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Consuming Canada: How fashion firms leverage the landscape to create and communicate brand identities, distinction and values

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ABSTRACT

In the increasingly global and competitive fashion industry, firms are adopting a variety of strategies to generate value and brand loyalty. While some emphasise the quality of material elements such as inputs, local production and design, others focus on immaterial aspects such symbolic value and exclusivity. In recent years, place-branding has become an important way to create connections between people, places, and products. Yet, the processes behind this type of branding remain poorly understood. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the ways in which landscapes – in all their forms – are being incorporated into place-branding practices. Drawing on 87 interviews, participant observation and an innovative analysis of Instagram accounts, this paper examines how a range of Canadian fashion firms leverage the landscape to create and communicate brand identities, distinction and values. It demonstrates how firms of different sizes and scales construct, harness, or reimagine landscapes and/or popular stereotypes to connect with Canadian identities and consumers. It also highlights how landscape-centric branding can be combined with broader value creation strategies such as local production. In so doing, this paper brings together the economic geography literature on place branding and the cultural geography literature on landscape and identity, and makes a methodological contribution to nascent examinations of social media and visual data sources in geography.

1. Introduction

Fashion is a globalised, image-intensive and highly-competitive industry that is undergoing a period of significant restructuring (Crewe, 2017). There is growing uncertainty in the marketplace as digitalisation and e-commerce bring new challenges and opportunities (Amed et al., 2016). With declining entry barriers and changing consumer habits, firms of all sizes – from global luxury brands to local independent producers – are under mounting pressure to attract the attention of consumers and convince them to buy their products. As a result, firms are adopting a variety of strategies to create and communicate values. Some independent firms endeavour to enhance the material value of garments through high quality inputs, local production and timeless design (Crewe, 2013a; Pike, 2015; Leslie et al., 2015; Brydges, 2017). Another strategy involves the immaterial aspects of a product and constructing symbolic value through branding, imaginaries, and identity (Pike, 2013, 2015). Indeed, place branding, which is about how "place gets into goods by the way its elements manage to combine" (Molotch, 2002, 686), is an increasingly important way to create connections between people, places, and products.

However, the processes behind this type of branding remain poorly understood (Pike, 2009, 2015). Indeed, Pike (2015) argues that economic geography has consistently undervalued brands as an area of study and that many theories and accounts stop abruptly as the product leaves the factors gates. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the ways in which landscapes – in all their forms – are being incorporated into place-branding practices within creative industries such as fashion. Moreover, given the dominant focus of existing studies within economic geography on global fashion capitals such as Paris (Larner et al., 2007; Rantisi, 2011) and global fashion brands such as Burberry (Moore and Birtwistle, 2004; Power and Hauge, 2008; Pike, 2009, 2015; Tokatli, 2012) less is known about the ways in which second-tier markets or emerging brands function.

To address these gaps and nuance our collective understanding, this paper brings together the economic geography literature on place branding and the cultural geography literature on landscape and identity in order to examine how a range of Canadian fashion firms, including established national champions and independent upstarts, leverage the landscape to create and communicate brand identities, distinction and values. Canada is an ideal case because it features a

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diverse range of landscapes and an understudied fashion industry that includes a variety of established and emerging fashion brands and fashion centres (Brydges, 2017; Brydges and Hracs, 2017). Moreover, as a young country – which celebrated its 150th birthday in 2017 – with a young fashion industry, Canada can yield insights into the ongoing process of carving out a national identity.[1]

With a wide range of methods and expertise, geographers are well positioned to study the intersection of the physical landscape, branding and digital technologies (Pike, 2015). For this study, a mixed-methods approach to the study of the Canadian fashion industry was developed, comprised of 87 interviews with independent fashion designers and key informants, participant observation at fashion industry events, and analysis of the social media accounts of fashion firms. Following the methodology of Rose (2012), a novel data set of over 2000 images from the Instagram accounts of five Canadian fashion firms has been constructed. A visual analysis of the ways in which firms utilise the landscape in their branding was conducted and five vignettes about each how firm portray fashion, identity and the Canadian landscape is presented.

The findings suggest that the Canadian landscape is central to the branding strategies of a variety of fashion firms in Canada, from luxury outdoor apparel to small lifestyle brands. These firms explicitly utilise the landscape in their branding in order to connect to, and (re)create, conceptualisations of Canadian identity. Moreover, firms choose to either embrace and/or reinvent notions of stereotypes around Canadian identity and lifestyle. Landscape-centric branding is also positioned as a layer within broader value creation strategies.

After reviewing the literature on place branding and the landscape, the paper provides an overview of the Canadian fashion industry and the research design. This is followed by five vignettes which examine how each selected firm leverages the landscape in their branding and a discussion section which unpacks three emergent themes related to Canadian stereotypes, consumer identity and place and the layering of value.

2. Literature review

2.1. Place branding and economic geography

In the contemporary economy, aesthetics, identities, signs and symbols can be utilised to differentiate, communicate and add value(s) to people, products and places (Hracs et al., 2013; Lash and Urry, 1994). As part of these processes, brands and branding have been studied by geographers from a variety of perspectives, such as brand architecture (Dooley and Bowie, 2005), cultural quarters and creative cities (Evans, 2003; Vanolo, 2008, 2015), rural development (Lee et al., 2005) and even personal brands (Sjöholm and Pasquinelli, 2014). More recently, economic geographers have focussed on the relationships between branding and geography (Power and Hauge, 2008; Pike, 2009, 2011a,b, 2013, 2015). While not all brands engage with spatial elements, this literature suggests that place branding can offer powerful associations laced with meaning, memories and values (Pike, 2011b). Moreover, specific spatial entanglements, such as where products are invented, designed, made or sold, can play a key role in the 'production of difference' and the processes through which branded objects are evaluated and understood (Power, 2010; Pike, 2011b, 2015). Place branding can thus imbue and project economic, social, cultural and political meanings and connotations (Pike, 2013, 2015). Menswear tailoring from Saville Row in London (Crewe, 2013a), and products, such as Nordic winter and outdoor sporting goods (Hauge and Power, 2013) are examples of the connection between quality, product and place.

[1] Of course, this 'official' birthday does not reflect the much longer presence, history, and legacy of the diverse Aboriginal populations in Canada.

Despite the growing range of valuable studies on this topic, several key aspects of place-branding remain poorly understood (Power and Hauge, 2008; Pike, 2011b, 2015). There is a need to move beyond established global brands such as Newcastle Brown Ale (Pike, 2011a) and to engage with the place-branding strategies and practices of independent and mid-size firms with different resource levels (Hracs et al., 2013). Moreover, whereas examinations typically focus on physical representations of brands such as posters or labels and the physical spaces that communicate brand value such as flagship stores (Jansson and Power, 2010; Crewe, 2016), less is known about the ways in which places and qualities are articulated in virtual spaces including online retail and social media platforms. Indeed, Crewe (2013b) calls for geographers to investigate the 'economics of digital transition.'

More recently, Pike (2015) has put forward a more sophisticated and nuanced consideration of place-branding. His conceptualisation of 'origination' aims to theorise how, why, by whom, where and in what ways geographical associations are deployed through branding to create and fix meaning and value. Crucially, Pike (2015) calls for critical examinations of the multiple and overlapping geographical associations – which may be material, symbolic, discursive, visual or aural – to identify and understand the ways in which brands and brand actors strategically emphasise or obscure specific elements. As his 'socio-spatial biographies' of firms such as Burberry and Apple demonstrate, while some actors play up certain desirable and valued meanings such as heritage, quality and reputation connoted by particular places, others may mask less commercially valuable or damaging elements such as unethical production performed in specific parts of the world. Researchers are encouraged to go beyond the constraints of typical 'national' or 'country of origin' approaches to engage with geographical associations which are more fluid and may play out at different spatial scales – especially within the context of international divisions of labour and globally integrated markets (Pike, 2015). We find Pike's relational approach to geographical associations very constructive and the paper incorporates themes from the origination concept such as spatial discontinuity and selectivity into the analysis.

2.2. Geographies of landscape and identity

While some firms rely on place in the construction and reconstruction of brand identities, studies in economic geography often overlook what is really being offered for consumption: the landscape. Therefore, this paper also engages with cultural geography literature related to the representations and meanings of landscapes. According to Widgren (2004) landscapes can be viewed in three ways: as scenery, as institution and as resource. Landscapes can take on many meanings, from strong visual connotations to feelings of community or memories from a photo of a particular place (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Cosgrove, 2006; Olwig, 1996).

The landscape can be actively constructed to support and/or legitimize national identities (Leitner and Kang, 1999). Indeed, landscapes are not only physical and highly symbolic territories with boundaries, but are also mental images in our imaginary (Sörlin, 1999). As such, Sörlin argues that landscapes also exist as symbolic or mental categories, imbued with social and cultural heritage. In some countries, such as Sweden, official landscape heritage has been utilised as a tool to support powerful discourses of national identity (Germundsson, 2005). Importantly, landscapes are not static, but rather evolving, mediated, and contested (Leitner and Kang, 1999; Sörlin, 1999). As such, Warf and Ferras (2015) remind us of the need to challenge dominant discourses of the nation and scales of analysis, such as the sub-state or region, in the construction of identity.

In this context, traditionally it has been the rural landscape, and the ways in which it has been shaped by economic, social, cultural and political institutions, that has been the subject of study. Indeed, the landscape is not the result of 'natural' processes but is produced and constructed (Setten, 2004). As Schein (2003, 203) describes: