Dutch identity in fashion: Co-evolution between brands and consumers
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1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In its most basic form, my research started with the question how Dutch fashion brands and their consumer groups relate to each other, from the premise that consumption is no longer a one-way road but an interactive relay where brands and consumers co-evolve. To what extent do brands try to get insight into the preferences of the individual consumer? Can they not be merely viewed as passive recipients of what the market puts on offer (Wohlfeil and Wethan 2006). Instead, they have become active agents who can collectively exert influence, or even pressure, on their preferred brands (Brown 2000). With the advent of the Internet and web 2.0 technology, firms have been given the chance to interact and foster ties with their clientele as well as to benefit from a more accessible ‘data base’ of consumption profiles. At the same time, digital technology prompted a development towards a more active stance of consumers.

The purpose of my research was to examine the aspects that motivate the purchase behaviour of Dutch fashion consumers and analyse the value connections they share with their preferred brands. In order to develop an understanding of these different components, the three central questions of my research were the following:

1. What are the different value systems that govern the brand-consumer relationship and is there something typically Dutch about them?
2. What level holds strongest when it comes to the purchase behaviour of Dutch consumers: individual identities, group identities, national or international sites of identification?
3. How do different audiences relate to their preferred brands? Do those ties have an impact on the buying behaviour of Dutch consumers?

2. THE TROUBLED QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Being part of a larger NWO-approved, interdisciplinary research project ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’, the first issue that needed to be addressed was that of identity. This concept is multifarious and not world’, the first issue that needed to be addressed was that of identity. This concept is multifarious and not...
is a theoretical tool to cluster consumer groups according to styles and segments. By way of example, a consumer who is partial to elegant lounge suits and a classic menswear is unlikely to buy clothes from a cheap skate wholesale shop. In fact, most probably he would not even dare to enter.

With a focus on the values that govern the dynamics between supply and demand in the Dutch fashion industry, it is crucial to understand how the processes of identification and purchase behaviour are connected. Even when consumers are part of more comprehensive social contexts, in the end consumption and presentation of the self are of course individual acts. Governing the connection between the symbolic value of consumer goods and individual and collective values, one critical concept therefore is style (Dolich 1969; Grubb and Graithwohl 1967; Phau and Lo 2014; Sirgy 1982). Consumer goods can take on the function of intermediaries that moderate between different levels of identity, and that can reinforce or weaken to, and acceptance by, certain reference groups. Intimately connected to this is the concept of consumer involvement. Although there are different types of involvement, for my study only ‘enduring involvement’ (Rothschild 1975) is important, which is defined as sustained interest in a product or product category over time. Consumer involvement is a multi-dimensional concept: it might refer to brands or products as well as to different purchase motivations. Regarding dress Jacobs (2010) makes a distinction between two basic motivations: ‘looking good’ versus ‘being fashionable’ (Fig. 1). If consumers are more concerned with the desire to look good they might be very much involved with clothing in general, but not with fashion. By contrast, consumers who put a premium on fashionable looks will traditionally be more involved with the fashion value of their clothes than with good looks. Fastening to these two dimensions, we can make a distinction between clothing involvement and fashion involvement. Researching consumption preferences and brand loyalty in the Dutch fashion industry, the involvement construct helps to measure these different motivations and develop an understanding of the material and immaterial values consumers connect with a brand.

Also important for my study is how brands actually relate to their consumers, and what kind of relationship they enter. My study incorporates the concept of co-creation to explore the level and quality of engagement between supply and demand. Co-creation describes a marketing approach that integrates the knowledge and experiences of consumers into the brand’s value proposition in order to achieve higher levels of consumer satisfaction. Conversely, this approach allows consumers to engage with their preferred brands, in certain cases to an extent where they can actually have an impact on supply and as a consequence economic performance.

4. METHODOLOGY

In section 2 and 3 I introduced the terms co-creation and co-evolution as focal points of my study. While in consumer studies these concepts have a longstanding history, fashion studies have treated them like some kind of taboo. Especially creative fashion designers like to present themselves as original artists who set the trends rather than following them. My research aims to explore how the interaction between fashion firms and their audience is really shaped and in this way contributes to an understanding of the dynamic processes that govern the relation between both parts. Aiming to analyse in what way, and to what extent, the attitudes of consumers interact with the strategic positioning of firms, my research targets the interactive component of fashion consumption and seeks to identify crucial drivers in the relationship. Moreover, I try to identify possible criteria in this relationship that are typical for the Dutch situation. Throughout my study I opted for an explorative treatment as the subject is largely unresearched. A case-study-based approach was considered the most appropriate form of analysis as it has enabled me to study the Dutch fashion landscape in its diversity and approach my subject from different angles, and collect rich data from a variety of sources. A well-conceived case study design is a key condition of external validity. If the cases are carefully selected and representative they might allow for inferences even beyond the actual case at hand (Yin 1994, Flyvbjerg 2006). In an attempt to arrive at a representative sample and to get an idea of what the Dutch fashion industry looks like, my supervisor, Prof. Daniy Jacobs, and I organised an expert panel before the actual selection of cases. To present an idea of the procedure, we jointly approached a longstanding history in Dutch fashion via e-mail, with the request to make a list of ten fashion firms that, in their view, best reflected the Dutch fashion landscape. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to provide an explanation for their choices, which opened the scope of analysis also towards the underlying values and connotations that correspond to what is generally considered as ‘being Dutch’.

After pooling all opinions, I first distilled different brand categories from the full set of responses and made a list of attributes that characterise the local fashion industry. In the second step, I tried to arrive at a more encompassing view by shifting the focus towards emerging patterns. In doing so, my aim was to pinpoint aspects that surfaced regularly during the discussion and that might represent a possible classification of the local fashion landscape according to prevalent themes, rather than brand categories. To achieve this goal, the full range of responses was coded according to recurrent values such as ‘minimalist’, ‘conceptual’, ‘denim’, ‘commercial’, ‘colourful’, or ‘innovative’. These keywords, in turn, functioned as indices for overarch ing themes of Dutch fashion. By clustering the findings into different categories, a set of common features was created for each category in order to show points of connection in the overall response pattern. From the analysis, four categories emerged that are indicative of different, in some cases overlapping, characteristics of Dutch fashion. FIG 2 presents the findings.

The defining features of Modernist Design with a Twist are a conceptual approach to the design process, the influence and inflection of modernist principles, and craftsmanship. Defined by a minimal and pared-down style, designers like Alexander van Slobbe, Truus and Riet Spijkers, or Jan Taminiau tend to play with conventions of the genre. Although a comparatively small segment of the local fashion landscape, it is substantial in the sense that it condenses certain tendencies that also prevail on the high street. Wild Design takes its name from an alternative tradition in Dutch fashion that has not received much attention in scholarly publications until now. The work of firms like Olliö, Bas Kosters, or CroaKemperman is characterised by colour, irreverence and playfulness and takes inspiration from a variety of sources including hippie culture, postmodernism, Dutch folklore, and the country’s colonial past. The look produced by this polyvalence is defined by a combination of streetwear-inspired and trend-savvy looks that is combined with progressive marketing tactics and business acumen. Often with an international market
appearance, the products are designed to appeal to universal demands across different national fashion appetites. The nature of this category is the use of denim. Treated or untreated, smart or casual, the Dutch fashion industry is recognised for its innovative approach to jeans clothing and unexpected variations of popular themes (Feitsma 2012a). Stylish Mid-Market is part of the Dutch women’s wear industry, that consists of small to medium enterprises. The foremost is a concern over the design and appearance. It is important that the firm’s clientele searches for a type of product that allows them to dress in a chic and trendy, albeit inconspicuous, way. The values mentioned above thus reflect a more general template when it comes to product preference: first and foremost, clothes need to be versatile. Wishes are not necessarily to wear frills and suited for leisure and business activities alike. Maintaining a rather diverse consumption attitude and sourcing their clothing from a number of suppliers with a similar product range, Vanilia’s is a rather ‘light’ style group that is not ‘owned’ by the brand. Due to the fact that the purchase act for many consumers satisfies functional and aesthetic interests rather than emotional needs, the level of product and brand involvement is moderate. Unlike CoraKemperman’s clientele, Vanilia’s is not heavily involved with the brand and searches for functional products that are at once representative and versatile, stylish and understated.

5. CASE STUDIES AND FINDINGS

For each of the brands I studied, a different pattern emerged with respect to the question how the relationship between supply and demand is defined. Co-evolving with and as its patrons over a longer period of time, my study showed that the relationship between CoraKemperman and its clientele is defined by a mix of exclusivity and product uniqueness. With no merchandising on the Internet and not even a mail order service, the brand relies exclusively on sales through its shops. By holding down the prices inside the shops (i.e., the available number of items per size and colour) a ‘first come, first serve’ mentality among consumers is created, which increases the products’ covetousness. Furthermore, on the shop floor the company works with a personalised and wellorchestrated sales approach that generates an atmosphere of belonging and individuality for consumers. Both the brand and the customer perceive the outcome might be owed to the company’s sheer presence in the market with big logos on the clothes rather than to a vested emotional commitment. As a result, G-Star’s style group is relatively light, with a broad interest in products from competing brands in the same segment.

The research on Spijkers en Spijkers was carried out according to different methodological premises. Not being able to collect qualitative and quantitative data, my study relied on field work from a four-day trip to Iasi (Romania) that I took together with Truus and Riet Spijkers and others, with the two designers as well as with other key informants. An intensive case study to complement my findings. My research demonstrates that the designers have adapted their product and retail strategy in a rather implicit manner throughout the years, taking into account changes in the market and looking for opportunities to collaborate with another high street brand. By entering into collaborations with popular mid- or even low-market firms (e.g. Claudia Sträter, Speessavers, Bavaria) and by creating the commercially successful diffusion line SIS, they have popularised their name and image among a wider public. While on the face of it many of the steps the brand has taken may appear remotely consumer-centric, my study makes clear that, in different ways, each of them has contributed to bringing the product closer to consumers and integrating their needs more into the brand proposition. Although my study did not allow for an exhaustive definition of the brand’s style group, it is still possible to present some conclusions. For instance, according to an interview with the manager of Arnhem’s Coming Soon store, there is a core group of people who regularly shop for the brand’s clothes and who develop a certain enthusiasm for the brand’s clothes. With a sometimes rather outspoken clothing style, the brand attracts a following among women who enjoy the combination of playfulness and sharp cuts and who are able to buy fashion products that are out of the ordinary.

6. CONCLUSION

My research explored the question how the relationship between supply and demand is defined in the Dutch fashion industry, and based on what value connections they possibly develop a closer connection. The choice of case studies is based on the ‘Four faces of Dutch fashion’, described in Section 4. My study is special in that regard, because it is not limited to a specific detail of the local fashion landscape, but focuses on the bigger picture instead, in order to stimulate critical debate and future research activities. My analysis demonstrates that the different categories are appropriate to illustrate, or at least approximate, what the local fashion landscape looks like, and what different aspects the purchase behaviour of different consumer groups is influenced by. Furthermore, my research provides an alternative understanding of the life- and experience-worlds that have an impact on purchase behaviour. Analysing and clustering consumer groups into ‘style groups’ according to different consumption profiles has shown to be quite useful to map the dynamics between supply and demand as this does not exclusively focus on consumer’s purchase behaviour but also incorporates the context and identity of a certain clientele. My results demonstrate that across the different cases a different picture emerged with respect to the question how brands and consumers interact and co-evolve. As a result, the firm’s involvement, the connection between CoraKemperman and its main consumer group is relatively close. The relationship is defined by a mix of exclusivity and product

1 Spijkers en Spijkers does not have a shop of their own. As a consequence it was not possible to investigate a recognisable consumer group in a similar way.
uniqueness as well as a personalised and well-orchestrated sales approach inside the shops. In the case of Vanilia, the ties consumers develop with the brand are looser and less focused on only one company. Sourcing their wardrobe from a larger number of firms with a similar range of products, Vanilia’s clientele is not heavily involved with the brand and searches for products that are at once representative and versatile, stylish and understated. With a product proposition that is slightly more refined than the offerings of its competitors, G-Star attracts a rather diverse consumer group with a penchant for a fashionable and unobtrusive type of streetwear. Based on a passive sense of identification that is connected to the firm’s larger-than-life presence in the local fashion market and its highly recognisable imago, the level of involvement is relatively high. More than with the other brands, fashion involvement is probably highest in the case of Spijkers en Spijkers.

In the analysis it was shown that, with the possible exception of Spijkers en Spijkers, none of the audiences I studied showed prominent levels of fashion involvement. We can conclude, therefore, that a distinct signature style takes precedence over the fashion value of clothes. Following the motivations ‘looking good’ and ‘being fashionable’, it appears that Dutch consumers of the brands I studied have a prominent interest to look good, while fashionable looks are of lesser importance for them. For each individual case, the value connections governing the relationship between brands and consumers are based on a different set of attributes.

FIG 3 maps the different brands I studied along the axes of ‘looking good’ and ‘being fashionable’ in relation to brand involvement.

Throughout my study, I tried to identify characteristics that can be considered typically Dutch. While the consumer research did not allow for conclusive inferences, the study as a whole produced a number of interesting insights in that regard. My results suggest that neither consumers nor brands are actually concerned with the question of a Dutch ‘style of dress’. The purchase decisions of consumers do not depend on where their clothes come from or have been designed – in fact, more often than not they are unaware of the national origins of their purchases. Local fashion brands, for their part, do not devise a ‘Dutch product’ either. Rather, beside the relationship they have with their clientele discussed before, they implicitly account for the local style by responding to possible preferences that result from a more informal cultural climate on the one hand or a taller and slightly sturdier body type on the other hand. My research shows that more can be said about Dutch style than is commonly assumed. At the same time, it became clear that there is no national fashion identity as such. Rather, brands devise products that, to a certain extent, respond to certain cultural conditions, while consumers are attracted to these products because they reflect their needs or suit their lifestyle.

Following the four levels of identification discussed in section 2, my results suggest that identification does not reach beyond the cognitive level.

Typical for the Dutch fashion landscape, then, is a clothing style that resonates with a rather liberal and tolerant cultural spirit as well as with a hands-on attitude. The four faces of Dutch fashion are a possibility to define, and study, the local fashion economy. Chances are that in other countries a similar picture might emerge. While that point still needs confirmation, my argument is that it is the combination of individual elements that makes it typically Dutch. The ‘bicycle factor’, for instance, is presumably something that is more pertinent to the Dutch context than to others. Dutch fashion is in many instances a compromise between seemingly contradictory concepts: stylish and casual, understated and dashing, luxurious and basic, colourful and black and white. All these ideas clash and complement each other and culminate in an easygoing style with an edge. In most cases, there is a subtle twist to a garment, an unexpected element that strikes a balance between individualism and tongue-in-cheek humour: a straightforward and no-frills style that does not take itself too seriously. To turn the old Dutch adage on its head: ‘Doe maar een beetje gek, dan ben je gewoon genoeg’.