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

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

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

This research would have not been possible without the assistance and generosity of a lot of people. First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor Dany Jacobs from the University of Amsterdam, ArtEZ, and HAN for his sharp advice, relentless support, and most of all – for giving me the chance to actually participate in this project in the first place. Originally I applied for another PhD position within the NWO project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’. During the interview there was this one guy sitting in the commission, all grumpy face and arms folded, who would not say a word until the talk was almost finished. At long last, he 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 his helpful suggestions and great support in teaching activities, Anneke Smelik for her critical commentary and feedback as well as for steering the NWO project in such a flawless manner, and Michael Scheffer for his extensive knowledge of the textile and fashion industry. Furthermore, I am indebted to the group of fellow PhDs who have been involved in the project. I suppose it makes a big difference whether you go through a period of four years in solitude or together with a number of people who share the same office space, face similar problems in their research, and experience a similar learning curve. I would like to thank Maaike Feitsma for her insight and support. She made the project fun all the way and helped me to stay focused. Also, she has been of great assistance in all matters concerning the organisation of events – admittedly, not one of my strongest points. For her kindliness and consistently interesting point of view I would like to thank Daniëlle 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 Koppchen for taking a critical stance towards my work, which I have greatly benefited from. Also, she has helped me out countless times when I was once again unable to manage the slippery slope down Word, Excel, or PowerPoint.

I am highly indebted to all the organisations that made this project possible in the first place. The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for funding a large-scale operation concerned with a subject that many still consider superficial and unworthy of academic scrutiny. I would like to thank the Meertens Koetsier Foundation, Premels (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 Marcel Stoopen of Studio Marcel Stoopen.

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