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‘Purveyors of Cool: Independent Fashion Retailers and Neighbourhood Change’

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Introduction

Neighbourhoods described as 'cool', 'hip', 'trendy', 'indie', emerging' and 'edgy' can be found in cities around the world including Kreuzberg, Berlin; Newtown, Sydney; Woodstock, Capetown; Bushwick, New York; Södermalm, Stockholm; and West Queen West, Toronto. Irrespective of the different labels attached to them, these neighbourhoods have common features. They offer alternative consumption experiences, often comprised of a similar mix of shops (record stores, vintage fashion boutiques), spaces (graffiti alleys, co-work offices, art galleries), styles (Swedish jeans, indie rock), activities (cooking schools, craft collectives) and actors (artists, designers, baristas, bloggers, sophisticated consumers) (Hubbard, 2016). Unlike mass-market tourist attractions, such as the Eiffel Tower, these neighbourhoods attract visitors with high levels of cultural capital (Hracs and Jansson, 2017; Sonnichsen, 2016) who spend money but more importantly help to build, and in turn promote, the identities and reputations of these scenes within their communities both in person and through social media channels (Martucci, 2019; Pratt, 2009; Zukin and Braslow, 2011).

As vital sites for the production, curation and consumption of cultural goods, services and experiences these neighbourhoods are empirically interesting and theoretically important. By acting as cauldrons of creativity and sites of experimentation and cultural production (Bain, 2003; Lloyd, 2006; Valli, 2017; Zukin, 1989) as well as magnets for highly mobile 'talent' whose creativity and consumption are said to spur economic growth (Clark, 2003; Florida, 2002; Florida et al., 2011; Mellander et al., 2011; Silver et al., 2010), these trendy neighbourhoods have been linked to processes of residential gentrification (Hackworth, 2002; Ley, 1996; Murdie and Texieria, 2011; Ocejo, 2011; Slater 2004).

Studies of Soho in New York (Zukin, 1989), Wicker Park in Chicago (Lloyd, 2006) and Queen West in Toronto (Bain, 2003) document a common development path. Put simply, artists (painters, writers, musicians, dancers etc.) move to transitional neighbourhoods for practical and physical considerations including the need for affordable, flexible and centrally located live/work spaces. But aesthetics and symbolism matter too and the gritty, isolated and alternative nature of ‘bohemian’ neighborhoods also attract artists. These artists are positioned as pioneers or first stage gentrifiers who convert ‘dilapidated’ areas into culturally distinctive nodes which in turn attract followers with higher levels of economic capital (Ley, 1996; Matthews, 2008).

Related bodies of literature focus on these neighbourhoods as sites of cultural consumption (Catungal et al., 2009; Currid-Halkett, 2008) and commercial gentrification (Lloyd, 2006; Martucci, 2019; Ocejo, 2011; Tuttle, 2019; Zukin et al., 2009; Zukin et al., 2009; Zukin and Braslow, 2011). Here, individually owned boutiques with hip and trendy atmospheres, selling unique and value-added products are replaced by local chain stores and eventually national or international franchises including McDonalds, Starbucks, Gap and Foot Locker (Zukin et al. 2009; Zukin and Braslow, 2011).

Beyond the physical changes to buildings and the mix of people, there are important psychic and symbolic changes that occur in neighbourhoods as their identities evolve and some ‘alternative’ quarters becoming ‘mainstream’ (Martucci, 2019). Scholars highlight the importance of considering not only where retailers locate but how these shops look, what products they sell and the feelings consumers get then from shopping there (Crewe et al. 2003; Leslie et al., 2015). From the perspective of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmour, 1999), retail spaces can be understood as key sites for consumption and exchange between producers, intermediaries and consumers (Crewe, 2000; Lorentzen and Jeannerat,

2013). Thus, local businesses, such as retailers and restaurants, play an important role in creating and communicating the character, aesthetics and identity of their neighbourhood to consumers and passers-by (Martucci, 2019). Indeed, the micro-spatialities of consumption spaces need to be understood in relation to consumer experiences including walking, touching, smelling, hearing and feeling in different retail spaces (Concha 2019; Crewe et al., 2003; Hracs and Jakob 2015; Shi et al. 2019; Zukin, 2011).

Yet, compared to the literature on the preferences and experiences of artists (Bain, 2003; Matthews, 2008; Lloyd, 2006; Zukin 1989), much less is known about individual entrepreneurs who start and run retail shops including independent fashion boutiques, record shops, restaurants and galleries. There is a need to explore how they produce new trends, authenticities and sources of value in the face of rapid urban homogenisation (Calkins, 2019; Kuppinger, 2014) and help neighbourhoods to form and evolve over time (Hyde, 2014; Kovesi and Kern, 2018; Parker, 2018; Zukin and Braslow, 2011).

To nuance our understanding of neighbourhood change, this paper draws on a longitudinal analysis, with data collected over ten year period, of a specific retail strip within the neighbourhood of Dundas West in Toronto, Canada. We focus on a sample of predominately female entrepreneurs who created and managed independent fashion shops. By sharing their motivations, challenges and experiences we trace the evolution of Dundas West from 2010-2019, as it gained a reputation for being one of the coolest retail strips in the country. We develop a four-stage timeline and deploy the concept of 'cool' as a 'red thread' which allows us to connect a range of actors, processes, activities and spaces and to consider the physical as well as ephemeral, intangible and symbolic aspects of neighbourhood change (Lash and Urry 1994). Moreover, cool represents the

language and understanding espoused by respondents when describing different aspects of Dundas West.

Although cool is subjective and difficult to pinpoint – consumers ‘know it when they see it’ (Warren and Campbell, 2014) – and it is used ubiquitously in popular media, there have been systematic attempts to understand its development and meaning. These studies have employed a range of approaches and methodologies, from surveys (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012) to experiments (Warren and Campbell, 2014) and even neuroscience (Quartz and Asp 2015). In conceptualising cool, it can be useful to take a historical approach (Pountain and Robbins, 2000; Leland, 2005; Lloyd, 2006). Beginning in the 1950s, the style and attitude of jazz music and ‘beat’ became synonymous with cool (Frank 1997, Pountain and Robbins 2000). Cool was also deeply intertwined with 1960s counter-culture and values such as being anti-establishment (Brooks, 2000; Marwick, 1998; Nancarrow et al., 2003). A defining feature of cool is the idea of being alternative, such as the rebellion against the consumption-oriented values of the masses (Frank, 1997; Leland, 2005). In the 1990s and early 2000s, the study of cool shifted to a focus on consumerism (Heath and Potter, 2004) and marketing (Frank, 1997), with a common undercurrent that cool had sold out and become co-opted by consumer capitalism (Brooks, 2000).

Selling cool became a way of excluding others who were perceived to be mainstream (Nancarrow et al., 2002). Much like the neighbourhoods described above, cool is dynamic and constantly evolving. The small group of people that form the nucleus of cool “keep their edge only by moving each time the commercial world catches up” (Leland 2004: 284). This reflects another dimension of cool: it is a positional good (Heath and Potter, 2004). Over time, cool moves in concentric circles – from the most innovative core to the broader public. Viewed in this way, cool shares the features of taste and capital as put forward by Bourdieu (1984). Therefore, cool is co-

constructed and negotiated through various forms of interaction, exclusion and the sharing and displaying of knowledge between particular actors (Hauge 2015). Following this logic, we also see that it is people, rather than commodities, who create cool (Nancarrow et al., 2002).

This underpins our focus on independent retailers as the ‘purveyors of cool’. Choosing certain (cool) products over others allows consumers to exercise their judgment of taste and articulate their sense of class and cultural identity (Shipman 2004). Yet, these judgements can be difficult to make and there is growing interest in the role that cultural intermediaries, including retail clerks, play in supporting consumption behaviours through framing, qualification and circulation of symbolic goods, services and experiences (Bourdieu, 1984; Jansson and Hrac, 2018; Maguire, 2014; O’Brien, 2014). These intermediaries share a number of common characteristics, including high levels of cultural capital, and positions within subcultures, scenes, industries and organizations, which contribute to and validate their legitimacy and authority (Maguire, 2014).

A key finding from our research is that commercial-led gentrification, at the scale of a retail strip is not an inevitable path. ‘Coolness’ is not a guaranteed outcome or necessarily a sustainable one, but cool can be a fruitful analytical concept for mapping and understanding these processes. Indeed, our research explores the mechanisms behind smaller, subtler, and unplanned processes – based not only on economic but social and cultural capital – that can define a retail strip. Using the concept of ‘cool’ allows us to highlight intangible aspects of neighbourhood change, and how quickly the atmospheres, identities and reputations can change, while also considering slower changes in the material or physical dimensions of a place, such as infrastructure investment and residential development.

Empirically, the paper starts by identifying the mix of social, economic and spatial factors which attracted the independent fashion retailers to this specific retail strip. It then unpacks the deliberate decisions and actions taken by these entrepreneurs to produce cool through their role as curators not only of fashion products but of the in-store experience. This is followed by an exploration of the collaborative and multi-scaler nature of efforts to promote cool and the strip's reputation in Toronto and internationally. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that despite the neighbourhood's 'upward trajectory' over the course of ten years, the precarious nature of entrepreneurship and a range broader structural forces, including rising rents and infrastructure investments, contributed to the untenability of retail entrepreneurship for many in our sample, the 'corrosion' of cool and the gradual dissipation of the Dundas West independent fashion retail strip.

The paper makes several important contributions. First, existing literature tends to focus on the inevitability of certain developmental processes and 'stages of gentrification,' and often focuses on cases where changes have materialized rather than stalled or failed. Our work highlights the importance of considering the specificity and uniqueness of each case and reinforces assertions that neighborhood change is negotiated, rather than inevitable, and can follow a range of trajectories (Frenzel, 2014; Parker, 2018).

Second, the paper addresses calls for more in-depth, longitudinal case studies which assess the nature of urban transformations over longer time periods (Kuppinger, 2014).

Third, given the difficulty of capturing and reflecting the complexity of the interrelated processes at work within cities or neighbourhoods, using a single retail strip the unit of analysis contributes to the limited but fruitful research on the more tangible scale of streets, shopping blocks and commercial corridors (Kuppinger

2014; Martucci 2019; Pratt 2009; Zukin and Kosta 2004. Notably, we add a unique Canadian case to this work on American and European contexts.

Fourth, the paper contributes to a growing body of research that emphasizes the importance of retail on urban transformations. Our case moves our understanding beyond global firms, flagship stores, malls and high streets (Crewe, 2010; Jeannerat; 2013) and considers the role of independent retailers more explicitly. In so doing, the paper addresses recent calls to explore the experiences of the entrepreneurs or merchants behind these shops, while recognizing their often overlooked perspectives and unique role in neighbourhood change (Parker, 2018).

Fifth, the paper contributes to studies which assert the importance of looking 'inside shops' by exploring how carefully curated micro-spatialities and the aesthetic labour of workers help to generate distinction, value, consumer loyalty and cool identities which in turn feed into neighbourhood change (Crewe et al., 2003; Crewe, 1996; Hracs and Jakob, 2015; Leslie et al., 2015; Zukin, 2010).

Sixth, there is a vital need to consider these processes in the contemporary era of digitalization which is rewriting the rules of retail. The paper builds on the pioneering work of Zukin and Braslow (2011) and Martucci (2019), by deepening our understanding of how blogs, print media, social media and 'influencers' create and disseminate information about people, products and places to growing global audiences at accelerating speeds.

Finally, by investigating how cool is created, harnessed, identified, experienced and incorporated into processes of retail consumption, identity formation at different scales and urban transformation the paper contributes to the aforementioned studies which aim to understand cool as an analytical concept instead of a nebulous buzzword.

The Case of Dundas West

Toronto, a city of approximately 2.9 million inhabitants (City of Toronto, 2019), has a long-standing reputation as a city of neighbourhoods (Hume, 2009). Sandwiched between two well established and trendy neighbourhoods, Little Italy to the North and West Queen West to the South, the Dundas West neighbourhood runs along Dundas Street West; a bustling, diverse main artery in Toronto's downtown core (see: Figure 1). The retail strip under examination is located on Dundas Street West between Lansdowne Avenue to the west and Bathurst Street to the east (see: Figure 1). Home to one of the largest Portuguese communities in Toronto (Murdie and Teixeira, 2011), Dundas Street West cuts across a number of Business Improvement Associations (BIAs), including the Dundas West BIA, Little Portugal BIA and the Trinity Bellwoods BIA.

Figure 1: Map of case study location



Beginning in the mid-to-late 2000s, there was growing speculation in the local media as to whether or not Dundas West would become ‘the next big neighbourhood’. Our preliminary research on Dundas West began in 2011, with interviews following between January 2013 and summer 2015. Over this time, Dundas West grew in reputation as one of the trendiest destinations in the city. There was also a small but growing buzz around the neighbourhood as independent fashion retailers and restaurants quietly began opening around this time, which was beginning to be reported by local blogs in 2011 and 2012. For example, blogTO asked whether “After years of promise, is Dundas West finally Toronto’s food and fashion hotspot” in spring 2012 (Urback, 2012). It was also mentioned as a “reason to love Toronto” in 2014 (Toronto Life), and in 2019, was featured in a Goop guide to Toronto (Goop, 2019).

Methodology

Given the exploratory and evolutionary nature of the research, we applied a longitudinal approach to one case study – Dundas West – and used a mix of qualitative methods (Yin, 2009). Rather than attempting to fully grasp or articulate the complex and fine-grain details of scene formation and neighbourhood change at broader geographic scales we focussed on one small retail strip with clearly defined boundaries. This focus and engagement over time, 2010-2019, produced rich detail and allowed us to identify and understand factors that helped to shape the trajectory of this ‘cool’ strip. The use of interviews, observation and document analysis allowed us to examine the case from multiple angles which enhanced rigour and validity.

Interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection because they can provide personal insight into an individual’s reflections of work and place (Worth, 2015). Between 2012 and 2015 a total of 25 in-depth (lasting roughly one hour) semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample included 11 retail owners, 4 retail employees and

10 key informants who provided a wider perspective of the area based on their experience as city councillors, members of local business improvement associations, retail industry experts and urban planners. Interviews with retailers took place in their shops which added richness and context to the discussions. Following an interview guide, to promote consistency, topics included entrepreneurial motivations, educational background and other work experiences, the style and strategies of their retail establishment and the ways in which they operate within but also shape, perceive and experience Dundas West.

Although the interviews generated detailed data and allowed respondents to express experiences and opinions in their own words, we also know that shops, retail strip and wider neighbourhoods contain complex physical and social milieus, including store layouts, interactions and behaviour, which cannot be fully understood through mere description (Hracs and Jansson 2017; O'Brien, 2014). Therefore, we supplemented and triangulated our interview data with periods of observation between 2010 and 2019. In 2010, for example, one of the researchers volunteered at a foodbank in the heart of Dundas West and was able to observe retail transformation and broader neighbourhood change. Subsequent observation involved repeated visits to the retail shops and neighbourhood, taking photos, visiting related websites, following relevant social media accounts and attending events such as street festivals, pop-up shops and neighbourhood tours. Data from this observation was collected in the form of field notes (Bryman, 2012; O'Brien 2014).

The third method was document analysis (Bowen, 2009). This was comprised of an analysis of relevant materials about the Dundas West Neighbourhood from Toronto-based media (such as Eye Weekly/The Grid, NOW Magazine, blogTO, the Toronto Star and Toronto Life).

Data analysis involved a systematic process of coding and re-coding (Crang, 2005; James, 2006). Each transcript, field note or document was analysed phrase by phrase while

thematic codes, annotations and reflective notes were added. After this ‘open coding,’ the data was organised into categories which corresponded to the themes and questions from the interview guides, literature, annotations and reflective notes. At this stage some codes and subcategories ‘broke down’ while others emerged as more pervasive or poignant across the sample (Crang, 2005). We then moved toward identifying preliminary theories and collapsing categories into overarching themes through an iterative process of moving back and forth between the data and the research questions, interview guides and literature (James, 2006). Throughout the paper we include verbatim quotes as the best way to demonstrate how participants expressed meanings and experiences in their own words.

Locating Cool: Finding the right mix of social, economic and spatial factors

In the summer of 2011, the (now-defunct) weekly paper, *The Grid*, ran a cover story about young entrepreneurs who had decided to “quit their day jobs” and open up their own shops. writing: *wander into a new shop on Dundas or Queen West and the fresh-faced young hipster behind the counter isn’t just working there—she owns the joint.*

In this first section, we unpack this quote and locate cool by tracing three interrelated factors – social, economic, and spatial that contributed to the formation of the Dundas West retail strip. Beginning with the social factors, the Dundas independent fashion retailers were a group of likeminded entrepreneurs with a number of shared characteristics: they were young (between 23 and 35), primarily female, lived and worked locally, and belonged to the same informal, longstanding and female-dominated social networks. Thus, like Zukin’s (2009) account of Williamsburg, where recent art school and college grads with shared tastes were at the leading edge of consumer culture, a combination of local knowledge and social embeddedness also fostered a strong personal and professional connection to their Dundas West neighbourhood. As one retailer explained:

We're all in the same circles. We go to the same bars and parties. It's just inevitable that you meet everyone... I feel a huge sense of community here, and I'm so happy about it.

As a retailer who opened a vintage and slow fashion boutique in 2012 described:

“It makes it so much easier to open up a store, because it feels like you’re joining the community. Everyone is so supportive” (Interview, retail owner). This has been defined as “functional reciprocity” by Zukin (2012) whereby retailers not only co-locate, but deliberately cooperate in the production and promotion of their cool retail strip by providing community, mentorship and support for other new businesses in the community (Hracs and Jansson, 2017).

This entrepreneurial desire was also stoked by the economic climate of the time. Many of these entrepreneurs graduated during the global financial crisis and faced an abysmal job market (Worth, 2015). Entrepreneurs described frustration with situations where rather than finding work in their desired profession, they were instead underemployed and/or freelancing. At the same time, entrepreneurs had longstanding creative passions, such as interests in art or fashion, and decided to make the leap to turn their passion into a business, rather than stay in an occupation that left them feeling unfulfilled (Brydges and Hracs, 2019; Duffy, 2016; Kovesi and Kern, 2018). In the literature, this process has been described as a “reconfiguration of labour” typified by the cultural entrepreneur (Frenzel, 2014, 4). The following quote from a vintage fashion retailer describes this transition:

Out of university, I really wanted to do design work. A couple of artist and designer friends and I opened a freelance studio. Then we started to do fashion pop-up shops in the studio, which did really well. When we saw this retail space on Dundas was available, we jumped at it.

However, there were additional and interrelated economic and spatial factors that facilitated the opening of these businesses at this time. Like many of the well-known examples, from Soho and Williamsburg in New York (Zukin and Braslow, 2011) to

Hoxton in London (Pratt, 2009) at this time, Dundas West was still a relatively affordable location to start a business. One retailer explained:

As a young business owner finding accessible space is the most important factor in choosing where to locate. Other areas I was considering, like Queen West and Roncesvalles Avenue, are far more expensive. Dundas West made sense. The space is also very small so my rent is very manageable.

Cool individuals, whether they are artists or retailers, are not only drawn to cheap space but symbolic and spatial proximity to other neighbourhoods. Within Toronto, the Dundas West retail strip is an accessible, downtown location in close proximity to well-known (West) Queen West, which has evolved from an alternative artistic neighbourhood to one experiencing residential and retail gentrification (Hracs, 2009). As mainstream retailers, personified by high street brands such as Lululemon and H&M began to infiltrate Queen West, Dundas West emerged as an alternative stronghold. This is in line with Tolstad's (2006) assessment of New York, whereby once cool areas become known and frequented by the general population, subcultural pioneers move into more run-down neighbourhoods in search of cheaper rent and more authentic surroundings.

In turn, Dundas West retailers positioned their location as symbolically distinct from Queen West but still close enough for those in search of something new (Zukin, 2012). This also supports the work of Gregson and Crewe (2003) who found that, in order to distinguish themselves from the high street, retro retailers deliberately locate in areas associated with the 'alternative' rather than the 'mainstream.' Proximity and the 'imaginary' borders between the alternative and the mainstream are implicitly understood by those in the know, and helped ensure retailers were co-locating alongside likeminded small businesses and creatives (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Pratt, 2009).

Taken together, social networks, the geographic location of Dundas West and the economic climate of the time, served to underpin the formation of this new independent retail strip. Moreover, at this stage of development, it was local residents who were contributing to processes of commercial change. However, as we will see in the

evolution of Dundas West, the tastes of cultural entrepreneurs can “exert a powerful appeal to consumers outside of the creative community who develop a taste for an authentic, bohemian lifestyle” (Zukin and Braslow, 2011: 136) and over time, the reputation for Dundas West cool began to spread.

Co-Producing Cool: The role of curation and in-store experiences

Once located in Dundas West, how did these fashion retailers and their patrons co-produce cool? In creating an alternative to the mainstream (Baker 2012, Crewe et al., 2003; Leslie et al., 2015; Zukin, 2009), Dundas West independent fashion retailers offered a carefully curated mix of clothing. Fashion’s constant state of trend-driven evolution introduces precarity into the process of brand selection. The retail entrepreneur – in his/her function as a fashion buyer, manager and shop-clerk – must monitor and negotiate changes in the fashion industry and decide which trends to embody and sell. The constant threat that one’s look will go ‘out of style’ (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006) is a challenge that Dundas West retailers faced on a daily basis.

All but two retailers focused on exclusively womenswear, with one retailer (run by a female entrepreneur) offering menswear and womenswear, and one retailer focusing exclusively on menswear. Boutiques typically specialized in either vintage clothing or local independent fashion brands. Both are examples of retail that represents cool alternatives to mainstream fashion offerings, as vintage is inherently unique (Baker, 2012) and independent brands are typically lesser known, niche brands (cf Leslie et al., 2015). The process of selecting particular brands to stock was described as a highly personal, important and time-consuming process for retailers. Each carefully chose the brands to stock, typically reflecting their own personal style, and also endeavoured to educate consumers on the value proposition of these brands in order to make the sale. These small shops are typically physically constrained in terms of the number of

garments they can offer. A limited selection of stock helps to reinforce the curated nature of the shopping experience. For example:

Shopping vintage is a lot of work. Having a smaller store means my collection is edited. It's not so daunting. When a new customer comes in, I measure them and then can go through the racks and start pulling things that would work for them. Within a few pieces, it's very easy to more or less know their style.

For retailers focusing on independent fashion brands, we found that a related motivation was the desire to offer access to brands that are not typically available in Toronto's retail scene or popular malls. For example:

When we opened, the underlying manifesto was to bring in premium brands that are very difficult to come by in not just Toronto but Canada... We wanted to bring in different colours, patterns and aesthetics that you normally wouldn't get in Canada. We just wanted to do something different, especially for menswear.

Again, this quote reveals the connection between coolness and scarcity, not only in terms of location and availability, but also the number of units that are produced and sold. Limited availability helps reinforce the exclusivity and coolness of products (Hracs et al. 2013). Through their curation and retailing of both vintage and independent fashion brands, we can understand one of the key functions of these entrepreneurs as creating new paths for the distribution of goods in the economy (Barthes, 1983; Tolstad, 2006; Zukin and Kosta, 2004).

However, getting these brands and particular garments is no small feat. This retailer explained the lengthy, and expensive, process that a retailer must negotiate when trying to become a stockists:

Brands and designers, they want to know if you're cool. They want to know you're not going to bring down the name of their brand. You have to go wherever their showrooms are - New York, Berlin, you name it - and meet with them. Sometimes it takes several meetings and there are still brands I'm trying to get.

This illustrates the tremendous aesthetic labour that is required on the part of the retail entrepreneur, who has to know what to buy – i.e. what is distinct and cool in the local market – but must also ‘look the part’ by embodying cool for the brand representatives in order to sign a wholesale contract (Leslie et al., 2015; Leslie and Brydges, 2019).

In the digital age, where access to information and products comes with the push of a button, why is the experience of physical retail still attractive and valued? The atmosphere and aesthetics of the Dundas West retailers is part of the pleasure of shopping there: retailers have built stores that are welcoming and visually appealing, with a carefully curated mix of clothing, art and plants on display, appropriate music and often a store pet (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Curated Aesthetics



From the literature on the ‘experience economy,’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Lorentzen, 2013) we know that retail is an important site for experiencing fashion (Crewe et al., 2003; Leslie et al., 2015). As Hracs and Jakob (2015) argue, spaces – such as independent fashion boutiques – are not only ‘containers’ of economic activity but spaces where producer and consumers engage and interact. In contrast to global luxury brands such as Hermes that feature exclusive services for elites or fast fashion retailers like H&M which offer a no-frills environment with minimal staff involvement, alternative

retail provides customer service in a welcoming atmosphere. In our sample, for example retailers offered informal styling services to their customers. This experience is seen as authentic and real – especially compared to the standardized or scripted experiences offered at mainstream retailers – and an opportunity to join the retailers’ community (Leslie, 2002; Warren and Gibson 2017). Getting assistance from a stylish and cool person who also has the ability to translate and share their style in an accessible manner, is highly appealing for consumers (Hracs and Jansson, 2017). For example:

I'm always telling my clients to bring in their own clothes, or pictures of colours and styles that they like. I can help them find things that work and show them how to wear it.

In-store experiences thus go beyond brand education and include unique, value-adding interactions that validate the cultural capital of consumers and cultivate loyalty (Hracs and Jansson 2017). In our case, several retail owners had previous experience and reputation in the fashion industry as stylists or fashion buyers for television, movies and magazines. This reinforces the work of Nancarrow et al., (2002) who argue it is people, rather than commodities who create cool. And in the case of fashion, this accessibility is important as retailers must be able to sell and communicate cool to potential customers, who in turn may become ambassadors or living billboards for the store (Hracs et al., 2013; Brydges and Hracs, 2018).

A related way to engage customers is through special events, such as product launches, in-store runway presentations or Q&As with designers, which all serve as opportunities for retailers to welcome customers into their community (Kovesi and Kern, 2018). Again, the involvement and engagement of consumers is a key component of the experience economy (Lorentzen and Jeannerat, 2013), as is demonstrated in the following quote:

We host events for customers. We send personal innovations through social media, email or in person. Over time, we've developed a pretty friendly relationship with customers. We might even go for dinner together or that sort of thing. We have a

nice relationship we've built over time, and as a result, they love to get involved with the store.

Dundas West entrepreneurs constructed cool (Nancarrow et al., 2002) through the combination of products and unique in-store experiences that serve to not only create a distinct environment (Zukin, 2012), but also enrol consumers as valued insiders and contributors. This reinforces the work of Hracs and Jansson (2017) who assert the importance of layering multiple value creation strategies in the world of physical retail. Value is socially and intentionally constructed through interactions between independent fashion retailers and their consumers. Crucially, this value is connected to place and the context in which it is evaluated (Pani, 2017).

Thus, at this stage in the evolution of the Dundas West retail strip, the co-production of cool and the unique experiences available in this neighbourhood not only served to differentiate this retail strip from others in Toronto, but strengthen this retail community as well (Zukin and Kosta 2004).

Co-Promoting Cool: The influence of intermediaries, social media and communities

Given that, “what is considered to be cool is constantly changing” and is “always on the move” (Tolstad, 2006, 1), how do consumers know what is cool? By extension, once created, how is cool recognized, legitimized and communicated? In this section, we explore how cool diffuses across space and within communities through identifying a number of actors that supported the co-promotion of cool.

First, we found that Dundas West entrepreneurs promoted their retail strip within their shops and on social media. Blogs and accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram highlighted the personal style and cultural capital of the entrepreneurs as well as goods, services and experiences available in their shops. Entrepreneurs also use social media to highlight events or promotions happening in their store alongside similar happenings at local coffee shops, restaurants and/or galleries.

We also found evidence of the co-promotion of cool between retailers who would offer unique ‘connected and complementary’ retail experiences as a strategy to differentiate their retail strip (Arthur and Hracs, 2015). Given the specialised nature of their businesses, retailers commonly would refer customers to a neighbouring shop that had what they were looking for. Over time, this mentality grew to include restaurants and other services that were popping up along the strip, who were welcomed into the community or ‘family’ (Kovesi and Kern, 2018). For example:

Perhaps the best thing that happened to us was The Federal [a restaurant] and This End Up [another restaurant] opening up. Now, there’s a fair bit of daytime traffic on the street. People come for brunch, and then they walk around.

Similar to the case of record stores in Södermalm – an enclave of cool within Stockholm – who receive reputational benefit from being located in a well-known cluster (Hracs and Jansson, 2017), retailers co-promoted Dundas West, and attempted to bring new consumers into the neighbourhood, by collaborating to organise and host special events. For example, the precursor to the popular “Dundas West Fest” was a smaller fashion-focused sidewalk sale organized by fashion retailers to promote their scene and “*give people a good excuse to come to Dundas West and see what there is to offer here.*”

In turn, the creation of Dundas West Fest allowed the community to join a growing roster of summertime neighbourhood events, further signalling the emergence of the Dundas West community to the city of Toronto more broadly. This example also illustrates the importance of community insofar as the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts: indeed individual Dundas West retailers created cool shops but through collaboration, they co-produced a cool scene and community.

Over time, consumers and local residents also played a role in co-promoting Dundas West. For example, rather than finding out about Dundas West through traditional marketing or newspaper articles, it was more about word of mouth, in-person and through social media. Through posting about specific shops, experiences and styles,

and by wearing and sharing information about specific brands and garments, consumers with high levels of social and cultural capital acted as ‘living billboards’ and were thus enrolled in the co-production and co-promotion of cool (Hauge and Hracs, 2010; Hracs et al., 2013).

Indeed, even if customers don’t come for a specific event, visiting fashion retailers (like record shops) becomes a ritual experience, where customers see what is new, chat with local entrepreneurs and their staff, as well as other customers (Hracs and Jansson 2017). Engaging in the co-promotion of cool allows customers to see and been seen. Cool people come to enhance and display their cultural capital by ensuring what they have is still cool, learning more from clerks and demonstrating their own knowledge and style. In the digital age, physical retail shops provide the opportunity to engage face-to-face, or ‘hang out with a purpose.’

Yet, key intermediaries including media actors and influencers, were also involved in these processes. Initially, entrepreneurs acted as key catalysts in the development of their neighbourhood through the interplay of physical and virtual channels such as social media platforms. Yet, over time ‘outside’ actors from Toronto’s media scene, including reporters and bloggers from local (and increasingly national and international) fashion and lifestyle magazines and websites, supported the diffusion of cool and solidified Dundas West’s status as one of the coolest neighbourhoods in Toronto. By helping to ‘spread the word’, these intermediaries played a role in legitimizing and validating the subcultural ethos that the entrepreneurs created.

As early as 2010, local alternative media, such as Eye Weekly and The Grid began documenting the rise of Dundas West. Central to the ‘buzz’ around this neighbourhood were the new businesses and the personal identities of their owners, setting these businesses, and the Dundas West neighbourhood, apart from other retail strips in the city, such as the adjacent and increasingly corporatized neighbourhood of West Queen West

(Hracs, 2007). Local media articles helped to legitimize Dundas West as the cool new neighbourhood in the city. However, as the literature on cool tells us, when things (or places) become too known or talked about, when their secrecy and exclusivity wane, cool starts to fade.

As the buzz around Dundas West grew, a broader range of media began reporting on the strip and highlighting it as *the* place to be. For example, in 2014, *Toronto Life* magazine included Dundas West in their annual roundup of reasons to love Toronto, stating:

Four years ago, Dundas West of Gladstone to Brock was still described as ‘up and coming.’ Now, it’s a full-fledged hipster village. Flannel-clad couples eat artisanal fare under bare Edison bulbs, shoppers flock to vintage boutiques to buy pieces they earmarked on Instagram, and dark bars cater to the writers, designers and musicians who’ve moved into nearby houses and studio spaces.

This was followed by a profile in the in-flight magazine of boutique regional airline Porter Airlines, featuring a Dundas West entrepreneur on the cover of their July 2014 issue and *Vogue* – the ubiquitously global and mainstream fashion and lifestyle magazine including Dundas West as part of their Toronto travel guide (Bergman, 2014).

We also found that national fashion media played a role in the co-promotion of Dundas West. During 2011-2014, when the Dundas West fashion scene was at its peak, it was common to see Dundas West entrepreneurs featured as style experts for national fashion magazines such as *Flare*, *Fashion*, and *Elle Canada*, featured as one of Toronto’s ‘best dressed’ by *Toronto Life*, and/or as regular attendees in the front rows of Toronto Fashion Week. Visibility and prominence on notable fashion blogs and websites validates the aesthetic labour of the entrepreneur and legitimizes their position as a local fashion authority and cool individual.

As such, it is clear that the co-promotion of cool radiated from the core of Dundas West – the entrepreneurs and their community of like-minded businesses – to the independent and then mainstream Toronto media, and eventually to national and

international publications. This also encouraged us to consider how the co-production of cool could factor into the corrosion of cool. In the early days, you had to be ‘in the know’ to find, access and experience Dundas West’s emerging cool but once mainstream attention broke down these value-generating obstacles (Simmel, 1978), those in the know moved on. As the Dundas West retail scene grew and became more popular, it also became less risky to make the claim that Dundas West is a cool place to be and compare it to more established hipster havens such as Hoxton (London), Williamsburg (New York) or Södermalm (Stockholm).

In tracing this evolution, it also became clear that the speed at which coolness and value for products, and spaces can appear and fade is accelerating. The processes of discovery, discarding and re-discovery might be the same, but they occur more rapidly because of social media. The secret gets out faster, which initially helps to build buzz and attract new consumers more quickly, but this also accelerates physical and symbolic transitions and the need to ‘move on’ to something else. This finding extends earlier work, which identified the role of the internet and blogs in building the reputation of places like Bushwick (Zukin and Braslow, 2011), but could not adequately account for the ways in which social media can spur transitions from cool to mainstream at an unprecedented pace.

The Corrosion of Cool

Based on the literature, it might be tempting to assume that Dundas West was evolving to become the next Queen West or Williamsburg. However, the Dundas West of 2019 looks very different from the Dundas West of 2009: nearly all of the independent fashion retailers who were at the heart of this retail strip and made it a destination for fashion in Toronto are no longer in business on this street. As of Fall 2019, only three of the eleven independent fashion retailers interviewed that opened along this retail strip in

the 2009-2011 are still operating, two on Dundas West and one on an adjacent street. In their place, a range of bars, restaurants and cafes have increasingly come to define Dundas West, in a trend reflected in Toronto's west-end neighbourhoods more broadly (Mintz, 2015).

But how did this happen? In this final section, we explore a range of factors that contributed to what we call 'the corrosion of cool' along the Dundas West retail strip. Whereas the literature on artist and retail-led gentrification suggests that the cool 'pioneers' who enter and transform a neighbourhood or street are always looking for the new thing and do not necessarily hesitate to move on (cf Lloyd, 2006; Nancarrow et al., 2002; Tolstad, 2006; Zukin and Kosta, 2004), the evolution of Dundas West tells a different story.

While the existing literature tends to focus on changes to spatial dynamics, resident populations and consumer behaviour, telling the story of the entrepreneurs helps nuance our understanding of urban change (Parker, 2018) and the fleeting nature of cool (MacAdams, 2001; Heath and Potter, 2004). Here, we explore the causes and consequences of these changes, emphasizing the relative speed at which they occurred. Thus, our longitudinal approach allows us to nuance existing literature by highlighting the range of factors that contributed to the corrosion of cool along the retail strip and led to broader neighbourhood changes, not only physically but symbolically, within Dundas West.

From the literature, we know that there is a close relationship between retail spaces of cultural consumption and gentrification or urban regeneration (Lloyd, 2006; Martucci, 2019; Ocejo, 2011; Tuttle, 2019; Zukin, 2009; Zukin et al., 2009; Zukin and Braslow, 2011). In the case of Dundas West, even as early as 2013, the pace of change along the retail strip was accelerating and as the following quote from an entrepreneur reveals, the neighbourhood seemed to be reaching a tipping point:

Dundas West is an exciting neighbourhood but some are already scared of how fast it's changing. In the last two years, at least a dozen businesses have opened, probably more. Because it's growing so fast, you don't really know what the future will hold. When you're renting, you realize it is starting to get really expensive.

As with similar cases in London and New York (cf Pratt, 2009; Zukin and Braslow, 2011) as Dundas West became cooler rents continued to rise. This economic reality attracted new businesses and created challenges for existing businesses. The role of landlords was a common discussion during interviews:

In my opinion, the biggest problem is landlords pricing out their tenants and just not understanding that's what they're doing. The tenants invest their hard work, establish the neighbourhood and then cannot afford to be there.

Increasingly, new restaurants and bars began to open alongside independent fashion retailers. While retailers initially welcomed these new additions, over time, the focus of Dundas West shifted from a daytime to night-time economy. Thus, although the fashion retailers created a cool and attractive atmosphere, they did not necessarily reap the economic benefits. Moreover, the culture of community, mutual support and co-promotion between independent fashion and other retailers on the strip, that was so beneficial and instrumental in producing and promoting cool appeared undermined by the new mix of actors and power dynamics.

In addition, by 2015, the infrastructure investments that were underway during the early stages of the formation of the Dundas West fashion retail strip, such as sidewalk repairs and streetcar upgrades, were complete, making the neighbourhood became more physically accessible. Around the same time, the introduction of new condominiums, such as the Abacus Lofts on Dundas Street West and 109 OZ on adjacent Ossington Avenue changed the demographics of the area. Importantly, as with Queen West before – where the arrival of Starbucks and the ‘Bohemian Embassy Condo’ development were met with vicious spray-painted messages of derision and resistance from local residents (Hracs, 2007), the arrival of shiny yet sterile condos constituted a physical and symbolic shift from alternative to mainstream.

These broader structural factors help to explain the corrosion of cool but they do not tell the whole story of why only a few independent fashion retailers continue to operate on Dundas West today. Another and often overlooked aspect is that entrepreneurial careers and especially those in the independent fashion sector are challenging, precarious and difficult to sustain over time (Brydges and Hracs, 2019; Kovesi and Kern, 2018; Leslie and Brydges, 2019). In Canada, microbusinesses – defined as businesses with 1-4 employees by Statistics Canada (2019) – make up 53.8 percent of Canadian businesses and have a failure rate of approximately 30%. Poor planning and inexperienced management identified as the key factors for business failure (Ward, 2019).

In the fashion industry, this volatility is especially acute for physical retailers who encounter constantly changing consumer demands, new forms of product ownership and competition from online alternatives (Crewe, 2017). As one retailer described: *“It’s a difficult industry. You cannot predict what a day or a week or a month or a year is going to look like. And, it is risky when you are dependent on people’s spending habits”* (Interview).

For Dundas West retailers, market trends were compounded by the structures and demands of their business operations, which often featured a D.I.Y. model with limited or no assistance or employees (Leslie et al., 2015). Individual entrepreneurs were required to wear a number of different hats to complete the range of tasks in order to create a cool store and environment. In outlining their typical day, many respondents talked about sourcing stock, reading up on trends and new brands, arranging the shop, promoting through social media, networking with local businesses, planning events and of course interacting with customers. This would not only require long hours and a range of skills, but also immense emotional and aesthetic labour, which can be difficult to sustain over time (Brydges and Hracs, 2019).

While retailers were extremely passionate about their jobs and adopted the maxim of ‘do what you love’ or ‘DWYL’ (Duffy 2016), many also expressed concerns about burnout and the sustainability of their business after being in operation for only a year or so. Here, we found strong parallels to Frenette’s (2016) work on the sense of disenchantment that workers in the creative economy can develop as a result of precarious working conditions over time, ageing out – becoming farther away from the cutting edge and what is cool – and a loss of passion.

As the economic and social conditions along the retail strip became less conducive to independent retail and the pressures and tolls of running a business continued to mount, the entrepreneurs in our sample responded in several different ways. Some simply decided to close their businesses. As one respondent explained:

The pressure and responsibility of taking on all of the demands of running a business was huge. It’s not cheap being in this prime location. It’s been rewarding but I’ve also had to learn a lot of hard lessons. I have a lot of responsibility outside of this too. I have a 12-year-old daughter, and through all that I need to find time for myself...

Other entrepreneurs decided to remain in business but transition away from a physical location and move their business solely online. Online businesses provide entrepreneurs with the opportunity to continue to build their now-established brand and retail to customers, albeit in a lower-cost setting. These online-businesses operate out of homes and/or studio spaces, with occasional pop-up shops or studio visits permitted by appointment.

Interestingly, while other businesses closed on Dundas West, it was not because the business closed for good, but rather, the business moved. Based on the literature we might expect that these businesses moved to new or lesser-known, cooler areas (Tolstad, 2006).

Yet, the retailers in our sample did not act as pioneers to start the process again. Rather, some entrepreneurs moved up the commercial ladder and carried their cool new

business with them and actually re-opened their businesses on more well-established fashion retail strips in Toronto's west end. In fact, two pioneering retailers, who contributed to the creation of cool along the strip, took the somewhat surprising step to leave Dundas West during its peak as a fashion destination in Toronto. These entrepreneurs elected to move, taking cool with them, to more mainstream, established and expensive retail strips in Toronto's west end.

Here, we see that entrepreneurs endeavoured to convert their cool subcultural capital into economic capital in a new part of the city. The decision to go (more) mainstream coincides with research on independent creative producers who make the decision to move 'beyond bohemia' and to embrace enterprise to pursue more sustainable business models which they hope will support and enable their creative passions (Hracs, 2016). However, while this strategy worked for some businesses (which are still in operation today), it did not work for all of the businesses that moved, as some subsequently went out of business less than two years after leaving Dundas West.

Today, Dundas West is known far more for restaurants and bars. From observation, there is less foot traffic during the day but more night-time traffic. Thus, we see that the forces of cool are centrifugal: the broader factors that drew people to the Dundas West community – the cool community created by unique experiences and retailers – also played a role in ultimately pushing them out (Parker, 2018). However, factors at the micro-scale such as personal motivations, family dynamics and business experiences should not be discounted (Kovesi and Kern, 2018). Thus, the evolution of this particular retail strip was as much about rising rents, property development and media (over)exposure as it was about the motivations and experiences of the entrepreneurs in our sample.

Conclusion

In studying neighbourhood change, our understanding of the role of retail and the entrepreneurs who run independent businesses is limited when compared to the literature on creative producers, residents and property developers (Parker 2018). Moreover, with respect to conceptualising the nature of cool, and how it connects to identities, values and forms of capital, studies tend to privilege people and products over places (Warren and Campbell 2014). Through our longitudinal analysis of the Dundas West retail strip and explicit focus on female entrepreneurs who created and managed independent fashion shops, this paper made several contributions to existing knowledge. Cool is shown to be a fruitful analytical concept which aids in the identification and understanding of processes which involve people, products and places as well as physical and immaterial aspects.

Tracing the evolution of Dundas West also supports critiques of the inevitability of gentrification and standard trajectories of neighbourhood development (Zukin and Kosta 2004; Zukin 2016). Indeed, the paper highlights a range of specific and interrelated factors, unique to the time and location of our case, that contributed to the formation, transformation and subsequent dissipation of the Dundas West retail strip. In so doing, the paper considered the pace of change related to physical buildings but also reputations and atmospheres. Whereas some factors, including infrastructure development and building permits, took years, others, such as the promotion of Dundas West as ‘the next big thing’ through traditional and social media took months, demonstrating the accelerating nature of knowledge flows in the digital age.

By extension, this paper addressed calls to focus on specific retail strips, instead of whole neighbourhoods, and the motivations and experiences of merchants (Martucci, 2019; Parker 2018). In telling the stories of the ‘purveyors of cool’ in our sample, the

paper contributed to our understanding of intermediation, entrepreneurship and the ways in which individuals and connected communities create value and shape physical and symbolic transitions within alterative scenes. Notably, the unique individual characteristics (location, education, age, gender, life cycle), motivations and experiences of retailers shaped the aims and practices of their businesses and their involvement in the locating, producing, promoting and corrosion of cool in Dundas West.

As change occurred, some entrepreneurs in our sample were able to find ways to negotiate their competing professional and personal demands and find a balance between the creativity and passion that comes with building (and sustaining) a cool business in a highly competitive sector. But, for others, the immense labour (aesthetic, emotional and otherwise), investment (financial and personal) and range of sacrifices that went into their business caught up with them and challenged the viability of their business, especially in the face of rising costs. While ‘ageing out’ played a part for some, we also saw retailers reinvent and/or relocate their businesses to find better harmony with their personal and professional goals and circumstances.

Importantly, the case of Dundas West, like Soho in New York, Wicker Park in Chicago or Shoreditch in London reminds us that change, even if difficult to see, is constant and unpredictable. As our most recent period of observation (summer 2019) illustrated, the Dundas West retails strip continues to evolve. While longstanding Portuguese businesses continue to coexist alongside the remaining fashion boutiques, new bars and restaurants, and a number of unoccupied storefronts, some fast food restaurants and smaller storefronts have been demolished as part of development proposals yet to be approved by the City of Toronto.

In short, the future of Dundas West is unknown and this paper reinforces the need for ongoing research and longitudinal case studies which explore the role and outcomes of local specificity. It also demonstrates that even in the digital age, physical retail

scenes remain attractive and valuable, as trying on clothing, interacting with staff and becoming part of a local community is an experience that is currently difficult to replicate online. However, the current reality may change at any time – as the recent COVID 19 pandemic has painfully illustrated – and we encourage future research on discreet retail strips around the world to help us better understand the dynamics of neighbourhood change and the actors who drive and experience it.

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