

# Surfing in the Third Millennium: Commodifying the Visual Argot

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The practice of surfing has often been at odds with the mores of wider society, to the point where surfers have been described in the media as rotten, long-haired, unwashed drug addicts, or as jobless junkies. However, in recent years there has been an increase in the popularity of surfing and an increase in the consumption of surfing related commodities. This increase in popularity is largely due to the marketing practices of the business interests that are involved in surfing, which has appropriated its images and sold them to a rapidly expanding and lucrative market.

This paper will outline how the commodification of surfing's visual style, and the meanings that are symbolised by this development, have had a three-fold effect on the sport. First, surfing has been shifted away from the beach into quite different contexts; second, surfing as understood by the wider society has been altered and; third, the commodifying practices of business interests have transferred the symbolic ownership of the sport from surfers to surfing capital.

## Introduction

In the third millennium, mention the word 'surfing' and many things spring to mind: surfing the net, windsurfing, sky surfing, channel surfing, surfing as a commodified form and, lastly, the act of skimming across the face of a wave on a 'surfboard'. Here I limit the manifold understandings of surfing to the last activity that I have just described and its commodified form, surfwear. The wider profile of surfing has been achieved by 'surfing capital', a term that I have coined to describe the three major, global, surfwear producers,<sup>1</sup> and identify these businesses as the core of surfing capital. However, these are not the only producers to be included in surfing capital, as there are many other manufacturers who currently remain on the periphery, but may, in the future, become part of the core as consumption of the surfing lifestyle shifts. I will discuss later why these producers are peripheral to the core manufacturers and how surfers and consumers distinguish between the different producers of surfwear. As a result of surfing capital's influence since the 1980s, surfing in the third millennium is firmly entrenched within the mores of wider society and has reached a level of acceptability in Australia that is unprecedented in the history of the activity.

The focus of this paper is to outline how the physical act of surfing has been appropriated by business interests and commodified to create a lucrative market based on the sale of 'lifestyle clothing'. As a result, a distinction needs to be drawn between the physical act of surfing in which the body is used, and what can usefully be considered to be the politicised, or commodified, surfing body; that which exists away from the beach and is recognised not by the act of surfing, but rather by a style of clothing. However, both of these formulations—surfing as an activity and as a politicised form—coalesce to become surfing in the third millennium. Surfing has become a more acceptable leisure activity than it was in the past, to the point where in Australia it has come the 'full circle'. As a result, a short history of surfing and its location within Australian society is addressed, followed by a more in-depth account of the process of commodification, as it is this facet that has transformed the sport, shifting it out of the wilderness and into a place in the sun.

## Methodology

The substantive information in this paper is based on an amalgam of observations and interviews with surfers, consumers, surf media and a small-scale attitudinal survey. Information about surfwear, in any form, is limited due to the closed nature of the industry, as the major surfwear manufacturers are relatively small companies, in terms of their management structure, and do not disclose their marketing, sales and distribution information readily. However, there are other sources available, such as videos about Rip Curl's marketing practices (see *Rip Curl* 1993; *Rip Curl 2* 1997) and articles in the popular press (see Browne 1991; Collins 1997; Safe 1997; O'Meara 1999), which offer a limited insight into the major producers of surfwear.

The survey mentioned above was administered to 200 university students at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia, with a 41% response rate (75 useable responses). When this information was combined with observation and interviews with surfers and consumers of surfwear, an account of the surfwear market and its wider effects on surfing was possible. In this rendering, I have included the two, not necessarily mutually exclusive, categories of consumer and surfer. The reason is, that of those people who consume surfwear, the majority of them are not surfers, and conversely there are surfers who are not always consumers of merchandise marketed by surfwear companies. The importance of such diverse sources is that surfwear has proven a more complex social space than first anticipated, as it is a confluence of business interests, fashion, and surfing as a current and an historical activity.

## The making of surfing

The origins of surfing is difficult to pin-point. Some authors locate it in the Pacific Islands around 3 to 4,000 years ago (Tristram and Wilson 1993; Crawford and Wright 1994:5; Finney and Houston 1996:21) with the first written account being recorded by Lt. James King in 1778 (Finney and Houston 1996:97). Although Pearson (1979:31) concurs, he notes that this was not the only area in which pre-Western surfing occurred by adding that '... there does appear to be some Atlantic surfing in Africa earlier than the twentieth century ...'. However, the cultural importance of surfing in Hawaii and the manner in which it was developed by the islanders at the time of colonial contact, suggests that

Hawaiian surfing has a continuing history of at least 1000 years (Finney and Houston 1996).

Surfing was introduced into Australia in the late 1880s (Basch 1971:248), and from 1907, when the Surf Lifesaving Association began, until the early 1960s, it was firmly located within a structure of surf lifesaving clubs (Booth 1994:263-66; Pearson 1979:47-50). As Pearson (1979:48) points out, '... very few people who were not members of the surf-lifesaving association used any type of equipment or craft in the surf'. Resulting from this, surfing was extensively regulated and surfers were encouraged to undertake their sport within the framework of the existing surf life-saving clubs.

During the 1950s, the 'outlaw' (Jarratt and Hackman, 1997) surf culture of the time was transformed by the 'Gidget' and other movies into mainstream culture (Booth 1994). However, it was not until the early 1960s that surfing became popular due to mainstream surf films, articles in popular magazines, such as the *Australian Women's Weekly*, and the holding of the first official World Championship<sup>2</sup> at Manly beach in May 1964 (Booth 1994:265). The acceptance of surfing in the 1960s stemmed from, '... the beach's centrality to the ... [Australian] ... culture' (Fiske et al. 1987:55), the success of Australians in the sport (such as Midget Farrelly and Nat Young), and the realisation by business interests of the potential market that existed for youth culture (Booth 1994:267-69). With this rise in popularity, business interests 'appropriated surfing images as avenues to the rapidly expanding and lucrative youth market' (Booth 1994:265). This widespread popularity can be seen in the sponsorship of surfing in the 1960s and early 1970s by 'mainstream' business interests such as Coca Cola, Ampol Petroleum and Trans Australian Airways. Furthermore, Douglas Booth (1994) maintains that during the 1960s, the image of surfers was firmly located within the dominant middle-class culture. This was due to the close ties of surfing with the existing surf-lifesaving structure; its acceptance as a sport and; its similarity to 'new middle-class hedonistic values emerging under the impetus of consumer capitalism' (Booth 1994:266).

Despite the appearance of the acceptance of surfing during the 1960s, Booth (1994:268) argues that the wider society saw surfing and similar activities as '... wasteful, selfish and irresponsible leisure [and they were often seen as an] unanchored cultural practice lacking social utility'. As a consequence, surfers were often labelled by the media as '... rotten, long-haired, unwashed drug addicts' or as 'jobless junkies' (1994:266). Moreover, it was in the 1970s that the position of surfing cemented. Surfers were seen as being in opposition to the attitudes and values of wider society (Fiske et al. 1987; Farmer 1992; Booth 1994) and they began to be the focus of increased regulation, to the point where some municipal councils and surf life-saving clubs attempted to ban the use of surfboards by other than surf life saving association members (Pearson 1979:59). Booth (1994:270) suggests that this was due to surfers being seen as having '...no respect for rules or the safety of any other bather'. Moreover, Fiske et al. (1987:66) argue that surfers were constructed in a position of opposition, not only to the dominant culture, but also the dominant body of the beach, that of the surf lifesaver, '... if the lifesaver is culture, the surfer is nature; if the lifesaver is responsible, law-abiding and community spirited, the surfer is irresponsible, feckless and "a bludger"'; if the lifesaver is civilised, the surfer is primitive; the lifesaver is land, the surfer is the sea'.

### Surfwear: a visible style of surfing

As a result of the change in the image of surfers during the late 1960s and 1970s, sponsorship for competitions begin to shift from business interests outside surfing to more dedicated interests, for instance, clothing and wetsuit manufacturers. As Browne (1991:156) suggests, many of the business interests involved in surfing today began so that the people behind them would be able to '... avoid the nine-to-five syndrome and to make it easier to have fun—which, in most cases, meant going surfing'.

The dedicated business interests of surfing have packaged the activity in such a manner that they achieved a shift in its position from the 'fringe' of wider society to where it is not only accepted, but where the associated lifestyle is embraced by many diverse groups who have no connection with the act of surfing. This has been achieved because the image that surfing elicits, of a pleasurable and playful lifestyle, has been appropriated and commodified, resulting in a profitable market that is based on the sale of clothing and other merchandise that is often described as surfwear. These businesses manufacture commodities, which when marketed, present an idealised notion of surfing. This linking of surfing so closely with the commodity, allows the non-surfer to share in the surfing lifestyle by the purchase and wearing of a style of clothing and other products. Such is the impact of this commodification that in 1991, the *Bulletin* magazine estimated that the global surfwear market was worth some A\$100 million (Browne 1991:157). However, in a recent article in the *The Australian*, Guyet (2002:27) quoted a market with global sales of A\$40 billion. This scale of business allows surfing capital to exert tremendous control over the activity of surfing and its representations at all levels, both within and outside of the activity.

Surfing's increasingly high profile and the positive image that it creates has seen surfing capital re-shape the sport, succeeding in changing it from a sub-culture as identified by Pearson (1979) and Hull (1976), through what Farmer (1992:248) has described as a '... semi-deviant scene ...', to the point where we are now, in which surfing images are used in marketing campaigns for a wide range of products that are unrelated to surfing. The re-shaping of surfing has allowed surfing capital to commodify the activity and, in doing so, has created an extremely profitable market that is based on the sale of clothing and other commodities. Although, the notion of surfwear has been accepted as a largely undisputed category by consumers, the terrain in which surfwear is articulated is not described.

The wearing of surfwear, and in particular surf t-shirts, is an overt form of identification with a particular lifestyle and group. This is partly due to the nature of logos on t-shirts—they are large and often in colours that make them bold and easily identified. According to O'Flinn (1990:69), this bold form of dress '... sends out a host of signals to other people about our sense of gender and morality, about our class and income, about our notions of style and taste'. This then brings us to the issue of just what it is that sets a particular article of clothing apart from others that circulate in the same grouping and identifies that article as surfwear. Goffman highlights this issue in his discussion of the value of objects in terms of social status, when he states that the value of objects in the social context is determined by the '... expressive difference between them ...' and, in doing so, accounts for the place of these objects in terms of the '... social gains that their owners obtain by showing these possessions to other persons' (1972:263-65).

Surfwear is not only consumed for its use value, in that it may be cooler and more casual to wear, but also for its sign value—that it signifies a particular attachment to a lifestyle and inherent in this lifestyle is the freedom and resistance associated with the

surfer and the surf beach. Consumers have an understanding of what constitutes surfwear and thereby, sets it apart from other commodities of similar intent. This is evidenced in the survey and interviews; when people were asked if 'genuine' or authentic surfwear exists, 65% responded that there is such a category. As such, this knowledge, or 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984), creates two groups of commodities that circulate within this matrix—surfwear, and other commodities that are not considered by consumers and surfers as genuine surfwear.

This articulation, of surfwear versus non-genuine surfwear, creates a series of disjunctures. First, it is possible that due to the commodifying (and possibly hegemonic) practices of surfing capital, some of the clothing worn by surfers engaged in the activity is not considered by consumers as surfwear, as it does not have the attendant signs that have been invested with the cultural capital of surfwear, yet in the final analysis, any clothing worn by a surfer is surfwear, regardless of whether it was produced by a surfwear company or not. Second, there are clothing labels<sup>3</sup> and styles that may exist as 'marginal' surfwear in that they were considered as such in the early commodifying process and have since been shifted aside, or other labels have taken their place, and made a claim to being surfwear that is more accepted by consumers. Third, due to surfers being unable to identify other surfers by their mode of dress, identity as a surfer is achieved through a displayed engagement in the physical activity of surfing. This also becomes problematic as the numbers of people surfing increases, and the access to waves decreases, a context is created in which the 'imagined community' of surfers, described by Stedman (1997) as being articulated through media, becomes one in which a sense of identification and community is achieved through an ongoing link with a particular beach. This situation is described by Maffesoli (1996:131) as being when '... location becomes connection ... [by linking] ... space and sociality ...'. This 'tribalism' has created what is commonly referred to as 'localism' among surfers, and in these instances the creation of the social space of surfwear has seen the argot of surfing cleaved away from those with whom it began and set adrift within a new web of meanings.

As a result of the identity of surfer being articulated at the local level, surfing capital needs a vehicle to link its produce with surfing that sets it apart from other forms of similar produce, and this is achieved through claims to authenticity which in turn carries the cultural capital of surfwear. These claims are evidenced by slogans that in turn are used in the marketing of the surfing lifestyle, rather than the product. These slogans range from: Rip Curl's 'Born at Bells 1969' (*Australia's Surfing Life* January 1995:11; *Rip Curl* 1999:34) or 'A Product of The Search' (*Australia's Surfing Life* November 1999:24); O'Neill's 'Since The Beginning 1952' (*Australia's Surfing Life* October 1998:28-29); Billabong's 'Since 1973' (*Australia's Surfing Life* October 1998:122); Quiksilver's 'superfine since '69' (*Australia's Surfing Life* April 1999:127). Furthermore, these slogans are not the only signifiers of authenticity as there are other manufacturers who are able to make claims to have been manufacturers of surfwear in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Lightning Bolt, Hang Ten, Crystal Cylinders, Golden Breed and Okanui, yet these labels do not have the same status as than those mentioned above. The reason for this is two-fold. First, surfing capital has created a market-place in which surfwear is linked closely to the notion of time, in this instance, how long and continuous the manufacturer has been both producing surfwear and remained linked with surfing. This 'invented tradition', to use Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) term, sees labels which do not have a continuing link to the market place and the activity, as being non-genuine in the perception of the consumer.

Second, Lightning Bolt, Hang Ten and Crystal Cylinders surfwear, was originally produced in the late 1960s, and during the late 1970s and 1980s the company was 'off the scene'. However, when these labels re-emerged in Australia on the crest of the wave of the surfwear boom, in the early 1990s, they were distributed through non-boutique retailers, such as 'K-Mart' and 'Big W'. This distribution strategy has contributed to their marginal status, as a similar strategy has not been taken up by the surfwear manufacturers that Safe terms, the 'big three'—Rip Curl, Billabong and Quiksilver. As Rip Curl's Brian Singer maintains '... our customers, who basically remain surfers, wouldn't like that' (Safe 1997:43). Furthermore, as Safe (1997:43) points out, 'Specialist surf shops are still where [Rip Curl's products are] found, never mass market stores or retail chains'. Although it must be pointed out that some of the 'specialist surf shops' that Safe (1997) mentions are nothing more than specialty clothing shops and it is possible to argue that, due to the number of outlets that some of these surf shops have, they are retail chains. This means that authenticity, from the point of view of the core of surfing capital, is two-fold; it is related to point of sale, or distribution, and to a continuing link to the popularisation of surfing in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>4</sup> This, in part, is borne out by comments from surfers: 'Genuine surfwear has a function directly related to surfing. However, name clothing that identifies the individual from the group "surfers" may be classed genuine but has very little functionality' (male surfer, WA 1999), and, 'Surfwear depicts a lifestyle rather than a brand name and as such, it is the attitude of the wearer, and the perception of his [sic] attitude by those around him that truly decides what surfwear is' (male, surfwear consumer, non-surfer WA 1999).

Yet when these notions were tested in the survey, it was found that consumers did not subscribe to this belief, as only 48% of respondents to the survey listed 'place of purchase' in their top five indicators of genuine surfwear. When this is combined with comments from surfers, such as '... as far as I'm concerned, it's only surfwear if a surfer wears them on the beach. If you are not a surfer, then it isn't surfwear' (male surfer, QLD 1999), then the point of sale is of little consequence, as surfwear is the lifestyle association and not the label attached to it.

The notion of authenticity, among surfers and consumers alike, is a contentious one and as one surfer pointed out, it is '... [t]he area in which the product was born, and by whom the product has been worn and promoted' (male surfer, WA 1999) that determines genuine surfwear, so when the manufacturers begin to move away from this base, and the 'roots' of surfing, authenticity begins to be questioned.

Although surfwear businesses such as Billabong (personal communication: February 2nd 1999) maintain that their distribution strategies are targeted at the coastal fringe of Australia, it is possible to find shops that retail surfwear, and sometimes only surfwear, in locations throughout Australia that are far removed from the beach and, more importantly, rideable waves. These areas range from Alice Springs and Mt Isa, to country areas throughout Australia. Resulting from this, I would argue that it would be extremely difficult not to be able to purchase an item of surfwear from the 'big three' producers in any town of a reasonable size in Australia, regardless of its isolation from the beach. When this availability is juxtaposed with, for instance, Rip Curl's claim that they support their main consumer group, 'who are largely surfers' (Safe 1997:43), it is hard to maintain the assumption that surfwear is part of the surfing lifestyle and not merely fashion. In support of this, when inland consumers were asked why they consumed surfwear, their priorities were more often about the quality of the commodity, its availability, or its price, rather than a link with surfing. Consumers express this in comments, for example: 'I like

the design and its easy to find. I Used to like wearing the label, but now its not important' (male, non-surfer, NSW 1999), and; 'I used to surf and live in a "surfy town". I felt good about wearing the labels. It means less to me now as I am further away from the ocean' (female ex-surfer, WA 1998).

In spite of the widespread availability of surfwear and the comments of consumers, surfwear producers, in particular Rip Curl, do not see themselves as being part of the fashion industry, as evidenced by their refusal to take part in the 1997 (Safe 1997) and the 1999 (O'Meara 1999) Australian Fashion Weeks. Despite this attitude, surfing capital has created an 'anti-fashion' industry through maintaining an antithetical stance to mainstream fashion by constantly reminding consumers and surfers that '[w]e're not really fashion, we're just beach stuff' (Singer cited in O'Meara 1999:42). However, consumers recognise this as rhetoric, and that surfwear is fashion, as highlighted by one consumer who commented that, 'You don't have to be a surfer to wear surfwear. Most surf labels have become just that, a label, and are subsequently worn for fashion. Thus they are almost indistinguishable from other fashion labels' (male, non-surfer, consumer. QLD 1999).

Yet, it is in the interest of surfing capital to remain in a liminal position *vis-à-vis* fashion so as to have a market for their commodity, yet retain the aura of, or links to, authenticity, in this case—surfing. The surfwear industry needs to maintain its links with surfing and enhance its credibility among surfers, while on the other hand it needs to offer commodities that fulfil the fashion needs of its consumers, because as Peter Turner, the owner of a surf shop that has been operating for 25 years on the Gold Coast in Queensland, has been quoted as saying, '[i]f you only sold surfwear to surfers, you wouldn't have much of an industry' (Collins 1997:5).

### Surfing in the third millennium

Surfing has come full circle, from being what Booth (1994) has described as part of mainstream culture during the 1950s and 1960s, through an interim period when it was marginalised as a minority leisure activity, or on the 'raw' edge of nature (Fiske et al. 1987), to its contemporary position where it is a commodified lifestyle that has been packaged, sold and accepted by wider society.

The current acceptability of surfing and its commodified form is best highlighted by two examples. First, when Mark Occhilupo achieved the pinnacle of his surfing career by winning the 1999 world championship, he was featured (wearing Billabong clothing—his sponsor) in the broadsheet newspapers as well as television magazine programs such as Channel Nine's 'Today'. This is something that had not occurred in the past, even though Australians, both female and male, have won a number of world surfing championships, beginning in 1964. Second, there have recently been numerous marketing campaigns, for a wide range of products, that feature surfing or links to surfing. These range from telecommunications products and services, through milk drinks, to luxury cars, and very few have a link to the activity of surfing, or its lifestyle and, in most cases, even consumption of the product does not complete this link.

The transformation of surfing has occurred largely due to the actions of surfing capital—the compressing of a surfing lifestyle into surfwear—resulting in the symbolic ownership of surfing being transferred from the individual surfer to surfing capital through the commodification of the activity and the marketing and sale of the visual argot of surfing. In the early stages of this process it was still possible to recognise a surfer by mode of dress, as surfwear was still the province of surfers. However, as surfwear

proliferated and became separated from the beach, surfers began to recede from ownership of the pleasurable and playful lifestyle, surfwear became fashion wear, and no longer the argot of a marginalised leisure group, surfing capital now decides what is surfwear and this commodified form is the public face of surfing. The former owner of Mambo, Dare Jennings, has pointed out that, '... they ... [surfing capital] ... produce stuff for the culture that they have created' (Collins 1997:5).

## Notes

1. The three principal producers of surfwear have Australian parent companies, and two of these are owned and operated by four people, while the third became a publicly listed company in 2000.
2. A single event competition to decide who would be World Champion.
3. These businesses I include as part of surfing capital, but remaining peripheral to the core group of three.
4. This is also evidenced in the logos of the businesses on the periphery of surfing capital, which also include the year that they began producing surfwear.

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