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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

DUTCH IDENTITY IN FASHION:

CO-EVOLUTION BETWEEN BRANDS AND CONSUMERS

Constantin-Felix von Maltzahn

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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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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 4

1 INTRODUCTION 6
2 THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES 12
3 CONSUMPTION AND FASHION IDENTITIES 20
4 ON METHOD 35
5 DUTCH FASHION THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: AN EXPERT VIEW 45
6 CORAKEMPERMAN: A CLASS OF ITS OWN 55
7 VANILIA: JUST ABOUT RIGHT 70
8 SPIJKERS EN SPIJKERS: WE DO IT–OUR WAY 86
9 G-STAR: A GLOBAL PLAYER FROM HOLLAND 95
10 CONCLUSION: CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT IN THE DUTCH FASHION INDUSTRY 108

SUMMARY • MY RESEARCH IN A NUTSHELL 122
SAMENVATTING • MIJN ONDERZOEK IN EEN NOTENDOP 129
BIBLIOGRAPHY 137
APPENDICES 142

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGE-MENTS

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 silken 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 individuals. What might sound like a silly school boy'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 torpedoed 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 enough to be part of. José Teunissen for her 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 Michiel 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 it has been a pleasure to learn about her opinion and profit from it. I would like to thank Anja Köppchen for taking a critical stance towards my work, which I have greatly benefitted 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 Meester Koetsier Foundation, Premsela (The Netherlands Institute for Design and Fashion), and the Opleidings- en Ontwikkelingsfonds voor de Confectie-industrie (Educational 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 Marsel Stoopen of Studio Marsel 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 CoraKemperman for their warm welcome and assistance during my research. It was an absolute pleasure to work with the entire team. I am indebted to Michiel 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 outlets. 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 Iasi an unforgettable experience.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents and sister for their endless support and tireless commitment. Without complaint they have listened to my rantings and shameless braggery, supported me in my work and progress, and provided emotional and financial backing when needed. Love and gratitude go to my wife, Kiti. She has supported me all the way and put up with my sometimes erratic and tiresome behaviour. She listened to all my concerns when I was feeling stuck or when my research was not moving into the desired direction, and she encouraged me to go the extra mile when I thought I had reached my limits. Also, my friends have been a great support for me throughout the project: Heimo, Stephanos, Dirk, Paul, and Ed. Balancing my writing and field work with countless hours filled with conversation and laughter, each of them has enriched and enhanced my life greatly.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: A DUTCH FASHION IDENTITY?

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 totality? 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 perfunctory 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. Fluegel'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 sociohistorical 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 Hollander'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 studies[1] 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 from different points of view. Adding to the existing body of knowledge, our ambition is to look into the different aspects that define the local fashion

1 Worth mentioning in this regard are: Breward, C. (ed.) (2002). The Englishness of English Dress; Goodrum, A. (2005). The National Fabric: Fashion, Britishness, Globalization; Palmer, A. (2004). Fashion: A Canadian Perspective; and Teunissen, J. (2006). Mode in Nederland.

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: 146). 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 shorthand 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 that is either part of the national authorities (e.g. police, fire brigade, judges in court, church) or specific movements like Goth culture or the 'Lolita' phenomenon in Japan. Evidently, both elements are interconnected. As FIG 1.1 shows, style refers to a level of consistency, an element that lasts and changes only gradually over time, while fashion is amplitudinal and by definition connected to change.

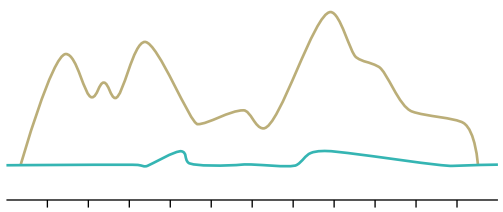


FIG 1.1 STYLE VS. FASHION

The question about a Dutch fashion identity oscillates between these two poles. On the one hand, there may be a stylistic code, a tacit element of national culture[2], 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 season. It is an interplay of tradition and innovation; it is 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. We respond to our workplace, families and peer groups, specific dress codes or the way celebrities dress (Woodward 2005). Undeniably it is a tired cliché that architects and designers all dress in black or that people who work in the creative industries are partial to an 'artistic' and somewhat unconventional look. Like with most stereotypes, however, there is a grain of truth to it. While we wish to express uniqueness and signal to our environment that we are 'one of a kind', only the smallest minority of us is prepared to be individualistic to the point that they can do without some kind of reference group.

2 Based on arguments by Elias and Bourdieu, Kuipers (2012) in this respect talks about 'national habitus', i.e., implicit cultural elements that distinguish one culture from another.

One of fashion's paradoxes is precisely the reciprocity between individuality and belonging: a unique expression of personal identity and its integration into a collective context (Simmel 1904). What applies to the dynamics between individuals and groups at the micro level may possibly be extended to the national level as well. Consciously or not, people identify with a country's implicit style or dress code, which in turn has an impact on the predominant style of dress. It is this nexus of individual, collective, and national identity that formed the point of departure for my research.

Above I already pointed to the dynamics between individualisation and group identity, and fashion's capacity to reflect their connection in a collective context. In their quest for defining identity people nowadays find inspiration in, for instance, virtual communities 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.

Taking a multidisciplinary approach, my research integrates the supply perspective as well and it 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 relays 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, so, 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. The co-evolution 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 whether there are characteristics that are typically Dutch.

- How do Dutch fashion firms relate to their audiences?
- By what aspects is the connection between brands and consumers defined?
- Is it possible to identify aspects in the value or brand proposition that respond to country-specific demands?

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. In an effort to come to terms with the question how 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 individual 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. With a focus on the connection 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 different types 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 is a theoretical 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 question how 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 a 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. Jointly, we approached several experts in the field of Dutch fashion with the request to list ten clothing brands that (in their opinion) reflect the Dutch fashion landscape and to provide a short explanation for their choice. The goal behind this effort was to distil a set of defining characteristics and develop an understanding of what Dutch fashion is actually about. The results produced four images that reflect the local fashion industry and provide both perspective and context for the research as a whole: 'Modernist Design with a Twist', 'Sophisticated Casual', 'Wild Design', and 'Stylish Mid-Market'. Informing the choice of case studies throughout my dissertation, each of the firms I studied reflects one of the four categories outlined above and is supposed to facilitate an understanding of the ruling demands in the respective segment. Individually, the case studies are meant to reflect different aspects of the Dutch fashion world, while the sum of findings presented at the end of this book will point out a number of common themes connecting the firms, irrespective of segment and audience.

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 Vanilia, 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 Organization 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; Michiel 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: Daniëlle Bruggeman, whose dissertation is entitled *'The Performance of Identity through Fashion'*; Maaike Feitsma, with a dissertation in Dutch *'Nederlandse mode? Een verkenning van mythevorming en betekenissen'* ('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 Tigert 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 fashion is about signification. As it is understood here 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 (Huyssen 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) equals 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 (2011c: 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 stronger feelings of identification.' The claims about pluriformity 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 'multiple' identities. In fact, in 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 frameworks (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 individuation 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 'social traffic' which defines this relationship 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 this bilateral model ultimately makes up the way we define ourselves in relation to others and the very manner we make sense of ourselves and the world around us.

According to Raab (ibid: 228), 'a person's individual 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 groups, 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. Hekman (2004: 7) specifies this argument by making a distinction between personal and public identities. The former distinguishes us from others based on the sum of experiences 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 a particular social terrain only with a certain number of people. As she states, '[o]ur personal identity makes us different from everyone else. Our public identity identifies us as the same as particular others' (Hekman 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 real life in the majority of cases. Belonging to 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 argument, they are socially constructed entities, based on public imagination. Anderson himself builds his theory around the example of nationhood: although most citizens share a sense of national identity, only the smallest 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 framework, 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 sociogist 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 extension, the argument also works the other way around. Someone who lives abroad is likely to experience some sense of identification with his home country. If we take the example of Mr. Browne (a fictional character we will encounter more than once throughout this and the next chapter), an Englishman working in the Netherlands, watching the World Cup: is he more likely to cheer for the English team or their opponents? Although we can only speculate what the answer might look like, my best guess would be that he is partial to his own people rather than another nation. An expatriate myself, also in my case it was not before I moved to the Netherlands that I figured out how German I actually am in a number of respects. What I want to illustrate with the example is how in both Mr. Browne's and my case, the spatial distance to our native country augmented the feeling of being part of its national community.

The quest for identity, then, is not an easy matter. While Anderson bases his theory on national identity the general idea applies to other areas as well. Social bonds that are based on mutual recognition and identification 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 any of 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 identfication with the firm and other participants on the site. The same goes for brand communities that emerge around a brand persona (e.g. Harley Davidson, Apple). Someone 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 create specific narratives. Marketing messages or particular 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 direct contact with other aficionados. As a devoted consumer 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 underlying principle still holds true. It is actually unimportant whether his clothes and attitude fit a certain vestimentary code or whether those 'in the know' approve of it. The majority of people are indeed ignorant when it comes to the details of a specific look. Mr. Browne might feel part of the group, regardless of whether this is a mutual relationship or not. What the example is supposed to show is that belonging is not automatically connected to direct interaction or personal relations. It may be distant and imaginary during all the time we feel attached to the group, to a greater or lesser extent. 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 likes clogs and tulips in the Netherlands or Bratwurst and 'Deutsche Gründlichkeit' in Germany, are cues that immediately trigger not only a familiar sensation but also a relationship between a given culture and its constituents. To a certain extent these are tired clichés, we might say. That, however, does not mean that we should not take them seriously. 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 immune 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 historical 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 constructions 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 audience groups, the guiding question is whether it is actually 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 pertinent to the Dutch rather than any other national context? Since Georg Simmel's 'Fashion' (1904) it is understood that dress-body relations are enmeshed with

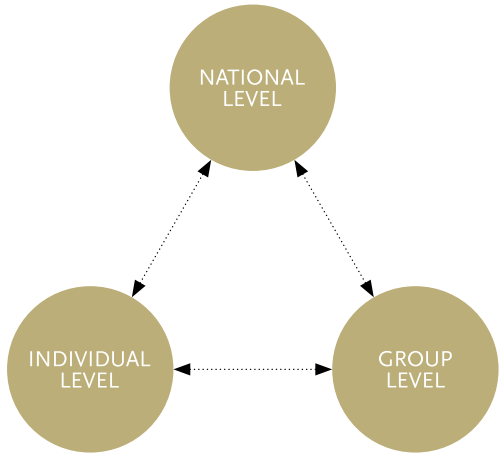


FIG 2.1 THREE LEVELS OF IDENTITY

the dynamics of individuation–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 (inter)play 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 context. This relation 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: 448-449). 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, 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 this 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'). Emotional involvement with the group might be the result of the previous two components. The more positive a person's evaluation of his membership, the more likely it is that he will be emotionally involved. We may even want to add a fourth component: conative identity. By this we mean that people move to a stage where their level of emotional involvement starts to influence their identity. For example, if Mr. Browne gets involved with a fashion brand to such a point that he decides to exclusively wear this one company's products, both firm and clothes become part of his identity and a (visible) extension of his personality.

How can this knowledge be useful to define a national fashion identity? Jacobs (2011c: 12-13) points out that the Netherlands have never been recognised as a fashion country. While his observation is correct, it is remarkable that in recent years the country has received a lot of interest from the fashion press and buyers from abroad, when it comes to fresh talent and innovative fashion design. Also, he suggests a number of aspects that distinguish the Dutch fashion culture from other countries with a relatively distinct style. While Italy may be known for its refined panache and France for understated elegance, the Netherlands have a fairly inconspicuous, casual, and informal culture, an aspect that, at least partly, can be traced back to cultural principles like a pronounced sense of democracy and egalitarianism.

In a number of respects this kind of egalitarianism has informed the country's predominant style of dress. Historically speaking, we can identify two different narratives that both have a more or less direct connection to certain characteristics of Dutch culture. Following famous costume historian François Boucher (1987), the first (and more positive) storyline states that, together with the French, the Dutch were an authority on style in the Golden Age. Compared to the French, whose style was more dashing and pompous, the Dutch were austere and pared down, 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 naff and unrefined. The common charge is that the Dutch prioritise practical over aesthetic concerns and show little attention to detail, which often results in a rather unstylish and coarse appearance. Furthermore, it is said that the Dutch have a predilection for 'humorous' (sometimes even frivolous) frills, like flower prints in the lining of the cuffs and collar of men's shirts or loud and garish graphics that, deliberately or not, go against so-called good taste. Counting 12.000 respondents, a recent survey conducted among frequent travellers voted the Dutch the second least stylish nation in the world (Skyscanner, 13 September 2012). Whether or not such a survey is representative of Dutch clothing culture as a whole is debatable, of course. Still, the fact remains that, apparently, the Dutch are perceived as rather unstylish and not exactly part of the cutting edge.

Another example of 'Dutch style', albeit in a more ad-lib form, can be observed during big football tournaments, like the World Cup or the European Championship. While fans of many countries paint the national flags on their faces or colour-coordinate their outfits, the Dutch usually take things to the extreme with spontaneous and fairly irreverent combinations, pairing straw hats with lederhosen or helmets with bull's horns with oversized glasses. With imagination running wild, 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 four 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 possibly there is an awareness of a distinct local style, as evidenced by a growing interest from the media within the country and from abroad.[1] 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 identitification would be conative like, for instance, if the fashion enthusiast would decide to exclusively focus on clothing products from the Netherlands.

The question is to what extent those different levels actually apply to the Dutch population at large. The fashion enthusiast who breathes (and wears) Dutch fashion is 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 similarities. We can therefore question to what extent identification 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 relation is quite obvious and at other times 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

1 An obvious example of this tendency is actually the research project 'Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World'. Had there not been good reason to believe that Dutch fashion is an interesting and relevant research topic we probably would never have received a rather high grant from the NWO.

PICTURE 2.1 DUTCH FOOTBALL FAN

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: 13-14) 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. Ghodeswar (2008: 5) maintains that brand identity implies a promise to consumers that is built around a core and an extended 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 is woven around brand identity 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 emotions 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 (Aaker 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 want- rather than need-based consumption interests (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, he points to the fact that those traits are 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 are more difficult to copy than product-related ones. In turn, they can provide sustained competitive advantage over a longer period of time (Ghodeswar 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 helps to forge direct customer 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 Simonson 1997: 59). 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 as it matures over time. The more developed and credible the brand identity is, the better a firm will be able to distinguish its offerings from competitors. While Knapp's argument in its most basic form might be valid, such kind of approach may just as well lead to a 'closed' brand identity that fails to account for the needs of consumers. If, however, a brand co-evolves with its audience and develops its identity in dialogue, there is a better chance to actually arrive at a distinguished and accessible corporate profile. In that line of argument Aaker (1996) points out that it is crucial to build the brand on the basis of a flexible framework, which allows for swift and dynamic moves without threatening the overall message. To be effective, a sustained brand identity involves that firms develop an understanding for the market and the needs of their consumers as well as for the image they communicate to the public.

2.6 FASHION AND DRESS AS CARRIERS OF IDENTITY

The way we give meaning and expression to our social selves is intimately connected to clothing. It represents a visible social signifier for individual and collective identities and serves mutual recognition (Jacobs 2011c). In *The Empire of Fashion*, Lipovetsky (1994: 146) argues that fashion can be understood as an intermediary tool for negotiating identities in contemporary society. Its inner logics can be envisaged as a set of visual attributes that equip the wearer with a versatile vocabulary to adapt to different social, cultural, or professional environments. Therefore, fashion is defined as a socially reproductive medium that 'socialises human beings to change' (ibid: 149). Seen thus, the fashion system embodies culture in that it serves to communicate different subject positions within a broader social context (ibid.; Kellner 1994: 160-2; Wilson 1992: 14). At the socio-analytical level clothes represent a mediating surface. Fastening on Bourdieu's theory about habitus, Jennifer Craik (1993: 4-5) extends the argument to a fashion and consumption context:

> *'"Habitus" refers to specialised techniques and ingrained knowledges which enable people to negotiate the different departments of existence. Habitus includes the unconscious dispositions, the classification schemes, taken-for-granted preferences which are evident in the individual's sense of the appropriateness and validity of his taste for cultural goods and practices as well as being inscribed to the body through body techniques and modes of self-presentation.'*

In a similar vein, Giselinde Kuipers (2012: 4) extends the argument to the national level, referring to national habitus as a set of 'learned practices and standards that have become so much part of ourselves that they feel self-evident and natural'. Fastening on arguments by Elias and Bourdieu, she argues that national habitus not only refers 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[s]' (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' (Craik 1993: 9). The language of fashion can not only help negotiate different subject positions across various cultural settings, but it engenders 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 within a given social context. In short, fashion provides an intermediary tool that, based on its visual qualities, articulates markers of identity across different social scales (Barthes 1990: 230-2).

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 relationship as the *poetics* of dress which combines sartorial qualities (e.g. shape, fabrics, 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 a certain extent. In that way, the fashion system allows 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 apparatus. Second, another 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-1990s hip-hop artists started acquiring clothes 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 nowadays because the clothes are used 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 context, 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 my 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 thereon I went to specify Anderson's concept of imagined 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 public 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 entrenched with consumer perceptions and developments in the market. I outlined the primary aspects that are critical in this regard, thereby providing an understanding of the dynamics between 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 wearer to his social and cultural background and equips him with a surface to define different subject positions.

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 pluriform 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 identity in a consumption context. Here, the focus will be on the relays that run back and forth between individual and collective 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 market knowledge as a means to build long-term relations. The theories, fleshed out on the following pages, seek to provide analytical tools that help us come to terms with the complex ways in which brands and consumers are interconnected and develop an understanding of 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 repertories 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 (Mulyanegara 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 (Belk 1988). Second, it is claimed 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: 391).

As an extension of the self-congruity theory, Allen (2002) proposes the values-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: 151). In a recent study Piacentini and Mailer (2004: 251) 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 further 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: 287) 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 meaning products have for them or their attitudes towards products' (ibid.). Consumer goods, then, are not only defined by material properties but represent stimuli for cueing 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 transgress the use value. In that way, fashion consumption serves a number of different functions, the most important being the affirmation and enhancement of the self. Grubb and Grathwohl (1967: 25-6) sum up these findings as follows:

1. Self-concept is of value to the individual, and behaviour will be directed toward the protection and enhancement of self-concept.
2. The purchase, display, and use of goods communicates symbolic meaning to the individual and to others.
3. The consuming behaviour of an individual will be directed toward enhancing self-concept through the consumption of goods as symbols.

The reasoning suggests that the acquisition of goods plays an important role in identity performances in that it helps to illustrate and strengthen the self-concept of consumers. Accounting for the extent to which possessions make up part of the self-concept, involvement is a measure for exploring different levels of attachment to brands and products. According to Sirgy (1982: 289), it is possible to identify congruities between different brand/product images and the self-concept of consumers. As he claims, the level of identification with goods is defined by key stimuli which activate mental concepts connected to the identity constructs of consumers.

If, for instance, Mr. Browne develops the associations 'fashionable', 'understated', and 'typically English' with a particular brand, finds them congruous with 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. 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 looks 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 sites 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 good he has purchased is recognized publicly and classified in a manner that supports and matches 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 image and the value connections attributed by individuals and their reference groups. Consequently, buying motivation is dependent on product and brand image and on the way(s) 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 likes to see himself. Still, it would be wrong to assume that his choice is exclusively based on product-intrinsic features. Even if the suit fits exceptionally well, the label Paul Smith has a specific trademark style as well as recognition value, both of which have symbolic relevance in a collective context. What the example illustrates is, that 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 symbolic meaning a brand or product has for Individual A. 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. When 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 the process of symbolic transaction 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.

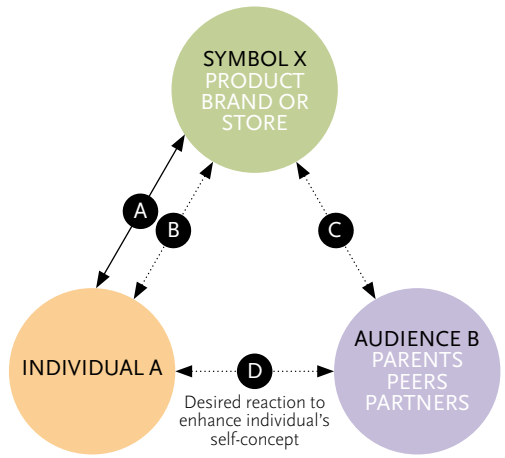


FIG 3.1 CONSUMPTION TRIANGLE: GOODS AS SYMBOLS TO THE SELF-CONCEPT (ADAPTED FROM GRUBB AND GRATHWOHL 1967: 25)

3.4 THE INVOLVEMENT CONSTRUCT

In the previous section we have seen how individual and collective identities are interrelated in a consumption context and what 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 involvement 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 to not only look into the general nature of attachment, but to identify gradual differences and work out 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 way brands have relevance for different audiences in terms of their meaningfulness; 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 the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests' (Zaichkowsky 1985: 342). In literature, the concept is mostly referred to as consumer involvement which can be classified according to four different dimensions (ibid: 347-8; Laurent and Kapferer 1985: 45 ff.). *Product Knowledge* refers to the extent to which consumers gather information about products, evaluate purchases, 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 committed to one or more brands in particular or buy a larger number of goods from one and the same label. The higher the level of involvement is, the stronger the level of brand patronage will be.

Rothschild (1979: 75) 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, only the last one is of importance and it will be used synonymously with the general terminology in the following. Enduring involvement is defined as 'an individual 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 (1988: 211) further specify this argument, maintaining that '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. (...) [T]he personal relevance of a product is represented by the perceived linkage between an individual's needs, goals, and values and their product knowledge'. According to this definition, involvement is a stable characteristic which reflects and sustains values over time. Needless to say, temporary and situational changes do occur. According to Bloch and Richins (1983: 71), however, even alternative buying patterns eventually reflect and confirm the general value system of individual consumers or an entire group for as 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 with entire product categories (e.g. clothing, 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 brand(s). The other way around, 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 Cabañero (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 (Evrard and Aurier 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 the more involved with a brand, service, or promotional message, the more they match personally held values, goals, or needs (Engel et al. 1993). Kim (2005: 208) claims that 'different types of product involvement may emanate from the importance of purchasing the "right" product for a particular situation or when certain product characteristics are symbolic of one's identity'.

As we can see, involvement is linked to different referential frameworks. Similarly, different levels of involvement can be identified when it comes to purchases of either utility-based or symbolic goods. Values in this context are seen as general representations of needs and goals in the lives of consumers that guide brand- and product-related consumption interests and help communicate those values to others (Kim 2005: 210). The better a good represents this referential framework, the more consumers will be involved with it. Also, the more brands and products are perceived as an affirmation of the self, the higher the likelihood of repeat purchases of the same brand (O'Cass and Julian 2001).

Changes in the level of involvement are usually caused by shifting values and needs (O'Cass 2000: 549). Research into the contributing factors has found that age frequently brings about changes in the worldviews and priorities of consumers, which in turn have an impact on the level of brand and product involvement (Mittal and Lee 1988: 45; 1989: 370-72). For example, in a fashion context it is understood that the target market between 15 and 25 years is traditionally the most free-spending because at a younger age consumers tend to be more prone to follow the latest trends. Furthermore, peer pressure and brand-driven consumption are stronger than in other age groups (Michon et al. 2007: 491; Phau and Lo 2004: 399-401). Beyond a certain age, however, in the majority of cases the frequency of purchases winds down due to product saturation and a different outlook on life. Consumption interests and shopping behaviour change with increasing age, which leads to lower degrees of fashion involvement (and usually higher degrees of involvement in alternative product categories).

3.5 LOOKING GOOD VS. BEING FASHIONABLE

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 time-specific and reaches beyond functional 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 (Lynge-Jorlén 2009; Moeran 2006; Reponen 2009), thereby seeking to catch a certain zeitgeist by translating cultural climates into visual means of communication (Barnard 2002: 38). 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 (Evans 2003).

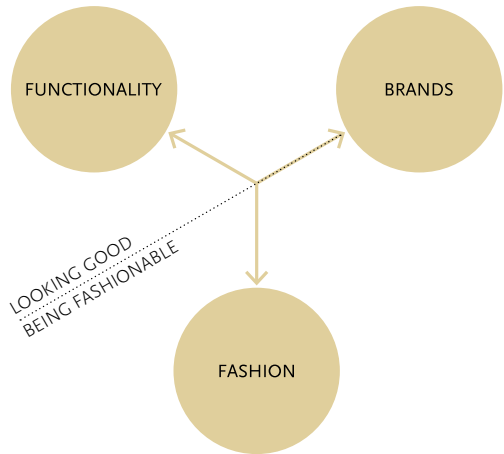
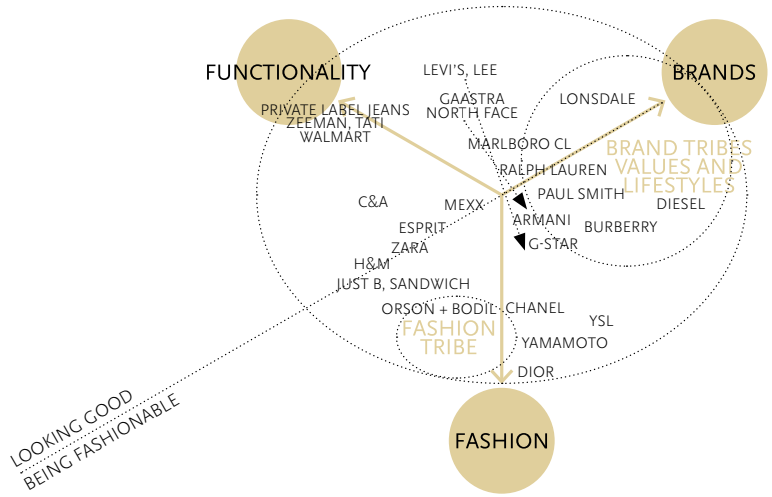


FIG 3.2 CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS CLOTHING (JACOBS 2010: 587)

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 knows that a Levi's 501 has 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 discussion altogether. The difference between looking good and looking fashionable is that 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 third axis needs to be taken into account in this regard, namely that of branding, resp. the meaning some brands take on within certain groups. The fact that group-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,

FIG 3.3 A SPECTRUM OF BRANDS: FROM 'JUST CLOTHES' TO 'FASHION' (JACOBS 2010: 588)



because to him, it is not only important that his clothes look fashionable but also that they are sourced and produced according to eco-friendly standards. However, it might just as well be the case that the company's business approach and branding strategy are of no importance to him, because he only cares for the clothes' great look and their tactile qualities. In fact, if he is not at all into fashion and only cares that the clothes suit him well, he might not even know about the branding message. Clearly, the dichotomy presented here is not as straightforward in actuality. More often than not it is a matter of degree, so either the brand-aware or brand-unaware frame will be more strongly pronounced. Nevertheless, what the example is meant to illustrate is that in a branding context we are dealing with different regimes of identification. FIG 3.2 visualises the different consumer attitudes according to the axes fashion, functionality, and brands.

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 unwearable. 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 involvement. 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 Zeeman (or any other cheapskate 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, Orson+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.[1] 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, licenses, and perfumes. Also in the middle, further up are brands like Armani or G-Star, whose brand image is defined by a combination of use value and reasonably fashionable looks. Here, the emphasis lies on product- and brand(ing)-related aspects. In other words, brand name, signature look, and use value 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 media 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 sophististicated 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.[2]

Ralph Lauren or Marlboro Classics stand for a casual and versatile type of clothing with rather high recognition value and a well-known brand idenity. 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 sportswear segment as well as to the everyday leisure-wear consumer. These firms 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 branding. 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 mode(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 insomuch 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 identities from a range of possible options 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'. A contemporary reprise of the traditional ethnic tribe, in his book *The Time of the Tribes* (1996) he defines them as small agglomerations of people whose meeting ground are 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 networks. The process of socialisation in this context 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: xi-ii). 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 heterogenous 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 start establishing rituals like greeting each other or having a short conversation. That way, they share a familiar, if ever so perfunctory and temporary, common ground. At work, however, Mr. Browne spends a much longer period of time and his contacts are likely to be more intense. He knows the names of his colleagues, has a more direct and intimate connection, and relates to them on a professional and sometimes even personal level. Provided he sees himself as an accepted and appreciated member of the group, we may assume that his sense of familiarity reaches beyond the level of professional ethos towards a type of bond that is based on affinity and emotional identification. After work, he practises with his football team twice a week, where he performs as a member of a fixed social group. Here his level of identification is not related to professional aspects but to team spirit and competitiveness. What this example is supposed to show is how in all these instances Mr. Browne becomes a temporary member of a social group that is based on individual codes of recognition. Throughout the day he enacts different facets of his identity according to the social context he is part of.

A similar concept, dubbed 'communities lite', is suggested by Duyvendak and Hurenkamp (2004). While Maffesoli's theory is mainly based on shared sentiment and common interests, the authors extend that idea towards goal-driven groups with a shared sense of agency. Enacting their 'plural identities', people form short-term alliances in order to reach a specific goal. For instance, people who stick up for smoking prevention, safe streets in the neighbourhood, or a ban on 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 pluriformity 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: 220). 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 necessary precondition for their emergence. It is possible for communities lite to take the shape and function 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]

Each in their own way, those positions are distinguishable from subcultures. According to Hebdige (1979), 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 accepted social standards and adopt a critical attitude towards them (Gelder 2007). In some cases that is certainly true. Punks, for instance, not only share a number of common markers of identity like dyed hair, combat boots with red laces, and studded waistcoats made from leather or jeans fabric, but also a specific attitude towards the establishment and an 'anarchic' stance. The Mods, by contrast, whose origins lay in the working-class England of the 1950s, tried to lower the impact of class and social origin through scintillating elegant looks. By adopting an 'upper-class style', members tried to distinguish themselves from the social majority and define their own social terrain. Also, the Mods were connected to a specific musical style (British rhythm and blues from bands like The Who, The Small Faces, or The Smoke) as well as the scooter as a social signifier. 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 (Hebdige 2006: 72).

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 identifiable style, and sometimes even a distinct lingo or argot that twists the meaning of certain words or phrases. That holistic view has received some criticism because in reality subcultures were often not as clear-cut as was frequently theorised. Still, the fact remains that subcultures are a more uniform concept than neo-tribes and communities lite insomuch that the latter two are more temporary and diverse (i.e., participation in a number of communities) whereas the former tends to be more monolithic. That does not mean all members subscribe to a subculture's lifestyle in equal measure, of course. Some might be heavily involved while others are moderate followers. Participation and membership, therefore, are always a matter of degree. Neo-tribes and communities lite, by contrast, are temporary social constructions that emerge and disband within a rather short period of time. None of them will be equivalent to an entire world-view actually. In fact, in the majority of cases they are micro collectives, independent of class and ideology, that share some sense of commonality. Unlike subcultures, then, it is the sum of those microcosms that makes up a certain life concept or mindset rather than one of the individual components (even though some might be more pronounced than others).

It is important to note that none of these examples completely supplants the traditional model. Friends and family are still important sites of identification. Each of the positions presented above marks an extension that widens the scope and possibilities of social identification, and each one is enmeshed with its own set of rituals and different degrees of attachment. Seen thus, neo-tribes and communities lite constitute auxiliary sites, the sum of which defines different social milieus. Also, we need to take into account that not all of these groups are based on intentional membership or a conscious sense of belonging. At the bus stop, it may not be a conscious choice that Mr. Browne greets the people he meets on a daily basis. He might do so out of politeness, not because he wants to forge a link. At work, he has no other choice than to accept that he is part of the environment, so, to some extent, he is required to abide by the codes of conduct. In both cases we might say that belonging is not a conscious decision. At the bus stop Mr. Browne's behaviour might be the result of intuition or respect, whereas at work a certain level of professional ethos is demanded, as part of the working environment. What the example means to show is that affiliative behaviour is not a conscious choice at all times. The processes guiding our actions are subject to circumstance and convention. We are taught to do things a certain way and we do not always question our behaviour. Even though, ultimately, the result might be a sense of familiarity or commonness, the ambition was perhaps more prosaic and not at all directed by a specific goal.

3.7 ... BUT STYLE GROUPS!

Taking fashion's malleable and kinetic nature into account, shortly after the research had started I realised that the defining features of neo-tribes and communities lite were not fully resonant with the goals of my research. The aim of the research is to look into the relations and value constructions between a number of Dutch clothing brands and their main audiences. Subcultures did not appear to be an appropriate concept because they don't not lend themselves to the subject of the study. Although certain brands might be synonymous with particular lifestyles, it seemed rather unlikely that they would attract a complete subcultural following. Neo-tribes looked interesting from a theoretical point of view but they did not fully account for the rather practical nature of the study. Their fleeting nature seemed too ephemeral to comprehend the nitty-gritty between consumers and brands. Communities lite felt like an interesting approach in the context of consumer agency and the active stance certain collectives take towards their preferred brands. Still, the concept appeared less suited for exploring the value connections between brands and consumers, specifically when trying to identify gradual differences between them, because in many cases brand communities are probably superlite.

Because of that reason I decided to distil certain aspects from Maffesoli's and Duyvendak and Hurenkamp's ideas and mould them into a similar category that is more directly related to fashion: style groups. Not unlike neo-tribes and communities lite, style groups are based on shared codes of recognition. My assumption is that different types of fashion consumers have similar stylistic preferences that lead to commonness and a sense of familiarity. People who adopt a similar clothing style might have a number of other characteristics in common, such as professional background (e.g. banking profession, creative industries, legal profession), product preferences, or life concept. By extension, a particular style or fashion can take on symbolic meaning within certain social or

3 The study of the book 'Kiezen 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 different 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 25 year-old woman looks for the same characteristics in a product as a woman of 45 years. Does the garment have the same meaning for each of them? Is it purchased for the same reasons? Do they try to express the same message with the product?

My account differs from neo-tribes and communities lite when it comes to the basis of their existence. Style groups do not emerge from 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 clothing 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 arguably 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, shirts, 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 a particular way to wear and contextualise the clothes. What I want to illustrate with this example is that, despite apparent differences, Mr. Browne has a rather uniform visual identity. That not only allows us to study the spectrum of his consumption interests, but also the wider social context in which they are situated. The following sections will explain how the symbolic function of brands and products serves to study the nexus between individual and collective consumption patterns.

3.8 STYLE GROUPS AND SYMBOLIC MEANING

Objects get inscribed with symbolic value once the meanings and interpretations attached to them transcend visible and physical characteristics. Following Elliott (1997: 287), 'the functions of the symbolic meanings operate in two directions, outward in constructing the social world – social symbolism – and inward towards constructing our self-identity: self-symbolism'. The level of attachment with a specific brand is consequently negotiated between the individual, the group, and the wider cultural surroundings. To the extent that socialisation can be linked to form, it serves mutual recognition and reaffirms belonging to the group (Maffesoli 2005: 205).

Developing an understanding of meaning-based purchase behaviour, Percy et al. (2001) suggest that it is important to study the interplay between individuals, collectives, and organisations. It is recommended not to focus exclusively on attitudinal or behavioural patterns, but to study brand-related behaviour in terms of the wider socio-cultural experiences of consumers. According to Algesheimer and Gurău (2008: 228), 'individual behaviour is determined by the specific structural context(s) in which people live and act (such as national and local culture, their reference groups, etc.), and by their specific position and role in various social collectives and organisations'. Okleshen and Grossbart (2001: 384) suggest a definition of consumer communities based on shared values and experiences, including activities and lifestyle-related events that are orchestrated by changes at social, economic, and market level.

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 behaviour and communal structure of consumers. I draw here on Holt's model of marketplace 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 1997: 328; cf. Algesheimer and Gurău 2008). By adopting a broad theoretical 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 collective retention strategies.

How is this knowledge usefully applied to the concept style groups? Earlier, it was stated that most fashion brands are synonymous with some kind of signature look. That does not necessarily mean that they stand for only one look. Nevertheless, more often than not a firm's different product lines are unified by a number of basic aesthetic principles that streamline the product proposition in its entirety. A brand like Dolce e Gabbana, for instance, offers a wide variety of products, ranging from T-Shirts and jeans to lounge suits and fashionable evening wear. Diversity notwithstanding, most of the products are relatively similar in style (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: style groups represent 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 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. Browne, purchasing products from an eco-friendly brand that prides itself on the exclusive use of sustainable materials and corporate social responsibility. Mr. Browne's attachment to the firm can be motivated by different aspects of the brand proposition. It could be that:

1. he just likes the clothes and is neither interested nor even informed about the branding message;
2. he chooses this particular brand because sustainability and CSR are crucial values for him, and he prefers to buy from brands that share and reflect these values;
3. it's a combination of both; i.e., he has a number of favourite brands but it is the firm's corporate policies that make the difference. In other words, the policies might not be the main driver in the purchase decision-making process but they constitute an added value in comparison to other firms with a similar product proposition.

As these positions show, Mr. Browne's sense of attachment could be motivated by different factors. It might be that he chooses for product-intrinsic attributes, like manufacturing quality and fit of the garment (possibility 1) or that his decision is strongly marketing driven (possibility 2), or that he has an informed view about what a particular brand stands for and therefore makes his decision based on product and brand values (possibility 3). In each of these instances the question is to what extent consumers respond to marketing-related aspects of the brand proposition and whether these actually prompt purchases.

More than many others, the fashion market is prone to rather fickle consumption habits, which makes the quest for loyalty both vital and challenging. It takes well-adjusted and intelligent formulas to bind consumers in the long run and convince them of the value of a firm's offerings. In section 2.5 we saw that brand identity can be a powerful means of securing patronage and a strong position in the market. At the same time, not all kinds of branding strategies work out the same way and, even if successful for some time, branding is not static but has to be sustained, renewed, and adapted to a zeitgeist and changing consumer needs. In the previous sections I fleshed out style groups as an analytical tool for clustering audiences in a way that not only takes into account their fashion or style preferences, but also makes a link to their life-worlds. The ambition is to identify different consumer types and get an idea of what the average audience looks like and which aspects of the brand proposition they mostly identify with. Clearly, not all members of a brand's audience are of the same kind, so it would be wrong to assume that it is possible to come up with monolithical categories. That, however, does not rule out the possibility to define an average level of involvement and explore the contributing factors.

The research is structured in an attempt to account for the different positions and develop a measure for the way different audiences relate to their preferred brands. In order to realise that ambition, the idea is to conceive of brand involvement and consumption behaviour along a continuum. On the one hand, the approach will serve to develop a discriminating and comprehensive perspective that allows the study of the relation between consumers and brands in a complex way. On the other hand, it might give us the chance to study variations and points of convergence between the different cases, and find out whether they are caused by the same factors.

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 groups, we are talking about a frame ranging from 'light communities' to 'tight communities' or 'brand fans'. In an effort to conceive of different conceptual models 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 it also defines 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 commonly shared values represents a decisive factor in the purchase decision-making process, consumer collectives turn 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 and driven by customer 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 they are 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 actually 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 'redesign' 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 consumption behaviour of their main audience groups based on consumer intelligence. Incorporating audience-specific values into retail concepts and marketing decisions, the goal is to appeal to the identity concepts

PICTURE 3.1 GAP: THE OLD LOGO (LEFT) AND THE NEW LOGO (RIGHT)

PICTURE 3.2 ADULTERATIONS OF THE LOGOS BY BRAND FANS

of consumers and develop a joint experiential framework (Forsström 2005). In that way, co-creation serves to establish brand loyalty, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of future (repeat) purchases and long-term relations (Edmonds 2008: 2). Mittal and Lassar (1998) found that, in many cases, brand loyalty is based on customer satisfaction. Instead of introducing ready-made and relatively unaccessible profiles, co-creation promotes the active integration of consumer input in the value proposition.

Practically speaking, such an effort could involve explicit methods like interviews, questionnaires or open-contest 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 (Prahalad 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 computer games or programmes are classic examples 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). Mascarenhas et al. (2004: 494) 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 of a new series of inline skaters to the French market. In contrast to direct competitors like Fila or Rossignol, 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., encountering the milieu, engaging in participant observation, 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 suppoted 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 which 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 life-worlds 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 market 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.

CHAPTER 4

ON METHOD

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 address 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. For my own research case 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 (Azevedo et al. 2008; Beaudoin, Moore and Goldsmith 1998; Phau and Leng 2008; Shim, Morris and Morgan 1989) or the economical and organisational structure of brands (Djelic and Ainamo 1999; Moore and Birtwistle 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 the possibility of identifying criteria in this relationship that are typical for the Dutch fashion landscape. Due to the fact that my subject is largely unresearched, an explorative treatment of the field was necessary, for which case studies were considered the most appropriate form. Case studies enable researchers to look into a subject from multiple points of view and collect rich data from 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) calls the 'how' and '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 facilitated an understanding of the value connections that govern the relationship on the one hand, and allowed me to make a foray into a largely untapped field of study on the other.

Positivist science argues that because of their practice-dependence case studies are best understood as a hypothesis-building 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 researchers, by contrast, have variously claimed 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 positions. In fact, the truth might be somewhere in the middle. Understanding case studies only as a research tool for generating hypotheses, appears to be a somewhat narrow conception and belies the actual potential of the approach. An exclusive reliance on interpretative methods, by contrast, excludes valuable insights that might be beneficial to the overall results. I agree with Yin's (1994) conception that case studies can include quantitative analyses or might even fully rely on them. In other words, the fact that case studies are mostly explorative does not rule out the possibility to apply a quantitative approach or a combination of interpretative and statistical methods.

It is said that, because of their explorative character, case studies are not suited to produce 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 uncontrollable, and so of no use'. That charge is neither fair nor correct. In fact, it is a somewhat dated argument built on 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 domain is mostly context-dependent. Following Flyvbjerg (2006: 223), 'there does not and probably cannot 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'. Case study-based research by definition relates to a specific context and generates knowledge that is not always readily transferable. At the same time, it would be wrong to assume that a setting that is built around a number of cases, does not allow for cross comparisons, provided that the research design is identical. I agree with Flyvbjerg (ibid: 228) that, because a case study-based approach facilitates a phenomenological understanding of a subject in all its particulars, it is a method that is beneficial to generalisation to the extent that it acknowledges the explorative scope of analysis.

The choice of case studies is a critical warranty of external validity. If the study is well chosen and representative it allows for inferences that reach beyond the actual subject of analysis. If not, however, the research starts from an ill-conceived basis and has little prospect of yielding conclusive insights. As a result, Flyvbjerg (2006: 229) suggests strategic sampling to increase the generalisability of the study and allow for methodologically sound inferences. Generally speaking, we can distinguish two different types of case selection: random selection and information-oriented selection. Random selection is divided into two categories: entirely random or stratified. The difference is that the former is aimed at providing general insights about society whereas the latter targets a specific sample of the population. Random selection is a method used to avoid systematic biases and to provide general insight into a phenomenon. Because of its non-specificity and broad scope the method relies on large samples and data sets. Information-oriented selection, by contrast, starts from an expectation about the outcome and is usually theory-driven to some extent. An information-based selection of case studies traditionally starts from a much smaller sample to maximise the use value of information from individual cases. Information-based selection can be divided into four categories: extreme/deviant cases, maximum-variation cases, critical 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 pertinent to the process of data collection or outcome (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 school of 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 show contrasting 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 – in 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. Dany 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 for their choices. From the full set of responses 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.

Generally 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 supposed to take. Due to the fact 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 this 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 two phases were interrelated to a certain extent, so 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, while the final conclusions were left to be drawn towards the end of the project with the full amount of data at hand.

4.2.1 DATA COLLECTION WITHIN THE CASES

The number and selection of case studies discussed above primarily pertain 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 methodological 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 one 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, each of the brands I focused on was examined over a period of three to four months. Consequently, the results should be read and understood as an attempt to understand the dynamics between consumers and brands rather than a longitudinal study of the phenomenon. Robson (2002) makes a distinction between three types of internal validity – description, interpretation, and theory building – that all relate to different types of knowledge and are connected to different problems during the research process.

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 that 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 memorise interesting observations. The observations were noted immediately and revised or extended once the further course of events allowed for more insights of a similar kind.

When it comes to *interpretation*, Robson (ibid.) notes that the biggest risk is to 'make up' a framework and factitiously construct causalities, rather than follow the steps of the research throughout and let the framework emerge on its own as part of the research process. The danger is to let preliminary conclusions halfway into the research, interfere with the findings because it invites a research bias into a certain direction that can inflect the actual results. In an effort to avoid misconstruing data I have relied on qualitative content analysis (clarified in section 4.3.1), which promotes data analysis according to clear-cut criteria that minimise the risk of premature conclusions and structure the process of detecting emerging patterns.

With respect to theory *building* and *understanding* Robson outlines three main threats that can influence the results: reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias. Reactivity refers to a scenario where the presence of the researcher influences, or even interferes with, the way respondents react. In order to minimise this risk I have tried, whenever possible, to interview candidates in a familiar and comforting setting. In addition, I briefly introduced myself and explained the procedure before each of the interviews, so the candidates knew what to expect. The term researcher bias describes the researcher's own ideas and judgments that might have an impact on the way he behaves and acts during the actual interview. Also, it involves the risk of asking probing questions and unintentionally steering the interview into a certain direction. Respondent's bias, by contrast, means that the respondent intentionally withholds or embellishes certain information to present a different image of a specific situation or state of affairs. One popular way to deal with these problems and detect certain flaws is to use different forms of data triangulation. Robson (ibid.) suggests data triangulation, theoretical triangulation, methodological triangulation, and observer triangulation as possible strategies to avoid any of these biases. For my own study I chose data triangulation and methodological triangulation. Looking into consumer perceptions and their value connections, I combined qualitative (i.e., in-depth interviews with patrons) and quantitative methods (i.e., short questionnaire-based interviews). In order to examine the different companies and their respective market approaches, I conducted in-depth interviews with people in a position of responsibility across the different brands[1] and studied documents and websites.

1 Excluding G-Star which eventually was not prepared to participate in the research.

Combining approaches and comparing different perspectives, the research relies on multiple sources of evidence and integrates a wide spectrum of ideas.

RELIABILITY

Yin (1994) refers to two different types of reliability. On the one hand the term relates to whether identical results would have been obtained if the study had been repeated and, on the other hand, whether 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: 79), '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) I structured the data with the help of a code book and a guided scheme for the analysis.

Next to the approaches mentioned above, the interview questions and questionnaires, as well as the final results have been extensively discussed with the group of fellow PhDs and professors who constitute 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 for 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 identical criteria. The scheme included a detailed list of each of the firm's outlets and the actual retail settings, as well as preliminary studies of each of the firms in order to get a first insight into the organisational set-up, media profile, and range of products. Furthermore, the research plan set forth 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 or with whom I was going to complete questionnaires, it was decided 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 shops 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.

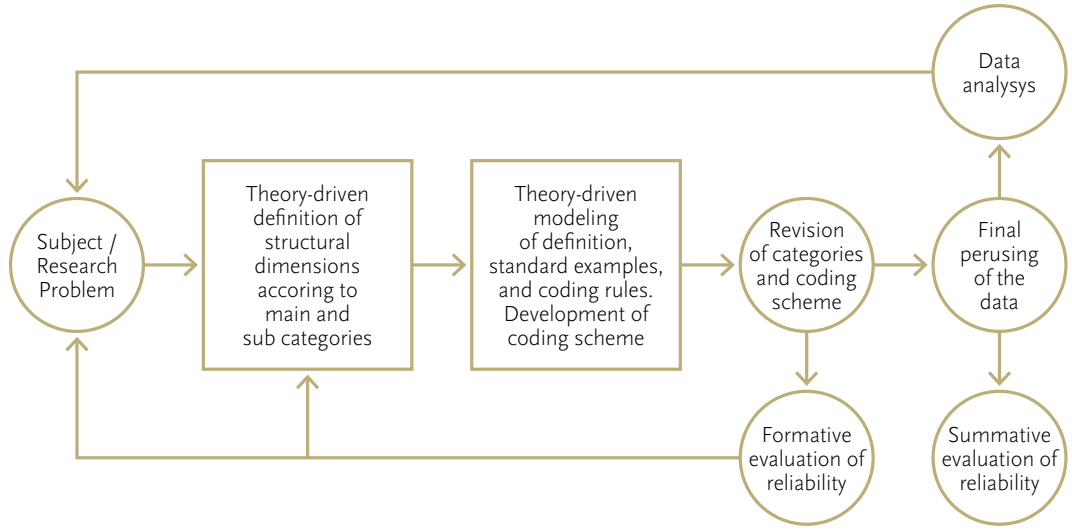
As far as the interviews I conducted with employees from the companies are concerned, I did not have a fixed target in mind regarding the number of people I wanted to interview. Rather, I attempted to cover all the relevant functions within each fashion company (marketers, PR assistants, designers, sales assistants, visual merchandisers) to get a complete picture of how the firm as a whole is organised, and detect patterns in the way different employees understand and execute the 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 Mailer 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 Bryjonfsson 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/informed 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 (Bryman and Bell 2007). 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 1993). One of the main reasons for this allegation 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-cut 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 theoretically-driven research set-up, the first step is 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

FIG 4.1 GUIDED CONTENT ANALYSIS MODEL (ADAPTED FROM MAYRING 2000: 5)



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 (Ritsert 1972; Wittkowski 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 (1973) 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 reasoning 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

background of the respondent (emotions, attitudes, experiences) and the circumstances in which the text was produced.
- Guided analysis: The material is broken down into units of analysis and studied step by step.
- Centrality of categories: Aspects are categorised and revised/adapted during the process of analysis.
- Quality criteria: The procedure should be documented and reproducible in order to make it comparable to similar studies according to the triangulation principle.

During my first year as a PhD candidate I was fortunate to get introduced to this method in a one-week workshop, under the direction of Dr. Jan Kruse at the University of Münster, Germany. In my view the great advantage of qualitative content analysis is that it strives for transparency and replicability of findings within the confines of the research, while taking into account the possibility of (minor) structural changes during the process of data collection. The aim is to analyse qualitative data according to principles that are similar to those used in quantitative research – with the very difference that the goal is not to actually verify causalities between different variables but to gain deeper insight into social phenomena. FIG 4.1 details the different steps used during the analytical process.

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 devoted to an extensive literature 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 the level of involvement (high/moderate/low) 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 text passage would fit the criteria and in what way it helped to provide an answer to the original 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/clothes · 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." (CKCII, 11') · "Of course, it's not really my identity. But this is the way I want to look. This dress is an extension of how I feel about myself." (CKCIII, 17') · CODING RULES All the 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." (VCII, 2') · 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 fulfils 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

TABLE 4.1 CODING SCHEME FOR 'CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT'

During the research in progress the 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 the categories and coding scheme led 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 developed for the coding scheme. Once the process of data collection was completed I made a summative evaluation of the entire material, checking for completeness and, again, suitability. This was followed by the actual analysis of the data set. The data was evaluated according to the final criteria of the coding scheme and analysed with respect to the goals of the research and its main subject.

Mayring's approach is beneficial to guarantee reliable qualitative data and develop methodological approaches that are comprehensible and stand up to scrutiny. The analysis of interviews, transcripts, protocols, and field notes in this dissertation follows the general lines of the Mayring's model and makes use of guided content analysis. Partly opting for an interpretative approach, the interviews and field work reflect the life-worlds of consumers in the context of each firm and facilitate an understanding of the underlying motives and experiences that define their relationship with a brand. With a focus on the lived experiences and social interactions between respondents and companies, the approach aimed to comprehensively illustrate the strategies of the different brands, and compare them with the motivational and attitudinal patterns of consumers.

4.3.2 A BROADENED PERSPECTIVE

Beyond an in-depth understanding of the relays between supply and demand, my research called for a second measure to make the findings comparable in a different way and to allow for more general inferences about the nature of the subject, specifically with respect to the Dutch fashion landscape. My aim was not only 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 observation protocols with quantitative data obtained by the questionnaires that were completed together with consumers.

My reasoning in this regard is informed by Bernard (2000) who advocates a less clear-cut distinction between the different approaches, arguing that 'while the boundaries between the disciplines remain strong, 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 insomuch as it does away with the classical divide between qualitative and quantitative methods. By extension, the approach he outlines 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 necessary data.

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 capacity of using the cumulative benefits of both traditions (Giddings 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 neglects fundamental discrepancies between different 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. Epistemologically speaking, investigator and 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 agree with the argument to the extent that epistemological differences do not have to be a disadvantage in a research setting that, next to an interpretative-explorative 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 only 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 phenomenon that each of the methods is supposed to examine. TABLE 4.2 shows in what way the individual research paradigms are used throughout my study. Quantitative methods are used to indicate certain

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)

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

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

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 distinguishable from other countries? What are its defining features?

It is commonly known that a number of Dutch designers work at big international corporate houses. Lucas Ossendrijver, head of menswear at Lanvin, 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 taken the brand from strength to strength in terms of both successful fashion designs as well as public identity. Presumably, their training in the Netherlands (or their national identity, for that matter) has been an integral part of their work for their current employers. Perhaps, it is even the very adaptation of their national background to a different aesthetic vocabulary that has been responsible for (part of) their success. But can we actually call this Dutch fashion? 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 challenging questions. For instance, Dutch denim brand G-Star, a trailblazer in the use of unwashed, raw denim cloth in the 1990s, has been a continued success for the past two decades, with the firm's clothes being retailed all across the globe. Before starting to thrive in the mid-1990s, however, the brand had almost shipwrecked. In fact, it was not before French designer Pierre Morisset took over the design department's creative direction in 1991 that the company started to garner critical attention. Here we can ask as well what qualities have contributed to the success and whether there is something typically Dutch about it? With Morisset in charge of the creative reigns, to what extent can we actually say the design is Dutch? In how far do the company's structure, market orientation, and marketing methods inflect this view? A case in point, not even in the home market many people are aware that G-Star is actually Dutch.

All these examples challenge the notion of Dutch fashion in different ways. Is 'Dutchness' part of the design or rather of the brand mentality? Is it possible to single out a number of brands that people do consider and recognise as 'typically Dutch'? If so, what are these assessments based on and what characteristics play a role?

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 and approached a number of cognoscenti in the field to share their view on what they consider as 'typically Dutch' fashion (brands) and shortly explain their choices. Twelve experts from different disciplines in the Dutch fashion world (economists, stylists, journalists, recruiters, trend watchers, independent retailers, academics... see list for details below) were contacted by email with the request to enlist a number of fashion firms they regard as typically Dutch. 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' firms (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 distil 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 will also reflect local culture in some way.

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 product of the predominant model of social intercourse. 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. Insomuch as local fashion materialises 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 repository, representative of the wider circuit of values and ideas on both the national and international level.

By extension, a goal of the expert round was to arrive at a workable, if not comprehensive, idea of what is meant when we speak about Dutch fashion within the format of this writing. In doing so, the enquiry informed the research as a whole. Obviously, the agglomeration of opinions presented here is neither exhaustive nor is it meant to be: the decision to approach a number of experts was not meant to produce a fast and hard definition of what Dutch fashion is – or could be. Rather, the aim was to develop a general understanding of:

a. a number of brand names which are considered typically or really Dutch;
b. an (assumed) number of defining features of Dutch fashion;
c. 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 selection of respondents was based on experience and an informed view. Each of them was selected for competent knowledge and a longstanding history in the field of fashion, thus warranting a long-term perspective and critical reflection on the subject. The sample size was deliberately kept at a maximum of 15 in order to guarantee both high response quality and internal validity (i.e., quality of the sample).[1] Even though some respondents had their reservations about the notion of Dutch fashion, all of them were able and prepared to provide a shortlist of 'typically Dutch' fashion brands.

THE RESPONDENTS

1 **HAN BEKKE** Director-general at *Modint*, the Dutch trade organisation for fashion, interior design, carpets, and textiles · 2 **CHARLOTTE BIK** Director 'Fashion & Product Design' at *ArtEZ Institute of the Arts* (Arnhem) · 3 **ANNE-MARIE COMMANDEUR** Trendwatcher; owner of *stijlinstituut amsterdam* · 4 **MATTHIJS CRIETEE** Deputy director at *Modint* · 5 **JOHN DE GREEF** Fashion director at *Elsevier* · 6 **MARIETTE HOITINK** Fashion recruiter; owner/managing director of *HTNK* · 7 **LIESBETH IN'T HOUT** Partner at *vof Flinterman & in't Hout*; former dean of *Amsterdam Fashion Institute*; former director of *Design Academy Eindhoven* · 8 **GEORGETTE KONING** Fashion editor/journalist · 9 **MANON SCHAAP** Co-founder/Co-Initiator & Curator of *SALON*; Founder & Creative Director of *Manon Schaap Studio*; Associate Professor 'Fashion, Image & Product Design' at *ArtEZ Institute of the Arts* (Arnhem) 10 **MICHIEL SCHEFFER**, President and CEO of *Noéton Policy in Innovation*; professor at *Saxion University* (Enschede) · 11 **JOSÉ TEUNISSEN** Professor at *ArtEZ Institute of the Arts* (Arnhem); visiting professor at *London College of Fashion*; fashion curator · 12 **JAMES VEENHOFF** Partner at *Fronteer Strategy*; former director of *Amsterdam International Fashion Week*.

5.3 WHAT IS MEANT BY DUTCH FASHION? AN EXPERT VIEW

What, then, is Dutch about Dutch fashion? Or, is there anything specific about it at all? When this experiment started it was yet to be seen whether the data collection would yield any pertinent results. In other words, the research started from a point of departure that sought to question and problematise the notion of a Dutch fashion identity rather than take it for granted: does 'Dutchness' – or an assumed Dutch fashion identity, for that matter – relate to design-specific properties or to the people who wear it? Or does it have to do with a business model or a specific market approach, or...?

In one way or another the respondents found themselves confronted with such and similar concerns as well – with the result that some of their responses and accompanying texts bore testimony to the ambiguous nature of the subject. Questioning how to actually define the boundaries of a Dutch company, John de Greef asked: 'Which brand is now purely Dutch and which one is not? Can firms like C&A or Viktor & Rolf, for instance, still be considered Dutch?'[2] Similarly, Manon Schaap challenged the notion of typically Dutch fashion as a whole, stating that: 'I have issues with calling something typically Dutch. (...) The problem is that I regard local fashion brands not as typically Dutch. I'd rather treat them as individual cases, each in their own right'. During a personal interview (Interview EPI) she specified this reasoning and called into question the actual necessity of making clear divisions between country-specific fashion discourses altogether. Schaap asks: 'How can we actually define what is Dutch and what isn't? Does it make sense at all to draw clear lines between national fashion styles? (...) In the end, I believe every country has more than one look or whatever else, so there is no such thing as uniformity anyway.'

Taking these and similar concerns into account, our first point of departure can be that Dutch fashion (and, presumably, any other national fashion narrative) is anything but a one-dimensional subject – and cannot be treated as such. Indeed, the question calls for a variety of angles, each with a different (and perhaps

1 The question what does or does not qualify as an expert is a critical yet hard to measure. The choices made here are the product of extensive debate, weighting to the interests of the project and its overarching goals.

2 C&A is owned by Switzerland-based holding company Cofra (owned by the C&A founding family Brenninkmeijer). Viktor & Rolf is owned by Italian superbrand Diesel's parent company Only the Brave since 2008.

TABLE 5.1 RESULTS EXPERT PANEL (# = NUMBER OF MENTIONS)

1 G-STAR · # 10 · VALUES Mass product with a distinct brand identity; clearly defined marketing/branding strategy; international orientation; (hyper)commercial; business acumen; 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

3A VIKTOR & ROLF · # 5 · VALUES Conceptual; coherent design/brand(ing) strategy; artistic; headstrong; design-driven and somewhat unrefined

3B ALEXANDER VAN SLOBBE · # 5 · VALUES Minimalist and modernist design approach; clean shapes; conceptual; academic; intellectual

4A MARLIES DEKKERS · # 4 · VALUES International entrepreneurship; emancipated image of women; no-frills aesthetics; geometry; daring and original product

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

4C IMPS EN ELFS · # 4 · VALUES Trailblazer in design-driven children's wear; freethinking and creative; trend setting; sustainable; practical; conceptual; no-nonsense

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

5A IRIS VAN HERPEN · # 3 · VALUES Craftsmanship applied to cutting-edge fashion; driven by technique and (material) experimentation; influenced by industrial design; uncompromising; conceptual

5B BAS KOSTERS · # 3 · VALUES Colourful; free; 'maladjusted'; non-commercial; visionary; freedom of creation; inspiring; in-your-face patterns and colours; theatrical; labour-/craft-intensive product

5C OILILY · # 3 · VALUES Colourful; informal; freethinking; recognisable

5D MART VISSER · # 3 · VALUES Commercial; design for the masses; mass premium; Dutch couture; media puffery; uninnovative; commercially successful; traditional

5E C&A · # 3 · VALUES Affordable ready-to-wear clothing; accessible; in-house collections; remotely fashionable; wide reach; mass product

5F GAASTRA · # 3 · VALUES Dutch sportswear; quality; functional

5G CLAUDIA STRÄTER · # 3 · VALUES Consistent representative style; unique position in women's ready-to-wear market; luxurious appearance yet affordable; business basics; good price-quality performance; clear trademark look (cut/use of colour)

6A VANILIA · # 2 · VALUES Commercial; premium mid-market women's wear; representative; recognisable signature style; good price-quality performance; fabric quality; easy-care; basics; colours

6B HANS UBBINK · # 2 · VALUES Innovative; commercial; geared to the Dutch menswear market

6C SUIT SUPPLY · # 2 · 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

6D GSUS · # 2 · VALUES Distinguished by creativity; international; unique take on contemporary streetwear

6E 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

6F SASKIA VAN DRIMMELEN · # 2 · VALUES Conceptual; moulage; craftsmanship; minimalist; collaboration with many different designers

6G MARCHA HUSKES · # 2 · VALUES Conceptual; restrained

7 OTHERS · # 1 · VALUES Aaiko; Pauw; McGregor; Kattenburg; Stijlgroep Groningen; Van Gils; Berghaus; Frans Molenaar; Soap Studio; The Sting; Geisha Jeans; Cool Cat; Rags Industry; Anna Scott; Bandolera; Expresso; Brunotti; Protest; Falcon; Hema; Sissy Boy; Wouters & Hendrix; Humanoid; Shoeby; Francisco van Benthum; Jeroen van Tuyl; Puck & Hans; Monique van Heist (Hello Fashion); Fong Leng; State of Art; AGU Sport; Jan Taminiau; G+N; Avelon; Mexx; Denham; Blue Blood; De Bijenkorf; Summum; People of the Labyrinths; CoraKemperman; Koos van den Akker; Mattijs van Bergen; Scotch & Soda

even conflicting) agenda. Schaap is right to observe that any possible answer would require a nuanced and distinguished view to pay tribute to the inherent complexity of the subject. In spite of its relative smallness, the Netherlands have in fact a flourishing and well-developed fashion industry with a variety of styles in its slipstream.

When it comes to topical research on the subject, we find that for a long time pointers have been put to one specific moment in Dutch history – the modernist, clean aesthetics of post-war Holland – that many have accepted as the country's predominant fashion narrative (Teunissen and Van Zijl 2000; Teunissen 2006). There is no denying that modernist heritage has had a strong impact on Dutch design (fashion and otherwise) in a variety of ways and continues to be a crucial element to this day. Still, to rely exclusively on this narrative seems to be insufficient to account for Dutch fashion in all its diversity. Because of this reason researchers have started to explore alternative approaches in recent years as well, attempting to make sense of a tradition in Dutch fashion that dates back to the 17th century, trailing a smorgasbord of influences from bright colour, to animate patterns, to local folk and costume traditions (Jacobs 2011c: 20-21; Feitsma 2011a, 2012b). Extending the scope of analysis into this direction means we are faced with a wider variety of conceptions. Some points of interest that filter into the discussion are questions like:

> *What different components actually play a role in discussions about Dutch fashion? In what way do they qualify as typically Dutch and why? How to make sense of different, and sometimes conflicting, appropriations of the term?*

The panel sought to respond to some of these questions. Summarising the brands and descriptions given by the experts, **TABLE 5.1** gives an overview of the results, with the brands being ranked according to frequency of mentions and the most pertinent attributes respondents connected to each of them.

TABLE 5.1 presents the results in a way that is supposed to give an impression of the general response pattern and the most pertinent aspects involved in the discussion. We can identify certain parallels across a number of brands, with elements like 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 of Spijkers en 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 frequently go hand in hand). So, the brands 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 · **1** Alexander van Slobbe, Klavers van Engelen, Viktor & Rolf, Iris van Herpen · **2** Sandwich, Turnover, Stills, Vanilia, Claudia Sträter, Bandolera, Expresso, Just B., Aaiko, State of Art · **3** G-Star, Gsus, Scotch & Soda · **4** Bas Kosters, People of the Labyrinths, Fong Leng, CoraKemperman · **5** Imps & Elfs, Oilily, The Rag · **6** Gaastra, Brunotti, Protest, Falcon, AGU Sport

TABLE 5.2 RESULTS CLUSTERED BY SUBGROUPS AND BRAND TYPES

In Group 1 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 Gatzen, Jan Taminiau, or Saskia van Drimmelen's collaborative project 'Painted'. Across the total sum of responses we can identify commonalities like minimalism, craftsmanship and, predominantly, 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, perfume bottles, logo, or 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 come from the same direction, yet with a focus on experimentation and manufacturing technology. A crucial ingredient of these designers' repertoires is the fusion of tradition, craftsmanship, and cutting-edge technology, leading to products that are inspired by industrial processes (e.g. CNC sheet metal laser cutting) and that allude to Dutch traditional style in innovative and sometimes radical ways. In this case conceptuality relates to a technologically driven process that determines the material aspects and appearance of the final product.

The firms in Group 2, amongst them Vanilia, Sandwich, Claudia Sträter, 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 retailed in the shops. Claudia Sträter 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 'Aaiko 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.

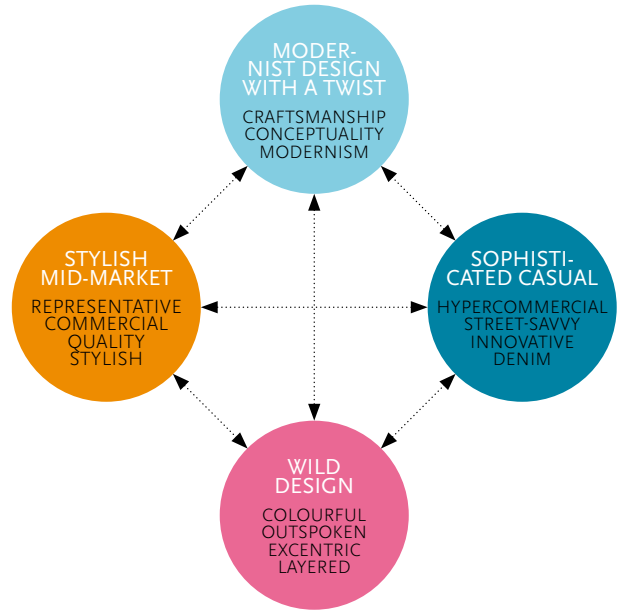
In Group 3 we find firms for who branding and product diversification form key aspects of the market appearance. G-Star, Gsus, or Scotch & Soda are all suppliers of mid-market denim products and casual wear. At the heart of the brand proposition are accessibility, clever marketing puffery, and international franchising agreements. Scotch & Soda, for example, has been expanding rapidly in recent years and now maintains multiple outlets in 32 countries and an even larger number of franchise and shop-in-shop concepts across the globe. Gsus 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 accessible and innovative products, commercial drive, and astute marketing tactics.

Brands in Group 4, amongst them CoraKemperman, People of the Labyrinths (POTL), Oilily, Koos van den Akker, or Fong Leng, do not epitomise conceptuality and clean aesthetics, but a colourful and upbeat look that takes its cues from pop and hippie culture as well as traditional Dutch costume. An extreme example, the work of young designer Bas Kosters represents a blueprint of this style: maximalist and somewhat irreverent, his designs are rich in colour and detail, feature loud and edgy patterns, and take inspiration from cartoons and Pop Art, the circus world and children's dolls. His clothes articulate freedom of creation, power of expression, as well as a bold sense of humour and the ironic exploitation (or bending) of creative references. At the more commercial end, companies like CoraKemperman or People of the Labyrinth have occupied unique positions in the Dutch fashion industry for many years. Founded in 1996, CoraKemperman's aesthetic lineage dates back more than 30 years when the firm's eponymous head designer created some of the definitive looks of the 1970s and 1980s for P & C spin-off Mac & Maggie. People of the Labyrinth, in a similar vein, has been a favourite with a conspicuously flamboyant audience for more than 25 years, boasting multiple points of sale in 19 countries including Japan, China, South Africa, and the USA, and a product range that includes everything from clothes to crockery, home accessories and stationary goods. Interestingly, this alternative tradition in Dutch fashion has started to receive some more critical attention in academic discourse only recently and it is a shared ambition of this project to further explore its multiple dimensions (Jacobs 2011c; Feitsma 2012b).

Group 5, too, holds a special position in the sense that the Netherlands have been a creative and economic force in the childrenswear industry for many years. Oilily and Imps en Elfs have been key forces in the emerging market for 'kids fashion' that is distinguishable from regular childrenswear in the sense that it engenders and translates global trends and zeitgeist for a young audience. Brands in this category stand 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. Imps 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 market hybrid at the intersection of two oftentimes separate domains, these companies bridge the gap between leisure wear and functional, goal-oriented attire products.

FIG 5.1 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 assess 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 insomuch 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

or a conceptual take on design (or a combination of the two). The Netherlands cannot compare their own luxury firms with superbrands 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's definitive vocabulary.

Wild Design (Group 4+5) takes its name from an alternative tradition in Dutch fashion that is characterised 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. Taking its cues from a wide variety 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 savviness. A distinguishing feature of this category is the very way in which companies are positioned in the market: frequently accomplished by a mix of alternative marketing strategies and hyper-commercial market orientation with nationwide points of sale, the branding formula is geared towards a plurality of fashion economies and resonates with universal demands. Fittingly, the product range in the majority of cases is comprised of sportswear basics (T-shirts, sweaters etc.) and trend-inspired, edgy garments in the firms' signature style. Furthermore, the use of denim represents an important theme in this context. Perennially striving for product innovation and new approaches to fabric treatments, the Netherlands have a longstanding tradition in denim fashion that resonates with attributes like esprit, humour, relaxed manner, and a 'blue' lifestyle (Feitsma 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 interesting and inspired formats. Generalists in their product range, brands in this category loom large with versatility and flexibility, hence seeking to cover large shares of the market. Part of the collection might be business oriented, another part composed of basics, and yet another might focus on more stately pieces. In spite of their mid-range position certain enterprises devote part of their collection to cutting-edge clothing styles, which adds more fashion cachet to the brand proposition. The combination of an original corporate identity, an informed communication strategy, and an established market position warrants a good balance between accessibility and exclusivity, up-to-the-minute fashion and business wear.

It is important to note that none of the categories exists in isolation. In fact, they cross-fertilise each other and in some cases even overlap. *Sophisticated Casual*, for instance, has points of connection with *Wild Design* insomuch as the bright colour schemes and animate patterns of the latter inform commercial street styles. *Stylish Mid-Market* shares ties with *Modernist Design with a Twist* to the extent that the underlying register of 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-ticket market, such as a moderate yet distinguished 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 all their diversity there is but one criterion which connects all four dimensions: above all, the Dutch put a 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.

In CHAPTER 2 I referred to 'national habitus' as a set of tacit elements that distinguish one country from the other. Kuipers (2012) explores this aspect with respect to the Dutch cycling culture and the degree to which the bicycle is far more than a means of transport: not only a characteristic that reflects local culture, she also argues that the bicycle in Dutch culture has made the transition from unself-conscious habit to 'self-conscious lifestyle'. As she contends:

> *'All Dutch are embedded in a network of conventions, habits and practices to do with cycling that are felt to be self-evident. If you want to go somewhere you just take the bike. Everybody cycles. You wouldn't know any better. In Dutch cities the unit of distance is the cycling minute, even in real estate brochures. The history has been forgotten because cycling has become second nature' (ibid: 9).*

Coming back to a clothing context, Kuipers claims that the bicycle is 'incompatible with bodily status ornamentations, such as stylish clothing' (ibid: 8). In my book that is not exactly true. Stylish clothes are actually not anathema to the Dutch. Rather, they put a premium on the fact that they are not *only* stylish but also practical. In contrast to countries like France or Italy where, depending on the occasion, changing clothes several times a day is a common ritual, the Dutch prefer their wardrobe to be flexible and accommodating. A piece of clothing needs to be suited for all different kinds of daily activities. Says Chananja Baars (cited in *VogelvrijeFietser* 2012: 34; my translation), store manager of the luxury store Coming Soon in Arnhem,

> *'It's incredible, really. You see that a skirt just looks fantastic on a woman but in the end she is still not going to buy it. [The dialogue would probably look like this:]*
>
> – *"When would I wear it?"*
> – *"Well, how about today?"*
> – *"But I'm about to go shopping now."'*

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.'

5.5 CONCLUSION

What has this account delivered? At the beginning of the chapter, the project's main constituents were explained with the aim to provide an understanding 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 given here are by no means exhaustive or definite: 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 presented an overview of 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 categorised according to six distinct groups. Third, the combination of brands and values was synthesised 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.

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 example of an 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 no 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 industry.
3. *Wild Design* will be explored with the example of CoraKemperman, a company that is defined by a dashing colourful signature style, as well as by a special approach to the market. The combination

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)[3], 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.

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

CORA KEMPERMAN: A CLASS OF ITS OWN

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Somewhat surprisingly, CoraKemperman 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[1] and businesswoman Gloria Kok, CoraKemperman is a Dutch high-street firm with a distinct value proposition and range of products. The business is medium-sized in scale and consumer approach, and caters to a specific share of the Dutch and international fashion market. Although the brand attracts women from a variety of backgrounds there is a surprising degree of uniformity concerning the type of consumer and the demands for clothing products. Somewhat peculiarly, while the firm barely engages in any kind of marketing activities, the majority of consumers have been loyal to the company for many years, worshipping the durability of the clothes as well as their unique style.

Based on a three-month period of research, this chapter analyses CoraKemperman'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 CoraKemperman 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 CoraKemperman'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 Rajasthan.

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). Bloated 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 CoraKemperman. 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, CoraKemperman's product range is sold under one name and in one single clothing line: *¯coraKemperman*. Including basics like longsleeves, 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,

1 Due to the fact that company and founder go by the same name, it is written in one word when I am referring to the brand and written in two words when the designer is meant.

PICTURE 6.1 ¯CORAKEMPERMAN · SPRING/SUMMER 2013

PICTURE 6.2 ¯CORAKEMPERMAN · SPRING/SUMMER 2013

versatile shapes and wide-cut silhouettes. With the ambition to offer unique garments that are artful and wearable, affordable and adaptable, CoraKemperman'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 distinguished visual identity at a rather attractive price. As claimed in the brand's mission statement, '[W]e 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"' (CoraKemperman 2002: 1).

Just like Mac & 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 (Interview CKII). Draped layers of fabric and the vibrant colours of India or Morocco loom large. On the other hand, high-end designer clothes are a main source of inspiration. First and foremost, it is the work by off-the-beaten-path designers like Comme des Garçons' Rei Kawakubo, Rick Owens, or Yohji Yamamoto that provides a template for Kemperman's own ideas (Interview CKI). By her own account, Cora Kemperman's collections are a translation of global fashion trends, marrying other designers' creative vision to her own. Referencing a plurality of influences, the result is an unconventional and individual product that bears the stamp of global and local style.

While the company admits to continuous change and is considered a fashion rather than a clothing enterprise, its product philosophy is underscored by an agenda that promotes durability and sustainability. Rather than creating of-the-moment pieces that look outdated after a collection or two, the firm develops 'complementary fashion products' with a smooth transition from one collection to the next. As Frans Ankoné, the firm's stylist and creative advisor, states:

> *'The clothes come in regular time intervals, so they always fit together. (...) It's a special characteristic of our brand that every week new clothes arrive at our shops and it just never happens that new garments are delivered only once or twice a season. We have a continuous flow of items that arrive every week.'* (Interview CKI)

Continuously developing the collections in the firm's trademark style, the clothes are decidedly anti throw-away. Each collection is an extension of the one before, many of them variegating signature themes like stripes and polka dots in different colours, pleats and the bias cut. The tension between the well-known and the new and unseen, produces an interesting style, 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 in the firm's Rotterdam outlet I became witness to a scene where a man filmed with his mobile phone a dialogue between his wife and one of the sales assistants who demonstrated the different ways the garments could be worn. When questioned he explained to me that he took the video 'in order to document how it [the garment] can be put together. Otherwise, we'll just forget. I mean, there are so many possibilities, you know'.

Furthermore, CoraKemperman's clothes are recognised for their feminine silhouette. With reference to her own body shape, Kemperman argues that her clothes are directed at the Dutch market in the first place. Dutch women are often tall and (tend to) have a slightly more robust shape, an aspect the designer unreservedly addresses. That, however, does not mean that the firm actually promotes baggy or shapeless clothes. Following Ankoné, the brand embraces more voluminous shapes as far as the market calls for it, but it is not the actual point of departure for the collections. As he states, *'[W]e also do not shy away from offering certain pieces in small sizes only'.* (Interview CKI)

6.4 A MEDIUM-SIZED BUSINESS

Boasting merely nine retail outlets – 6 in the Netherlands and 3 in Belgium – the firm operates from a medium-sized basis and oversees the entire lifecycle of its garments from start to finish. The products and patterns are designed in a section of the designer's private residence in Amsterdam, while the manufacturing is based on long-term collaborations with a number of SA8000-certified factories in India, as well as with suppliers from Portugal, Belgium, and Italy (Ciliberti et al. 2009; Köppchen forthcoming).

The decision to keep a low business profile and minimise the number of outlets to an amount that is overseeable and easily manageable, was one of the starting points of the business. Based on past experiences at Mac & Maggie, Kok and Kemperman wanted to grow the company only to a point that guarantees sustainability and sufficient leverage for developing in creative terms. Keeping the business overseeable, the entire creative process – from conception to realisation of the collections, from the styling of the shops to the seasonal campaigns for the website – is handled in-house. Another reason to not build the company beyond the Benelux border is that CoraKemperman has always been firmly rooted in corporate social responsibility. Based on one of its founding pillars – 'people, planet, profit', as is claimed on the website – the ambition is to provide proper treatment to all people involved in the company, minimise the environmental impact during the production process, and dedicate part of the profit to support social projects in their countries of production. In keeping with the claim to provide 'responsible quality', the brand's straightforward business model allows ensuring quality control in the production facilities concerning, for instance, the type of yarns that are being used or the conditions under which the brand's products are being manufactured.

According to Frans Ankoné (Interview CKI), the decision to keep full control over the firm's product development and build the entire business in-house has also a strong impact on the firm's strategic positioning in the Dutch fashion market. First, the close connection between supply and demand guarantees that the actual product matches consumer needs. Second, a medium-sized business set-up allows for a high degree of flexibility and makes it possible for the company to respond to the market quickly and make rapid changes to the current collection. Third, the fact that the whole firm is built by people with a similar mentality has helped to reinforce CoraKemperman's strong brand identity. While these positions should be analysed with a grain of salt, they appear generally valid. My own observations concur with Ankoné's view insomuch as there is an exceptional degree of internal coherence throughout the firm that also affects the people who work for the brand. 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 CoraKemperman 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 CoraKemperman capitalises on a strong team spirit and long-term relations with employees.

6.5 UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Inasmuch as the firm keeps a low profile on the high street it also maintains a low-key presence in on- and off-line media. Following no actual marketing strategy, the company neither takes out advertisements, nor uses other classic branding tools to create a high profile or attract public attention. The main channels to showcase the clothes are the shops as well as the brand's website. The latter is regularly updated with the latest looks of the season. It contains information about the company's history and mission but does not feature merchandise or a webshop. Instigated by Saskia Kemperman, Cora Kemperman's niece and successor, the brand has recently joined the new-media bandwagon with a Facebook fan page and Twitter account. Counting a mere 1600 'fans' (Status: October 2012), the Facebook page is regularly updated with photos and posts and features lively interaction between 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 174 followers (Status: October 2012), fails to deliver in promotional terms.

Website and new-media channels aside, the main point of value exchange is the actual retail setting. During my period of observation it became apparent that CoraKemperman has developed a specific, highly personalised sales approach that is based on identification and interaction with the staff. The service provided in the shops is a key variable in the relationship between brand and consumers, personalising the company and guiding consumers throughout the purchase decision-making process. While the firm's primary order winner is the product, the time and attention assistants spend on consumers is integral to the value proposition and represents an important aspect in CoraKemperman's retail strategy. As Rotterdam store manager Boy van der Hout (Interview CKIV) explains, 'eventually our main sales argument is service. I mean, that's what they [the consumers] mainly come for'.

In the retail environment the majority of consumers rely heavily on the judgement and opinion of the sales staff. Stronger even, the individual assistants represent a role model/yardstick for consumers when it comes to clothing choices and advising or disadvising certain items. The firm's sales approach is based on honest judgment and assistants are trained to choose pieces carefully according to the body type and personality of consumers. In addition, all of the brand's salespeople are required to have a complete overview of the product catalogue, which allows for an informed opinion when it comes to finding the right item and/or suitable alternative choices. A peculiar effect produced by this level of service is that in many instances the assistants successfully sell head-to-toe outfits rather than single items.

Apart from well-informed service CoraKemperman offers a personalised sales approach that is valued by consumers. Strongly capitalising on patronage, the sales pitch is individual and includes knowledge about the purchase history and preferences of consumers, as well as more personal data like birthdays, new-born children, the professions of the consumers, or even personal problems. Says Amsterdam assistant Kim de Graaf:

> *'[What is important] when it comes to our loyal customers [is] certainly that little bit of extra attention, our service and, indeed, our knowledge. But most of all [it's] that little bit of friendliness and the social component. By asking about their personal concerns*

or simply remembering their birthdays you really can build a strong tie with consumers, so that – in the end – they might appreciate that even more than my advice. We really do our best here to create a certain feeling, a kind of mentality if you will.' (Interview CKV)

By combining fashion preferences with more personal information, CoraKemperman's staff create a bond with consumers, which in a wide number of instances reaches beyond the material properties of the clothes. The result is a homey and welcoming atmosphere that connects assistants and consumers on a personal level. As one consumer explained to me,

'It's quite like spending time with your friends. You come here and it just feels right. In the end it really doesn't matter whether I buy a piece or not. I mean, in the majority of cases I do (...) but that's not actually the point.' (Informal conversation on the shop floor)

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, CoraKemperman'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 or talk 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 retail process but a condition both desired 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 CKII)

6.6 IT'S A SYSTEM

The sales approach constitutes a stronghold in the firm's strategic positioning. During the period of observation and supported by internal documents (e.g. guidelines explaining the desired sales pitch) it 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 advice on the proper maintenance 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 manicure', 'neat outfit'), to the shop's 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 consumer 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 themselves 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 clothes when they are asked to assemble an 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 really need to see whether customers can identify with her. That's really, really important. You can't hire someone just because she is nice – the way consumers respond to her is crucial. That's why we usually have more than one day [of trial-runs] with each new candidate.' (ibid.)

Working with a strategy designed to deliver good and intimate service in the shops, CoraKemperman 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 CoraKemperman 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'tlike 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. Once people 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 CKII)

The way Kemperman presents the case might be exaggerated to some extent. For one thing, there are nine shops and not just one, 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 small size and reach, is probably owed to the fact that a.) CoraKemperman 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, the Netherlands or Belgium. In addition, the strategic decision to keep the supply down leads to a certain covetousness of the products. As US expat Jemitra Hairstom 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 CKCIII).

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 overstocking. A side effect of that 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 disadvise 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 CKIII)

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 in the shops. Although officially open to all consumers, 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 that were expected to arrive in 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, CoraKemperman offers a certain privilege to its more spend-active 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 and they keep me informed about... you 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 CKCII)

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, CoraKemperman 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 CoraKemperman 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 clothes have 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 Marjolein van Rooy describes the product philosophy,

> *'You certainly have to like our style. We sell a type of clothing that is different from what you generally 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 three response options the item was designed to measure attributes consumers spontaneously associate with CoraKemperman'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; wearable · 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 CHARACTERISTICS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE CLOTHING OF CORAKEMPERMAN' (ITEM 14)
AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

Following these characteristics, the primary driver in the relationship between brand and consumers 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 luminescent hues. The style is characterised by juxtaposing plains 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 CoraKemperman'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 effortlessly across different seasons and that the items come in a reliable and lasting quality.

These attributes are also reflected by the results of Item 15 ('Which three of the following attributes are most suited to describe CoraKemperman as a brand?'). Whereas Item 14 sought to tap into the mental concepts of consumers, Item 15 was designed as a multiple-choice question with 15 default response options. In order 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, in both locations the items are distributed rather evenly. In Amsterdam we find peaks (i.e., more than 30%) for the attributes *recognisable* (47.04%) and *special* (61.76%). In Rotterdam we can identify peaks for the attributes *authentic* (45.78%), *stylish* (31.32%), *recognisable* (46.98%), and *special* (47.37%). Regardless of location, all those aspects are in different ways linked to the brand's outspoken and distinguishable 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, CoraKemperman 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 "congruent" [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 feeling of belonging and personal identification, 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.

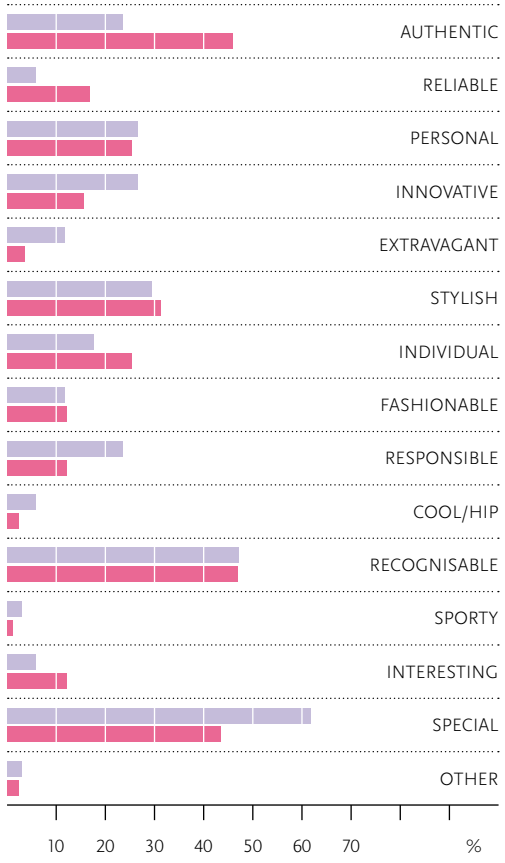


FIG 6.1 'WHICH THREE OF THE FOLLOWING ATTRIBUTES ARE MOST SUITED TO DESCRIBE CORAKEMPERMAN AS A BRAND?' (ITEM 15) · AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

6.9 PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR AND BRAND INVOLVEMENT

In the preceding sections it was said that CoraKemperman is positioned in the Dutch fashion market as a low-profile business, capitalising on a personalised 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 CoraKemperman tries to make the brand attractive for a younger clientele as well, at present the main consumer 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

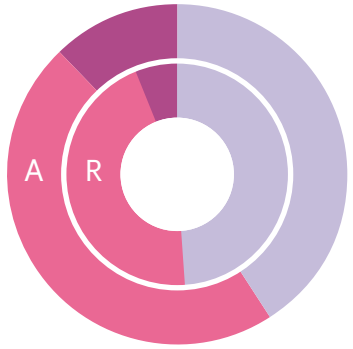


FIG 6.2 'ON AVERAGE, HOW MANY ITEMS DO YOU PURCHASE PER VISIT?' (ITEM 13) AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM
ONE ITEM TWO ITEMS THREE OR MORE ITEMS

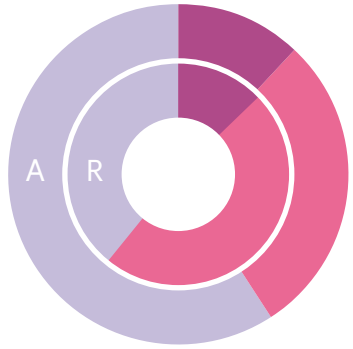


FIG 6.3 'HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT ONE OF CORAKEMPERMAN'S STORES?' (ITEM 12) AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM
ONCE A WEEK ONCE A MONTH LESS OFTEN

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 Jemitra Hairstom,

> *'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 it just so happened that Cora Kemperman's stuff matches up with how I feel about me.'* (Interview CKCIII)

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 that consumers wish to express.

When we look at the firm's audience in a more global way the high degree of patronage and repeat buying is striking. During the period of observation, as well as during the interviews it became apparent that many consumers have been loyal for many years, sometimes even decades (since the days of Mac & Maggie), growing together with the brand and sharing a strong sense of attachment to the firm. This tendency is also reflected in consumers' average purchase frequency. Item 13 ('On average, how many items do you purchase per visit?') was constructed in an attempt to gain insight into the average purchase behaviour of consumers and get an idea of how consumers interact with the brand in a consumption context. When we look at **FIG 6.2** we can see that the average number of items purchased per visit is comparatively high. In Amsterdam 41.17% of the respondents indicated to buy one item at a time while in Rotterdam it was 49.39%. Strikingly, in each of the locations almost half of the sample stated to buy two items per visit (Amsterdam: 47.04% / Rotterdam: 45.78%). In Amsterdam 11.76% claimed to purchase three or more items per visit while in Rotterdam it was a mere 6.02%.

When we compare these results with the visiting frequency a similar picture emerges. Item 12 ('How often do you visit one of CoraKemperman's stores?') sought to determine the average number of visits consumers pay to the shops. As **FIG 6.3** demonstrates, there is a rather equal distribution in both locations. In Amsterdam about one third (29,41%) of the respondents and almost half (48.19%) of the sample in Rotterdam visit one of CoraKemperman's retail outlets on a monthly basis, while 11.76% resp. 13.25% even come every week.

As these results show, CoraKemperman capitalises on repeat purchases to a large extent, with many of the respondents visiting the shops regularly and purchasing between one and two items. These findings are also significant in order to determine to what extent the level of brand identification has an impact on the purchase decision-making process. Item 8 ('I like to purchase clothes from brands I can identify with') was conceived in an effort to specify in what way purchase behaviour is related to brand-specific aspects, like

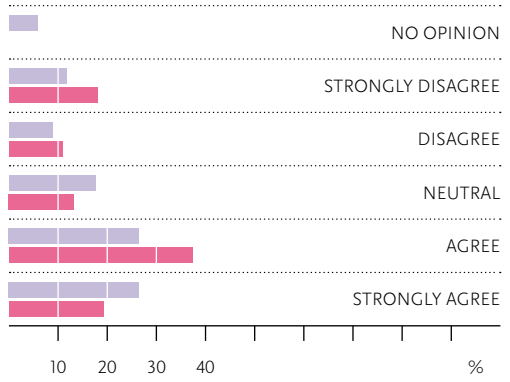


FIG 6.4 'I LIKE TO PURCHASE CLOTHES FROM BRANDS I CAN IDENTIFY WITH' (ITEM 8) · AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

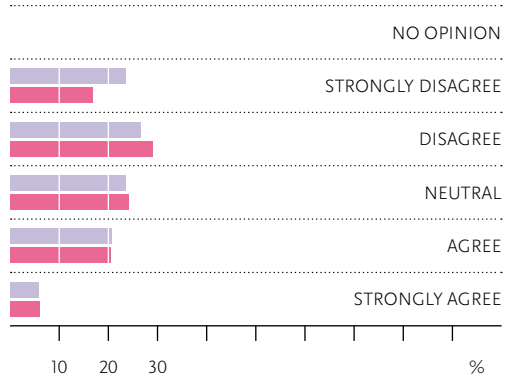


FIG 6.5 'I LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS' (ITEM 2) · AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

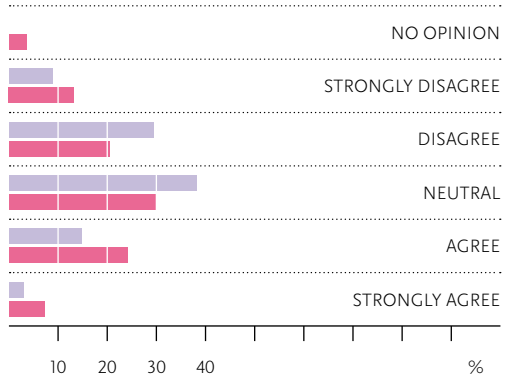


FIG 6.6 'I AM AMONG THE FIRST IN MY CIRCLE OF FRIENDS TO BUY A NEW FASHION ITEMS WHEN IT APPEARS' (ITEM 3) · AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

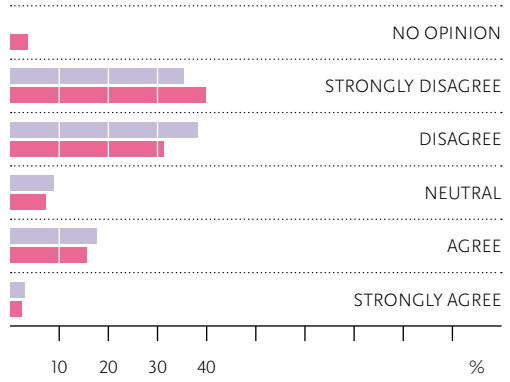


FIG 6.7 'I REGULARLY BUY FASHION-RELATED MAGAZINES' (ITEM 5) · AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

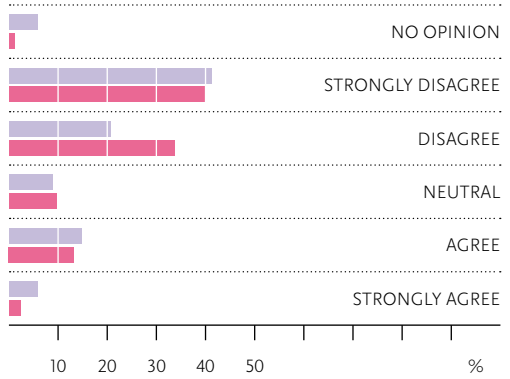


FIG 6.8 'I REGULARLY CHECK THE INTERNET FOR THE LATEST CLOTHING TRENDS' (ITEM 6) · AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

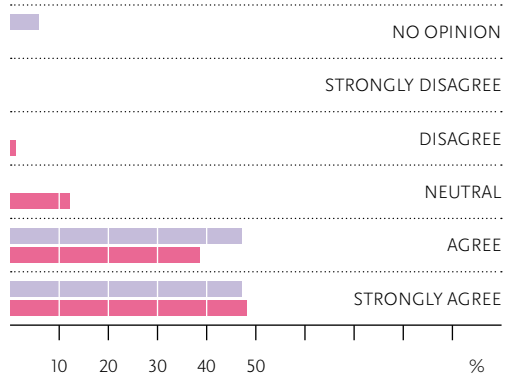


FIG 6.9 'I LIKE TO BUY CLOTHES WITH AN OUTSPOKEN LOOK' (ITEM 7) AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

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' self-concept and 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 my 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 26.47% agreed. In Rotterdam we find an almost identical distribution, with 45.78% objecting to the statement compared to 24.09% taking a neutral stance and 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 items 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 17.64% agreed. In Rotterdam we can identify a slightly more balanced distribution. 33.73% 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 75% 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 consumption behaviour and fashion involvement 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 73.52% 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, we saw in section 6.9 that brand involvement, visiting frequency, and the number of items purchased per visit are comparatively high. With product uniqueness as a main driver in the relationship between consumers and brand, this section looks into the question how clothing consumption is defined in relation to CoraKemperman's product proposition.

Item 7 ('I like to buy clothes with an outspoken look') was conceived to measure the level of clothing involvement. While fashion involvement relates to the

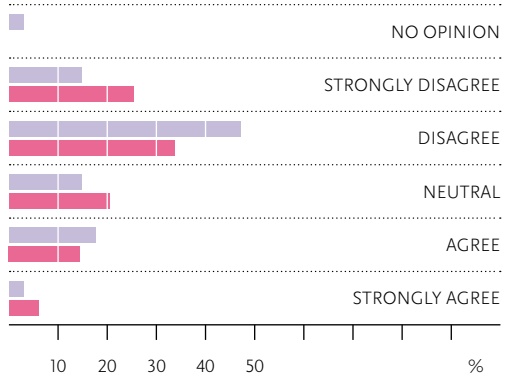


FIG 6.10 'COMPARED TO MY FRIENDS I BUY FEW NEW CLOTHING ITEMS' (ITEM 4)
AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

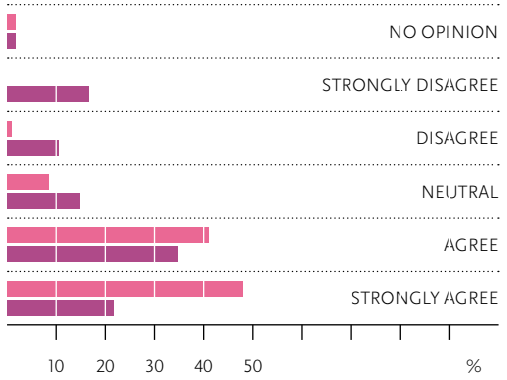


FIG 6.11 JUXTAPOSITION BETWEEN CLOTHING INVOLVEMENT (ITEM 7) AND BRAND INVOLVEMENT (ITEM 8)
CLOTHING INVOLVEMENT BRAND INVOLVEMENT

temporary and changeable face of apparel products, clothing involvement has more to do with a certain style or a general interest in clothing products.[2] Rather unsurprisingly, FIG 6.9 shows that CoraKemperman's consumers put a premium on an outspoken and identifiable look, 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 few 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 slight 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.

2 One of the most obvious examples of in this context is the traditional menswear market. Many men are actually interested in well-tailored clothes and an accurate wardrobe. While the items of classical men's tailoring may be subject to fashion they certainly do not have to be.

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 11a ('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 they had troubles to pinpoint what 'typically Dutch' actually means. From the few respondents who actually completed the item, the most common explanations referred to the firm's product style and use of colour. Says 53 year-old Jacintha 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.'* (Interview CKCVI)

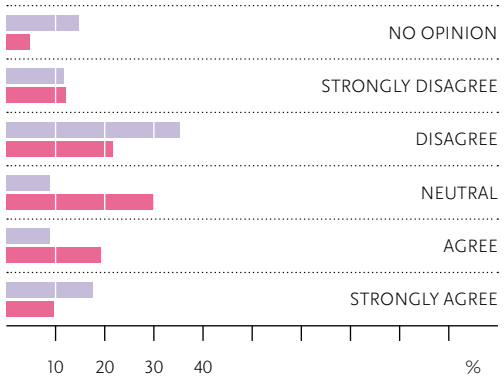


FIG 6.12 'CORAKEMPERMAN IS TYPICALLY DUTCH' (ITEM 11A)
AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

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.'*
> (Interview CKCV)

In some way, this outcome reflects a more general tendency that kept coming back in virtually all responses 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 consumers does not care where their clothes actually come from. Another important aspect is that it is generally hard to recognise country-specific attributes from the inside, i.e., when people are confronted with their own culture on a daily basis. As we saw in CHAPTER 2, it is mostly when people go abroad that they recognise certain characteristics they had never paid attention to specifically because they had been taken for granted.

When we leave the opinion of consumers out of consideration and look more at the general characteristics of CoraKemperman's brand and value proposition, I believe the firm actually qualifies as typically Dutch in a number of respects. First, the product proposition can certainly be considered Dutch. What I called 'Wild Design' in CHAPTER 5 entails a rather unconventional and expressive edge, meaning that many products in this category are playful and colourful, multi-referential and unique in their integration of unexpected elements. CoraKemperman plays with different parameters and eventually offers a kind of product that is barely matched in the fashion world. Second, the way the firm integrates the local clientele's slightly bigger body size could be considered Dutch somehow. It goes without saying that as such the very fact is not actually Dutch. Rather, the shape of the garments reflects, and takes into account, a body type (tall, slightly more curvy) that is more Dutch than French, for instance. Last, the way the company is positioned in the fashion market is somewhat Dutch. There is a sense of 'stubbornness', as it were, that distinguishes CoraKemperman from many other brands. Resisting expansion, franchising, and merchandising on the Internet, the company holds its own very well by carving out a distinct brand and product identity. Thanks to a coherent and professional organisational set-up CoraKemperman maintains a competitive edge in spite of its rather small size.

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 designer for Mac & Maggie. In the following section I described CoraKemperman's signature style based on these insights. We learned that the firm has developed a unique aesthetic vocabulary, defined by the use of vibrant colours, flowing shapes, and the juxtaposition between graphic elements and plains. Furthermore, it was said that CoraKemperman has become well known for a rather sustainable approach towards clothing production and consumption that allows combining items across several seasons and complementing an existing wardrobe.

Next, we looked into the firm's set-up and position in the fashion market. We saw that CoraKemperman is a medium-sized enterprise with a limited number of outlets and no retail channel other than the actual shops. Keeping full control over the production cycle, the company capitalises on long-term relations with manufacturers and employees and is distinguished by handling the entire value-creation chain in-house. By holding down the number of outlets, as well as the supply inside the shops, the clothes are given an exclusive edge that makes them more covetous and attractive for its clientele. Promoting exclusivity as an asset, CoraKemperman successfully creates a 'buzz' around its products, thereby augmenting their desirability.

The relation with the company, however, not only depends on product-intrinsic aspects but is also connected to personalised and individual interaction between consumers and staff. Instead of traditional promotion strategies (e.g. advertisements, billboards, product placement, or push marketing) the company works with a well-orchestrated, consumer-centric sales pitch that produces an atmosphere of belonging and individuality for its consumers. While the effort is meant to appear casual and natural, it was shown that its well-functioning depends on a set of well-designed strategies to retain loyalty, and build a relationship based on personal ties between consumers and salespeople.

In the analysis we saw that the audience puts a premium on the brand's distinguished avant-garde style. Use of colour and signature look constitute key drivers in the relationship, as do attention to detail, durable quality, and ease of wear. Throughout, the firm's clients emphasised uniqueness and recognition value as critical aspects, thereby linking their own desire for differentiation to primary product attributes. The relation between consumers and the brand is defined by a shared kind of 'mindset'. The message to consumers is that the firm offers a special product for a particular type of people, and this creates a group mentality and nurtures the feeling of purchasing an 'insider tip'. Consumers buy into the value proposition based on the fact that they are given the opportunity to be part of a rather small and somewhat exclusive group of people: it is a non-mainstream type of clothing that is actively sold to consumers as 'not for everyone'. In doing so, (perhaps unwittingly) in- and out-groups are created that help build identification with brand and product.

With a narrow scope of consumers, CoraKemperman is geared towards a rather specific share of the fashion market. Largely capitalising on patronage and long-term buying relations, the level of consumer involvement is comparatively high. Consumers frequent the shops regularly and purchase rather large quantities. Identification and interaction with the brand largely depends on the way the brand's clothes are used to communicate a certain image or identity. The garments provide a stage for consumers to convey how they see themselves and feel about themselves. Greatly in line with that finding, we have seen that the connecting variable is not actually the clothes' fashion value but their unique and expressive appearance. In that way, CoraKemperman's consumers are conscious of product and style rather than drawn to trendy or up-to-the-minute fashion products.

While no clear picture emerged with respect to the question whether consumers rate the firm as typically Dutch, there are a number of aspects that seem more resonant with the Dutch cultural background than with certain others. First, the product proposition refers to the country's tradition of colourful dress ('streekdracht') and ethno-inspired clothes from the 1970s and 80s. Second, the brand takes the more robust build of Dutch women into account by offering clothes in a wider, flattering cut. Third, the way the firm is distinguished in the fashion market is somewhat peculiar. On the one hand 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.

CHAPTER 7

VANILIA: JUST ABOUT RIGHT

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The Dutch womenswear brand Vanilia[1] 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.

Vanilia'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.

PICTURE 7.1 VANILIA (MAIN LINE) • SPRING/SUMMER 2013

PICTURE 7.2 VNL • SPRING/SUMMER 2013

The company's third line, *Vanilia Elements*, is composed of chic and business-oriented clothing. Here, skirts, blouses, trouser suits, and belted dresses dominate, most of them combine muted colours with textured fabrics and detailed stitching. Integrating elements of the two other collections, *Vanilia* 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

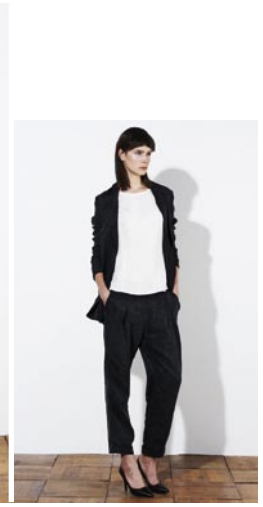
During the past few years, Vanilia has increasingly sought to establish the image of a trend-oriented quality fashion brand, thereby extending its former focus on business wear to up-to-the-minute fashion clothing. The current separation between the different lines reflects this progression to the extent that *Vanilia Elements* and *Business Basics* are contemporary takes on business wear while the main lines, *Vanilia* and *VNL*, are focused on chic, comfortable leisure clothing. According to an interview with the firm's PR manager, Tatiana Striekwold, Vanilia 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 VVIII).

Restructuring the retail strategy under the guiding theme of 'affordable luxury', Vanilia 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 Striekwold, 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 "tuttiger" (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 Vanilia'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, Vanilia 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

PICTURE 7.3 ELEMENTS · SPRING/SUMMER 2013



PICTURE 7.4 BUSINESS BASICS · SPRING/SUMMER 2013

(Interview VI). The leap forward constitutes an extension of the existing product range, trying to emphasise more fashion-oriented aspects of the collection while 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 consumers 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 Vanilia'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 VIX)

This, to be sure, is just one of a few 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 Vanilia 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 Hulzebosch, 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 VIV). To accomplish that goal, Vanilia 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 factory in Turkey. With the aim to render these aspects 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 furbishings, 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, earthenware, and objets d'art (Interview VII).

In an effort to highlight pertinent aspects of the retail environment, Vanilia 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 Vanilia'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 homelike atmosphere. A place where people simply like to spend time. So, we have all kinds of paraphernalia like old trunks, huge planters, ladders, sailing hawsers, and what not. 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 crowds, no pushy service. I believe that our consumers appreciate that a lot because it makes them feel welcome.' (Interview VIX)

This concerted approach, however, is not limited to the presentation of products, but also pertains to the staff's outward appearance. 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 VIX),

'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 consumption act as they help contribute to a holistic retail experience, in which music, service, atmosphere, and product range all play their part.

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

Trying to translate the latest 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 work flow 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 VIX). 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 consumers. Says Vanilia's director, Michel Hulzebosch (cited in *Lampe* 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 sell 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 retesting 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 7.7.1 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 in Turkey to their website, thereby trying to make consumers aware of the fact that the firm's clothing is produced under proper working conditions and with attention to detail. Over a sequence of seven 'chapters' (i.e., seven short feature films) consumers can follow the different steps of how the firm's products are being manufactured. From start to finish they get insight into the different stages involved in the creation of a garment and the conditions under which it is being created. Seeking to market the company image from different angles, the aim is to foreground what Vanilia actually stands for: corporate social responsibility and quality clothing.

7.4.3 THE INTERACTIVE RELAY: WEB 2.0

Next to the efforts described in the previous sections, the restructuring also involved making better use of new media. Paying tribute to a changing consumption mentality, Vanilia nowadays engages in social media like Facebook and Twitter. For the past few years, e-mailing via the brand's internal customer registry had been the primary channel to connect to consumers and keep them updated about the brand. Practically speaking, every consumer who subscribes to the mailing list regularly receives information about projected events, pre-sales, sample sales, and other brand-related information (see section 7.5). Due to the fact that such an approach is largely unidirectional – consumers receiving information without actively engaging with the brand themselves – Vanilia's latest forays seek to get the brand involved with web 2.0 technologies that allow for a different kind of interaction between supply and demand (Interview VIII).

Certainly, employing web 2.0 technologies in a marketing context is not actually a new phenomenon. In fact, the majority of state-of-the-art (fashion) labels have made them an integral part of the brand proposition years ago. In the case of Vanilia, however, tapping new media constitutes a break with tradition insomuch as the firm had deliberately refrained from online marketing for years, in favour of retail-based offline concepts. According to the company's former head of communications, Eva Beekhof, 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 relays 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 answered. Most of the time consumers are addressed personally, responses are immediate and in a casual friendly tone. Recently, also other new-media technologies, such as Pinterest[2], have been added to the list. Here, photos with short accompanying texts, lifestyle-related information, and links to websites are posted, thus giving consumers the chance to get an idea of design inspirations and gain insight into the experience world that is created around the brand proposition.

2 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.

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 Bijwaard, regional manager)

While the developments I 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 stimulated with special events or promotions they receive information about via e-mail[3] 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 '15%-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 do 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 list 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.

Vanilia also has a history of collaborating with other suppliers in the fashion circuit. 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. The promotion became such a success that, according to Arnhem store manager Eveline Otten, consumers eventually 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

3 The notion of 'patron' Vanilia employs is rather loose, considering that every consumer who fills in a registration form is eventually part of the registry.

'Would you be able to organise one for me? I really don't need the subscription, but I want that bag!' This way you see how [the sales promotions] really do live and how people are highly sensitive to them.'
(Interview VVI)

The most interesting bit of this consumer-oriented model, however, are the firm's special night-time events like the 'Vanilia Friends Night' ('vriendinnen avond') or 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, so consumers could choose a full makeover, complete with make-up, image consulting, or professional styling in Vanilia clothes. The results were photographed with a Polaroid camera and given to the consumers as give-aways. In another instance, the company teamed up with a producer of vodka. A special-edition bottle was designed with the Vanilia logo that was handed to consumers as a gift after the sales act.

The latest and, to date, biggest of these efforts took place in March 2011. During the second collaboration in a projected series with the Dutch fashion and lifestyle magazine Jan, Vanilia designed a 12-piece limited-edition collection that was promoted in the preceding magazine and that was sold during a one-off night-time event in all 16 shops across the country. Complete with DJs, hair stylists, make-up artists, and *tableaux vivants* dressed in the collection, serving finger food and champagne, the event was designed to have a party-like playful atmosphere. Special sales promotions were planned for the evening as well. Each purchase, for example, was rewarded with a discount voucher of 10 Euros and goodie bags containing fashion gadgets from Vanilia and Jan. Also in March, the company celebrated the launch of a concept store located on the ground floor of the headquarters in Wormerveer. The idea to turn the company's work space into an open retail area, was an occasion to bring the environment where most of the clothing is designed closer to consumers, and introduce the people who work for the firm (Interview VV). Each of these efforts was meant to connect the firm's portfolio to a lifestyle context and allow consumers to experience the collection in an exclusive, socially stimulating setting. Shifting the point of value exchange from product-centric to lifestyle-related properties, it is an integrated approach to tap into the consumers' life-worlds and facilitate a different experience of the brand. Future collaborations include a subscription promotion with Red Magazine, the Grazia Wedding Special, the Jackie Shopping Day (21% discount on all Vanilia items) plus after-party, and a publication in the Marie Claire shopping guide 'Think Global, Act Eco'.

7.6 CONSUMER IDENTITIES

What with all the new developments, the interesting part of the development as a whole are the means by which Vanilia tries to change its image and sales strategy in order to reach and attract a different kind of audience group. The fact worthy of attention here is how the company is making a conscious effort to integrate consumers' opinions and profiles into the fashion cycle/value creation chain. Following a number of interviews at Vanilia's headquarters, the company used to develop its image not so much based on consumer needs in the past, but by trying to create an identity through advertising campaigns and fashion events. This approach was successful until the brand decided to address a different clientele (Interview VI). Gearing 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 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 personalise 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 reliance on a unidirectional, brand-driven business approach is insufficient to reach the desired target market. Vanilia's embrace of a consumer-oriented model suggests not only a certain expedience but, perhaps, an exigency to make the audience a more integral part of the value creation chain.

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 particular, 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 VVII). To an extent, this development 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 understated fashion 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 between approximately 30 and 45 years of age (Group 1), often with a business background, who look for a fashionable 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. Offering distinct fashion styles across the different clothing lines, the scale of consumption interests is also reflected in Vanilia's range of products. As Anna-Maartje 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 questionnaires (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 successful and in what way its audience will develop.

7.7.1 STYLE... ON THE SAFE SIDE

Despite its mixed clientele a rather straightforward picture emerged concerning the main value connections of Vanilia's consumers. Questionnaire Item 14 ('Please try to name three characteristics you associate with the clothing of Vanilia') sought to identify the primary value connections. The item was created based on three response options, measuring certain characteristics spontaneously associated with Vanilia's range of products. After typing out the full amount of responses the results were coded, clustered, and analysed according to TABLE 7.1.

QUALITY/PRICE Quality; workmanship; durability; attention to detail; good price-performance ratio; quality fabric(s) · STYLE Stylish; hip; fashionable; neat; classy; trendy; chic; original · COMFORT/WEARABILITY Good fit; comfortable; wearable · OTHERS Femininity; versatility; business-like; timeless; allows for multiple combinations

TABLE 7.1 CODING SCHEME FOR CONSUMER RESPONSES · VALUE CONNECTION FOLLOWED BY ATTRIBUTES

From the full amount of responses, the results suggest a connection based on three variables: quality/price (I), style (II), and comfort/wearability (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.

RESPONDENTS		QUALITY/PRICE		STYLE		COMFORT/WEARABILITY		OTHERS	
G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2
81	37	34.56%	59.45%	67.90%	54.05%	16.04%	10.81%	39.50%	24.32%
52	27	30.76%	44.44%	69.23%	88.88%	17.31%	14.81%	17.30%	22.22%
65	32	44.61%	28.12%	83.07%	28.12%	16.92%	31.25%	29.23%	15.65%
198	96	36.87%	44.79%	73.23%	55.21%	16.67%	8.75%	30.30%	20.83%
294		39.46%		67.35%		17.35%		27.21%	

TABLE 7.2 'PLEASE TRY TO NAME THREE CHARACTERISTICS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE CLOTHING OF VANILIA' (ITEM 14) GROUP 1 / GROUP 2 AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

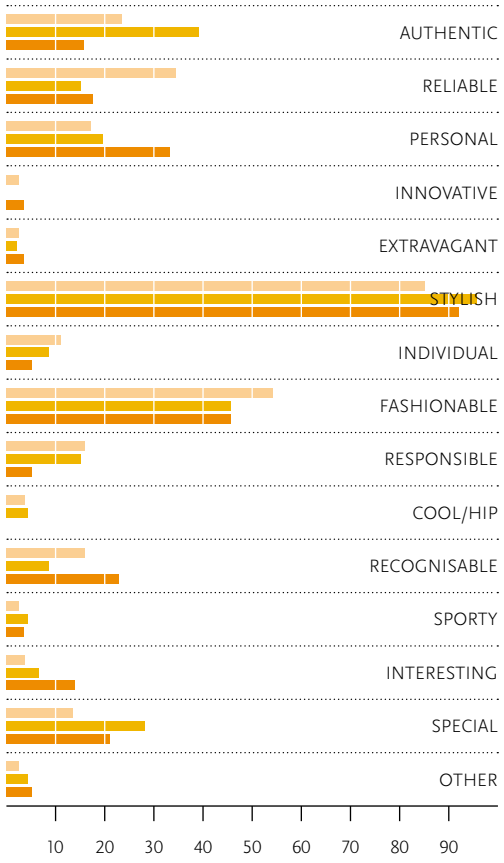


FIG 7.1 'WHICH THREE OF THE FOLLOWING ATTRIBUTES ARE MOST SUITED TO DESCRIBE VANILIA AS A BRAND?' (ITEM 15/GROUP 1)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

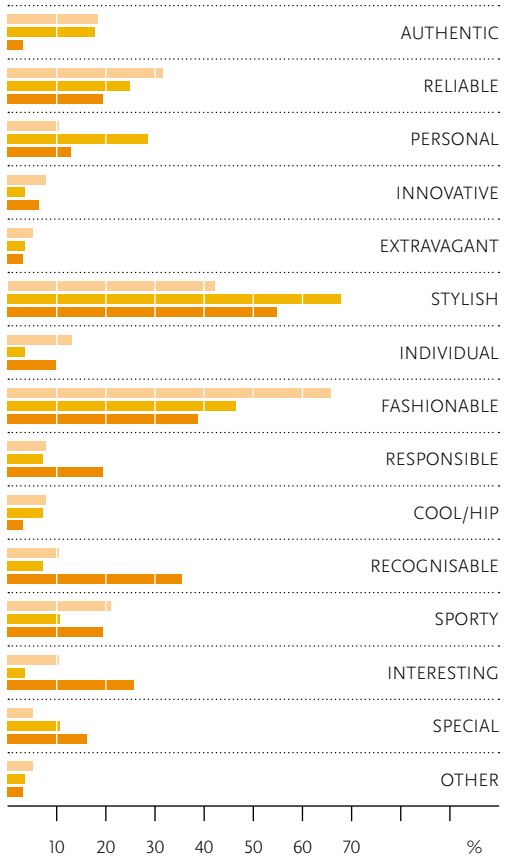


FIG 7.2 'WHICH THREE OF THE FOLLOWING ATTRIBUTES ARE MOST SUITED TO DESCRIBE VANILIA AS A BRAND?' (ITEM 15/GROUP 2)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

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 this case, however, they are distributed according to the individual locations. In Arnhem *style* proved significant while *product quality* produced a moderate score and *comfort* proved largely insignificant. In Amsterdam *quality* and *style* are distributed evenly, while *comfort* turns out to be largely insignificant. In Rotterdam all three values are distributed evenly, with comfort being the strongest connection. At first glance, none of the three value connections is strongly pronounced. To better understand this outcome we need to take a relatively high number of abstentions in Group 2 into account. In Amsterdam 13.51% of consumers did not complete the item, in Arnhem 25.92%, and in Rotterdam even 31.25%. If we now apply absolute rather than relative values (i.e., the full number of actual responses minus abstentions), the items are distributed the following way: 39.13% for *quality*, 39.13% for *style*, and 43.47% for *comfort/wearability*.

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: 54.32%; 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,

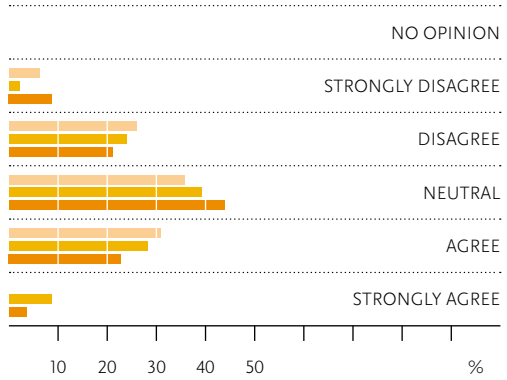


FIG 7.3 'I LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS' (ITEM 2/GROUP 1)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

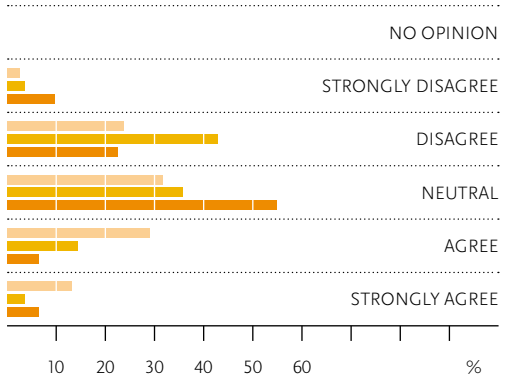


FIG 7.4 'I LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS' (ITEM 2/GROUP 2)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

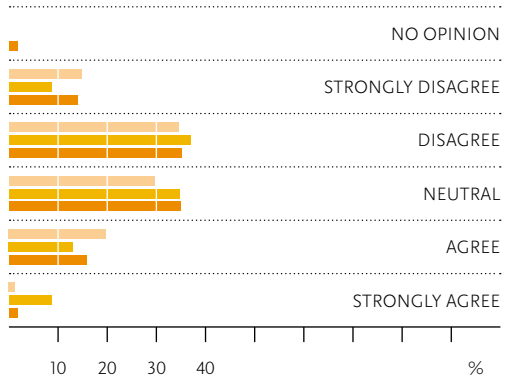


FIG 7.5 'I AM AMONG THE FIRST IN MY CIRCLE OF FRIENDS TO BUY A NEW FASHION ITEMS WHEN IT APPEARS' (ITEM 3/GROUP 1) · AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

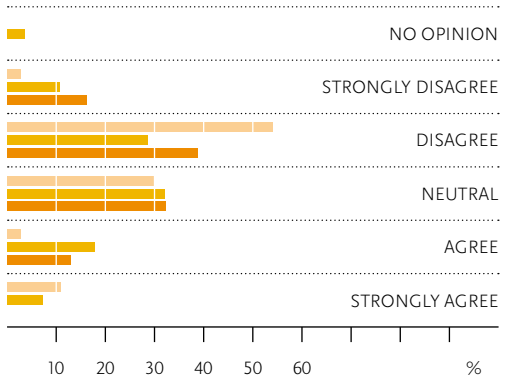


FIG 7.6 'I AM AMONG THE FIRST IN MY CIRCLE OF FRIENDS TO BUY A NEW FASHION ITEMS WHEN IT APPEARS' (ITEM 3/GROUP 2) · AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

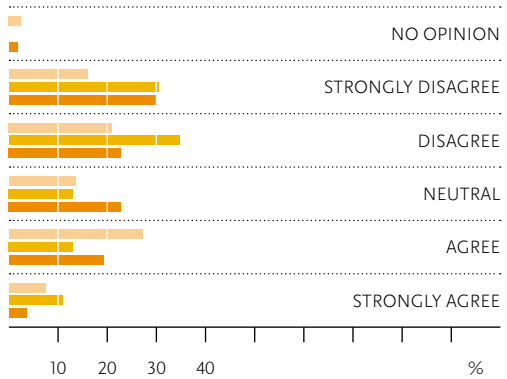


FIG 7.7 'I REGULARLY BUY FASHION-RELATED MAGAZINES' (ITEM 5/GROUP 1)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

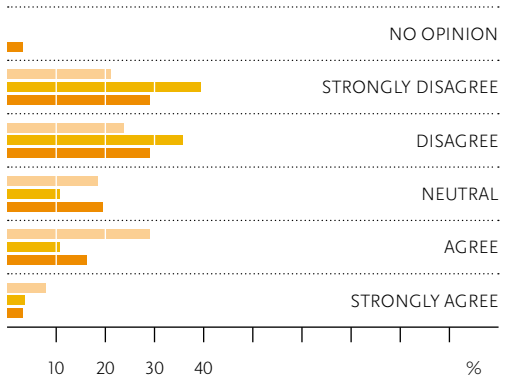


FIG 7.8 'I REGULARLY BUY FASHION-RELATED MAGAZINES' (ITEM 5/GROUP 2)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

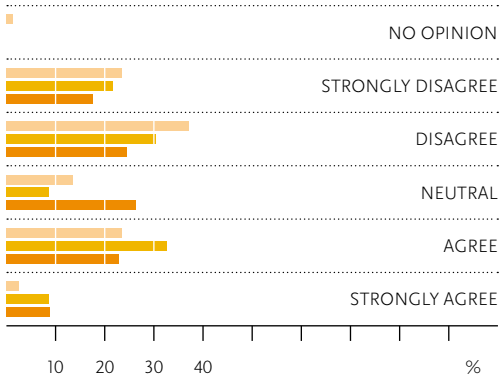


FIG 7.9 'I REGULARLY CHECK THE INTERNET FOR THE LATEST CLOTHING TRENDS' (ITEM 6/GROUP 1)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

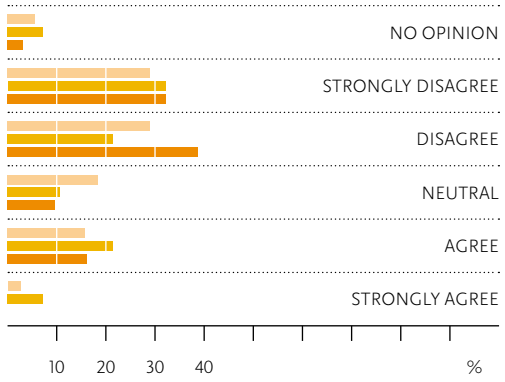


FIG 7.10 'I REGULARLY CHECK THE INTERNET FOR THE LATEST CLOTHING TRENDS' (ITEM 6/GROUP 2)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

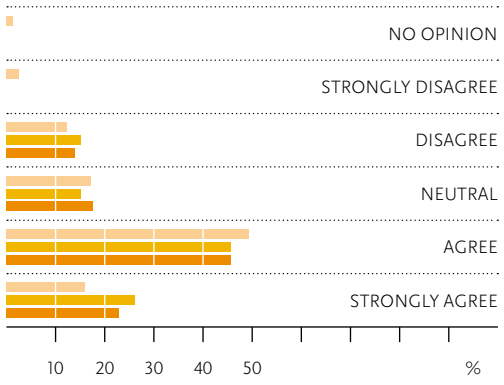


FIG 7.11 'I LIKE BUYING CLOTHES WITH AN OUTSPOKEN LOOK' (ITEM 7/GROUP 1)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

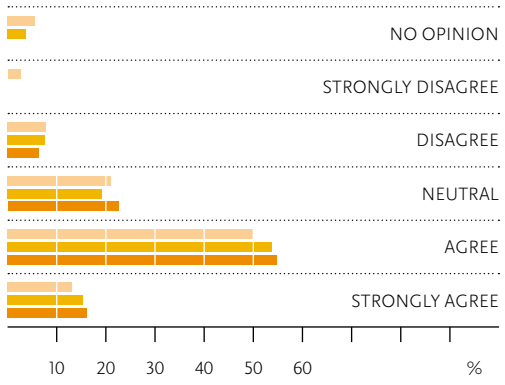


FIG 7.12 'I LIKE BUYING CLOTHES WITH AN OUTSPOKEN LOOK' (ITEM 7/GROUP 2)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

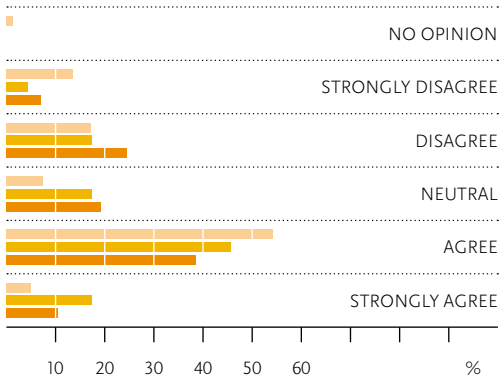


FIG 7.13 'I LIKE TO PURCHASE CLOTHES FROM BRANDS I CAN IDENTIFY WITH' (ITEM 8/GROUP 1)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

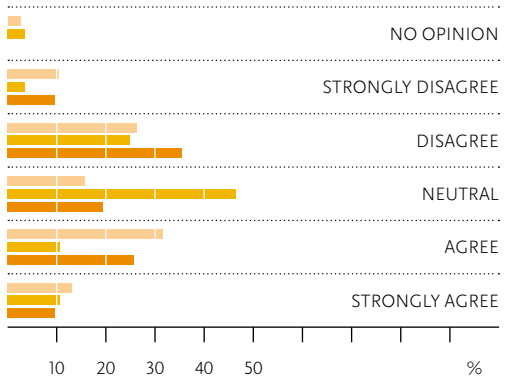


FIG 7.14 'I LIKE TO PURCHASE CLOTHES FROM BRANDS I CAN IDENTIFY WITH' (ITEM 8/GROUP 2)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

here style and fashionable appearance proved to be the strongest connectors too, while across the individual locations a number of different aspects appeared modestly relevant (e.g. *reliable* in Amsterdam: 31.57%; *personal* in Arnhem: 28.57%, or *recognisable* in Rotterdam: 34.37%).

These findings largely concur with the insights from the eight in-depth interviews that I conducted with the firm's patrons. Aimed at exploring the lifeworlds of consumers, the connection between aesthetics, versatility, and price proved a critical theme in their individual relationships with the firm. Many of Vanilia's consumers are working women whose clothes need to serve as leisurewear and business clothing alike. For many of them the outfits need to travel well across a variety of contexts, effortlessly combining professional and private life. Says 27-year old Nanda Ruiter,

> *'Well, I wear it a lot to work [because] I think it's always a good option. I think that the type of clothing you wear to work makes a lot of difference... so I do take that into account. For me Vanilia is more business-like. But I also think that certain items... just take a pair of jeans and slippers and it looks great too. You can combine the clothes in a number of ways.'* (Interview VCIII)

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 a certain framework.'* (Interview VCIV)

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 awkward). 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 people 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.'* (VCV)

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 VX), 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.

7.7.2 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

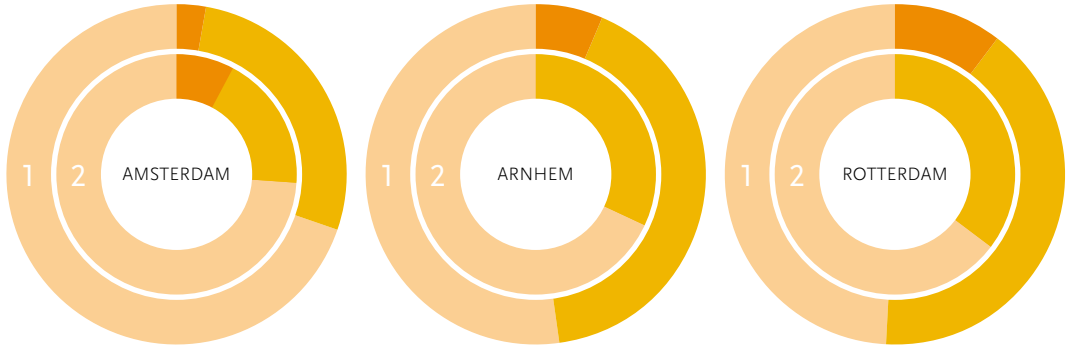


FIG 7.15 + 7.16 'HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT ONE OF VANILIA'S STORES?' (ITEM 12) GROUP 1 / GROUP 2
ONCE A WEEK ONCE A MONTH LESS OFTEN

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 surprisingly, 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 71.72% and in Rotterdam 68.41%. In Group 2, in Amsterdam 63.15% agreed with the statement while in Arnhem it was 69.22% and in Rotterdam 70.95%.

7.7.3 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 (44.73% 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

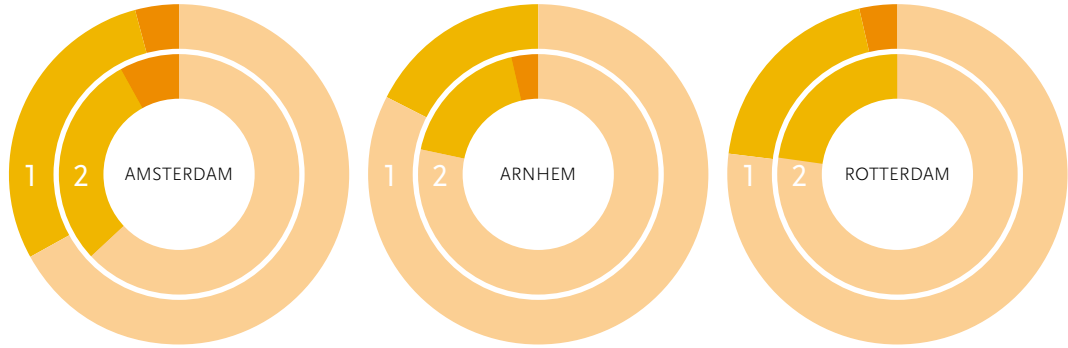


FIG 7.17 + 7.18 'ON AVERAGE, HOW MANY ITEMS DO YOU PURCHASE PER VISIT?' (ITEM 13) GROUP 1 / GROUP 2
ONE ITEM TWO ITEMS THREE OR MORE ITEMS

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 relationship 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.

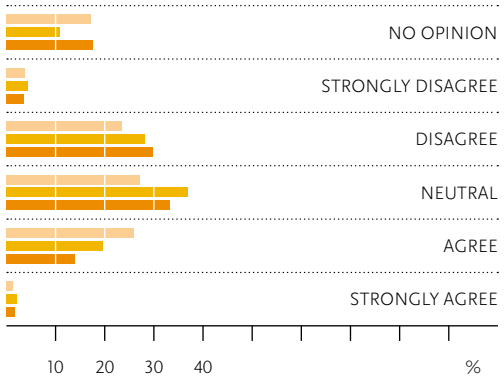


FIG 7.19 'VANILIA IS TYPICALLY DUTCH'
(ITEM 11A/GROUP 1)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

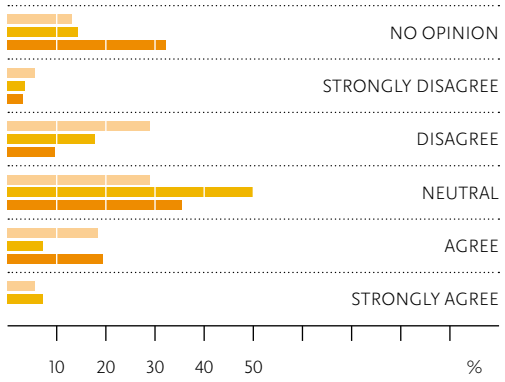


FIG 7.20 'VANILIA IS TYPICALLY DUTCH'
(ITEM 11A/GROUP 2)
AMSTERDAM ARNHEM ROTTERDAM

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-inspired, colourful, 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 pictured emerged. In Group 1, in Amsterdam 27.15% disagreed and the same number of people agreed. In Arnhem, 32.60% disagreed and 21.72% agreed, while in Rotterdam 33.32% disagreed and 15.78% agreed. In Group 2, in Amsterdam 34.56% disagreed and 24.04% agreed. In Arnhem 21.42% disagreed and 14.24% agreed, while in Rotterdam 12.89% disagreed and 19.35% agreed. With a rather mixed distribution, the most remarkable result is the rather large number of people that took a neutral stand or did not have an opinion. Overall, we can conclude that the majority of respondents either does not perceive Vanilia as typically Dutch or does not have an opinion about it.

Item 11b ('Why is/isn't Vanilia typically Dutch? Please explain your opinion in a few words') sought to further explore the question of national identity and give the respondents the chance to explain their views. Unfortunately, most of them felt unable to give a conclusive answer to this question. Some argued that the brand had a more 'international' look while others related the rather practical style to the Dutch identity. Says 33 year-old Iris Otten,

> *'Funny enough, I think [Vanilia] is almost a bit un-Dutch. (...) The Dutch style is always a bit "well-behaved" while I do think that Vanilia has quite a number of pieces that are a bit more outgoing... or at least more daring than a non-descript pair of trousers.'* (Interview VCI)

CHAPTER 5 tried to address the question of Dutch fashion from different angles. As I argued, the Dutch fashion industry is replete with womenswear brands that operate under a similar branding formula as Vanilia. With a design process that is structured around a swift and flexible assimilation of international fashion trends, companies like Stills, Turnover, Just B., or Aaiko capitalise on quick response mechanisms. Distinguishing the brand through clever marketing puffery and attractive merchandise, the aim is to offer accessible and democratic products at affordable prices. Furthermore, the separation between basics or business wear and more fashion-inspired products is a crucial ingredient to the brand proposition: perhaps more pronounced than in other fashion economies, a substantial number of Dutch fashion houses seeks to marry a mid-market business approach to an original and distinguished design identity.

As it is mainly oriented towards international fashion trends, Vanilia does not stand out as typically Dutch when it comes to the actual product. In fact, the firm's different ranges have a largely universal appeal. In business terms, however, the firm's approach represents a blueprint for an economically powerful part of the national fashion industry. Fresh and accessible, unique and modest, fashionable and subtle, Vanilia's brand proposition resonates with an all-round cultural spirit. With a product range and marketing strategy that both have a decidedly varied and accommodating cachet, the brand is typically Dutch in the sense that it navigates between casual and more distinguished looks within a certain framework.

7.10 CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the chapter we saw that Vanilia is in a transitory stage. Striving towards a more refined brand proposition, the firm is currently adjusting its profile with new ideas and concepts in the pipeline. The branding strategy reflects the ambition to balance different consumption interests. Making the transition towards a younger audience group, the current efforts seek to position or reposition the firm by augmenting existing parts of the brand proposition (e.g. production facilities in Cappadocia, Turkey) and adding new ones (e.g. a new and improved website, interacting with consumers on social media like Facebook or Twitter).

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 multilayered 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.

CHAPTER 8

SPIJKERS EN SPIJKERS: WE DO IT – OUR WAY

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; Bem 2011: 79; Husslage 2011: 3).

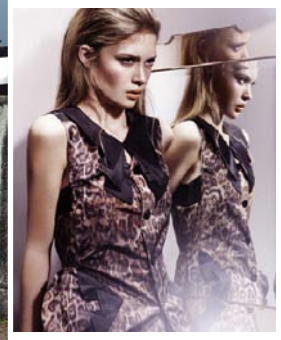
While this is an interesting aspect in itself, it also posed a number of challenges for my research. For one thing, the brand does not have its own stores, but sells its products exclusively through select retailers across the globe. For another, the fact that the mainline, *Spijkers en Spijkers*, is being retailed in only two outlets[1] 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.



PICTURE 8.1 SPIJKERS EN SPIJKERS · CAMPAIGN AUTUMN/WINTER 2010-2011
PICTURE 8.2 SPIJKERS EN SPIJKERS · CAMPAIGN SPRING/SUMMER 2009

reed-thin looks (Mumby-Croft 2010: 5). This stance deserves some critical attention, though. It might be true that in their work notions like empowerment and grace surface regularly and take precedence over sexiness or an emphasis on women's sexual characteristics. That, however, does not take away the fact that the designers are part of the fashion system just like any other firm, so that the idea of actual criticism is a somewhat over-optimistic view.

8.3 THE DESIGNERS AS ENTREPRENEURS: CREATIVE FREEDOM

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 unrighteous 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 Husslage 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 zero overheads, only 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.

8.3.1 BUILDING AWARENESS

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 F/W 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 SSI) 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 understood 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 SSI; cf. Teunissen and Van der Voet: 58).

PICTURE 8.4 SIS · SPRING/SUMMER 2011

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 though the exhibition [at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem], it's quite incredible, really'.* (Interview SSI)

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 *Elle.nl* 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).

PICTURE 8.5 TRUUS AND RIET SPIJKERS FOR SPECSAVERS · **PICTURE 8.6** VICTORY DRESS FOR BAVARIA

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 SSI; 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 retailed at lower prices. Second, the label features more accessible looks, which makes it attractive for a bigger audience. By turning the products into more everyday items, the designers did quite directly respond to a change in the consumption mentality of their audience. Also in their markets abroad bulk purchasers had begun to change horses almost at random during the crisis, which made a transformation necessary to respond to the changing needs with a different type of product. Jacobs (2011b: 121) sums up the problem in the following way,

> *'From the start, their operations have been very international. Their first buyers have been Japanese, followed by the British, Russians, Chinese, plus buyers from the Gulf States (...). All went extremely well for some time. But sales were never stable. On average, they sell to some twelve countries, but those often vary and their shares in overall sales fluctuate constantly.'*

Eventually, the introduction of a diffusion line therefore served the double purpose of creating a new market in their home country and stabilising the sales volume abroad. The fact that the brand was originally devised to only target the Dutch market makes no difference for the final result.

8.3.3 BETTER TOGETHER

The introduction of SIS is but one example of how the designers build and extend their public profile. From a different angle they realised that goal through a number of collaborations, each of them was meant to connect the brand name to popular high-street companies in order to gain a wider reach. Truus and Riet Spijkers designed a capsule collection for Dutch high-street chain Claudia Sträter in 2009, featuring 15 pieces in total, each available in a number of colour variants. This was followed in 2010 by a series of spectacle frames (24 regular models and 10 sunglasses) for the Dutch optician chain Specsavers. The Dutch beer brand Bavaria teamed up with the duo to design a low-budget dress ('Victory Dress') for women, which was meant to be worn during the European Football Championships in 2012. In each case, the growing popularity of the designers in the Netherlands made them interesting candidates for the joint ventures. For both parties the effort turned out to be a win-win situation. The commissioning houses took advantage of the fact that their name was connected to a high-ticket fashion label, thereby adding fashion cachet to the brand proposition. Truus and Riet Spijkers, for their part, capitalised on the media impact of these large-scale projects, which meant free advertising and further financial resources to back and develop their own label. In each of these cases the designers adopted and developed their brand profile in a way that sought to tap into consumer demand by making the brand more accessible through offering multiple points of connection. The introduction of SIS, as well as the collaborations with high-street firms are good examples of how the company responds to the 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 SSI; 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 when you're actually one on one with a client.'* (Interview SSI)

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 their predecessors, however, for Truus and Riet Spijkers a sole reliance on private clients – even if it was financially viable – would not be a route worthwhile pursuing. As they claim, it is precisely the polarity between collection-based work for a larger audience and individual commissions that adds interest to their designs, as it allows them to work in both broad and narrow experiential frames (Interview SSI).

Here we encounter an interesting balance between their regular collections for a more diverse clientele and the commissions from individual clients, which are dialogue-based and require the ability to adapt. The most direct manner to gain insight into their consumers' desires, and profit from hands-on experiences, is of course the immediate interaction in the workroom. The direct response forges a personal bond between supply and demand, which is not possible to achieve in a regular retail setting. Despite different points of departure, both approaches eventually seek to fulfil the same goal, since the designers place a strong emphasis on the consumers' emotional response – in other words: what clothes do to the wearer; what experiences they facilitate; what feelings they evoke or trigger. Says Riet,

> *'Actually, the nicest thing is a small-scale presentation in a showroom like it used to be back in the day. Take Chanel, for example... there is Marlene Dietrich sitting on the staircase and you have a number of models, dressed in the latest collection, walking around with number boards in their hands. You know, here's your customer and it's nice and direct. I'd love working like that.'* (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, '[W]ell, 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 trademark 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 distinguished 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

PICTURE 8.7 SPIJKERS EN SPIJKERS · AUTUMN/WINTER 2012–2013

and cutting-edge player in the global fashion industry. The cash flow, meanwhile, comes from business basics, more understated fashion pieces, and leatherwear (e.g. bags, wallets, belts).[2] Bigger profits, then, are made from clean and immaculately produced business wear – or at least a type of clothing that lends itself to a professional context. These clothes, too, are surely fashionable, but at least they are subtle enough to be worn across a wide variety of different social and professional contexts.

The Spijkers en Spijkers line, by contrast, relies for the most part on a rather outspoken type of product. That does not mean they are conspicuous or outré: they fall in a product category that is closer to state occasions than an everyday context. Since much of the Spijkers en Spijkers collection is comprised of real 'design pieces' they do not always encourage everyday use.[3] As Riet Spijkers contends,

> *'After all, it's quite an expressive product. (...) And I think in our case it has to be like that simply because we don't have the marketing apparatus [of the bigger brands]. We have to make the cut with our products, not by placing nice campaigns in fashion magazines.'* (Interview SSI)

Surely, such an approach greatly fuels the brand's fashion cachet. At the same time, the Spijkers en Spijkers label takes a somewhat undecided middle position between formal wear and catwalk fashion. The clothes are outspoken but not flamboyant, wearable but mostly unsuited for everyday use. Many of the label's pieces are not an obvious choice for business occasions outside the creative industries, while rather high retail prices make the products accessible to only a niche clientele that can afford to collect high-ticket fashion next to their regular wardrobe. Relating these aspects back to the question how the brand deals with different (and sometimes unequivocal) consumer demands, it appears that Truus and Riet Spijkers have used the immediate acclaim of their SIS line to great effect. By resorting to a distribution line as a means of pursuing a more commercial track, they were able to operate by an approach similar to those of the industry's bigger names. Also here, higher sales in a slightly lower segment have enabled the designers to avoid making major concessions to commercial demand with their main collection.

The Spijkers en Spijkers brand represents an interesting case of a niche fashion enterprise that needed to find its own way to compete with the industry's big players. For obvious reasons only the fewest small 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 a global scale, Qatar (1), Brunei (3), 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 democratic 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: 122). Seen thus, it is probably not altogether surprising that the Spijkers en Spijkers main line fares much better in foreign markets. Fittingly, Truus and Riet Spijkers make a distinction between their markets in countries from the Middle East and those in Europe, stating that motivations and consumption behaviour are subject to different premises. As they say, in a place like Dubai people will purchase a product 'just because they like it', whereas in Europe buying behaviour in the luxury segment tends to be connected to special occasions. In the former case women shop for hedonistic reasons while in the (near-)home market purchase behaviour is more occasion specific. Those differences aside, even within Europe the spending activity on luxury goods is distributed rather unevenly: in Italy the annual expenditure on luxury goods was 16.6 billion Euros in 2011, while in France it was 12.6 billion and in Germany 8.0 billion (Altagamma 2011: 5). The Dutch luxury sector has perhaps grown during the past couple of years. Nonetheless, it remains a gradual (and rather slow) shift that is connected to a changing consumption mentality over time.

In view of these facts it would be wrong to assume that local consumers simply disregard the Spijkers en Spijkers products. On the contrary, aesthetically speaking the Dutch might be more prone to purchase the clothes than probably the German or French. Dutch consumers, in fact, are anything but averse when it comes to flamboyant and outgoing fashion pieces. The reason why the label does not run as well as abroad (whereas SIS, which is not so different in style, actually does) is mainly that Dutch consumers are not willing to spend large amounts of money on a type of 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, '[T]he 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... 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 2000; Feitsma 2011a), 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

2 One of the most potent examples of this dynamic comes from Chanel. Karl Lagerfeld's collections keep turning heads, making the brand one of the most successful luxury enterprises of the world. What the brand earns the most money with, however, are not the biannual catwalk pieces, but classic business costumes for women (complete with fitting accessories, shoes, and bags) as well as cosmetics and perfumes.

3 By the same token, the principal choice of materials (silk, taffeta, lace etc.) is rather delicate, so many items of the collection do not lend themselves to an easy-wear attitude.

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 savviness 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 fashion-forward denim products; some look for casual understated everyday pieces; others are attracted to the brand for functional or quality reasons; and yet others are drawn to the products for their status(-differentiating) value or as markers of group identity. In order to make sense of the firm's relevance within these diverse consumption contexts, the following paragraphs are devoted to the brand's structural set-up which is built around three key sites: product development, retail strategy, and branding.

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 sales rates and a counter assurance for more experimental designs (Querfurth 2006: 14; TextilWirtschaft 2005: 48).

PICTURE 9.1 SEASONAL · **PICTURE 9.2** RAW ESSENTIALS · **PICTURE 9.3** RAW BY MARC NEWSON

PICTURE 9.4 G-STAR FLAGSHIP STORE AMSTERDAM · STORE INTERIOR

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. Coming 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 selvedge 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/VanBentm). *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 binds 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.

9.3 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

an eye to new opportunities and chances in the market (TextilWirtschaft 2005: 47; TextilWirtschaft 2009: 33).

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 with 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 actress 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 (Judith Polgár, Hirkaru Nakamura, and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave) were seated

PICTURE 9.5 RAW CANNONDALE · **PICTURE 9.6** RAW FLASK

in an adjacent room to advise an Internet community of players on what and how to play.

In a similar vein, the *Crossovers* 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 Flask* (cognac) was developed, 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 01* was developed as a project directly linked to the city of Amsterdam. As a fully refurbished old canal boat 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'[1]

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 extends 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 warranted 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 traditional, 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), franchisees 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.[2] 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.[3] This begs the question to what extent 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 cognisance (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 Lugt 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 audiences. Instead they claim that the main activities are focused on product development and accessibility. If we ignore the marketing puffery behind these allegations for a moment, the underlying idea helps us to understand how the company negotiates a set of diverse 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 attempts 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 working 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 propositions that are 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 contrived reputation of a supplier of cutting-edge denim wear helps to justify a product 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 a product slate that is innocuous and rather conventional in style, i.e., slightly more adventurous than your everyday jeans brand but downright commercial in 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 2007b: 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 clusters is an outdated model. There is neither a young consumer group nor a sporty one. That idea has run its course. One day consumers want to look smart, the next they go all casual, and the day after they wish to look rough' (ibid., my translation). Marketing lore aside, Van Tilburg's stance is indicative of the general direction the brand has taken over the past few years: creating a flexible brand persona that accommodates 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 IN DETAIL: G-STAR'S DUTCH CONSUMERS

9.7.1 METHODOLOGY

Forced to adjust the research settings in a number of respects (as compared to the case studies on CoraKemperman and Vanilia) the following section is meant to provide a quick overview of these changes. Due to the fact that G-Star had refused any collaboration on the project, the only way to collect data was from the outside. Ideally, the research would have been conducted inside the shops, complete with participant observation and a research protocol. Because this option was not possible, I spent several weeks in front of the brand's retail outlets in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and 's-Hertogenbosch, completing questionnaires with consumers who had purchased one or more items. The method of data acquisition was chosen in an attempt to gain insight into consumer perceptions and the way specific attributes are connected to the brand. The questionnaires were composed of 7 Likert-scale items, two items with 3 closed response options, one freely-associative item with 3 response options, and one open-choice item (3 out of 15 possible options).

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 for the most part 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 pretext of 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 insights no doubt remain perfunctory and by no means contend to be exhaustive or complete. Rather, the goals were to get a first-hand impression of the whereabouts and goings-on inside the shops, to be able to observe the behaviour of different consumers, and to put the findings into perspective as well as sharpen my own point of view.

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 company's kinetic persona makes a relatively 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 heterogeneous clientele would hold true, and based on what factors consumers actually connect with the brand.

TOUGH Tough; masculine · INNOVATIVE Distinctive; hip; modern; recognizable identity; innovative; own style; special; new; design-oriented; original · DENIM JEANS-RELATED Denim; jeans; raw denim; jeans fabric; blue · OTHERS Comfort; casual; quality; expensive; sporty; dark (colours); repetitive; nice · FASHIONABLE Fashionable; contemporary; trendy; stylish; hip; cool; fashion-conscious · QUALITY (Good) quality · TOUGH Tough · OTHERS Informal; comfort(able); casual; diversity; easy; expensive

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 2007a: 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 audience group. According to my own results, the firm's main market consists of consumers younger than 30 years (71.7%) (Group 1). Next to this one, 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, without exception, came from the first group. Also worthy of attention 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 response options measuring attributes readily associated with G-Star's range of products ('Please try to name three characteristics you associate with the clothing of G-Star'). After typing out the full amount of responses the results were coded, clustered, and analysed according to TABLE 9.1.

As appears from TABLE 9.2, the results suggest an associative connection with G-Star on the basis of three variables per group: GROUP 1: tough (I), innovative (II), denim(-related) (III) · GROUP 2: fashionable (I), product quality (II), tough (III)

Interestingly, the value connections in each group were quite different. 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 outré 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 *tough* 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 G-Star's clothes, in the end they do look for similar aesthetic properties, i.e., an understated and grounded look.

RESPONDENTS 86 · TOUGH 46.51% · INNOVATIVE 43.02% · DENIM 34.88% · OTHERS 32.55% · RESPONDENTS 34 · FASHIONABLE 75.00% · PRODUCT QUALITY 37.5% · TOUGH 33.3% · OTHERS 54.16%

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 facilitate an understanding of the product-related mental concepts consumers had developed, Item 11 was conceived as a multiple-choice question, comprising 15 pre-conceived response

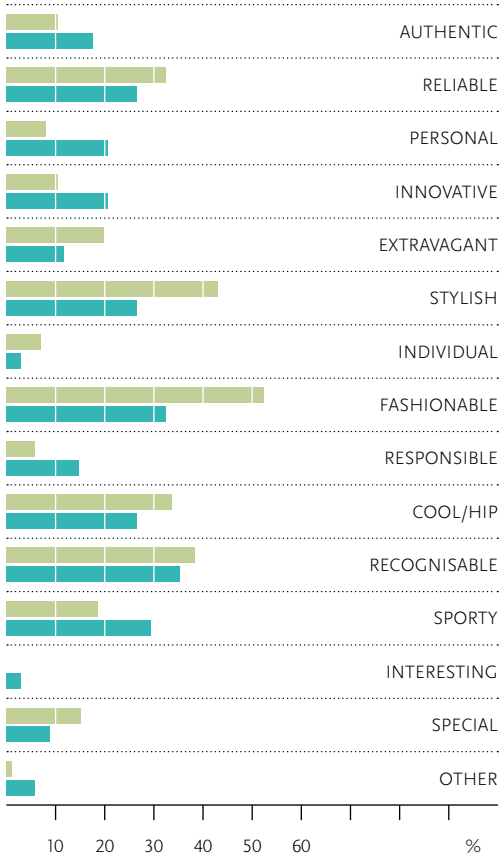


FIG 9.1 'WHICH THREE OF THE FOLLOWING ATTRIBUTES ARE MOST SUITED TO DESCRIBE G-STAR AS A BRAND?' (ITEM 11) · GROUP 1 GROUP 2

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* (32.55%), stylish (43.02%), *fashionable* (52.32%), *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%). Classifying G-Star as *reliable*, the value on the one hand relates to the company's clear-cut and distinguished brand identity, indicating a relation to consumers' general expectations. On the other hand, reliability might be connected to product quality and the level of post-purchase satisfaction in the long run. The values *stylish* and *fashionable* presumably share a direct link to the general purchasing profile of consumers. The value connection *cool/hip*, in turn, is connected to G-Star's position as a trend-oriented or trend-following brand. The last of the connectors, *recognisability*, is related to this aspect as well. Considering that the firm's clothes are used by some consumer groups as markers of social distinction and/or group identity, hipness and recognisability are actually closely connected. Important to note in this context are the firm's advertising campaigns and part of the product slate. Traditionally in the form of larger-than-life billboards, the adverts show the brand's insignia in prominent script (PICTURE 9.7). The product range, too, includes a rather large number of items with big logo prints (T-shirts, sweaters, and some jeans models) (PICTURE 9.8). The combination of brand image and media proliferation works as a powerful boost for G-Star's high profile, which in turn has an impact on the social function of the products within particular social contexts.

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?') 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%), while some indicated not to buy even one item per visit (Group 1: 27.38% / Group 2: 17.64%), 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 makes purchases on such a regular basis is striking. If we take into account that the question meant to target the average and not absolute number of purchases, it follows that commitment in this case relates to modest but steady levels of patronage, as defined by repeat purchases and average consumption frequency.

Item 8 ('How often do you visit one of G-Star's stores?') was constructed in an attempt to gain insight into the average visiting frequency. As FIG 9.3 shows, in Group 1 we can identify a split distribution between consumers visiting the outlets once a month on average (46.51%) and those visiting the shops on a less frequent basis (41.86%). Furthermore, a small number

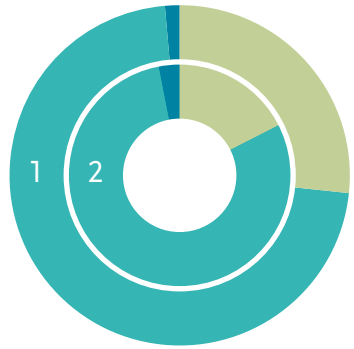


FIG 9.2 'ON AVERAGE, HOW MANY ITEMS DO YOU PURCHASE PER VISIT?' (ITEM 9) GROUP 1 / GROUP 2
NONE BETWEEN ONE AND THREE MORE THAN THREE

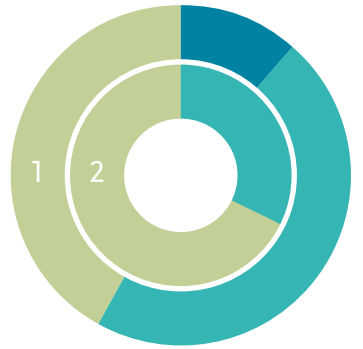
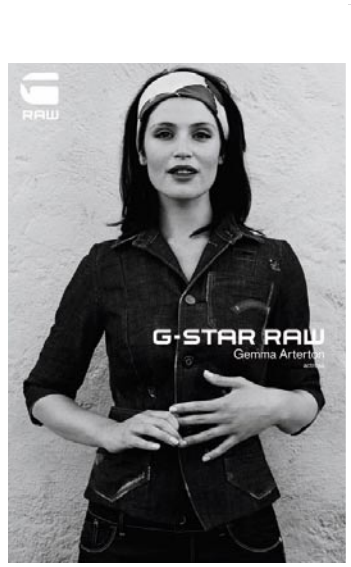


FIG 9.3 'HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT ONE OF G-STAR'S STORES?' (ITEM 8) GROUP 1 / GROUP 2
ONCE A WEEK ONCE A MONTH LESS OFTEN

(11.62%) indicated 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 (67.64%) 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]

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 Hyves 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.



PICTURE 9.7 G-STAR CAMPAIGN · SPRING/SUMMER 2011 · PICTURE 9.8 G-STAR HOODED LOGO SWEATER

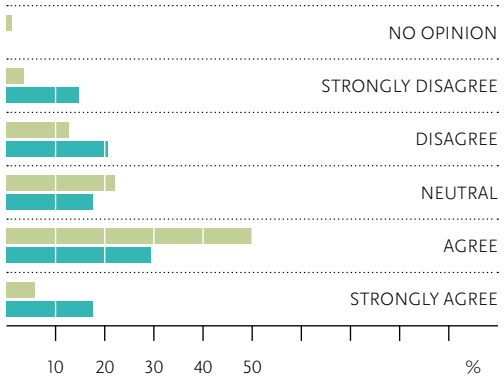


FIG 9.4 'I LIKE TO PURCHASE CLOTHES FROM BRANDS I CAN IDENTIFY WITH' (ITEM 6) · GROUP 1 GROUP 2

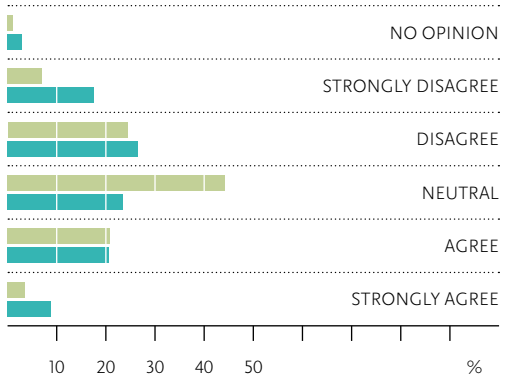


FIG 9.5 'I AM AMONG THE FIRST IN MY CIRCLE OF FRIENDS TO BUY A NEW FASHION ITEMS WHEN IT APPEARS' (ITEM 2) · GROUP 1 GROUP 2

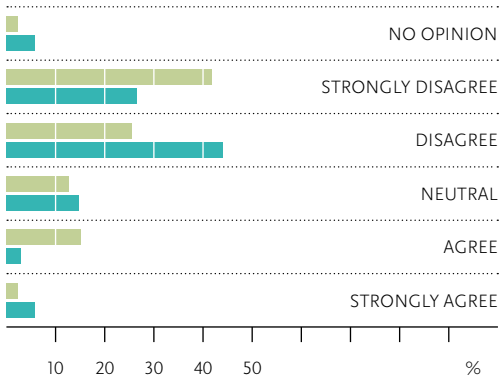


FIG 9.6 'I REGULARLY BUY FASHION-RELATED MAGAZINES' (ITEM 3) · GROUP 1 GROUP 2

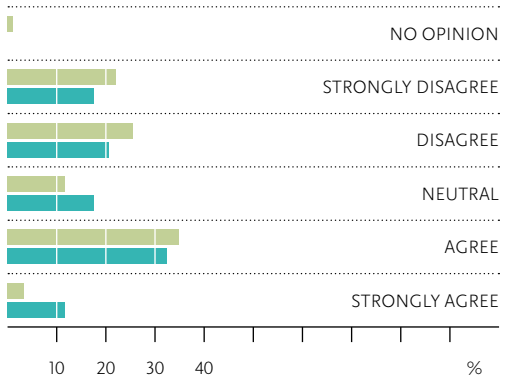


FIG 9.7 'I REGULARLY CHECK THE INTERNET FOR THE LATEST CLOTHING TRENDS' (ITEM 4) · GROUP 1 GROUP 2

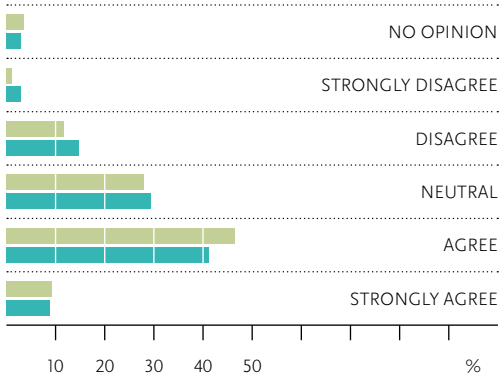


FIG 9.8 'I LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS' (ITEM 1) · GROUP 1 GROUP 2

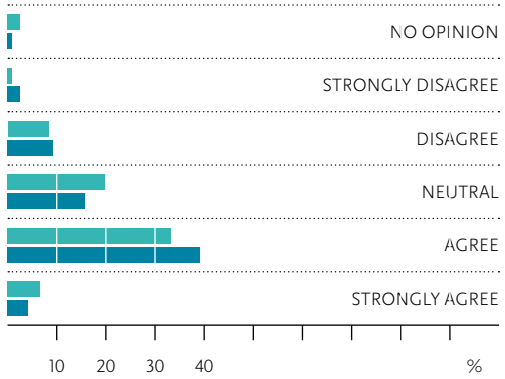


FIG 9.9 JUXTAPOSITION OF FASHION INVOLVEMENT (ITEM 1) AND BRAND INVOLVEMENT (ITEM 6/GROUP 1) FASHION INVOLVEMENT BRAND INVOLVEMENT

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 items when it appears'), which sought to relate 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, 31.38% disagreed with the statement, while 24.41% 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 on the basis of fashion-magazine readership, 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, Item 1 ('I like to dress according to 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 when 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 look the firm has arguably carved out a market position in its own right. In a similar vein, it is not too 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 timelessness 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 baggy fit as well as with slim legs under the name 'Elwood 10', thus adapting the design to ruling taste.

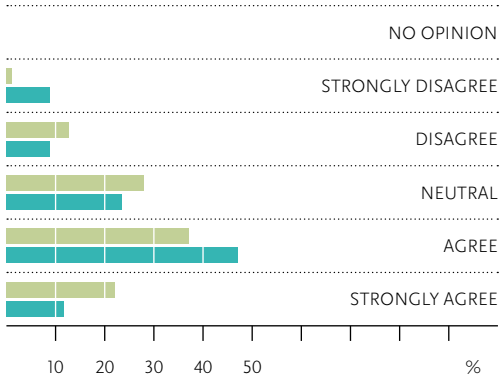


FIG 9.10 'I LIKE TO BUY CLOTHES WITH AN OUTSPOKEN LOOK' (ITEM 5) · GROUP 1 GROUP 2

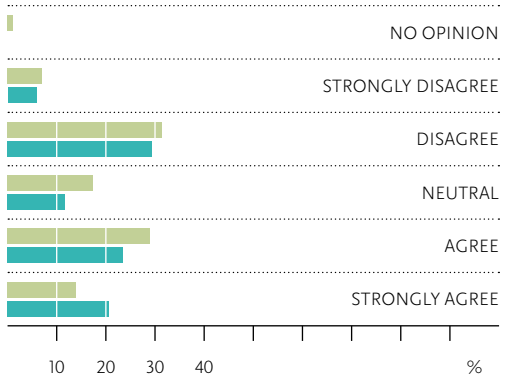


FIG 9.11 'G-STAR IS TYPICALLY DUTCH' (ITEM 7A) · GROUP 1 GROUP 2

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. 13.95% 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 attempt 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 is a summary of components that make up Dutch fashion identity as a whole.

Item 7a ('G-Star is typically Dutch') addressed this question from a consumer perspective in order to test to what extent the findings were congruent with the ideas discussed above. As FIG 9.11 shows, we are confronted with a split distribution. In Group 1, 43.02% of the respondents agreed with the statement, while 38.37% disagreed and 17.44% were neutral. In Group 2 we find a similar set with 44.11% who agreed, 35.29% who objected to the statement, and 11.76% who adopted a neutral stand. From a consumer point of view, then, it appears that there is no clear-cut answer to the question. To some extent this result might be owed to the fact that Dutchness in itself is a rather abstract and ambiguous concept, leading to confusion how to properly make sense of the question. Still, it is interesting to note that almost half of the sample in each group considers G-Star a typically Dutch brand.

Item 7b ('Why is/isn't G-Star typically Dutch. Please explain your opinion in a few words') tried to specify these insights and allow consumers to put their opinion into perspective. Unfortunately, the vast majority felt unable to explain their opinion and left the question unanswered. From the number of actual responses the most recurrent ones in favour of the proposition were that consumers, irrespective of age, regarded the style as typically Dutch. This result is not altogether surprising considering that the firm's principal aesthetics is based on characteristics like sobriety, matter-of-fact looks, and graphic elements. Those who disagreed with the statement indicated that the clothes were retailed all over the world and might just as well come from another country. Ironically, the way most respondents understood the firm's international market orientation and product proposition contradicts the view of the experts. Whereas the latter deemed this aspect a determining feature of Dutch fashion, the former argued the opposite. The asymmetry might be explained by the fact that the experts looked at this dimension primarily from a business point of view, whereas consumers probably based their opinion on product-related features.

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 leftfield marketing strategies such as the *Raw Chess Challenge* or the *Crossovers* 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 consumption 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 insomuch as it supplies a mass-market consumer base with a product that is at once mid-range 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 those 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 Oilily 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, Claudia Sträter or Aaiko are geared for a comparatively large target market and seek to satisfy a plurality of consumption interests. More generalists than specialists, companies in this group are defined by a high degree of business acumen, and they produce clothing styles that are right on message between casual and formal, stylish and sporty, outgoing and understated.

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 Gsus). 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 a result, Dutch fashion design is not only stylish, but it also tries to take practical matters into account. Perhaps a more general template of the Dutch fashion industry is that garments need to wear comfortably and allow for maximum movement, they need to look good and should be easy to maintain. They need to be stylish and suited for everyday use, versatile enough to move from the market to a restaurant and from work to a pub.

The expert panel provided the basis for the case studies. Each of them was selected to represent one of the four dimensions in order to explore the Dutch fashion landscape in its diversity, and develop and understanding of 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 empirical 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.

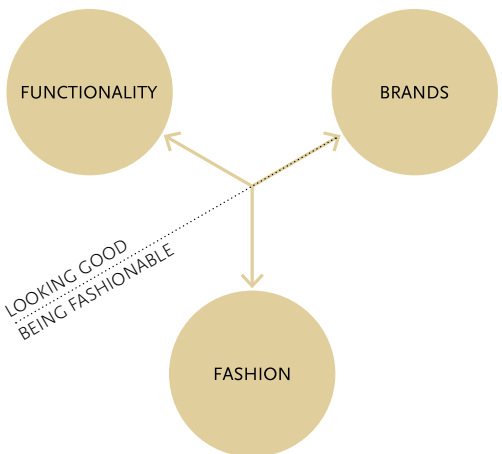


FIG 10.1 CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS CLOTHING (JACOBS 2010: 587)

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, **FIG 10.1** reintroduces the different 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.

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 completely unknown designer, the brand identity 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 these dimensions with respect to my own research and look at points of connection and divergence between the individual cases.

10.3.1 FASHION INVOLVEMENT

When we look at the quantitative results of the research on G-Star, Vanilia, and CoraKemperman it appears that the fashion value of clothes is not an overly strong driver in the purchase decision-making process. The results indicate that only for G-Star's consumers the fashion cachet of their clothes has relevance, whereas

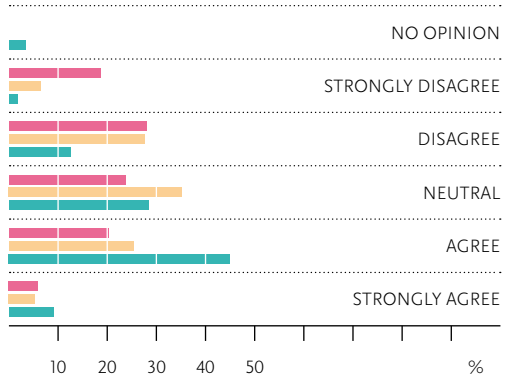


FIG 10.2 'I LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 2) CORAKEMPERMAN VANILIA G-STAR

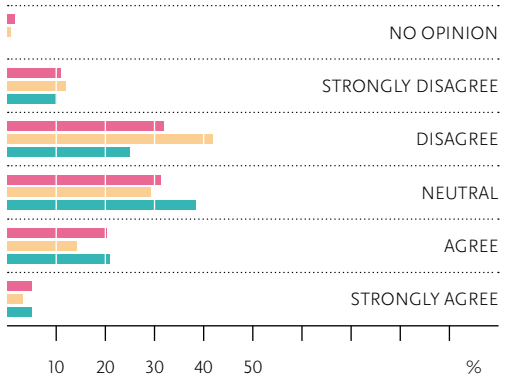


FIG 10.3 'I AM AMONG THE FIRST IN MY CIRCLE OF FRIENDS TO BUY A NEW FASHION ITEM WHEN IT APPEARS' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 3) CORAKEMPERMAN VANILIA G-STAR

for CoraKemperman's and Vanilia's audience it seems to be an aspect of lesser importance. **FIG 10.2** shows the summarised results of Item 2[1] ('I like to dress according to the latest fashion trends') that sought to explore the level of fashion involvement. 54.09% 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 33.98% disagreed, and 35.22% neither agreed nor disagreed. With 46.58% disagreeing, 26.25% agreeing, and 23.71% 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 **FIG 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 29.16% 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: 587) 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 **FIG 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 only 14.99% disagreed, while 69.66% of Vanilia's consumers agreed and 13.23% disagreed. In CoraKemperman's audience we find the most pronounced distribution, with 88.10% agreeing and less than 1% disagreeing.

When we look at the results of 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.

FIG 10.5 shows the results, according to the product attributes indicated in **TABLE 10.1**. In the case of G-Star 72.50% of the respondents indicated product style as a product characteristic, within CoraKemperman's audience this was 88.98%, and for Vanilia it was 64.96%. Following these results, consumers connect

1 The consecutive numbering of the items differs in the case of G-Star, due to an adapted research approach which included a shortened questionnaire.

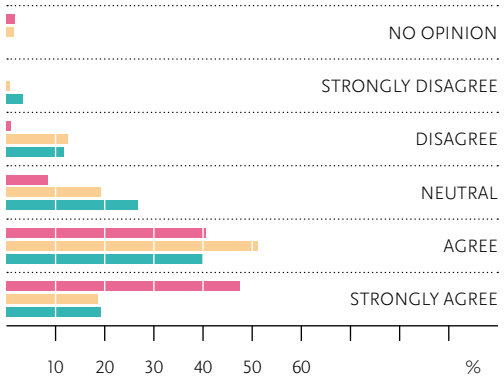


FIG 10.4 'I LIKE BUYING CLOTHES WITH AN OUTSPOKEN LOOK' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 7)
CORAKEMPERMAN VANILIA G-STAR

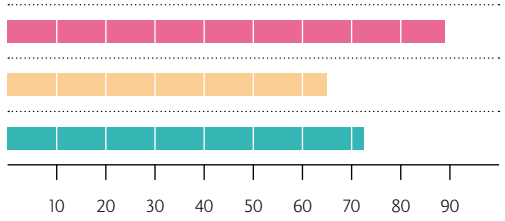


FIG 10.5 SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 14, CODED ACCORDING TO PRODUCT STYLE
CORAKEMPERMAN VANILIA G-STAR

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 Neat; classy; stylish; original; fashionable · G-STAR Tough; masculine; distinctive; recognisable identity; innovative; own style; special; new; original

TABLE 10.1 CODING SCHEME FOR CONSUMER RESPONSES (ITEM 14) BRAND FOLLOWED BY VALUES

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 response options to identify similarities and/or differences between the variables tested through Item 14 and a number of standardised brand values, this aspect becomes even more apparent. As 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* (38.97%), *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.).

Vanilia is a case of what I named 'Stylish Mid-Market'. As FIG 10.6 demonstrates, consumers see Vanilia 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 do probably impart fashion qualities. As explained in CHAPTER 7, however, these are not the main drivers for purchases. 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 a 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* (30.83%), *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/Item 14), the most common characteristics are 'tough' ('stoer'), 'innovative', and 'denim'. Following those descriptions, style relates to the firm's history in (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

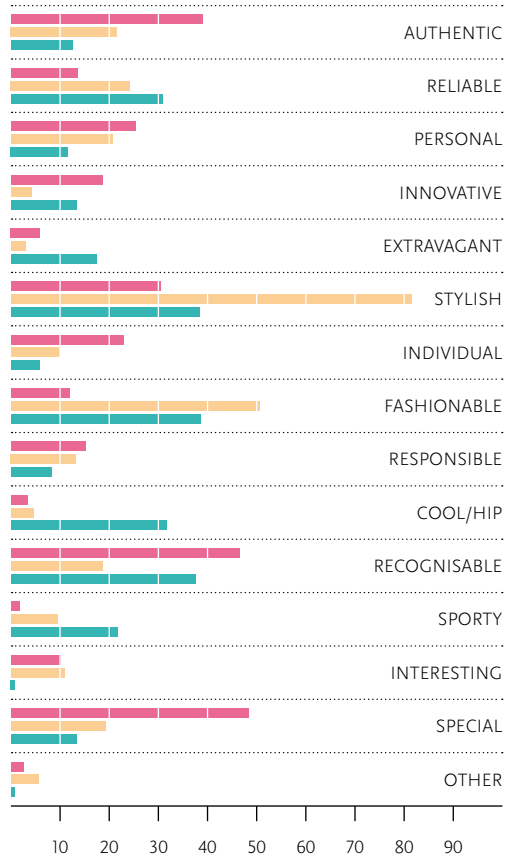


FIG 10.6 'WHICH THREE OF THE FOLLOWING ATTRIBUTES ARE MOST SUITED TO DESCRIBE CORAKEMPERMAN VANILIA G-STAR AS A BRAND?' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 15)

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 messages.

For the analysis of Spijkers en Spijkers, 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 their own. Still, it is possible to offer a description of the company's signature style and the way 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 collections, 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 Spijkers en Spijkers 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, Vanilia, 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 Spijkers en Spijkers 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. With 78.10% agreeing and only 21.65% 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 Vanilia's audience, 50.72% agreed and 33.70% disagreed, while in CoraKemperman's consumer group 49.04% agreed and 26.25% disagreed. As we can see, for G-Star's consumers brand identity plays an important role in terms of purchase behaviour, whereas in the other two audiences consumers appear to relate more to the product than to the actual brand.

When we compare this result with the average visiting frequency (Item 12), FIG 10.8 shows that for G-Star and CoraKemperman the results are evenly divided between visits on a monthly basis (G-Star: 42.48% / CoraKemperman: 42.36%) and visits on a less frequent basis (G-Star: 49.16% / CoraKemperman: 44.04%). In

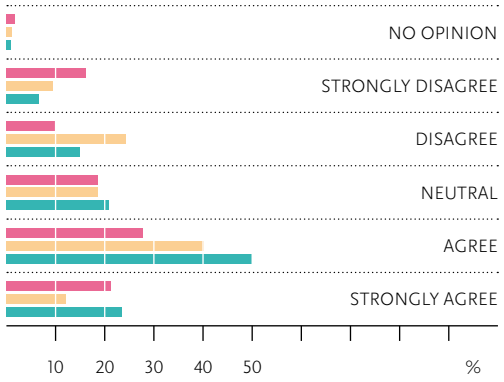


FIG 10.7 'I LIKE TO PURCHASE CLOTHES FROM BRANDS I CAN IDENTIFY WITH' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 8)
CORAKEMPERMAN VANILIA G-STAR

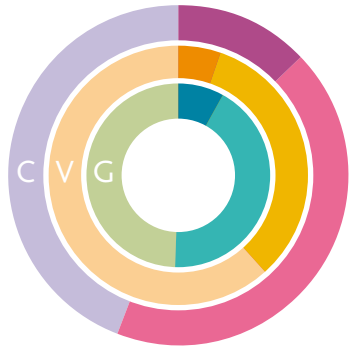


FIG 10.8 'HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT ONE OF THE STORES OF CORAKEMPERMAN VANILIA G-STAR?' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 12)
ONCE A WEEK ONCE A MONTH LESS OFTEN

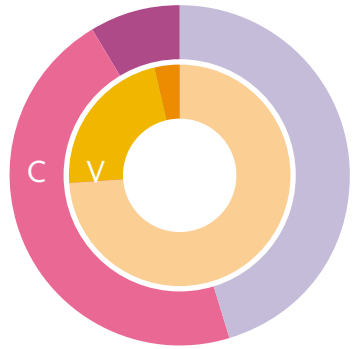


FIG 10.9 'ON AVERAGE, HOW MANY ITEMS DO YOU PURCHASE PER VISIT?' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 13)
ONE ITEM TWO ITEMS THREE OR MORE ITEMS

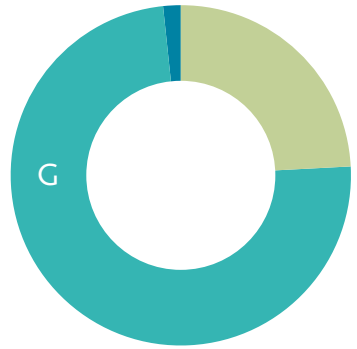


FIG 10.10 'ON AVERAGE, HOW MANY ITEMS DO YOU PURCHASE PER VISIT?' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 9)
NONE BETWEEN ONE AND THREE MORE THAN THREE

Vanilia'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 Vanilia's consumers buy about one item at a time (73.47%), while CoraKemperman's consumers purchase between one (44.58%) and two items (45.75%). In FIG 10.10 we can see that 74.16% 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 Vanilia 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 respectable, 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 unfashionable[2], 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 comparison, 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 Vanilia'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 Vanilia'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, Vanilia is situated right on the edge between 'looking good' and 'being fashionable'. As the analysis showed, Vanilia'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.

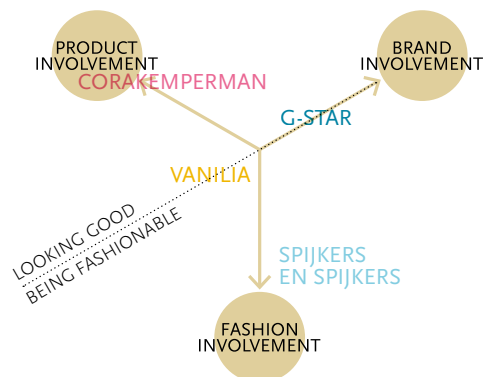


FIG 10.11 PURCHASE MOTIVATIONS AND TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE CASE STUDIES

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 Vanilia's patrons, 42 year-old Renske 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.'* (Interview VCII)

2 For further reference see Jacobs (2012).

That demand for practicality is not exclusively connected to product-inherent aspects, but has its roots in the rather informal and broad-minded Dutch culture. In the Netherlands it is 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 national contexts. In a country like France, 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, grocery shopping or dinner at a restaurant.

In section 10.3.2 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 CoraKemperman 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. Practicality, 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 proves a crucial connector in the relationship of each audience with their preferred brand, while the fashion value of clothes is of lesser significance. Furthermore, I demonstrated that consumer involvement can be more connected to the brand proposition (G-Star) or to the product proposition (CoraKemperman), without having a significantly different impact on consumption behaviour. While the discussion to this point has primarily focused on product-related aspects, this section focuses on the intersection of dress and identity discussed in **CHAPTER 2**.

10.4.1 MARKETING AND BRAND IMAGE

This section is meant to broaden the scope of findings towards marketing approaches and retention strategies. While most companies want to bind consumers in the long run, the question is to what extent buying behaviour is actually connected to a shared identity between brand and consumers, and whether that identity is actively produced. The results suggest that across the four cases I studied each firm uses a different strategy to retain the loyalty of their audience: some opt for a more explicit marketing strategy including loyalty programmes and a customer club, whereas others rely on more implicit approaches.

The relationship between CoraKemperman and its consumers on the one hand depends on a unique product style that produces a kindred spirit in the brand-consumer relation. On the other hand, the relationship hinges on a personalised sales pitch and the in-store performance of staff. Above was shown that one of the primary drivers in the relationship is a unique product proposition. The fact that CoraKemperman offers a type of clothing that, at least in this 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'.

In **CHAPTER 6** was shown that the selection of staff constitutes a key component in the relationship between brand and consumers. Every staff member has to be 'on brand' and needs to reflect the firm's values. By selecting a spectrum of characters for every outlet, the shop assistants not only cater carefully to the needs of consumers by, for example, keeping track of their purchase portfolios or remembering personal details, but they also represent an important site of identification. Many of the firm's patrons have one specific assistant they have established a relation with over many years and whom they entrust with the task to guide them through the fitting and buying process. In turn, the individual approach creates a strong emotional bond between consumers and staff that is rewarded by high levels of patronage. In the absence of any real branding activity or a strong presence on the internet, the firm relies more on an implicit marketing strategy by offering a unique service and product proposition.

Vanilia is a different concept in that the brand's efforts to create a common link are more outspoken and involve a greater number of dimensions. By means of lifestyle events and personalised sales promotions, collaborations with magazines and a combined performance across different media channels, the brands intends to reposition itself in the market and create a basis for multiple points of connection. While the research showed that all of these aspects are in some way important, the firm's success in retaining consumer loyalty is not owed to these efforts alone, specifically when it comes to reaching a younger clientele. Above all, the shift towards a fresh and up-to-the-minute image and product style has made the brand attractive also to younger consumers. The results suggest that, similar to CoraKemperman, the actual product proposition and service variable inside the shops are critical building blocks for repeat buying and consumer satisfaction. Unlike CoraKemperman, however, Vanilia's target market is bigger and addresses a less particular type of consumers, which leads to a looser and less intimate connection. The results indicate that with a fairly explicit and elaborate marketing strategy, the relationship primarily hinges on product-specific attributes, while most of the branding-driven efforts are actually additional drivers that support this value connection.

G-Star is an interesting case with respect to the fact that the brand presents a somewhat contradictory image concerning its promotional efforts. G-Star's spokespeople claim that the firm is not about any kind of lifestyle concept, so it can firmly concentrate on product development. Having said that, we learned in **CHAPTER 9** that a.) the firm engages in a wide variety of activities that contradict the self-proclaimed product-centric strategy (e.g. product placements, art and lifestyle events), and b.) that G-Star maintains a fairly active presence on the internet. Therefore in effect part of the value proposition extends the focus from product-specific aspects to external sites of identification. Added to that, G-Star's advertising strategy is a case in point. With recognisable signature aesthetics, created by Dutch photographer Anton Corbijn, and a distinct choice of models, the firm does create a specific image and communicates a certain mentality to consumers. For the most part, G-Star's promotional efforts are geared towards sustaining and increasing awareness of the brand. Still, it would be incorrect to conclude that the marketing strategy is exclusively product oriented. The firm's determination to create a coherent visual identity, for instance, has produced a brand profile that Dutch consumers associate with an innovative, 'raw', and cool product. The same holds true for G-Star's shows at New York Fashion Week or the collaborations with the designers Marc Newson and Michiel Keuper, which further contribute to the image of an edgy high-street brand. In short: contradicting its rather understated consumer approach, the firm capitalises on its distinct image that, in turn, produces a set of common associations that resonate with its audience groups.

Spijkers en Spijkers represents a case in its own right because, on the one hand, the firm does not use any explicit forms of consumer marketing and, on the other hand, because the research set-up was different in the sense that the situation did not allow me to carry out consumer research in shops. As the analysis of the firm's development over the past 12 years shows, Spijkers en Spijkers has gradually developed a more consumer-centric approach, in the sense that the focus has been increasingly directed towards the firm's actual target market by incorporating the demands of their niche clientele in the value proposition. In this case it is hard to speak of an actual branding concept because the designers work with an exceptionally small team and invest most of their resources in the development of upcoming collections. Having said that, Truus and Riet Spijkers do take advantage of their own public identity: by capitalising on an increased interest in their work and their somewhat peculiar status as identical twins, the two sisters lead by example. By lending their name and aesthetic signature to different ventures, they promote a certain style and attitude, which broadens the scope towards a greater number of points of connection between brand and consumers and opens up their brand profile to different consumer types.

10.4.2 INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP IDENTITIES?

Above I discussed the strategies of each brand to retain the loyalty of their consumers. 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 in their choices. Be it the dress code at work, or the style of an adolescent's peer group or family – we are bound up by certain dynamics that relate our purchases to one or more reference groups. While this principle applies to all kinds of purchases, it is probably more strongly pronounced in a fashion context, because that 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 a set of external influences.

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. Consciously or not, the consumer groups I studied source their clothing within a specific range with largely similar stylistic attributes. That collective context made it possible to examine the dynamics from an alternative point 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 connection between brands and consumers in a more 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.

As I pointed out 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 identification 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 is, 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 that is not only highly recognisable, but also encourages a 'complete look'. With high 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, so we can conclude that 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 near-monthly visits and regular purchases of one or two pieces at a time, the firm capitalises on long-term relations 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 interviews suggest a general awareness 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 insider tip – made for a market of only a 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 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 little emotional commitment, Vanilia's audience is a rather light 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. Offering a versatile and adaptive type of clothing, the product proposition and collective identity are connected to the extent that the appearance and composition of the clothing promote a certain lifestyle that is shared by members of the clientele.

As a jeans and casual-wear brand, with international market orientation, G-Star's offerings encompass a large number of clothing lines, styles (from casual to fashion-forward), and sizes. Covering a spectrum, from sporty and casual to fashionable and trend-savvy, the firm caters to men's and women's markets across different segments. Due to the fact that the firm offers multiple points of connection and accommodates a rather large number of consumption interests, it is hard to pinpoint whether specific consumer types are more strongly represented than others. By the same token, it is hardly possible to speak of a group identity or a shared set of features that connect the audience as a whole. For some, the brand name and recognisable appearance of the products are the decisive factors in the purchase decision-making process, for others fashionable appeal and innovative details are the determining variables.

Judging by the plurality of consumer types attracted by the company, G-Star's audience is a light style group. With a frequency of monthly or near-monthly visits, consumers tend to purchase one or more items at a time. At the same time, the study shows that the association between firm and audience is primarily product-specific and not so much based on high emotional commitment. One explanation for this asymmetry could be that the firm offers a product with a high recognition value and relevance for different interest groups, while, at the same time, the market it caters to is rather non-specific. G-Star is distributed across the globe and caters to a number of segments that are all subject to different demands. In comparison with Vanilia and CoraKemperman, G-Star's product portfolio is less individual, addresses a global market and seeks to appeal to a less specific type of consumer.

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 sites of identification are important in a clothing-consumption context, and to what extent the brands I studied reflect characteristics that are typically Dutch. Item 11a ('G-Star/Vanilia/CoraKemperman is typically Dutch') intended to determine if consumers connected their preferred clothing firms to attributes that are related to the Dutch cultural landscape as well. As FIG 10.12 demonstrates, no clear picture emerged in that regard. For the most global brand G-Star, 43.32% of its consumers agreed while 38.30%

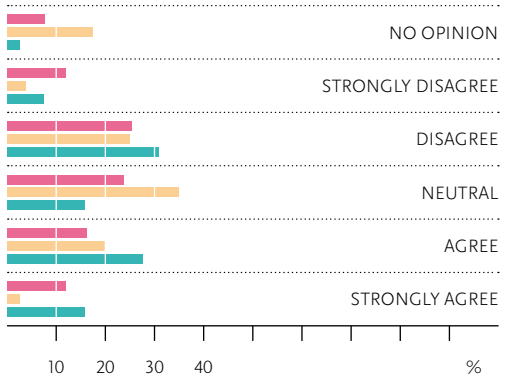


FIG 10.12 'CORAKEMPERMAN VANILIA G-STAR IS TYPICALLY DUTCH' (SUMMARISED RESULTS OF ITEM 11A)

disagreed with the statement. In Vanilia's audience 22.08% of the respondents agreed while 28.75% disagreed. In CoraKemperman's consumer group, 27.94% agreed and 36.26% disagreed with the statement.

According to this distribution, part of the sample connects the firms to country-specific aspects, while at least as many consumers contradict that idea. Item 11b ('Why is/isn't G-Star/Vanilia/CoraKemperman typically Dutch. Please explain your opinion in a few words') was constructed in an effort to further explore the question of national identification and allow respondents to explain their view. Unfortunately, the vast majority left the question unanswered, which made it difficult to relate their opinions to an attitude or a certain degree of specificity. When questioned about their problems to answer the question, the respondents usually told me that they were unsure what aspects actually qualify as typical for local culture or how to define Dutch identity.

In some way, this result is not altogether surprising. Ever since we started the project 'Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World', one of the central questions that kept coming back in the discussions within our research group has been what actually qualifies as 'typically Dutch', and how to extend characteristics that are pertinent to local culture in general to a fashion context. Is there anything like 'Dutchness'? What distinguishes Dutch identity from other countries' 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. As journalist Santje Kramer (cited in De Vogelvrije 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, tight skirts you need to pull up across your derrière, woollen dresses irritate the skin on a women's saddle (...). And rain does not go well together with high heels or panties and skirts made from delicate fabric.'

While Kramer's description is pointed and oversimplified, 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 sturdy 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 unstylish 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 meaningless. Adaptable and stylish, they go for the middle ground, a compromise that marries style with practicality.

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 critical 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 diversity, 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 say that similar 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 elements – 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 than competing brands in the same segment. Vanilia's audience connects to the firm based on a product proposition that is chic and understated, stylish and versatile. CoraKemperman's consumers build loyalty mainly based on the uniqueness of the products. We can conclude, therefore, that the different categories are relevant to describe, or at least approximate, what the local fashion landscape looks like and what different criteria influence the purchase behaviour of the respective audiences. Moreover, within the confines of my study the results contradict the general conception that the Dutch are careless and unrefined when it comes to clothing choices. Instead, they are interested in a type of product that is affordable and stylish, practical and easy to maintain.

In the analysis we saw that consumer involvement relates to a number of different dimensions. None of the audiences I studied showed prominent levels of fashion involvement and neither are they early adopters of new trends. More important than the fashion value of clothes seems to be a distinct signature style: when following the dimensions 'looking good' and 'being fashionable', it appears that Dutch consumers (at least in the audiences I studied) have a vested interest to look good but not so much to look fashionable. For each individual case, the value connections governing the relationship are based on a different set of attributes, which have an impact on the type of involvement. G-Star's consumers show high levels of brand involvement but lower levels of clothing involvement. CoraKemperman's audience, by contrast, mainly focuses on product-inherent characteristics whereas brand identity plays a rather subordinate role. As we have seen, both types of involvement produced similar types of consumption behaviour.

When it comes to the interplay between supply and demand, my study shows that G-Star, Vanilia, CoraKemperman, and Spijkers en Spijkers all employ different strategies to address the demands of their consumers and retain their loyalty. Each of these approaches is successful in its own right. More important than the question to what extent they are implicit or explicit, seems to be that the approaches are authentic and in-sync with the overall brand proposition. Contributing to an alternative understanding of the life- and experience-worlds that define purchase behaviour, the analysis made clear that the concept of style groups is a relevant and appropriate method to study the dynamics between consumers and brands. I demonstrated that certain characteristics can be seen as extensions of product categories and clothing preferences as a theoretical tool to cluster audiences according to different consumption profiles. In turn, these make allowances for certain inferences about an audience in terms of consumer backgrounds and experience worlds.

As a last point, I tried to define a number of characteristics that are typical for the Dutch fashion culture. As we have seen, the research did not actually present a clear picture when it comes to the question what aspects are considered typically Dutch. In CHAPTER 2, four different levels of identification were discussed: cognitive, evaluative, affective, and conative. From the research it appears that neither consumers nor brands are even aware of a Dutch style of dress. Consumers do not consciously buy 'Dutch clothes' – 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', but they mostly respond to certain preferences (e.g. a more informal cultural climate; local weather conditions; a taller and slightly sturdier body type), and consumers are attracted to these products because they reflect their needs or fit with a specific requirement profile and lifestyle. As such, the concept of a national fashion identity is anything but straightforward. It should be seen and treated as an implicit notion that neither brands nor consumers are particularly conscious of.

Some of the issues presented in this research might appear to be rather universal, while other points are more directly linked to the Dutch national culture. At the end of the day, all insights produced by this study should be seen as tendencies rather than hard facts that pertain to Dutch fashion culture exclusively. All the firms under scrutiny are relatively accessible and boast a product proposition that is slightly different 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 innovative 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'.

SUMMARY MY RESEARCH IN A NUTSHELL

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 clientele? Nowadays, consumers cannot be 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 2007). 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 matter than personal and collective identity. At the same time, all these concepts are in some way related to one another, which makes it difficult to draw clear lines. Throughout my study, identity pertains to the following aspects:

a. Individual and collective identities and the question to what extent the two are related in the context of brand involvement and purchase behaviour
b. The question to what extent identity and identification are connected to imagined rather than real-life communities (Anderson 1983)
c. Brand identity and its impact on the purchase decision-making process
d. The Dutch cultural landscape and elements of national identity that define the fashion preferences of Dutch consumers

In the framework of my research personal identity is viewed as a combination of two mutually dependent components: an individual way to express ourselves 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 behaviour and related dress. Many authors have claimed that we have progressed from uniform social identities towards plural or 'fluid' identities (Bauman 2000; Huyssen 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 mostly conform to these 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 shows, the mental images connected to certain looks are not purely individual, but also produced by social context. In that way, fashion is a chief social signifier when it comes to the dual nature of identity: we may present our own interpretation of 'formal', 'stylish', '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 approach 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 understand 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 (Skyscanner, 13 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,

evaluative, and affective. Applied to the fashion context, the cognitive levels refers to an awareness of a specific phenomenon, i.e., a distinct local clothing style. The evaluative stage questions what is good, bad, or special about Dutch fashion. The affective stage defines a level of emotional involvement. The more positive the evaluation, the higher will be the level of involvement. Adding a fourth level to the list, identity might also be conative, meaning that emotional involvement is so strong that it influences one's actual behaviour (Jacobs 2011c). The question my study addresses is to what extent these different levels actually apply to Dutch consumers, and by what parameters their purchase behaviour is defined.

3. CONSUMPTION DYNAMICS

Clothing often reaches beyond covering the body, signifying individual and collective identities. Those signifying practices are anything but unidirectional: the meanings 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 connected 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 interplay between individuals and groups in a consumption context, I developed the concept of 'style groups'. These are virtual consumption collectives whose members share similar values and life concepts related to stylistic preferences and consumption interests. Association with a style group might be conscious or unconscious, 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 according 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.

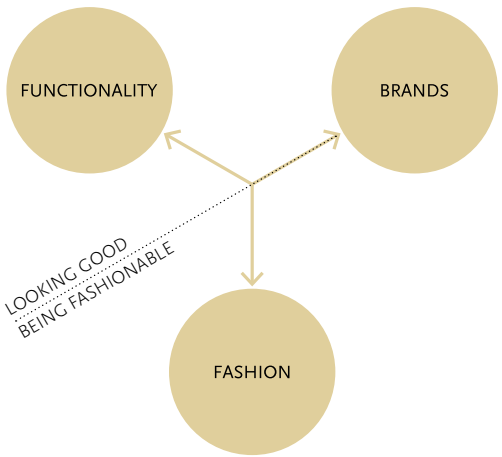
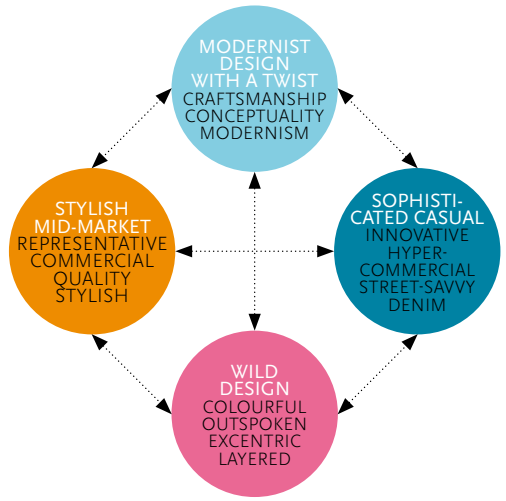


FIG 1 CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS CLOTHING (JACOBS 2010: 587)

With a focus on the values that govern the dynamics 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 presentation of the self are of course individual acts. Governing the connection between the symbolic value of consumer goods and individual and collective values, one critical concept therefore is self-concept (Dolich 1969; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Phau and Lo 2004; Sirgy 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. Intimately connected to that is the concept of consumer involvement. Although there are different types of involvement, for my study only 'enduring involvement' (Rothschild 1975) is important, which is defined as sustained interest in a product or product category over time. Consumer involvement is a multi-dimensional concept: it 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 fashionable' (**FIG 1**). If consumers are more concerned with the desire to look good they might be very much involved with clothing in general, but not with fashion. By contrast, consumers who put a premium on fashionable 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 distinction between clothing involvement and fashion involvement. Researching consumption preferences and brand loyalty in the Dutch fashion industry, the involvement construct helps to measure these different motivations and develop an understanding of the material and immaterial values consumers connect with a brand.

Also important for my study is how brands actually relate 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 in order to achieve a higher degree of consumer satisfaction. Conversely, this approach allows consumers to engage with their preferred brands, in certain cases to an extent where they can actually have

FIG 2 THE FOUR FACES OF DUTCH FASHION



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 has 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 contributes 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 and seeks 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 unresearched. A case-study-based approach was considered 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 angles, and collect rich data from a variety of sources.

A well-conceived case study design is a key condition of external validity. If the cases are carefully selected and representative they might allow for inferences even beyond the actual subject of analysis (Yin 1994; Flyvbjerg 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 selection of cases. To present an idea of the procedure, we jointly approached twelve experts with a longstanding history 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 'being 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 industry. 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 pinpoint aspects that surfaced regularly during the discussion 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. **FIG 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, and craftsmanship. Defined by a minimal and pared-down style, designers like Alexander van Slobbe, Truus and Riet Spijkers, or Jan Taminiau tend to play with conventions of the genre. Although a comparatively small segment of the local fashion landscape, it is influential in the sense that it condenses certain tendencies that also prevail on the high street. *Wild Design* takes its name from an alternative tradition in Dutch fashion that has not received much attention in scholarly publications until now. The work of firms like Oilily, Bas Kosters, or CoraKemperman is characterised by colour, irreverence and playfulness and takes inspiration from a variety of sources including hippie culture, postmodernity, Dutch folklore, and the country's colonial past. The look produced by this polyvalence is defined by a play of volumes and shapes, dashing colours and vibrant patterns. *Sophisticated Casual* describes firms like G-Star or Gsus that are widespread with a combination of streetwear-inspired and trend-savvy looks that is combined with progressive marketing tactics and business acumen. Often with an international market

appearance, the products are designed to appeal to universal demands across different national fashion economies. Another defining feature of this category is 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. With a wide product range, brands like Aaiko, Stills, or Vanilia are defined by versatility and flexibility and seek to cover larger shares of the market. Part of the collection might be business oriented, while another could be composed of basics, and yet another might focus on more stately pieces. Despite the fact that the products are retailed at rather moderate prices, some of the firms devote part of their collection to more cutting-edge clothing styles in order to add more fashion cachet to the brand proposition. The combination of an original corporate identity, an informed communication strategy, and an established market position warrants a good balance between accessibility and exclusivity, up-to-the-minute fashion and business wear.

None of these categories exists in isolation. Indeed, they all cross-fertilise each other and, in certain cases, overlap or even clash. In all their diversity, the common denominator of all four groups is what I call the 'bicycle factor': clothing for the Dutch market needs to be practical, so it can be worn throughout the day and function effortlessly in both social and professional settings. Allowing for maximum movement and comfortable wear, the clothes need to be suited to bike rides, professional environments, doing groceries, or having dinner with friends at a restaurant – all that has to be manageable with just one set of clothes.

Until now, the discussion about Dutch fashion has mainly focused on certain historic periods, while no attempt has been made to define, or at least approximate, the local fashion landscape in its entirety. The contribution of my study is that it provides a framework to study the Dutch fashion industry according to a number of predominant patterns and ideas. The four brands I studied in my dissertation are the product of this exploration, and are intended to present an idea of the dynamics between brands and consumers in each of the categories. *Spijkers en Spijkers* was chosen as an example of *Modernist Design with a Twist*, while *CoraKemperman* was selected to represent the category *Wild Design*. *G-Star* was chosen as an example of *Sophisticated Casual*, and *Vanilia* was selected to illustrate *Stylish Mid-Market*.

To study these different firms I relied on an explorative mixed-methods approach. In keeping with the principles of data triangulation (Perry 1988), my study relies on different sources of evidence. 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. For my analysis of the different brands, I worked on the basis of in-depth interviews with marketers, designers, store and regional managers, and stylists in order to facilitate a thorough understanding of the retention mechanisms and strategic positioning. The interviews were complemented by a detailed literature study to provide a framework and allow for comparisons between my own findings and those of other authors. To study the consumption behaviour within the different audience groups I relied on in-depth interviews as well to facilitate an understanding of the experiences and life-worlds of consumers. These insights were complemented with structured questionnaire-based interviews that I completed together with respondents in- or outside the retail outlets of three of the four firm.[1] All in-depth interviews were coded and analysed according to Mayring's model of qualitative content analysis. For this approach, formal aspects are integrated in the process of data collection in order to ensure the replicability of results and optimise the quality of conclusions (Krippendorff 1969; Mayring 2000).

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 many of 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. With no merchandise 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 among 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 these factors help produce rather high levels of brand and product involvement, and lead to an emotionally-charged relationship. CoraKemperman's style group is narrowly defined and surprisingly tight. Above all, clients are attracted by the brand's colourful avant-garde style. Throughout, they indicated uniqueness and recognition value as key characteristics of the product proposition. As a result, we can conclude that the group is largely 'owned' by the brand since there are few competitors that offer a similar type of product.

In the case of *Vanilia*, 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 stylishness, product quality and comfort. Regardless of age, 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 and good looking – stylish without unnecessary 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 functional and aesthetic interests rather than emotional ones, 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.

G-Star has made a name with innovative denim products and clever product placements – all in the firm's trademark charcoal-grey and pared-down house style. While the brand tries to communicate the somewhat contrived image of a cutting-edge, creative fashion firm, my analysis showed that its modus operandi is by far not as innovative and experimental as is often thought. The consumer profile attests to the fact that, at least in the Dutch market, G-Star is not perceived as an accomplished fashion player, but as a common high-street brand with a slightly smarter product proposition. Consumers relate to the firm mainly based on attributes like recognisability or a stylish and hip appearance. Moderating between casual street styles and more fashion-forward looks, G-Star attracts a heterogeneous clientele that ranges from students to middle-aged business people. With a regular visiting frequency and steady purchasing rates, the level of brand involvement is relatively high. That notwithstanding, the analysis showed that, to a certain extent at least, this 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, interviews 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 larger high-street brands. By entering into collaborations with popular mid- or even low-market firms (e.g. Claudia Sträter, Specsavers, 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 might seem only 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 Chananja Baars, store manager of Arnhem'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.

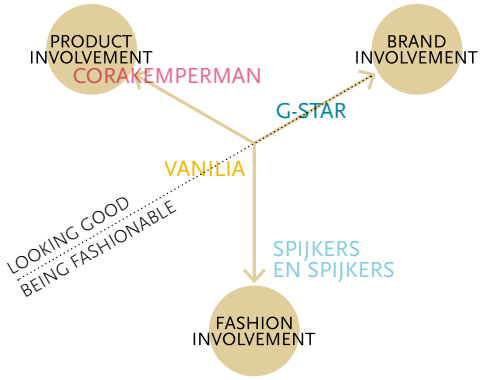
6. CONCLUSION

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 the respective audiences 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. With rather high levels of product and brand involvement, the connection between CoraKemperman and its main consumer group is relatively close. The relationship is defined by a mix of exclusivity and product

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.

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



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'.

SAMENVATTING MIJN ONDERZOEK IN EEN NOTENDOP

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. Tegelijkertijd zijn al deze concepten wel met elkaar verbonden, waardoor het moeilijk is om scherpe grenzen te trekken. In mijn onderzoek heeft identiteit betrekking op de volgende aspecten:

a. Individuele en collectieve identiteiten en de vraag in hoeverre die twee met elkaar zijn verbonden in de context van merkbetrokkenheid en aankoopgedrag.
b. De vraag in welke mate identiteit en identificatie meer verbonden zijn met 'ingebeelde gemeenschappen' dan met reëel bestaande (Anderson 1983).
c. Merkidentiteit en de invloed daarvan op het aankoop-besluitvormingsproces.
d. De Nederlandse cultuur en de elementen van nationale identiteit die de modevoorkeuren van Nederlandse consumenten mee bepalen.

In het kader van mijn onderzoek wordt persoonlijke identiteit gezien als een combinatie van twee van elkaar 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 omgeving, culturele tradities, politieke situatie), die een bepaald gedrag en bijpassende kleding vereisen. Veel auteurs beweren dat we steeds meer geëvolueerd zijn van uniforme sociale identiteiten naar meervoudige of zelfs 'vloeibare' identiteiten (Bauman 2000; Huyssen 1986, 1988; Jameson 1998; MacGuigan 1999; Muggleton 2000; Sarup 1996; Wilson 1990). Hoewel ik erken dat men er op die manier tegenaan kan kijken, ben ik meer geneigd identiteit te definiëren als een relatief stabiele constructie die, al naargelang de context, enigszins kan worden aangepast. Weliswaar wordt de zoektocht naar identiteit vanuit steeds meer kanten beïnvloed, het zou verkeerd zijn om daaruit te concluderen dat onze sociale identiteit volledig versnipperd is. Voor sommige mensen mag identiteit misschien het karakter van een 'act' hebben, de meesten onder ons stemmen evenwel hun sociale persona eerder onbewust af op de situatie waaraan ze op een zeker moment worden blootgesteld.

Kleding kan een krachtig middel zijn om onze identiteit uit te drukken en vorm te geven aan onze diverse sociale rollen. Door haar kinetisch en kneedbaar karakter, voorziet kleding ons als het ware van een 'gereedschapskist' waaruit we, afhankelijk van de situatie, componenten kunnen kiezen om de verschillende facetten van onze identiteit te accentueren (Evans 2003). Daardoor functioneert mode soms als medium waarmee we sociale signalen en ook een beeld van onszelf uitzenden. Een kantoorbaan vraagt om andere kleding dan een voetbalwedstrijd, en meestal voldoen we aan deze kledingvoorschriften, zonder daarover na te denken. Met andere woorden, kleding kan helpen om de beelden die we van onszelf creëren te versterken en dus ook de manier waarop we uitdrukking geven aan onze identiteit. Zoals de voorbeelden laten zien, zijn de mentale beelden die horen bij een bepaalde stijl niet louter individueel, maar worden ze ook geproduceerd door sociale context. Als het gaat om het tweeledige karakter van identiteit, is mode op die manier een belangrijke sociale betekenisgever: ook al presenteren wij onze eigen interpretatie van een 'formele', 'stijlvolle', 'casual', of 'sportieve' stijl, dan kan dat alleen individueel zijn in relatie tot een bepaald cultureel kader (Simmel 1904).

Ook merkidentiteiten spelen in dit spel een rol. Bepaalde ondernemingen worden geassocieerd met een specifieke levensstijl of sociale identiteit. Lonsdale is populair in de rechtse skinheadcultuur, of dit bedrijf dat nu leuk vindt of niet, terwijl Fred Perry in bepaalde landen wordt geassocieerd met de homocultuur (Mossinkoff 2012). Prada wordt dan weer gepositioneerd als 'een intelligent en kritisch alternatief in vergelijking met... concurrerende bedrijven' (Moore en Doyle 2010: 920), terwijl bedrijven als Polo Ralph Lauren of Tommy Hilfiger bekend staan om hun verschillende interpretaties van Amerikaans 'preppy chic'. Merkidentiteit wordt dus meestal verbonden met specifieke sociale uitingen en een daarmee verbonden benadering van consumenten. Daarmee is niet gezegd dat merkidentiteiten statische constructen zijn. Ze zijn integendeel voortdurend in beweging, omdat ze het voorwerp zijn van voortdurende sociale discussie en aangepast worden aan de veranderende smaken van consumenten. Zodoende co-evolueren merkidentiteiten idealiter met hun beoogde doelgroep.

Dertig jaar geleden presenteerde Benedict Anderson zijn concept van 'ingebeelde gemeenschappen' (1983) als alternatieve benadering van sociale identificatie. Het is inderdaad niet ongebruikelijk dat wij een deel van onze identiteit ontlenen aan een of meer reëel bestaande dan wel meer ingebeelde gemeenschappen. In een consumptiecontext kan het zijn dat bepaalde consumenten zichzelf zien als onderdeel van een merkgemeenschap, terwijl in werkelijkheid die gemeenschap niet echt bestaat en het lidmaatschap van de groep alleen denkbeeldig is (Mossinkoff 2012). Dit idee is cruciaal om te begrijpen hoe, in een modecontext, consumenten zich (kunnen) identificeren met een onderneming of haar imago, op basis van een ingebeeld gevoel van verbondenheid. Het is niet nodig om daadwerkelijk deel uit te maken van de groep, zolang consumenten zich identificeren met de *spirit* of de emotie die belichaamd worden door het merk. Consumenten worden als het ware onderdeel van een consumptiebelevenis en als gevolgd daarvan van een specifieke lifestyle-groep.

Tot nu toe heb ik in kaart gebracht hoe kleding gezien kan worden als drager van persoonlijke en collectieve identiteiten, hoe dit begrip aansluit bij merkidentiteit en hoe persoonlijke identiteit verbonden kan zijn met zowel echte als ingebeelde gemeenschappen. Hoe verhouden deze overwegingen zich nu tot een mogelijke nationale mode-identiteit? We kleden ons allemaal op een bepaalde manier en in de meeste gevallen doen we dat intuïtief, al naar gelang de gelegenheid. Daarbij worden we wellicht ook beïnvloed door een typische nationale stijl. Hoewel stereotiep en enigszins gesimplificeerd worden Italianen geroemd om hun elegante zwierigheid, terwijl de Fransen bekend staan om hun moeiteloze verfijning. Als we een recente enquête onder 12.000 mensen die veel reizen mogen geloven, zijn de Nederlanders de tweede minst stijlvolle natie ter wereld (Skyscanner, 13 september 2012). Of dat waar is, is een andere discussie. Feit blijft dat verschillende landen verschillende tradities en leefstijlen hebben, die op subtiele wijze een rol spelen bij de wijze waarop de inwoners zich kleden. Giselinde Kuipers (2012: 4) verwijst hierbij naar Norbert Elias' concept van 'nationale habitus' en definieert het als 'aangeleerde praktijken en normen die zozeer deel van onszelf zijn geworden dat ze als vanzelfsprekend en natuurlijk aanvoelen'. Een deel van mijn onderzoek verkent de relatie tussen dergelijke aangeleerde praktijken en normen en de wijze waarop Nederlanders zich kleden.

Ellemers e.a. (1999: 372-373) onderscheiden drie verschillende niveaus van identificatie: cognitief, evaluatief en affectief. Toegepast op een modecontext verwijst het cognitieve niveau naar een besef van een specifiek fenomeen, in dit geval een aparte lokale kledingstijl. In de evaluatieve fase wordt de vraag gesteld wat goed, slecht of speciaal is aan bijvoorbeeld Nederlandse mode. Bij de affectieve fase tenslotte gaat het om emotionele betrokkenheid. Hoe positiever de evaluatie, hoe groter wellicht de mate van betrokkenheid. In een vierde fase kan een identiteit ook conatief worden, hetgeen betekent dat de emotionele betrokkenheid zo groot is dat ze het concreet gedrag vorm geeft (Jacobs 2011c). In mijn studie onderzoek ik in hoeverre deze verschillende niveaus feitelijk van toepassing zijn op Nederlandse consumenten en door welke parameters hun aankoopgedrag kan worden bepaald.

3. DE CONSUMPTIEDYNAMIEK

Kleding reikt in de regel verder dan het bedekken van het lichaam en geeft meestal aanduidingen van individuele en collectieve identiteiten. Die betekenisgeving is allesbehalve eenduidig: de betekenissen die met bepaalde kledingmerken en producten worden verbonden, komen tot stand en worden weer veranderd via sociale conversatie op verschillende niveaus. Ze vertonen dus hoogstens een tijdelijke stabiliteit. Het komt wel eens voor dat dezelfde waarden worden verbonden met verschillende merken, ongeacht de context. Meestal verschillen de met bepaalde merken verbonden waarden evenwel, soms tussen landen, soms ook tussen de afzonderlijke groepen daarbinnen.

Om de wisselwerking tussen individuen en groepen in een consumptiecontext te begrijpen, ontwikkelde ik het concept van 'stijlgroepen'. Dat zijn virtuele consumptiecollectieven waarvan de leden gelijkaardige waarden en levensvisies delen met daarmee verbonden stilistische voorkeuren en consumptie-interesses. Die verbinding met een stijlgroep kan bewust of onbewust zijn, afhankelijk van de mate van betrokkenheid bij een bepaald merk of een bepaalde productcategorie. Dit theoretisch concept waarmee groepen consumenten herkend kunnen worden op basis van stijlen en segmenten daarvan is een soort variatie op moderne 'stammen theorieën' in termen van 'tribes' en 'neotribes' (Maffesoli 1996). Het is bijvoorbeeld onwaarschijnlijk dat een consument met een voorliefde voor elegante loungepakken of klassieke herenkleding kleren zou kopen bij de Wibra. Hij zou er waarschijnlijk niet eens naar binnen durven.

Omdat de focus ligt op de waarden die de dynamiek beheersen tussen vraag en aanbod in de Nederlandse mode-industrie, is het cruciaal om te begrijpen hoe de processen van identificatie en aankoopgedrag met elkaar verbonden zijn. Ook als consumenten deel uitmaken van een meer omvattende sociale context, blijven consumptie en zelfpresentatie uiteindelijk natuurlijk individuele handelingen. Een cruciaal begrip bij de verbinding tussen individuele en collectieve waarden enerzijds en de symbolische waarde van consumptiegoederen anderzijds, is daarom het 'zelfconcept' (Dolich 1969; Grubb en Grathwohl 1967; Phau en Lo 2004; Sirgy 1982). Consumptiegoederen kunnen bemiddelen tussen verschillende identiteitsniveaus en zodoende het behoren tot, en geaccepteerd worden door, bepaalde referentiegroepen versterken of verzwakken. Nauw verbonden hiermee is het concept van consumentenbetrokkenheid. Hoewel er verschillende vormen van betrokkenheid bestaan, is voor mijn studie slechts 'blijvende betrokkenheid' (Rothschild 1975), gedefinieerd als 'een individuele variabele, die de algemene, langetermijninteresse voor een product dat een consument inbrengt in een situatie voorstelt' (Richins, Bloch en McQuarrie 1992: 143).

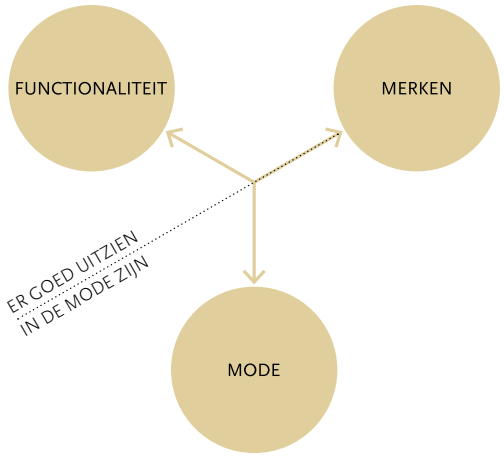
Consumentenbetrokkenheid is een meerdimensionaal begrip: het kan verwijzen naar merken of producten en ook naar verschillende aankoopmotivaties. Als het over kleding gaat, maakt Jacobs (2010) onderscheid tussen twee basismotivaties: 'er goed uitzien' dan wel 'in de mode zijn' (FIGUUR 1). Als consumenten het vooral belangrijk vinden er goed uit te zien, zijn ze misschien veel bezig met kleding in het algemeen, maar niet met mode. Daarentegen zullen de consumenten die een modieus uiterlijk het allerbelangrijkst vinden, in de regel de modewaarde van hun kleren belangrijker

vinden dan of ze er goed uitzien. Op basis van deze twee dimensies kunnen we onderscheid maken tussen kledingbetrokkenheid en modebetrokkenheid. Bij het onderzoek naar de consumptievoorkeuren en merkentrouw in de Nederlandse mode-industrie, helpt de betrokkenheid-constructie om verschillende motivaties te meten en begrip te ontwikkelen voor de materiële en immateriële waarden die consumenten aan een merk verbinden.

Van belang voor mijn onderzoek is verder hoe merken zich verhouden tot hun consumenten en welk soort relatie ze daarbij met elkaar aangaan. Ik hanteer daarbij het concept 'co-creatie' om het niveau en de kwaliteit van die verhouding tussen vraag en aanbod te verkennen. Als het over marketing gaat betekent co-creatie dat de kennis over en de ervaringen van de consumenten geïntegreerd worden in de waardepropositie van het merk, om zodoende een grotere mate van consumententevredenheid te realiseren. Een dergelijke aanpak maakt het ook mogelijk voor consumenten om in gesprek te gaan met hun favoriete merken, soms in die mate dat ze daadwerkelijk invloed hebben op het aanbod en daarmee verbonden de economische resultaten.

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 consumentenonderzoek 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 ze te volgen. Mijn onderzoek probeert evenwel te



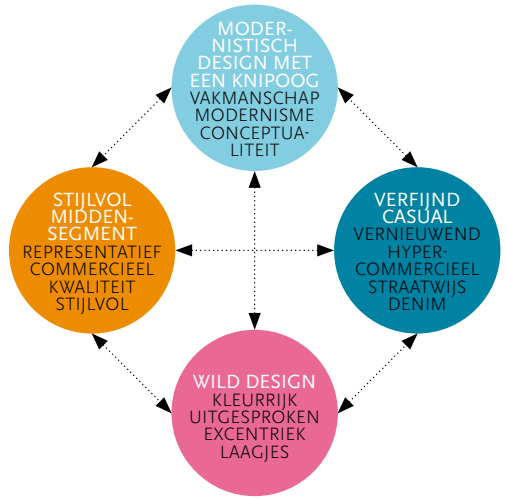
FIGUUR 1 CONSUMENTENHOUDINGEN TEN OPZICHTE VAN KLEDING (JACOBS 2010: 587)

begrijpen hoe de wisselwerking tussen modebedrijven en hun publiek reëel vorm krijgt en op deze wijze bij te dragen aan een goed begrip van deze onderlinge dynamiek. Door te onderzoeken op welke wijze en in welke mate houdingen van consumentengroepen de strategische positionering van bedrijven doorkruisen, neem ik de interactieve component van modeconsumptie in het vizier. Daarbij tracht ik de cruciale aanjagers van deze relatie te identificeren. Bovendien ga ik na of er criteria in deze relatie zijn die typisch zijn voor het Nederlandse situatie. Verkennend onderzoek was daarbij het meest aangewezen, aangezien dit thema voor het grootste deel nog niet onderzocht was. Een benadering gebaseerd op casestudies was daarom het meest geschikt, omdat deze me in staat stelde om het Nederlandse modelandschap in al zijn diversiteit en vanuit verschillende invalshoeken en een veelvoud aan bronnen 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 krijgen van hoe de Nederlandse mode-industrie eruit ziet, organiseerden mijn begeleider, prof. dr. Dany Jacobs, en ik een panel van deskundigen voordat de cases feitelijk geselecteerd werden. Om een idee van de procedure te geven: we hebben samen, via e-mail, twaalf deskundigen met een grote ervaring in de Nederlandse mode benaderd, met het verzoek tien modebedrijven te noemen die samen de beste afspiegeling vormen van het Nederlandse modelandschap. Bovendien werd aan deze respondenten gevraagd om een verklaring te geven voor hun keuze. Hiermee richtten we de blik op de onderliggende waarden en connotaties van wat als 'typisch Nederlands' wordt gezien.

Na samenvoeging van deze gegevens, distilleerde ik eerst verschillende merkcategorieën uit alle reacties en maakte een lijst met kenmerken die blijkbaar de lokale mode-industrie karakteriseren. Als tweede stap probeerde ik tot een meer omvattend perspectief te komen door de onderliggende patronen te construeren. Daarmee wilde ik de aspecten identificeren die telkens opdoken tijdens de discussie en die tot een classificatie konden leiden van het Nederlandse modelandschap. Ik zocht daarbij meer naar overkoepelende thema's dan naar merkcategorieën. Daartoe werden alle reacties gecodeerd op basis van terugkerende waarden zoals 'minimalistisch', 'conceptueel', 'denim', 'commercieel', 'kleurrijk' of 'vernieuwend'. Op hun beurt fungeerden deze termen als index voor overkoepelende thema's in de Nederlandse mode. De bevindingen werden gebundeld in verschillende categorieën; er werd een set van gemeenschappelijke kenmerken gemaakt voor elke categorie om punten van overeenkomst in het totale

FIGUUR 2 DE VIER GEZICHTEN VAN DE NEDERLANDSE MODE



responspatroon te laten zien. Uit de analyse kwamen tenslotte vier categorieën naar voren die een beeld geven 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* zijn een conceptuele benadering van het ontwerpproces, vakmanschap en de invloed en interpretatie van modernistische principes. Gekarakteriseerd door een minimale en sobere stijl, hebben ontwerpers als Alexander van Slobbe, Truus en Riet Spijkers of Jan Taminiau de neiging te spelen met de conventies van het genre. Hoewel het een relatief klein segment van het lokale modelandschap betreft, is het invloedrijk in de zin dat het bepaalde tendensen condenseert, die ook zichtbaar zijn in de winkelstraten. *Wild Design* ontleent zijn naam aan een alternatieve traditie in de Nederlandse mode die tot nu toe niet veel aandacht heeft gekregen in wetenschappelijke publicaties. Het werk van bedrijven als Oilily, Bas Kosters, of CoraKemperman wordt gekenmerkt door kleur, oneerbiedigheid en speelsheid en is geïnspireerd door een verscheidenheid aan bronnen, waaronder de hippiecultuur, postmoderniteit, Nederlandse folklore en het koloniale verleden. De mode die door deze polyvalentie ontstaat wordt gekenmerkt door een spel van volumes en vormen, onstuimige kleuren en levendige patronen. *Verfijnd Casual* betreft bedrijven als G-Star of Gsus met een combinatie van op streetstyle geïnspireerde en trendy mode, die volop zichtbaar zijn als gevolg van vooruitstrevende marketingtactieken en zakelijk inzicht. De producten zijn dan ook ontworpen met het oog op universele eisen in een veelvoud van modeeconomieën. Een ander kenmerk van deze categorie is het gebruik van denim. Of die nu behandeld of onbehandeld is, keurig of casual, de Nederlandse mode-industrie staat bekend om haar innovatieve benadering van jeanskleding en onverwachte variaties op populaire thema's (Feitsma 2012a). Het *Stijlvol Middensegment* is vooral te vinden in de Nederlandse damesmode. Door hun brede assortiment worden merken als Aaiko, Stills of Vanilia gekenmerkt door veelzijdigheid en flexibiliteit en hun streven een groot deel van de markt te bedienen. Een deel van de collectie is op zakelijke kleding georiënteerd, terwijl een ander deel uit basics bestaat en weer een ander deel zich richt op meer formele kledingstukken. Ondanks de niet te hoge prijzen van deze merken, die in de meeste winkelstraten te vinden zijn, wijden bepaalde ondernemingen een deel van hun collectie aan meer geavanceerde kledingstijlen om het merkaanbod meer modecachet te geven. De combinatie van een originele huisstijl, een weloverwogen communicatiestrategie en een gevestigde marktpositie, garandeert een goede balans tussen bereikbaarheid en exclusiviteit, de laatste mode en zakelijke kleding.

Geen van deze categorieën staat op zichzelf. Sterker, ze bestuiven of overlappen elkaar en soms botsen ze. De gemeenschappelijke noemer van de vier groepen, in al hun verscheidenheid, is wat ik de 'fietsfactor' noem: kleding voor de Nederlandse markt moet praktisch zijn, zodat die de hele dag door gedragen kan worden en moeiteloos functioneert in zowel sociale als professionele omstandigheden. De kleding moet rekening houden met maximale bewegingsvrijheid en aangenaam zijn om te dragen, geschikt zijn voor fietsritten, professionele omgevingen, om boodschappen te doen of uit eten te gaan – dat alles moet mogelijk zijn met slechts één stel kleren.

Tot nu toe heeft de discussie over Nederlandse mode zich vooral gericht op bepaalde historische periodes, terwijl geen poging werd ondernomen om dit modelandschap in zijn geheel, op zijn minst bij benadering, te beschrijven. De bijdrage van mijn onderzoek is dat het een kader biedt om de Nederlandse modeindustrie te bestuderen op basis van een aantal overheersende patronen en ideeën. De vier merken die ik in dit proefschrift heb bestudeerd zijn het resultaat van deze zoektocht en zijn bedoeld om een idee te geven van de dynamiek tussen merken en consumenten in elk van de genoemde categorieën. *Spijkers en Spijkers* werd gekozen als voorbeeld van *Modernistisch Design met een Knipoog*, terwijl *CoraKemperman* werd geselecteerd voor de categorie *Wild Design*. *G-Star* werd gekozen als voorbeeld van *Verfijnd Casual*; *Vanilia* tenslotte moet het Stijlvol *Middensegment illustreren*.

Om deze verschillende bedrijven te bestuderen steunde ik op een exploratieve, gemengdemethodenbenadering. In overeenstemming met het uitgangspunt van 'gegevenstriangulatie' (Perry 1988), is mijn studie gebaseerd op verschillende bronnen. Om de constructvaliditeit van mijn studie te waarborgen, is geput uit

meerdere bronnen zoals interviews en websites, winkelbezoek en observatieprotocollen. Voor mijn analyse van de retentiemechanismen en strategische positionering van de verschillende merken heb ik diepte-interviews gehouden met marketeers, ontwerpers, stylisten 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 consumentengroepen te bestuderen heb ik diepte-interviews afgenomen. Dit stelde me in staat de ervaringen en leefwerelden van de consumenten beter te begrijpen. Deze inzichten werden aangevuld met een gestructureerde vragenlijst die ik samen met respondenten binnen of buiten de winkels van drie van de vier onderneming invulde.[1] Alle diepte-interviews werden gecodeerd en geanalyseerd volgens Mayrings model van kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse. Bij deze inhoudelijke aanpak worden formele aspecten in het proces van gegevensverzameling geïntegreerd, die de reproduceerbaarheid van de resultaten helpen te garanderen en de kwaliteit van de conclusies te bewaken (Krippendorff 1969; Mayring 2000).

5. CASESTUDIES 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 *CoraKemperman*, dat zich gedurende langere tijd in nauwe interactie met veel van haar klanten ontwikkelde, de relatie met die klantenkring wordt bepaald door een mix van exclusiviteit en uniciteit van het product. Omdat het merk niets via internet of postorder verkoopt, is het volledig afhankelijk van verkoop in haar winkels. Door de voorraad (het beschikbare aantal items per grootte en kleur) in de winkels laag te houden wordt er een 'wie het eerst komt, het eerst maalt' mentaliteit onder veel van haar klanten opgeroepen. Bovendien wordt op de winkelvloer een persoonlijke en goed geregisseerde verkoopaanpak gevolgd, die bij de kopers een sfeer van verbondenheid en individualiteit oproept. Beide factoren leiden tot vrij hoge niveaus van merk- en vooral productbetrokkenheid en een emotioneel geladen relatie. CoraKempermans stijlgroep is nauw omschreven en verrassend sterk. Klanten worden vooral aangetrokken door de kleurrijke avant-gardistische stijl van het merk. In alle opzichten gaven zij uniciteit en herkenningswaarde aan als de belangrijkste kenmerken van de productpropositie. We kunnen dan ook concluderen dat de groep grotendeels 'eigendom' is van het merk, aangezien er weinig concurrenten zijn die een vergelijkbaar type product aanbieden.

Bij *Vanilia* wordt de verbinding tussen merk en consumenten op een heel andere manier gedefinieerd. De relatie draait in de eerste plaats om elementen als functionaliteit en elegantie, productkwaliteit en comfort. Ongeacht hun leeftijd zijn Vanilia's klanten op zoek naar een soort product dat hen in staat stelt zich op een chique en trendy, zij het onopvallende, manier te kleden. Bovengenoemde waarden leiden zodoende tot een helder beeld waar het gaat om productvoorkeur: het allerbelangrijkste is dat de kleding veelzijdig bruikbaar is en er goed uitziet; stijlvol zonder onnodige franje en geschikt voor zowel zakelijke activiteiten als vrije tijd. Omdat Vanilia's stijlgroep er een nogal uiteenlopend consumptiepatroon op nahoudt en ook kleding vindt bij andere aanbieders met een vergelijkbaar assortiment, is het een eerder 'lichte' stijlgroep die geen 'eigendom' is van het merk. Aangezien de aanschaf voor de meeste consumenten meer met functionaliteit en esthetiek te maken heeft dan met emotie, zijn product- en merkbetrokkenheid eerder gemiddeld. In tegenstelling tot de klantenkring van CoraKemperman, is die van Vanilia niet sterk betrokken bij het merk. Ze zoekt functionele producten die tegelijkertijd representatief en veelzijdig, stijlvol en ingetogen zijn.

G-Star heeft naam gemaakt met vernieuwende denimproducten en slimme productproposities – alle in de voor het bedrijf kenmerkende houtskoolgrijze en sobere huisstijl. Terwijl het merk zich positioneert met een wat gekunstelde imago van geavanceerd, creatief modebedrijf, toonde mijn analyse aan dat zijn modus operandi lang niet zo vernieuwend en experimenteel is als vaak wordt gedacht. Het consumentenprofiel wijst uit dat G-Star, althans in Nederland, gewoon gezien wordt als een doorneewinkelstraatmerk met een iets slimmere productpropositie. Consumenten brengen de onderneming vooral in verband met kenmerken als herkenbaarheid of een stijlvol en hip uiterlijk. Door te laveren tussen casual straatstijlen en meer modieuze mode trekt G-Star een heterogene klantenkring aan die varieert van studenten tot zakenmensen van middelbare leeftijd. De regelmatige bezoekfrequentie en constante aankoopaantallen wijzen op een relatief hoge merkbetrokkenheid. De analyse toonde evenwel aan dat deze uitkomst tot op zekere hoogte eerder te wijten zou kunnen zijn aan de sterke zichtbaarheid van het merk, met grote logo's op de kleding, dan aan emotionele betrokkenheid. Als gevolg hiervan is de stijlgroep van G-Star relatief 'licht', met grote interesse voor de producten van concurrerende merken in hetzelfde segment.

Noodgedwongen werd het onderzoek naar *Spijkers en Spijkers* uitgevoerd met een andere methodologische aanpak. Aangezien ik wegens het ontbreken van winkels niet in staat was om kwalitatief of kwantitatief klantenonderzoek te doen, was mijn studie afhankelijk van veldwerk tijdens een vierdaagse verkenning van

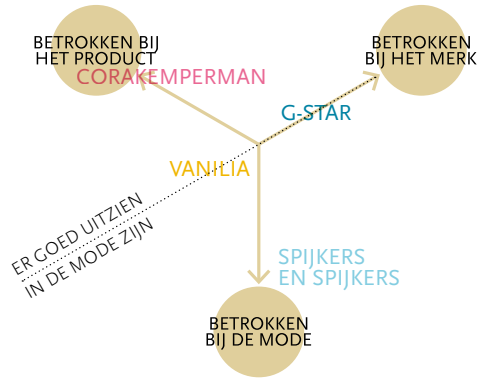
1 Spijkers en Spijkers heeft geen eigen winkel, zodat het niet mogelijk was hiervoor op dezelfde wijze een herkenbare klantengroep te ondervragen.

productiemogelijkheden in Iasi (Roemenië), die ik samen met ondermeer Truus en Riet Spijkers ondernam, uit interviews met zowel deze twee ontwerpers als met winkeliers en een uitgebreide literatuurstudie om deze bevindingen aan te vullen. Mijn onderzoek toont aan dat de ontwerpers door de jaren heen hun product- en verkoopstrategie op eerder impliciete manier hebben aangepast, waarbij ze wel degelijk rekening hielden met veranderingen in de markt. Daarbij zochten ze naar mogelijkheden om hun merk grotere 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 (Claudia Sträter, Specsavers, Bavaria). Daarnaast voegden ze een iets lager gepositioneerd zustermerk SIS aan hun assortiment toe. Terwijl het op het eerste gezicht lijkt dat bij veel van de stappen die zij zetten, de consument 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 stijlgroep van het merk niet toestond, is het toch mogelijk om enkele conclusies te trekken. Volgens Chananja Baars, manager van de Arnhemse designwinkel Coming Soon, bestaat er een enthousiaste kerngroep 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 scherpgesneden 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 waardeverbindingen soms sterkere verbindingen tot stand komen. De keuze van de casestudies was gebaseerd op de 'vier gezichten van de Nederlandse mode', zoals beschreven in paragraaf 4. Deze studie was bijzonder in de zin dat ze zich niet beperkte tot een specifiek detail van het lokale modelandschap, maar integendeel focuste op het grotere geheel. Daarmee wil ik zowel een kritisch debat als toekomstige onderzoek stimuleren. Mijn analyse laat zien dat de verschillende categorieën geschikt zijn om, althans bij benadering, te illustreren hoe het lokale modelandschap eruitziet en door welke verschillende aspecten het koopgedrag van de verschillende consumentengroepen wordt beïnvloed. Bovendien werpt mijn onderzoek een nieuw licht op de leef- en ervaringswerelden die het koopgedrag van deze consumenten mee bepalen. Het analyseren en clusteren van consumentengroepen, op basis van

FIGUUR 3 AANKOOPMOTIVATIES EN VORMEN VAN BETROKKENHEID IN DE CASESTUDIES



verschillende verbruiksprofielen, tot 'stijlgroepen' is een zeer bruikbare methode gebleken om de dynamiek tussen vraag en aanbod in kaart te brengen, omdat hiermee niet uitsluitend gefocust werd op het koopgedrag, maar ook op de context en identiteit van een bepaalde clientèle.

Mijn resultaten laten zien dat in de verschillende gevallen een verschillend beeld ontstaat met betrekking tot de vraag hoe merken en consumenten interacteren en co-evolueren. Met tamelijk hoge niveaus van product- en merkbetrokkenheid, is de band tussen CoraKemperman en haar belangrijkste consumentengroep relatief innig. Deze relatie wordt bepaald door een mix van exclusiviteit en uniciteit van het product, evenals een persoonlijke en goed geregisseerde verkoopbenadering in de winkels. In het geval van Vanilia is de band van consumenten met het merk losser en minder exclusief gericht op één bedrijf. Omdat ze hun garderobe vergaren bij een groter aantal bedrijven met een vergelijkbaar productaanbod, is de klantenkring van Vanilia niet sterk betrokken bij het merk en zoekt ze naar producten die tegelijkertijd representatief en veelzijdig, stijlvol en ingetogen zijn. Met een productpropositie die iets verfijnder is dan het aanbod van zijn concurrenten, trekt G-Star een vrij uiteenlopende consumentengroep aan met een voorliefde voor een modieuze en niet al te opvallende soort straatmode. Op basis van een eerder passieve identificatie, verbonden met de meer dan levensgrote aanwezigheid van het merk op de lokale modemarkt en zijn zeer herkenbare logo, is de betrokkenheid relatief hoog. Meer dan bij de andere merken gaat het bij Spijkers en Spijkers tenslotte wellicht om een sterkere modebetrokkenheid.

In de analyse werd aangetoond 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

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 tolerante 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 bestuderen. 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.

De 'fietsfactor' bijvoorbeeld is waarschijnlijk iets dat meer past bij de Nederlandse context dan bij andere. Nederlandse mode is in veel gevallen een compromis tussen schijnbaar tegenstrijdige begrippen: stijlvol en casual, ingetogen en levendig, luxe en basic, kleurrijk en zwart-wit. Al deze ideeën botsen en vullen elkaar aan en komen samen in een ongedwongen stijl met een randje. In de meeste gevallen heeft een kledingstuk een subtiele 'draai', een onverwachte element dat het evenwicht houdt tussen individualisme en ironie: een ongecompliceerde stijl zonder franje die zichzelf niet al te serieus neemt. Om een oud Nederlands gezegde op zijn kop te zetten: 'Doe maar een beetje gek, dan ben je gewoon genoeg'.

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APPENDIX I
EXAMPLE: QUESTIONNAIRE

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.

11b. 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?
9. Would you label Brand X as typically Dutch? Why? Why not?

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 Ankoné • 08.12.2009, Amsterdam
CKII Cora Kemperman, Saskia Kemperman • 03.03.2010, Amsterdam
CKIII Marjolein van Rooy • 04.03.2010, Amsterdam
CKIV Boy van der Hout, Denise Nieuwenhout • 26.04.2010, Rotterdam
CKV Kim de Graaf • 06.09.2010, Amsterdam
CKCI Vanessa van Berkum • 26.04.2010, Rotterdam
CKCII Tine Krebsburg • 29.04.2010, Rotterdam
CKCIII Jemitra Hairstom • 03.06.2010, Rotterdam
CKCIV Monique • 03.06.2010, Rotterdam
CKCV Judith Arts • 04.06.2010, Rotterdam
CKCVI Jacintha Hessels • 24.06.2010, Rotterdam

CHAPTER 7

VI Eva Beekhof • 17.07.2010, Wormerveer
VII Eva Bijwaard • 26.11.2010, Amsterdam
VIII Tatiana Striekwold • 31.01.2011, Wormerveer
VIV Michel Hulzebosch • 10.02.2011, Wormerveer
VV Tatiana Striekwold • 15.02.2011, Telephone
VVI Eveline Otten • 18.02.2011, Arnhem
VVII Wendy de Bruine • 23.02.2011, Rotterdam
VVIII Romana Kosic • 24.02.2011, Rotterdam
VIX Birgit Groot • 27.04.2011, Wormerveer
VX Anna-Maartje van der Veen • 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
SSII Chananja Baars • 18.12.2012, Arnhem

COLOPHON
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