Scottish style: the construction of national identity and place amongst Scottish fashion influencers on Instagram.

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of personal style as an expression of national identity by investigating the construction of Scottish identity amongst fashion influencers on Instagram. Instagram is recognised as an example of visual media that has been embraced by the fashion industry and one that lends itself to the communication of place.

The paper adopts a novel photo-interview approach, building on the work of others in the fields of visual analysis and qualitative research. Participant influencers were asked to select and discuss a sample of their own Instagram posts that they felt represented their identity as a Scottish fashion influencer. These posts were subject to further interpretation and new meanings around Scottish identity and fashion were uncovered, including: the use of historic settings and landscapes as a backdrop for outfit posts, expanding the traditional definition of street style; a preference for autumn-winter styles; and a relationship between belonging to a place and personal style.

Scottish identity was important to the participants in this study and something they felt made them stand out within the increasingly crowded realm of fashion influencers online.

Introduction

Scotland is recognised as a small stateless nation with a vast and widely recognised iconography (McCrone, 2017). It is globally renowned for its textiles industry and academic research has tended to focus on this area with particular attention given to tartan and tweed (Fulton, 1991; Hume, 2010; Pittock, 2010; Cheape, 2010; Platman, 2011; Young and Martin, 2017).

It is argued by leading academics in the field of Scottish identity that Scotland is a victim of its own rich heritage whereby the appropriation of a romantic Highland vision of Scotland as stark and remote has made it difficult to establish a more contemporary vision of the nation and its people (McCrone et al, 1995). McCrone et al (1995: 7) argue 'if Scotland is heritage rich, then it could be because it has a past but not a present or a future'. Equally, it has been suggested that Scottish identity is overwhelmingly masculine (McCrone et al, 1995; Martin, 2009), where 'the quintessential image of a Scottish national dress and identity is the kilted highlander' (Cheape, 2010: 17). Scotland's vast iconography, which includes items of material culture such as the kilt, may be distinctive but some believe these images are superficial, outdated and not representative of a modern Scotland (Nairn, 1981; Trevor-Roper, 1983; McCrone et al, 1995; McArthur, 2003).

Research into Scottish fashion is an underdeveloped field and this paper explores the contemporary expressions of Scottish identity conveyed by personal style influencers who are recognised as having revolutionised the fashion industry. The wave of fashion bloggers that emerged during the mid 2000s has attracted the attention of academics in the developing field of fashion studies (e.g. Allen, 2009; Pham, 2011; Rocamora, 2011b; Chittenden, 2013; Findlay, 2015; Titton, 2015). The definition of a blogger has since evolved and these are now typically termed 'influencers' who focus their attention on visual platforms such as Instagram (Abidin, 2016: 86). Not only do large numbers of posts on the medium relate to fashion but engagement levels on these posts tend to be much higher than that of other media, such as Facebook and Twitter (Rogers, 2017).

Fashion bloggers and influencers are heralded as having ‘extended the fashion map beyond traditional fashion capitals’ (de Perthuis, 2015: 524; Rocamora, 2011a). Although physically situated in a geographic location, the digital and global nature of an influencer’s audience allows them to appear placeless. However, there are also many who choose to reveal and promote their national identity and physical location online.

During the campaign leading up to the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, there was much discussion of Scottish identity. The current research took place amidst conversations about the possibility of a second Independence Referendum following the UK’s vote to leave the European Union. Indeed, in the wake of the *Brexit* outcome, which saw every constituency in Scotland vote to remain in the EU and an overall UK-wide outcome to leave, McCrone (2017) argues that Scottish identity took on a new form as European and thus the adoption of a Scottish identity in a potentially global arena might take on a new dimension.

The aim of this study was to explore the construction of Scottish identity and place amongst fashion and style influencers on Instagram. It is argued that their experiences provide valuable insights into contemporary Scotland.

Theoretical perspectives on Scottish fashion and style

Research into Scottish fashion focuses on the production of Scottish textiles (Grierson et al*,* 1985; Butt, 1987; Cheape and Anita, 2005; Faiers, 2008; McKeen, 2009; Rae, 2016), especially tartan and tweed (Fulton, 1991; Hume, 2010; Pittock, 2010; Cheape, 2010; Platman, 2011; Young and Martin, 2017). Tartan, in particular, is regarded as inextricably linked with Scottish identity and Cheape (2010: 16) refers to this as ‘a touch stone of Scottishness’.

Although regarded as quintessentially Scottish, tartan is recognised as a by-product of the romanticised writing of Scottish history that took place in the latter half of the 18th/early 19th centuries by writers such as Sir Walter Scott (Fulton, 1991). Tartan and kilts have a more widespread place in Scottish history from this point on, propagated by their perceived historical importance (McCrone et al, 1995). Although

the popularity of tartan and kilts is only observable from the beginning of the 19th century, the history of tartan predates this and can be traced back to the 17th century in the Scottish Highlands, where it has been described as a 'Highland response' to the Renaissance (Young and Martin, 2017, p. 17; Cheape, 2010). Pittock (2010) presents a less cynical view of tartan as more than an invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Trevor-Roper, 2010). He argues that, although tartan stems from the Highlands and was later appropriated in Scotland more widely, it is symbolic of Scottish pride and therefore a genuine part of Scottish history. Given the fact that research into Scottish fashion is so heavily focused on tartan, its significance cannot be disregarded.

The kilt and tartan are strongly interlinked but often regarded separately in the literature. Young and Martin (2017: 56) argue that the kilt is highly visible today as a signifier of Scottish identity and cite 'the tartan army', where the kilt arouses a 'warrior spirit' and 'the school girl look', where the kilt was brought to the fore as a mainstream fashion trend in the 1990s through films like *Clueless* (1995) (Butt, 2010; Young and Martin, 2017). Of course the kilt is also associated with Scottish celebrations and formal occasions, such as weddings (Fulton, 1991). The influence of tartan is evident across a range of subcultures from the 1970s onwards, where Punk, Grunge and Hipster movements all appropriated the cloth in new and diverse ways (Percival, 2010; Young and Martin, 2017).

Young and Martin (2017: 54) maintain that 'tartan is a lot more than misty glens, bagpipes, haggis and shortbread – it can be rebellious, masculine and cool'. They observe tartan and its influence in contemporary fashion, notably amongst luxury fashion designers, with Vivienne Westwood, Alexander McQueen, Jean Paul Gaultier and Burberry as just a few they name 'tartan visionaries' (ibid: 92). As one of the oldest couture houses and luxury fashion brands, Chanel's long-standing relationship with the Scottish textiles industries (tartan, cashmere and Fair Isle) is perhaps particularly illustrative of their excellence (ibid).

Platman (2011) tells the story of *Harris Tweed: from Land to Street* through personal anecdotes and introductions to those who work in the industry. Her book consists primarily of photographs, most of which depict the Island's iconic landscape. Harris

Tweed is one of the strongest examples of a brand that is physically and not just symbolically entrenched in place. Where other fashion brands, such as Burberry, focus strongly on heritage and place in their marketing (Straker and Wrigley, 2016), Harris Tweed by its very definition is rooted to place; the orb trademark can only be used where the tweed has been sourced, spun and woven on the Island. Guy Hills describes Harris Tweed as ‘timeless’ and ‘the very pinnacle of heritage’ (Platman, 2011: 123). The visual nature of Platman’s work, as well as telling the tale of the iconic textile, demonstrates the extent to which the Scottish landscape and the people who live there are a meaningful part of Scotland’s fashion story.

Crane et al (2004: 67) explore Scottish dress, ethnicity and self-identity through a study of Americans with varying degrees of Scottish descent, arguing that ‘items of Scottish material culture are… dramatic, easily recognised, and market accessible’. Their study focuses on dress, which can be used to ‘self-symbolise’, i.e. to signify a national identity or heritage and/ or align with a group (ibid: 68). They found the participants in their study differed in the value they placed on their Scottish ancestry and in the extent to which they felt complete in their Scottish identity. Clothing was found to be most important to those who were exploring their Scottish roots for the first time and wanted to communicate their Scottish identity in a more explicit manner: ‘once a respondent has constructed and feels complete in his or her ethnic identity, symbols are likely to become less important’ (ibid: 79).

In summary, the area of Scottish identity has attracted scholarly attention for some time, where renewed interest might be attributed to a dynamic political landscape. However, research into Scottish fashion and style remains an underdeveloped field, with tartan and tweed remaining the focus of academic studies. Perhaps, as McCrone et al (1995) argue is the case with Scottish heritage more generally, tartan and tweed are such dominant signifiers of Scottish fashion, they eclipse any further conceptualisations of Scottish style that might exist.

This study sought to explore Scottish identity and style in a new context from the perspectives of those who actively communicate their personal style and identify outwardly as Scottish or as physically placed in Scotland.

Research approach

The study was qualitative and consisted of interviews with 14 Scottish fashion influencers. Participants were chosen based on the criteria that they operate publicly on Instagram and identify explicitly as Scottish or Scotland-based in their Instagram biography. In addition, participants conveyed a strong fashion element of their identity where the focus was on their own personal style. All participants had a fashion blog and although this was not a sampling requirement, it suggests a level of commitment and professionalism in their approach. It is not possible to search for users on Instagram based on profile keywords and so a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify research participants (Browne, 2007). The participants in this study were all female, which is typical of the Scottish fashion influencer community. Equally, it has been argued that Scottish identity is overwhelmingly masculine (McCrone et al, 1995; Martin, 2009) and so these women might be regarded as particularly significant in shaping contemporary ideas of Scotland and its people.

Upon agreeing to take part in the interviews, participants were asked to provide a sample of posts they felt were representative of their identity as a Scottish fashion influencer. This is a novel approach that builds on the work of others in the field of visual analysis. Photo elicitation (Collier, 1957) and evolving methods like photo voice (Wang and Burris, 1997; Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001) are recognised for their ability to provoke multi-layer responses from participants who engage more emotionally with a subject (Croghan et al, 2008). Indeed photo elicitation, which traditionally involved showing photographs to participants to prompt a response, and photo voice, where participants are asked to take their own photographs in response to an issue, are seen as particularly valuable when exploring issues of identity (Vila, 2013) and facilitating ‘conversations in place’ (Anderson, 2004: 254; Leddy-Owen, 2013; Baxter et al, 2015; Hood and Reid, 2018).

The approach that was adopted for the current study differs in that participants were asked to curate a set of their own Instagram posts (consisting of image and text) that already exist and had been shared independently prior to the research being conducted. It is believed that asking participants to curate their own imagery avoided

issues of researcher bias in selecting a sample; where ideas about what constitutes Scottish identity and style might have been imposed on the data as a result of the common narratives and iconography surrounding Scotland that have already been discussed. The adoption of this 'naturalistic' approach enabled new meanings around contemporary Scottish identity and style to be uncovered (Van House, 2009: 1077). The fact that participants chose these posts themselves also enabled insights into participants' online behaviour, their awareness of and motivations surrounding the construction of their online self. Reflecting on their identity in this way evoked strong memories and the expression of greater self-awareness by participants, enabling them to gain new insights into their own beliefs about Scottish identity.

Participants could select as few or as many images as they wished and between four and 12 images per participant were collected, resulting in 77 Instagram posts, which were then subject to further analysis. This was informed by Barthian semiotics (1957) and Panofskian iconology (1955) whereby the images were analysed for their denoted and connoted meanings; interview data and the written caption that accompanies an image allowed for contextual understanding to be extracted.

The posts that were curated by participant influencers and brought together as a set in this study are regarded as illustrative of contemporary Scottish identity and fashion as expressed through personal style. The following discussion highlights some of the key themes that were uncovered.

Scottish street style

Rocamora and O'Neill (2008) define street style as a type of photography that depicts everyday personal style against an urban backdrop. Rocamora (2011a: 102) argues that fashion bloggers have brought this aesthetic to the fore and further established street style as a stronghold of contemporary fashion, bringing the city to life through the real people who live there. Instagram lends itself well to the aesthetic whereby the medium is recognised for the immediacy through which individuals can document their everyday style outdoors and in the moment (Song, 2016; MacDowell and de Souza e Silva, 2018).

The participants who took part in this research were found to convey their personal style outdoors in a slight variant of the traditional definition of street style. Although participants were all city dwellers (two lived in London, one in Perth, Australia and the rest in three of Scotland's four main cities) they tended to opt for more rural and historic settings as a backdrop to their outfit posts. In these posts the participants themselves and their clothing were key signifiers but the backdrop had often been chosen quite carefully. Figure 1 shows a street-style post of Eday (20) near her home in Edinburgh.

Fig. 1 Eday's Edinburgh street style

Eday's style identity was strongly centred on her passion for Scottish brands. Although she was born in Birmingham and had spent most of her life there, she was living in Edinburgh at the time of interview. Her affinity with what she saw as the Scottish political mind-set made her feel more Scottish and attached to her city, which she regarded as culturally vibrant.

Fig. 2 Iona's Scottish street style

Figure 2 shows another example of street style where Iona (23) is denoted outside her family home in the North-East-of-Scotland countryside. Iona was living in London at the time of interview but regarded herself as Scottish. She associated Scotland with connotations of home and family and observed that her Scottish identity had become more important as she grew older and something she had become more conscious of whilst living in London. In the caption, Iona reveals her intention behind her backdrop, implying that a certain type of setting was required for this particular style and one that could not be accessed within her everyday London surroundings.

Throughout the interviews participants highlighted the importance of the setting for their imagery. Generally they preferred to showcase their style outdoors and opted for historic (Figure 1) or natural (Figure 2) settings. Figure 3 illustrates the Scottish street-style aesthetic further.

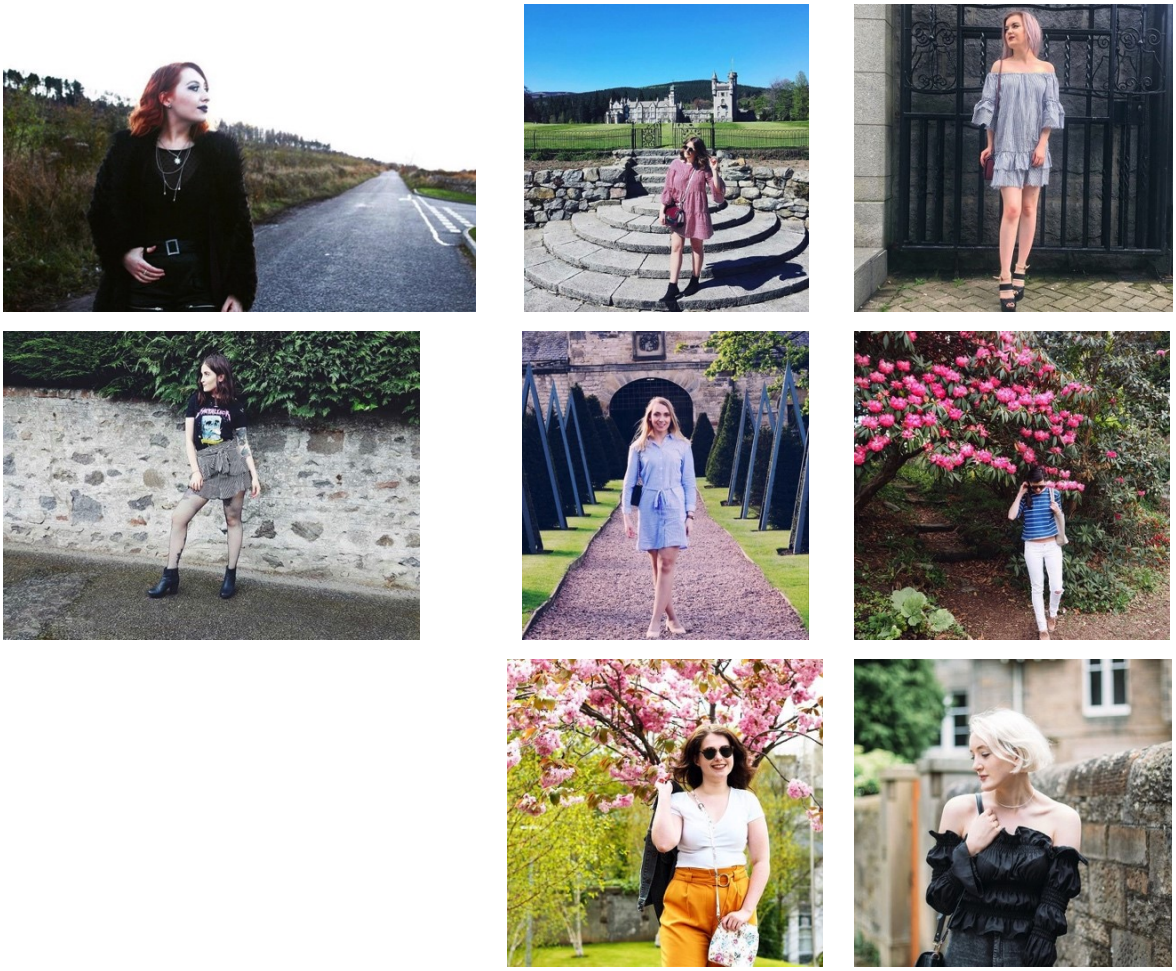

Fig. 3 Scottish street style

Participants' preference for historic built environments or natural settings suggests the traditional Highland vision of Scotland as stark and people-less is still strong in contemporary Scottish style (McCrone et al, 1995; McCrone, 2017).

The autumn aesthetic

Craik (2009: 413) maintains that fashion communicates 'the zeitgeist of a place'. During the interviews, participants distinguished between what they regarded as stereotypes and more authentic signifiers of Scottish identity and style. Notably, participants did not reflect strongly on traditional textiles such as tartan and tweed as part of their personal style. Those who mentioned these recognised their value but did not see these as sufficient in representing contemporary Scottish fashion, which they felt was more diverse.

Fig. 4 Tiree wearing tartan

Tiree (19) was the only participant who provided a post denoting tartan as part of her own style. During the interview she revealed that she chose the post because it showed a garment (the tartan scarf) that was gifted to her from a Scottish designer with whom she had worked as an intern. This suggests that, to the participant, the tartan element of the image is not as significant in connoting Scottishness as the individual designer and memory of working with her. Figure 4 conveys street style but in the more traditional sense where the influencer is pictured in Edinburgh city centre, which also happens to be where she was born and brought up. It illustrates another key theme around Scottish fashion where participants expressed a strong preference for autumn-winter styles.

Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on a familiarity with the ‘dreich’ Scottish weather and a subsequent inclination towards warmer clothing; in particular scarves, boots and coats were mentioned. The interviews took place in the summer months and participants spoke of feeling drawn towards autumn-winter styles earlier in the season. The sample included two Scottish influencers living in London and one Scottish influencer living in Perth, Australia and they also observed a preference

for autumn-winter fashion and spoke about layering their clothing. In all cases, they felt this was linked with their sense of self as ‘Scottish’, where even London was regarded as warmer, and as somewhere that people tended towards a summer wardrobe in a manner to which a Scottish person could not quite relate.

Only one participant, who was born and brought up in Greece but was living in Scotland and characterised her online self as predominantly Scottish, expressed with ‘sadness’ a recognition that she could not embrace summer fashion. The findings suggest, therefore, that those who live in seasonal zones of the world might feel familiarity and positivity towards seasonal styles in this way. Figure 5 illustrates this theme further from the perspectives of the participant influencers:

Fig. 5 Autumn-winter style

The autumn-winter aesthetic is evident not only in the clothes themselves but also through the tonality of the image set. A number of the participants reflected on autumn in particular as an influence for them. One expressed a fondness for autumn that she felt had derived from having an October birthday. Another spoke of a brand collaboration that took place in autumn each year, where she would visit the Scottish countryside solely to be photographed in their clothing. A third example involved an influencer who applied a warm filter to all her imagery and ‘played around with the

seasons', using these to help showcase Aberdeen, where she was living, in new and creative ways for her followers.

The tension between a Scottish and London style identity

The participants in this study were passionate about their Scottish identity and felt 'proud to be Scottish'. Perhaps this is not surprising given they all identified as Scottish or Scotland-based in an online world where they might choose to appear placeless. Participants felt that their Scottish identity was an attractive feature and something that made them distinctive in an increasingly crowded infosphere online.

Participants recognised London as the epicentre for UK fashion and one participant even reflected on what she regarded as the lack of a fashion industry in Scotland, where she felt it was the job of style influencers to help build this. Participants drew on comparisons between Scotland and London throughout the interviews. London was recognised as somewhere that offered significant opportunities for those who pursued a career as a fashion influencer. Two participants were living in London at the time of interview and categorised themselves on Instagram as 'Scottish girl[s] in London'. One participant, who was living in Glasgow and had the highest follower numbers (in excess of 50k), recognised the need to move to London in order to fully realise her career as a fashion influencer.

Although London was regarded as advantageous from a career perspective, none of the participants felt that London was somewhere that they belonged long term and they all recognised their home as being in Scotland. This idea of London as almost the antithesis of Scotland resonates with the Highland vision of Scotland as a place of tranquillity and escape. The popularity of this ideal dates back to Queen Victoria's acquisition of the Balmoral estate in 1852. A subsequent 'Balmoral effect' (Fulton, 1991: 42) is recognised as significant in shaping perceptions of Scotland predominantly through literary and artistic impressions (McCrone et al, 1995; Crawford, 2009; Martin, 2009; Brown, 2010).

Throughout the interviews, participants spoke about Scotland as a place for escape. This was firstly because it was regarded as peaceful, in contrast to big

cities like London (Fulton, 1991; McCrone et al, 1995; McCrone, 2017). One participant who had experience of living in London observed: ‘as soon as you get off the train in Edinburgh, you just feel like you’re in Scotland and it’s like you can breathe better than you can in London’. Secondly, Scotland was seen as a place in which it is possible to escape city life even whilst living in a city. Most participants recognised the ease with which they could escape to the countryside and pursue outdoor activities as an advantage of living in Scotland. This idea is illustrated in a number of the sample posts, many of which show people-less landscapes and natural elements as either a backdrop or focal point of the image.

Gunna (24), who was living in London at the time of interview, reflected on her fashion in London and in Scotland. She discussed Figures 6 and 7 as illustrative of her personal style and how this differed depending on her place. Figure 6 shows an example of her Scottish style, which she described as ‘more classic casual’ than in London, where her style was more ‘girly and playful’. This is illustrated in the garments themselves, with jeans and trainers signifying a dressed-down and practical, yet fashionable, look. Gunna’s pose appears natural and this adds to the casual look she described as her ‘Edinburgh style’.

Fig. 6 Gunna’s Scottish style

The caption speaks strongly of her love for her picturesque hometown of Edinburgh with a light-hearted reference to the rain, reminding the audience that her feet are planted firmly on the ground and a jacket is always required. Her reference to ‘finding the cutest little streets’ suggests the post was unplanned and, perhaps therefore, reflective of a more authentic personal style. It also suggests that the discovery of a ‘cute little street’ such as this is, in itself, worthy of sharing with her followers.

Figure 7 illustrates Gunna’s ‘London style’ and is indicative of a different aesthetic in both clothing and photography. Here, the garment appears as the focal point, overshadowing the white and nondescript background and, indeed, the participant herself. In looking down she draws attention to the garment and her ‘girly’ London style is connoted through the floral pattern of the dress and her youthful pose. In contrast with the summer style that is depicted in this photo, the caption suggests the weather was not summery. This emphasises further the self-confidence she associated with London, where – even in bad weather – she was comfortable wearing a dress with bare legs. When reflecting on the story behind this image, Gunna revealed that she chose it because it was a dress that her mother had bought her when they were in Scotland and this was the reason she considered it privately as part of her ‘Scottish identity’.

Fig. 7 Gunna’s London style

Participants varied in how they felt about their style in London versus their style in Scotland. Some were more confident in London, where they felt that fashion was more diverse and they as individuals were more anonymous. Others felt more comfortable ‘at home’ in Scotland, where they were able to ‘be themselves’ and make more authentic fashion choices.

Overall, it appeared that participants felt able to express their most fashionable identity in London, embracing more conspicuous and outrageous trends; they also felt braver in baring their legs (as is illustrated in Gunna’s sample posts). However, where participants were inclined towards more anti-fashion styles, they saw Scotland as more accepting of these; for example, one participant spoke of baring her tattoos. Others reflected on a more general anti-establishment attitude and defiance that they associated with their Scottish identity and felt was reflected in their style. One participant observed: ‘I think, as Scots, we don’t really let other people tell us what to do… we’re not one to be told, like, sit down and shut up’. This defiant attitude is reminiscent of other Scottish cultural icons, such as Robert Burns whose poetry was characterised as bold and daring (Crawford, 2014).

Conclusion and implications for future research

This paper has addressed a gap in the literature by exploring new meanings around contemporary Scottish fashion and identity through a study of Scottish fashion influencers on Instagram. Although there is a growing interest in Scottish identity, some of which is motivated by a recently vibrant political landscape, research into Scottish fashion has continued to focus on traditional textiles. Although these are undoubtedly iconic and important to Scotland’s fashion heritage and future, it is argued that these textiles are not sufficient in conveying contemporary Scottish style.

Participant influencers were passionate about their Scottish identity and felt this was something that made them distinctive online. By choosing to identify openly as Scottish or as physically placed within Scotland, it is argued that these fashion influencers are styling perceptions about what it means to be Scottish today. The findings illustrate the interaction between past and present Scotland, where

participants tended to draw on historic settings and rural outlooks as a backdrop for their outfit posts, reinventing the traditional definition of street-style. This, alongside their distinction between Scotland and London, perhaps reaffirms the Highland vision of Scotland as a romantic place for escape but conveys this idea in a contemporary manner. Participants' overwhelming preference for autumn-winter styles was most strongly shaped by the feelings of comfort and familiarity they associated with their Scottish roots.

The themes and ideas uncovered in this study help pave the way for future research into Scottish fashion and identity, as well as studies of national identity and fashion within other geographic contexts.

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