Understanding Regional Innovation Systems and Fashion as a Cultural Industry:

A comparison of New York and Toronto

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April 8, 2023

Introduction

Cultural industries produce, distribute, market and display cultural products like art, film, architecture, performing arts, and fashion, and their value usually lies within their subjectivity and experiential qualities (Leslie & Rantisi, 2017). Due to the demand for culture and cultural experiences in recent years, the commodification of culture has grown exponentially (Leslie & Rantisi, 2017). While this creates more jobs in creative industries and allows culture to contribute to the economy at a greater scale, it also means such industries are at bay to commercial objectives, not just aesthetic purposes. In particular, fashion is a cultural industry that has been largely impacted by globalization and industrial restructuring (Jansson & Power, 2008), resulting in mass consumption where the culture is now more valued for the profits it can generate (Leslie & Rantisi, 2017). Certain cultural industries, like fashion, have been most greatly impacted by this shift in priorities, especially when looking at examples such as mass production, cheaper labour markets, and government and industry support, as each is driven by fashion's economic contribution to each actor. Today, the fashion industry is dominated by long-standing fashion-producing cities like Paris, Milan and New York, seemingly leaving tier-two cities (operates outside the dominant fashion city centres (Brydges, 2017)) playing catch up. For example, despite Toronto being home to Toronto Metropolitian's Fashion Design BA program, which consistently ranks top 50 globally (Business of Fashion, 2017) compared to other fashion design programs, the city's fashion industry continues to struggle. This paper aims to unpack why a global city filled with many of the foundational tools for cultural innovation to thrive continues to fall behind by analyzing the differences between Toronto and New York's fashion industries, to prove that strong regional innovation systems are vital to the industry's success. To develop such conclusions, a brief history and context of cultural innovation systems will be given, specifically in the context of fashion while referencing authors such as Cooke

(1997), Scott (2000), Bertola et al. (2016), Leslie and Rantisi (2017), and Brown and Vacca (2022). Secondly, as a tier-one fashion city, the New York fashion innovation system will be evaluated in terms of the institutional infrastructure that allowed American-designed ready-to-wear fashion to flourish, building the regional innovation systems that are perceived today and discussed by Rantisi (2004), Jansson & Power (2008) and Williams and Currid-Halkett (2011). New York serves as an example of how regional innovation systems support various industries, especially the fashion industry in this case. Subsequently, Toronto's fashion innovation systems will be evaluated, unpacking the city's weaknesses in the fashion industry and why support through regional innovation systems would improve the industry's success. Articles written by Hiebert (1993), De Sousa (2002), Srigley (2007), Leslie & Brail (2011), Rantisi (2011), Brydges (2018), Brydges and Hracs (2018), Brydges and Pugh (2017 & 2021), will be referenced to outline the industry's current limitations, the connections and disconnections to regional innovation systems, and attempt to define the culture of the Toronto fashion industry and rewrite what it could be. Lastly, this paper will conclude with a summarized comparison of Toronto and New York fashion innovation, while concluding regional innovation systems' importance in the fashion industry. Understanding the differences between each city is important in helping change the fashion industry as we push for a more sustainable future, environmentally, culturally, and economically.

Understanding Regional Innovation Systems & Fashion as a Cultural Industry

To understand the relevance behind fashion innovation systems, the history and theoretical contexts of cultural innovation are important to understand as it contributes to the systems that perpetuate regional struggles and successes. Culture stems from different forms of art, ideas, styles, and ways of life, yet at the start of the twentieth century, the convergence of

cultural and economic systems became increasingly popular due to the trends of contemporary urbanization (Scott, 2000). As capitalism moves towards finding importance in all elements of human life that can produce capital, cultural forms are at increasingly more risk of commodification. The fashion industry faced such commodification, growing to be one of the most dominant global cultural industries around the world. With such profitability came discussions of innovation, and how such markets could remain at the forefront of consumer mindsets. As innovative fashion transpired, the physico-economic characteristics of fashion products were analyzed and marketed for such cultural products, creating a competitive edge that targeted one's personal ornamental preferences, modes of social display and expression, forms of distraction, or sources of self-awareness (Scott, 2000). The growth of consumers' disposable income and increased 'free' time allowed such audiences to consume mass amounts of cultural products, launching city and government interests in supporting such economies.

Fashion is a unique cultural industry in its relationship to capitalism, as the balance between aesthetic and commercial considerations is extremely important (Leslie & Rantisi, 2017) especially as both contribute to the innovation that takes place. To innovate within the industry, symbolic knowledge is heavily relied upon as it encompasses the process of continuous interpretation and understanding, rather than simply processing information, and is time- and place-specific that cannot be readily transferred (like an object or design) (Leslie & Rantisi, 2017). Such processes of knowledge and knowledge transfer are key to understanding the role of regional innovation systems in fashion innovation. Further, 'know-how' (knowledge of processes) and 'know-who' (knowledge of industries actors) processes are extremely important to symbolic knowledge production and how such regional networks promote the cultural industry workers and the growth of the fashion industry in various cities. To define regional innovation systems, it is important to also define regions as all territories that are smaller than their state that

have significant governance capacity and cohesiveness that differentiates them from their state or other regions (Cooke et al., 1997). Cooke et al. (1997) suggest that regional innovation clusters likely have access to other firms as customers, suppliers, knowledge centres (universities, research institutions, etc.), financial structures and capacity, the governance structure of private business associations, chamber of commerce, training and promotion agencies, and government departments. The author also notes how it is important to recognize that these systems interchange, are two-way, and are associative (Cooke et al., 1997) meaning their interconnected nature is extremely important to the innovation and competitiveness of firms and industries. This concept can be applied to specific industries, specifically cultural innovation systems, as it stems from the complex interactions between cultural and economic systems (Scott, 2000), and innovation within cultural industries like fashion is reliant on symbolic knowledge where continuous interpretation and understanding are produced, rather than the production of information (Leslie & Rantisi, 2017). Such interpretation and understanding is the driver of the innovation process for fashion products and services (Bertola, 2016), yet it is argued in literature to date that design cannot be forgotten as the core of the innovative process (Brown & Vacca, 2022). This is important to consider when evaluating the Toronto and New York fashion industries concerning each respective regional innovation system, as knowledge transfer and sharing along with technical processes are extremely important for the fashion industry's success.

Development & Influence of Regional Innovation Systems: New York Fashion Industry

New York is considered a tier-one leading force in the fashion industry today, home to world-class global brands and designers such as Tory Burch, Michael Kors, Calvin Klein, Vera Wang, and Ralph Lauren. New York's success in cultivating one of the most prominent fashion

cultures in the world today developed from decades of various actors, institutions, and economic conditions. Taking a regional innovation system approach to understanding New York's emergence into fashion, most notably the ready-to-wear industry, is an example that proves the importance of networks in supporting an industry's success. From the invention of the sewing machine in 1846 to the establishment of department stores and mail-order catalogues, ready-made production was quick to follow in cities that had easy access to immigrant labour workers to manufacture such products, such as Boston, Philadelphia and New York (Rantisi, 2004). The Hudson Valley seaway became an increasingly important transportation pathway for steam-powered ships that were able to transport materials and trimmings (Rantisi, 2004). The seaport enabled large influxes of immigrant workers (mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe, largely Jewish and Italian populations) in the 1880s and 1890s, and since tailoring had traditionally been a Jewish occupation, New York suddenly had a vast supply of skilled and cheap labour force that grew from 25,000 in 1880 to 84,000 in 1905 (Rantisi, 2004). This vast expansion with little available capital grew what is known today as 'sweatshops' with notoriously unsanitary conditions. The International Ladies Garment Worker's Union was founded in 1900, leading strikes across the industry and working to establish the 'Protocol of Peace' as well as the *Women's Wear Daily* journal (Rantisi, 2004). Local department stores and retail spaces flourished during this time, as well as marketing strategies such as mail-order catalogues and fashion magazines (like *Vogue, and Harper's Bazaar*) followed by the design schools of New York (Rantisi, 2004). With the push of urbanization, industrialization and the creation of manufacturing, journalism, higher-education systems, and union systems, New York's regional innovation system was growing exponentially. Fabric innovation, machine production, technique advancements, major pushes in the advertising industry and changing social conditions (women entering the workforce) pushed ready-to-wear fashion into importance for New York's

economy (Rantisi, 2004). It is important to also outline Paris's influence on New York's fashion innovation system, as higher education systems in the city, like Parsons School of Design, were largely French-oriented in the 1920s, as many instructors were French and teaching Parisian couture sketch designs as well as manufacturers copying Paris models (Rantisi, 2004). Yet, in 1940 when Nazis occupied Paris, New York was ultimately cut off from its influences (Rantisi, 2004), forcing fashion in the city to develop its culture both creatively and economically, relying on its regional innovation networks to support such a transition. For example, the union and dress manufacturers formed the New York Dress Institute pushing the city as a world fashion centre and maintaining their domination in the dress industry by exporting to South America. The Fashion Groups' Fabric Division drew connections between manufacturers to American fashion designers to develop quality fabrics, while also promoting such talent in New York Fashion Shows (Rantisi, 2004). In the 1960s and 1970s, various other cultural industries influenced New York's fashion identity, along with identity politics (specifically African-American culture and feminism), yet as the 1980s approached, there was an extreme shift from a manufacturing focus in New York to the off-shoring of such production for cheaper labour, causing an 81.5% decline in US apparel manufacturing jobs (Williams & Currid-Halkett, 2011). Such a decline launched New York fashion's symbolic and cultural capital, as the design aspect of the city's fashion industry could be supported by the regional innovation system that had been built over the last century. Today, New York City is nearly 16 times more concentrated in fashion designers than any other US location, with nine of the Fortune 1000 companies being New York fashion industry firms, generating US$31 billion in revenue annually (Williams & Currid-Halkett, 2011). The role of history in developing regional economies is extremely important to understand the complexities of the industry's success and possible alterations the regional industry could take in the future. New York's fashion history has built an empire

through trial and continuous interdisciplinary support through various means and periods, which often cannot be said like other smaller tier-two fashion cities like Toronto.

Today, New York's fashion market is one of the most globalized industries in the world despite much of its production being moved offshore. Post-industrialization and as New York transitioned to a design capital, Jansson & Power (2008) argue that the multi-channel systems of brand building at the regional level supported the cultural industry to remain a dominant force within the fashion world. Continual innovation is necessary for an industry to stay at the top, yet within a knowledge-based market, such innovations consist of the immaterial and experience positioning of products more than their technical aspects (Jansson & Power, 2008). For New York, place-based branding holds extreme importance (Jansson & Power, 2008), as the knowledge and values of fashion branding have been utilized and built for decades so that consumers understand the excellence and quality (when discussing high luxury items) behind the products. Furthermore, New York brand designs often give a 'feel' of the city that is cool and chic, but Jansson and Power (2008) also offer another perspective that recognizes how portraying a certain feeling of the city or way of seeing the city through design will exclude certain groups or perspectives. It is important to understand how such branding pushes for a specific city and fashion narrative, and the influences, both positive and negative, it has on attracting fashion designer talent to New York City within a regional innovation system mindset.

Lack of Regional Innovation Systems: Toronto's Fashion Industry

When evaluating the history of Toronto's fashion industry, similarities can be drawn between New York's garment industry regarding its formative years. In a similar time frame, the early 1900s for Toronto was greatly impacted by immigrant workers, entrepreneurial chains (where minority groups achieve mobility through entrepreneurial pursuits, typically specializing

in trade-based activities), and ethnic economic concentrations (when entrepreneurs from a specific group hire co-ethnic workers, thus furthering the labour-market's segmentation) (Hiebert, 1993). From 1901 to World War 1 the influx of Jewish immigrants could not be absorbed into the already existing small entrepreneurial market, thus instead concentrating in the manufacturing sector, specifically the garment industry. This specialization eventually heightened the number of Jewish entrepreneurs in the Toronto garment production industry and the continual hiring of Jewish workers between 1915 and 1931 (Hiebert, 1993). Economic growth during this time significantly supported this process, as 60,000 employment opportunities were added between 1900 and 1929 in only manufacturing (Hiebert, 1993). The development of department stores severely hurt the Jewish community's success in the garment industry in Toronto (Hiebert, 1993), as the 1930s saw the creation of Timothy Eaton Company and Eaton's as *the* store for women to shop in Toronto due to its cheaper prices, drawing customers away from Jewish producers (Srigley, 2007). Such a reduction in the price of fashion allowed working-class women at the time to purchase new clothing styles that were notoriously too expensive to purchase, yet such freedom came with issues of social identity (Srigley, 2007). Women of the time took great care to appear as worthy customers, as they understood that when they shopped they too were on display, trying to prove themselves as a class that "deserved to be served," (Srigley, 2007, p. 94). Such social identity crises were preyed upon by department stores, as they were designed to exploit one's class position and perceived attractiveness. Such an attack on consumerist traits hooked many into shopping at such department stores that became increasingly more and more dominant for such reasons.

Toronto's fashion industry was hit most hard in the mid and late 1990s as manufacturing and industrial activities no longer fit the "modern, high-tech image," (De Sousa, 2002) that Toronto wanted to display itself as to other global markets. Planners and other governmental

bodies began to propose plans to allow more people to live in the urban core and for a knowledge-based high-tech economy to flourish (De Sousa, 2002). De Sousa (2002) sites Toronto Urban Planning and Development Services (1999), Toronto Economic Development (2000), and Toronto Waterfront Redevelopment Task Force (2000) as plans that wanted to remove traditional land-use controls in the central city, to ultimately push out manufacturing and warehousing activities, limiting Toronto's fashion sector to a very small corridor in the King- and Queen-Spadina area. Unlike New York's case, where changes in economic conditions made the industry more resilient and connected to the region's innovation system, Toronto's fashion industry was pushed out of any regional innovation system support, segueing into the tier-two fashion industry that is prevalent today. With no vertical innovation system supports, Toronto's fashion industry has failed to remain a competitor or largely innovative.

The most prominent cultural industries cluster in globally situated cities that have regional innovation supports like incubators, capital, educational institutions, and freedom to arrange how innovators live and work (Brydges & Hracs, 2018). Even though Toronto is not considered a tier-one fashion capital, the city still has to compete with key fashion engines to attract and retain talent. The City of Toronto estimates that the fashion industry contributes $1.1 billion in annual wages to the economy, and develops world-class designers due to the multiple post-secondary fashion institutions, including Toronto Metropolitan University's Fashion Design program that consistently ranks top 50 in the world. Despite having strong educational systems, the rest of a typical regional innovation system is largely lacking. The repeated cancellation of Toronto Fashion Week (Brydges & Hracs, 2018) and lack of governmental support has not helped Toronto's circumstances, leaving the industry at the lower end of the scale of tier-two fashion capitals. Up until 2017, fashion was not considered in the definition of creative industries for the City of Toronto, limiting the available funding and support available to such companies.

When the Creative Canada Policy Framework report was launched in 2017, hope was raised for the industry in gaining more institutional support, yet to public disappointment, fashion was only mentioned once throughout the entire 38-page report (Brydges & Pugh, 2021). The City of Toronto offers designers extremely limited investment, for example, the Toronto Fashion Incubator grants program attendees $2500 to $5000, training, and mentorship with no clear number on how many designers have access to this program (Brydges & Hracs, 2018). Furthermore, some designers are beyond the start-up phase which makes them ineligible for incubator support, which leaves many designers without governmental support. The lack of financial assistance in Toronto for designers also impairs many from attending fashion shows that are still running in Toronto as it is often too expensive for them to join or prepare for (Brydges & Pugh, 2017). Each of these issues is not a consequence of the quality or kind of fashion Canadian designers are producing, as slow fashion, timeless and high-quality designs are continuously produced (Brydges & Pugh, 2017), thus proving that the structural factors (the regional innovation system) that surround Toronto's fashion industry is failing local designers and upcoming talent.

Despite the lack of financial and governmental support for Toronto's fashion industry, there is an argument to be made about the other qualities that attract designers to the city when creating their own brands and designs. Leslie & Brail (2011) in their article *The productive role of 'quality of place': a case study of fashion designers in Toronto* discuss this concept thoroughly, arguing that it is a convergence of both employment opportunities and amenities that enhance the attractiveness of a city or region for talent. As discussed previously, with concepts such as know-how and know-who dominating networks, the authors outline how fashion design largely relies on symbolic knowledge and how occupational place is an important inspiration for fostering creativity (Leslie & Brail 2011). Since cultural occupations are risk heavy and highly

variable, the support of place-based characteristics is extremely important in attracting and mediating such risks of the occupation (e.g. daycare, affordable housing, education, social services, etc.) (Leslie & Brail, 2011). Furthermore, the authors articulate that while factors of economic success (employment, institutional supports, and quality of place) are important, moving to a new region is often for reasons of religion, sexuality, ethnicity, or identity (such as an aesthetic appeal or to be around similar types of people) (Leslie & Brail, 2011). In Leslie & Brail's (2011) study, 47% of interviewee designers moved to Toronto from another region in Canada, 31% were born in Toronto, and about one-fifth were born abroad. The majority of designers that were born in Toronto were attracted to the presence of the local fashion industry rather than the quality of place, as were the majority of the designers that moved to the area, or came to the city for a design education and generated lasting relationships and networks within the industry encouraging them to stay (Leslie & Brail, 2011). Furthermore, the urban nature of the city was extremely attractive to many designers that moved to the area from smaller Canadian cities, especially when it comes to designing "crazy out-there stuff," (Leslie & Brail, 2011, p. 2906) as one designer said was only consumable and marketable in bigger cities with more socially progressive markets. None of the internationally-born interviewees were attracted to Toronto's fashion market, yet instead came to the city for personal reasons, not professional opportunities (Leslie & Brail, 2011). While the liberal social policies and culture in Canada (healthcare and freedom of religion for example) are attractive to designers who already reside in Toronto, such lifestyle amenities are not enough to retain many designers who will move abroad to tier-one fashion cities (Brydges & Pugh, 2017), perpetuating the lack of a regional innovation system.

While the Canadian fashion market lacks talent retention, institutional support, and financial backing, the lack of a Canadian fashion culture further deteriorates Toronto's chances

of building a regional innovation system that can support the industry. It is understood that culture is built from years of localized practices, rituals, and values, thus since Toronto lacks such a fashion culture, investing in the industry financially and institutionally is not possible due to the lack of base foundational understandings. Rantisi (2011) also recognizes this as a challenge for Toronto, as identifying a distinct, and viable, fashion identity is an important step in helping correct the industry. Aesthetic innovation within a knowledge-based economy presents an opportunity for Toronto's fashion industry to define the city's place-based branding and promotion. Fashion is typically thought of as one's look (Rantisi, 2011), thus defining a regional culture of fashion could be approached by understanding localized values and trends and transforming those ideas into business and design practices or "looks." Brydges and Pugh (2017) outline how wearing Canadian design is not seen as a point of pride, thus unlike European countries where wearing such pieces is fashionable, the question remains what the marketable trait of Canadian designs could be. Literature to date (Brydges and Pugh (2017) for example) have found innovative success in Canadian designers who are customer-facing and communicative, almost to the extent of a marketable piece of the brand themselves, which helps push a personal narrative to audiences that wouldn't typically shop in boutique or smaller local stores. Secondly, those who take a sustainable or "slow fashion" approach to production and design have been found (see Brydges (2017) and Brydges and Pugh (2017)) to resonate with Canadian consumers on a larger scale, as many consumers are beginning to care more about where their clothing and where items they consume come from, how they are produced, and who produces them. Yet, such sustainable principles that are discussed in the literature are still limitedly practiced, nor largely understood how to apply such concepts empirically. If Canadian designers commit to or participate in sustainable, socially conscious, transparent, slow fashion, Toronto has the potential to be a leader in sustainable fashion practices and demonstrate

alternatives to the dominant fast fashion narrative portrayed in other countries. This cultural direction could significantly influence innovation within Toronto and Canada more broadly, as sustainable practices require significant research, various industry actors, and governmental support, ultimately shaping the regional innovation system. This concept and cultural direction do not need to be only applied by designers: such concepts could drive innovation within fashion weeks or shows, retailers, fabric producers, and university research. For Toronto's cultural identity to develop, adoption from other contributors to the regional innovation system would significantly influence the speed and level of impact to which the cultural identity could form.

Conclusions: The future of fashion innovation

Business of Fashion released its State of Fashion 2023 report on November 30, 2022, outlining the top 10 themes that would dominate the industry in 2023. These themes include managing inflation for growth, regional realities for growth potential, connecting with consumers over more than just price, Gen-Z's propelling of gender-fluid fashion, the reinvention of formalwear, multi-channel landscapes, tackling greenwashing, future-proofing manufacturing, digital marketing and Web3, and organizational overhauls. Each theme provides a unique and in-depth understanding of the state of the global fashion industry. While many of these concepts are easily applicable to the New York context, Toronto should focus on a couple of themes to further its success and innovation within the industry. For example, focusing on Gen-Z's propelling nature of promoting gender-fluid fashion is an excellent source of innovative inspiration for designers. Over half of Toronto's population are young individuals, as 1.6 million people are between the age of 15 and 44 (City of Toronto, 2022), and those born in the 1990s to 2010s are extremely vocal about supporting brands that are less restrictive and more inclusive (Amed & Berg, 2022). Furthermore, Gen-Z continues to be 'trendsetters' by uniquely drawing

inspiration from various role models and previously coined ‘decade’ styles (Amed & Berg, 2022). Understanding such consumerist mindsets in terms of fashion innovation in Toronto could transform the industry into one that adheres to its largest market, which is the younger generations. In the State of Fashion report, Amed and Berg (2022) also discuss the brand implications of greenwashing. As proposed earlier, that Toronto fashion designers could create a market for sustainable and slow fashion and be leaders in the space, such goals and values should come with a greater understanding of what is meant by ‘sustainable’ practices. Amed and Berg (2022) outline the complexities in applying sustainability to the fashion world, as, for example, leather supply chains are often associated with animal cruelty and “unsustainable” farming, yet when other “sustainable” vegan alternatives are proposed, many materials contain plastics that contribute to the CO2 footprint of the item. The authors provide an interesting example of what it means to position a brand within a ‘sustainable’ context, as Patagonia (a champion in responsible business) does not refer to its products as sustainable because they understand they are a part of the problem (Amed & Berg, 2022), and then suggests that to even simply use the word *sustainable* in any brand promotion is potentially harmful to retaining consumers. Instead, clarity and transparency with consumers on how items are made, what materials they are made from, who made them, and what causes the brand supports are more active and responsible ways to improve business. Leading with these ideas, Toronto has the designer base, educational institutions, and a large and socially-conscious younger target audience that could build the regional innovation system in the city to gain the support of governmental institutions and private funding sources. For Toronto’s fashion future, it is about understanding the innovation market already at play in the city, what is missing, what its values are, and contributing to those ideals on a global scale.

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