Making waves: Contesting the lifestyle marketing and sponsorship of female surfers

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Abstract

The surfing industry is a multi-billion dollar a year global business (Gladdon, 2002). Professional female surfers, in particular, are drawing greater media attention than ever before and are seen by surf companies as the perfect vehicle to develop this global industry further. Because lifestyle branding has been developed as a modern marketing strategy, this thesis examines the lifestyle marketing practices of the three major surfing companies Billabong, Rip Curl and Quicksilver/Roxy through an investigation of the sponsorship experiences of fifteen sponsored female surfers.

The research paradigm guiding this study is an interpretive approach that applies Doris Lessing’s (1991) concept of conformity and Michel Foucault’s (1979) notion of surveillance and the technologies of the self. An ethnographic approach was utilised to examine the main research purpose, namely to: determine the impact of lifestyle marketing by Billabong, Rip Curl and Quicksilver/Roxy on sponsored female surfers. The data collection was conducted over a four-year period and was predominantly based on interviews supported by observation, field notes and document analysis that included the analysis of visual material represented in magazines, newspapers, surf-related websites and DVDs. Interviews were conducted with fifteen female surfers who were predominantly sponsored by either Billabong, Rip Curl or Quicksilver/Roxy and included other non-surf-related companies to discuss their sponsorship experiences. Four representatives from three manufacturers of global surf wear, Billabong, Rip Curl and Quicksilver/Roxy, were also interviewed in order to determine the motivation, selection criteria and philosophy that will impact on the sponsorship of these female surfers.
Results from this study indicate that lifestyle marketing by the Big Three through sponsorship provides a limited number of female surfers with the opportunity to compete on the professional surfing circuit. While there has been a pronounced increase in the number of women and Generation Y girls taking up surfing, their gendered position is continually under surveillance and being shaped by other surfers, spectators, leading sport and surf brands, the media and society in general. All of these onlookers make assumptions about how female surfers should look, behave, surf and be represented. Therefore, despite the potential of lifestyle marketing to raise the profile of women’s surfing, in the last two decades there appears to be limited improvement in the promotion of this sport. This is due to a lack of sufficient funds and support from companies as well as the ongoing control of women’s surfing by the surf companies, the ASP and the media. The literature dealing with aspects of effects of commercialisation within the surfing industry and contemporary issues affecting women in the sporting context illuminates the problems being encountered by female surfers.

The study found that the attributes of female surfers recommended for sponsorship selection were surfing ability, an appropriate look or image, engaging personality and the ability to communicate effectively in public. The Big Three confirmed that all four attributes were highly regarded in the sponsorship selection process of female surfers. However, the terms and conditions of a sponsorship agreement or contract by the Big Three serve as a form of surveillance over female surfers. In order to fulfil the sponsorship requirements of surf companies, female surfers undergo self-surveillance and compliance. This self-surveillance takes the form of scrutinising their look,
dress and behaviour at surfing competitions and events in order to secure media attention. Furthermore, the commercialisation of the surfing industry has encouraged the continued use of sexualised images of sponsored female surfers to sell products and increase company profits and has served to devalue women’s surfing performance. The conundrum is whether the commercial aspects of lifestyle marketing and sponsorship of female surfers can coexist so that their marketability is not just being used to sell products but is equitable to all concerned. My study not only adds new knowledge to the lifestyle marketing and sport literature but may empower female surfers that they can be empowered to make informed decisions regarding their sponsorship.

In order to develop a deeper understanding about the complexities surrounding surfing as a competitive sport, three recommendations for future research are suggested. The first recommendation is to investigate the practices and aspirations of the ASP regarding the future promotion and support of female surfers. A second recommendation is to investigate the intentions of non-surf-related companies to gauge and determine the extent of their business interests in women’s surfing. Finally, there has been a significant increase in the use of surf-related websites and social networking as marketing strategies by surf companies. Therefore, future research examining the impact of modern technology would be meaningful as women’s surfing and other action/lifestyle sports continue to source methods for promotion and growth. All three recommendations will help raise awareness about the issues surrounding the future promotion and opportunities for
amateur and professional female surfers and assist in the future direction of women’s surfing in general.
I declare that this thesis has not previously been submitted for any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Roslyn Franklin

Date: April 3, 2012
Dedication

Mary Menhinnitt – March 5, 1920 - May 7, 2012.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Mary Menhinnitt, who has encouraged me in all of my endeavours and has always been there for me.
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