Dutch identity in fashion: Co-evolution between brands and consumers
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CHAPTER 2
THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In an early comparative study about cross-cultural differences in fashion consumption Tigges et al. (1980) found that Dutch consumers showed higher levels of involvement with fashion and lifestyle industries than, for example, consumers in the United States. Trying to explore cultural differences in fashion and clothing consumption on a global scale, the report suggests that Dutch consumers put a premium on attributes like ‘fashionable appeal’, ‘comfort’ and ‘individuality’ (ibid: 19). Although the results are dated, the general ambition of that study was similar to the goals of this one: trying to account for the relative positioning of Dutch fashion (brands) and consumption behaviour in the face of an increasingly globalised economy. The consumption of products reaches beyond the actual purchasing act. As a consequence, common interests around brands and products have the potential to forge a link between people who identify with one another on the basis of symbolic attributes (Cova 1995; Cova 1997; Cova and Pace 2006; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Ostberg 2007). In its capacity to transmit socio-cultural messages, fashion by definition is about signification. As it is understood here, fashion is about transmission of socio-cultural messages, fashion by definition materialises just as well as an imaginary concept. Sec tions 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 investigates 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 multiferalerative, 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. 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 investigates 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.

2.3 COMMODITIES, BRANDS AND IDENTITIES: A NETWORK APPROACH

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 investigates 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.
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 person (e.g. a 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 mostly take their direct social belonging as a reference 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 sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. As he recalls, he never paid much attention to his national identity until his Polish nationality was cast in doubt during an anti-Semitic wave in his home country in March 1968 (Bauman 2004: 12). By extension, the argument also works to the case of Mr. Browne. 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, he is 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, also in my case it was not before I moved to the Netherlands that I figured out how German I actually am in number of respects. If I ask the example is how 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 dynamics of individualization–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 social environment that 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 (Jacks 2011c: 8, Leerssen 2007: 337). Meier 2007: 488-495 speaks of ‘Iden’, then, is not a fixed concept. It is in flux as it is constantly reproduced and redefined by our direct and indirect social environment.

Ellermers 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 oneself as 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’). Another example of this tendency is actually the research project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’. 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 spontaneity and fairly inconspicuous combinations, painless hats with lacedefen or helmets with bull’s horns with overtness even cross-fertilize one another. The Dutch are infamous for putting together outrageous and wild outfits that celebrate the occasion and add a witty, sometimes even bizarre, edge to the game.

Earlier I referred to different levels of identification: cognitive, evaluative, affective, and conative. If we now extend this knowledge to the idea of a national fashion identity we might say that 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. 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, but not less refined actually, is probably no coincidence that for a long time more flower prints in the lining of the cuffs and collar of men’s shirts or loud and garish graphics that, deliberately designed, demonstrate, we are pre-
be taken. Chodeswar (2008: 5) maintains that brand identity implies a promise to consumers that is built around a core identity.

“Core identity is the central, timeless essence of the brand that remains constant as the brand moves to new markets and new products. Core identity broadly focuses on product attributes, service, user profile, store ambiance and product performance. Extended or second-skin brand identity emerges as elements organized into cohesive and meaningful groups that provide brand texture and completeness, and focuses on brand personality, relationship, and strong symbolic 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 a consistent communication strategy combined with credible consumer marketing to the market.

If implemented successfully, those associations or brand personality. Here, the focus is on developing brand attributes that are more difficult to copy than product-related ones. In turn, they can provide sustained competitive advantage. According to Sherrington (2003: 23), emotional and personality traits are the bedrock of the brand proposition that remains constant as the brand moves to new markets and new products. Core 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 this perspective, the focus is on how, in a fashion context, consumers (can) identify with a firm or its public image, based on an imagined community in an attempt to demonstrate that identification – or even identity – is not necessarily based on face-to-face interaction. The idea is crucial to understanding how, in a fashion context, consumers (can) identify with a firm or its public image, based on an imagined community in an attempt to demonstrate that identification – or even identity – is not necessarily based on face-to-face interaction. The idea is crucial to understanding how, in a fashion context, consumers (can) identify with a firm or its public image, based on an imagined community in an attempt to demonstrate that identification – or even identity – is not necessarily based on face-to-face interaction.

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 this perspective, the focus is on how, in a fashion context, consumers (can) identify with a firm or its public image, based on an imagined community in an attempt to demonstrate that identification – or even identity – is not necessarily based on face-to-face interaction. The idea is crucial to understanding how, in a fashion context, consumers (can) identify with a firm or its public image, based on an imagined community in an attempt to demonstrate that identification – or even identity – is not necessarily based on face-to-face interaction.