a popular choice in rightwing skinhead culture while Fred Perry is associated with gay culture in certain countries (Mossinkoff 2012). Prada is positioned as ‘an intelligent and discerning alternative to... competing businesses’ (Moore and Doyle 2010: 920) while firms like Polo Ralph Lauren or Tommy Hilfiger are known for their take on American ‘preppy chic’. Brand identity, then, is mostly connected to a specific social expression and a corresponding consumer approach. Having said that, brand identities are not static constructs, but constantly in flux as they are part of continuous social conversations and need to be adapted to changing consumer tastes. In order to stay abreast of changes in the market, brand identities ideally co-evolve with the main target audience.

Benedict Anderson’s (1983) concept of ‘imagined communities’ has been introduced to present an alternative to social identification. In fact, it is not uncommon that we build part of our identity based on one or more real or rather imagined communities. In a consumption context, it might be the case that certain consumers see themselves as part of a brand community, while in actuality there is no community at all, and membership with the group is only imaginary (Mossinkoff 2012). This idea is crucial to understanding how, in a fashion context, consumers (can) identify with a firm or its public image, based on an imagined sense of belonging. It is not necessary to be actually part of the group as long as consumers identify with a spirit or sentiment embodied by the brand. In many cases consumers ‘buy into’ a consumption experience, and hence into belonging to a specific lifestyle group.

So far I have mapped out how dress can be defined as a carrier of personal and group identity, how this notion ties in with brand identity, and how personal identity can be connected to both real and imagined communities. How do these considerations relate to the idea of a national fashion identity? We all dress a certain kind of way and in most cases we do so intuitively and according to occasion. Still, there is a reason for the prevalent styles in different countries. Although stereotypical and somewhat simplified, Italians are famous for their elegant swagger, while the French are known for their effortless sophistication. If we believe a recent survey conducted among frequent travellers, and counting 12,000 respondents, the Dutch are the second least stylish nation in the world (Sky scanner, 15 September 2012). Whether or not that is true is a different discussion. The fact remains that different countries have different traditions and lifestyles, and in subtle ways these feature into the way inhabitants dress. Giselinde Kuipers (2012:4) refers to Norbert Elias’ concept of ‘national habitus’ and defines it as ‘learned practices and standards that have become so much part of ourselves that they feel self-evident and natural’. Part of my research explores the relation between these learned practices and standards and the way Dutch people dress.

Ellemers et al. (1999: 372-373) distinguish between three different levels of identification: cognitive,
Dutch IDentIty In FashIon

tribal or neo-tribal theory (maffesoli 1996), the concept of these are virtual consumption collectives whose mem-
tion context, I developed the concept of ‘style groups’. Even when consumers are part of more comprehensive social contexts, in the end consumption and presenta-
tion of the self are of course individual acts. Govern-
ning the connection between the symbolic value of con-
sumer goods and individual and collective values, one critical concept therefore is style (Dulwich 1969; Grubb and Grahtholm 1967; Phau and Lo 2004; Sirig 1982). Consumer goods can take on the function of intermediaries that moderate between different levels of identity, and that can reinforce or weaken belonging to, and acceptance by, certain reference groups. In the con-
text of the four faces of Dutch fashion.

Clothing often reaches beyond covering the body, signi-
fying individual and collective identities. Those signify-
ing practices are anything but unidirectional: the mean-
ings attached to certain clothing brands and products are actively produced, shaped, and altered between groups and individual agents, so they are neither stable nor universally defined. In some cases, the values con-
ected to certain brands might be similar regardless of the cultural context. More often than not, however, they differ – sometimes between countries and sometimes even between individual groups within these cultures.

In order to facilitate an understanding of the inter-
play between individuals and groups in a consump-
tion context, I developed the concept of ‘style groups’. These are virtual consumption collective whose mem-
bers share similar values and life concepts related to stylistic preferences and consumption interests. Asso-
ciation with a style group might be conscious or uncon-
scious, depending on the level of involvement with a particular brand or product category. A variation on tribal or neo-tribal theory (Maffesoli 1996), the concept is a theoretical tool to cluster consumer groups ac-
cording to styles and segments. By way of example, a consumer who is partial to elegant lounge suits and a classic menswear is unlikely to buy clothes from a cheapskate wholesale shop. In fact, most probably he would not even dare to enter.

With a focus on the values that govern the dynam-
ics between supply and demand in the Dutch fashion industry, it is crucial to understand how the processes of identification and purchase behaviour are connected. Even when consumers are part of more comprehensive social contexts, in the end consumption and presenta-
tion of the self are of course individual acts. Govern-
ning the connection between the symbolic value of con-
sumer goods and individual and collective values, one critical concept therefore is style (Dulwich 1969; Grubb and Grahtholm 1967; Phau and Lo 2004; Sirig 1982). Consumer goods can take on the function of intermediaries that moderate between different levels of identity, and that can reinforce or weaken belonging to, and acceptance by, certain reference groups. Inti-
mately connected to that is the concept of consumer involvement. Although there are different types of in-
volvement, for my study only ‘enduring involvement’ (Rothschild 1975) is important, which is defined as sus-
tained interest in a product or product category over time. Consumer involvement is a multi-dimensional concept which might refer to brands or products as well as to different purchase motivations. Regarding dress Jacobs (2010) makes a distinction between two basic motivations: ‘looking good’ versus ‘being fashion-
able’ (Figure 1). If consumers are more concerned with the desire to look good they might be very much in-
volved with clothing in general, but not with fashion. By contrast, consumers who put a premium on fash-
ionable looks will traditionally be more involved with the fashion value of their clothes than with good looks. Fastening to these two dimensions, we can make a distinc-
tion between clothing involvement and fashion in-
volvement. Researching consumption preferences un-
its brand loyalty in the Dutch fashion market and in-
volved in the involvement construct helps to measure these different motivations and develop an understanding of the ma-
terial and immaterial values consumers connect with a brand.

Also important for my study is how brands actually re-
late to their consumers, and what kind of relationship they enter. My study incorporates the concept of co-
creation to explore the level and quality of engagement between supply and demand. Co-creation describes a marketing approach that integrates the knowledge and experiences of consumers into the brand’s value proposition and, in the Dutch fashion market, contributes to consumers’ satisfaction. Conversely, this approach allows consumers to engage with their preferred brands, in certain cases to an extent where they can actually have an impact on supply and as a consequence economic performance.

4. METHODOLOGY

In section 2 and 3 I introduced the terms co-creation and co-evolution as focal points of my study. While in consumer studies these concepts have a longstanding history, fashion studies have treated them like some kind of taboo. Especially creative fashion designers like to present themselves as original artists who set the trends rather than following them. My research aims to explore how the interaction between fashion firms and their audience is really shaped and in this way con-
tributes to an understanding of the dynamic processes that govern the relation between both parts. Aiming to analyse in what way, and to what extent, the attitudes of consumers intersect with the strategic positioning of firms, my research targets the interactive component of fashion consumption. I try to identify crucial drivers in the relationship. Moreover, I try to identify possible criteria in this relationship that are typical for the Dutch situation. Throughout my study, I opted for an explorative treatment as the subject is largely un-
researched. A case-study-based approach was consid-
ered the most appropriate form of analysis as it has enabled me to study the Dutch fashion landscape in its diversity and approach my subject from different an-
gles, and collect rich data from a variety of sources.

A well-conceived case study design is a key condi-
tion of external validity. If the cases are carefully selected and representative they might allow for inferences even beyond the actual case of study (Yin 1994; Flyv-
jer 2006). In an attempt to arrive at a representative sample and to get an idea of what the Dutch fashion industry looks like, my supervisor, Prof. Dany Jacobs, and I organised an expert panel before the actual selec-
tion of cases. To present an idea of the procedure, we jointly approached a longlist of ten fashion firms in Dutch fashion via e-mail, with the request to make a list of ten fashion firms that, in their view, best reflected the Dutch fashion landscape. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to provide an explanation for their choices, which opened the scope of analysis also towards the underlying values and connotations that correspond to what is generally considered as ‘be-
ing Dutch’. After pooling all opinions, I first distilled different brand categories from the full set of responses and made a list of attributes that characterise the local fashion in-
dustry. In the second step, I tried to arrive at a more encompassing view by shifting the focus towards emerging patterns. In doing so, my aim was to pin-
point aspects that surfaced regularly during the discus-
sion and that might represent a possible classification of the local fashion landscape according to prevalent themes, rather than brand categories. To achieve that goal, the full range of responses was coded according to recurrent values such as ‘minimalist’, ‘conceptual’, ‘denim’, ‘commercial’, ‘colourful’, or ‘innovative’. These keywords, in turn, functioned as indices for overarching themes of Dutch fashion. By clustering the findings into different categories, a set of common features was created for each category in order to show points of connection in the overall response pattern. From the analysis, four categories emerged that are indicative of different, in some cases overlapping, characteristics of Dutch fashion. Figure 2 presents the findings.

The defining features of Modernist Design with a Twist are a conceptual approach to the design process, the influence and inﬂection of modernist principles.}

FIG 1 CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS CLOTHING (JACOBS 2010: 587)

FIG 2 THE FOUR FACES OF DUTCH FASHION

FUNCTIONALITY BRANDS LOOKING GOOD BEING FASHIONABLE
appearence, the products are designed to appeal to a universal demands across different national fashion However, the nature of this category is not the use of denim. Treated or untreated, smart or casual, the Dutch fashion industry is recognised for its innovative approach to jeans clothing and unexpected variations of popular themes (Feitsma 2012a). Stylish Mid-Market is part of the Dutch women's wear industry. In this context and identity of a certain clientele. According to different consumption profiles has shown to be quite useful to map the dynamics between supply and demand as this does not exclusively focus on consumers' purchase behaviour but also incorporates the context and identity of a certain clientele. My results demonstrate that across the different cases a different picture emerged with respect to the question how brands and consumers interact and co-evolve. As an example of a rather opportunistic and brand intensive research, the connection between brand and consumers is defined in quite a different way. My analysis showed that the relationship primarily hinges on elements like functionality and styliness, product quality as well as the firm's clientele searches for a type of product that allows them to dress in a chic and trendy, albeit inconspicuous, way. The values mentioned above thus reflect a more general template when it comes to product preference: first and foremost, clothes need to be versatile. With regard to the above mentioned frills and suited for leisure and business activities alike. Maintaining a rather diverse consumption attitude and sourcing their clothing from a number of suppliers with a similar product range, Vanilia's is a rather 'light' style group that is not 'owned' by the brand. Due to the fact that the purchase act for many consumers satisfies fundamental motives and at the same time other motives, the level of product and brand involvement is moderate. Unlike CoraKemperman's clientele, Vanilia's is not heavily involved with the brand and searches for functional products that are at once representative and versatile, stylish and understated.

5. CASE STUDIES AND FINDINGS

For each of the brands I studied, a different pattern emerged with respect to the question how the relationship between supply and demand is defined. Co-evolving with its patrons over a longer period of time, my study showed that the relationship between CoraKemperman and its clientele is defined by a mix of exclusivity and product uniqueness. Without marketing on the Internet and not even a mail order service, the brand relies exclusively on sales through its shops. By holding down the supply inside the shops (i.e., the available number of items per size and colour) a 'first come, first serve' mentality amongst consumers is created, which increases the products' covetousness. Furthermore, on the shop floor the company works with a personalised and well-orchestrated sales approach that generates an atmosphere of belonging and individuality for consumers. Both the supply and demand element of the outcome might be owed to the company's sheer presence in the market with big logos on the clothes rather than to a vested emotional commitment. As a result, G-Star's style group is relatively light, with a broad interest in products from competing brands in the same segment.

The research on Spijkers en Spijkers was carried out according to different methodological premises. Not being able to collect qualitative and quantitative data, my study relied on field work from a four-day trip to Iasi (Romania) that I took together with Truus and Riet Spijkers and others, with the two designers, as well as with shop owners, and an extensive literature study to complement my findings. My research demonstrates that the designers have adapted their product and retail strategy in a rather implicit manner throughout the years, taking into account changes in the market and looking for opportunities to collaborate with other high street brands. By entering into collaborations with popular mid- or even low-market firms (e.g. Claudia Sträter, Speessavers, Bavaria) and by creating the commercially successful diffusion line SIS, they have popularised their name and image among a wider public. While on the face of it many of the steps the firm has taken may seem remotely consumer-centric, my study makes clear that, in different ways, each of them has contributed to bringing the product closer to consumers and integrating their needs more into the brand proposition. Although my study did not allow for an exhaustive definition of the brand's style group, it is still possible to present some conclusions. For instance, according to the interview with the manager of Arrhem's Coming Soon store, there is a core group of people who regularly shop for the brand's clothes and who develop a certain enthusiasm for the brand's clothes. With a sometimes rather outspoken clothing style, the brand attracts a following among women who enjoy the combination of playfulness and sharp cuts and who are able to buy fashion products that are out of the ordinary.

6. CONCLUSION

My research explored the question how the relationship between supply and demand is defined in the Dutch fashion industry, and based on what value connections they possibly develop a closer connection. The choice of case studies is based on the ‘Four faces of Dutch fashion’ described in Section 4. My study is special in that regard, because it is not limited to a specific detail of the local fashion landscape, but focuses on the bigger picture instead, in order to stimulate critical debate and future research activities. My analysis demonstrates that the different categories are appropriate to illustrate, or at least approximate, what the local fashion landscape looks like, and what different aspects the purchase behaviour of Dutch consumers is influenced by. Furthermore, my research provides an alternative understanding of the life- and experience-worlds that have an impact on purchase behaviour. Analysing and clustering consumer groups into ‘style groups’ according to different consumption profiles has shown to be quite useful to map the dynamics between supply and demand as this does not exclusively focus on consumers’ purchase behaviour but also incorporates the context and identity of a certain clientele.

My results demonstrate that across the different cases a different picture emerged with respect to the question how brands and consumers interact and co-evolve. As an example of a rather opportunistic and brand intensive research, the connection between brand and consumers is defined in quite a different

1 Spijkers en Spijkers does not have a shop of their own. As a consequence it was not possible to investigate a recognisable consumer group in a similar way.
uniqueness as well as a personalised and well-orchestrated sales approach inside the shops. In the case of Vanilia, the ties consumers develop with the brand are looser and less focused on only one company. Sourcing their wardrobe from a larger number of firms with a similar range of products, Vanilia’s clientele is not heavily involved with the brand and searches for products that are at once representative and versatile, stylish and understated. With a product proposition that is slightly more refined than the offerings of its competitors, G-Star attracts a rather diverse consumer group with a penchant for a fashionable and unobtrusive type of streetwear. Based on a passive sense of identification that is connected to the firm’s larger-than-life presence in the local fashion market and its highly recognisable imago, the level of involvement is relatively high. More than with the other brands, fashion involvement is probably highest in the case of Spijkers en Spijkers.

In the analysis it was shown that, with the possible exception of Spijkers en Spijkers, none of the audiences I studied showed prominent levels of fashion involvement. We can conclude, therefore, that a distinct signature style takes precedence over the fashion value of clothes. Following the motivations ‘looking good’ and ‘being fashionable’, it appears that Dutch consumers of the brands I studied have a prominent interest to look good, while fashionable looks are of lesser importance for them. For each individual case, the value connections governing the relationship between brands and consumers are based on a different set of attributes.

FIG 3 maps the different brands I studied along the axes of ‘looking good’ and ‘being fashionable’ in relation to brand involvement.

Throughout my study, I tried to identify characteristics that can be considered typically Dutch. While the consumer research did not allow for conclusive inferences, the study as a whole produced a number of interesting insights in that regard. My results suggest that neither consumers nor brands are actually concerned with the question of a Dutch ‘style of dress’. The purchase decisions of consumers do not depend on where their clothes come from or have been designed – in fact, more often than not they are unaware of the national origins of their purchases. Local fashion brands, for their part, do not devise a ‘Dutch product’ either. Rather, beside the relationship they have with their clientele discussed before, they implicitly account for the local style by responding to possible preferences that result from a more informal cultural climate on the one hand or a taller and slightly sturdier body type on the other hand. My research shows that more can be said about Dutch style than is commonly assumed. At the same time, it became clear that there is no national fashion identity as such. Rather, brands devise products that, to a certain extent, respond to certain cultural conditions, while consumers are attracted to these products because they reflect their needs or suit their lifestyle. Following the four levels of identification discussed in section 2, my results suggest that identification does not reach beyond the cognitive level.

Typical for the Dutch fashion landscape, then, is a clothing style that resonates with a rather liberal and tolerant cultural spirit as well as with a hands-on attitude. The four faces of Dutch fashion are a possibility to define, and study, the local fashion economy. Chances are that in other countries a similar picture might emerge. While that point still needs confirmation, my argument is that it is the combination of individual elements that makes it typically Dutch. The ‘bicycle factor’, for instance, is presumably something that is more pertinent to the Dutch context than to others. Dutch fashion is in many instances a compromise between seemingly contradictory concepts: stylish and casual, understated and dashing, luxurious and basic, colourful and black and white. All these ideas clash and complement each other and culminate in an easygoing style with an edge. In most cases, there is a subtle twist to a garment, an unexpected element that strikes a balance between individualism and tongue-in-cheek humour: a straightforward and no-frills style that does not take itself too seriously. To turn the old Dutch adage on its head: ‘Doe maar een beetje gek, dan ben je gewoon genoeg’.

Dutch Identity in Fashion: Co-evolution Between Brands and Consumers

FIG 3 PURCHASE MOTIVATIONS AND TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE CASE STUDIES

• Co-evolution between brands and Consumers

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1. Onderzoeksvragen

Consumptie is minder dan ooit eenrichtingsverkeer. Zeker waar het kleding betreft heeft ‘consumptie’ alles te maken met de identiteit en het zelfbeeld van de mensen die de kleren dragen. Ook merken hebben een identiteit. Mijn onderzoek richtte zich op de verhouding tussen de identiteiten van Nederlandse consumenten op verschillende niveaus (individueel, als onderdeel van verschillende groepen en mogelijk ook als Nederlander) en die merkidentiteiten, waarbij ik ook naging in welke mate die identiteiten co-evolueren. In hoeverre proberen merken daarbij inzicht te krijgen in de voorkeuren van hun klanten? Consumenten kunnen immers niet meer alleen worden gezien als passieve ontvangers van wat de markt aanbiedt (Wohlfeil en Whelan 2006). In plaats daarvan zijn ze actief handelende personen die mogelijk invloed uitoefenen op hun favoriete merken (Brown 2007). Met de komst van internet en Web 2.0-technologie hebben bedrijven de kans gekregen om op hun klanten te reageren en de banden te versterken en tevens te profiteren van een meer toegankelijke ‘database’ van consumptieprofielen. Tegelijkertijd stimuleerde deze digitale technologie de ontwikkeling van een actievere houding bij consumenten. Consumenten discussiëren niet alleen meer face to face, maar ook met grotere groepen via de sociale media.

Met dit onderzoek wilde ik de motieven in kaart brengen die een rol spelen bij het aankoopgedrag van de Nederlandse modeconsumenten en de waardeverbindingen die ze delen met hun favoriete merken analyseren. Zodoende stonden de volgende drie vragen centraal in mijn onderzoek:
1. Wat zijn de verschillende waardesystemen die de relatie tussen merken en consumenten beheersen en is daar iets typisch Nederlands aan?
2. Welk niveau is het meest van belang als het gaat om het aankoopgedrag van Nederlandse consumenten: de individuele identiteit, groepsidentiteiten dan wel nationale of internationale identificatiemodellen?
3. Hoe verhouden verschillende klantengroepen zich tot hun favoriete merken? Hebben die banden invloed op het aankoopgedrag van Nederlandse consumenten?

2. De ingewikkelde zoektocht naar identiteit

Omdat dit onderzoek deel uitmaakt van een groter, door de NWO goedgekeurd, interdisciplinair onderzoeksproject ‘Nederlandse mode-identiteit in een geglobaliseerde wereld’, was identiteit het eerste thema dat moest worden aangepakt. Dit concept is veelomvattend en niet zonder problemen, met definities die een andere inhoud hebben al naargelang de context:
bij nationale identiteit stellen we ons iets geheel anders voor dan bij persoonlijke of collectieve identiteiten. Te- gelijkertijd is ons aanzienlijk verder verwijderd van elkaar. We beperken ons taal en kledingmerken uit meer dan een cultureel gebied, waardoor het moeilijk is om scherpe grenzen te trekken. In mijn onderzoek heeft identiteitsbetrekking op de volgende aspecten:

a. Individuele en collectieve identiteiten en de vraag in hoeverre deze twee met elkaar verbonden zijn in de context van de mode/merkteken. Hierbij kunnen we de vereniging van een merk- en een consumentenidentiteit zien als het karakteristieke element van de modecontext. We observeren dat consumenten hun aankoopgedrag kan worden bepaald door merken en producten, waarbij de aankoopdecisie wordt genomen op basis van persoonlijke identiteit en de context waarin de aankoop plaatsvindt. Ook erkennen we dat de consumenten identiteiten hebben die de mode/merkteken in de modecontext kunnen worden gedefinieerd als ‘ingebeelde gemeenschappen’.

b. De vraag in welke mate identiteit en identificatie meer verbonden zijn met ‘ingebeelde gemeenschappen’ dan met reeel bestaande (Anderson 1983).


d. De Nationale cultuur en de elementen van nationale identiteit die de modevoorkeren van Nederlandse consumenten mee bepalen.

In het kader van mijn onderzoek wordt persoonlijke identiteit gezien als een combinatie van twee jaar elk afhankelijke componenten: een individuele manier om onszelf uit te drukken en een reactie op onze sociaal-culturele omgeving (Raab 2009). Enerzijds proberen we een ‘unieke’ persoonlijke identiteit te creëren die ons van anderen onderscheidt. Anderzijds maken we deel uit van een specifieke context (professionele om- standingen, culturele situatie), die een bepaalde gedrag en bijpassende kleding vereist. Veel dan een voetbalwedstrijd, en meestal voldoen we aan de verplichting deelnemers te zijn om deel uit te maken van een ‘gemeenschap’ dan met reëel bestaande (Anderson 1983). Ook erkennen we dat de mode/merkteken in de modecontext kunnen worden gedefinieerd als ‘ingebeelde gemeenschappen’.

c. Merkidentiteit en de invloed daarvan op het aankoop- en consumenten gedrag.

de. De Nationale cultuur en de elementen van nationale identiteit die de modevoorkeren van Nederlandse consumenten mee bepalen.

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vinden dan of ze er goed uitzien. Op basis van deze twee dimensies kunnen we onderscheid maken tus-
sen kledingbedrijven en modebedrijven. Bij het onderzoek naar de consumptieveoorkeuren en mer-
kentrouw in de Nederlandse mode-industrie, helpt de betrokkenheid-constructie om verschillende motivaties te en begrijpen hoe de wisselwerking tussen modebedrijven en hun publiek netel vorm krijgt en op deze wijze bij te dragen aan een goed begrip van deze onderlinge dyna-
miek. Door te onderzoeken op welke wijze en in welke mate houdingen van consumentengroepen de strate-
gische positie van bedrijven doorkruisen, neem ik de interactieve component van modeconsumptie in het vizier. Daarbij tracht ik de cruciale aangeslagen van deze relatie te identificeren. Bodiedenburg en al zijn criteria in deze relatie zijn die typisch zijn voor het Ne-
derlandse situatie. Verkennend onderzoek was daarbij het meest aangewezen, aangezien dit thema voor het grootste deel nog niet onderzocht was. Een benading ge-
baseerd op casestudies was daarom het meest ge-
schikt, omdat deze me in staat stelde om het Neder-
lanske modebedrijven een kijkje te geven en vanuit verschillende invalshoeken en een veelvuld aan bron-
en te benaderen.

Casestudies goed opzetten is een belangrijke voorwaarde voor validiteit. Indien de cases zorgvuldig worden geselecteerd en representatief zijn, kunnen ze leiden tot meer generaliserende conclusies die het eigenlijke onderwerp van de analyse te buiten gaan (Yin 1994, Flyvbjerg 2006). In een poging om tot een representatieve steekproef te komen en een idee krij-
gen van hoe de Nederlandse mode-industrie eruit ziet, organiseerde mijn begeleider, prof. dr. Dany Jacobs, een panel van deskundigen met een grote ervaring in de Nederlandse mode-industrie. Ik deed dat met de bedoeling om een van de beginnende merken en trends in dit veld te erkennen. Deze merken werden als originele kunstenaars die trends maken in plaats van slechts een stuk kleding te verkopen. Als het over marketing gaat betekent kwaliteit van die verhouding tussen vraag en aanbod het onderzoek naar de consumptievoorkeuren en mer-
ken zich verhouden tot hun consumenten en welk van belang voor mijn onderzoek is verder hoe mer

4. METHODOLOGIE

In de vorige twee paragrafen heb ik de begrippen co-
creatie en co-evolutie geïntroduceerd als focus van
mijn studie. Terwijl deze concepten in consumenteron-
dezoek al een lange geschiedenis hebben, worden ze in modestudies als een soort taboe beschouwd. Vooral creatieve modeontwerpers presenteren zich graag als originele kunstenaars die trends maken in plaats van gemeenschappelijke kenmerken voor elke categorie om punten van overeenkomst in het totale responspatroon te laten zien. Uit de analyse kwamen tenslotte vier categorieën naar voren die een beeld ge-
ven van de verschillende, elkaar soms overlappende, kenmerken van de Nederlandse mode. FIGUUR 2 brengt deze resultaten in beeld.

De bepalende kenmerken van Modernistisch Design met een Knipoog worden als een conceptuele benadering van het ontwerpproces, vakmanschap en de invloed en interpretatie van modernistische principes. Gekarak-
teriseerd door een minimale en sobere stijl, hebben ontwerpers als Alexander van Slobbe, Tristan en Riet Spijkers en Jan Taminiau de neiging te spelen met de conventies van het genre. Hoewel het een relatief klein segment van het lokale modebedrijven betreft, is het invloedrijk in de zin dat het bepaalde tendensen con-
denseert, die ook zichtbaar zijn in de winkelstraten.

Wild Design ontleent zijn naam aan een alternatieve traditie in de Nederlandse stad, terwijl ze toevallig niet veel aandacht heeft gekregen in wetenschappelijke publica-
ties. Het werk van bedrijven als Oilly, Bas Kosters, of Vera van den Broek wordt gekenmerkt door kleur, oneer-
biedigheid en speelsheid en is geïnspireerd door een verscheidenheid aan bronnen, waaronder de hippie-
cultuur, postmoderniteit en de hedendaagse cultuur van de koloniale verleden. De mode die door deze polylevel wordt ontworpen wordt gekenmerkt door een spel van volumes en vormen, onstuimige kleuren en levendige patronen. Verfijnd Casual betreft bedrijven als G-Star of Cusus met een combinatie van op streetstyle geïnspireerde en trendy mode, die volop zichtbaar zijn als gevolg van vooruitstrevende marketing- en communicaties. Deze bedrijven stellen een knipoog naar het ge-
inzicht. De producten zijn dan ook ontworpen met het oog op universale eisen in een veelvuld van mode-
ceeomene. Een ander kenmerk van deze categorie is het gebruik van denim. Of die nu behandelbaar of onbe-
handelbaar is, keus of casual, de Nederlandse mode-in-
dustrie heeft een brede benadering van jeanskleding en onverwachte variaties op populariteit

FIGUUR 2: DE VIJF GEZICHTEN VAN DE NEDERLANDSE MODE

3. DE ONDERZOEKSTOCHT

Om deze verschillende bedrijven te bestuderen stelde ik op een exploratieve, gemengdemethoden-
benadering in. In overeenstemming met het uitgangspunt van 'gegevenstriangulatie' (Perry 1988), was mijn studie gebaseerd op verschillende bronnen. Om de construct-
validiteit van mijn studie te waarborgen, is gepot uit
de retentiemechanismen en strategische positionering. Voor mijn analyse van de verschillende merken heb ik diepte-interviews gehouden met marketeers, ontwerpers, stylsten en winkel- en regionale managers. Om het kader te schetsen en vergelijkingen tussen mijn eigen bevindingen en die van andere auteurs mogelijk te maken werden de interviews aangevuld met een gedetailleerde literatuurstudie. Ook om het consumptiegedrag binnen de verschillende conserveringstypen te bestuderen heb ik diepte-interviews aangevuld. Dit stelde me in staat de ervaringen en verlevenswerden van de consumenten beter te begrijpen. Deze inzichten werden aangevuld met een gestructureerde vragenlijst die ik samen met respondenten binnen of buiten de winkel aan deelnemers van de vier ondernemingen invulde.1 Alle diepte-interviews werden gecodeerd en geanalyseerd volgens Mayrings model van kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse. Bij deze inhoudelijk aanpak worden formele aspecten in het proces van gegevensverzameling geïntegreerd, die de reproduuceerbaarheid van de resultaten helpen te garanderen en de kwaliteit van de conclusies te bewaken (Krippendorff, 1969; Mayring, 2000).5. CASE STUDIES EN BEVINDINGEN

Bij elk van de merken die ik bestudeerde, kwam een ander patroon naar voren met betrekking tot de vraag betreffende de relatie tussen vraag en aanbod. Mijn studie toonde aan dat bij Cora Kemperman, dat zich gedurende langere tijd in nauwe interactie met veel van haar klanten ontwikkelde, de relatie met die klantenkring werd uiteenlaten in een mix van exclusiviteit en uniekheid van het product. Omdat het merk niets via internet of postzender verkoopt, is het volledig afhankelijk van verkoop in haar winkels. Door de voorraad (het beëlkbare aantal items per grootte en kleur) in de winkel gedaan te houden wordt er een ‘wie het eerst komt, dat wat is’-principe opgevolgd (Clara Sträter, manager van de Arnhemsse designwinkel Coming Soon). Bij andere aanbieders met een vergelijkbaar asceptrofn is de band tussen de klantenkring tot de vraag hoe merken en consumenten interacteren en co-evolveren. Met tamelijk hoge niveaus van product- en merkbetrokkenheid, is de band tussen Cora Kemperman en haar belangrijkste consumentengroep relatief sterk. Deze relatieve sterkheid ervan zou het hoogst aangepast, waarbij ze wel degelijk geraken hielden niet van regressieve afleiding, maar een soort gedwongen het merk hun grootere bekendheid te geven door samen te werken met meer bekende merken. Zo gingen ze bijvoorbeeld samenwerkingsverbanden aan met populaire bedrijven uit het middensegment of zelfs het lagere segment van de markt (Clara Sträter, Specavers, Bavia). Daarnaast voegen ze een iets lager consumentenpatroon aan bij het lagere segment toe. Telkens met wat bij de stappen die zij zetten, de consumptie slechts beperkt centraal stond, maakt mijn studie duidelijk dat elke stap op een verschillende manier heeft bijgedragen het product dichter bij de consumenten te brengen en de behoeften daarvan beter te integreren in de merkpropositie. Hoewel mijn studie een uitputtende omschrijving van de stijl van het merk niet toestond, is het toch mogelijk om enkele conclusies te trekken. Volgens Chananja Baars, manager van de Arnhemsse designwinkel Coming Soon, bestaat een enthousiaste kersgroep van mensen die regelmatig op zoek zijn naar kleding van het merk. Ondanks de soms opvallende stijl blijft het een merk dat trouw gevolgd wordt door vrouwen die de combinatie van speelsheid en scherpzinnige vormen op prijs weten te stellen en het zich kunnen veroorloven om meer bijzondere modeproducten te kopen.

6. CONCLUSIE

Mijn onderzoek verkende de vraag hoe aan de relatie tussen vraag en aanbod in de Nederlandse mode-industrie vorm wordt gegeven en op basis van welke waardevolle kaders voor het werkzaam zijn. De keuze van de casestudies was gebaseerd op de ‘vier gezichten van de Nederlandse mode’ zoals bekend is uit paragraaf 4. Deze studie was bijzonder in de zin dat ze zich niet beperkte tot een specifiek detail van het lokale modelandschap, maar integendeel functioneel en conceptueel betrokkenheid tot de vraag hoe merken en consumenten interacteren en co-evolveren. Met een productpropositie dat iets verfijnder is dan het aanbod van zijn concurrenten, trekt G-Star een vrij uitlopende conserveringstypen aan met een voorliefde voor een mode die van een meer straathoogte draagt. Op basis van een eerder passieve identificatie, verbonden met de meer dan levensgrote aanwezigheid van het merk op de lokale markt en zijn zeer herkenbare logo, is de betrokkenheid relatief hoog. Meer dan bij de andere merken gaat het bij Spijkers en Spijkers ten slotte wellicht om een andere modebetrokkenheid. In de analyse werd aangezien dat, wellicht dus met uitzondering van Spijkers en Spijkers, geen van de klantenkringen een hoge niveau van modebetrokkenheid laat zien. We kunnen dus concluderen, dat

1 Spijkers en Spijkers heeft geen eigen winkel, zodat het niet mogelijk was hiervoor op dezelfde wijze een herkenbare klantengroep te ondervragen.
een herkenbare stijl meestal belangrijker is dan de modewaarde van de kleding. Als we de motivaties ‘er goed uitzien’ en ‘in de mode zijn’ opnieuw bekijken, lijkt het erop dat de Nederlandse consumenten van de merken die ik bestudeerde, vooral belang stellen in er goed uitzien, terwijl een modieus uiterlijk van minder belang is. Voor elk van de casussen zijn de waardeverbindingen tussen merk en consumenten gebaseerd op een ander stel kenmerken. FIGUUR 3 brengt de verschillende merken die ik bestudeerde in kaart volgens de assen van ‘er goed uitzien’ en ‘in de mode zijn’ in relatie tot betrokkenheid tot het merk.

Door mijn hele studie heen heb ik ook geprobeerd om de kenmerken te identificeren die als typisch Nederlands kunnen worden beschouwd. Hoewel het consumentenonderzoek geen definitieve conclusies toestaat, leverde de studie wel een aantal interessante inzichten op. Mijn resultaten suggereren dat consumenten,noch merken zich erg bezighouden met wat een typisch Nederlandse kledingstijl zou inhouden. De aankoopbeslissingen van de consumenten zijn niet afhankelijk van waar de kleding vandaan komt of ontworpen is – in feite zijn ze zich vaker niet dan wel bewust van de nationale oorsprong van hun aankopen. De lokale modemerken van hun kant bedenken ook geen ‘Nederlands product’. Los van de relatie met klantengroepen, zoals daarnet besproken, houden zij hoogstens impliciet rekening met een mogelijke lokale stijl die te maken kan hebben met een meer informeel cultureel klimaat enerzijds of een groter en iets steviger lichaamstype dan elders anderzijds.

Zoals blijkt uit paragraaf 4 over de vier gezichten van de Nederlandse mode, bleek uit mijn onderzoek evenwel dat er meer kan worden gezegd over Nederlandse modestijl dan vaak wordt aangenomen. Tegelijkertijd werd duidelijk dat er als zodanig geen nationale mode-identiteit bestaat. Integendeel, merken bedenken producten die, tot op zekere hoogte, reageren op bepaalde culturele voorwaarden, terwijl consumenten zich aangetrokken voelen tot deze producten omdat ze hun behoeften weergeven of aansluiten bij hun levensstijl. Voor wat de vier mogelijke niveaus van identificatie betreft, zoals besproken in paragraaf 2, geven mijn resultaten aan dat identificatie niet verder reikt dan het cognitieve niveau.

Typisch voor het Nederlandse modelandschap is dus een kledingstijl die resoneert met een vrij liberale en tolerantie culturele ‘spirit’, alsook met een pragmatische cultuur van ‘aanpakken’. De vier gezichten van de Nederlandse mode bieden de mogelijkheid de plaatselijke mode-economie verder te definiëren en te studeren. De kans bestaat dat er in andere landen een soortgelijk beeld zou kunnen ontstaan. Hoewel dat nog verder moet worden bevestigd, betoog ik evenwel dat het precies de combinatie van de afzonderlijke elementen is die het totaalbeeld typisch Nederlands maakt.
Please answer the questions 1 through 11a by selecting one of the following options:

- No opinion
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

1. It is important that my clothes sit comfortably.
2. I like to dress according to the latest fashion trends.
3. I am among the first in my circle of friends to buy a new fashion item when it appears.
4. Compared to my friends I own few new fashion items.
5. I frequently buy fashion-related magazines (Vogue, Elle, Marie Claire...).
6. I frequently check the internet for the latest clothing trends.
7. I like to buy clothes with an outspoken look.
8. I like to purchase clothes from brands I can identify with.
9. I prefer buying brands that work with organic materials and/or are involved with sustainability issues.
10. I am more willing to make bigger purchases when I am attended on a personal level by the assistants.
11a. Brand X is typically Dutch. Why? Why not?

12. How often do you visit one of the outlets of Brand X?
   - Once a week
   - Once a month
   - Less often

13. On average, how many items do you purchase per visit?
   - None
   - One item
   - Two items
   - Three or more items

14. Please try to name three characteristics you associate with the clothing of Brand X.
   1.
   2.
   3.

15. Which three of the following attributes are most suitable to describe Brand X as a brand?
   Authentic • Reliable • Personal • Innovative • Extravagant • Stylish • Individual • Fashionable • Responsible • Cool/ Hip • Recognisable • Sporty • Interesting • Special • Other

APPENDIX II
EXAMPLE QUESTIONS: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

1. What are some of Brand X’s characteristics that particularly appeal to you or with which you can identify?
2. Are the clothes part of your self-image or identity? If so, how is this expressed?
3. Would you consider yourself a fan of the brand? How would you describe your relationship with the brand?
4. When do you usually wear clothes by Brand X?
5. Is Brand X popular with your friends and/or colleagues as well?
6. Generally speaking, do you think there is a particular target group for Brand X’s clothes? If so, how would you describe or characterize this group?
7. What does differentiate Brand X from other fashion brands?
8. How would you describe the brand in a couple of keywords? Do these characteristics apply to you as well?

APPENDIX III
LIST OF INTERVIEWS

All interviews by Constantin-Felix von Maltzahn.
Interview EPI by Constantin-Felix von Maltzahn and Dany Jacobs.

CHAPTER 5
EPI Manon Schaap • 28.09.2011, Amsterdam

CHAPTER 6
CKI Frans Ankone • 08.12.2009, Amsterdam
CKII Cora Kemperman, Saskia Kemperman • 03.03.2010, Amsterdam
CKIII Marjolein van Rood • 04.03.2010, Amsterdam
CKIV Boy van der Hout, Denise Nieuwenhout • 26.04.2010, Rotterdam
CKV Kim de Graaf • 06.09.2010, Amsterdam
CKVI Vanessa van Berkum • 26.04.2010, Rotterdam
CKVII Tine Krebsburg • 29.04.2010, Rotterdam
CKVIII Jernita Hairstorn • 03.06.2010, Rotterdam
CKIX Monique • 03.06.2010, Rotterdam
CKX Judith Arts • 04.06.2010, Rotterdam
CKXI Jacintha Hessels • 24.06.2010, Rotterdam

CHAPTER 7
VI Eva Beekhof • 17.07.2010, Wormerveer
VII Eva Bijwaard • 26.11.2010, Amsterdam
VIII Tatiana Streekwold • 31.01.2011, Wormerveer
VIV Michel Hulzebosch • 10.02.2011, Wormerveer
VV Tatiana Streekwold • 15.02.2011, Telephone
VVI Eveline Otten • 18.02.2011, Arnhem
VIII Wendy de Brum • 23.02.2011, Rotterdam
VIII Romana Kosic • 24.02.2011, Rotterdam
VIX Birgit Groot • 27.04.2011, Wormerveer
VX Anna-Maartje van der Ven • 18.05.2011, Amsterdam
VCI Iris Otten • 07.12.2010, Amsterdam
VCII Renske Hogness • 07.10.2010, Amsterdam
VCIII Nanda Ruiter • 11.03.2011, Arnhem
VCIV Jessica Jetten • 15.03.2011, Arnhem
VCV Anonymous (58 years old) • 11.05.2011, Rotterdam

CHAPTER 8
SSI Truus and Riet Spijkers • 04.08.2011, Arnhem
SSI Chananja Baars • 18.12.2012, Arnhem