Dutch identity in fashion: Co-evolution between brands and consumers
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CHAPTER 6

CORAK KEMPERMAN: A CLASS OF ITS OWN
6.1 INTRODUCTION

Somewhat surprisingly, Cora Kemperman turned out to be a rather special case. For one thing, the research shows that the company capitalises on a comparatively large number of very loyal consumers who worship the firm’s strong visual identity. For another, the sales approach inside the retail outlets proved to be a key aspect of the value proposition. Seemingly effortlessly, the firm has developed a set of practices and organisational routines that guarantee an individualised sales pitch that extends the point of value exchange from a purely material to a personal level.

Established in 1995 by designer Cora Kemperman1 and businesswoman Gloria Kok, CoraKemperman is a Dutch high-street firm with a distinct value proposition and range of products. The business is medium-sized in scale and consumer approach, and caters to a specific share of the Dutch and international fashion market. Although the brand attracts women from a variety of backgrounds there is a surprising degree of uniformity concerning the type of consumer and the variety of backgrounds there is a surprising degree of uniformity concerning the type of consumer and the demands for clothing products. Somewhat peculiarly, while the firm barely engages in any kind of marketing activities, the majority of consumers have been loyal to the company for many years, worshipping the durability of the clothes as well as their unique style.

Based on a three-month period of research, this chapter analyses CoraKemperman’s relation with consumers and looks into the way the firm is profiled in the Dutch fashion market. As the results suggest, the firm attracts a rather special audience, whose relationship with the brand is based on product uniqueness, exclusivity, and individuality. The fact that it is a comparatively affordable high-street firm, the manufacturing quality and the products’ price-performance ratio constitute crucial aspects in this respect as well. In order to make sense of the firm’s relevance within its particular consumption context the following paragraphs are devoted to the brand’s structural set-up that is built around three key aspects: a personalised consumer pitch, an exclusive value proposition, and a distinct product identity.

6.2 VOICES FROM THE PAST

Before delving into CoraKemperman more specifically, we need to take one step back to the period before the business was established, which is essential to understand some of the defining features of CoraKemperman’s business approach. From 1976 till 1994 Cora Kemperman worked as a buyer and designer for the Peek & Cloppenburg offshoot Mac & Maggie. When P & C started the new fashion line in 1976 Kemperman took her post as head of buying womenswear. Pairing a distinguished vision of the brand’s identity with business acumen, she positioned Mac & Maggie as a vanguard fashion enterprise with an attractive price proposition. At the time, the concept was inspired and innovative: to make catwalk fashion from Paris, London, and Tokyo accessible to the wider public, both in terms of wearability and pricing policy (Meeuwissen in Bakker 2010: 77). The look – fashionable extravaganza mixed with ethnic elements – took its cues from high-ticket designer fashion as well as from Kemperman’s own penchant for India and the traditional garments of Rajasthan.

During the 1980s Mac & Maggie turned into an enormously successful concept. In its heyday the brand boasted 38 shops in four countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, England, and Germany), 244 employees, and an annual turnover of 38 million guilders – 25 per cent of Peek & Cloppenburg’s annual turnover at the time (Van den Brand 1993). In the early 1990s, however, the firm’s star began to wane. Threatened by international players like Hennes & Mauritz or Miss Selfridges, which followed a similar business strategy, the company’s direction decided to alter its course, introducing a different product philosophy and hiring a host of young designers to realise that ambition (Schenk 1993). Befuddled with different ideas about the brand’s visual identity, the result was a mishmash of conflicting voices that did not bear Kemperman’s stamp anymore and failed to meet the demands of consumers. Held accountable for the increasing losses, Kemperman eventually left the firm in 1994. P & C closed Mac & Maggie down one year later.

Interestingly, the main constituents of the brand’s business model were all transferred to her new venture with Gloria Kok. The style, the concept of ‘borrowing’ from international trends from the catwalks, as well as a certain ‘team spirit’, which constituted an important driver in Mac & Maggie’s success story, are also the founding pillars of CoraKemperman. At the same time, the designer also learned from some mistakes. Mac & Maggie’s downfall was partly owed to the fact that the firm had become the victim of its own success. With more and more stores opening, the business had become harder to control and eventually lost its competitive edge. The following sections will analyse each of these aspects more in depth and explain in what way they have influenced the firm’s business profile.

6.3 TRADEMARK STYLE

Marked by a consistently individual style, CoraKemperman’s product range is sold under one name and in one single clothing line: “coraKemperman. Including basics like longsleeves, leggings, and scarves, as well as more complex garments like skirts, dresses, blazers, and coats, the product style is characterised by a combination of neutral (black/white) and dashing colours,
versatile shapes and wide-cut silhouettes. With the ambition to offer unique garments that are artful and wearable, Cora Kemperman’s price proposition is fairly moderate. Dresses cost between 50 and 100 Euros, coats range from about 100 to 250 Euros, blouses cost between 30 and 70 Euros, and basics like leggings or scarves have a price tag of about 20 Euros. The result is a type of product with a distinctly coarse visual and attractively priced. As claimed in the brand’s mission statement, ‘[W]e want to dress women in a distinguishing, unique, creative way. To achieve this, we translate the most outstanding fashion trends into reasonably priced fashion, while we bring in our own perspective on fashion. This results in an “individual style”’ (Corakemperman 2002: 1). Just as Ankoné, the firm’s signature style takes cues from two main sources. On the one hand, Cora Kemperman’s aesthetic universe is largely autobiographical. Designing ‘for herself and friends’, the prod- uct catalogue is inspired by the designer’s own lifestyle and experience world. In addition, travels, foreign cul-
tures, and local paraphernalia influence her work (in-
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...
or simply remembering their birthdays you really can build a strong tie with consumers, so that – in the end – they might appreciate that even more than my advice. We really do our best here to create a certain feeling, a kind of mentality if you will.’ (Interview CVK)

By combining fashion preferences with more personal information, Cora Kemperman’s staff create a bond with consumers, who in a wide number of instances reaches beyond the material properties of the clothes. The result is a homey and welcoming atmosphere that connects assistants and consumers on a personal level. As one consumer explained to me, ‘It’s quite like spending time with your friends. You come here and it just feels right. In the end it really doesn’t matter whether I buy a piece or not. I mean, in the majority of cases I do (…) but that’s not actually the point.’ (Informal conversation on the shop floor)

The orientation towards the salespeople is crucial when it comes to the relationship many consumers maintain with brand and products. Although perhaps a slightly exaggerated term, Cora Kemperman’s staff members create some kind of ‘family feel’ that elevates the retail experience from an individual to a social or even collective activity. Consumers and assistants chat and laugh about any subject, from the economic crisis to their family situation or their plans for the evening. The brand profits from this type of individual sales pitch in that they provide an extra incentive in the purchase decision-making process and foster long-term buying relations. Asked about her relationship with the brand, 46-year-old Judith Arts states: ‘Very close. Very close, really. (…) What is truly important to me is that I know the girls in the shop very well. In the majority of cases one and the same assistant helps me since she knows what I already have in my closet. And I find that quite convenient. I have to say that I am always advised very well and in a nice way. They know my taste and I find that important. For me, that’s the primary reason to come here, really.’ (Interview CVCK)

It is important to note that the personal bonds between consumers and staff are not actually a by-product of the retail process but a condition both desired and endorsed by the company founder, Cora Kemperman, and her general manager Marjolein van Rooy. Kemperman herself takes a very clear position in this respect. According to her, creating a welcoming and familiar environment that promotes some kind of emotional relationship between consumers and salespeople is actually an integral part of the value proposition. As she states: ‘I always used to say ‘I design for me and my friends’, and that’s also what I (tell) my assistants in the shop. You have to help your customers as though they were friends or peers.’ (Interview CVK)

6.6 IT’S A SYSTEM

The sales approach constitutes a stronghold in the firm’s strategic positioning. During the period of observation and supported by internal documents (e.g. guidelines for the description of sales pitches) it is apparent that brand image, retail environment, and the experiences provided for consumers are subject to rigid systematisation and a whole apparatus that guarantees their well-functioning. The sales assistants are trained on the materials used in every collection and how to maintain them in order to provide accurate service and advise on the proper use of products. These specifications are summed up in a 12-page manual each employee is asked to study carefully and sign after completion at the beginning of every new season. Moreover, the company’s approach involves a number of policies concerning the corporate look of the shops and presentation of items. For example, in the downstairs common room of the Rotterdam shop several sheets of paper are pinned to the walls detailing ‘codes of conduct’, a checklist concerning the look of the personnel, and a task list. The aspects included in the list range from outward appearance (‘neat haircut’, ‘proper manicure’), ‘constructive’ and ‘energetic’ organisation (e.g. each of the shop girls has one specific task, like cleaning or administration, she needs to carry out every day/week/month), to the actual sales approach (‘Greet every consumer with a smile, be attentive and guide her through the purchasing process’).

Ensuring that salespeople and consumers connect and that staff members are actually ‘on brand’, candidates need to undergo a rather rigorous selection procedure. First, a letter of motivation is requested next to the CV. After that, an interview with the store manager and a colleague takes place in order to get an idea of the candidate’s personality and character. In the next step candidates have to prove their skills during a one-day acceptance trial, following by a debriefing by the store manager. If a candidate shows promise two or three more trial days will ensue ‘so we can see whether they really fit into our team’ [B. van der Hout]. By the same token, a lot of attention is paid to what applicants make of the retail environment which they are asked to describe in an essay to decide whether or not it fits for themselves for the first time. As Rotterdam store manager Boy van der Hout explained to me, ‘If that doesn’t work, we really have a problem and can’t take her in. I mean, you can’t train them. Either you have that feel for Cora’s clothes or you don’t.’ (Informal conversation on the shop floor)

The brand devotes a lot of attention to these details to ensure a coherent brand image and guarantee a ‘match’ between the different characters in the shop and the company’s different consumer types. As Mrs van der Hout told me during a trial with a candidate, ‘We really have to be sure that the people can identify with her. That’s really, really important. You can’t hire someone just because she is nice – the way consumers respond to her is crucial. That’s why we usually have more than one day [trial-runs] with each new candidate.’ (ibid)

Working with a strategy designed to deliver good and intimate service in the shops, Cora Kemperman seeks to create an atmosphere of personal relevance for its consumers. Apart from product-specific attributes, which play an important role in the relationship with the firm, its customised sales pitch helps to forge bonds beyond the product proposition.

6.7 EXCLUSIVITY

To a great extent Cora Kemperman capitalises on long-term relations with consumers. These are partly based on the service provided in the shops, partly related to the products’ unique appearance, and partly have to do with a number of policies endorsed by the firm to retain an exclusive edge.

As explained in section 6.4 Cora Kemperman and Gloria Kok decided to open just a small number of outlets and to keep a low business profile on the high street. Keeping control over the product cycle, the decision to minimise the number of outlets was also a strategic move in order to retain a certain degree of exclusivity. With the goal to devise individual and outgoing products that appeal to a rather specific clientele, the firm nurtures a non-mainstream attitude and seeks distinction through both a limited number of sales points as well as limited order numbers (i.e., few items per size and colour). According to the direction, there are ‘weekly requests’ to expand the business and open retail destinations in places ‘like New York or Israel’, which are consistently turned down. As Cora Kemperman explains, ‘You really have to like our style. And – fortunately – there are quite a few people who don’t like what we do. And that’s what I like. I certainly wouldn’t feel comfortable with my clothes being available in many places. For me it’s just fine to have nine outlets. If you have discovered us they also have to make some effort to get the clothes. In return, we give them the opportunity to wear somewhat exclusive pieces.’ (Interview CVK)

The way Kemperman presents the case might be exaggerated to some extent. For one thing, there are nine shops in the Netherlands, so the company is exclusive only to a certain extent. For another, it is debatable whether the interest from other countries is really as big as the brand claims. Nevertheless, we can assume that the general argument actually holds. The fact that the firm receives much attention from other countries, in spite of its relatively small size, is probably owed to the fact that a) Cora Kemperman offers a one-of-a-kind product with a strong visual identity, and b) the firm consistently refuses to broaden its scope of retail channels. With no website or external merchandising, the product is the exclusive privilege of those living in the Netherlands or travelling to Belgium. In addition, the strategic decision to keep the supply down leads to a certain covetousness of the products. As US expat Jemima Haistrom explained to me, ‘My friends are just as mad about the stuff as I am. Sadly for them, I’m the only one who can buy it. I mean, they live in the States’…’ (Interview CVK).

When it comes to the visual merchandise inside the shops, every product is displayed in only one size per colour in order to have better control over which items sell well and which ones need further attention from the assistants. As indicated in section 6.3 the company has a steady supply of new items every week, which keeps the collection up to date and the face of the shops fresh and interesting. Receiving new arrivals on a regular basis actually requires keeping down the order numbers in order to avoid overstocking. A side effect of that system is that it produces a ‘first come, first served’ mentality. Due to the fact that only a limited number of pieces is available per shop, size, and colour, many of the firm’s patrons have developed almost a ‘collector’s attitude’, as Marjolein van Rooy describes it, treating the pieces like hard-to-get and must-have items. As she states, ‘Every week we get new items in our shops. So, if you’re really crazy about clothes (…) you can actually buy a new piece every week. We really have clients who we need to advise on certain garments and say “You really don’t need this anymore because you have five others in the same style already.” It’s almost like they’re afraid to miss something.’ (Interview CVK)

Closedly connected to this, the brand keeps a ‘log book’ featuring every piece of the current collection, complete with descriptions of available colours, fabrics, washings and instructions and the week or date in which they will arrive in the shops. Altogether this system is designed to help consumers, the log book is mainly used as a strategic device directed at patrons. As Rotterdam shop assistant Denise Nieuwenhout told me, ‘[The book is great to keep them busy, you know’ During the period of observation either regulars themselves requested to leaf through the book or they were referred to it with reference to specific pieces that were expected to arrive in a certain week. The effect of this strategy is that many regulars shortlist products and place (non-binding) orders. By giving regulars the opportunity to ‘cherry-pick’
and reserve favourite pieces from the collections before they go on regular sale. Cora Kemperman offers a certain privilege to its more spend-active consumers and, albeit unintentionally, creates in- and, out-groups. As 52-year-old patron Tine Krebsburg told me, ‘Why Cora? When I come to the shop there is always something that I like and that immediately fits me well. But the salespeople also know what I like and what suits me and they keep me informed about, you know, ‘in week X or week Y this and that new item will arrive and I think that will look very good on you’ So I do take that into account.’ (Interview CKIII)

To some extent exclusivity is a property that is simulated and actively sold to consumers. For patrons it feels like they receive a special treatment and obtain something extra that others do not have access to. For all the other consumers, the margin of available items is relatively small, so that many designs come in an edition of only one or two per size. In that way, an ‘early-bird’ mentality is created that adds a boost to the purchase behaviour of consumers. Extending the point of value exchange from the material properties of the clothing to charging them with emotional relevance, Cora Kemperman employs a number of strategies that augment and nourish this effect.

### 6.8 PRODUCT UNIQUENESS

Exclusivity is a property that is stimulated by keeping a small stock and minimising availability of the products on the one hand. On the other hand, it is an attribute that hinges on the product proposition itself. As described in section 6.2 Cora Kemperman offers a clothing style that is unique in a number of ways. First, the garments are cut in a special way that gives them a flowing, organic shape. Second, the choice of colour is peculiar. Using a range of bright blues, reds, greens, oranges, and yellows that are contrasted with blacks and whites, Cora Kemperman have a strong visual appeal and high recognition value. Third, the clothing is given an appearance that is playful and matter-of-fact at the same time. Both attributes relate to product uniqueness and exclusivity are two of the main drivers in the purchase decision-making process. First, consumers relate to the product based on an aesthetic register that is hard to find anywhere else. Second, the skilfully orchestrated sales pitch of the firm helps to establish a style of dressing and personal identification, foregrounding the consumer and her needs. Third, by keeping a low supply of items and outlets a sense of exclusivity is created or even augmented. In different ways all these aspects actually cross-fertilise the consumer approach discussed in section 6.3 and the consumer decision-making process, thereby connecting the firm’s value proposition to a desire for differentiation. This section broadens the scope towards analysing the level of consumer involvement as well as their purchase behaviour.

The firm claims to neither make a difference between consumers nor to have a specific clientele in terms of age or body size. While Cora Kemperman tries to make the brand attractive for a younger clientele as well, at present the majority is in the age bracket of 40 to 60 years. The firm’s audience is heterogeneous to the extent that consumers come from a variety of backgrounds. At the same time, the actual type

### TABLE 6.1 CODING SCHEME FOR ITEM 14 VALUE CONNECTION FOLLOWED BY ATTRIBUTES

Following Table 6.2, the mental concepts and attitudes consumers develop towards the brand are defined by four variables: product uniqueness (I), use of colour (II), comfort (III), product quality (IV).

### TABLE 6.2 THREE CHARACTERS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE CLOTHING OF CORA KEMPERMAN (ITEM 14) AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

Following these characteristics, the primary driver in the relationship between brand and consumer is the actual appearance of the product. Product uniqueness is a more general term characterising the clothes according to a number of distinguishing features (as discussed in section 6.3). Use of colour, by contrast, specifically refers to the firm’s stark use of vivid and luminous hues. The style is characterised by juxtaposing plains with graphic patterns, which gives the pieces an appearance that is playful and matter-of-fact at the same time. Both attributes relate to product uniqueness and a desire for differentiation, highlighting the fact that Cora Kemperman’s products allow consumers to dress ‘different from the rest’. Comfort relates to the wearability of the clothing as well as Cora Kemperman’s ability to create an interesting and flattering silhouette for more voluminous body types. Product quality is connected to the price/performance ratio of the clothes and their durability. During the interviews consumers also stated vanously that the collections can be confused active consumers across different options the seasons the item was designed to measure attributes consumers spontaneously associate with Cora Kemperman’s range of products. After typing out the full amount of responses the results were coded, clustered, and analysed according to Table 6.1.

**PRODUCT UNIQUENESS** Unique; expressive; original; special; different; surprising; extravagant; distinct; creative, recognisable • USE OF COLOUR (Beautiful) colours; colourful; COMFORT (Good/perfect) fit; fits nicely; beautiful and comfortable fabrics; correct fit; ease of wear; \*QUALITY (Good) quality; fabric quality; durable; fine materials; OTHERS Easy to combine; feminine; affordable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Product uniqueness</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>94.11%USE OF COLOUR 38.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QUALITY 26.47% OTHERS 26.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PRODUCT UNIQUENESS 87.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COMFORT 49.39%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 6.2 THREE CHARACTERS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE CLOTHING OF CORA KEMPERMAN (ITEM 14)** AMSTERDAM ROTTERDAM

In the preceding sections it was said that Cora Kemperman is positioned in the Dutch fashion market as a low-profile business, capitalising on direct customer sales approach and a unique product proposition. Furthermore, we have seen that product uniqueness and exclusivity are two of the main drivers in the purchase decision-making process, thereby connecting the firm’s value proposition to a desire for differentiation. This section broadens the scope towards analysing the level of consumer involvement as well as their purchase behaviour.

The firm claims to neither make a difference between consumers nor to have a specific clientele in terms of age or body size. While Cora Kemperman tries to make the brand attractive for a younger clientele as well, at present the majority is in the age bracket of 40 to 60 years. The firm’s audience is heterogeneous to the extent that consumers come from a variety of backgrounds. At the same time, the actual type
of consumer is largely similar. The majority has a similar attitude towards clothing consumption and looks for similar features when it comes to clothing purchases. With a desire to express themselves through their clothes, the product is understood as an extension of personal identity and a means of self-expression. Says Jemrita Haistron, “Of course, it’s not really my identity, but this is the way that I like to look. [Points to her dress] This dress is an extension of how I feel about myself. And it just so happened that Cora Kemperman’s stuff matches up with how I feel about myself.” (Interview CKCI)

When we now look at the interaction between individuals and the company, consumers relate to the brand based on an out-of-the-ordinary type of product that they use to ‘dress’ their identity. Says 33 year-old Vanessa van Berkm, “All in all, I find it very... ‘different’ from all the others. It’s just different from what you generally see on the streets, you know. I always look for something that’s one step ahead of the average stuff [and] I find it very nice to wear the clothing from Cora because then I feel special myself.” (Interview CKCI)

Identification and interaction with the brand, then, hinges on the product proposition and the extent to which it reflects the consumers’ self-perception and desire for self-expression. The products provide a stage that embodies meanings or ideas that consumers wish to communicate about themselves. Clothing certainly is no identity fix but it helps to transmit a certain image to communicate about themselves. Clothing certainly provides a stage which it reflects the consumers’ self-perception and identification and interaction with the brand, then, growing together with the brand and sharing a strong sense of attachment to the firm. This tendency is also reflected in consumers’ average purchase frequency. Item 13 (‘On average, how many items do you purchase per visit?’) was constructed in an attempt to gain insight into the average purchase behaviour of consumers and get an idea of how consumers interact with the brand in a consumption context. When we look at FIG 6.2 we can see that the average number of items purchased per visit is comparatively high. In Amsterdam 41.17% of the respondents indicated to buy one item at a time while in Rotterdam it was 69.39%. Strikingly, in each of the locations almost half of the sample stated to buy two items per visit (Amsterdam: 47.04% / Rotterdam: 45.78%). In Amsterdam 11.76% claimed to purchase three or more items per visit while in Rotterdam it was a mere 6.60%.

When we compare these results with the visiting frequency a similar picture emerges. Item 12 (‘How often do you visit one of Cora Kemperman’s stores?’) sought to determine the average number of visits consumers pay to the shops. As FIG 6.3 demonstrates, there is a rather equal distribution in both locations. In Amsterdam about one third (29.41%) of the respondents and almost half (48.19%) of the sample in Rotterdam visit one of Cora Kemperman’s retail outlets on a monthly basis, while 11.76% resp. 13.25% even come every week.

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

![FIG 6.2](image1)

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

![FIG 6.3](image2)

**FIG 6.3** ‘HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT ONE OF CORA KEMPERMAN’S STORES?’  
ITEM 12 (AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM) 
ONCE A WEEK ONCE A MONTH LESS OFTEN

![FIG 6.4](image3)

**FIG 6.4** ‘LIKE TO PURCHASE CLOTHES FROM BRANDS I CAN IDENTIFY WITH’  
ITEM 8 (AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM) 
LIKE TO PURCHASE CLOTHES FROM BRANDS I CAN IDENTIFY WITH

![FIG 6.5](image4)

**FIG 6.5** ‘LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS’  
ITEM 2 (AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM) 
LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS

![FIG 6.6](image5)

**FIG 6.6** ‘I AM AMONG THE FIRST IN MY CIRCLE OF FRIENDS TO BUY A NEW FASHION ITEMS WHEN IT APPEARS’  
ITEM 3 (AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM) 
LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS

![FIG 6.7](image6)

**FIG 6.7** ‘REGULARLY BUY FASHION-RELATED MAGAZINES’  
ITEM 5 (AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM) 
LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS

![FIG 6.8](image7)

**FIG 6.8** ‘REGULARLY CHECK THE INTERNET FOR THE LATEST CLOTHING TRENDS’  
ITEM 6 (AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM) 
LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS

![FIG 6.9](image8)

**FIG 6.9** ‘LIKE TO BUY CLOTHES WITH AN OUTSPOKEN LOOK’  
ITEM 7 (AMSTERDAM / ROTTERDAM) 
LIKE TO DRESS ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FASHION TRENDS
brand persona or congruencies between brand- and product-related attributes. FIG 6.4 shows that the majority of consumers agrees with the statement. Both the results from the questionnaires as well as the in-depth interviews indicate that the level of involvement with the firm is comparatively high. From the interviews I learned that in particular the brand’s regulars show high levels of awareness and emotional attachment to the brand, with many of them hardly souring their clothes from any other brand than Corakemperman. The reasons they gave were connected to two main points. First, the value proposition (i.e., product, service, brand values) represents a warrantor in the relationship between brand and consumers, connecting the consumer to the brand and identity constructs with the brand’s identity. Second, based on the fact that the firm’s signature style has been very consistent throughout the years and because items from older and newer collections can be easily combined, consumers enjoy the possibility to complement their existing stock of clothing.

6.10 FASHION INVOLVEMENT

With a strong visual identity, the question is whether the firm’s fashion cachet actually represents a significant driver in the purchase decision-making process. In this section I will look into these aspects with respect to the variables fashion and media involvement. With the first my purpose is to test to what extent the purchase behaviour of consumers is subject to fashion trends. The latter looks into these questions more from an information-based angle, exploring whether consumers make use of different media channels to stay abreast of developments in fashion.

Item 2 (‘I like to dress according to the latest fashion trends’) was designed to measure the level of fashion involvement and define the degree to which current trends have an impact on the purchase behaviour of consumers. As FIG 6.5 demonstrates, we can identify a negative tendency. In Amsterdam, 49.88% disagreed with the statement. In comparison, 25.52% responded in a neutral way while 26.47% agreed. In Rotterdam we find an almost identical distribution, with 45.78% objecting to the statement compared to 24.09% taking a neutral stance and 26.50% agreeing. According to these results, the actual fashion value of the clothes is not of paramount relevance for Corakemperman’s consumers.

This finding is further supported by the results from Item 3 (‘I am among the first in my circle of friends to buy a new fashion trend when it appears’) which sought to determine to what extent consumers are early adopters of new fashion trends, and whether their purchase behaviour is actually trend-driven. Following FIG 6.6, Corakemperman’s consumers do not have a pronounced interest in adapting their wardrobe to the latest fashion trends and neither does early adoption of fashion trends have a strong influence on their choice. In Amsterdam, 38.23% disagreed with the statement while the same number of people adopted a neutral attitude and 31.64% agreed. In Rotterdam we can identify a slightly more balanced distribution, 33.33% disagreed whereas 30.77% indicated to neither agree nor disagree and 33.33% agreed. Remarkable in this context is the rather large number of people taking a neutral stance. Following my own observations in the shops and the in-depth interviews with consumer, the most probable explanation is that fashion in general is not actually relevant for the brand’s audience. Trend consciousness of the adopter of new fashions, then, play a rather secondary role in their life-worlds and consumption behaviour.

Comparing these insights with the results from Item 5 (‘I regularly buy fashion-related magazines’), which was constructed to measure the level of media involvement and interest in current developments in fashion, this tendency becomes even more pronounced. As FIG 6.7 makes clear, Corakemperman’s audience does not have a vested interest in keeping up to date with fashion trends through fashion magazines. In Amsterdam, almost 73% disagreed with the statement while only 20.59% agreed with it. In Rotterdam a similar picture emerged, with 71.07% disagreeing with the statement compared to 18.06% who agreed.

Item 6 (‘I regularly check the internet for the latest clothing trends’) was designed to determine to what extent consumption behaviour and fashion involvement are connected to new media channels. Again, Corakemperman’s consumers showed a considerably low interest in following recent fashion trends on the Internet. As we can see in FIG 6.8, in Amsterdam 61.70% disagreed with the statement, compared to 20.58% who agreed. In Rotterdam 15.63% agreed with the statement, whereas 73.52% disagreed.

6.11 CLOTHING AND PRODUCT INVOLVEMENT

As the results demonstrate, Corakemperman’s clientele does not exhibit high levels of involvement in fashion or media. At the same time, Corakemperman is one of the most obvious examples of in this context is the traditional menswear market. Many men are actually interested in well-tailored clothes and an accurate wardrobe. While the items of classical men’s tailoring may be subject to fashion they certainly do not have to be.

Another factor might be that consumers are generally interested in clothing products with a strong visual identity, irrespective of the actual brand name.

6.12 DUTCH, ACTUALLY?

The question remains to what extent Corakemperman is actually perceived as a Dutch brand by consumers, or whether there are attributes we might call typical for the Dutch cultural landscape. Item 11a (‘Corakemperman is typically Dutch’) sought to develop an understanding of these aspects by confronting the respondents with a statement-based item. As FIG 6.12 shows, in both locations we can identify a slightly negative tendency. In Amsterdam, 47.05% disagreed while 26.46% agreed. In Rotterdam, 28.90% agreed with the statement compared to 33.68% who opposed it. Although the overall distribution is fairly mixed and does not allow for a final answer, we can at least conclude that for the majority Corakemperman does not represent a typically Dutch clothing brand.

Item 11b (‘Why is/isn’t a Corakemperman typically Dutch? Please explain your opinion in a few words’) sought to deepen the scope of analysis, and give consumers the opportunity to substantiate their opinion and reflect on their views. Sadly, the majority of respondents left the question open, indicating they had troubles to pinpoint what ‘typically Dutch’ actually means. From the few respondents who actually completed the item, the most common explanations referred to the firm’s product style and use of colour.

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

“Yes, I think it’s quite [a] Dutch [brand]. The colours… I really don’t know why, but certainly the colours. I mean, I can’t remember that I’ve seen this kind of style when going on vacation, for instance. (…) Simply because I know it I’d say it’s Dutch, but it’s hard to explain.” (Interview CKCVI)
Ironically perhaps, the very same reasons were given by those stating Corakemperman is not representative for Dutch (fashion) culture. As Judith Arts explained to me, ‘Well, as far as I’m concerned [the brand is] not [typically Dutch] at all. (...) Dutch, for me, is usually... simple... boring colours... quite basic, you know.’ (Interview CJKC)

In some way, this outcome reflects a more general tendency that was recognising back in virtually all responses across the different case studies. As it appears, it is hard for people to determine what attributes reflect ‘Dutchness’. Either the respondents had difficulties to answer the question at all, or they were troubled by articulating what effectively made the firms Dutch, other than being their country of origin. One possible explanation for that might be that cultural identity is a too complex and multidimensional phenomenon to boil down to a sheer number of attributes – perhaps even more so in a fashion context, as the majority of consumers does not care where their clothes actually come from. Another important aspect is that it is generally hard to recognise country of origin and is distinguished by handling the entire value-creation chain in-house. By holding down the number of outlets, as well as the supply inside the shops, the clothes are given an exclusive edge that makes them more covetable and attractive for its clientele. Promoting exclusivity as an asset, Corakemperman nurtures the feeling of purchasing an ‘insider tip’. Consumers buy into the value proposition based on the fact that they are given the opportunity to be part of a rather small and somewhat exclusive group of people: it is a non-mainstream type of clothing that is actively sold to consumers as ‘not for everyone’. In doing so, (perhaps unwittingly) in- and out-groups are created that help build identification with brand and product.

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

While no clear picture emerged with respect to the question whether consumers rate the firm as typically Dutch, there are a number of aspects that seem more resonant with the Dutch cultural background than with certain other brands. First, the product proposition refers to the country’s tradition of colourful dress (‘streekdracht’) and ethno-inspired clothes from the 1970s and 80s. Second, the brand takes the more robust build of Dutch women into account by offering clothes in a wider, flattering cut. Third, the way the firm is distinguished in the fashion market is somewhat peculiar. On the one hand it defies global expansion, while on the other hand the company is highly entrepreneurial and well organised.— perhaps a quality the Dutch have cultivated in more than one respect. Corakemperman...