

The locational choices and interregional mobilities of creative entrepreneurs within Canada's fashion system

Abstract

Although creative industries and creative talent have traditionally clustered in established global centres such as London and New York, new forms of independent production, digital technologies and mobilities are reshaping this landscape. Drawing on 87 interviews and participant observation, this paper considers whether independent fashion designers in Canada still need to locate in the established centres to realise their ambitions. It explores how these entrepreneurs choose a 'home base' for their operations and demonstrates how they mobilise three forms of mobility (temporary, mediated, virtual) to access opportunities and resources within Canada's fashion system.

Key words: mobility, locational choice, fashion designers, creative labour, Canada

JEL codes: F66, J61, L26, R

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1. Introduction

Creative industries such as music, film and new media have long clustered activities and infrastructure in a handful of established global centres (Florida, 2002; Hracs et al., 2011). As a result, aspiring creative talent has typically flowed up the hierarchy, from peripheries and regional incubators to national centres and global capitals. This is especially true in the fashion industry where four superstar cities – London, Paris, Milan and New York – serve as talent magnets that have traditionally dictated trends and dominated other markets (Breward & Gilbert, 2006; Kawamura, 2004; Rantisi, 2004).

While these cities are still regarded by many creatives as the 'place to be,' recent developments may be undermining their attractiveness and centrality. Just as these capitals are becoming more crowded, costly, competitive and cutthroat, new forms of independent production, digital technologies and mobilities are furnishing individuals with greater freedom to arrange where, when and how they live and work (Hracs et al., 2011; Nilsson, 2014). This raises a

fundamental question which lies at the heart of regional studies (Turok et al. 2017): do independent creatives still need to locate in the established centres to realise their ambitions?

This paper addresses this question through a case study of Canada's fashion system. Drawing on 87 interviews and participant observation, it provides a typology of the country's diverse regions and examines the ways in which independent designers can access opportunities and resources in other parts of the national system and overcome the limitations of their 'home base' by practicing forms of mobility in strategic ways. Our conceptualisation of mobility is informed by the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller & Urry, 2006) and encompasses the physical and virtual movement of humans, ideas, knowledge and objects across space and at different scales (Cresswell, 2010). Three forms of mobility are presented: 1) temporary mobility, which entails physically attending events such as fashion week, 2) mediated mobility, which involves working with intermediaries to create a presence in key markets, and 3) virtual mobility, which harnesses the internet and social media to promote and sell products in local, national and global markets. The paper argues that although 'making it' in the Canadian fashion system is difficult (Brydges and Pugh, 2017), being permanently located in one of the big cities, like Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver, is not essential.

The paper contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, it nuances our understanding of the locational choices of creative workers and mobile 'talent' by moving beyond traditional considerations of 'one-off' (one time, permanent) moves and the 'jobs vs. amenities' debate (Florida, 2002; Storper & Scott, 2009). Second, while the existing literature highlights growing possibilities for the mobility of people, ideas, objects and knowledge (Sheller & Urry, 2006), this paper demonstrates how mobilities are being practiced 'on the ground' – within and between regions – in the wake of new developments in transportation and communications

technologies (Boschma et al., 2014; Grabher & Ibert, 2014). Third, it nuances our understanding of creative labour, and the spatial, temporal, organisational and commercial strategies independent producers are using to overcome the challenges associated with intensifying global competition and the do-it-yourself (D.I.Y) model. In so doing, the paper advances our conceptualisation of the determinants of regional entrepreneurship (Turok et al. 2017), cultural intermediation (Bourdieu, 1984) and creative collaboration (Hauge and Hracs, 2010). By revealing the multi-directional flows of creative talent, the paper also contributes to existing research that looks at creative practice outside core areas including suburbs, small towns and rural areas (Bell & Jayne, 2006; Hracs, 2009). This is particularly relevant in the case of the fashion industry, where there is a need to look beyond established fashion capitals and examine the dynamics of the fashion industry in tier two and/or emerging countries (Larner & Molloy, 2009). Finally, the paper uses the unique and understudied case of Canada to contribute to existing theories related to fashion and the global fashion industry within economic geography and fashion studies more broadly.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Individualised Nature of Locational Choice

As creativity and innovation have become key engines in the contemporary knowledge economy, many cities and regions have joined the ‘war for talent’ by competing to attract and retain the highly educated and mobile individuals who catalyse these activities (Florida, 2002; Fratesi 2014; Gertler et al. 2014; Sternberg 2017). As a result, understanding the locational choices of these individuals and identifying the factors that attract them has become an important research agenda within geography and regional studies (Fratesi 2014; Turok et al. 2017).

While Storper and Scott (2009) argue that talent follows good quality jobs, others assert that talent is attracted to locations that offer amenities including tolerance (Florida, 2002), consumption opportunities (Glaeser et al., 2001), and leisure and entertainment activities (Clark et al., 2002). However, as Hracis and Stolarick (2014) argue, the binary between jobs and amenities fails to reflect the evolving nature of what constitutes a job. After all, freelance creative workers and entrepreneurs do not migrate for specific firm-based jobs but rather markets that offer opportunities for paid work.

Moreover, there is a need to question the assumptions underpinning these theories; that is to say, the glorification of a neoliberal competition for talented creative workers, who are understood to be footloose and free with their locational choice preferences. As Sternberg (2017) cautions, several Swedish studies on interregional migration reveal that members of the creative class are not highly mobile or motivated by amenity-related factors. Despite notable exceptions (Niedomysl & Hansen, 2010), the tendency to generalise the preferences of creative workers fails to provide sufficient nuance by acknowledging the intersectionality of research subjects and the extent to which the locational preferences of talent are differentiated by factors including age, class, occupation, gender, ethnicity, and other identity markers (Leslie & Catungal, 2012; Reimer 2016). For example, levels of mobility may increase or decrease at key life-cycle events, including entering the labour market or family formation (Berck et al. 2016; Sternberg, 2017). Thus, place-based amenities such as culture, climate, low crime levels, good schools, and tolerance may matter to varying degrees depending on individual tastes and subjectivities (Hracis & Stolarick, 2014; Leslie & Brail, 2011).

While the attractiveness of large urban centers is often emphasised, recent research has also highlighted the appeal of smaller cities, suburbs, and rural areas (Bell & Jayne, 2006; Gertler et al.

2014; Hracs, 2009; Hracs et al., 2011). Indeed, not all creative workers want to live and work in cities and permanent co-location in large urban centres or specific neighbourhoods is not necessary if access to key resources, people, networks and activities can be gained remotely or through temporary visits (Hracs, 2009; Nilsson, 2014). This reinforces the need to study the locational choices and patterns of mobility of creative talent.

2.2 The Mobility of People and Knowledge in the Digital Age

Because the mobility of labour constitutes a direct transfer of embodied knowledge in space and may induce localized learning processes and innovation, the movement and pooling of labour – especially skilled workers and entrepreneurs – is regarded as a key driver of regional development and a crucial topic within regional studies (Boschma et al. 2014; Fratesi, 2014). Existing literature suggests that physically locating within specific clusters allows individuals and firms to access local ‘buzz’ (Bathelt et al., 2004). As buzz is often spontaneous, fluid, comprised of tacit forms of information and may be blocked by local actors, frequent face-to-face interactions are essential to cultivating trust and maximising the benefits of ‘being there’ (Bathelt et al., 2004). Yet, buzz can also be accessed from distant or multiple locations. Beyond the costly practice of establishing satellite offices, firms can create or participate in temporary clusters such as trade fairs, conventions and conferences (Maskell et al., 2006; Power & Jansson, 2008). By leveraging the physical mobility of individuals, firms can identify knowledge frontiers, find suitable partners to complement their needs and establish trusting relationships through repeat interactions (Bathelt & Turi, 2011).

However, sending teams to events around the world is not only resource intensive but there may be an upper limit to the benefits of spatial clustering including information overload (Bathelt

et al., 2004; Hracs, 2009). Therefore, staying competitive requires identifying and analysing trade-offs, understanding what tasks are best suited to different forms of interaction and communication, and ultimately developing a strategy that optimises the right mix of mobilities and geographic proximity (Maskell et al., 2006; Bathelt & Turi, 2011).

In 2008, Rychen and Zimmermann highlighted the need to better understand how and why firms build the links and spatial strategies that they do. Yet, as new infrastructure and declining transportation costs keep increasing possibilities for physical mobility and new technologically mediated communications, such as video conferencing and social media, enhance interactions and knowledge flows across time and space, the need for detailed case studies is only intensifying (Grabher & Ibert, 2014).

There is also a need to go beyond firms and examine the mobility-related practices and experiences of entrepreneurs (Boschma et al. 2014). Whereas Torre (2008) suggests that small firms may be more tied to local territories than large firms (who have greater financial and human resources) more empirical research is needed to test this assumption. Concomitantly, it is important to empirically investigate the extent to which digital technologies and mediated communications are increasing the use and value of virtual spaces and new forms of what Bathelt and Schuldt (2010) call 'virtual buzz.'

2.3 The Economic Geography of Fashion

Fashion has received a considerable amount of attention from scholars in a range of disciplines including economic geography, regional studies, sociology, media and communications, business, marketing and fashion studies more broadly (Jansson & Power, 2010; Rantisi, 2004, 2002; Rocamora, 2011; Hauge et al., 2009; Brydges, 2017a). Although a comprehensive review is

beyond the scope of this paper (see Brydges, 2017a), a key issue for this paper is the tendency of this literature to focus on established fashion industries, such as the 'big four' global cities of London, Paris, Milan and New York (Breward & Gilbert, 2006; Kawamura, 2004; McRobbie, 2002b; Rantisi, 2004, 2002). As the dynamics in these cities are exceptional and difficult to replicate this focus is 'self-sustaining and self-referential' (Larner & Molloy (2009), the specificities and attractiveness of unique and local fashion industries outside of the established centers remain poorly understood. The Canadian case is therefore situated within an emerging body of literature which explores the dynamics of 'tier two,' or emerging fashion markets, such as Sweden (Hauge et al., 2009) and New Zealand (Larner & Molloy, 2009).

It is also useful to contextualize the contemporary nature of work for independent fashion designers. The creative industries have experienced a rise in entrepreneurship, whereby many young and talented individuals have flocked to industries, such as fashion, music, film or new media (Arvidsson et al., 2010). Like other forms of creative labour, independent fashion design is highly individualised and precarious (McRobbie, 2016). Under the contemporary D.I.Y. (do it yourself) model, independent fashion designers have become individually responsible for a growing range of creative and non-creative tasks. This leads to challenges related to de-specialisation, multi-tasking and the 'corrosion of creativity' (McRobbie, 2002), which are exacerbated by a lack of resources and intense global competition. Yet, whereas scholars have investigated the working lives, spatial dynamics and coping strategies of entrepreneurs in other creative industries such as music, design and craft (Hracs, 2015; Reimer, 2016; Shultz, 2015), much less is known about the experiences of independent fashion designers and how they shape locational choices and patterns of mobility.

3. Research Design

The research presented in this paper takes a qualitative case study approach involving interviews, participant observation and analysis of online spaces. First, 87 semi-structured interviews were conducted; 54 with independent fashion designers from across Canada and 33 with key informants who included executives and managers from industry (such as fashion weeks, PR and consulting firms) as well as from fashion education institutions and government. A wide range of sources (including fashion week rosters, media coverage) and strategies (including snowball sampling and working with a gatekeeper¹) were used to identify and gain access to designers from across the country. Beyond location, the designers were differentiated by age, experience, education, life cycle and career stage. Interview topics explored their education background, work experience in the fashion industry, business structure and aspirations, involvement in the local, regional and national fashion industry, and where they saw themselves living and working in the future. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded according to dominant themes. Quotations are utilised in-text to best demonstrate how participants expressed themselves and their experiences.

To triangulate the interview data and better understand the nature of cyclical clusters, temporary mobility and the complexities of key spaces and interactions, observation was also conducted during twenty fashion shows and related events. While a number of these events were public, access to closed settings, such as front-rows and backstage areas, and opportunities to meet key informants and designers was facilitated by a key gatekeeper (Campbell et al., 2006). Gatekeepers play a key role in providing access to “key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional or informal” (Campbell et al., 2006, pp. 98). To

¹ Gatekeepers are defined as those ‘individuals in an organization that have the power to grant or withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research’ (Burgess, 1984, pp. 48 in Valentine, 2005, pp. 116).

investigate forms of virtual mobility we also conducted online observation of spaces, including websites, blogs and social media platforms, that independent fashion designers are increasingly engaging with (Nilsson, 2014). For a detailed account of the observation criteria and analytical process see (Brydges, 2017a).

4. Study Context

4.1 The structure of the Canadian fashion industry

The Canadian fashion industry employs more than 12,800 workers who contribute \$790 million in GDP to the Canadian economy² (Nordicity, 2015). Of these, 3,240 people work in fashion design services, 3,960 people in non-core industry functions, such as employment in retail, distribution and manufacturing, and 5,620 people in support and administrative roles (Nordicity, 2015). Within the industry, the majority of ‘design firms’ (of which fashion is included in this definition) are small businesses, typically run by an individual or pair of designers, with less than nine employees (Statistics Canada, 2013). 74% of this labour force is female (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Although the industry has produced some success stories in recent years, many high-profile domestic brands are struggling. Developing a long-term career in the Canadian fashion industry is difficult, as a number of socio-economic, historical, geographic and institutional factors contribute to the industry’s weakness, including a challenging retail environment for independent designers, limited investment, and proximity to and competition from the American ‘cultural behemoth’

² The Nordicity report is based on cross-tabulations of existing data from the National Household Survey, North American Industry Classification System and the National Occupational Classification System. This analysis only covers Canada (as a whole) and the Province of Ontario. There is a lack of data on the fashion industry across Canada in part because Statistics Canada typically includes the fashion industry in broad occupational categories such as “Theatre, fashion, exhibit and other creative designers.”

(Brydges & Pugh, 2017). Interviews with independent fashion designers revealed significant obstacles including: difficulties with accessing capital to produce their collection and grow their business, difficulties with receiving media attention, difficulties accessing retailers and consumers, as well as difficulties with gaining policy support and recognition (Brydges, 2017a).

Given these unique structural contours, interviews revealed that independent design businesses in Canada follow a range of development paths based on personal preferences and varying ambition levels. While some aspire to build multi-store brands with a strong domestic and international presence, others want to keep their operations small and in-house in order to retain complete control of their brand while catering to a local market.

4.2 The regional dynamics of Canada's fashion system

Canada is large – the size of Europe – and is home to diverse regions which vary in terms of physical environment, climate, history and local culture (Gertler et al. 2014). Canada's population is highly urbanized but also concentrated in towns and cities mainly within 100 kilometres of the southern Canada-US border. However, the population density is much lower than that of the United States or countries in Europe. Thus, whereas people in some countries are able to work in one city, live in another and make use of amenities in a third, levels of accessibility vary greatly across the country and certain city-regions in Canada are quite remote (Gertler et al. 2014).

While many domestic fashion industries are dominated by an established core that pulls in aspiring designers, in Canada there is no single dominant fashion city or 'obvious' choice to locate a fashion design business. Canada is home to a number of regional centres, from larger and well-known cities such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, to smaller regional hubs such as Edmonton, Ottawa, and Regina, and suburbs such as Mississauga and Brampton. To account for

the size of the country and the diversity of its regions we have developed a scheme of categorisation (see: see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Canadian Fashion System (about here)

Table 1 distils the main functions and relative limitations of each region. This information is crucial to contextualizing and understanding the locational choices and mobilities of independent fashion designers.

Table 1: Summary of regional function and limitations (about here)

In analysing the regions based on interviews and criteria derived from the literature (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2010; Leslie & Brail, 2011; Rantisi, 2004) such as firm structure, the presence of fashion institutions and events, the culture of networking and support, the local market for fashion and quality of life factors such as relative cost of living, two key findings emerged: there is no 'perfect' region for independent fashion designers and as a result, these entrepreneurs are spread across the country. The next section examines how these entrepreneurs find their 'home base.'

5. Empirics

5.1 'Here' – Finding the 'right' region and establishing a 'home base'

Although creative workers are said to be highly mobile, our understanding of how they make locational choices is still developing (Florida, 2002; Storper & Scott, 2009; Hracs & Stolarick, 2014). Our findings suggest that instead of simply moving in a one-way flow up the urban

hierarchy, independent designers move in a range of directions based on their individual preferences, experiences and needs. Moreover, while unrestricted mobility is often emphasized in the literature, many of our respondents were unwilling or unable able to move. Thus, in reviewing the range of moves that designers in our sample make and the rationales behind them, this section starts with the choice to start their businesses in their hometown. For example, as one designer in Central Canada described:

This is where my friends and family are. People can put a face to the brand. It's hard to know how you will do in other cities. You'll never be as famous as you are in your hometown!

Given the personal and economic costs involved in moving to another place, designers would often place emphasis on personal factors, such as the location of family and friends, when choosing where to live (see also: Leslie & Brail, 2011). However, others regarded moving from their hometown to a larger city as a necessary stepping-stone for growing a business. As a pair of designers from Atlantic Canada with ambitions to grow domestically and abroad described:

We're the only fashion brand in [our town]. When you don't have a support system or even a system with competition, it is a challenge to really thrive. If we want to have that experience and be successful, we will have to move to Montreal or Toronto or New York in the future.

For others, moving from their small town or city to one of the largest cities in the country was an unrealistic and unattractive option. Mid-sized cities (such as Calgary or Edmonton) were seen as more 'liveable' than cities such as Toronto or Vancouver, in terms of offering lower costs of living and more accessible communities (see also: Hracs et al., 2011). Moving to a mid-sized

city was not reserved only for those coming from smaller or peripheral regions. Indeed, some designers from large cities chose to opt-out of a highly-competitive city and make a mid-sized city their home base. The attractiveness of working outside the core comes from the chance to drive or participate in the formation of a new scene and the ‘next big thing,’ rather than adapting to established rules and structures.

Although this paper focuses on mobility within the Canadian fashion system, a final type of one-off move entails designers choosing to leave the national system altogether. The decision to leave Canada was often made by designers with international ambitions who recognised the considerable challenges of building a global brand from within Canada, and chose to relocate to a more established fashion capital (for a detailed account, see: Brydges & Pugh, 2017).

Thus, in the absence of one obvious locational choice, designers choose to locate their businesses in regions across the country. These decisions are not only based on economic rationales (such as the number of industry institutions in a region) but a variety of personal and highly-individualized factors. These findings support recent critiques that “creative people do not always migrate as Florida wishes us to believe” (Sternberg 2017, 342). They challenge the purported one-way flow of talent up the urban hierarchy and highlight processes of counter-urbanization. They also reinforce the work of Gertler et al. (2014) and Hracz et al., et al. (2011) who demonstrate that smaller and remote centres in Canada may be more supportive than larger cities and may afford greater opportunities for collaboration and creative freedom. In addition, the findings support the notion that smaller cities in Canada can serve an essential function as career incubators (Gertler et al. 2014). Importantly, however, they challenge the assumption that incubated talent or businesses will eventually move to larger centers to grow or develop. Thus, although the country’s best, or most ambitious, talent may choose to leave Canada, which is problematic (Brydges & Pugh, 2017),

the incidence of inter-regional brain-drain and depending regional inequality within the Canadian fashion system is less than we might expect based on existing literature (Pike et al., 2017).

Although specific regions may be attractive enough to retain or poach talent from across the system, each region has relative weaknesses that need to be negotiated by designers (as illustrated in Table 1). The subsequent empirical sections demonstrate the ways in which independent fashion designers harness three forms of mobility to build their businesses and overcome the limitations of their 'home base' by accessing resources and opportunities in other parts of the national system.

5.2 'There' – Temporary Mobility

The role of temporary events in creative industries continues to be poorly understood. While Torre (2008) argues that temporary, short-term face-to-face meetings spur cooperation and knowledge exchange, the spatial and temporal fragmentation and 'compulsory networking' associated with these events is said to contribute to the precarity of creative labour (Nilsson, 2014). Our research suggests that practicing temporary mobility to physically attend events can be beneficial for independent designers, as the positive dynamics of a designers' home base can be complemented with short and/or recurring visits to other markets within the Canadian fashion system to access key events, actors, spaces and resources.

The main driver of temporary mobility are fashion weeks: large-scale, bi-annual designer showcases that follow a hierarchical calendar and have long played a key role in shaping the rhythms and pace of work in the fashion industry (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006). Given the geographic size of Canada, fashion weeks provide an opportunity for the regional and/or national industry to come together in one place. Similar to trade fairs, fashion weeks can be understood as

temporary clusters that facilitate knowledge production and exchange (Maskell et al., 2006; Power & Jansson, 2008). Presenting a collection at a regional fashion week allows designers to leave their self-described 'bubble' and showcase their clothing to the media (with the intention of building buzz around a brand) and to buyers (with the intention of generating sales). Industry-specific showcases also provide opportunities for learning, professionalisation, networking, trend-monitoring, gaining new sources of inspiration, mutual support and overcoming isolation (Nilsson, 2014; Power & Jansson 2008).

Although larger fashion weeks were described as providing the best opportunity to access the most influential players in the national fashion industry, while also gaining international exposure, smaller events were also regarded as beneficial. For example, Atlantic Canada Fashion Week was cited by several designers as a key opportunity to connect to local customers and network with emerging and established designers. Moreover, whereas the costs (money, resources, time) of putting on a runway show can be prohibitive, particularly for newer designers who often use smaller regional showcases as a starting point, smaller events try to lower costs and entry barriers, such as by having designers share runway models. These practices also encouraged networking and collaboration that was rarely found during events in larger and more competitive markets.

Therefore, practicing temporary mobility to physically attend fashion weeks can be a valuable strategy for independent fashion designers. These findings support the work of Torre (2008) who argues that temporary geographic proximity, timed at key opportunities, can spur knowledge production and innovation. They also reinforce research which suggests that permanent co-location in established cores is not essential, or even desirable, as long as those cores can be accessed when needed (Hracs, 2009; Nilsson, 2014). Importantly, temporary mobility allows

independent designers to stay in smaller, rural or remote places. Moreover, when these entrepreneurs leave their home base and return, they often bring back valuable knowledge and expertise which they are more likely to share with others. Therefore, while one-off moves may result in a 'zero-sum' competition between regions and produce negative consequences associated with brain drain, temporary mobilities can generate positive feedback effects (Fratesi 2014; Turok et al. 2017).

5.3 'There' – Mediated Mobility

Despite these benefits, exercising temporary mobility may exacerbate the challenges associated with the D.I.Y. nature of independent fashion design. For designers already struggling to complete a growing range of creative and non-creative tasks, the need to physically move within the fashion system and to be at the right location at the right time – while managing a personal life and responsibilities – can contribute to the twin processes of de-specialisation and multi-skilling (McRobbie, 2002), and the extensification of work (Hracs & Leslie, 2014). To avoid the resulting 'corrosion of creativity' (McRobbie, 2002), which undermines their ability to stand out in the crowded marketplace and make a sustainable living from fashion, many designers in our sample are 'getting help' in the form of mediated mobility. As one respondent explained, 'you can't do it alone...There are too many moving parts, so it's good to learn how to delegate early on.'

While help can come in the form of working with other creatives – such as musicians or artists or photographers (see: Hauge & Hracs, 2010) – fashion designers also turn to specialised intermediaries (or mediated mobility) to support the growth of their businesses. Echoing existing accounts of musicians and designer-makers (Hracs, 2015; Shultz, 2015), this

help is often provided by ‘cultural intermediaries’ who may function as brokers, gatekeepers, co-producers, co-promoters, managers and curators (Bourdieu, 1984; Hracs, 2015).

Although specialised divisions of labour and collaborations within scenes have been documented (Hauge & Hracs, 2010), this section moves beyond typical questions about ‘what’ tasks are being performed by ‘whom,’ to consider ‘where’ these activities are distributed within the Canadian fashion system. Our findings suggest that independent fashion designers are mobilising mediated mobility, which entails not only outsourcing specific tasks to intermediaries, but creating a multi-locational presence by working with actors such as public relations firms, talent agencies, brand consultants and bloggers strategically located within key networks, markets and spaces. By enabling designers to be simultaneously ‘absent and present,’ it also challenges linear assumptions of temporality and traditional understandings that actors can only do one thing at a time (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Although mediated mobility may be practiced by designers in individualised ways, the findings suggest common motivations related to penetrating distant networks and markets, accessing local buzz, and promoting and selling from a distance.

Many respondents reported difficulties associated with identifying and accessing networks in distant or less familiar markets within the Canadian fashion system. For example, within their ‘home’ markets, designers may be able to establish and harness existing networks and insider knowledge to gain press attention or get their collection into local retailers (interviews). However, interviews revealed it was difficult to replicate this strategy in other national markets. Despite assumptions about the ease of accessing networks and the free-flow of knowledge within them, firms and/or key actors have many reasons to retain or restrict information rather than sharing it with potential competitors (Hanson & Blake, 2009). For example, in larger

markets such as Toronto, simply understanding the ‘lay of the land’ and determining the ‘right’ people to approach was described as a challenge facing many designers. Competitive market dynamics were also found to encourage established actors to be wary of and potentially exclude perceived ‘outsiders’ or ‘upstarts.’ As one respondent from the West Coast stated: “The fashion industry is a very tight circle. There seems to be a small group at the top and you feel like you can’t break in.”

To overcome these challenges, designers from across the system get help from locally-embedded intermediaries who serve as gatekeepers by providing access to networks or brokers by connecting the designers to key actors in the local fashion industry, including fashion buyers, stylists, journalists, bloggers and independent fashion retailers. Reinforcing the work of Rychen and Zimmermann (2008), mediated mobility allows designers to side-step entry barriers, reduce the costs (time, effort, money) of networking, and access local buzz, knowledge and resources without the need to physically be there (see also: Sheller & Urry, 2006). In one example, the designer above ‘rented’ local knowledge and outsourced technical and organisational details by hiring a PR firm to set-up a brand showroom and invite the right people to view his collection. Despite being located in Calgary, mobilising mediated mobility resulted in this designer’s collection being stocked by independent fashion retailers in Toronto and Montreal. Similarly, fashion designers who struggle to secure sales contracts from big department stores, due to their unproven status or peripheral location, worked with local independent retailers in their home base and markets across the system who are adept at telling the story of particular garments and can help designers co-produce and co-promote their brands (see also: Leslie et al., 2015.)

Thus, mediated mobility reduces the need for independent designers to locate in an established centre and helps them overcome the challenges associated with the D.I.Y. model and

market competition. Getting ‘help’ can be particularly beneficial for individuals that may be excluded because of their age, gender, experience or location from close-knit and/or highly gendered industry networks. Therefore, mediated mobility allows designers to gain legitimacy and trust without having to necessarily cultivate it on their own, which saves time and removes barriers (Hanson & Blake, 2009; Hracs, 2015). As relationships and collaborations between designers and intermediaries are often forged through temporary face-to-face interaction during physical visits within the system, mediated mobility is also connected to temporary mobility (Rychen & Zimmermann 2008). Yet, there is also evidence that ‘help’ can be contacted, coordinated and carried out across space through virtual channels (Nilsson, 2014; Hracs, 2015).

5.4 ‘Everywhere’ – Virtual Mobility

Crewe (2013) argues that online retailing is bringing about ‘transformative shifts in the spaces, times, and practices of fashion consumption... [and that] the Internet has brought new fashion worlds into the homes, screens, and minds of consumers’ (p. 775). Our research suggests that although physical spaces remain vital for independent designers, online platforms are increasingly important channels of promotion and distribution. For example, websites provide the space to display clothing and sell to customers from across Canada and abroad, while also allowing customers to learn more about the brand through ‘About Us’ pages and image-based archives of past and present collections. By extension, through the practices of ‘friending’ and ‘following,’ blogs and social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook allow independent designers to engage directly with a wide range of consumers on increasingly personal levels.

As Hracs and Jakob (2015) demonstrate, creating ‘conversations’ and ‘meaningful emotional connections’ is vital to building a client base and surviving in a volatile marketplace.

While much of the value of the clothing produced by independent fashion designers still needs to be experienced (seen, felt, worn) in person to appreciate the artistry and value in the product (Leslie et al., 2015; Brydges, 2017b), social media and virtual spaces provide increasingly powerful opportunities for branding, marketing, and promotional purposes (Crewe, 2013). Many designers described meeting first time customers who discovered the brand from social media sites such as Instagram.

In this way, independent designers are harnessing digital technologies to practice what we call virtual mobility. Adding contemporary empirical evidence to Torre's (2008) conceptual understanding of virtual co-presence through technology, virtual mobility repositions actors in space and allows independent designers to act in real time in different places which may be local, regional and/or global. The strategic manipulation of time also allows designers to take advantage of the benefits of asynchronous interactions with consumers and intermediaries (Grabher & Ibert, 2014) and the value enhancing dynamics of both short and long-term interactions (Hracs & Jakob, 2015).

Interviews revealed that promoting and selling online can be particularly beneficial to new designers who are trying to establish a presence across multiple cities and regions in the Canadian fashion industry while simultaneously building their business, which may be located in other parts of the country. Highly visual platforms like Instagram also provide cheap and effective channels through which to articulate brand identities directly to consumers. As one designer described:

Whether we like it or not, fashion is commercial and it's something that people consume.

But it's also a form of art. Just like when you paint a picture, you have to be able to sell it.

You are selling a vibe and an identity.

Through social media, these brand identities can also be linked to multiple places, or spatially-entangled, in strategic ways to enhance their distinctiveness and value (Pike, 2013). Irrespective of the actually-existing geography of where a product is designed or produced, designers can create and communicate an imagined geography which links their products and brands to particular markets within Canada or global fashion capitals such as Paris. For example, whereas one brand featured images of Canadian beaches and lakes on their Instagram account to emphasise the seasonality and quality of their outdoors collection, an upscale womenswear label presented celebrities wearing their clothing in cities such as New York and Los Angeles.

While interviews with key informants (including some of the most powerful fashion buyers in the industry) confirmed the importance of fashion designers being from the ‘right’ circles and having the ‘right’ look in order to be accepted and be stocked in major department stores, our research also highlights the democratising potential of technology. In particular, our findings reinforce recent research on the power of social media and digital technology to connect small-scale producers to consumers and intermediaries, allowing them to bypass traditional gatekeepers, such as these established fashion buyers, who may block their access to markets and opportunities (Shultz, 2015). Indeed, for independent designers based in smaller or remote centers as well as those in major cities who lack access to the traditional fashion ‘scene’, social media has become a powerful tool. Moreover, whereas physical interactions, for networking, collaboration or sales may reveal a lack of legitimacy (based on age, gender, or appearance) working in virtual spaces may allow designers to create and perform alternative identities or personas (Hracs & Leslie, 2014). As one retailer focusing on Canadian design asserted: ‘Social media puts our company at an advantage...it almost evens the playing field by allowing small shops like us to have a voice.’

Therefore, practicing virtual mobility allows independent designers to connect, promote and sell from anywhere within the Canadian fashion system. It also furnishes them with tools to develop and deploy strategies to create distinction, value and loyalty. Yet, building brands, selling products and establishing relationships with consumers in virtual spaces requires intense and constant performances of aesthetic labour which may limit the time and resources these entrepreneurs can allocate to developing new creative content and undermine their businesses (Hracs & Leslie, 2014). Ultimately, while virtual mobility may reduce the need for geographic proximity and face-to-face interactions (Torre 2008), the findings suggest that virtual channels should be regarded as complements rather than substitutes.

6. Conclusion

As new forms of independent production, digital technologies and mobilities offer creatives greater freedom to arrange where, when and how they live and work, this paper has considered whether independent fashion designers in Canada still need to locate in one of the established centres to realise their entrepreneurial ambitions. It began with a typology of the country's diverse regions and explored how independent designers choose a 'home base' for their operations based on their unique preferences, needs and goals. In so doing, the paper highlighted the logics of moving up the urban hierarchy, but also the benefits of staying in, or moving to, smaller cities or more remote regions within the fashion system.

As no 'home base' is ideal, the paper also examined how designers negotiate localised strengths and weaknesses, and access opportunities and resources in other parts of the national system by practicing three forms of mobility in strategic ways: First, temporary mobility allows designers to complement the benefits of their home base with short and recurring visits to other

markets within the Canadian fashion system for key events such as fashion weeks. Crucially, this form of mobility reduces inter-regional brain drain and inequality by allowing designers to stay in smaller, rural or more remote regions and enabling them to bring back and share valuable knowledge and expertise. Second, by collaborating with intermediaries, such as public relations firms, talent agencies, brand consultants, and bloggers who are strategically located within key networks, markets and spaces, mediated mobility allows designers to ‘get help’ with a range of tasks. It also facilitates the creation of a multi-locational presence which allows designers to penetrate distant or exclusionary networks and markets, accelerate the cultivation of legitimacy and trust, access local buzz and to promote their brands and sell specific products from a distance. Third, highlighting the growing importance of social media and online spaces, virtual mobility enables independent designers to connect, promote and sell from anywhere. It also helps independent designers to compete by furnishing them with tools to develop and deploy strategies to create distinction, value, and loyalty.

Ultimately, the paper found that being permanently located in one of the big cities like Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver is not essential for independent designers. While the lack of one dominant ‘fashion capital’ may be a weakness, because the industry lacks a springboard to the global fashion industry, it can also be a strength, as the Canadian fashion system offers a variety of spaces for designers of different sizes, scales, and motivations to build their fashion businesses.

As such, this paper contributed to our understanding of the locational choices of creative talent and highlighted new possibilities and practices related to the mobility of people, knowledge and values in the digital age. The original case of independent fashion designers in Canada nuances existing theory related to creative labour, entrepreneurship, cultural intermediation and creative practice beyond core areas including suburbs, small towns and rural areas. In so doing, it also

contributed to ongoing efforts within the field of regional studies to develop more permeable and fluid conceptualisations of 'regions' in the wake of heightened physical mobility and new communications technologies (Turok et al. 2017). More broadly, the paper addressed calls to look beyond the established fashion capitals (Larner & Molloy, 2009) and contributed valuable insights into the dynamics of a tier two and/or emerging fashion industry.

Although the forms of mobility outlined in this paper have the potential to help a range of independent fashion designers, including women working from home and/or managing family obligations as well as fledgling designers, to develop their businesses from a variety of locations within Canada, it is also important to acknowledge their limitations and the need for further research. For example, the need to physically move within the fashion system may contribute to the spatial and temporal fragmentation and extensification of work (Hracs & Leslie, 2014). Moreover, in addition to the challenges of the D.I.Y. model, creating a specialised division of labour and coordinating a range of intermediaries requires other skills, resources and tasks that may exacerbate the 'corrosion of creativity' (Hracs, 2015; McRobbie, 2002; Nilsson, 2014). Virtual spaces provide powerful channels to create value, engage consumers and sell products at a distance, yet doing so requires investments of time, energy and aesthetic labour which may not be sustainable over the long term (Hracs & Leslie, 2014). Thus, it is fair to wonder whether successful innovation and entrepreneurship in peripheral areas requires more creative effort, originality and ingenuity than in central areas (Petrov & Cavin, 2013).

Fruitful avenues of further research could therefore entail comparative studies which probe the tensions and implications associated with practicing temporary, mediated and virtual mobility, and longitudinal studies which assess their effectiveness in underpinning successful businesses over time. With respect to regional policy, like Gertler et al. (2014), this research highlights the

importance of considering regional and/or national specificity and developing bespoke supports based on the unique context of each domestic industry rather than a ‘one-size fits all’ approach based on, or directly imported from, policies developed for other countries, contexts or industries.

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