Dutch identity in fashion: Co-evolution between brands and consumers
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7.1 Introduction

The Dutch women’s wear brand Vanilia was originally a supplier of business clothing with a range of products focusing on twin sets, trouser suits, blouses, and a number of basics such as sheer tops in muted colours, belts, and vests. Since the current owner, Michel Hulzebosch, took over the brand in 1991, it has undergone a transformation towards ever more stylish clothing styles and a broader target market. Covering all major Dutch cities, Vanilia boasts 17 mono-brand stores across the Netherlands and is retailed in about 100 fashion boutiques across the country (Lampe 2011: 1).

The development from business-wear to fashion brand has had important consequences for the firm’s market position and retail strategy. Increasingly focusing on a younger and hipper audience, Vanilia has made great efforts to distinguish the company as a lifestyle brand with more serious fashion cachet in recent years. My research on the company started at a time when most of these developments were just starting to come into full effect. This chapter traces the different steps the brand has successively undertaken. Probably as a result of the recent shift, the company targets two different consumer groups at present: young and middle-aged (business) women and older consumers with a stake in fashion clothing and lifestyle activities. As the results suggest, the relationship between consumers and the brand is defined by a stylish and high-quality product proposition that effortlessly negotiates between classy business clothing and chic leisurewear.

7.2 Trademark Style

The brand boasts three different and seasonally changing clothing lines and one line of NOS (i.e., never out of stock) items. The eponymous first line, Vanilia, features a large quantity of fashion-forward, loosely elegant pieces, suited for slightly less formal business contexts or as chic leisure clothing. Although conceived as a flexible and compositional type of clothing, many of the pieces are inspired by vintage finds, rich with details such as ruffled appliqué, denim shirts, or lace.

Vanilia’s second line, VNL, is composed of casual and street style-oriented items, featuring more loose cuts and original combinations of fabrics, denim, leather, and knitwear. Reintroducing, for example, bib trousers, flared legs, or compound fabrics like rexine and mesh, the collections take their cues from various sources and seek to cater to a type of woman that effortlessly combines work and casual wear, current fashion pieces with a more classical wardrobe. According to the company board, the VNL trademark style – fashionable but not too outspoken, sporty and chic, innovative and retro-inspired – should become the brand’s projected new focus. Slowly shifting the collection’s size and target group from Vanilia to VNL, the brand for the future seeks to embrace a different direction to add more diversity to its portfolio.

CHAPTER 7

VANILIA: JUST ABOUT RIGHT

1 There is also a German fashion label of the same name. However, no relation exists between the two.
The company’s third line, Vanilla Elements, is composed of chic and business-oriented clothing. Here, shirts, blouses, trouser suits, and behind dresses dominate, most of them combine muted colours with textured fabrics and detailed stitching. Integrating elements of the two other collections, Vanilla and VNL, the emphasis is on everydaywear and fashion styles that blend understated chic with restrained trendy formality. The brand’s fourth collection, Business Basics, is a small selection of business evergreens though trouser suits, blazers, blouses, twin sets and ladies’ suits. These items undergo only marginal alterations (cut, colour, fabric) to adjust them to the brand’s current portfolio. All items are NOOS pieces that are sold year in year out, subject only to minor changes based on either summer or winter season.

7.3 Changing Faces: Towards a New Brand Identity

During the past few years, Vanilla has increasingly sought to establish the image of a trend-oriented quality fashion brand, thereby extending its former focus on business wear to up-to-the-minute fashion. The current separation between the different lines reflects this progression to the extent that Vanilla Elements and Business Basics are contemporary takes on business wear while the main lines, Vanilla and VNL, are focused on chic, comfortable leisure clothing. According to an interview with the firm’s PR manager, Tatiana Striekvold, Vanilla tries to restructure and reposition the brand at present, by introducing a new corporate identity to give the firm a more contemporary edge (Interview VIII). The goal is to further improve the firm’s retail profile and shift the brand identity from ‘a mere clothing firm to a lifestyle brand’ (Interview VIII).

Restructuring the retail strategy under the guiding theme of ‘affordable luxury’, Vanilla seeks to open the firm’s profile towards a wider audience (Interview VIII). In doing so, the brand intends to stimulate relations with a younger audience group and consumption mentality. According to Striekvold, the aim is to try to loosen up the firm’s predominant image of a traditional fashion retailer and gradually turn it into a trendy fashion brand. As she states, ‘Just now, the women who come to the shops on average are older and “tuttiger” (roughly this translates into “frumpy” but doesn’t quite catch the meaning) than we would actually like. Alas. (…) So, my task is to change that by means of PR and the like. (…) We are now trying to make a conscious effort to connect Vanilla’s name and brand image to a different kind of audience group – so, basically all things the company stands for or is being associated with.’ (Interview VIII)

In spite of the projected changes, the aim is not to sever the ties with the firm’s established clientele. Originally targeted at women of 35 years and older, Vanilla now likes to draw in a younger public as well, with a different consumption attitude – (business) women combining work and free time, family and social life (Interview VI). The leap forward constitutes an extension of the existing product range, trying to emphasise more the individual aspects of the collection while not sticking with the brand’s trademark assets of good fit, tailored yet comfortable proportions, quality materials, and original style.

So much for the argument in general. Still, there is a certain edge to the idea of ‘going younger’ when it comes to the appreciation of the firm’s current customer profile. During interviews with a number of people at the firm’s HQ in Wormerveer, my impression was that the firm’s elderly customers are more than welcome to leave their money at the sales counter while the brand, if possible, would like to make a complete shift towards a young and hip public. As the head of Vanilla’s Visual Merchandising team, Birgit Groot, states, ‘Our clientele is quite mixed, that’s true. We really have this “wallflower” type of consumer, but we also have a lot of younger ones (…) I certainly don’t want to lump them all together or generalise… also, I’d find it strange to say that older women cannot actually wear our clothes. Some look great, really. But then in Bergen, for example… Jesus, they seriously have walking frames and that’s just not nice, so everybody feels thoroughly ashamed of what’s going on there. Then again, those women will also walk into an even hipper shop next door, so they just terrorise the whole town actually’ (Interview VII).

This, to be sure, is just one of a few voices and my intention is certainly not to paint a bleak picture of the way the firm perceives its consumers. Rather, I mean to take a somewhat critical stance towards the rejuvenation process the company has embarked on and, in its slipstream, the changing relation between brand and consumers.

7.4 Concentrating Strengths

Trying to extend the brand’s portfolio to other areas, Vanilla largely relies on a number of long-time assets in the brand proposition. Most interesting about the development, especially when it comes to attracting and establishing relations with a younger clientele, is the firm’s chosen approach. In the past Vanilla has largely refrained from making active use of customer profiles or involving consumers as agents in the brand proposition. According to the firm’s director, Michel Huizebosch, the recent leap forward is motivated by the fact that the current market climate, specifically within the firm’s desired target group, calls for a different, more consumer-conscious approach (Interview VII). To accomplish that goal, Vanilla tries to make more efficient use of the Internet as a tool for engaging with consumers and get a better insight into their actual needs. Furthermore, the firm’s new strategy seeks to augment extant properties of the brand proposition, such as the retail environment and socially-responsible, eco-conscious production policies in the company-owned factory in Turkey. With the aim to reposition the firm’s chosen approach, the firm’s retail destinations are now trying to install in all shops
are part of that approach. Consumers can sit down, have a cup of decent coffee, take a rest. There’s no rush, no crowd for you. I believe that our consumers appreciate that a lot because it makes them feel welcome.’’ (Interview VII)

This concerted approach, however, is not limited to the presentation of products, but also pertains to the staff’s outlook. Following the styling of the retail environments, the VM team puts together a number of assemblies for each individual sales assistant, in an attempt to a) match the different types of assistants (i.e., colour, type, body size, body height etc.), and b) creatively present the season’s different looks across all of Vanilia’s lines. In addition, the fitting sessions are documented with photographic footage and later evaluated in consultation with the company’s two retail managers, the design team, and the director.

The desired outcome of this effort is to endorse a holistic strategy behind the styling of shop and staff. Says Groot (Interview VII), ‘‘In a way, the assistants are a kind of advertisement inside the shops. And, ideally, they should be an inspiration for our consumers, so they get an idea how certain items can be combined, how to create an interesting, maybe unexpected look. Our job is to make sure they all look proper and dress in a way that matches their personality and body shape. In some cities we hardly have any work because, quite intuitively, they do it very well. In others, we need to help them along. The girls then have to take pictures of each other every day for two weeks, so we can monitor if and how they progress.’’

By means of this ‘role-model policy’ – dressing the salespeople in a specific manner, creating a specific, coherent atmosphere inside the shops – the firm seeks to address a particular kind of consumer identity. Following interviews with four of Vanilia’s store managers, atmosphere and service constitute a linchpin in the consumption process, as they help contribute to a holistic retail experience, in which music, service, atmosphere, and product range all play their part.

7.4.2 OWN FACTORY / OWN MENTALITY: WE’RE ONE OF A KIND!

Trying to understand Vanilia’s fashion trends into the company’s very own design vocabulary, the brand has an in-house design team, comprised of four people who are regularly sent to places like New York, London, Paris, or Hong Kong with the aim to find inspiration for their collections and model their own collections on the season’s latest clothing styles. Moreover, the firm owns a factory in Turkey where most of the garments are manufactured. The combination of these two factors allows Vanilia to supply well-made fashion products at an affordable price.

In January 2011, Vanilia introduced a new system to the overall workflow and design process. Practically speaking, the company has departed from designing the collections about a year in advance. Instead, Vanilia currently introduces 12 collections per year, with an almost weekly supply of new items in the shops (Interview VII). In doing so, the brand seeks to establish a system that responds more directly to upcoming trends and retail developments. This allows for a quick adaptation to the demands set by the consumers. Says Vanilia’s director, Michel Huizebosch (cited in Lompe 2011: 3, my translation), ‘‘We are now able to respond to trends much quicker. Of course, I don’t mean to just copy trends – the fashion world is full of that anyway. At the same time, I don’t want to be stubborn and sell one and the same fashion concept for over two years. I just have a keen eye on current developments.’’

Two key components of Vanilia’s trademark style are the elaborate use of printed fabrics and the rich detailing of clothes. In this context, the firm’s QA (Quality Assurance) labs, located at the headquarters in Wormerveer, are a crucial component in the firm’s structural set-up. By means of labour-intensive testing and relaxing the company tries to assure, for example, that the stitching inside the garments stands the test of time or that colours do not bleed in washing. In section 7.3 we will see that this aspect is crucial in the relationship between brand and consumers who put a premium on the manufacturing quality and durability of the clothes. It is even one more reason to justify retail prices that are slightly higher than other high-street brands like H&M, Mango, or Zara.

More recently, Vanilia started to turn its production plant in Turkey into a more integral part of the firm’s marketing approach. For example, the company added feature films about the brand’s production facilities in Turkey to their website, thereby trying to make consumers aware of the fact that the firm’s clothing is produced under proper working conditions and with attention to detail. Over a sequence of seven ‘chapters’ (i.e., seven short feature films) consumers can follow the different steps of how the firm’s products are being manufactured. From start to finish they get insight into the different stages involved in the creation of a garment and the conditions under which it is being created.Seeking in this way to give company image and brand the chance to get an idea of design inspirations and gain insight into the experience world that is created around the brand proposition.

7.5 WELCOME TO THE CLUB! ARE YOU IN... OR OUT?

‘‘It’s more like a party and what you do see happening is that other consumers also start filling in one of our customer cards, so they can become ‘members of the club’.’’ (Eva Bijwaard, regional manager)

While the developments described above are fairly recent, Vanilia does also have a longstanding tradition in organising special events for consumers. Attempting to create an atmosphere of belonging and personal relevance, the brand has established a firm registry for sales promotions over the years. Regulars are stimulated with special events or promotions they receive information about via e-mail2 on an almost monthly basis (8-10 times per year). For example, they get invitations to pre-sale days where they can purchase items at discount prices before they go on regular sale. The same goes for the sample sales where designs that did not end up in the final collection are sold for a bargain. Also, patrons are regularly invited to so-called ‘‘15-days’’ where they can shop through the current collection at discount rates of 15 per cent off the regular retail price.

In this way, the firm tries to create a kind of club mentality as all promotions are by invitation only. In effect, only members of the brand’s internal customer registry are really aware of the information about the events and are allowed to participate in them. Arguably, it does not take more than filing in a registration form to become part of the mailing list. That, however, does not alter the fact that both registry and events serve as platforms for interacting with consumers and binding them closer to the brand. It constitutes an important tool in the relationship between brand and consumers because for the company it allows insight into consumer profiles and for consumers a kind of ‘members-only’ treatment is being created.

Vanilia also has a history of collaborating with other suppliers in the fashion industry. For example, the firm has repeatedly offered its regular subscriptions to fashion magazines at discount rates, which were combined with branded give-aways. Teaming up with the Dutch fashion glossy Glamour, for instance, the firm designed a leather bag that accompanied each subscription to the magazine. As promotion became so successful that, according to Arnhem store manager Eveline Otten, consumers eventually got more interested in the branded object than the actual subscription. As she recounts, ‘‘There was such a run to get one of the bags that a lot of customers even called in at the shop asking

2 Pinterest is a photo sharing website that allows users to create theme-based collections of images and attach short references and additional data to them.
7.6 CONSUMER IDENTITIES

What with all the new developments, the interesting part of the development as a whole is the means by which Vanilia tries to change its image and sales strategy in order to reach and attract a different kind of audience group. The fact worthy of attention here is how the company is making a conscious effort to integrate consumers’ opinions and profiles into the fashion cycle/value creation chain. Following a number of interviews at Vanilia’s headquarters, the company used to develop its image not so much based on consumer needs in the past, but by trying to create an identity through advertising campaigns and fashion events. This approach was successful until the brand decided to address consumer clients (interview VI). Getting the brand identity to a younger and more fashion-conscious audience made it necessary to alter Vanilia’s public profile and think of alternative approaches concerning the relation between brand image, sales people, and consumers.

When we look at Vanilia’s latest forays on their website, for instance, we can see how the firm tries to create the image of a fashion brand that is hip and modern, but also socially and environmentally responsible. In other words, we can identify certain features that are supposed to tell a story about the brand and highlight distinct features of the brand identity. Furthermore, the decision to move the brand online and actively engage in web 2.0 technologies, like Facebook or Twitter, have as a goal to a) make better use of the consumers’ opinions and feedback and b) to personify the company and make it more accessible. By the same token, the way the firm is working to create a kind of “members’ club” can be regarded as a means to establish a more intimate relationship with consumers. When we look closely at the different steps, a certain pattern emerges: it becomes apparent that an exclusive reliance on a unidirectional, brand-driven business approach is insufficient to reach the desired target market. Vanilia’s role as a consumer-oriented model suggests not only a certain expedience but, perhaps, an exigency to make the audience a more integral part of the value creation chain.

7.7 CONSUMER VALUE CONNECTIONS

Starting out as a supplier of business attire, over the years the product range has been extended towards more fashion-oriented styles. Since 2008, in particular, the brand has been moving into a direction where casual chic has taken precedence over the firm’s earlier focus on fashion products with a trendy but less outspoken look (interview VII). To an extent, this development has produced different consumption interests and consumer types. At one end, we find women who source their businesswear from the firm and, at the other end, there is a growing number of consumers who are attracted to the brand for its versatile and under-stated fashion pieces. These interests are certainly not mutually exclusive. Rather, they reflect the shift the company has undertaken throughout the years.

The firm’s audience can be divided into two age groups. The first group is comprised of women between approximately 30 and 45 years of age (Group 1), often with a business background, who look for a fashionable pared-down type of clothing that is suited for a wide variety of contexts. The second group are women of over 45 years old (Group 2) who can be categorised as chic, slender, upper-middle-class women with a stake in fashion products and lifestyle activities. Offering distinct fashion styles across the different clothing lines, the scale of consumption interests is also reflected in Vanilia’s range of products. As Anna-Maarit van der Veen (Interview VI), designer of the firm’s VNL line, explains, “Certainly, we do have a certain target group. These are women between 30 and 40 [years], independent, with a working background and their own income. Still, the idea is to reach a rather large group of different people. That’s why we have the [four] different labels. I mean, there is a reason behind that strategy.”

The accounts of the company’s area manager, Eva Bijwaard, and the shop managers and sales staff I talked to all stated that Vanilia has a rather nondescript consumer profile, in the sense that it attracts a variety of different consumer types. This concurs with my own observations, the results of the questionnaires (that included enquiring after the participants’ age after completion of the forms), and my tally sheet (divided by categories of age and estimated body size). Vanilia’s audience is, indeed, fairly heterogeneous in terms of age distribution and consumption interests. To some extent, the current situation might be owed to the fact that Vanilia has been in a transition phase during the past couple of years. Retaining old consumer groups, while seeking to attract new ones is, if done successfully, a traditionally slow process that requires a careful balance between the different interest groups. Time will tell whether the firm’s current efforts are successful and in what way its audience will develop.

TABLE 7.1 CODING SCHEME FOR CONSUMER RESPONSES - VALUE CONNECTION FOLLOWED BY ATTRIBUTES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENTS</th>
<th>QUALITY/PRICE</th>
<th>STYLE</th>
<th>COMFORT/WEARABILITY</th>
<th>OTHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>59.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the full amount of responses, the results suggest a connection based on three variables: quality/price (I), style (II), and comfort/wearability (III).

As Table 7.2 indicates, for Vanilia’s younger consumers the characteristics quality (in relation to purchase price) and style are the strongest value connections. Following these results, the brand’s average consumer puts a premium on fashionable appearance and high quality of clothes. As a third variable comfort emerged.
Although this aspect surfaced with some regularity, the overall results do not suggest a strong relationship. In Group 2 we can identify all three values as well. In Rotterdam all turns out to be largely insignificant. In Amsterdam 13.51% of consumers did not account. In Arnhem 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strong. In Amsterdam 13.51%; Arnhem: 95.65%; Rotterdam: 93.84% and fashionable (Amsterdam: 54.32%; Arnhem: 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strongest connection. A first glance, none of the value connections is strongly pronounced. As Fig. 7.1 and Fig. 7.2 demonstrate, consumers see Vanilia as a supplier of fashionable and stylish clothing. In Group 1 the variables stylish (Amsterdam: 85.15%; Arnhem: 95.65%; Rotterdam: 93.84%) and fashionable (Amsterdam: 54.32%; Arnhem: 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strongest, while in Amsterdam also reliability (Amsterdam: 34.56%; Arnhem: 12.5%; Rotterdam: 21.53%) proved important. In Group 2, we can identify a more even distribution across the different items. Nevertheless, the strongest connection. A first glance, none of the three value connections is strongly pronounced. While this aspect surfaced with some regularity, the overall results do not suggest a strong relationship. In Group 2 we can identify all three values as well. In Rotterdam all turns out to be largely insignificant. In Amsterdam 13.51% of consumers did not account. In Arnhem 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strong. In Amsterdam 13.51%; Arnhem: 95.65%; Rotterdam: 93.84% and fashionable (Amsterdam: 54.32%; Arnhem: 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strongest connection. A first glance, none of the value connections is strongly pronounced. As Fig. 7.1 and Fig. 7.2 demonstrate, consumers see Vanilia as a supplier of fashionable and stylish clothing. In Group 1 the variables stylish (Amsterdam: 85.15%; Arnhem: 95.65%; Rotterdam: 93.84%) and fashionable (Amsterdam: 54.32%; Arnhem: 45.65%; Rotterdam: 46.15%) proved strongest, while in Amsterdam also reliability (Amsterdam: 34.56%; Arnhem: 12.5%; Rotterdam: 21.53%) proved important. In Group 2, we can identify a more even distribution across the different items. Nevertheless,
here style and fashionable appearance proved to be the strongest connectors too, while across the individual locations a number of different aspects appeared modestly relevant (e.g. reliable in Amsterdam: 31.57%, personal in Arnhem: 28.57%, or recognisable in Rotterdam: 34.37%).

These findings largely concur with the insights from the eight in-depth interviews that I conducted with the firm’s patrons. Aimed at exploring the life-worlds of consumers, the connection between aesthetic, versatility, and price proved a critical theme in their individual relationships with the firm. Many of Vanilia’s consumers are working women whose clothes need to serve as leisurewear and business clothing alike. For many of them the outfits need to travel well across a variety of contexts, effortlessly combining professional and private life. Says 27-year old Nanda Ruiten, ‘Well, I wear it a lot to work [because] I think it’s always a good option. I think that the type of clothing you wear to work makes a lot of difference... so I do take that into account. For me Vanilia is more business-like. But I also think that certain items... just take a pair of jeans and slippers and it looks great too. You can combine the clothes in a number of ways.’ [Interview VCI]

The combination of chic and versatile clothing has particular relevance for consumers between 20 and 50 years old, who search for understated products that impart feminine and sophisticated traits without overpowering, or conflicting with, a professional appearance. Providing maximum flexibility, the possibility to mix and match the company’s products is an interesting option. Vanilia’s products allow consistently for a wide variety of combinations across its own four lines, as well as with other fashion labels. Alternately, the firm’s consumers search for a type of attire that supports or even enhances their performance of social roles, regardless of the occasion. Fashionable and professional attire are not considered disparate but complementary entities. As 31-year old Jessica Jettens explains, ‘It’s a nice brand because it fits both leisure and business contexts. That suits me well because I’d rather have clothes that work well in both parts of life. I’m a lawyer and it’s just very handy. It’s a style that does not look dowdy but stylish and fashionable. I like this combination a lot because it allows me to express myself within a certain framework.’ [Interview VCI]

Vanilia’s elderly consumers, too, look for a fashionable type of product. While their purchase behaviour is rather motivated by aesthetic concerns, we saw that the drivers in Groups 1 and 2 are largely identical. In this case, the combination of stylish and restrained looks simply has a different function. The clothes allow them to dress in a chic and fashionable way without going down the slippery slope of overly fashionable looks (which at a higher age can easily be regarded as inappropriate or awkward). As a 58-year old patron explained to me, ‘The thing is this: I like fashion and I like to dress in a feminine, trendy way. Nevertheless, I’m 58 years old now and there are limits to what I can wear. Certain pieces – however beautiful they might be – just don’t work. They would look ridiculous on me because they are made for people who are much younger. Vanilia is a great option because the clothes are trendy and understated. They look decent on me. You know, fashionable but not hip.’ [VCI]

The in-depth interviews and the results from the questionnaires suggest that Vanilia’s consumers have a keen interest in clothing products with an articulate look. However, the type of garment they aspire to is defined more by subtlety and attention to detail than a committed fashion-forward message. In fact, the largest part of Vanilia’s collections are fashion products “in translation”: interpretations of international fashion trends for the Dutch market. According to designer Anna-Maarit van der Veen (Interview VA), the clothing is ‘fashionable but surely not too extravagant because that is never going to work [in the Netherlands].’ The interviews with the brand’s regional manager, stylist, public relations manager, and the store managers and sales personnel, reflect a similar attitude.

772 STYLE OR FASHION? Exploring to what extent the buying behaviour of Vanilia’s consumers is motivated by current fashion trends, Item 2 (“I like to dress according to the latest fashion trends”) sought to measure the level of fashion involvement or commitment as a potential driver in the purchase decision-making process. In Group 1, we can identify a balanced distribution between trend-following consumers and trend-averse or neutral ones. As FIG 7.3 demonstrates, one segment of the respondents (Amsterdam: 32.09%; Arnhem: 26.68%; Rotterdam: 29.82%) exhibited consistently modest to low levels of fashion involvement, while others appear more involved with the latest fashion trends (Amsterdam: 30.86%; Arnhem: 36.89%; Rotterdam: 26.30%). The most remarkable result, however, is the rather large number of people that took a neutral stand, which indicates that for many of the firm’s consumers trends are largely irrelevant. In FIG 7.4 we can identify a similar distribution. The number of respondents taking a neutral stance is also rather pronounced in the second group. In Amsterdam 26.31% disagreed while in Arnhem it was 46.4% and in Rotterdam 32.25%. Similarly, in Amsterdam 42.64% agreed while in Arnhem it was 17.82% and in Rotterdam 13.90%.

When we look at the connection between trend adoption and purchase behaviour the results of Item 3 (“I am among the first in my circle of friends to buy a new fashion item when it appears”) support the
In a similar way, Item 6 (‘I regularly check the Internet for the latest clothing trends’) sought to look into the critical awareness of current developments in fashion and the degree to which they attach meaning to them. Consumers in both groups have a critical awareness towards the clothing products they purchase in general. Consumers in Amsterdam 65.42% agreed, in Arnhem it was 71.22% and in Rotterdam 68.41%. In Group 2, in Amsterdam 65.15% agreed with the statement while in Arnhem it was 69.22% and in Rotterdam 70.95%.

### 7.3 BRAND INVOLVEMENT AND PURCHASE FREQUENCY

Item 8 (‘I like to purchase clothes from brands I can identify with’) sought to explore the level of brand identification and the degree to which consumption behaviour responds to not only product-specific features but also company-specific attributes. As FIG 7.13 shows, in Group 1 we can identify consistently high levels of brand involvement across the three locations. In Group 2, however, the distribution is not as clear. While in Amsterdam we can identify a slightly positive relationship (44.29% of consumers agreed with the statement, compared to 36.84% who disagreed), in Arnhem and Rotterdam purchase behaviour appears to relate to a lesser extent to the level of brand identification. As the results indicate, identification with brands represents an important variable for Vanilia’s younger consumers, while for its older consumers it is a less significant driver for consumption behaviour. A similar pattern emerged for Item 12 (‘How often do you visit one of Vanilia’s stores?’), which sought to determine the average visiting frequency. In Group 1, consumers in Amsterdam visit Vanilia’s shops less than once a month, while in the two other locations we can identify an almost balanced distribution across response options 2 and 3 that suggests an average frequency of monthly visits (FIG 7.15). In Group 2, by contrast, the results indicate that in all three locations consumers visit the stores less than once a month (FIG 7.16).

While Item 12 was constructed to determine the average visiting frequency, Item 13 (‘On average, how many items do you purchase per visit?’) sought to identify the average number of purchases per visit. As FIG 7.17 and 7.18 demonstrate, consumers in both groups on average buy about one item per visit.

### 7.8 FUNCTIONAL AESTHETICS

The interviews indicate that Vanilia’s consumers see the brand as a supplier of affordable quality clothing, they use to complement and enhance their existing wardrobe. With a rather diverse consumption attitude, the audience is not ‘owned’ by the brand, but sources clothes from a wide variety of brands with a stylistic repertoire ranging from sporty to elegant and from smart-casual to business-oriented. Considering the multiple contexts in which garments need to function and influence appearances, a very specific requirement profile emerges: largely irrespective of age, Vanilia’s consumers aspire to a clothing style that is restrained and subtle, wearable and adequate across a wide variety of different social and professional contexts. That combination of stylish and functional clothing is important to understand the relationship consumers maintain with the brand. In the previous section we saw that the level of brand involvement is rather high among the firm’s younger consumers and somewhat lower in the second group. Purchases are made on a regular basis but on average not in high frequency or large quantities. With rather low levels of fashion involvement, Vanilia’s audience has a functional attitude towards clothing consumption. While this attitude does not lead to a very close or emotionally charged relationship with the brand, loyalty is guaranteed through attributes like reliability, product quality, comfort, and versatility. In other words, the ties are relatively loose in terms of fashion and brand involvement but closely bound to functional qualities. Functionality not only plays an important role in terms of product features but also in the way key components of the brand’s trademark style attractconsumption interests. Markedly modern in character, the majority of consumers can be classified as young or middle-aged (working) women with career ambitions and/or a family life, as well as an interest in lifestyle activities and cultural offerings. From the period of observation and the insights gained through the questionnaires and interviews it appears that Vanilia’s audience tends to opt for a type of clothing that is chic and understated, flexible and discreetly distinctive in terms of details. At the same time, they appreciate design qualities: a signature style that is fashionable and edgy without unnecessary pomp or loud and conspicuous details. The firm’s structural set-up, encompassing four different fashion lines, and the recent shift towards introducing 14 individual collections per year seeks to take into account this demand from different angles. By establishing the company as a consummate supplier of diversified and distinguished fashion products Vanilia capitalises on a nuanced range of products, offering ample choice and encouraging a wide variety of combinations.
7.9 Dutch or international?

To what extent can Vanilia actually be considered typically Dutch? The most interesting aspect in this context is the dichotomy between signature style and business model. In a way, the firm’s trademark style is not typically Dutch. It neither ties in with a modernist, minimal aesthetics, nor does it run the gamut of the folklore-inspired, colourful, and more outgoing range. As regional manager Eva Bijwaard (Interview VII) contends, “It’s not a typically Dutch brand. The sizes are typically Dutch in a way... but the look and feel really aren’t. It’s more a mixed bag of what the top brands show on the catwalk at a certain moment, infused with some personal inspiration from our designers.”

Item 11a (‘Vanilia is typically Dutch’), which sought to explore the perception of consumers in that regard, reflects a similar tendency. As Figure 7.19 and Figure 7.20 demonstrate, a rather mixed picture emerged. In Group 1, in Amsterdam 27.15% disagreed and the same number of people agreed. In Arnhem, 32.60% disagreed and 15.78% agreed. In Group 2, in Amsterdam 12.89% disagreed and 19.35% agreed. With a design process that is structured around a more fashion-inspired products is a crucial ingredient to what extent can Vanilia actually be considered typically Dutch. (…) The Dutch style is always a bit “well-behaved” while I do think that Vanilia has quite a number of pieces that are a bit more outgoing… or at least more daring than a non-descript pair of trousers.” (Interview VCI)

CHAPTER 5 tried to address the question of Dutch fashion from different angles. As I argued, the Dutch fashion industry is replete with womenswear brands that operate under a similar branding formula as Vanilia. With a design process that is structured around a swift and flexible assimilation of international fashion trends, companies like Stills, Turnover, Just B., or Aaiko capitalise on quick response mechanisms. Distinguishing the brand through clever marketing puffery and attractive merchandise, the aim is to offer accessible and democratic products at affordable prices. Furthermore, the separation between basics or business wear and more fashion-inspired products is a crucial ingredient to the brand proposition: perhaps more pronounced than in other fashion economies, a substantial number of Dutch fashion houses seeks to marry a mid-market business approach to an original and distinguished design identity.

The brand has a more ‘international’ look while others related the rather practical style to the Dutch identity. Says 33-year-old Iris Otten, ‘Funny enough, I think [Vanilia] is almost a bit un-Dutch. (…) The Dutch style is always a bit “well-behaved” while I do think that Vanilia has quite a number of pieces that are a bit more outgoing… or at least more daring than a non-descript pair of trousers.’ (Interview VCI)

7.10 Conclusion

At the beginning of the chapter we saw that Vanilia is a transitory stage. Striving towards a more refined brand proposition, the firm is currently adjusting its profile with new ideas and concepts in the pipeline. The branding strategy reflects the ambition to balance different consumption interests. Making the transition towards a younger audience group, the current efforts seek to position or reposition the firm by augmenting existing parts of the brand proposition (e.g. production facilities in Cappadocia, Turkey) and adding new ones (e.g. a new and improved website, interacting with consumers on social media like Facebook or Twitter).

In the ensuing analysis, we saw that the relationship between consumers and brand is defined by values like functionality and stylishness, product quality and comfort. With rather moderate levels of fashion and brand involvement, consumers build a relationship with the brand predominantly based on product-intrinsic features, rather than on lifestyle concepts or on a shared outlook on the world. Vanilia’s audience is not owned by the brand. Many of the brand’s consumers maintain a rather diverse consumption attitude and source their clothing from a variety of brands with a similar aesthetic register. As such, the purchase act primarily satisfies functional and aesthetic interests rather than emotional ones. To some extent this is little surprising, because the firm’s more generalist consumer approach does not focus on a specific clientele. Clothes need to look good but they also should be practical without requiring too much care to maintain. For many consumers the diversity of styles offered by the brand holds the promise to find products that they like and that look good on them without spending too much time in the retail outlets. Vanilia is right on the money with a product that is fashionable and eclectic, affordable but not cheap or underpriced.

When we look at the above value connections between consumers and brand, it is apparent that most of them are more universal than typically Dutch. More pertinent to the Dutch context is the brand’s market approach. Vanilia is structured around a diverse and multi-layered business model that is meant to target a varied consumer base. With a market approach that seeks to integrate multiple consumption interests, Vanilia in general stands more for many successful Dutch fashion enterprises. The combination of stylish and distinguished fashion products is crucial in this context. The Dutch, arguably, are not in the vanguard of the international fashion. Instead, they prefer a type of product that is a compromise between stylish and comfortable, casual and elegant. Neither daring and avant-garde nor dowdy and old-fashioned, Vanilia’s products are a safe bet in the best sense of the word: not ahead of fashion but not lagging behind either. Or, in the words of famous Dutch fashion journalist Bregje Lampe (2011: 3, my translation), “Vanilia certainly is not overly progressive. The clothes are modest, elegant, feminine and in some cases sporty or a bit coarse. In other words, it is a type of product that is eminently suited for the Dutch market.”

The brand’s recent expansion towards more fashion-oriented styles is no contradiction in that regard. Vanilia consistently develops within a certain framework: with a view to the market, the firm carefully seeks to accommodate different consumption interests and adapts the brands proposition accordingly. In so doing, the company assumes a position that negotiates between stylish and understated, exclusive and accessible products. In short: just about right.