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

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Citation for published version (APA):
When the Dutch fashion duo Spijkers en Spijkers celebrated their ten-year anniversary with the exposition ‘The Mirror Has Two Faces’ at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst in Arnhem in May 2011, the event was proof of a development the brand had undergone over the preceding decade. Starting as a small two-women operation, the firm has gone from strength to strength with a mix of market adaptation, idealism, and firm belief in the brand’s signature style and relevance. Despite the fact that the exposition came as a sort of accolade, paying tribute to the designers’ growing popularity in their own country, most of their business and the biggest share of revenues comes from sales abroad. In fact, in the Netherlands the duo has been mostly treated as an insider tip until recently, while in the U.K., Japan, and the Middle East their collections have been thriving on positive reviews and successful sales for many years (Interview SSI, Bern 2011: 79; Husslage 2011: 3).

While this is an interesting aspect in itself, it also posed a number of challenges for my research. For one thing, the brand does not have its own stores, but sells its products exclusively through select retailers across the globe. For another, the fact that the mainline, Spijkers en Spijkers, is being retailed in only two outlets1 in the Netherlands meant a low consumer frequency, which ruled out the possibility to follow an approach comparable to those used for the other case studies in this research. Instead, I had to rely on an in-depth interview, knowledge obtained during a 4-day research trip with the designers to Iasi (Romania), which served the purpose of exploring new possibilities in manufacturing, and an interview with Coming Soon’s store manager, Chananja Baars. The qualitative data was supported by an extensive literature study in the form of various articles and interviews in magazines, as well as a recently published monograph. While at first it seemed like a drawback to work with this approach, the fact that I could study the relation between brand and consumers from a less consumer-centric perspective allowed me to adopt a company-specific perspective and develop an understanding for the firm’s implicitly consumer-oriented market approach.

Admittedly, Spijkers en Spijkers is a rather small label compared to luxury heavyweights like Prada or Louis Vuitton whose operative set-up is integrated in, and backed by, large conglomerates. For my own research this aspect proved remarkably beneficial, as it facilitated an intriguing perspective on the largely unexplored subject of managing target audiences of small-scale luxury fashion brands.

8.2. THE SPIJKERS EN SPIJKERS SIGNATURE

Effortlessly combining influences from Art Deco and modernism with a daunting use of patterns and graphic elements, the clothes are deceptively simple in appearance, yet rich in construction and attention to detail (Teunissen and Van der Voet 2011: 12). The Spijkers en Spijkers signature look might be described as a play of colour and form that foregrounds the garment and instils a subtle sense of sophisticated sensuality in the wearer. As the designers claim, there is no specific target audience in terms of age or social and professional background. Rather, they try to appeal to a certain spirit and mindset – or pronounce it more strongly through their work. Some authors have argued that their understanding of femininity involved the challenging of gender stereotypes, such as eternal youth, sexual objectification, or the industry’s almost exclusive reliance on...
8.3 THE DESIGNERS AS ENTREPRENEURS: CREATIVE FREEDOM

Traditionally, most small-scale fashion labels operate on a small-order basis. This is also true in the case of Spijkers en Spijkers. With average production runs of no more than a 100 pieces per design (in some cases the limit is even 10 to 20 pieces) the brand consistently works with orders of small calibre. This has important consequences for the set-up of the company. First, substandard order sizes mean that most of the production can only be done in specialised factories and/or workshops. Second, small production units lead to relatively high manufacturing costs per piece, which in turn leads to a rather tight gross margin. Unlike many competitors, Truus and Riet Spijkers deliberately chose against collaboration with an investor since, in their view, that would have curtailed their creative freedom too severely. As Truus recounts:

‘We’ve had quite a number of talks with potential investors, but the people we spoke to asked unrighteous things. I’m realistic in my thinking and I understand that collaborating with a partner means they will ask something in return. What we don’t want is someone who thinks: I want to get as much money out of this as possible in the shortest amount of time, or who wants a majority holding in our company. That’s just not interesting for us [since] we have been building this [brand] for the past ten years.’

(Truus Spijkers cited in Hustlage 2011: 3; my translation)

By not working with an investor, the designers chose to develop the brand independently and free from liabilities. Over the past decade, they have successfully implemented this strategy and managed to strengthen their position as a fixture in the international fashion scene. Moreover, they have managed to create a brand with a loyal customer base that is willing to pay a higher price for the unique designs. This has allowed them to maintain their creative freedom and continue to produce high-quality garments that reflect their vision.

8.3.1 BUILDING AWARENESS

Unlike many competitors, the Spijkers en Spijkers brand does not work with ads or other explicit forms of consumer marketing. According to the designers, the first priority is product development, with the majority of resources going into fabrics, pattern-making, and manufacturing. From this perspective it might seem that a sheer reliance on skilled design and a sophisticated production slate could outweigh large-scale campaigns with top models and blue-chip photographers. Indeed, their resolutely marketing-averse stance is credible to the extent that the Spijkers en Spijkers brand has come a long way during the past ten years and keeps being relatively successful. This being said, it is equally true that the chosen approach, to some extent, is an imperative dictated by economic means and financial scope. When compared to the large multi-label corporations that rule a good deal of the high-fashion industry (e.g. Pinault-Printemps-Redoute, Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy, Prada Group, Gucci Group, Compagnie Financière Richemont) there is a striking difference in budget, leverage, and economic reach, but also in the determining variables of a collection’s success or failure. A company like Prada, for example, launches its products with the help of an enormous marketing apparatus, including large-scale advertising in all important magazines, million-dollar budgets for fashion shows, costume designs for blockbusters, or – as happened in July 2011 – renting five floors of Park Hyatt Shanghai to stage a three-day fashion-show exhibition for MiuMiu’s F/W 2011-2012 collection. The Spijkers en Spijkers imprint, by contrast, has no other choice than to rely on a comparatively implicit approach.

To be sure, it does not take million-dollar budgets and glamorous advertising campaigns to position a fashion brand in the market. Still, a substantial financial backing certainly helps to achieve that goal. Truus Spijkers (Interview SSI) sums up the situation the following, rather laconic, way: ‘Brands like Prada are our direct competitors. And you just can’t compete with them. It’s impossible. You see, these are mega teams and mega budgets...’ From an early point in their career the designers understand that by choosing not to work together with an investor, they would require an alternative strategy to advance their business and develop the brand: building the brand through creating awareness and devising a brand narrative that plays with notions like high design, modernist aesthetics, and individualism (Interview SSI; cf. Teunsissen and Van der Voet: 58).

Clearly, awareness is what all brands, regardless of size and turnover, strive for an profit from. Also high-profile advertising, artist sponsorships, or ritzy locations for fashion shows are nothing but means to raise awareness. In the case of Truus and Riet Spijkers, then, the notion most pertains to increased visibility, which they achieve by exploiting two principal assets of the brand proposition: signature style and their status as identical twins, which over time has made them ambassadors of their brand and product. In a sense the sisters are their own best models. All creations are made to their own liking; the proportions of garments are modelled on their own physique. Despite the fact that they do not advertise explicitly through spreads in magazines, for instance, they do capitalise on the presence they have as designers and their increasingly iconic status in their home country. As Truus remarks, ‘We build publicity ourselves. We are good crowd pullers actually and you shouldn’t underestimate that. If you consider the enormous amount of attention we got through the exhibition [at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem], it’s quite incredible, really.’ (Interview SSI)

8.3.2 SISTER ACT

As a consequence of their growing awareness of market demands, a crucial addition to their business portfolio was made in 2010 with the introduction of the diffusion line SIS, which at present counts 11 points of sale in the Netherlands. Originally, the collection made its debut at the Amsterdam International Fashion Week as an extra precollection with the aim to test the firm’s potential in the home market. However, due to the fact that it became an instant commercial success with critics and buyers, the idea quickly turned into a mainstay of business operations. As the designers state, SIS was partly the result of a development during the course of which the main line – but also the twins as a brand in their own right – had finally started to receive more media attention in the Netherlands.

‘At the time, we were getting more and more requests for affordable clothing from Dutch retailers. With our main collection it was impossible to satisfy that demand, so we introduced a “little sister”. Actually, SIS was developed specifically for the Dutch market because we wanted to be able to also sell our products in stores close to where we live’.

(cited in Elle.nl 2010: 1; my translation)

From the initial idea to establish SIS as an exclusive line for the Dutch market, it was only a small step to extend it to other countries as well, with large parts of the production now going to Japan, Russia, and the UK (Teunsissen and Van der Voet: 65).
Apart from creating a more accessible product for the home market, the brand expansion was aimed at exploring new possibilities and steering the brand into a different direction. The financial crisis between 2008 and 2010 had left a deep mark on the mainline’s sales volume, with rather alarming economic discharges in the firm’s markets in Russia and the Ukraine. Lower purchasing quantities and a changing consumption mentality meant a change of direction for the company in order to prevent floundering and to keep the business sustainable (Interview SS; cf. Teunissen and Van der Voet: 57-8). Consequently, the introduction of SIS was as much the result of the designers’ desire to develop a new market as it was a means to guarantee more reliable sales in their established ones. The difference between the main collection and the commercially more viable distribution line is basically twofold. First, SIS is produced in higher quantities and sold at lower prices. Second, the label features more accessible looks, which makes it attractive for a bigger audience. By turning the products into more everyday items, the designers did quite directly respond to consumer needs and their (changing) consumption habits into account. For the future the projected goal is to pursue similar projects, using their reputation to advance their skills in different areas (Interview SS; cf. Teunissen and Van der Voet: 61).

Eventually, the introduction of a diffusion line therefore served the double purpose of creating a new market in their home country and stabilising the sales volume abroad. The fact that the brand was originally devised to only target the Dutch market makes no difference for the final result.

8.3.3 BETTER TOGETHER

The introduction of SIS is but one example of how the designers build and extend their public profile. From a different angle they realised that goal through a number of collaborations, each of them was meant to connect the brand name to popular high-street companies in order to gain a wider reach. Truus and Riet Spijkers designed a capsule collection for Dutch high-street chain Claudia Sträter in 2009, featuring 15 pieces in total, each available in a number of colour variants. This was followed in 2010 by a series of spectacle frames (24 regular models and 10 sunglasses) for the Dutch optician chain Specsavers. The Dutch beer brand Bavaria teamed up with the duo to design a low-budget dress ("Victory Dress") for women, which was meant to be worn during the European Football Championships in 2012. In each case, the growing popularity of the designers in the Netherlands made them interesting candidates for the joint ventures. For both parties the effort turned out to be a win-win situation. The commissioning houses took advantage of the fact that their name was connected to a high-ticket fashion label, thereby adding fashion cachet to the brand proposition. Truus and Riet Spijkers, for their part, capitalised on the media impact of these large-scale projects, which meant free advertising and further financial resources to back and develop their own label. In each of these cases the designers adopted and developed their brand profile in a way that sought to tap into consumer demand by making the brand more accessible through offering multiple points of connection. The introduction of SIS, as well as the collaborations with high-street firms are good examples of how the company responds to the market and, in a rather implicit manner, takes consumer needs and their (changing) consumption habits into account. For the future the projected goal is to pursue similar projects, using their reputation to advance their skills in different areas (Interview SS; cf. Teunissen and Van der Voet: 61).

8.3.4 PRIVATE AFFAIRS

Another way in which the designers respond to consumer needs is a bespoke service for made-to-measure clothes they offer to private clients. Translating the individual wishes and ideas of consumers into a custom-made clothing piece, they claim each garment is the product of a dialogue between them and their clients.

During a fitting session, Truus and Riet seek to channel their own aesthetics in consultation with the client. Says Riet, ‘We work a lot with private clients and there you get a first-hand experience of what clothes do to the person who wears them. You see that, of course, only when you’re actually on one on one with a client.’ (Interview SS)

In a sense, this way of working goes back to the heyday of the couturier who dressed socialites in his studio rather than designing collections for a wider audience. Unlike their predecessors, however, for Truus and Riet Spijkers a sole reliance on private clients – even if it was financially viable – would not be a route worthwhile pursuing. As they claim, it is precisely the polarity between collection-based work for a larger audience and individual commissions that adds interest to their designs, as it allows them to work in both broad and narrow environments (Interview SS).

Here we encounter an interesting balance between their regular collections for a more diverse clientele and the commissions from individual clients, which are dialogue-based and require the ability to adapt. The most direct manner to gain insight into their consumers’ desires, and profit from hands-on experiences, is of course the immediate interaction in the workroom. The direct response forge a personal bond between supply and demand, which is not possible to achieve in a regular retail setting. Despite different points of departure, both approaches eventually seek to fulfill the same goal, since the designers place a strong emphasis on the consumers’ emotional response – in other words: what clothes do to the wearer; what experiences they facilitate; what feelings they evoke or trigger. Says Riet, ‘Actually, the nicest thing is a small-scale presentation in a showroom like it used to be back in the day. Take Chanel, for example… there is Marlene Dietrich sitting on the staircase and you have a number of models, dressed in the latest collection, walking around with number boards in their hands. You know, here’s your customer and it’s nice and direct. I’d love working like that.’ (Interview SS)

According to the designers, clothes can exert an influence that reaches beyond modesty towards a sense of self-assuredness. While their vision is not entirely free from idealism, there might be some kind of truth to it, after all. As 34 year-old consumer Lisa T. (private conversation May 18, 2011) told me, ‘Well, that whole notion of empowerment I’m not sure about. Still, the clothes are certainly powerful. I own quite a few of their dresses and when I put them on they certainly do something to me.’

8.4 ODDITIES OF THE LUXURY MARKET

While the made-to-measure service is more of a sideline in their business, the biggest share of creative output comes from the Spijkers en Spijkers main collection. With prices of 800 Euros for one of their trade mark jumpsuits and between 700 and 1200 Euros for a dress, the brand is clearly situated in the luxury segment. In section 8.3.2 we saw that the label does actually grow but fails to establish a loyal customer base in one of more of its (foreign) markets. Part of the firm’s difficulties can be explained by the actual product proposition, which is fashion-forward and fairly uncompromising when it comes to the designers’ aesthetic vision.

Although more elusive, the luxury market is neither distinctly separated from the high street and other retail environments in terms of clothing style nor in terms of the principal demands consumers make on products. In fact, it is the inherent dynamics that are somewhat different. It is a popular fallacy to believe that the big luxury houses take the main share of revenues from the extravagant fashion pieces that attract most media attention. Those eye-catchers are primarily integrated in the collection to manifest the status of an innovative
and cutting-edge player in the global fashion industry. The cash flow, meanwhile, comes from business basics, more understated fashion pieces, and leatherwear (e.g. bags, wallets, belts). Bigger profits, then, are made from clean and immaculately produced business wear – or at least a type of clothing that lends itself to a professional context. These clothes, too, are surely fashionable, but at least they are subtle enough to be worn across a wide variety of different social and professional contexts.

The Spijkers en Spijkers line, by contrast, relies for the most part on a rather outspoken type of product. What does not mean they are conspicuous or outré: they fall in a product category that is closer to state-of-the-art – or at least a type of clothing that lends itself to a professional context. These clothes, too, are surely fashionable, but at least they are subtle enough to be worn across a wide variety of different social and professional contexts.

The Spijkers en Spijkers collection is comprised of real \‘design pieces\’ they do not always encourage everyday use. \‘After all, it\’s quite an expressive product. (\’) And I think in our case it has to be like that simply because

Surely, such an approach greatly fuels the brand\’s fashion cachet. At the same time, the Spijkers en Spijkers label enjoys great, albeit unstable, popularity abroad while in the Netherlands it could never really catch on. SS1, by contrast, turned out to be a success in both home and foreign markets. This asymmetry requires some clarification if we want to understand how the company relates to consumers and adapts to different markets. Also, the difference tells us something about the Dutch fashion landscape and local consumers\’ predominant consumption mentality.

One explanation for the difference in interest and sales volume is the income distribution across different national contexts and, as a result, different buying mentalities. Comparing the brand\’s key markets in the Middle East or Russia with the European ones, we can identify a principal difference in spending ability between Western countries and the (moneyed) nations of the Middle and Far East. According to the International Monetary Fund (accessed on November 9, 2011), the Netherlands rank number three in the European nations, with the highest purchasing power parity per capita (PPP), after Luxembourg and Norway. So, the country\’s (relatively) high gross domestic product goes together with a fairly democratic income distribution. On the other hand, Qatar (1), Brunei (2), and the United Arab Emirates (4) rank at the top four of countries with the highest gross domestic product per capita. In this case, however, the figures are partly produced by the high density of the super-rich rather than a democratic overall income distribution. The difference is rather that in the Netherlands these attributes are more pronounced. (Feitsma 2011a; van Zijl and van Zijl 2000). (To be sure, comfort and easy maintenance are not anathema to any western or European country has a well-established and economically strong middle market. At the same time, the demand for luxury products is somewhat lower because the super-high income groups are fewer as well (Jacobs 2011b: 122).)

In CHAPTER 5 we saw that in the past Dutch fashion was viewed mainly in conceptualist terms, or as a continuation of the country\’s modernist heritage (Teunissen and van Zijl 2000), whereas more recent research suggests more than one predominant fashion narrative and at least two \‘fashion identities\’ (Feitsma 2011a; Jacobs 2010; Jacobs 2011a). The first to find its own way to compete with the industry\’s big players. For obvious reasons only the smallest few high-fashion brands will specialise in business wear, simply because it is hard to make a mark and attract media attention. In this respect there is no difference between big and small enterprises since also the established names will feature in magazines with the season\’s showstoppers rather than with business basics. The very difference is actually that the established brands are mostly integrated in corporate networks with strong financial support, which allows them to create both extravagant and understated fashion pieces without having to choose for either approach.

**8.5 DUTCH LUXURY FASHION?**

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8.6 DUTCH FASHION: HERE AND THERE

In CHAPTER 5 we saw that in the past Dutch fashion was viewed mainly in conceptualist terms, or as a continuation of the country’s modernist heritage (Teunissen and van Zijl 2000), whereas more recent research suggests more than one predominant fashion narrative and at least two ‘fashion identities’ (Feitsma 2011a; Jacobs 2010; Jacobs 2011a). The first
type – Modernist Design with a Twist, as I called it – is linked to sobriety and aesthetic restraint, with a foothold in the national traditions of art and architecture, graphic and industrial design (Teunissen and Van Zijl 2000), while the other – Wild Design – is defined by colour, pattern, and playfulness. According to Jacobs (2010: 20), the former can be found mostly in the upper-middle and high segment, while the latter is mainly connected to the more popular ranges of the fashion market.

The work of Truus and Riet Spijkers takes its cues from both realms, merges them, and gives a new twist to it. Many of their products are inspired by modernist aesthetics on the one hand, especially when it comes to graphic composition, use of patterns and fields of colour. On the other hand, the vibrancy and edgy appearance of the collections are more akin to Wild Design and the way the Dutch fashion narrative is inflected by various cultural influences. Merging elements of both traditions into a new whole, the garments resume conceptualist roots in terms of proportion and graphic composition, while a predilection for animal prints and metallics evidences a playful and upbeat stance. Much of the clothing is about achieving the right balance between two poles: symmetry and asymmetry, colourful and colourless, exposed and hidden, patterns and planes.

In a country like Italy, for instance, we find a clear opposition between companies catering to either end of the spectrum. At one end there are brands like Armani or Prada, whose aesthetic signature is sleek and pared down. At the other end, houses like Versace, Cavalli, or Dolce & Gabbana stand for a style that can be dubbed ‘dirty chic’, i.e., a classy yet aggressive and erotically charged type of fashion. Along the general lines, the former reflect the kind of understatement we also find with many Dutch upmarket fashion labels like Orson+Bodil, Saskia van Drimmelen, or Marcha Hüskes. In the spot of the lascivious panache of the latter, however, we find designers like Bas Kosters whose work is a smorgasbord of colour, pattern, and frivolous exuberance. Interestingly, the work of Truus and Riet Spijkers occupies a space that combines these two extremes. The brand is typically Dutch in the sense that it blurs the boundaries between reprised conceptualism and playfulness, graphic composition and edgy looks, it juggles with different disciplines and aesthetic repertoires and merges them into a new whole.

8.7 CONCLUSION

Spijkers en Spijkers had to find their own way to establish a position in the market. A small enterprise without major financial backing to support the brand, which allows for greater entrepreneurial freedom, the brand is peculiar in the sense that it successfully operates its global business with an exceptionally small team. Rather than riding the branding wave, Truus and Riet Spijkers have made their own face and signature style the figurehead of the brand. The brand’s marketing approach is rather implicit in the sense that brand awareness is created by a number of different strategies that, on the face of it, might seem just remotely related to a consumer-centric approach. On closer inspection, however, many steps the firm has taken since its inception are tacit ways to bring the clothes closer to their consumers and integrate their needs into the brand proposition. When there was a demand for more affordable clothes, SIS was created as a more accessible alternative in the designers’ trademark style. The moment Truus and Riet Spijkers understood that their own media profile was a marketing tool in its own right, they put themselves more into the limelight and started to connect their name to well-known high-street brands. The same is true for their fashion designs. On the one hand, these are resolutely built around what the two sisters call ‘high design’. On the other hand, they do consider the products’ wearability (despite their sharp looks). Spijkers en Spijkers are creative with an eye to the market; exclusive, but not out of reach; conceptual in its way of working, yet playful in appearance. In short, the brand is typically Dutch in the sense that it is not either... or, but and... and.