SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

The Consumption and Representation of Lifestyle Sports

Edited by Belinda Wheaton

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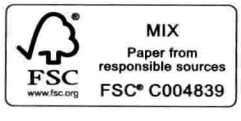

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The Consumption and Representation of Lifestyle Sports

Since their emergence in the 1960s, lifestyle sports (also referred to as action sport, extreme sports, adventure sports) have experienced unprecedented growth both in terms of participation and in their increased visibility across public and private space. This book seeks to explore the changing representation and consumption of lifestyle sport in the twenty-first century.

The essays, which cover a range of sports, and geographical contexts (including Brazil, Europe, North America and Australasia) focus on three themes. First, essays scrutinise aspects of the commercialisation process and impact of the media, reviewing and reconsidering theoretical frameworks to understand these processes. The scholars here emphasise the need to move beyond simplistic understandings of commercialisation as co-option and resistance, to capture the complexity and messiness of the process, and of the relationships between the cultural industries, participants and consumers. The second theme examines gender identity and representations, exploring the potential of lifestyle sport to be a politically transformative space in relation to gender, sexuality and 'race'. The last theme explores new theoretical directions in research on lifestyle sport, including insights from philosophy, sociology and cultural geography.

The themes the monograph addresses are wide reaching, and centrally concerned with the changing meaning of sport and sporting identity in the twenty-first century.

This book was previously published as a Special Issue of *Sport in Society*.

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Introducing the consumption and representation of lifestyle sports

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The emergence and growth of the field: a personal account

My own academic interest in what I have termed lifestyle sports began back in the mid 1990s when I embarked on a Ph.D. based on the culture of windsurfing. As one of only a handful of scholars worldwide who shared this interest, I remember vividly my excitement when, during the research, Becky Beal's paper on skateboarding in Colorado was published.[1] This was the first in-depth empirical study to emerge in English publications, and it was very exciting to learn that I wasn't the only person who thought there was something interesting and potentially different about lifestyle sport that needed articulating. Since then, there has been an explosion in academic interest in what has been variously labelled alternative, new, extreme, adventure, panic, action, whiz and lifestyle sport.[2] These labels encompass a wide range of participatory and made-for-television sporting activities including residual cultural forms, such as climbing, and emergent activities, such as kite-surfing.[3] While commentators have differed in nomenclature, many are agreed in seeing such activities as having presented an alternative and potential challenge to traditional ways of 'seeing' 'doing' and understanding sport.[4] This special issue is testament to the steady stream of exciting work that has emerged over the past three decades, research that has not only contributed to comprehending the significance of these sporting activities, their cultures and identities, but that has provided insights into understanding the relationship between sport and society more widely.

Initially this body of work on alternative/extreme/lifestyle sport was dominated by scholars from North America and to a lesser extent Australasia.[5] This is not surprising as North America is the home of the extreme sport phenomena – and as Bourdieu[6] observed, the spiritual base of many lifestyle sports. However it is also where commercialization and institutionalization processes are most developed, and as a consequence, many activities have experienced fundamental shifts in their meanings. For example, as Beal's work has illustrated, the emergence and success of ESPN's X Games has had a profound impact on the growth and trajectory of North American skateboarding culture.[7] More recently, empirical work has emerged from a wider and more international range of sites including Europe, New Zealand, Africa,[8] China, Brazil (Dorfman Knijnik et al, this issue), illustrating both commonalities and diversity in participants' experiences. Over these decades the academic interest in lifestyle sport has also broadened to encompass a broad range of different academic (inter) disciplines including cultural geography,[9] architecture and urban planning,[10] anthropology,[11] gender studies,[12] philosophy[13] and psychology,[14] which as evidenced in this issue, has lead to the emergence of new theoretical developments and to fruitful avenues of enquiry.

Lifestyle sport in the twenty-first century

Since their emergence in the 1960s, lifestyle sports have experienced unprecedented growth both in participation, and in their increased visibility across public and private space. In Britain, for example, the BBC draws on imagery of street-running, surfing and kite flying in its idents, (the imagery used between programmes to 'identify' the station), and in the USA extreme sport has featured on a postal stamp.[15] The allure and excitement of lifestyle sport has been appropriated to sell every kind of product and service imaginable, from cars and deodorant to holidays, and to market geographic regions.[16] Lifestyle sports have been the focus of numerous 'mainstream' television shows and films such as *Blue Crush*, *Point Break*, *Kids*, *Jackass*, *Touching the Void*, and *Dogtown* and *Z-Boys* that present the danger, but also the vertigo, inspired by the sports, demonstrating what Beck describes as the importance of experiencing danger and 'living life to the full' in a 'risk society'.[17] Specialist magazines still fill newsagent's shelves, and are sustained by a multimillion-dollar industry selling commodities and lifestyles to 'hard-core' aficionados and grazers alike. The media's appetite for such sports is exemplified by the continued and still- growing success of ESPN's X Games, which in 2003 commanded a global audience of 50 million, in a context where television contracts for football, baseball and basketball lost the North American networks billions of dollars.[18]

Thus in the twenty-first century lifestyle sports are attracting an ever-increasing body of followers and participants, from increasingly diverse global geographical settings.[19] While the outdoor, non-association-based and itinerant nature of these activities makes it hard to accurately measure participation levels, it is clear from the available sources, such as sales of equipment, market-research surveys[20] and media commentaries,[21] that participation in many types of lifestyle sports continues to grow, rapidly outpacing the expansion of most traditional sports in many western nations. Moreover, this expansion in participation includes not only the traditional consumer market of teenage boys, but older men, women and girls. Nonetheless, these participants and consumers have a broad range of interests and experiences, from the 'outsiders' who experience activities as media consumers, or who occasionally experience participation via an array of 'taster' activities being marketed through the adventure sport and travel industries, to the 'hard-core' committed practitioners who are fully familiarized in the lifestyle, argot, fashion and technical skill of their activity(ies), and spend considerable time, energy and often money doing it.

Aims of the special issue

This special issue seeks to explore these changing representations and understand the consumption of lifestyle sport in the twenty-first century. However the essays gathered together in this volume were not solicited to create a comprehensive collection that reflects core developments in the field; rather it has emerged more organically as a result of a rigorous peer-review process.[22] Indeed, 25 papers were submitted – from a wide range of geographic locales, reflecting the increasing range of interest and scholarship in this still-growing field. Those selected were chosen on the basis of academic merit, not for their capacity to illustrate themes or trends; nonetheless, where possible essays that illuminate previously under-researched sports (like BMX and mountain biking) or geographic locales (like Brazil) have been included. Inevitably therefore the coverage of conceptual and theoretical trends is uneven, and there is an over-emphasis on some activities – such as surfing – and an absence of others, including skateboarding. Thus my objective in the remainder of this introductory chapter is to overview current directions in

research on lifestyle sport, illustrating both productive trends, and gaps in the body of knowledge. First, I briefly introduce readers to the 'alternative sportscape',[23] focusing on the type of activity termed lifestyle sports. I discuss what these activities are, and their significance in contemporary sporting culture, also noting central themes in their conceptualization, and theorization. Then I give an overview of the essays, illustrating how they inform these broader themes. Lastly I point to some of the areas where further work is required.

The alternative sportscape

Lifestyle sports are a specific type of alternative sport, including both established activities like skateboarding[24] through to newly emergent activities like kite-surfing. It is not my objective to contribute to debates about nomenclature as numerous comprehensive commentaries on what lifestyle/action/alternative/extreme sports are, their histories, and how they at least initially differed from more traditional sporting forms and cultures, already exist.[25] However, as I outline in more depth elsewhere, my preference for the term lifestyle sport is informed by concerns about the labels of alternative and extreme; the former, as Rinehart explores, is a wider-ranging term and set of activities,[26] and the latter a media-driven and misleading label. As Booth and Thorpe outline, many activities labelled 'extreme' are actually very safe.[27] My preference for lifestyle sport is because this is the term used by many of the participants, who describe their activities as 'lifestyles' rather than as 'sports'. Indeed in this collection there are commentaries on yoga and fell running, activities one might not usually describe as lifestyle sports, but as the author Michael Atkinson argues, it is not the 'form and context' of sport practices but 'the orientation to and use of athletic movement in these post-sport spaces that creates fundamental differences'.[28] Thus as Atkinson's chapter reminds us, our understanding of what lifestyle sports are, their boundaries and definitions needs to be continually reviewed in the light of emerging research.

While each lifestyle sport has its own history, identities and development patterns, there are nevertheless some commonalities in their ethos, ideologies and increasingly the national and transnational consumer industries that produce the commodities that underpin their cultures. Historically as Bourdieu noted, many of these sports originated in North America in the late 1960s, and were then imported to Europe by American entrepreneurs.[29] With their roots in the counter-cultural social movements of the 1960s and 1970s many have characteristics that are different to the traditional rule-bound, competitive and masculinized, 'dominant' institutionalized, western 'achievement' sport cultures.[30] Participants identify themselves through recognizable styles, bodily dispositions, expressions and attitudes, which they design into a distinctive lifestyle, and a particular social identity. Unlike more traditional sports, subcultural affiliation tends not to be based around 'national' attachments, but operates more transnationally,[31] often connecting with other 'alternative lifestyle' groupings such as those found in domains of art, fashion and music. Although commercialization and mainstreaming has lead to an erosion of their oppositional character, participants often denounces regulation and institutionalization, and are often critical of, or ambivalent to commercialism. Centrally, underpinning these forms of commercial consumption are sporting cultures where the main emphasis is on participation. The meaning of these lifestyle sport activities for the participants is found in their creative and self-actualization potential,[32] through which the individuals loses him/herself in 'transcendence of the self'.[33] Although participants invest heavily in their lifestyles and identities, this commitment is to the feeling of being

'stoked', variously characterized as the 'buzz', the ecstasy of speed, being 'at one' with the environment, the standing still of time, and the 'intense awareness of the moment';[34] experiences that, as Ford and Brown contend, participants find extremely hard to express verbally.[35] Participants embrace risk and danger, but in most cases as a means to provide the thrill or 'stoke' that characterizes the experience. Indeed, the body is used in non-aggressive ways, mostly without bodily contact, focusing on personal challenges and goals, not competing against others; and the locations in which these sports are practised are often new or re-appropriated (urban and/or rural) spaces, without fixed or delineated boundaries. Nonetheless, despite some shared characteristics, lifestyle sports take multiple and increasingly fragmented forms, drawing on a vast array of narratives that are saturated with ambiguities and contradictions, reflecting the multiple configurations of identity characteristic of cultural processes in late capitalism.

(Lifestyle) sport in late modernity

Theorists have represented the emergence of these sporting activities, and the subcultures and lifestyles that develop around them, as a new phase in the development of sport, characterized by some as 'postmodern'.[36] Certainly, commentators see the emergence and growing popularity of these sports and their associated lifestyles related to broader cultural development in late modernity. In these activities we can see some of the central issues and paradoxes of advanced capitalist or late-modern societies, such as the expression of self-identity as increasingly fragmented, 'mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflexive, and subject to exchange and innovation',[37] the decline of collective and community values, and a concurrent focus on the (self-fulfilled, hedonistic) self, what Beck describes as a 'social surge of individualization'.[38]

People have become compelled to make themselves the centre of conduct of life, taking on multiple and mutable subjectivities, and crises are seen as individual problems rather than socially based.[39] Furthermore, as Booth and Thorpe explore, the changing relationship between the state and citizens in western nations, and particularly the ways in which the state has attempted to 'eliminate risk from social life' promoting 'unrealistic promises of certainly' provides an important backdrop to contextualize these processes.[40] Risk taking in lifestyle sport has been widely connected – particularly for youth and factions of the middle classes – as an escape from the over-rationalized and sanitized leisure experiences in modernity, providing 'an antidote to our safety-first shrink-wrapped world'.[41] In this context Le Breton suggests dangerous sports are most prevalent in those societies that can provide their members with social and economic stability.[42] Likewise Fletcher argues that such risk-taking appeals more to a professional middle-class habitus.[43] Yet as West and Allen discuss (in this issue) in contrast to risk-taking, lifestyle-sport participants often seek ways to manage and control risk. Theorists such as Giddens and Beck outline that an increased awareness of risk as a 'product of human action rather than fate',[44] and the need to manage it, are important features of late-modern societies. Risk is 'closely linked to reflexivity, accountability and responsibility'.[45] Indeed, as West and Allen outline, risk management is bolstered by neo-liberal discourses which discourage state support and encourage individuals to take personal responsibility for their action. Nonetheless, accounts that over-emphasize the risky and dangerous aspects of these activities are misleading; the actual risks in many lifestyle sports often do not exceed, or are less than those in traditional sports activities like football and swimming.[46] While activities such as BASE and tombstoning[47] clearly involve physical risk, (and can be illegal) the majority of lifestyle sport activities are

practised in safe and controlled ways by the majority; yet it is the antics of the minority that make the headlines.

From counter-culture to co-option

Another factor that is central to understanding the expansion of lifestyle sport is the impact of corporate forces. The landscape of alternative sport is increasingly characterized by the presence of a range of global commercial interests. As Kusz reminds us, extreme sports were initially 'decried' by both sports fans and pundits, seeing them as 'made-for-TV pseudo-sports created solely to peddle products to the much coveted teen male demographic'.[48] As noted above, lifestyle sport has been appropriated to sell a vast array of products, services and experiences, and the star performers like Tony Hawk (skater) and Kelly Slater (surfer) have become celebrities who, like other global sport celebrities, transcend their subcultures and 'occupy and inform national and transnational space'.[49]

> In the world of extreme-sport sponsorship, pierced and tattooed skaters and skysurfers mix quite amicably with buttoned-down corporations such as AT&T and Toyota. . . . For all of the counter-culture cachet associated with ESPN's X Games and NBC's Gravity Games, the truth is that the events were co-opted from the start.[50]

Commentators have therefore described extreme sport as a 'co-opted' sporting movement, increasingly associated with the global expansion and reproduction of consumer capitalism and controlled by multinational and transnational corporations and media organizations.[51] Nonetheless as a wealth of emerging research, as well as several papers in this collection, illuminate (see section two), consumer capitalism penetrates these lifestyle sports in complex and contradictory ways. As I have argued:[52]

> Despite the 'resilient belief' that 'grassroots' or 'authentic' culture resists and struggles with a 'colonizing mass-mediated corporate world,'[53] the media and consumer industries' roles are more complex, contradictory and fluid than simply incorporation and co-option; these subculturalists are not simply 'victims' of commercialism, but shape and 're-shape' the images and meanings circulated in and by global consumer culture.[54]

Research on the institutionalization and professionalization process, especially as expressed through attitudes to competition and regulation have also provided important insights into understanding the commercialization of these activities. While our knowledge and analysis of the globalization of the cultures and industries is still relatively under developed,[55] emerging work suggests that the 'alternative sportscape'[56] as Rinehart terms it, is becoming increasingly diverse and globally widespread. Studies like Ormrod's exploring how British surfers have expressed regional and national identities,[57] helps understand local, or glocal,[58] differences in the representation and consumption of these sports, particularly what Robertson termed glocalization – that is the global production of the local, and the simultaneous localization of the global.[59]

In many lifestyle sports the female consumer has become one of the most valuable and targeted commodities. Indeed as Atencio, Beal and Wilson suggest, 'many executives within the action sport industry identified women as being the crucial component of expanding their market'. [60] This expansion has included not just equipment and clothing but has lead to a flourishing market for a range of products and experiences. For example women's surfing over the past decade has experienced such rapid growth across many western countries, it has been termed a 'female surfing revolution'.[61] This expansion has been reflected in surf schools, surf tourism, surf shops and surf magazines, all of which now produce female-specific products and services, and increasingly into 'more mainstream' forms of popular cultures such as the Hollywood blockbuster *Blue Crush*, and US reality shows like *Surf Curl*.

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