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Recognition for Female Surfers: Riding a Wave of Sponsorship?

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Recognition for Female Surfers: Riding a Wave of a Sponsorship?

Abstract

Gaining recognition for women's surfing achievements has been a long struggle. The sport's sponsorship dollars have historically been disproportionately focused on and provided for male surfing. However, recently this trend is declining as sponsors, primarily surf clothing companies are realising that elite female surfers can sell products to girls and women drawing greater media attention than ever before. This Chapter provides a summary of research aimed at gaining insights about what sponsorship means to sponsored female surfers. To achieve this, the research explored the impact of sponsorship by surf companies on sponsored female surfers.

This was achieved by examining data collected via questionnaire and interviews with elite sponsored female surfers attending surfing contests and company-sponsored events. Results suggest that sponsorship for female surfers has improved significantly, and has contributed to a heightened level of performance. Implications for future research suggest investigating why surf companies choose to sponsor elite female surfers.

Introduction

Competitive female surfers, like other elite athletes, are constantly searching for the edge that will enhance their opportunity for success in the water and in terms of their earnings. Even though the popularity of women surfing has undergone drastic changes and greater acceptance in the past 10 years, elite female surfers still struggle for equity in the water and also in other areas such as prize money and sponsorship (Booth, 2001a).

Sponsorship has developed as an independent and important element of promotion and sales. Researchers have described sponsorship as an investment to bring about varied outcomes, such as public awareness of company or brand, changing or enhancing brand or company image or testing products under 'real-life' conditions (Intel, 1994; Witcher, Craigen, Culligan & Harvey, 1991; Abratt, Clayton & Pitt, 1987). Shilbury, Quick and Westerbeek (2003) note that 'sponsorship in the sport context allows the sponsor to communicate more directly and intimately with its target market creating opportunities for enhancing brand loyalty' (p. 227). One follow on effect from sponsorship can be strong media and public interest and exposure, resulting in 'free' publicity. This can be very cost effective for the sponsoring company, and "in the case of many sporting companies securing lucrative sponsorship deals with the credible and appropriate athletes is linked to profit margins" (pp. 228). A central outcome of sponsorship depicted by Wilmshurst (1993) is described:

Sponsorship is usually undertaken to encourage more favourable attitudes towards the sponsoring company or its products within a relevant target audience, such as consumers, trade customers, employees or the community in which it operate (pp. 377).

Niche sports, such as surfing, offer excellent opportunities for sponsors to

communicate with very specific target markets' (p. 235). Kim Novick, the Surfrider Foundation's Director of Development, adds that women's surfing represents a specific lifestyle market whose potential has just started to be realized and the challenge now is for sponsors to find ways of connecting to the female surfers (McClain, 2003). There are now magazines and retailers specifically targeting female surfers sponsored events and greater exposure of female surfers through the media. Surfing companies who in the past have predominantly sponsored male surfers are now beginning to realise the potential of marketing and sponsoring high profile female surfers.

As women assert their presence into the previously dominated male preserve of surfing there may be some shift in culture and behaviour as has occurred in other sports (Kane & Buysse, 2005). This increase in the number of girls and women participating in surfing demonstrates a viable market opportunity for surf companies. Thus the purpose of this research was to explore and describe the experiences and impact of sponsorship on elite Australian female surfers. Specifically the research addressed four questions:

1. What does sponsorship mean to professional female surfers?
2. What are the different types of surfing sponsorship and how does it affect female surfers?
3. How are female surfers promoted by the larger surfing companies through sponsorship?
4. Does sponsorship and organized events by surfing companies assist the promotion of female surfing?

In doing so, this Chapter provides an insight into the development of sponsorship for female surfers, marketing and surf company involvement. It focuses on the responses from questionnaire and interview data to gain an understanding of the implications for sponsored female surfers.

Marketing 'Girl Power' or Disempowering Female Equality in the Waves?

The development of women's surfing and subsequent interest by surfing companies predominantly grew as a result its sexual attractiveness, appeal and marketability (Gault-Williams, 2003). Women originally were introduced into professional surfing contests as a sideline in order to attract a wider audience (Gault-Williams, 2003). This marginalisation was exacerbated by surfing magazines and other media which portrayed bikini-clad female surfers as sexual objects rather than concentrating on their ability and surfing capability (Gault-Williams, 2003). This typical representation was illustrated in an issue of Tracks Magazine (April, 1995) portraying images and photographs of women taken from behind mostly in G-string bikinis marginalizing women.

Heywood and Dworkin (2003) argue that this "babe factor" in sports, and controversies surrounding the marketing of female athletes according to their physical appearance, rather than a focus on their performance, reinforces traditional gender roles. This creates yet another oppressive body ideal for girls to follow and constructs the impression that "only appropriately feminine athletes draw the commercial benefits of that attention" (p. 39). Cohen (1993) and Duncan (1990) describe the suppression of active and talented female athletes as problematic and view those resisting the construction at risk of being labeled unfeminine or lesbian. Therefore if this image of the sponsored female surfer does not match the socially accepted representation required by the sponsoring company the result might be either failure to attract sponsorship or loss of an already existing agreement. Surf companies are perhaps being persuaded to endorse the popular societal icon of what is considered

‘feminine,’ based on the physical attributes of the female surfer rather than her performance. This raises issues about whether surfing sponsorship for female surfers is actually promoting ‘girl power’ or disempowering female equality within surfing.

Research by Stedman (1997) supports this notion and suggests female surfers are ‘not only being denied access to the physical surfing experience but denied access to the symbolic community of surfers as a basis for their own identities’ (p. 80). Research findings (Thorpe, 2008; Harris, 2005; Thomsen, Bower and Barnes, 2004; Miller & Heinrich, 2001 and Anderson, 1999) indicate that female athletes struggle with the pressure in maintaining a balance between being feminine and physically attractive with the demands of their sports. Anderson (1999) reports this “gender marking serves to infantilize women and distinguish them as “other” thus supporting the construction of surfing as a masculine practice (p. 73) and women as lesser. Booth (2001b) concurs that “the sudden representation of women as sex objects by the surfing media, and women’s long struggle to forge a viable professional circuit” (p. 7) both provide evidence of surfing’s continuing fraternal structure. Stedman (1997) attributes ‘sexploitation’ by surf magazines to “hostility” towards, and “suspicion” of feminism. Booth (2001b) maintains this perception about female athleticism has “posed contradictions for sportswomen” (p. 11). This has lasting implications for effective sponsorship for female surfers. Postmodern ethnographic research from the feminist perspective is based upon not only the active participation of the researcher in the production of knowledge but pays attention to the significance of gender and the contribution to an understanding of a social reality of women (Pederson, 1998). Thus the feminist postmodern perspective and approach to data collection in this chapter proved valuable in investigating relationships between female surfing, sponsorship and industry. The following section provides an understanding of the opportunities available for females aspiring to compete on the professional circuit, and discusses the developing relationship between the “big three” surf companies, Billabong, Roxy (a brand owned by Quiksilver), and Ripcurl and the implications this has on the marketing of female surfers.

Professional Circuit, Marketing and Surf Company Impact

There are several avenues for female surfers to engage in competitive surfing. These include local, State and National or international level. For most aspiring young female surfers the aim would be to compete in the most prestigious event which is the Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP) Women’s World Tour. The ASP is the governing body of professional surfing and organizes the ASP World Championship Tour. The ASP sanctions the Foster’s ASP World Tour, the ASP Women’s World Tour, the World Qualifying Series (WQS), and the World Longboarding, Junior and Masters Championships. The ASP women’s division is made up of the top 17 women competing in seven events worldwide in Brazil, Peru, Hawaii, Portugal, USA and Australia. The only way to qualify for the ASP World Tour is through the ASP World Qualifying Series (WQS). By accumulating point totals throughout the season, ASP WQS surfers are then rated, giving them a chance at qualifying for the ASP World Tour. The point total is garnered from a competitor's best seven results. The top six surfers from the women's ASP World Qualifying Series are awarded seeds onto the Women's ASP World Tour. The ASP World Tour also grants Wildcards to be awarded, allowing ASP World Tour surfers who could not acquire enough points to re-qualify through competition during the season to compete in the World Tour. The Quiksilver Roxy Pro is just one of those sponsored qualifying events. Female surfer serious about entering the professional arena would need sponsorship from one of the major surfing companies to be able to afford participation on the

ASP tour. However, many female surfers who are not necessarily involved in professional surfing circuit, also vie for sponsorship. Without sponsorship, traveling, and funding, competition expenses becomes cost prohibitive for most up and coming young surfers. Training is also quite often part of the sponsorship package providing female surfers opportunity to enhance performance. In the absence of this support, progression to the elite ranks could prove problematic.

Surf companies historically have predominantly accommodated male surfers and it is only recently that they have begun to realize the growing potential of the female market. The acceptance that female surfers can sell products through sponsorship and raise attendance at surfing events is also drawing more media attention (Southerden, 2003). The principal global producers of surfwear (known as 'The Big Three') are Australian companies - Billabong, publicly listed on the Australian Stock Exchange; Quiksilver (and its female equivalent Roxy), publicly listed on the New York Stock Exchange; and Rip Curl, an Australian company which is still privately operated. Each company has influenced the surfwear revolution through identification with lifestyle and their involvement has resulted in commodification of the industry (Lanagan, 2003). What was once an industry where surf companies were suppliers of surfboards, board-shorts, wet suits and surf-related equipment has evolved into fashion items of clothing, such as swim wear, sunglasses, watches, bags, and hats.

The shift from a narrowly defined market catering to surfers to a global fashion-based clothing industry, in direct competition with mainstream and sport clothing, emerged in a relatively short space of time. The wearing of surf wear is considered a form of identification with a particular group and lifestyle and as such is unique compared to other corporations that promote their products or brand through an association with a sport (Lanagan, 2003). The surfing industry maintains close contact with its consumer base by sponsoring both professional and amateur male and female surfers. Sponsorship in each of the three surfing companies involves varying exchanges of goods and services: the company supplies a select group of surfers with free equipment, clothing and stickers, boards in exchange for exposure through entry and participation in surfing contests. The surfing industry also utilises different types of sponsored surfers to endorse and advertise their products or competitions and events. These events, in particular the premier ASP world tour, attract naming rights from the major 'Big Three' sponsoring companies. Events such as the Quiksilver Roxy Pro on the Gold Coast (Australia), and Tavarua (Fiji), the Ripcurl Pro at Bell's Beach (Australia), as well as the Ripcurl Cup at Sunset beach (Hawaii), Billabong Pros at Teahupoo (Tahiti). Jeffrey's Bay (South Africa) and Mundaka (Spain) all compete for media attention (Arthur, 2003). These events are aimed at promoting the highly competitive surf brands worldwide attracting sponsorship and involvement of other companies unrelated to the surfing industry (Arthur, 2003).

Today, surfing images and the associated lifestyle are used in marketing campaigns for a wide range of these products unrelated to surfing. The commodification of the industry and an idealized notion of surfing have resulted in a profitable market based on the sale of surf clothing and other merchandise sold as surf wear' (Lanagan, 2003). This allows the non-surfer to 'share in the surfing lifestyle, but not necessarily be identified as a surfer, by the purchase of a style of clothing and other products" (pp. 173-174). Lanagan ((2003) argues that, "the physical act of surfing has been appropriated by business interests and commodified to create a lucrative and popular market based on the sales of lifestyle clothing" (p. 174). This commodification provides a niche market for increasing the professional status

of female surfers but to what extent is uncertain. As a result, one by-product of this commercialism and sponsorship has been the increased use of professional female surfers as role models to raise the profile of individual companies and make surfing for females more attractive (Arthur, 2003).

Stearns (2004) suggests that the profile of female surfing changed with the success of two Australian female surfers Lisa Anderson and Layne Beachley who made women's surfing 'attractive and accessible to everyone' (p. 119). Beachley contends that the big three surfing sponsors – Billabong, Roxy and Rip Curl – have seen the value in promoting women's fashion lines and bringing out women's clothing (ABC, Radio National, 1998). This makes sense as women shop for themselves as well as for men. (Radio National ABC, 1998). During the 1980s and 1990s the surf media produced surfing magazines such as *Surfing Girl*, *Chick* and *Wahine*, devoted entirely to women. According to Beachley "people want to see female surfers on good waves ripping it up, or the girls modeling their sponsor's wear because we're all a marketable bunch" (National Radio ABC, 1998, pp. 2).

The success of Anderson and Beachley as role models for female surfers in combination with the change in consumer fashion directed attention to the surfing culture. The acceptance of female boardshorts for surfing contestants also had a number of outcomes (Booth, 2001b). Roxy, the female off-shoot of Quiksilver, was the first to produce a board short that was appropriate for active female surfers. This brought about a significant shift in attitude with younger sportswomen feeling more comfortable about their feminine identity as well as gaining physical freedom to perform greater variety of moves in the surf (Booth, 2001b). The combined development of these products and the growth of larger surfing companies impacted not only on the sport generally, but importantly on women's gender order within surfing (Booth, 2001b). All surf companies recognised the marketing strategy and enhanced value with the inclusion of more female surfers as role models.

However, there still appears to be disparity between men and women in the sport with the amount of sponsorship funding and total prize money available for surfing competitions still favouring men. Therefore, the question remains whether the marketing and images of sponsored female surfers depicted by the big surfing companies through the media, could be perceived by female surfers as empowering, assertive or even worthwhile? This research explored female surfer's experiences and the impact of sponsorship on female surfers by the 'big three' surfing companies. This was achieved by employing a research design that was 'woman-centred' and appropriate to "open the space for the reassertion of female voices" (Stedman 1997, p. 88), namely the voices and opinions of sponsored female surfers. The following section discusses this design.

Method

Research Design

In order to understand the impact and ramifications of sponsorship on the female surfers, it was necessary to design a method that would enhance our understanding of assumptions made about surfing sponsorship. Ethnography, underpinned by postmodern thought, moves the researcher from not only being encapsulated and actively involved in the research process but also in the empowerment of the research participant's understanding of the research issue under investigation. With the emphasis in this Chapter on female surfers the research design utilised a feminist postmodern ethnographic approach to examine the relationship between female surfers, sponsorship and surfing companies. Postmodern ethnographic researchers

argue that feminist ethnography includes “more than ‘women studying women’ and is more about the relationships between women and men and how gender structures all social institutions” (Moore, 1988; Reinhartz, 1992). Pederson (1998) states “by placing women in the centre of the analysis, male standards that have become norms are challenged” (p.400). Other examples of postmodern ethnographic research that have been employed in sports with an obvious participant culture include windsurfing (Wheaton, 2000), skateboarding (Beal, 1996), and snowboarding (Anderson, 2001). These studies explicitly highlight how ethnographic research can reassert the voices and in particular the female voices within a predominantly male hegemonic culture. Stacey (1991) regards postmodern ethnography as “particularly suited to feminist research” (p. 112) as the focus of the enquiry gives voice to the subjective experiences of women, in this instance sponsored female surfers. In order to achieve this aim, it was necessary for the researcher to literally, as well as figuratively, immerse herself in the surfing environment. This research was therefore the product of a two-year feminist post modern ethnography that allowed the researcher to become a participant observer in the world of female surfing, both on the beach and in the water.

Participants

Participants were recruited through attendance by the researcher at the following main surfing competition sites for females - the Quicksilver and Roxy Pro on the Gold Coast, Lizzy Girls Surf Series (a series state title rounds for female surfers to advance to the Australian Surfing Titles), Queensland School Surfing Titles and the Napa Australian Masters Surfing Titles. Fifteen sponsored female surfers from each of the participating companies - Billabong, Ripcurl and Roxy were asked to complete a questionnaire and participate in a follow up interview. The average age of the participants ranged from 12 to 35. All participants agreed to complete the questionnaire and all interviews were conducted in person at the competition site. Competition organisers were also approached to request permission to use the competition site for data collection. These sites were chosen for ease of access to all the elite female surfers to fill out questionnaires and organize follow up interviews.

The sample of female surfers was limited to the particular surfing companies mentioned because they are acknowledged as the largest and most popular of the sport’s sponsors. These companies sponsor the largest surfing events making access to participants less problematic. This allowed perceptual insight into a cross section of the competitive female surfing community as well as the companies that sponsor its competitions and many of the elite female surfers.

Data Collection

Observations

The observation component of the fieldwork involved time spent at the research site in informed conversation with event organisers, representatives from surfing companies and members of the surfing community either participating or being spectators at the surfing events. This not only established rapport with participants but stimulated ideas about the types and suitability of questions to be asked in the preliminary questionnaire.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was given to 15 sponsored female surfers from Billabong, Ripcurl and Roxy. The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate the scope and extent to which particular companies sponsored and supported female surfers. The questionnaire gave the researcher vital background information about the participants particularly regarding the nature, type and company involved in their surfing sponsorship. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions and analysis of the responses were used as a starting point to provide further conversational themes for the interview questions. The questionnaire also gave participants some background knowledge about the purpose of the study and proved useful in eliciting initial conversation about their responses thus enabling expansion of the comments made.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview format was chosen to investigate professional sponsored female surfer's experiences of the sponsorship. The researcher's background and ability to communicate in a shared surfing language was an advantage not only in the recruitment of the participants but also in facilitation of semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured format was deemed most appropriate because it allowed the interview to be focused directly onto the realm of surfing sponsorship informed by issues and ideas arising and responses from the questionnaire. This allowed the researcher to gain clearer understanding about the existing types of sponsorship arrangements available between the various companies. Interviews were conducted in person and were mainly at surfing events at a convenient time for the sponsored female surfer. Due care was taken when choosing the appropriate timing of the semi-structured interview to ensure it didn't interfere with the participant's preparation for competition.

All interviews were audio taped to provide an accurate account of the conversation. Code names were utilized for the participants so the identity of the individual was protected throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

It was acknowledged that the researcher was not only immersed in the data collected, but in the culture of surfing long before this formal research took place making complete separation from the data problematic. However, in all cases every effort was made to allow the sponsored female surfers to speak for themselves and not ascribe any unintended meaning. Making observations and collecting the experiences of sponsored female surfers over this two-year period allowed the researcher time to seek elaborations and clarifications of those experiences.

The information shared by the sponsored female surfers was interpreted through a feminist lens. As a feminist study the purpose was to bring the knowledge of women from the margin to the center (Hooks, 2000). The data analysis in this research revealed the experiences of sponsorship for female surfers, going beyond a literal reading and employing an interpretive approach from which inferences were made to construct and interpret the meanings given to those experiences (Mason, 2002).

Each question from the questionnaire was coded by the researcher and put into an excel spreadsheet. General impressions and themes were noted both during the interviews and immediately following. Memos were also used initially to categorize and provide a framework for the comparison of data (Strauss, 1987). These memos were also taken to

capture meaningful statements, points to follow up and include in the interview discussion.

All interview data was transcribed verbatim and a manual coding process employed to maintain a close familiarity with the material. During this process, concepts, themes and ideas were formed into major categories from both the questionnaire and interviews. Open coding was employed to identify themes and understand the effects of sponsorship on the respondents. Once transcribed, the interview and questionnaire data was read in its entirety multiple times, and notes taken on potential themes. Meaningful statements were underlined. The transcription was reviewed until the researcher was satisfied that all the relevant pieces of data had been underlined. Each interview was read independently and data was placed into categories. Axial coding was then employed to make connections between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After multiple revisions of data placement the categories emerged into themes. Finally, selective coding was undertaken (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in order to validate the relationships that existed between the categories and sub-categories. In this process the themes for each individual interview were continually revised and edited until there were major categories developed and all of the significant points were included in a meaningful language. Meaningful and relevant quotes were then noted to exemplify these overall themes. The following section briefly discusses the validity of data analysis.

Validity of Data Analysis

Pedersen (1998) states, “there is no position from which ethnographic research can be conducted in an unbiased manner (pp. 399). To remain objective, the researcher’s influence on the results must be minimized even though it is difficult to avoid taking sides. Becker (1970) confirms that the researcher should remember to ask themselves whose side they are on (p. 399), whose knowledge becomes visible (Harding, 1991) and realize the influence of the researcher on the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Richardson (2000) suggests that postmodernists view the world from more than three sides and proposes the central imagery for ‘validity’ is not the triangle but prefers the crystal. Richardson (2000) states crystallization as deconstructing the traditional idea of validity and providing the reader with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Crystallization refers to the way the material is reported as a participant observer. Therefore this research will depend upon the crystal or the lens that the researcher looks through. Reinhartz (1992) assumes that “as long as the researcher is self aware, whatever happens is useful data (p. 68). The researcher was acutely aware of the fact that the female surfers had loyalty and contractual agreements with their surfing sponsors and was careful to be sensitive especially in the interview process.

Triangulation, or using these multiple sources of data, was used as a means of reducing the number of potential problems in this ethnographic research experience and method. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) confirm that triangulation evolved from the traditions where a researcher employs “different methods such as interviews, census data and documents to “validate” findings. Triangulation in this research was used to compare the data collection techniques employed, namely, observation, questionnaires and interviews to validate the findings to ensure the messages and stories were consistent.

Discussion

Results

The following section addresses the purpose of the research through discussion of the evolving themes uncovered from the questionnaire and interviews of female surfers. Quotes and details from the transcriptions are included to further clarify and describe these themes. Initially five to eight themes were developed from the questionnaire and interviews and were combined to create a set of overall themes that represented the entire data set. One topic heading was used to organize the themes: Female Surfers and Types of Sponsorship. Under this heading three sub-themes are included: Types of Sponsorship; Sponsorship and Expectations; and Image and Sponsorship. The sponsored female surfers described many differences and experiences in their surfing sponsorship and varying understandings of these experiences. The perspectives and interpretations of the participants show the diversity and similarities in these experiences.

Types of Sponsorship

Support from surfing company sponsorship includes equipment, clothing, products, money coaching, wetsuits and gym membership. There are two main types of sponsorship for female surfers. The main type is being sponsored as a 'team rider'. A team rider is a specific girl chosen for sponsorship for her potential and promise in surfing style or who is competing well in contests. The prospective sponsee is interviewed to ensure they are appropriate to endorse and represent the sponsoring company. There are sub-levels of sponsorship within this category and girls are allocated a certain amount sponsorship or have contract conditions and terms depending on their ranking or position in ASP Women's World Surfing Tour or junior circuits. Some sponsored females not only receive product but also obtain funding to pay for contest entry fees, international or domestic flights and accommodation. To receive this category of sponsorship girls are required to achieve at high levels in their surfing competitions and representing the sponsoring company in the media.

The other type of sponsorship is called 'lifestyle' sponsorship. The girls in this category are allocated and amount of sponsored product and are generally only given the opportunity to travel to surfing destinations for photo shoots and media interviews. These girls have a different selection criterion to the team rider girls although a certain 'look' attracts surf companies when choosing sponsorship arrangements for either type of sponsorship. This sentiment is reaffirmed by two of the participants:

What I would like to do is create change and bring about awareness to the fact that there are a lot of beautiful women surfers out there that don't necessarily have that look but have so much to offer. I think in general women's professional surfing is being held back so much and dictated by the industry.

I think in general they (the surf companies) like 'hot' girls to represent them and it is not always about surfing as it should be. There are women who are in the top ten in the world and they struggle to get sponsorship because they are not attractive and I think that is very wrong.

Several participants commented on the great relationship they had with their sponsoring

company. They felt this aspect was very important as a means of support especially when they had to travel to compete. One of the most important features for the girls and women was that the competitions and sponsorship had to be 'fun' otherwise they believed that it wasn't worth it.

They aren't too strict at a young age as they (the sponsoring company) just want you to be having fun but you still should get good results and be a good role model for the company, and also a good sponsorship means getting on with others in your team.

Another respondent stressed the importance of fun with their teammates from the same company while away on tour. This female surfer summarized it: "Surfing provides a chance to not only compete but meet new friends, travel and in general have experiences that otherwise would not have happened, without sponsorship this would not have been possible." This emphasis on the combination of the fun of surfing as a sport, the seriousness of competitive surfing as a business and the need for support seemed to be common amongst the female surfers interviewed. One elite female surfer commented:

I get to travel with the girls to the pro juniors and stuff which is a really good atmosphere and it's really good to travel with everyone in a supported environment and maybe further down the track maybe I will learn how to cook and do everything for myself, become independent which I will need to do in the future.

Although the sponsored surfers' description of sponsorship depicts the comradery and fun connected with competitive surfing their responses evidenced that there are certain expectations that were shown to impact on the availability and continuation of sponsorship. These aspects will be explored in the next section.

Female Surfers, Equity and Sponsorship

Surfing sponsorship is unique in comparison to other sports. It has transformed from a 'sub-culture' as identified by Pearson (1979), through what Hull (1976) described as "semi-deviant scene" (p. 248) to what Lanagan (2003) explains as a setting where "surfing images and associated lifestyle is used in marketing campaigns for a wide range of products" (p. 173). Shilberry, Quick and Westerbeek (2003) suggest extreme sports such as surfing "boast a highly identified and segmented following, offering excellent opportunities for affordable sponsorship and sponsors to communicate with a specific target market. This target market being more specific than the bigger sports market segments" (p. 235). The "Big Three" surf companies contend for naming rights to some of the premier surfing events although there is the inclusion of sponsorship from other non-surfing corporations.

Overwhelmingly surfing was described as a 'fun' sport and most girls reported starting surfing at a young age and being influenced, supported and encouraged by family and friends to participate and apply for sponsorship. Fifteen respondents said that the family members who encouraged them to pursue surfing were overwhelmingly male 12, as opposed to 3 females. Four responses also indicated encouragement from peers and friends. The following comment was typical:

I always love to surf with my mates, it's so much fun. My school lets me have

time off school to compete. My family is all extremely supportive as well, we travel and compete together.

Another question delved into whether girls should compete against the boys. This question elicited a mixed response with 6 thinking they should have mixed competition. The following responses represent the female surfers who were opposed to mixed surfing competition: [suggest consistency in presentation of responses as provided earlier]

Better for their own identity, hype and own promotion to have separate competitions

You can watch the boys surf if not mixed

Separate because when you compete together in a camp situation they usually get the priority waves and we always get the worst conditions

Better for the industry and spectators not so boring if mixed

For girls to compete against guys it would be hard they would constantly win

there are girls coming through like Carissa Moore, currently sponsored by Roxy and rated number five on the World Qualifying Series who are beating the guys

This question and another related to the differences between girls' and boys' surfing styles initiated discussion about whether or not this had an impact on sponsorship. Descriptors about boys surfing styles portray boys being "more radical, aggressive, having more guts, a lot more compression, speed, boys are more powerful, fast and flowing than girls much more exciting; go for better turns." The one classic comment was that the "best girl surfers surf like boys." All these comments indicate possible reasons why male surfers receive more sponsorship dollars and better deals. One other female surfer's observation was "my body is different and hips and boobs get in the way of surfing performance". Another female surfer believed if the sport of surfing is seen as predominantly masculine, female surfers need to work exceptionally hard at maintaining that feminine image to preserve their sponsorship opportunities. In an attempt to analyze whether sponsorship is equitable between male and female surfers, it is important to understand the expectations required to obtain as well as maintain sponsorship.

Sponsorship and Expectations

Most of the participants stated the main expectations when being sponsored by a surfing company included surfing well in contests, doing your best, and being a good role model. Being a good role model seemed to be paramount in all responses with one participant commenting:

A team rider is expected to always conduct themselves with the highest level of professionalism. We should perform at our highest standard in order to attain the best possible contest results not only for ourselves but also for the company. We also need to be available for photo sessions, video shoots, trips, use only the company

clothing, wetsuits, accessories at events and contests.

This comment was consistent in all interviews and there appeared to be only slight variation in expectation from the different companies. All female surfers pointed out, it was obviously vital to enter competitions and achieve good results at that elite level to maintain their ranking. Some of the larger surfing events are sponsored by specific surf companies and in this instance sponsored girls are required to wear sponsor's clothing at all times especially during competition and when participating in any media work at the competition site. Several interviewees commented the importance of staying fit and healthy as this enhanced their image, especially at competitions and photo shoots. All girls remarked that their sponsoring company expected them to be good role models at all times and project an excellent image. This included undertaking team signings at competitions or launches; attending trips away for photo shoots; and generally being involved in as much promotion for the company as possible. The girls mentioned this involvement contributed to raising their own profiles as well as the sponsors, which was preferable and enhanced their long-term prospects with that company. Some companies run promotion days like the Billabong "Girls Get Out There Day" or the "Roxy Surf Jam." These days are designed to not only get the company brand out to the public but to also promote surfing for girls as a healthy lifestyle choice. At these days sponsored girls are required to participate in media interviews and help run surfing sessions for all participants.

When participants were asked whether or not they had known someone who had their sponsorship terminated, the response was varied. Most girls commented that ending a sponsorship usually resulted from misbehaviour at a contest, being disrespectful to judges or organisers of the event, or bad behaviour generally while on tour. Other breaches of sponsorship contract they noted included: wearing other companies clothing; drug related issues; or consistently failing to make the cut into competitions one example given was "falling off the WQS (World Qualifying Series)." One participant revealed that one company relinquished sponsorship from one female surfer and gave it to a younger, better-looking girl.

She was getting too old, she was 20 and they were looking for younger more attractive girls to sponsor.

Another instance that one respondent gave was when a company had to choose between a girl and boy and they gave the sponsorship to the male surfer instead. The respondent didn't give a full explanation for this and there could have been other mitigating circumstances in this decision. One small company sponsor was also reported as going bankrupt and sponsorship had to be withdrawn.

Overall, all sponsored female surfers reported satisfaction with the expectations and requirements of their sponsorship agreement. The general consensus amongst all participants was to become an elite ranked surfer and survive, sponsorship was essential. The following section discusses the type of image expected when either applying or maintaining a surfing sponsorship.

Sponsorship and Image

Belch and Belch (2001) suggest that to convey and communicate an effective message in marketing, the credibility and attractiveness of the source, namely product or endorsee, is paramount. Credibility and attractiveness is therefore an important notion when choosing

female surfers for sponsorship. When asked whether or not surfing companies want to project a certain image in relation to sponsorship of female surfers there were several similar responses. The emphasis on health and fitness as a life style was evident in nearly all responses to the questionnaire and interviews as demonstrated in the following-

Yes. I think Billabong want to project a certain image. It's an image of healthy lifestyle, fit, happy and have a positive attitude. I feel I do fit this image as I love surfing and exercise, I'm happy where my life is at the moment and I love to crack a joke to make people laugh. I am comfortable with this image. I think it's just what the new age of women's and girl's surfing is all about!

Another participant responded –

Yes. Female surfing image should be seen as a fun and healthy sport also projecting healthy body image too. I feel like I do fit the image and I am very comfortable with the image of “female surfing” being projected to the public.

When asked whether or not they felt they were role models for younger girls, the younger inexperienced girls found this question a little confronting and said they were unsure or that they did not think so. However, most older and experienced girls responded quite positively:

Yes, I feel good about it – it's a healthy lifestyle – keeps you fit –body and mind.

Confidence is gained by surfing, which translates into other aspects of my life. I am glad to be a role model and encourage other girls to get active.

Yes, I babysit 2 young girls on a regular basis and they try and dress the same as me and they want to surf like me. I enjoy being a role model for younger girls.

Yes, I consider myself a role model to younger girls because I involve myself in Girls Get Out There” and other programs involving girls surfing and self-image. It makes me feel great as I am projecting a happy and positive image to these girls to be themselves.

The influence of advertising and marketing on the image and portrayal of sponsored female surfers is significant. If strong, physically attractive thin female surfers are constantly depicted as the ideal to obtain sponsorship this could affect other talented but perhaps less appealing female surfer's chances. This view may even impact on other young adolescent female's perception of what is considered ‘appropriate’ body image for sponsorship.

Implications and Conclusions

This Chapter documented the experiences and impact of sponsorship by the ‘big three’ surfing companies on sponsored female surfers. By examining this impact there was an overwhelming sense by sponsored female surfers that sponsorship has provided them with the opportunity to compete professionally in a sport that has historically been dominated by men. Without sponsorship many female surfers believed they would not be able to afford the costs involved in maintaining effective equipment for their sport or travel to the varying locations

around the world for competition. The data collected through the questionnaire described the varied types of sponsorship available and its impact on individual surfers capacity to compete. The data collected during the interviews suggested a high level of participant loyalty to their sponsoring surf company. Participants were happy with the sponsorship arrangements. Female surfers were able to promote themselves and their image via sponsorship agreements and good results in competitions assisted their sponsorship prospects. There also appeared to be consistent levels of expectation for sponsorship by surf companies. The surfers believed that for female surfers to effectively continue participating in the professional surfing circuit it was very dependent on the type and amount of financial sponsorship support provided by the relevant surfing company.

This Chapter has highlighted that female surfing has progressed a long way in terms of recognition however there still remains some ambiguity about a definite shift in attitude toward sponsoring female surfers. Future studies could question and interview older (30 – 50 year old) female surfers to determine how they believe sponsorship has developed and also interview female surfers who have had their sponsorship terminated. To fully understand the impact and relationship between sponsored female surfers and sponsoring companies future research could investigate why surf companies sponsor female surfers.

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