

Economy, Governance, Culture Working Paper 2/2017

‘Locating Canada’s Independent Fashion Designers’

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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 in other parts of Canada's fashion system.

Introduction

Creative industries such as music, film and new media have long clustered the bulk of their activities and infrastructure in a handful of established global centres (Florida, 2002; Hracs et al., 2011; Scott, 2010). As a result, aspiring creative talent has traditionally 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' (Clare, 2013), 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: 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 participant observation and 87 interviews, it provides a typology of the country's diverse regions and explores how independent designers choose a 'home base' for their operations based on their unique preferences, needs and goals. The paper also examines the ways in which independent designers can access opportunities and resources in other parts of the national system by practicing forms of mobility in strategic ways. It is important to note that 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 scales (Cresswell, 2010; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014). In particular, the paper presents three forms of mobility: 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. Ultimately, the paper argues that although 'making it' in the Canadian fashion system is difficult (Brydges & Pugh, 2017), being permanently located in one of the big cities like Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver is not essential because mobilising mobility allows independent designers to develop successful businesses in different parts of the country.

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' 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 and objects and knowledge (Sheller & Urry, 2006), this paper demonstrates how mobilities are being practiced 'on the ground' in the wake of new developments in transportation and communications technologies (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 also advances our conceptualisation of cultural intermediation (Bourdieu, 1984) and creative collaboration (Hauge & Hracs, 2010). Finally, the paper contributes to existing research that looks at creative practice beyond core areas including suburbs, small towns and rural areas (Bell & Jayne, 2006; Denis-Jacob, 2012; Hracs, 2009). This is particularly relevant in the case of the fashion industry, as 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).

Literature Review

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). 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. To distil a robust body of literature, two camps have emerged. While Storper and Scott (2009) argue that talent follows good quality jobs, others assert that talent is attracted to locations that offer a rich mix of amenities including tolerance (Florida, 2002), consumption opportunities (Glaeser et al., 2001), and leisure and entertainment activities (Clark et al., 2002).

However, as Hracz 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 only for specific firm-based jobs but rather markets that offer opportunities for paid work or to run their businesses. Despite notable exceptions (Scott, 2009; Niedomysl & Hansen, 2010), the tendency to generalise also fails to provide sufficient nuance by acknowledging the degree to which the preferences of talent are differentiated by factors including age, occupation, gender, ethnicity, and previous experience. Indeed, specific amenities such as culture, climate, low crime levels, good schools, and tolerance may matter to varying degrees depending on individual tastes, subjectivities, and life cycle requirements (Hracz & Stolarick, 2014; Leslie

& Brail, 2011). Moreover, while this literature has traditionally focussed on and emphasised the attractiveness of large urban centres, more recent research has highlighted the appeal of smaller cities, suburbs, and rural areas (Bell & Jayne, 2006; Denis-Jacob, 2012; Hracs, 2009; Hracs et al., 2011). This research suggests that not all creative workers want to live and work in cities and that 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). As a result, creative talent and creative practice can be found in a range of places and spaces.

Thus, there is an ongoing need to consider the individualised nature of the locational preferences of specific strands of talent including independent fashion designers who remain understudied (Markusen & King, 2003). By extension, because the typical focus on 'one-off' moves only tells part of the story, there is a need to explore the varied forms of mobility that these individuals practice.

The Mobility of People and Knowledge in the Digital Age

To rehearse a well-known narrative in economic geography, place matters. Physically locating within specific clusters allows individuals and firms to access local 'buzz,' or to 'continuously contribute to and benefit from the diffusion of information, gossip and news' (Bathelt et al., 2004, 38). Because this buzz is often spontaneous, fluid, comprised of tacit forms of information and may be blocked by local actors, it is argued that co-location, co-presence, frequent face-to-face interactions and trust are essential to maximising the benefits of 'being there' (Bathelt et al., 2004; Gertler, 2003).

There are a number of ways to access 'buzz' from distant or multiple locations, including physically moving workers through establishing satellite offices. For example, despite being headquartered in California, Google and Apple have set up large operations in London. Yet, this practice is too resource intensive for most firms, let alone entrepreneurs. Thus, another strategy involves creating or participating in temporary clusters such as trade fairs, conventions and conferences (Maskell et al., 2006; Power & Jansson, 2010). 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 new and recurring events around the world is also resource intensive and there may be an upper limit to the benefits of spatial clustering, as too much buzz may result in information overload (Bathelt et al., 2004; Hracz, 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; Rodríguez-Pose & Fitjar,

2013). Moreover, in considering contemporary forms of mobility, we would emphasise the importance of looking beyond firms to examine the practices and experiences of entrepreneurs. Whereas Torre (2008) logically suggests that small firms may be more tied to local territories than large firms, who are more footloose because of their 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.' Indeed, although new technologies and practices bring new possibilities to transfer information and collaborate over distance, our understanding remains limited (Bathelt & Turi, 2011; Nilsson, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2006).

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 gatekeeper) were used to identify designers from across the country (including major cities like Toronto and smaller cities such as Edmonton and St. John's). Beyond location, the designers were differentiated

by age, experience, background, education and career stage. Interview topics explored their education background, work experience in the fashion industry, the structure and aspirations of their business, their involvement in the local, regional and national fashion industry, and where they saw themselves living and working in the future. Whenever possible, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following James (2006), we annotated transcripts and coded the data according to the dominant themes. As is common with qualitative interviews, our goal was not to establish statistical significance or representativeness but rather analytical plausibility and cogency of reasoning (James 2006). Quotations are utilised in-text to best demonstrate how participants expressed themselves and their experiences.

To triangulate the interview data and better understand the complexities of key spaces and interactions, observation was also conducted during twenty fashion shows and related events (see Table 1). This observation provided first-hand insight into the spaces and interactions of the field, and facilitated an understanding of the nature of temporary mobility and cyclical clusters. Following the methodology of Cook (2005), after an observation event, data was collected recording observations in the form of written field notes. Through a key gatekeeper (Campbell et al., 2006), access to closed settings such as front-rows and backstage was granted, which also provided an opportunity to meet key informants and designers.

Table 1: Observation Criteria

<p>During an observation event, the following criteria were considered:</p> <p>The physical layout of the fashion week ‘tents’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advertiser/sponsor booths• Mercedes-Benz Start-up Competition showcase• The main runway: Experienced from the front-row with gatekeeper (surrounded by ‘A list’ of Canadian fashion), as well as backstage, through purchased general admission tickets (often fashion students and/or sponsor tickets) <p>The studio: Smaller studio showcases for emerging designers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Time of day: how time impacts the type of event• Smaller and/or lesser known events held during the day• Main runway shows at 7pm and 8pm• Who is in attendance at each show? What is the ‘buzz’ like? <p>Audience: who is in attendance?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Studio shows typically had smaller attendance, fewer ‘mainstream’ media (i.e. from The Globe and Mail) and more bloggers• Evening shows consistently draw ‘bigger’ names from the Mayor to celebrities filming in Toronto and well-known bloggers• Attendance at shows reflected in media coverage the following day <p>Additional events during Toronto Fashion Week (onsite)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Press and buyers showcase co-organized by Toronto Fashion Incubator and the City of Toronto• Bloggers and street-style photographers outside of the tents before and after runway shows <p>Additional events during Toronto Fashion Week (offsite)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Shows in March 2014• Designer showcase at local mall The Eaton’s Centre• Politics of Fashion exhibition at the Design Exchange
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The recent emergence and widespread adoption of online and web 2.0 technologies has increased the number of different types of data sources, including blogs and social media platforms, that are available to researchers (Nilsson 2014; Rettberg 2008). As independent fashion designers are active on these platforms, online observation was also conducted (see table 2). As Sheller and Urry (2016) suggest, this observation of designers’ virtual presence provided further background information on the designers and contributed to our understanding of virtual mobility.

Table 2: Criteria for analysing virtual presence

<p>For each designer, the following online characteristics were considered:</p> <p>Website: what is the function of a designer's website?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>About Us</i>: Where a designer provides an introduction to the brand and brand history• <i>Press</i>: Links to previous press coverage (domestic and international) the designer has received• <i>Look-book</i>: Catalogue of professional photographs of clothing from current and previous season collections on models• <i>Web-shop</i>: Where the current and/or previous seasons clothing is available for sale• <i>Stockists</i>: A list of physical and online retailers where clothing is for sale, both in Canada and abroad <p>Social media: how does a designer utilize social media to communicate with consumers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Instagram</i>: Highly visual medium comprised largely of images and/or short videos with a brief text accompaniment. Posts can be 'liked' or commented on by viewers. Online shopping is increasingly integrated into social media platform (such as embedded links to purchase)• <i>Twitter</i>: Often links to Instagram or blog posts, less dedicated content• <i>Facebook</i>: Often functions similar to a website (providing opening hours, location, number of stars/ranking) but with more customer information <p><i>Other</i>: Additional, but often less utilized social media platforms, such as a tumblr page, Pintrest profile or standalone blog.</p>

The Canadian Case

Before presenting the empirical findings, this section will provide an overview of the Canadian fashion system. In the creative industries declining entry barriers have led to a rise in entrepreneurship and many young and talented individuals have flocked to the fashion industry seeking opportunities for autonomy, creativity and self-expression (Arvidsson et al., 2010). In Canada, the majority of design firms (of which fashion is included) are small businesses, typically run by an individual or pair of designers, with less than nine employees (Statistics Canada, 2013). Interviews revealed that independent design businesses in Canada typically follow one of two models: either a menswear or womenswear brand with two collections (spring-summer and fall-winter) a year, or a 'niche' business focusing on a particular product such as leather goods, footwear or children's clothing. Within these two different business models, designers were found to have different entrepreneurial motivations, in terms of growth and their definition of

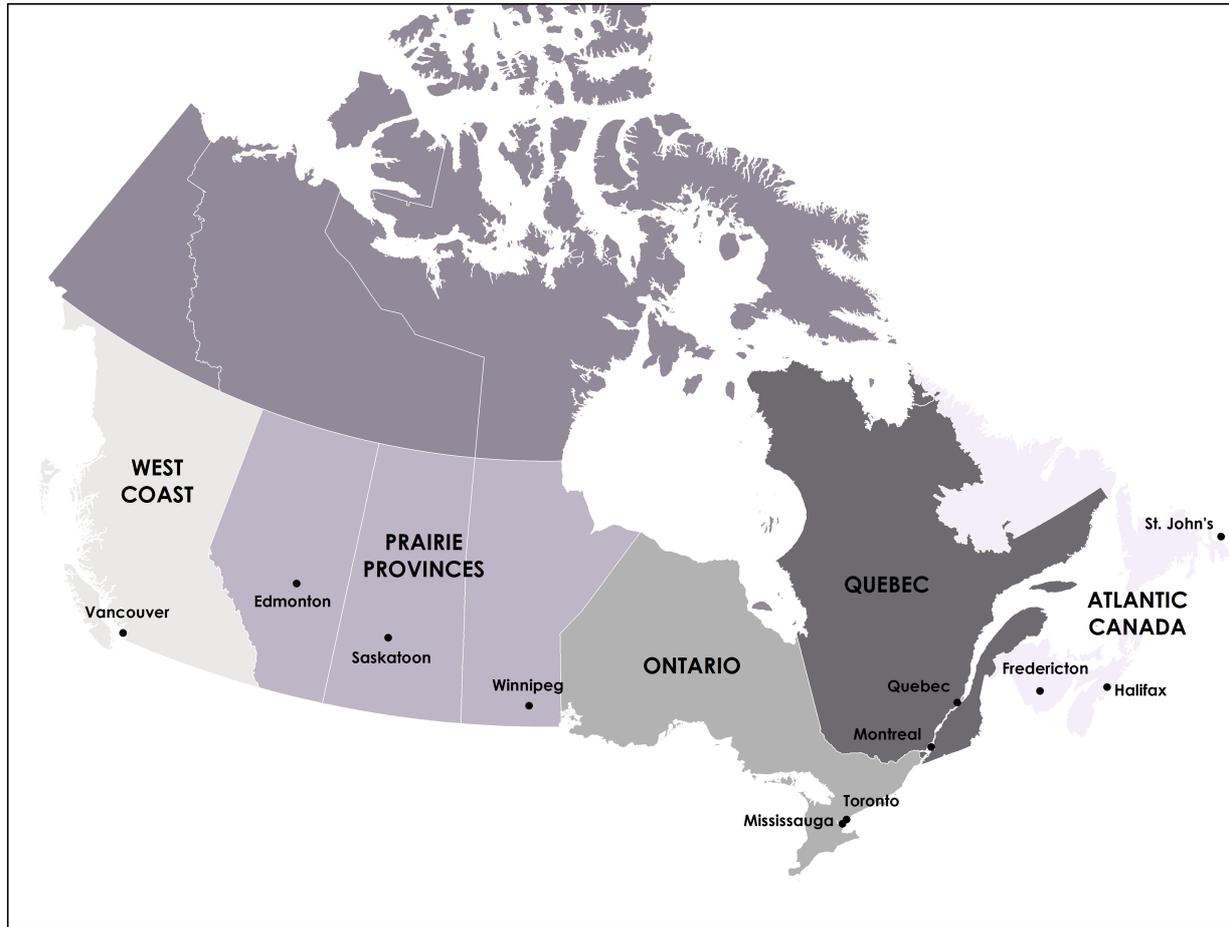
success. For example, some designers aspire to build multi-store brands with a strong domestic and international presence, while others are content to keep their operations small and in-house while catering to a local market. As one designer described:

I am my own boss. I want to be able to tell my story without being under pressure about the latest trends or what someone else expects of me. I can balance my work and family life without sacrificing either one (Interview, designer).

Regardless of the type of fashion business or where it is located, it is difficult to be an independent fashion designer in Canada (Brydges & Pugh, 2017). Like other forms of creative labour, independent fashion design is highly individualised, competitive and precarious (McRobbie, 2002a; McRobbie, 2016). With limited training, resources and support, most independent designers struggle to complete the growing range of creative and non-creative tasks associated with the D.I.Y. (do it yourself) model.

Finally, it is important to appreciate the sheer geographic size and diversity of Canada's fashion system, which is approximately the size of Europe. Whether it is a global city such as London (McRobbie, 2016) or Paris (Kawamura, 2004), or an emerging capital such as Auckland (Larner & Molloy, 2009) or Stockholm (Hauge, 2007), most national fashion industries are dominated by an established core that pulls in aspiring designers. However, in Canada there is no dominant fashion city and no 'obvious' choice to locate a fashion design business. Indeed, as depicted in figure 1, designers are spread across the country which we have divided into five major regions.

Figure 1: The Canadian Fashion System



‘Here’ – Finding the ‘right’ region and establishing a ‘home base’

Although creative workers are highly mobile, our understanding of how they make locational choices is still developing (Florida, 2002; Storper & Scott, 2009; Hracs & Stolarick 2014). For independent fashion designers, little is known about how they decide where to set up their ‘home base’ of operations. Table 3 presents a typology which provides background details on each region within Canada’s fashion system according to five characteristics derived from the literature and interviews:

- *Designers*: Typical firm structure and types of designers found in the region
- *Fashion institutions*: Such as education facilities, media and/or public relations firms, and fashion weeks
- *Networking*: Is networking possible or are there high barriers to entry?
- *Quality of life*: Local amenities and factors such as cost of living
- *Local market*: What is the local ‘buzz’ and reputation of the region?

Table 3: Typology of regions within the Canadian fashion system (about here)

Region	Cities	Description
West Coast	Vancouver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Designers</i>: young talent, specialty or niche products • <i>Institutions</i>: Vancouver Fashion Week, Vancouver Eco-Fashion Week • <i>Networking</i>: Dispersed across the region, which can make it difficult to make connections, and geographically isolated from Toronto and Montreal • <i>Quality of life</i>: Attractive quality of life with access to natural amenities but high rental / home ownership costs • <i>Local market</i>: Growing reputation for both eco-fashion and ‘athleisure’ brands
Prairie Provinces	Edmonton Saskatoon Winnipeg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Designers</i>: Often local/from region; mix of young and established designers who have successfully developed local clientele • <i>Institutions</i>: Saskatchewan Fashion Week • <i>Networking</i>: Small network of designers in a supportive community where designers often know each other • <i>Quality of life</i>: Lower cost of living with growing buzz around creative economy including fashion • <i>Local market</i>: Small but very loyal urban markets which can be supportive of established designers but a challenge for new designers trying to carve out a niche
Ontario	Toronto Mississauga Ottawa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Designers</i>: Mix of new and established designers, highly professional in a competitive market, often international ambitions • <i>Institutions</i>: Several fashion weeks for men and women, two fashion incubators, respected fashion education programs • <i>Networking</i>: Difficult to access overlapping, and at times competing, communities within the fashion industry especially for designers coming in from outside of Toronto • <i>Quality of life</i>: Big city amenities but also higher cost of living and studio space • <i>Local market</i>: Hub for many industry related sectors (media, PR) and diverse retail market (independent and department stores)
Quebec	Montreal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Designers</i>: Reputation for high-fashion designers as well as outwear; mix of designers from Montreal and from other parts of the country • <i>Institutions</i>: Festival Quebec Mode, Fashion and Design Festival • <i>Networking</i>: Perceived to be difficult for outsiders (i.e. Anglophones) to enter networks and community • <i>Quality of life</i>: Montreal in particular has reputation for being an attractive, ‘European’ creative city • <i>Local market</i>: Vibrant retail scenes but Quebec market seen as insular from rest of the country
Atlantic Canada	Halifax St. John’s Fredericton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Designers</i>: Small but innovative businesses often focusing on a niche product range (such as sunglasses or knitwear); mix of younger and mid-career designers • <i>Institutions</i>: Atlantic Canada Fashion Week • <i>Networking</i>: Small and supportive community, often able to access non-fashion institutions (such as women’s business incubators) • <i>Quality of life</i>: Lower cost and attractive quality of life. Many hometown designers who have chosen for personal reasons to stay • <i>Local market</i>: Smaller reputation for fashion, which can lower competition, but can also result in fewer consumers to sell to locally

Building on this foundation, Table 4 distils the main functions and relative limitations of each region.

Table 4: Summary of regional function and limitations (about here)

Region	Primary function in national system	Limitations of region
West Coast	Reputation for eco fashion and 'athleisure' brands; international outlook with Vancouver Fashion Week	Geographically isolated from cities such as Toronto and Montreal, which can make it difficult to access media & buyers in other large markets
Prairie Provinces	Local support for 'darlings'; less volatile markets; growing buzz; opportunity to build a new fashion community; lower cost of life	Lack of reputation for fashion industry; limited local education facilities and fashion industry related institutions and/or infrastructure
Ontario	Toronto fashion capital with the largest number of fashion designers; hub for media, PR firms and buyers; excellent education facilities; largest market in Canada; proximity to US / stepping stone	Competition and lack of communication between designers and intermediaries; cancellation of Toronto Fashion Week and uncertainty around new events; high cost of living and production space
Quebec	High fashion and outerwear, reputation for creativity and attractive quality of life, only province with financial support for fashion designers	Insular media coverage; perceived as unwelcoming to outsiders; challenges with organization of fashion weeks / related events to support sector
Atlantic Canada	Smaller and/or niche businesses; supportive local business community; longstanding fashion week	Limited local ecosystem makes long-term growth a challenge; incubators and business supports often not fashion related

Given that each region has strengths and weaknesses that need to be negotiated, table 5 provides an overview of the five rationales that designers use for finding a 'home base.'

Table 5: Rationales for finding a 'home base' (about here)

Finding a 'home base'	Rationale
Stay in your hometown	Embedded in supportive local networks that are difficult to replicate: "you'll never be as famous as you are in your hometown"
Move from a small city to a larger regional 'hub' (i.e. Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver)	Lack of competition or reputation for fashion in smaller cities and regions can make growth difficult
Move from smaller city to mid-sized cities (such as Calgary or Edmonton)	Big cities can be "too" big and unwelcoming; middle market provides an alternative, new home
Move from large city to smaller city	Opt out of the highly competitive markets and international ambitions for a smaller, local and/or niche business
Move from the Canadian system to an international city	Even the largest fashion cities (Toronto and Montreal) fail to function as international springboard; extremely difficult to build a global fashion business from Canada

We can now unpack these locational decisions. In the first scenario, because of a range of individual preferences and needs, not every designer is willing or able to move their life from coast to coast. Thus, many designers choose to start their businesses in their hometown. 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 and you'll never be as famous as you are in your hometown!

Given the personal and economic costs that must be considered in moving to another place to start a business, 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, for others, moving from their hometown to one of the largest Canadian cities was seen as a necessary stepping-stone for growing a business. As a pair of designers from Atlantic Canada with ambitions to grow inside Canada and internationally 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 can be 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.

But for others, moving from their small town or city to one of the largest cities in the country was an unrealistic and unattractive option. Instead, smaller or 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: Hracz et al., 2011). Moving to a smaller or 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 smaller or mid-sized city their home base.

The attractiveness of living and working outside of the big established cities can also come 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. For example, in November 2016 Vogue magazine wrote about the growing buzz around new fashion destinations in Central Canada, stating 'Saskatoon and Winnipeg are stealthily gathering

cred among those in the know...What's happening in the Prairies is something more than fresh—it feels like peak Canadiana.'

While not the focus of this paper, a final type of one-off move entails designers choosing to leave the national system altogether (for a detailed account, see: Brydges & Pugh, 2017). The decision to leave Canada was often made by internationally-focused designers, who recognise the considerable challenges of building a global brand from within Canada, and chose to relocate to a more established fashion capital.

In the absence of one obvious locational choice it is clear that designers choose to operate their businesses in regions across the country based on their unique needs and preferences. It is also clear that each location has relative strengths and weaknesses but as the next section demonstrates, independent fashion designers can harness three forms of mobility to overcome these limitations by accessing resources and opportunities in other parts of the national system.

'There' – Temporary Mobility

The role of temporary events in creative industries continue to be poorly understood (Comunian, 2016). Torre (2008) argues that temporary, short-term face-to-face meetings spur cooperation and knowledge exchange. Yet, the spatial and temporal fragmentation and 'compulsory networking' associated with these events is said to contribute to the precarity of creative labour (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006; Nilsson, 2014). Our research suggests that if harnessed strategically, 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 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; Weller, 2007). Given the geographic size of Canada, fashion weeks provide an opportunity for the regional and/or national industry to come together in one place. Canada is home to a number of regional fashion weeks, including Toronto Women's Fashion Week, Mode and Design Festival Montreal, Atlantic Fashion Week, Saskatchewan Fashion Week and Vancouver Fashion Week. Recently, a variety of pop-up shops and designer showcases have been added to the calendar.

Similar to trade fairs, fashion weeks can be understood as temporary clusters that facilitate knowledge production and exchange (Maskell et al., 2006; Power & Jansson, 2010). Presenting a collection at a regional fashion week allows a designer to not only leave their self-described 'bubble' but importantly, to promote their brand. These types of industry-specific showcases also provide opportunities for learning, professionalisation, monitoring trends, gaining new sources of inspiration, mutual support and overcoming isolation (Power & Jansson 2010). As this established designer described:

Fashion week is a great opportunity to have the community all at the same site...We are much stronger when the Canadian fashion industry is together, so that we can all grow and succeed. We are such a large country but a small industry.

In addition to networking, fashion weeks are places for designers to showcase their clothing to the media (with the intention of building buzz around a brand) and to buyers (with the intention of generating sales). As the founder of an influential public-relations firm described:

Fashion week is all about marketing and creating brand materials for fashion designers to use. It is about creating buzz and getting their name out there so they can get noticed by the media and retailers.

Although larger fashion weeks, such as those in Toronto, were described as providing the best opportunity to access the most influential players in the national fashion industry while gaining international exposure, even smaller events were regarded as beneficial. Participating in temporary events is also reflective of the evolution of networking for creative workers; familiar ties may be seen as redundant and rather, new and complementary connections are instead needed to support advancement (Grabher & Ibert, 2006; Nilsson, 2014).

However, 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. For example, at Atlantic Fashion Week in Halifax, organisers also sought to alleviate some of the barriers to entry, such as sharing runways models as one way to reduce the costs of a fashion show. This also had the added benefit of bringing designers together to collaborate and network before the shows take place. One outcome was that designers in these regions often described feeling like they were a part of a fashion community. This type of collaboration was not found in larger and more competitive markets and events, such as Toronto Fashion Week.

Therefore, practicing temporary mobility to physically attend fashion weeks can be a valuable strategy for independent fashion designers for different reasons: smaller shows may provide a more supportive environment and the opportunity to gain local attention, while larger shows may act as a more formalised stepping-stone to domestic and international markets. Indeed, some fashion weeks are more supportive to encourage mentoring and collaboration, while others emphasise promotion and professionalisation. These findings support the work of Torre (2008) who argues that temporary geographic proximity, timed at key opportunities, can spur knowledge production and innovation. It also reinforces 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).

‘There’ – Mediated Mobility

Despite these benefits, exercising temporary mobility may exacerbate the challenges associated with the D.I.Y. nature of independent fashion design. Indeed, 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, 2002b), and to the spatial and temporal fragmentation and extensification of work (Jarvis & Pratt, 2006; Hracs & Leslie, 2014). To avoid the resulting ‘corrosion of creativity’ (McRobbie, 2002b), 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.’ 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 to support the growth of their business. Echoing existing accounts of other independent creative producers, including 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 ‘art worlds’ (Becker, 1982), ‘creative fields’ (Scott, 2010) and ‘localised scenes’ (Hauge & Hracs, 2010) have been documented, 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 also mobilising what we call mediated mobility. This 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 who are 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.

Within their 'home' markets, designers may be able to establish and harness networks. For example, one designer described using local connections and knowledge to 'pound the pavement' in his Central Canada hometown to get his newly-founded collection into local retailers. However, when he tried the same strategy in Toronto — without this insider knowledge — he returned home empty-handed. Indeed, nearly all independent fashion designers reported difficulties associated with identifying and accessing networks in distant or less familiar markets within the Canadian fashion system. For example, in Toronto where fashion-related activities are often chaotic, with overlapping and competing actors and organisations who rarely work together, simply understanding the 'lay of the land' and determining the 'right' people to approach is challenging for designers. In big cities, competitive market dynamics also encourage established actors to be wary of perceived 'outsiders' or 'upstarts' and may result in 'defensive exclusionary networks' (Christopherson 2008). 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. You feel like you can't break in. It's almost better to be naïve about it because the more you know, the more you feel like, 'I'll never make a living at this.'

To overcome these challenges, some designers 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 (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, work with local independent retailers in their home base and markets across the system (Leslie et al., 2015). By trading on their uniqueness, curation and consumer experience, these shops are adept at telling the story of particular garments and can help designers co-produce and co-promote their brands.

Thus, working with intermediaries allows individual designers to access and generate local buzz without the need for establishing satellite offices. By extension, designers can increase their visibility and presence in markets across the system without physically being there (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Therefore, 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. As the 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 connected to temporary mobility (Rychen and Zimmermann 2008).

Yet, there is also evidence that 'help' can be contacted, coordinated and carried out across space through virtual channels (Hracs, 2015; Nilsson, 2014).

'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 findings suggest 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. Many include '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, social media and virtual spaces provide increasingly powerful opportunities for branding, marketing, and promotional purposes (Crewe, 2017). 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 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).

All of the designers interviewed offered some form of online shopping and the rationale for this was quite clear. As one designer described, 'we realised we could make money while we sleep.' Moreover, promoting and selling online can be particularly beneficial to new designers who are trying to establish a presence in the Canadian fashion industry while simultaneously building their business. As one respondent explained:

We sell mostly online. We're in our first year and focused on refining our manufacturing processes and getting the business running smoothly. Once that is in place, we will focus on wholesale retail accounts.

Highly visual platforms like Instagram also provide effective, yet low cost, 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 or New York. For example, in analysing the Instagram accounts of designers, one brand relied heavily on images of Canadian beaches and lakes and emphasises the seasonality and quality of their outdoors collection. By contrast, an upscale womenswear label focuses on featured celebrities wearing their clothing in major North American cities such as New York and Los Angeles.

In considering the 'independent turn,' Shultz (2015) demonstrates the power of social media and digital technology to connect small-scale producers to consumers and intermediaries while also allowing them to bypass traditional gatekeepers (such as established fashion buyers) who may block their access to markets and opportunities. Our findings reinforce this shift and highlight the democratising potential of technology. As one retailer focusing on Canadian design asserted: 'Social media puts our company at an advantage compared larger businesses. It almost evens the playing field by allowing small shops like us to have a voice.'

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 the success and sustainability of 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.

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 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 and regions within the fashion system. While the lack of one dominant 'fashion capital' may be a weakness, the findings suggest that 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 no 'home base' is ideal, the paper also examined the ways in which these 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. 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 networks and markets, 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. In so doing, the 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 also nuances existing theory related to creative labour, cultural intermediation and creative practice beyond core areas including suburbs, small towns and rural areas. It also addressed calls to look beyond the established fashion capitals 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 independent fashion designers develop their businesses from a variety of locations within Canada it is 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; Jarvis & Pratt, 2006). Moreover, while the D.I.Y. model is problematic, creating a specialised division of labour and coordinating a range of intermediaries requires other skills, resources and tasks that may contribute to the ‘corrosion of creativity’ (Hracs, 2015; McRobbie, 2002b; Nilsson, 2014). Likewise, while virtual spaces provide powerful channels to create value, engage consumers and sell products at a distance, 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.

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