Dutch identity in fashion: Co-evolution between brands and consumers
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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-descriptive 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 as 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; McNeel 2010; McRobbie 1998, Palmer 1997, Tseelon 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’ (1897). Anti-fashion 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 studies1 are concerned with the fashion of a specific country. Some publications analyse national styles of dress but hardly any scholars approach the subject of fashion, defined as seasonally changing clothing styles, in the context of a particular national context. The project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’, of which this study is the first major publication, is the first larger scale study that explores national fashion instead of detracting from it, mostly so because its nature of long-haired blondes with a chic but fairly non-descriptive stylistic repertoire.  

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

1.3 DUTCH FASHION IDENTITY

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

In its capacity to equip wearers with a flexible vocabulary to illustrate different facets of their identity, fashion needs to be interpreted as both a cultural artefact and a tool for negotiating identity (Lipovetsky 2002: 145). Kelner (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 is connected to larger collective entities. In certain cases, groups can be identified by a specific dress code that people who work in the creative industries are passionate about. For example, fashion editors, journalists, models, and peer groups, specific dress codes or the way celebrities dress to:

- the systems that govern the relationship between brands and consumers;
- the relationship between individual and collective identity and their impact on purchase behaviour;
- the nature of the relationship between brands and their main audience groups.

Tying a multidisciplinary approach, my research integrates the supply perspective as well and it looks at 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.

1.3 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 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 question about a Dutch fashion identity oscillates between these two poles. On the one hand, there may be a stylistic code or a national integration, which is emmeshed with local traditions and climate as well as the country's way to-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.

Cultures like Italy or France have long been recognized 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 environment, 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 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.

One of fashion’s paradoxes is precisely the reciprocity between individuality and belonging: a unique ex- pression of identity, a tacit element of national integration, which is enmeshed with local traditions and climate as well as the country’s day-to-day reality (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 look for 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 extrapulate from similarities in the way people dress to:

- 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.

FIG 1.1 STYLE vs. FASHION

Based on arguments by Elias and Bourdieu, Kupers (2012) in this respect talks about ‘national habitus’, i.e., implicit cultural elements that distinguish one culture from another.
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 tool or retention fix. Instead, Dutchness shows in the way the brands respond to the varying 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 qualitative analysis of questionnaires that I completed with consumers over a period of three to four months inside the outlets of the different brands.

The structure of the book is as follows: CHAPTER 2 will introduce different terms and conceptions of identity and 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 fashion and 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. In order to explore the relation between individual and group identity and their relation to a consumption context, I will introduce the term self-concept in order to show by what processes purchase behaviour is motivated. In the same context, consumer involvement will be defined as a measure for the difference of relations that consumers establish and maintain with brands. Furthermore, the chapter will define ‘style groups’ as a model to account for the dynamics between individuals and groups in a fashion context. Based on an assumed link between clothing style and identity construction, the ‘style groups’ concept is used to examine how 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 to come to terms with the different strategies 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: ‘Modemist 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 different images 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 Spierenburg, an example of ‘Modernist Design with a Twist’, while CHAPTER 8 will analyse the development of Spierenburg’s brands, a case of ‘Sophisticated Casual’, and its consumers is defined. CHAPTER 10 will present the conclusions of this research with respect to a number of theoretical concerns. Showcasing a synthesis of how the different fashion brands I researched co-evolve and forge ties with their audiences, this chapter responds to the main questions of the study and highlights basic elements of the Dutch fashion identity in the confines of my own field of research.

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

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