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What motivates millennials? How intersectionality shapes the working lives of female entrepreneurs in Canada's fashion industry

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary fashion industry is based on a set of 'gendered skills and attributes.' Women numerically dominate fashion schools and the labour force of fashion firms, and also start and run the majority of independent fashion brands. Angela McRobbie and others have highlighted the importance of considering the gendered dynamics of fashion-related work. Yet, as the industry continues to evolve in the wake of global integration, the digital transition and intensifying competition, there is an ongoing need for research. Using an intersectional approach, this paper provides a novel case study of young 'Millennial' female independent fashion designers who operate within the emerging and under-explored Canadian fashion industry. Drawing on 87 interviews and participant observation, the paper demonstrates how entrepreneurial motivations, pathways, practices and experiences are shaped by individual characteristics, such as gender, age, lifecycle and class. Particular attention is paid to the challenges and tensions associated with the D.I.Y. (do it yourself) model and how forms of work, including aesthetic labour, are performed and experienced in virtual spaces such as social media platforms. In so doing, the paper contributes to nascent research on Millennials and nuances our understanding of the gendered nature of creative labour. Crucially, the paper also moves beyond typical masculinist conceptualisations of entrepreneurship, which focus on high-growth and high-technology businesses, to highlight the legitimacy, prevalence and importance of alternative motivations, networks, identities and business practices within contemporary markets and creative industries.

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Introduction

> Working in an independent capacity [fashion designers] experienced high levels of stress, exhaustion and were forced into patterns of self-exploitation way beyond that which any employer could legitimately get away with … It was by no means uncommon to have been left with £20,000 of debts to pay off, after working day and night with no breaks, no holidays and no real salary (McRobbie, 1998, 88).

In 1998, Angela McRobbie's *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* explored the working lives of a group of young female fashion designers in London. This empirically rich account reflected on the education-related experiences of these women and the challenges they faced while entering the British fashion industry as interns, employees, freelancers and entrepreneurs. In so doing, McRobbie shed light on the poorly understood motivations, practices and experiences of young women in a creative and highly precarious industry. Beyond becoming a seminal text in many fields, this study, and McRobbie's wider body of work, has been a key influence and source of inspiration for the authors. As the fashion industry has evolved over the past two decades, in the wake of restructuring, flexibilization, global integration, the digital transition and intensifying competition (cf. Crewe, 2017), we have been particularly interested in the rise of contemporary forms of independent production and the experiences of entrepreneurs in this industry.

Despite the ongoing ascendance of fast fashion and the growth of online shopping, the demand for local and sustainable fashion is re-emerging (Crewe, 2017) and independent fashion designers appear uniquely positioned to thrive. For example, new retailing and social media channels allow independent designers to interact directly with consumers and to share brand messages which are often connected to personal identities and the principles of authenticity and transparency (Leslie, Brydges and Brail, 2015). Yet, as powerful multinational brands continue to expand their global reach and independent designers with limited resources struggle to market and monetise their products, the opportunities for democratisation in the fashion industry may be overstated (Hracs, Jakob and Hauge, 2013; Brydges, Hracs and Lavanga, 2018). Moreover, while the industry has changed on many levels, it remains unclear whether labour conditions are markedly different from those described in the quote above. Thus, more research is needed to nuance and update our understanding of the gendered entrepreneurial and labour dynamics in the contemporary fashion industry.

In particular, we have identified four important gaps in this literature. First, with respect to scale, academic attention has focused primarily on the global firms, such as Burberry and Prada, which dominate the global fashion industry (Crewe, 2013a; Pike, 2015; Power and Hauge, 2008). As a result, much less is known about the dynamics and experiences of small, local and independent designers and brands which are becoming increasingly

important in the contemporary fashion marketplace (Hracs et al., 2013; Brydges, 2018; Molloy and Larner, 2010).

Second, existing studies have focused on fashion-related activities within global cities including the 'big four' fashion capitals of London, Paris, Milan and New York (Breward and Gilbert, 2006; Rantisi, 2004). However, as the industrial dynamics of these cities are the exception, not the rule (Larner, Molloy and Goodrum 2007), there is a need to consider how the specificities of other locations including 'tier two' or 'emerging' fashion markets, such as Auckland (Larner and Molloy, 2009; Molloy and Larner, 2010) and Stockholm (Hauge, Malmberg and Power, 2009), shape the educational pathways and working lives of creative workers (Vinodrai, 2006).

Third, much of the research on the fashion industry, and the creative industries more broadly, tends to focus on the experiences of individuals who work for firms, either as employees or contracted freelancers (Arvidsson, Malossi and Naro, 2010; Crewe and Wang, 2018; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). While this work is important and highlights the fragmented, uncertain and precarious nature of creative labour, we must move beyond the firm to examine the motivations, practices, spatial dynamics and experiences of independent entrepreneurs. As the vast majority of fashion designers work under the D.I.Y. (do it yourself) model, there is an acute need to investigate how they perform and balance the growing range of creative and non-creative tasks and experience work within new digital platforms such as Twitter and Instagram.

Finally, as the fashion industry is numerically dominated by women and based on a set of 'gendered skills and attributes,' it is imperative that new studies consider the highly gendered nature of this work (Molloy and Larner, 2010). Indeed, although male designers have historically, and continue to, dominate the highest positions in many of the most influential global fashion brands, women make up the majority of this labour force, fashion school student bodies, and entry-level creative positions in fashion brands (Business of Fashion, 2017). Driven by their 'passion for fashion', the desire for creative freedom and the pursuit of work-life balance, women also start and run the majority of independent fashion firms (Larner and Molloy, 2009; Molloy and Larner, 2010; McRobbie, 1998, 2016). However, these entrepreneurs are often rendered invisible or unvalued within masculinised discourses of entrepreneurship which emphasise profits and growth and fail to recognise alternative motivations, networks, identities and business practices (Hanson and Blake, 2009, Ekinsmyth, 2011).

To address these gaps, this paper adopts an intersectional approach to the case of young female independent fashion designers in Canada. Rather than focusing on one dimension such as race, gender or class separately or comparing bi-model inequalities, the concept of intersectionality captures discrete combinations of multiple sources of disadvantage. Originally used by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality is now widely used across the social

sciences and has been developed by feminist geographers working on masculinities (Hopkins and Noble, 2009), age (Hopkins and Pain, 2007), ethnicity/race (McDowell, 2008), and disability (Valentine, 2007). As Gill describes, a feminist intersectional approach “seeks to understand the connections between multiple axes of oppression and exclusion, on the understanding that these are not simply ‘additive’ but constitute distinct experiences and subjectivities” (2014, 510). Importantly, the imperfect, often ambiguous and open-ended nature of intersectionality is what makes it so useful (Davis, 2008).

Although it is often overlooked within the field, geographers have the potential to advance the theoretical discussions of intersectionality through the acknowledgment and analysis of the how identities, experiences and inequalities differ across space and time (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). As Valentine argues, “the stories through which specific identities emerge for a particular individual do not occur in a vacuum; rather, identities are highly contingent and situated accomplishments” (2007, 19). Furthermore, geographers are well-positioned to explore the ways in which spatial dynamics associated with physical locations at different scales including countries, cities and neighbourhoods as well as virtual spaces shape the experiences of individual creative workers (Brydges and Hracs, 2018).

Beyond highlighting the relationships between spatial context and work, we wish to contribute to recent studies which focus on age as an important element of intersectionality. For example, Reimer (2016) provides a prime example of how age intersects with gender for those working within London’s advertising scene, while Stokes (2017) highlights the importance of age and class in shaping the working lives of women in creative industries. Crucially, these studies demonstrate how different identities and circumstances, including varying levels of childcare responsibilities, support from families and partners as well as training and financial resources, produce different motivations, approaches and experiences.

While studies of children and seniors are common within geography, less attention has been paid to young working age individuals (Moos, Pfeiffer and Vinodrai, 2017). We focus on ‘Millennials,’ who are generally defined as individuals born between 1980 and 1995 (Moos et al., 2017; Worth, 2015). Beyond their underrepresentation, Millennials are an interesting group to study because they have ‘only ever known neo-liberalism,’ have entered a highly flexible and uncertain labour market, and face growing pressure to be entrepreneurial in their personal and professional lives (Moos et al., 2017; Worth, 2015). Moreover, as the most educated generation in human history, Millennials are potentially quite different from other generations and exhibit diverse and sometimes contradictory preferences and practices with respect to living and working (Moos et al., 2017). As our analysis will show, however,

this is still a broad category and these relatively young individuals can have vastly different working experiences based on their position on the age spectrum (between 23 and 38) and a range of other intersecting realities.

To examine these issues, this paper draws on 87 interviews, participant observation and document analysis to unpack and illuminate the experiences of young female entrepreneurs within the Canadian fashion industry. It examines the motivations and pathways of these young women and demonstrates how different starting points and educational experiences shape the aims and structures of their businesses. The paper highlights differences between younger Millennials, who are just completing school and entering the labour market for the first time, and older Millennials, some of whom have been in the labour market for over a decade. The paper also explores the structure of this kind of work and the ways in which contemporary creative work – which provides opportunities for freedom and flexibility but also requires workers to 'always be on' – produces a range of tensions and challenges which must be negotiated on a daily or hourly basis. Particular attention is also paid to how forms of work, including aesthetic labour, are being performed and experienced in virtual spaces such as social media. While the lifestyle and images presented by designers on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram are meant to look effortless, the paper demonstrates that these branding and promotional activities are carefully staged and require intensive and ongoing effort which contributes to what McRobbie calls the "corrosion of creativity" (2002, 61).

The paper contributes to existing literature in several ways. Empirically, it draws on a rich data set to illustrate the ways in which on-going changes in the fashion industry are experienced 'on-the-ground' by female Millennial fashion designers. In so doing, the paper nuances our understanding of creative labour and the ways in which the entrepreneurial experiences of independent fashion designers are structured and shaped by individual characteristics, such as gender, age, lifecycle, as well as education and experience. Spatially, the geographic focus on Canada, provides a novel case of an emerging and under-explored fashion market and the explicit focus on virtual sites of work contributes to our understanding of entrepreneurship in the digital age. By positioning this unique spatial context alongside traits, such as the age and gender, networks and ambitions of the business founders, the paper extends our conceptualisation of cultural intermediation (Bourdieu, 1984), creative collaboration (Hauge and Hracs, 2010), intersectionality (Hanson and Blake, 2009) and the determinants of regional entrepreneurship (Brydges and Hracs, 2019). Crucially, the paper provides a counterbalance to typical masculinist conceptualisations of entrepreneurship, which focus on high-growth and high-technology businesses, and reinforces existing studies which demonstrate the legitimacy, prevalence and importance of a range of business

structures and ambitions within contemporary markets (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Hanson and Blake, 2009).

Material and Methods

Research design

This research draws on a qualitative mixed methods approach comprised of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection because they can provide personal insight into an individual's reflections of work (Worth, 2015). Taking a narrative approach to interviews has been found to be particular useful in studying precarious work as it allows the interviewee to not only share the facts of their employment situation, but also to reflect on broader experiences and issues that shape their working lives (Worth, 2015). In total, 87 semi-structured interviews were conducted; 54 with independent fashion designers and 33 with key informants.

To be included, the fashion design business needed to be based in Canada and the fashion label needed to be independent (but could be from any industry segment, including womenswear, menswear, unisex, and/or accessories). A number of sources were used to identify fashion designers, including regional fashion week rosters, newspapers and other fashion media, social media, key informants, and snowball sampling. This sampling approach was developed in order to reach designers differentiated by age, gender, education, lifecycle and career stage. Moreover, designers from different spatial contexts including large cities (Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver), mid-sized cities (Edmonton, Regina, Quebec City, Halifax) and small, rural and/or remote locations from across the country were also recruited.

The sample of independent fashion designers was predominately female. In total, 45 female designers and 9 male designers were interviewed. Of the designers interviewed, the majority (44/54) were Millennial, and 10 were not. We also see that more than half of all design businesses have been in operation for less than 5 years (63%), while 22% have been in business for 5 to 10 years, and only 15% of designers interviewed have been in business for more than ten years.

The interviews were conducted in public spaces (such as cafes), the studios/workspaces of designers, or on Skype when time and/or geographic distance prevented meeting in person. Following an interview guide, topics included a designer's previous education and/or experience before becoming a designer, their entrepreneurial motivations, the structure and spaces of their daily working lives, business development strategies, and the biggest challenges and rewards of their work.

To get a broader understanding of the Canadian fashion industry and to triangulate findings, 33 key informants including officials from government and academia, public relations firms and consultants, buyers from department stores, and fashion-related media were also interviewed.

The second method was participant observation which included attending over twenty fashion shows during Toronto Fashion Week, as well as attending related-events such as studio showcases. Interviews and participant observation in physical spaces were complemented with analysis of the websites and social media profiles of independent fashion designers, to further probe the how independent fashion designers work and showcase their lives and businesses across a range of physical and virtual spaces.

The third method was document analysis. This was comprised of an analysis of all the creative industry policy documents written in Canada from 2000-2016. The objective of this analysis was to examine the ways in which fashion is included and/or excluded from the policy discourse on the creative industries in Canada, and serves as a background to an understanding of the institutional environment independent fashion designers operate within (see Brydges and Pugh, 2017 for a detailed discussion of creative industry policy in Canada).

Data analysis involved a systematic process of coding and re-coding (Crang, 2005; James, 2006). Each transcript, fieldnote 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. In line with our intersectional approach, each quote includes additional information - beyond being young women – about the respondent's home life and educational background.

The Canadian case

In Canada, the majority of fashion designers are entrepreneurs who start and run small businesses. Statistics Canada (2013) reported only one design firm (of which fashion design is included) with more than 200 employees, compared to 499 reported business with one-to-four employees. Working alone or in small groups, these individuals exercise complete control and are

independently responsible for all the tasks associated with their businesses (Brydges, 2018).

There are a number of factors that explain the dominance of this industrial structure. First, compared to a fashion system like Italy (Arvidsson et al., 2010) the Canadian fashion industry lacks the significant presence of large fashion brands that can offer firm-based pathways to employment. Second, there are low barriers to entry in the Canadian fashion industry. This stems in part from the lack of regulatory or institutional supports, such as an industrywide membership organization, that restrict entry into the industry. Thus, the Canadian system provides the freedom and opportunity for a wide range of individuals to enter the sector. However, once in the industry, designers face a number of obstacles, including a highly competitive retail environment, few opportunities for mentorship or support, and difficulties accessing capital (Brydges and Pugh, 2017).

Finally, whereas the fashion industry in most countries is anchored by a dominant core city, like New York or Paris, which attracts aspiring designers from across the national system (Rantisi, 2004), in Canada, there is no dominant fashion centre or 'obvious' choice to locate a fashion design business. With a similar geographic size to Europe, Canada features large cities like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, smaller regional hubs such as Edmonton, Ottawa and Regina as well as smaller, rural or remote locations such as Vancouver Island, Charlottetown, and Saint John. While the fragmented nature of the system and lack of a dominant 'fashion capital' to act as a springboard to the global fashion industry may be a weakness it can also be a strength as it offers a variety of spaces and milieus for designers of different sizes, scales, and motivations to build their fashion businesses (Brydges and Hracs, 2019).

In particular, it has been argued that this diverse national system, and forms of mobility which allows entrepreneurs to move within in it to access resources and opportunities, allows a broader range of designers, including women working from home and/or managing family obligations as well as young fledgling designers, to develop their businesses (Brydges and Hracs, 2019). As unpacking the implications of regional differences for independent designers in detail is beyond the scope of this paper and has been reviewed elsewhere (Brydges and Hracs, 2019), the remainder of this paper limits the focus to the physical and virtual spaces where tasks are performed.

Results

Passion for fashion: work-related motivations and pathways

The Millennial generation in Canada has entered a neoliberal labour market at a time of economic austerity (Worth, 2015). In general, this means high

rates of unemployment and underemployment for young people and young adults. With respect to fashion, intensifying competition and uncertainty within the labour market is increasing the prevalence of freelance work, temporary jobs and self-employment (Stokes, 2017). This section examines how Millennial fashion designers negotiate this labour market and rationalise their decisions. It focuses on the entrepreneurial motivations of these workers and how different individual characteristics and experiences shape the aims and structures of their businesses. Although many respondents celebrate the freedom to construct their own biographies (Gill, 2014; Worth 2015), the choice to become independent is influenced by a range of factors, including personal aspirations, age, gender, lifecycle, previous educational and entrepreneurial experiences, and the specificities of the Canadian fashion system.

Despite precarious working conditions, creative industries continue to attract young and talented individuals because of the psychic rewards associated with creative expression and autonomy (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2016). As Duffy argues, "highly affective terms like 'passion' and 'love' have become so salient to contemporary labour narratives that some members of the social media community have adopted the maxim 'DWYL' (Do What You Love) to describe new employment spaces where pleasure, autonomy and income seemingly coexist" (2016, 442).

Echoing the findings of Larner and Molloy (2009) on independent fashion designers in New Zealand, our respondents frequently described a lifelong passion for fashion. Several designers also reported leaving more secure and higher paying jobs in unrelated sectors, including engineering and banking, to pursue their dreams of becoming a designer. As one explained:

> After I finished my degree in Engineering, I began working in the field. I was bored and knew I didn't belong there. After some personal upheaval, I began sketching, which really brought peace to me. It was then I realised I didn't want to waste my life working for someone else. I wanted to get out and do something I'm passionate about. I didn't want to regret my life one day. If I fail, at least I can say I tried. I decided at that point to go forward with my dream and take the risk *(Married, with children, non-fashion education).*

This quote highlights the important point that even individuals belonging to one generational cohort can and do have a variety of experiences which are shaped not only by gender or age but a range of intersecting individual characteristics and circumstances. Indeed, the path of the designer above, who had already graduated, found secure and well-paid employment, accrued real-world skills and experiences and had decided to make a career change based on work-related dissatisfaction and life-course developments (including getting married and having a baby), is different from other

Millennials in our sample who are younger and trying to pursue a career in fashion right out of school.

Although some independent fashion designers start their own labels without any fashion or business-related training, most follow a pathway that includes a combination of education, internships, and/or firm-related experiences. Many of the young designers in our sample attended some of the most prestigious fashion schools in Canada and abroad, such as Ryerson University, George Brown College, Central Saint Martins in London, U.K. and Parsons in New York, U.S.A. Others, who were unable to go abroad for their entire schooling (often due to cost and a lack of support from parents), completed shorter, intensive courses during winter or summer holidays in order to supplement their Canadian education. Like other Millennials (Moos et al., 2017), at this life stage many respondents sought to offset the high costs of schooling by living at home and taking on part-time jobs.

As the Canadian fashion industry lacks the presence of large, leading international fashion design brands that can offer firm-based pathways to gain industry experience and/or employment, a number of respondents, particularly younger Millennials starting their careers, felt 'forced' to go abroad in order to get initial experiences in the fashion industry. While these were often described as formative experiences, particularly when these were at leading houses such as Erdem or Alexander McQueen, independent designers also recognised the temporary, and ultimate 'dead-end' nature of internships as they were unlikely to lead to secure employment. In particular, several older Millennial designers described their experiences of graduating during the recession that began in 2008 and how this shaped their career path. Facing an extremely tight labour market, expiring visas, mounting debts and/or the prospects of another unpaid internship, several respondents decided to return to Canada, where they ultimately started their own fashion label. As one designer put it: "It was a very natural next step for me. I did not want to continue to work for anyone else. Now, I do what I want, when I want. It feels very freeing" (*single, no children, fashion design education*).

Interviews with fashion educators revealed that fashion design schools actively encourage students to consider less precarious jobs relating to other aspects of the fashion industry, such as supply chain management or retail management. However, a common theme from our interviews was that the majority of aspiring designers could not be swayed by their instructors from starting their own label and were committed to going out on their own despite the risks and uncertainty. As one respondent explained:

> I studied fashion design in Barcelona for three years. After that, I did two internships; one in Paris and one in New York. Then I worked at the Cirque du Soleil doing costumes and sewing. I could have tried to work for someone else, but

> my options were either a big company that isn't very creative or a small independent designer business where they really don't need another person. So, I decided to go out on my own. It happened really fast. At the beginning, I didn't have training in business or entrepreneurship (*single, no children, fashion-education).*

While the two younger designers quoted above decided to follow a direct path into the fashion industry (training, work experience and starting their own business) at a time in their life before they were thinking about starting a family, some other older respondents decided to combine their business development with childcare and family commitments, which produced different outcomes and experiences.

Independent fashion designers are taking advantage of on-going changes to the global fashion industry, including new or niche market segments such as 'high casual' clothing (Larner and Molloy, 2009) and the expansion of accessible, low-cost digital technologies which allow them to enter the industry, side-step traditional gatekeepers and interact with consumers in new ways (Crewe, 2017). Indeed, the marketplace has been described by some as a 'wild west' without rules or clear pathways. These conditions also open up possibilities for a range of business structures. While some designers in our sample, with formal fashion education, started traditional firms – producing seasonal collections focussing on menswear or womenswear – and held ambitions to become a national and/or international brand, others started niche businesses with very different intentions.

Our interviews revealed that many of the designer's interviewed have a deliberate desire to build businesses that are small, specialised, and sustainable. Instead of multi-store international brands, many were focused on building a local, small business, in order to retain control of their brand and to ensure a 'hands-on' approach to all aspects of the business. As one respondent explained: "My long-term career goal is to be an important part of the fashion, design and craft scene of Toronto and bring Canadian fashion to the world audience for its originality and great craftsmanship. I am focused and dedicated, and getting there slowly but surely" (*relationship, children, fashion-education)*. Relatedly, the majority of independent fashion designers in our sample manufacture locally and connect their brand to broader social and/or environmental goals, particularly related to slow fashion. With origins in the 'slow food' movement, slow fashion encourages quality, ethical and environmentally-sustainable production, classic design and respect for workers and is founded on the premise that consumers will buy less clothing and instead invest in higher quality garments (Crewe, 2013b; Leslie et al., 2015; Brydges, 2018). For some designers, this was connected to creating jobs and contributing to the local economy, while for others, it was about being a global citizen and working closely with artisans from around the world.

Beyond forms of environmental sustainability, our respondents described the importance of building businesses that are sustainable over the long-term and offer greater work-life balance (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Worth, 2015). Despite the risks, uncertainty and demands associated with independent production, Millennial designers in our sample regard the freedom and ability to control one's working life and daily routines as an advantage of running their own fashion business; an issue which we will come back to.

This section has demonstrated the range of alternative motivations and suggests that young female designers can use flexibility and opportunities within the labour market to side-step barriers within the industry and forge businesses that help them exercise forms of freedom and autonomy. They may also be able to challenge or re-work structures and regimes that produce inequality and discrimination based on gender, age or class (Acker, 2006). However, it is imperative to think critically about the role of intersectionality and privilege. Indeed, it is important to remember that not all Millennials have the resources and forms of social and economic capital to pursue formal education or to turn down exploitative firm-based work, including unpaid internships, within the fashion industry. For example, while some younger Millennials in the sample could accept unpaid internships after graduation because of financial support from parents and/or the ability to live at home rent-free, some older Millennials, were unwilling or unable, because of financial and family commitments, to work for free and had to find other ways to enter the industry and gain experience.

Thus, the ability to launch and sustain a fledgling fashion label in a highly competitive marketplace requires time, connections, knowledge, skills and resources which can be linked to class as well as material and emotional supports provided by partners and parents (Worth, 2015). However, the combination of these factors varies from designer to designer and we want to emphasise that there is not one linear path that all individual's must follow in order to become a fashion designer in Canada. Indeed, as we demonstrate elsewhere (Brydges and Hracs, 2019), spatial dynamics produce different experiences as designers negotiate the relative strengths and weaknesses of their chosen base of operations within Canada – from large cities to small, rural or remote locations – while also using forms of mobilities to access opportunities and resources in other parts of the national system. While all workers negotiate the labour market to construct their own biographies, workers inhabit different spatial contexts, come from unequal subject positions and have different amounts and kinds of privilege (Worth, 2016). Ultimately, the interviews suggest that a set of unique, complex and intersecting realities shape the aspirations, strategies and experiences of individual designers as they enter the industry and build their brand.

Table 1. Key tasks for independent fashion designers.

Creative and design-related tasks	Professional and business-related tasks
• Develop brand aesthetic • Plan seasonal collection(s) and product ranges • Trend forecasting • Sketching and visualising designs and developing specifications (i.e. colour schemes, construction, materials) • Sourcing, selecting and buying fabrics, trims, fastenings etc. • Produce patterns / grading • Cut and sew samples • Manage fit and other technical specifications • Produce collection individually or oversee out-sourced production process • Solicit, evaluate and incorporate customer feedback (creative issues) • Develop marketing campaigns and promotions including 'lookbooks' and creative collaborations • Show collections at trade fairs, fashion weeks, show rooms and other events • Undertake training to improve skills	• Develop and manage business plan • Accounting • Pricing • Manage production process including supply, costing and manufacturing • Negotiating with suppliers • Produce and disseminate sample cards, 'lookbooks' and order sheets • Manage distribution process across online outlets, retail shops, stockists as well as shipping and logistics • Developing and managing promotional campaigns including working with the media and intermediaries • Select and participate in trade fairs, fashion weeks, show rooms and other events • Solicit, evaluate and incorporate customer feedback (business issues) • Marketing and branding of collection(s) • Produce and monitor profiles and dynamic content across social media platforms (websites, blogs, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook etc.) • Undertake training to improve skills

Negotiating tasks and tensions: working as an independent fashion designer

In their daily working lives, independent fashion designers must complete a range of creative and non-creative tasks (see also: McRobbie 1998; 2016). These industry-specific and broader entrepreneurial tasks are summarised in Table 1: *Key tasks for independent fashion designers.* It is also important to note that the majority of independent fashion designers interviewed do not have a business partner and must complete these tasks alone.

As a result of working independently, designers must be highly flexible and adaptable throughout their day as they switch between radically different tasks (Gill, 2014). Because these demands fall on one person, feeling tired or becoming ill was often seen as 'not an option' (Gill, 2014; Crewe and Wang, 2018). When asking an independent designer about how they tackled the challenge of balancing and completing all the creative and non-creative tasks in Table 1, respondents often started with something like: "Where should I even start?" or "How much time do you have?"

Many described difficulties in reconciling their passion for design and desire to focus on their creativity with the need to perform technical, administrative and business-related tasks (McRobbie, 2002, 2016; Hracs, 2015). As one designer put it:

> There are so many things to do at any given time that are quite different from each other. It is difficult to combine tasks, or to move from doing something creative one moment to responding to emails the next. It would be nice to have

someone to share that with or be able to delegate (*single, no children, fashion education*).

In unpacking this quote, we found that individual experiences and characteristics, notably previous fashion training and education, shaped the working lives of independent fashion designers. For example, respondents with a fashion design education often explained that their degree prepared them to handle technical tasks, such as pattern-drafting and developing their design aesthetic, but they were often less-confident when managing the business aspects of their label. By extension, many described struggling with a variety of business-related issues, ranging from accessing financing for their business to understanding the impact of trade regulations when shipping clothing outside of Canada.

On the other hand, designers without a fashion design education, often had transferable skills from their previous employment (for example, marketing or retail experience), but had limited training or experience with technical design skills. These designers tended to have a more niche product line and often relied more on their manufacturers to implement their designs. Beyond technical skills and training we found that the performance and experience of specific tasks was shaped by the unique personality, inclination, experience and comfort level of each designer. This reaffirms the importance of considering the role of intersectionality in shaping work-related experiences.

As very few independent fashion designers had a creative or business partner, the nature of work, responsibility, and risk was highly individualised. While the literature suggests that creative workers can turn to locally embedded networks for support and resources (see: Bain, 2005 for the case of artists), this is not the case for independent fashion designers in our sample who are isolated from each other. There are a number of factors that contribute to this. First, the vast majority of independent fashion designers are spatially fragmented and work alone in design studios, the home, and hybrid retail-studio spaces. While a handful of start-up spaces or incubators exist for fashion designers in Canada, their locations (based in Toronto) and competitive entrance criteria make them inaccessible for most designers. The disorganised nature of Canada's fashion industry and lack of community-based forums to bring designers together also contributes to this isolation (Brydges and Pugh, 2017).

Second, many designers were unsure of the benefits of collaborating with other fashion designers, or simply did not prioritise it. For example, despite the presence of regional fashion weeks existing across the country, approximately half of the designers decided not to be involved with them. Some chose to stay away because they lacked the technical expertise to produce a full collection while others, especially those with children

explained that fashion and/or arts community events and networking opportunities, which take place during evenings and weekends, are incompatible with family demands. Others talked about the importance of protecting evenings and weekends from the 'extensification of work' and choosing not to physically travel internationally or even within Canada for fashion weeks and events (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006). Here, we see age and lifecycle as important intersectionality markers (Stokes, 2017) with respect to how willing a designer is to be 'always on' to build their business (Gregg, 2011). Relative location within Canada also seems to shape decisions as designers located in or near Toronto were generally more willing to attend events in the city than those based in more distant and/or remote locations.

Yet, relative career stage is also important. We found that emerging and less known designers were more likely to attend as many events as they were invited to. At early stages there was a general willingness – perhaps temporarily – to exchange work-life balance for the opportunity to promote and develop their brand. Here, it is important to keep in mind that over half of Millennial designers interviewed had been in business for less than five years, and as such, we wonder how their willingness to prioritise the brand above other aspects of their life may change over time based on evolving and intersecting circumstances.

To provide one detailed example, we see that the individual quoted previously who was an Engineer before becoming a designer, was not married and did not have children when she made this change. She launched her first collection to rave reviews in her Western Canada hometown, as well as in Toronto. Around the same time, she got married, and after two years developing her business, she had her first child. She then decided to step back from the brand to focus on her family. Four years later, she relaunched the label and was able to, as she described, "pick up where I left off." This designer had a partner who was the primary income earner while she was away from the label, but in returning to work, she described the importance of being her own boss, as it "allows me to balance my work and my family life, without sacrificing either one" *(Married, with children, non-fashion education).*

Although the experiences of work are shaped by the unique circumstances and preferences of each individual, this section has argued that independent fashion designers face a number of challenges relating to the daily negotiation of creative and business demands. Work is highly individualised and creeps (intentionally or otherwise) into other parts of a designer's life. Thus, the ability of independent fashion designers to truly and consistently restrict their working hours to more standard '9-5' working hours is a key tension of creative work.

Working and performing aesthetic labour online

Virtual platforms are becoming increasingly important spaces and sources of work in the fashion industry (Hracs and Leslie, 2014). Digitalisation has fundamentally altered the fashion industry and offers enormous opportunities for independent fashion designers (Crewe, 2013a, 2017; Business of Fashion, 2017; Brydges and Hracs, 2018). It is difficult to overstate the importance of websites and social media platforms such Twitter, Instagram and Facebook which have created new occupations, such as blogger or 'influencer' and new ways of promoting, selling and connecting with consumers (Brydges and Sjöholm, 2019; Crewe, 2013a; Duffy, 2016).

In particular, Instagram – which is an image-intensive social media platform consisting primarily of photos (with a short text description and hashtags) and video 'stories' – was mentioned as the most important channel our respondents use to showcase their brand and interact with the public (Brydges and Hracs, 2018; Brydges and Sjöholm, 2019). Social media provides an avenue for low-cost promotion and direct retailing which enables fledgling independent businesses, including those located in small or remote locations within Canada, to bypass traditional industry gatekeepers such as national fashion media and buyers in the big cities (Brydges and Hracs, 2019). Our research found that social media is not used in a universal way by designers across Canada. Rather, it is used to amplify local or regional strengths and to compensate for relative weaknesses or constraints (see: Brydges and Hracs, 2019). As one respondent argued:

> Social media has been fundamental to the business. My brand is so much more visible and customers can find me. I have received messages from across the world, which would have been so unthinkable otherwise (*single, no children, non-fashion education*).

Yet, the intensifying use of social media brings new challenges and work-related demands. Here the concept of aesthetic labour, which Warhurst et al. (2000, 4) use to refer to the "embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers," is relevant. Initially developed within the context of the service sector where employees are increasingly hired for their ability 'look good and sound right' (Williams and Connell, 2010), aesthetic labour has more recently been applied to creative industries (Hracs and Leslie, 2014) and the fashion industry in particular (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006; Williams and Connell, 2010). While much of this work is often thought of as 'effortless', in reality, many struggled with the aesthetic labour demands of being an independent designer. As one respondent explained:

> My ultimate goal is to be recognised as a successful Canadian luxury clothing line, and to sell worldwide at major luxury department stores. However, the hardest part of the job for me is the selling. It's hard to put my work in front of buyers and stay strong and confident. I almost feel naked (*relationship, children, non-fashion education*).

This quote reveals insecurity not based on technical skill or design capabilities. Rather, we see specificity at the level of individual personality, where some are 'natural' sellers and more outgoing, while others struggle with the more performative aspects of being a designer.

Through the practices of 'friending' and 'following', producers invite consumers to experience their creativity, businesses and private lives. In such an image-intensive industry where many workers portray a glamorous and fashionable life, members of the fashion industry, such as fashion models and bloggers, have been shown to perform aesthetic labour which entails an ongoing commitment to body maintenance through diet and exercise (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006; Brydges and Sjöholm, 2019). Crucially, unlike service workers, who can take their uniforms off and end their performances at the end of a shift, these workers cannot walk away from the product which is their entire embodied self. While many independent fashion designers work with models and bloggers to build their brand image, they also perform aesthetic labour and our research highlights how their lives, experiences and bodies can become exposed and deeply intertwined with their brand and business. Designers frequently described the need to maintain and display a fashionable life to sell their fashionable clothing. However, we found that designers took different approaches in deciding what role their name, face, and body would play in their brand. For example, while many designers had models wear their clothing, other designers choose to model their clothing and embody their brand, such as one respondent who walked in the runway show for her collection during Toronto Fashion Week.

With respect to the need to develop a strategy to brand and promote their collection, one interviewee put it quite bluntly:

> Whether you like it or not, fashion is commercial. But it's also a form of art. When you paint a picture, you have to be able to sell it. You need to sell a vibe and identity that people are looking for. It's such a big part of the fashion industry (*relationship, no children, non-fashion education*).

Thus, this quote reveals that while the lifestyle and images presented by designers may look effortless, these activities are deliberately developed, staged and require intensive and ongoing effort. Our research found that on social media, designers not only share behind the scenes aspects of the making of a collection – from sewing machines at work to arrays of fabric samples purchased abroad – but also elements of their personal life, from family vacations and their children, to date nights and evenings at home. The nature and structure of this work resulted in many designers commodifying their bodies and lives in order to produce and project an aesthetic that was relevant to their target customer base (see also: Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006).

Here, we found that a designer must make a decision with respect to the extent to which they (and by extension, their life) embody their brand.

Again, the relative age, life stage, circumstances and experiences of an individual designer was reflected in their narrative. For example, one designer, whose brand focused on tailored workwear for professional women, downplayed her personal life – and recent pregnancy – in the brand's social media profile, which instead consisted of editorial photos featuring models. The lifestyle and aesthetic they offered is very different from the brand of a husband and wife team on the East Coast, which regularly posts pictures of the entire family (including their young children) wearing their collection.

As demands are unrelenting and seem to 'snowball' due to pressure to constantly produce new and engaging content (Brydges and Sjöholm, 2019), the need for constant visibility and accessibility not only requires intense aesthetic labour but increases the precariousness and extensification of work (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006; Duffy, 2016; Hracs and Leslie, 2014; Jarvis and Pratt, 2006). While independent fashion designers are proud of their passion and many celebrated the ability of social media to facilitate intimate relationships and establish brand loyalty with 'friends' and 'fans,' working online limits the time and resources these entrepreneurs can allocate to other tasks and contributes to what McRobbie calls the "corrosion of creativity" (2002: 61).

To mediate the highly individualised, aestheticised and demanding nature of the D.I.Y. model of independent production, some respondents are developing strategies to manage their workload by 'getting help' (Hracs, 2015). Several respondents talked about working with a range of intermediaries and creatives to outsource specific creative and business tasks such as graphic design, web design, marketing, accounting and public relations (Schultz, 2015; Brydges and Hracs, 2019). Beyond task completion, some sought help from experienced insiders embedded within large markets like Toronto to compensate for a lack of legitimacy, trust or access based on their age, gender, training, experience or location (Brydges and Hracs, 2019; Hanson and Blake, 2009). Based on their individual circumstances, various forms of 'help' – from accounting services to steaming clothing the night before a store opening – can be provided by friends and family members for free or through bartering arrangements with other scene members (Hauge and Hracs, 2010). However, the ability to find, hire and pay freelance professionals or firms requires significant levels of economic and social capital (Duffy, 2016). Moreover, as mentioned, designers must also carefully consider what tasks can be outsourced without harming their brand, and what other tasks appear to demand the aesthetic labour of the designer.

Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from McRobbie (1998) and the concept of intersectionality, this paper explored the working lives of young female independent

fashion designers in Canada. With respect to their entrepreneurial motivations and pathways into the industry, the Millennials in our study were driven by a lifelong passion for fashion and desire for the perceived creative freedom and autonomy associated with 'being your own boss.' Beyond supporting nascent research on Millennials, these findings contribute empirical richness to existing studies on the allure of non-monetary forms of compensation and alternative entrepreneurial ambitions. Indeed, instead of extending masculinist conceptualisations of entrepreneurship, which emphasise profits and growth, the paper demonstrated that many designers wanted to build and run small local businesses that are environmentally and structurally sustainable - to facilitate security over the long-term and a positive work-life balance that can accommodate healthy personal relationships and childrearing.

The paper also provided an original account of the range of specific creative and non-creative tasks associated with the D.I.Y. model of independent fashion design. Here the findings exposed a range of challenges, tensions and implications for entrepreneurs including the need to constantly oscillate between radically different activities, the pressure to be 'always on' and the difficulty of slowing down, getting sick or maintaining a private life that is indeed private. It also nuanced existing understandings of the role of collaboration and networking within creative industries by pointing out the highly individualised nature of this form of work and that independent fashion designers are often spatially and psychologically isolated and are unwilling or unable to work with and draw support from others.

As virtual platforms become increasingly important spaces and sources of work, the paper also considered some of the opportunities and challenges of performing tasks, such as promotion, through social media channels. The findings suggest that although tech-savvy Millennial designers can use apps such as Instagram to directly promote, sell and interact with consumers, the omnipresence of social media exacerbates pressures for these entrepreneurs to constantly maintain and display a carefully crafted image and to perform aesthetic labour seemingly around the clock.

Ultimately, the paper argues that while all workers negotiate the labour market to construct their own biographies, workers are based in different locations and come from unequal subject positions. As a result it is imperative to think critically about the role of intersectionality and privilege. Indeed, the paper shows how the unique starting points, characteristics and educational experiences of these designers shape their ambitions, practices and business structures. Yet, the paper also pointed out the ways in which wider spatial contexts and the specificities of Canada's under-studied fashion industry can encourage or constrain entrepreneurship.

Key avenues for future research could include studies which compare Millennials working in different locations and industries. Moreover, given that

more than half of the designers interviewed had been in operation for less than five years, we believe that a fruitful area of future study would be longitudinal research that follows these individuals as they transition within and beyond this generational category and examine how their entrepreneurial motivations, practices, strategies and experiences evolve over time and alongside other developments in their personal and professional lives.

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