Dutch identity in fashion: Co-evolution between brands and consumers
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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 understanding to group consumption. 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 repertoires due to behavioural and stylistic conventions. Fashion products, in this reading, are appropriated to specifically emphasise those differences and help enact social performances (Shields 1992: 11), so we slip in and out of styles in an attempt to give meaning to ourselves or to create the impression of being professional, seductive, creative, or inconspicuous.

3.3 SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION: ENHANCING THE SELF-CONCEPT

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

As an extension of the self-congruity theory, Allen (2003) develops the concept of 'brand personality,' which is defined as 'the unique set of human personal traits that are applied to 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 personal traits attributed by individuals and the values symbolized by a brand.' This model further extends the idea of brand personality and different consumer types, this research seeks to further contribute to an understanding of self-concept and the purchase and consumption of goods as symbols to the self-concept. The arrows b and c 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 consumer interests.

The reasoning suggests that the acquisition of goods plays an important role in identity performances in that it helps to illustrate (Batra and Brown 1998) that consumers start to develop a relationship with a brand once they identify consistencies between their identity constructs and the primary characteristics of a brand (Aaker and Fournier 1995: 39). Through a goal-directed purchase, Individual A wishes to enhance his self-concept and emphasize 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. Therefore, 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, then, the product takes on new meaning as it 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.

The identification of specific consumption interests. 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 question, the following page 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 and grasp the factors that play a role in the process. This, in turn, provides helpful insights when trying to identify different style groups, their level of attachment, and buying motivations. Most generally speaking, the term describes the ways brands have relevance for different audiences in terms of their meanings. 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

3.4 The Involvement Construct

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**FIG 3.1.:** Consumption Triangle: Goods as Symbols to the Self-concept (adapted from Grubb and Grathwohl 1967: 25)
constitute engaging and focal activities (O’Cass and Julian 2001: 2), thus signalling ‘a person’s perceived relevance and inherent needs, values, and interests’ (Zaichkowski 1985: 342). In literature, the concept is mostly referred to as consumer involvement which can be classified according to four different dimensions (ibid. 342-8; Laurent and Kapferer 1985: 45 ff.). Product Knowledge refers to the extent to which a consumer acquires general information about products, participates in evaluating purchases, and shows 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 motivated to purchase a particular brand 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: 25) further distinguishes between three different types of involvement: situational (SI), response (RI), and enduring involvement (EI). Unlike SI and RI, which reflect temporary states of involvement, EI is cognitively based and intrinsically motivated. As this research aims at exploring different levels of brand loyalty and buying behaviour, 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 or group of products’ (Evans and Auhier 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 or attributes 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, whereas values 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 world-views 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. Peculiar, 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 representative of the psychological 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 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 about 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 a favourite brand. 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/perform ance ratio. Yet, this does not automatically entail that he has a vested interest in fashion in general. In this case, traditionally the use value of a branded product takes precedence over its symbolic function (Kim 2005).

According to Perez Cabanero (2006: 75), involvement is connected to an assessment of the importance of the stimulus but it also produces certain types of behaviour and agency. The concept mediates between self-image and product in a particular or broad, 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.

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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’ 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, the example is meant to illustrate that in a branding context we are dealing with different regimes of identification. Figure 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. Figure 3.3 shows the different dimensions of brand value and clothing and fashion and sportswear. The middle axis represents the distinction between looking good and being fashionable. The closer brands are to the middle axis, the more they are hybrid; the further they are removed from it, the clearer they belong to only one category. Going counterclockwise: top left we find Zegna (or any other cheesecake 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 J. Crew which are slightly more fashionable than the average highstreet brand but not actually valuable brand names in their own right. Further to the right, Onson+Bodil represents an almost couturier-driven fashion house in the sense that it is neither advertised nor branded. The primary ambition of consumers who shop there is to look fashionable while the brand name itself is of not too much importance. Moving on further, we find brands like Yamamoto or Dior. They too, are fashion companies in a rather pure sense. At the same time, they are commercialised enterprises whose leverage is monetised through distribution lines, collaborations, licences, and perfumes. Also in the middle, further up are brands like Armani or C-Star, whose brand image is defined by a combination of use value and reasonably fashionable looks. Here, the emphasis lies on product- and brand-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 sophisticated Britishness like the trenchcoat and the ‘Burberry check’. Across the middle axis, a rather utilitarian firm with a cult following is Lonsdale which 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.1 Ralph Lauren or Marlboro Classics stand for a casual and versatile type of clothing with rather high recognition value and a well-known brand identity. Still, they occupy a middle position: both brands have loyal consumers but it is doubtful whether their level of involvement is of an emotional kind. Lee and Levi’s are jeans brands that are known for classic cuts and a largely uninnovative product portfolio. Most of the products are tried and tested formulas and the brand name reflects this market position. Purchasing one of their products is a safe bet rather than a fashion statement because they stand for timelessness rather than the latest fad. Lastly, we find companies like Gaastra or The North Face. While both are originally outdoor brands, nowadays they can be considered hybrid enterprises that cater to the 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 brand(ing)-related aspects. In other words, brand name, signature look, and use value are in good balance.

1 NB: The brand name in this case is not that important insofar much 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 own identities and personal options, our so- cial 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 subculture is a category that is more directly related to fashion: style groups are based on shared codes of recognition. 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 do not lend themselves to the subject of the study. Although certain brands might be symbolic of fashion or a particular lifestyle, 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 of consumer and brands. Neo-tribes 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 many cases brand communities are probably superfluous.

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 a subculture, a style group is subject to circumstance and convention. We 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 commun-
ities like were not fully resonant with the goals of my research. The aim of the research is to look into the social major and define their own social terrain. Also, the Mods were connected to a specific musical style, a specific colour, a specific world-view. Who, The Small Faces, or The Smoke) as well as the societ in a more casual and friendly manner. Nonetheless, their attitude was largely non-ideological. The aim was not to actu-
ally subvert existing norms, but connect to a different social class and lifestyle by means of a flamboyant out-ward appearance.

As the two examples demonstrate, resistance alone does not qualify as a mark of distinction. The di-
ference between subcultures and neo-tribes and communi-
ties like that, according to theory, subcultures usually encompass an entire world-view, comprised of value systems, political views, a certain taste in music, an aesthetic, a lifestyle and sometimes even a distinct lin-
go or argot that twists the meaning of certain words or phrases. That holistic viewpoint 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 like inomacht, which the latter two are more temporary and diverse (i.e., participa-
tion 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 with subcultures’ cultural aspects, whereas others are moderate followers. Participation and membership, therefore, are always a matter of degree.

Neo-tribes and communities like, in contrast, are tem-
porary 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, indepen-
dent 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 lifestyle concept or mindset rather than one of the individual components (even though some might be more pro-
nounced than others).

It is also 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 exten-
sion that widens the scope and possibilities of social identification, and each one is enmeshed with its own set of rules and codes of conduct. In this context, the
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The Time of the Tribes

Chapter 3 •

Co-evolution between brands and Consumers

A similar concept, dubbed ‘community life’, is sug-
gested by Duyvendak and Hurenkamp (2004). While Maffesoli’s ideas are mainly based on the observation of a social group that is based on individual codes of recogni-
tion, throughout the day he enacts different category or interest communities in the sense of affinity-based network. The process of socialisation and identification is realised through the sum of multiple temporary identities which are based on, for example, ‘wearing par-
ticular types of dress, exhibiting group-specific styles of adorning and espousing the shared values and ide-
als of collectivity’. (ibid: xii). 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.

One of the differences is the aspect of plurality, as people participate in a variety of these communities through-out 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 sympa-thise with some of them. He and his remote acquaint-
ances 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 per-
sonal level. Provided he views 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 shared values, political views, a certain taste in music, an aesthetic, a lifestyle and sometimes even a distinctive lin-
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tion 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 with subcultures’ cultural aspects, whereas others are moderate followers. Participation and membership, therefore, are always a matter of degree.

Neo-tribes and communities like, in contrast, are tem-
porary 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, inde-
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Thus, neo-tribes and communities like constitute aux-
iliary 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 someone by saying ‘Hey, how are you doing?’. 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

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 co-evolutionary consumption contexts and identify the drivers that motivate purchase behaviour. Most brands do indeed stand for a certain type of clothing. Some are more versatile than others, but most of them are connected to some kind of trademark look. Consequently, the question is whether a 23-year-old woman can have a 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 suits and fashionable evening wear. Diversity notwithstanding, we find different aspects of the same characteristis (e.g., sexy, outgoing, provocative, slightly extravagant) and they are likely to attract an audience that shares certain commonalities. Depending on how narrow or broad the scope of consumers actually is, their common ground will be more or less uniform. Therefore I shall use the concept throughout this dissertation as follows: A firm is represented by 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.

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. Brown, who could be classified as a brand purist, and count as very relevant 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 purchase. Provided that 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 chapters I illustrated that classification is a valuable 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 monolithic categories. That, however, does not rule out the possibility to define an average level of involvement and explore the contributing factors.

In Section 3.8 Style Groups and Symbolic Meaning, 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 particularly in disentangling the tacit 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
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 control instead. Others might have a very clear image of consumers more strongly attracted by product-intrinsic aspects of preferred brands and identifying with the milieu, engaging in participant observation. 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: 429), organisations become increasingly customer focused, which, 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 performance. 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 desires of their favourite brands and audiences. The term describes the ‘central and primary concern of an organisation’. By providing tailored experiences like exclusive music events, sports competitions or leisure-time activities, companies strive to create emotional bonds and added value beyond the point of sale exchange during the act of consumption (Rowley et al. 2007: 140-41). An interesting example in that regard comes from the sports brand Salomon before it introduced a new series of inline skaters to the French market. In contrast to direct competitors like Fila or Reebok, whose 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., encouraging the milieu, engagement, 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’ (Cova and Cova 2002: 34). 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 that 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 shared brand 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 engage 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?
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.