

On trend and on the wave: carving cultural identity through active surf dress.

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Abstract.

Clothing, as both functional and fashionable, has become a key marker in signifying and shaping personal identity. This is particularly clear in a range of ‘lifestyle sports’ (Wheaton, 2004), including the array of practices associated with the culture of surfing. This paper examines the ways in which companies market performance clothing to surfers. By critically analysing the ways in which wetsuits, rash vests, bodygloves and neoprene-boots are advertised by companies such as Billabong, Quiksilver, RipCurl and O’Neill, this paper outlines how particular engagements with waves are designed into these forms of dress, and how specific cultural performances and identities are encouraged through their marketing. The paper suggests that four cultural ideals become integral to the ‘dress code’ for performance surf wear, namely: 1) Unique Surfing Performance, 2) Cultural Authenticity, 3) Transient Engagements, and 4) Cyborgian Skin. The paper will argue how this marketing of active surf dress is important as it not only signifies particular types of identity within surfing culture, but also valorises specific types of communion with the surf zone.

Keywords:

Surfing, marketing, dress, performance, culture, engagement

Introduction.

Clothing, as both functional and fashionable, has become a key marker in signifying and shaping cultural identity (Shields, 1992, Dunn, 2008; Hetherington, 2011; Whiting and Hannam, 2015). As part of the process of ‘individualisation’ (Beck, 2002), individuals in the developed world make particular dress choices as “agents of their own livelihood mediated

by the market” (Beck, 1992, 130). As a consequence, “small decisions [such as] what to wear” contribute to the reflexive project of forming an identity (Giddens, 1991, 81). Clothing purchase and performance is thus inextricably tied by both producers and consumers to people’s sense of themselves and the cultural groups they wish to feel, and be seen to be, a part of. As a consequence, clothing manufacturers play a key role in commoditising aspirant and desirable lifestyles, and even creating them. This is perhaps particularly clear in the arena of lifestyle sports.

Lifestyle or ‘whizz’ sports (see Wheaton, 2004, Midol, 1993) refer to a range of cultural activities including rock climbing, sky-diving, skateboarding, and snowboarding. However, of all lifestyle sports, surfing is perhaps the activity that has most currency in the popular imagination. As it is generally understood, “surfing is the deceptively simple act of riding a breaking ocean wave on a surfboard” (Kampion and Brown, 2003, 27), or as Warren and Gibson describe it, surfing refers to “an ancient interaction between humans and the environment, a fluid and exciting pastime where breaking waves, the body, and a surfboard interact” (2014, 1). Surfing as a cultural activity shares many of the defining features of all lifestyle sports (Tomlinson, Ravenscroft, Wheaton, & Gilchrist, 2005; van Bottenburg & Salome, 2010). Surfing is individualistic in nature (as opposed to team-oriented); it is participatory (rather than spectator-focused); it is centred on skill, risk, and hedonism, often shows resistance to regulation and institutionalisation, and remains ambiguous in its relationship to competition (Wheaton, 2004, 12). Associated surfing cultures generally occur in coastal environments that are often spectacular, exciting and picturesque. With these elements combined, surfing is not simply a cultural practice that brings together humans and the sea, but has also been portrayed as a “metaphor for life [that has] almost universal appeal” (Kampion & Brown, 2003, 27).

Thus, as Barilotti (2002) states, “everyone today wants to be a surfer”, and although such claims are hyperbolic in nature, reports claim that 35 million people participate in surfing worldwide (Surfer Today, 2013). The surf dress industry is therefore a lucrative market; Surfer Today (2014) estimates that the industry is worth over US\$20 billion, whilst companies such as Quiksilver report annual turnovers in the multiple billion dollars (e.g. US\$1.81 billion in 2013, as cited in Surfer Today, 2014). As is clear from even a cursory glimpse at mainstream culture, the hedonistic thrill, adrenalin-fuelled risk, laid-back lifestyle, and even spiritual understanding that are commonly understood to be integral to surfing practice (see Midol 1993; Tomlinson 2001; Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003; Wheaton 2004, Stranger, 1999; 2011; Anderson, 2013a) means that the activity has cultural capital not simply within the boundaries of lifestyle sports. Many non-surfing products have been injected with a dose of surfer culture in order to add economic and social value. This process of (hyper)commoditisation (Scott, 2001, see also Crook et al, 1992, and Stranger 2011), has been used to sell travel destinations (e.g. Visit California, 2015), cars (e.g. Toyota Hilux Surf), perfume (e.g. Chanel No.5), and of course, clothes (see also Mondy, 2014). Due to the cultural appeal of this lifestyle sport, these products are not solely marketed to active surfers, but also to aspirant or even armchair surfers; in other words, those in the wider population who are attracted to the images, identities, and practices associated with surf culture, but are not engaged with the activity directly. These associated markets are crucial to surf dress companies, as Surfer Today notes,

“surf companies don’t live off selling [active surf] gear, that’s for sure. [For] the ‘Big Four’ - Billabong, O’Neill, Quiksilver and RipCurl – [shore-side] surf wear is where the profit is. Forget wetsuits, surf fins, traction pads or surfboards. Surf brands want

you to buy boardshorts, shoes and sandals, sweatshirts, t-shirts, trousers. That's where the coin meets the pocket" (2014).

Thus due to the popularity of surfing culture and their role in promulgating it, companies manufacturing surf dress have developed their product range from the niche provision of surf dress for the water-world (including wetsuits, rash vests, bodygloves, and neoprene-boots) to a range of fashion clothing items (including t-shirts, hoodies, coats, trousers, and shoes) that are sold to surfers *and* the mainstream market (Stranger, 2011). A number of corporations dominate this surf dress industry; long established surf companies (including RipCurl, Billabong, Quiksilver, and O'Neill) vie with newcomers to the scene (e.g. Hurley and Red Bull) to claim a slice of this lucrative market. It is through designing and advertising active surf dress to the core surfing market, and surf-inspired shore-side clothes to the general public, that these surf companies attempt to "control the clothes and shorts that we [i.e. surfers themselves] wear, and even the way we ride waves" (Surfer Today, 2013).

In general, the active surf dress that surfers choose to wear can be seen to require a number of functional, as well as fashionable, fundamentals. Surf dress is primarily purposeful in nature, enabling terrestrially-based human beings temporary freedom to engage with the 'water world' of the surf zone (Anderson and Peters, 2014). This temporary access is enabled through protection (from extremes of temperature, ultra violet radiation, or even surf zone impact), and through enabling practice (by aiding natural buoyancy and dynamism through the water). Yet beyond these primary functions, active surf dress has come to symbolise and re-present aspects of this lifestyle sport to others, both contributing to the identities of those choosing to wear them and creating solidarity between individuals in broader surfing collectives. This is particularly clear in the case of surfboards. Surfboards are not

conventionally understood as a form of dress, but like the wetsuits, boardshorts, neoprene boots, rashvests and thermal armour that make up the active surf dress wardrobe, surfboards become part of the surfer assemblage that engages with the water world (Anderson, 2012). As such, surfboards – like other forms of surf dress as we shall see below – are amalgams of function and fashion, they are not simply purposeful by providing mobility to the wave, an island-like refuge whilst waiting for waves, or the ability to catch and ride waves when they occur, but are also “symbolic, even talismanic... of cultural, social and emotional meanings” (Warren and Gibson, 2014, 1). Surfboards are thus at once technologies (Michael, 2000) which enable particular types of engagement with particular types of waves (e.g. the shortboard for aerial or acrobatic surfing on quick, fast and often messy waves; or the longboard for long, slow rides on larger, cleaner waves). Yet they are also cultural objects that promise affective encounters with waves and present aesthetic meanings to the broader cultural world about the nature of the board-rider (see Featherstone, 1991). As Warren and Gibson confirm, surfboards “are now used to construct a personal identity as much as answer a utilitarian purpose” (2014, 10). Thus a surfboard and (as we will see) more specific performance wear, enables surfers to practice their identity on the waves, and perform it on the shore. Active surf dress thus becomes a key part of the assemblage that is the surfed wave (including the coming together of surfer, water, geology, fetch, wind and tide (Anderson, 2012)), and the assemblage that makes the cultural territory of the liminal zone (see Anderson, 2013b). Surf dress is a technology that allows surfers to engage with the world differently, and define themselves differently in relation to the world.

In this light, companies such as RipCurl, Billabong, and Quiksilver, alongside smaller surf companies such as C-Skins, Patagonia and Finisterre, are key players in clothing and commoditising the surfing ‘neo-tribe’ (Maffesoli, 1996). These companies’ advertising

campaigns become definitive of key aspects of this lifestyle sport and the cultural, affective, and practical ‘traces’ (Anderson, 2010) that surfers and surf-friendly consumers elect to buy and wear in order to practice their identity. Surf dress therefore becomes an integral dimension of being a surfer, for this neo-tribe “consumption for adornment, expression and group solidarity become not merely the means to a lifestyle, but the enactment of lifestyle” (Shields, 1992, 16).

Methods, Marketing and Surf Magazines.

The key means through which these companies market their product to surfers is surf media, principally the internet and surfing magazines. According to Surfer Today (2013), “surf media dominates [access to surfers]. Surf magazines ...reach wide audiences. They are opinion-makers and may rapidly change consumption patterns in the surf shopping world”.

The importance of surf magazines cannot be underestimated, as Jean-Sebastien Estienne, European Marketing Manager of RipCurl, states, “we are deeply convinced that surf magazines are amongst the best tools we can use to reach our core customers” (Personal Communication, 2015). This paper explores the key ways in which surf companies from across the globe seek to market their active surf dress to surfers in Europe and America. By critically analysing the ways in which wetsuits, rash vests, body gloves, and neoprene boots are advertised by companies such as Billabong, Quiksilver, RipCurl and O’Neill (amongst others), this paper outlines how particular engagements with waves are designed into these forms of dress, and how specific cultural performances and identities are encouraged through their marketing. It does this by using content and visual analysis from seven magazine titles sold in the UK: *Surfer*, *Carve*, *Wavelength*, *Surf Europe*, *SUP International*, *Drift*, and *The Surfer’s Path*. It is argued that these surf magazines offer an illustrative cross-section of the titles available in Europe and the United States, as well as including the major titles and a

sample of ‘second tier’ magazines (Endo, 2013) which have sustained circulation in the market. This range has been chosen in order to gain a broad cross-section of surf company advertising, covering the ‘Big Four’ (who are likely to dominate advertising in the major surf magazines) as well as smaller surf companies.

Surfer magazine, produced in the United States, is often considered the “bible of surfing” (Surfing Today, 2013). *Carve* is the UK’s most popular surf publication, and is considered to be ‘the best European surf magazine’ (Estienne, Personal Communication, 2015), whilst *Wavelength* is the UK’s longest-running title (starting in 1981). These magazines, alongside *The Surfer’s Path* (which ceased trading in December 2013) and *Drift*, report on a range of short- and long-board surfing activities, tend to focus on male surfing (but not exclusively), and combine news on surf competitions, travel expeditions, and surf wear, with broader surf culture stories. *Surf Europe* represents the closest equivalent to a surfing ‘lad’s mag’, covering similar issues to the mainstream surf magazines but with a more controversial, often sexist tone; whilst *SUP International* (founded in 2008) caters to the growing constituency of Stand Up Paddleboarders. Back issues of these magazines were analysed from 2001 to 2014. 28 editions were chosen, covering a range of years and publications¹. All full page and double spread adverts were included in the study, with 220 different active surf dress adverts identified and analysed; whilst some adverts marketed specific surf wear products, others sold the lifestyle ‘brand’ of the particular surf company (discussed in detail below). (In terms

¹ Editions covered: *Carve* issues (7): editions numbered 102, 119, 123, 128, 131; *Drift*: 5, 6, 7; *SUP* (1): 7; *Surf Europe* (1): 75; *Surfer* (4): 53, 54, 55, 56; *Surfers’ Path* (9): 27, 28, 30, 33, 64, 82, 92, 95, 97; *Wavelength* (3): 184, 234, 235. Years covered: 2001: 1; 2002: 4; 2008: 5; 2009: 1; 2010: 2; 2011: 3; 2012: 2; 2013: 3; 2014: 7.

of product type, in the editions chosen 77 adverts were for wetsuits, 57 for boardshorts, 53 for the lifestyle brand of the company, 5 for rashvests, 5 for neoprene boots, and the remainder for miscellaneous items). Sixty different companies advertised in the sample, but the following dominated the advertising pages: O'Neill (24 adverts); C-Skins (19); RipCurl (18); Patagonia (12); Quiksilver (12); Reef (11); Billabong (8); NinePlus (8); Xcel (8); Alder (6); BodyGlove (6); Volcom (6); Finisterre (5); Hurley (5); Oakley (5); and Rusty (5). Both thematic and visual analysis (Miles, 1994; Pink, 2001, 2006) was conducted for these adverts, with the taglines, scripts, colours, locations, participants, and surfing styles noted and thematised. Key images are reproduced in the Figures below, and on the following webpage: <http://www.spatialmanifesto.com/research-projects/surfing-places/on-trend-and-on-the-wave>; where appropriate further information was referenced through related websites and social media feeds.

From this secondary material, the paper suggests that four key cultural ideals become integral to the identity of surfers through their active surf wear 'dress code'; namely: 1) Unique Surfing Performance, 2), Cultural Authenticity, 3) Transient Engagements, and 4) Cyborgian Skin. The paper will go on to show how this marketing of active surf dress is important as it not only signifies particular types of identity within surfing culture, but also valorises specific types of communion with the surf zone.

Performance.

As argued above, performance clothing needs to protect the surfer and enable surfing practice. Surf dress adverts therefore seek to convince participants with regard to their functionality on these fundamentals. As Stranger argues, "one key element in maintaining the link with core surfers is that the companies supply good quality functional items ... (as

opposed to purely symbolic goods) that the core accept as genuine ‘insider’ products” (2011, 190). In order to achieve this, a key element of marketing active surf dress is communicating to surfers a product’s USP. In general, a product’s USP is understood to refer to its Unique Selling Point; however, in the case of active surf dress, this paper suggests the USP of a product is better understood as the way it can help protect the surfer and enable surfing practice, in other words, help contribute to an individual’s Unique Surfing Performance. Patagonia, for example, used a campaign based on what their products are “built for” (see Figure 1). This series of adverts involved boardshorts and wetsuits that are “built for purpose”, and in practice this means they include a triumvirate of key enablers: protection, performance, and place-specific facilitation. As the following examples illustrate:

“We build for purpose. Its sounds obvious, but we’re committed to producing HIGH PERFORMANCE SURF GEAR THAT WORKS FLAWLESSLY IN THE WATER. [It] provides unparalleled WARMTH, COMFORT AND FLEXIBILITY from the most temperate of waves to the most frigid and demanding” (Patagonia, wetsuit, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 92, Sept-Oct, 2012, emphasis in original²).

“Built for: ‘getting barrelled’” (Patagonia, boardshorts, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 97, July-Aug, 2013).

“Built for: Ireland” (Patagonia, wetsuit, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 95, March-April, 2013).

² Surfing adverts are referenced as follows (Company, product (if noted), Source Title, Volume, Issue, Year). Page numbers for adverts are not cited in surf magazines.

[INSERT FIGURE 1. Figure 1. Unique Surfing Performance: Built for Purpose.]

This campaign exemplifies how surf companies offer functional products that protect the surfer from extremes of temperature (providing warmth in cold climes – or as an O’Neill advert for a rashvest worn by Jordy Smith claims, sun defence in tropical zones: “Don’t get burned. Ultraviolet protection 50+. Ultra light. Ultra stylish. Perfect fit” (in *Wavelength*, 184, July 2009). However, this protection is complemented and enhanced by the ability of surf dress to enable the surfer to perform on more difficult, elusive, and high status waves. For example, in the case cited above boardshorts are ‘built for getting barrelled’. As Fordham outlines, getting barrelled is “an essential aspiration for every surfer” (2009, 140); it refers to the ability to ride a wave that breaks over the surfer’s head, and whose crest or lip curls over the surfer, effectively enveloping the rider, whilst they travel through the moving water underneath (see Quiksilver, 2013a). Often called a ‘tube ride’, or accessing ‘the green room’, getting barrelled has become “an iconic element of surf culture and those who [can] ride the tube become members of an elite sub-cult” (Fordham, 2009, 140). In light of this, any product that promises to help the surfer to ‘get barrelled’ is going to be attractive, with individuals suspending their disbelief that this dress may actually help them generate this practice. The Patagonia campaign also suggests that their products are ‘built for’ particular places (for example Ireland in Figure 1). Waves breaking off the west coast of Ireland have become the new, not necessarily exotic, but definitively fashionable destination for local and global surfers. Communicated through surf travel books (Fordham, 2007), surf trip reportage in magazines (Carve, 2011), surf films (Conroy, 2009), and endorsed by surfing icons including Kelly Slater and the Malloy brothers, Irish breaks such as Easkey and Mullaghmore have become important ‘must-ride’ waves on the global surf map. As Ireland is now recognised as hosting world class breaks, albeit in colder conditions than experienced in

conventional surf locations, any product that promises to help withstand such wave power and temperature extremities will excite the curiosity of those wishing to experience this ‘new’ water world.

This move towards marketing products for colder climates is a key shift in surf companies’ design and advertising strategy over recent years. This paradigm shift is perhaps best illustrated through Finisterre’s entry into the surf market (see Figure 2):

“O’Neill, RipCurl, Billabong and Quiksilver, we’d like to welcome you to a task. There are more cold water surf spots than warm ones and we’re surfing them more than ever. ... The lifestyles we continue to see marketed are ones that focus on warm water surf regions. It’s a business model that isn’t geared towards designing products around what the cold water surfer actually needs. Do we really need another board short, flip flop, or sunglasses company? We don’t think so. Instead, we believe that designing quality products around the lifestyles of cold water surfers is the right step for the industry. We’re here to focus on the cold water surfer and to design products for them. We’d like to welcome you to the task” (Finisterre, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 92, Sep-Oct, 2012).

[INSERT FIGURE 2. Figure 2. Unique Surfing Performance: Cold Water Surfing.]

Although this advert effectively outlines Finisterre’s corporate and surfing philosophy (or ‘brand’, which is discussed in more detail below) in black and white, it suitably illustrates the shift within surf culture from a dominance on tropical zone surfing, to temperate, and even cold water surfing. In the popular imagination, and within surf culture itself, the ‘proper’ places to surf have conventionally been located in warm water spots (e.g. Australia, Hawaii),

however with changes in technology (boards and suits), as well as the spread of surfing from the 1970s onwards into a wide range of nations that do not have warm water waves, many surfers require rashvests, wetsuits, neoprene boots, gloves and hats to ward off the cold and prolong the time they can spend in the water. This is a USP that Protest and C-Skins surf companies attempt to commoditise, as the following advertising excerpts illustrate:

“Never leave the water. Surf till you can’t keep your eyes open. Dream of surfing. Then surf some more. Island protest makes trip to the shore obsolete. Protest to get there” (Protest, in Surf Europe, 75, July, 2010).

“we know british winters [and] ... we know how to combat them. c-skins ensure that you surf to your fullest potential whatever the british winter throws at you” (C-Skins, wetsuits, in The Surfer’s Path, 33, Oct-Nov, 2002, lower case in original).

As these shifts in advertising demonstrate, surf companies attempt to valorise and celebrate particular *types* of surfing activity. It is possible, for example, to surf with a longboard (8-12 feet in length) on cleaner, longer waves, and this technology encourage ‘glides’ rather than faster, more dynamic, and often aggressive manoeuvres. In contrast, shortboards (approx 6-7 feet) can be used on messier, gnarlier and sometimes quicker waves, and due to this board-wave combination, encourage fast moves, cutbacks, and even aerial manoeuvres (with many moves similar to those undertaken on skateboard or snowboard pipes). Many surf companies market their products particularly for this latter constituency; as the following examples illustrate:

“The new fusion 3q zipper with over-locking teeth completely blocks out water. The reduced zipper length allows for more freedom of movement. Easy in easy out. Formula for aggression” (O’Neill, wetsuit, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 30, April-May, 2002).

“Fighting the cold war. Razor. Zone. Bullet. 5x3 wetsuit technology from C-skins. Put the boot in! C-skin boots and reef slippers... designed for aggressive surfing. [...] Push harder!” (C-Skins, wetsuits, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 28, Dec-Jan, 2002)

“Designed to fit. Made to grip. So you rip” (C-Skins, boots, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 64, Jan-Feb, 2008).

Echoing through the military metaphors used and the tendency of surf companies to ‘weaponise’ their surf dress, these adverts seek to service the trend in surf culture that sees the domination of aggressive shortboard riding (in tropical or colder locations) over gliding longboard riding. These companies’ campaigns can be seen to, if not wholly create, then consolidate and perpetuate a ‘norm’ in surf culture that this form of riding is the orthodox and ‘proper’ way to perform surfing activity (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Anderson, 2010). As Ford and Brown (2006) identify, in recent years – and perhaps since the ‘shortboard revolution’ of 1968-1970 (see Kampion and Brown, 2003) – short-board riders have enjoyed elevated status and respect in the surfing field. This cultural norm brings with it certain power dynamics which favour young, athletic, male surfers within surf culture, and serves to (further) marginalise female surfers, older surfers, long-boarders, bodyboarders and surf-ski riders. Although adverts aimed at these latter groups do exist (for example RipCurl’s and Reef’s seasoned support for pro surfer Alana Blanchard), they nevertheless remain marginal to the “commonly accepted norm in and outside of the surf” (Mihi, 2015, 91). Performing surfing

on shortboards in an aggressive, aerial way has come to be the dominant mode of practice in surf culture, and these adverts do little to challenge this orthodoxy.

Finally in relation to performance, many surf companies use professional surfers, active on the surf tours, to help sell their product. As Jean-Sebastien Estienne, European Marketing Manager of RipCurl states, “Most of the time, we use action pictures of our ambassadors using RipCurl’s products. The goal is to highlight the features of our products (e.g. ‘Flashbomb³, the world fastest drying wetsuits’) by using the performances of our team riders (e.g. 3 times world surfing champion Mick Fanning or the recent world surfing champion Gabriel Medina)” (Personal Communication, 2015). Other key campaigns echo this trend for professional surfer endorsement, including:

“Xero furnace. Superior warmth. ‘When I put on a Billabong wetsuit, I don’t even have to think about it. I just know it works’ (Shane Dorian)” (Billabong, wetsuit, in *Surfer*, 55, Oct, 2014).

“Built for Action. Dane Reynolds. Signature” (Quiksilver, wetsuit, in *Surfer*, 53, Sept, 2012).

“KS10. Kelly Slater 10x World Champion” (Quiksilver, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 82, Jan-Feb, 2011).

³ Again, note the tendency of surf companies to weaponise their surf dress, to appeal to the younger, masculine, aggressive, surf market.

“PSYCHO series will take you to places you’d have to be nuts to surf. Rider Developed - Rider Proven” (O’Neill, wetsuit, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 28, Dec-Jan, 2002, see Figure 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 3. Figure 3. Unique Surfing Performance: Rider Developed, Rider Proven.]

The intended message through these campaigns appears to be: ‘if you want to surf like these individuals, our products will help you do this’. Often pictured performing aggressive cutbacks on fast moving waves, or aerial jumps in a variety of exotic or fashionable locations (Quiksilver, 2013b), such marketing ploys play to the dominant themes of performance within surfing culture outlined above, whilst also moving surf culture closer to accepting, and celebrating surf competitions. The professional surfers used to endorse products have their credentials underlined by the frequency with which they have won international or global surfing titles. From a lifestyle sport that is ambivalent to institutionalisation, these adverts seek to subvert cultural scepticism towards competition and lionise surfers who aspire to and succeed in the surf tour. As these competitions are wholly sponsored by surf companies (both long standing companies and newcomers to the industry), it is clear that surf dress manufacturers have a vested interest in promoting not only their products, but also the participating surfers likely to succeed in them. In this way, surf companies are not simply attempting to foster particular performances in the water world, they are also seeking to influence how surfing is defined in the broader culture.

Cultural Authenticity.

“I doubt that many [corporations] would welcome a commodity marketplace in which one competed solely on price, promotion and trade deals, all of which can easily be duplicated by competition, leading to ever-decreasing profits, decay and eventual bankruptcy” (Graham Phillips, from Ogilvy & Mather, cited in Klein, 2001, 14).

As the previous section has argued, through marketing active surf dress companies attempt to create their own Unique Surfing Performance criteria in order to gain credibility with the core surfing neo-tribe. However, as suggested by Phillips above, this can be achieved not simply through providing functional product, but also by creating ‘goods’ that have meanings which resonate with the broader cultural values of surfers. Increasingly this is realised through the ‘branding’ of the product and the company itself. As Klein seminally argued, over recent decades there has been a “corporate obsession with brand identity” (2001, 5). Now companies do not operate in a marketplace where competition is based solely on price or even purpose, rather they compete in terms of concepts and ideas, what Klein terms: “the brand as experience, as lifestyle” (2001, 21).

From this perspective, companies, and in this case, surf companies are in “the culture-creation business” (ibid. 46). Their goal is for their own company branding – the public story, aims, and ideals of that company – to resonate with and ultimately colonise the surf culture they wish to sell to. In this light, the question is not *whether* surf companies influence what is seen to be authentic surf culture, but *what specific ideals and preferences* do they seek to define authentic surf culture by?

As we have seen, many surf companies seek to demonstrate that professional surfers have a direct role to play in their product development, either through testing or wearing that product

in photo shoots or competition. This endorsement gives the impression to consumers that these companies are not outsiders muscling in to a new market, but are rather part of that culture and creating products that they (as real surfers) want and need. An alternative way to demonstrate this integration with surf culture (what Stranger (2011) has termed an ‘insider’ status) – is through the geographical origins of that surf company. As the following examples go some way to illustrate:

“A surf icon born in Hawaii. ...Our history goes back to the beginning... there were no limits for the Hawaiian surfers and our boards ruled the huge tubes of Pipeline. A cool and relaxed attitude, a soul surfer approach and a free rider state of mind, Lightning Bolt is inspired by the true spirit of surf and its riders’ lifestyle” (Lightning Bolt, in *Surf Europe*, 75, July, 2010).

“North Shore Fuelled” (Hurley, in *Carve*, 153, Aug, 2014).

“We’re all about aloha, we stay on Hawaiian time” (T&S Surf Designs, in *Surfer*, 53 Sept, 2012).

“[Simply] Santa Cruz” (O’Neill, in *Carve*, 131, Feb, 2012).

These adverts emphasise the importance of companies having origins in geographical locations that are integral to surf culture. The origins of surfing are generally accepted to be in Polynesia, specifically Hawaii, and any surf company who knows its salt (water) will seek to convince surfers that they have indelible connections to this spatial location. As geographers have long argued, individual identity is a spatial phenomenon; the question of

who we are directly connects to where we are, and indeed where we are from (Casey, 2001). The same logic applies for surf companies. As a consequence, surf companies who are able to demonstrate connections to key geographical places in the history of surfing generate cultural credibility more easily than others. These connections are often to surfing's origins in Polynesia, or places where the western development of surfing from the 1950s onwards occurred (e.g. Santa Cruz, California). It is important to note that this identification and celebration of surfing roots has a number of effects; firstly it recognises the historical and geographical origins of surfing, effectively retelling these stories, turning them into legends, and mythologizing those people and places involved; and secondly, reinforcing the status of these places (now with surf companies' roots and identity grafted onto them) as crucial touchstones for any surfer to recognise and affirm. This status and these stories are chosen by companies so their product can be associated with particular cultural traits which become perpetuated over time. Echoing points made in the 'Performance' section, those surf companies who graft their roots to the 'North Shore' for example (see Hurley, above), attempt to appeal to cultural awareness that this area of Hawaii's coastline has both notorious waves and hard-line surf communities (Surflife, no date). The message is: if like us you can cut it (back) here, you can cut it (back) anywhere. If you buy our performance wear, you can graft a piece of this geographical action and associated culture into your own surfer identity.

This argument may suggest that companies associated with locations that exist beyond these key littoral places would suffer in the surf market. However, as Barilotti (2002) claims, everyone, everywhere, wants to be a surfer, and as we have seen in the case of Ireland, new surfing sites have been regularly discovered over recent years (see also Taylor, 2014). As a consequence, with every new location comes an opportunity to define a new USP and identity for a product or brand. This can be seen in relation to C-Skins above (e.g. We know

British Winters), or Patagonia (e.g. Built for Ireland); but what is common in these examples is the wish to demonstrate to surfers that companies' products have intrinsic connections to surfing places, and the water in particular. As the following examples go some way to illustrate, coming from the water world is crucial:

“Born in the water” (C-Skins, thermalwear, in *The Surfer's Path*, 33 Oct-Nov, 2002).

“Born on the beach in the 70s, Mistral understands water, wind, waves and the original beach lifestyle like no other brand. ...Mistral coast life” (Mistral, in *SUP International*, 7, Summer, 2014).

“The original surf co since 1967. From our humble beginnings in the back of a VW splitty on Fistral Beach, Newquay, to our purpose built head office in North Cornwall, we have been leading the development of technical products for over 40 years” (Gul, in *Wavelength*, 184, July, 2009, see Figure 4).

“The Waterman Collection” (Quiksilver, wetsuits, in *Surfer*, 53, Sept, 2012).

[INSERT FIGURE 4. *Figure 4. Cultural Authenticity: Geographical Roots.*]

These allusions to being ‘born in the water’ suggest that surf companies recognise the main way in which surfers form their identity – as people who have a special affinity with the sea. The sea shapes their sense of self (Brown & Humberstone, 2015); it is transformative of their identity and their approach to the world (Anderson, 2014). As such, these companies want to show themselves to be not just geographically rooted in culturally significant surfing places,

or have products that work best in particular breaks in specific geographical locations, but that they too know what it is to be different to normal terrestrial beings, they too know what it is to be shaped by the sea.

Another key aspect of the ‘difference’ exhibited by surf culture is the disrespect it can show to mainstream culture and authority. In this sense, surfing has always had a strain of counterculture running through its ideals and practices, not only originating from the eastern philosophies associated with Polynesia, but also the alternative music, drug, and beach cultures of 1960s California where surfing became acknowledged within the western psyche (Warshaw, 2005). This counterculture is communicated in active surf dress marketing as follows:

“Originals don’t walk the path, they carve it” (Quiksilver, boardshorts, in *Surfer*, 54, April, 2013).

“Stray from the beaten path” (Smith Optics, sunglasses, in *Surfer*, 55, July, 2014).

“Disruptive by design” (Oakley, sunglasses, in *Surfer*, 55, July, 2014).

“you want a r.evolution?” (Rusty, boardshorts, in *Wavelength*, 184, July, 2009).

“Our kind. Think it’s in to be out” (Rusty, in *Surfer*, 54, April, 2013).

“Self-expression knows no boundaries” (O’Neill, in *Surfer*, 53, Sept, 2012).

These adverts suggest that these particular products can not only provide the surfer with access to new experiences in the water (as opposed to land), but they can live these experiences in their own way. With these products surfers can take and make their identity through their own practices on the water; they can transgress any cultural and geographical (b)orders that determine the proper and normal way to be (Anderson, 2010) and make a world that (r)evolves around their own goals and aspirations. Acknowledging this counter cultural spirit is vital for many companies as it becomes a new way to locate their products within surf culture, rooting their branding within a template of self-expression and individualism. Many companies realise this through using innovation to mark their difference and their wish (like surfers themselves) to challenge the established norm. This is identifiable in relation to Finisterre's alternative ideal of catering to cold water surfers; for them this is a journey on 'The Road Less Travelled' (in *The Surfer's Path*, 95, Mar-April, 2013, see also Frost, 1916). Such literary metaphor not only resonates with many surfers' wish to carve their own line on the wave (Quiksilver, 2013c), but also with a broader attitude to life that prioritises short term encounters with empty waves more than other more durable life objectives⁴.

Transient engagements.

⁴ Of course, there is a clear paradox identifiable within a culture that valorises self-expression and individuals, yet renders this possible (only) through buying and wearing the same clothes as everyone else. There remain many within surf culture that are aware of this irony (see Mitchell, no date) and choose not to wear explicitly branded water-world surf dress. Yet it is possible to identify some companies who are not cognisant of the irony in their marketing straplines; for example: "Join the Order" (Relentless, in *Wavelength*, 184, July, 2009).

This paper has demonstrated how surf culture as witnessed through the marketing of active surf dress has a strong countercultural strain running through it. Despite the move towards increased commoditisation, and the paradox that countercultural ideals are increasingly being influenced by ‘counter’ (or capitalist) cultural priorities, surfing retains an ambivalent and tense relationship with many mainstream values. One key example of this is the celebration within surf culture of hedonism, risk and enjoyment, principally through engagement with waves. In short, individuals participate in surfing not to become rich, but to become stoked. According to Kampion and Brown, “stoke is one of those wordless conditions that you have to experience to know” (2003, 200), yet has been defined as “the feeling of euphoria stimulated by surfing” (Fordham, 2009, 265; see Anderson, 2012 and 2014 for a fuller investigation of the nature of stoke and surfing). The importance of getting stoked is such that it becomes a new means through which surf companies can demonstrate their understanding and insider status within surf culture. This is how some surf companies attempt to capture the feeling in words:

“Experience you can feel” (Mistral, in SUP International, 7, Summer, 2014).

“British surfing. It takes commitment. The Assassin series has been designed without compromise for UK surfers and UK conditions. Performance, warmth and flexibility are in built to maximise your riding enjoyment. You’ll find our wetsuits a very different Animal” (Animal, wetsuits, in Carve, 119, Nov, 2010).

“I surf because... I love the feeling of being surfed out” (Billabong, in Carve, 123, May, 2011).

“Surfing is like nothing else. Its frozen hands and fumbling keys. Its being cleaned up by a closeout and coming up laughing. Surfing is rubber arms and a dry wetsuit. It’s the first duck dive on a cold morning. Its hot food, car heaters and the smell of coffee. Surfing is paddling out somewhere you’ve never been. Its step-ups, broken boards and long swims. Its ‘how is it?’ and ‘had a couple?’ Surfing is sitting in the lineup alone under a pale winter sun. Its talking in the parking lot. ...Surfing is who we are... Surfing is everything” (RipCurl, in *Surfer*, 55, Oct, 2014, see Figure 5).

[INSERT FIGURE 5. Figure 5. Transient Engagements: Stoke.]

This allusion to the intangible but all-encompassing nature of stoke is often articulated by surf companies through the use of (quasi) religious language (Taylor, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, Anderson, 2013a), as the following examples illustrate:

“Wear the spirit” (Oxbow, boardshorts, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 30, Apr-May, 2002).

“True to this. There is a light somewhere begging to be followed. Calling out from distant horizons in your mind. Reach in through the noise and grab it. Fall into spiritual intoxication” (Volcom, boardshorts, in *Surfer*, 55, Oct, 2014).

“I just saw the universe” (Rusty, in *Surfer*, 53, Sept, 2012).

Acknowledging the existence of this stoke, valorising its importance, and offering consumers the opportunity to celebrate and experience more of it, is integral to the alternative cultural approach that defines surfing. The importance of stoke informs a broader cultural attitude

within surfing that could be summed up as ‘#enjoy[ing] the ride’ (Surfdome, in Wavelength, 235, Autumn, 2014). In this sense the surfing life often aspires to prioritise the enjoyment to be had from the energy of the global oceans – the stoke gained from a transient engagement with a passing wave – rather than be concerned with more material or terrestrial responsibilities. This commitment to the transience of stoke is enough for surfers to orient their ‘liquid lives’ (Bauman, 2000) around it, and from this commitment a number of other cultural ideals are generated. Echoing the spiritual aspects of stoke noted above, many surfers (and indeed surf dress adverts) acknowledge the transient engagement that humans have in their own lives on the planet, and perhaps more ecologically and existentially as a species too. Similarly, despite stoke consolidating strong geographical connections between surfers and their local break, it also generates an urge to experience new waves at new locations (Doherty, 2007; Anderson, 2013b). This global mobility has been part of surfing since the dissemination of the practice by Cook and London (Warshaw, 2004), and has continued through seminal surf movies such as ‘The Endless Summer’ (Brown, 1966). This wanderlust for stoke is articulated in adverts such as the following from RipCurl:

“Surfing is being local yet still searching. Its road trips, boarding passes and rocking boats. It’s a tropical reef and a track through the dunes. Surfing is the first view of the ocean every morning. Surfing is who we are...” (RipCurl, wetsuit, in Surfer, 55, July, 2014).

Stoke therefore produces a tendency within surf culture to acknowledge the transient engagement that humans have with waves, with particular surf travel locations, and their own lives on the planet, both as individuals and as a species. These transient engagements are

summed up in Reef's longstanding campaign to market active surf wear: we, as surfers, are 'Just Passing Through' (Brownley, 2012).

Cyborgian Skin.

Surf Culture, and the associated marketing by surf companies of performance wear, thus demonstrates the essential importance of direct contact with the water world, as well as acknowledging the temporary and provisional nature of this contact. As we have seen in the Performance section, anything that can enable or extend contact with this world is deemed a 'good thing', and surf companies seek to market their brand in ways which persuade surfers the latest product can help them feel and live this connection in more effective ways.

However, in paradoxical relation to the countercultural and non-modern traits exhibited in the discussion of surf culture to date, surf companies often include science to communicate and evidence their contribution to surfing and its practice. In these cases it is science and technology that are argued to drive the evolution and expression of particular identities, enabling performance and extending enjoyment of the surfed wave; as the following examples illustrate:

"TDC thermo dry celliant. Smartfiber technology. TDC's clinically proven Smart Fiber Technology actively recycles your body heat for maximum warmth and performance. Available exclusively in the Drylock, Revolt, and Infiniti Celliant" (Xcel, wetsuits, in SUP International, 7, Summer, 2014, see also WetsuitMegastore, 2014).

“Where nature and science converge. Blade 2 performance boardshort. Dual layer technology, featuring a compression inner liner, optimizes power, endurance, and comfort” (Oakley, boardshorts, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 92, Sept-Oct, 2012).

“The science behind obsession. The technology of the Blade 3 compression boardshort increases power, strength and endurance beyond anything you’ve ever worn and we’ve got the science to prove it. Oakley. Beyond reason” (Oakley, boardshorts, in *The Surfer’s Path*, 95, Mar-Apr, 2013).

Science and technology is therefore used by some companies to create a new USP for their product, and is particularly employed by those companies who do not enjoy the forms of cultural authenticity outlined above. These may be companies who originally focused their business on fashion (e.g. Volcom), or built their reputation in other sports or industries (e.g. Nike in track and field, or Red Bull in energy drinks), yet now seek to expand their business into the active surf dress market. These companies do not benefit from the insider status of a company such as Billabong or RipCurl, nor can they exploit genuine connections to the history and geography of surfing to authenticate their products; to address this problem they choose to market an expertise in technology to appeal to the surfing constituency. As the following advert outlines:

“Rest assured that Volcom Mod-Tech Boardshorts have been worn, torn and tested by the greatest minds in destruction. We do the thinking so you don’t have to” (Volcom, boardshorts, in *Surfer*, 55, July, 2014).

In this case, Volcom are not attempting to suggest they are ‘inside’ surf culture because they are surfers themselves, nor are they explicitly sharing the countercultural, individualistic outlook of surfing (although the reference to a non-reflexive surfer may resonate with the popular caricature). However, they are drawing on a more mainstream deference to technical advancement and rigorous scientific testing to persuade the potential buyer of the quality, durability, and functionality of their active surf dress. One could argue that this unique selling point may not appeal to “core surfers” (Stranger, 2011, 190) who are likely to prefer more sub-culturally dominant themes of authenticity, however it may appeal to the broadening constituency of surfers who participate in surfing in new and different ways. Where once the ‘original’ or ‘essential’ surfer – a ‘searcher’ who gives over their life to the call of the swell and the draw of the sea – was wholly and solely celebrated; now a wider range of surfers are acknowledged by surf companies and their wallets courted as a consequence. As Estienne states,

“while true Searchers are the customers we will always focus on, there are millions of people around the globe who – whenever the demands of life permit – make their own forays pursuing their own Search. And there are still millions more who just aspire to the energy of that very special lifestyle – those who want a piece of it, who want to be associated with the freedom and fun” (Personal Communication, 2015).

Perhaps acknowledging the broadening of surfing’s appeal, alongside the maturing of teenage ‘surf bums’ into more respectable tax payers, surf marketing now acknowledges the customer who has little discretionary time to solely prioritise surfing, but still shares the sense that their identity is shaped by the sea. For these surfers, more mainstream marketing strategies such as those which appeal to scientific rigour and appropriate testing, are designed to convince them

that their precious short time on the waves will not be wasted if they choose one particular company's high tech surf dress.

Indeed, it is also possible to argue that this use of science and technology in performance wear marketing is designed to convince surfers that these products are not simply functional, or act to improve their surfing skill, but can also change the very nature of their human form in the water. Companies argue that science and technology can uniquely transform the human surfer into a being more comfortable and at home in the open ocean. Adverts give the impression that these design innovations can make humans more amphibious, that by super-loading them with ultra-modern geek-tech they can become someone – or something – else during their surf sessions; as the following examples illustrate:

“[Get] Vapor skin. Water repellent technology” (Bodyglove, wetsuits, in *Carve*, 128, Oct-Nov, 2011).

“[Get] Ultraspan, thermospan, ... kanoko flex, smoothskin” (Snugg, wetsuits, in *The Surfer's Path*, 82, Jan-Feb, 2011).

“Waterproof drylock zipper, drylock wrist seals, geometric ankle seals, fusion seam technology, air chambered neoprene, recycled fibre thermocarbon, quick dry fibre, 100% ultrastretch. [Get] Less Seam, more stretch (” (Xcel, wetsuits, in *Carve*, 128, Oct, 2011).

This technological turn in active surf dress grafts science to the act of board-riding, promising that the human body can be transformed into a neoprene-skinned, super-amphibious,

cyborgian assemblage that can repel, flex, heat, dry, and perform beyond conventional limits. Although conspicuously employed by a range of new surf companies, the transformative potential of this technological turn is not ignored by core manufacturers. These latter companies often fuse scientific advances to more established trends within surf culture, conveying that science can advance surfing through turning human surfers into water-mutants, or as O'Neill's boardshorts suggest, 'hydrofreaks' (O'Neill, in Carve, 153, Aug, 2014). As the following examples suggest:

"Evolution is the product of random mutations" (Vans, in The Surfer's Path, 33, Oct-Nov, 2002).

"Specimen: Cory Lopez. Objective: Analyse Overall Utility. Procedure: Regenerate" (O'Neill, wetsuits, in The Surfers's Path, 33 Oct-Nov, 2002, see Figure 6).

"The Greatest Wetsuits on Earth - the O'Neill Freak Show: Mutant - two headed modular maniac that performs in all conditions; Psycho 2 - built to withstand any punishment; Gooru - torqued and twisted to illogical extremes in minimal seam madness; ... PsychoFreak casts his spell on the coldest corners of creation in the new PsychoFreak with XDS Air neoprene" (O'Neill, wetsuits, in Carve, 119, Nov, 2010).

[INSERT FIGURE 6. Figure 6. Cyborgian Skin: The human regenerates as surfer.]

In this way, core surf companies attempt to use science and technology to market active surf dress in a way that resonates with culturally valued notions of difference, self-expression, and otherness to conventional norms. In these adverts, science and technology does not become

something that turns surf-wear into nerd-dress, or is reduced to mere function or reliability. Rather science becomes something that torques and twists performance wear into contemporary or even futuristic garb, enabling surfers to gain their USP *and* enjoy a sense that a different wetsuit can mutate their identity, even if it is just for the duration of their session.

Conclusion.

“connect[...] the dots between the past, the present, and the future” (Quiksilver, boardshorts, in *Surfer*, 54, April, 2013).

This paper has argued that surf companies influence and form surf culture through the marketing of their active surf dress. To succeed in selling product and defining culture surf companies must create a commodity and associated brand that is seen to speak the language of, share the values with, and produce the goods for surf culture. In identifying four key traits that characterise active surf dress marketing over the last ten years (performance, cultural authenticity, transient engagement, and cyborgian skin), this paper pinpoints the main ways in which surf companies from across the world are attempting to mould and perhaps even define surfing culture. Their success or failure in this end will be measured by their ability to retain and grow market share – in other words, sell their cultural product.

Over recent years, it is clear that some surf companies have not enjoyed complete success in this regard. Billabong, an Australian ‘insider’ company established in 1973, reported a net loss of A\$859.5m (US\$777.8m; £495.1m) for the year ending 30 June 2013, compounding a loss of A\$275.6m in 2012 (BBC, 2013). These losses were argued to be a direct consequence of their expansion into broader board-sport and mainstream leisure markets, resulting not

only in large debt, but also the removal of their ‘insider’ status within traditional surfer culture (Kuo, 2013). In light of these losses, it will be important to diagnose how trends within surf dress marketing gain durable traction within surf cultures in the future. This paper has argued that success has been achieved by surf companies offering a unique surfing performance through their product. Whilst some companies associate their products to a broader philosophy that suggests they are surfers themselves (see also Stranger, 2011), others argue that they simply share the countercultural, individualistic outlook of surfing, whilst a third band position their expertise in the realm of science and technological development, suggesting that these characteristics can transform the surfer and their surfing experience in new ways. There is future potential to analyse how far these shifts in marketing acknowledge (and attempt to perpetuate) the overlap between surfing and other lifestyle sports, and introduce new traits in surfing culture. It remains an open question whether these trends will change surf culture substantively away from the hegemonic white, male, aggressive, shortboard surfing stereotype, and whether other surfers, surfing types, and styles will gain greater recognition in these marketing campaigns.

What is clear, however, is that the reciprocal relationship between capitalist marketing and surf culture is not a new phenomenon. This is acknowledged by the companies themselves – as O’Neill’s “60 years of innovation” in (and one might add commoditisation of) surf culture campaign celebrates (in *Surfer*, 53, Sept, 2012). Such acknowledgment of the role of surf companies’ marketing in influencing and defining surf culture openly invites the surfer to be part of this continual co-evolution, connecting the dots between the past, present, and future (Quiksilver, above). By experiencing the stoke of surfing itself, and enhancing this experience through wearing and being seen in their product, surfers are offered a sense of belonging not simply to a (perhaps cynical) short-lived marketing campaign, but also to

something that started before many of them were born, and may outlive them, in the culture, and on the waves.

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