

Bond University  
Research Repository



## Research Report 2: How Surf Magazines Can Gain Focus and Purpose in the Modern Media Landscape

Sims, Craig

*Licence:*  
CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to output in Bond University research repository.](#)

*Recommended citation(APA):*

Sims, C. (2020). *Research Report 2: How Surf Magazines Can Gain Focus and Purpose in the Modern Media Landscape.*

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

For more information, or if you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact the Bond University research repository coordinator.



10/1/2020

# Research Report 2

How Surf Magazines Can Gain Focus and Purpose in the Modern Media Landscape.

Craig Sims (PhD Candidate), Bond University

## Discussion: Magazines, Surf Culture, Trust, and Identity

The following discussion is an addendum to the surf industry report titled *Circling the Drain*, and reflects on the significance of the finding that magazines are superior for the uses and gratifications motive of identity and trust. It will establish relevant theoretical links and explain what this means for the surfing subculture and why it is important to surf brands.

A powerful driver of consumer interest in surf brands is the mainstream appeal of surf culture (Ford & Brown, 2005; Hull, 1976; Humphreys, 1997; Jarratt, 2010; McGregor, 1966; Stratton, 1979). This can be better understood when consideration is given to the concept of personal identity development.

### Identity Theory

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1950) posits that identity formation starts during adolescence in the *Identity versus Role Confusion* life stage during which an individual seeks a sense of uniqueness and affiliation (Browning, 2008). More recent studies recognise this process as an active and ongoing phenomenon through all life stages. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) postulate that one of the central tenets of postmodernity is the recognition that a person's identity is something that is actively created and constantly validated. Thompson (1995) describes this construction of the self as a *symbolic project*, during which a consumer seeks out *symbolic materials*, which are weaved into "a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity" (p. 120). Elliott and Wattanasuwan proceed to conclude that, "all voluntary consumption carries, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings" and thus, "if the consumer has choices to consume, he or she will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings" (p. 134). Consumption choices, therefore, are based not only on a product's utility but also on the contribution their symbolic meanings make to the construction of identity.

Significantly for this research, Markus and Nurius (1986) made the connection between identity construction and media consumption. They suggest that an individual can construct any number of identities based on their social experiences and, "the models, images and symbols provided by the media" (p. 954). Thompson (1995) built on this work by explaining that symbolic resources for the construction of self can be obtained through lived and mediated experiences, with mediated experiences resulting from mass-communication culture and the consumption of media products.

## Identity and Magazines

Four media products, or media sources, were included in this study, namely: social media, magazines, websites and television. The online survey asked participants to select, from six U&G motives provided, why they choose to use certain media sources over others. The six U&G motives provided are listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Motives with Abridged Names*

Full name	Abridged name
They keep me informed about my passion	Information
They provide me with entertainment	Entertainment
They reinforce my identity as a surfer	Identity
They help me interact with other surfers	Interaction
They have more trustworthy content than other sources	Trust
It's just a habit; it's what I've always done, and I'm used to it	Habit

The results showed the whole participant group ( $n = 816$ ), ranked magazines ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.073$ ) and websites ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.047$ ) equal first for the gratification of Identity. When broken down by age, Gen-Z ( $n = 214$ ) ranked social media ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 0.962$ ) highest for the gratification of Identity, with magazines ranked second ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 0.887$ ), and websites third ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 0.943$ ). The older cohort ( $n = 602$ ) ranked magazines ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.112$ ) and websites ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.075$ ) equal first for the gratification of Identity, and social media third ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 1.207$ ). So clearly, Identity is a compelling determinant of media source choice for magazines.

This finding has implications for surf brands. Brands are defined as products or services which become distinguishable because of such differentiators as name, term, design or symbol (Pride, 2017). According to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), brands are a rich source of symbolic meanings that are often used for the construction and maintenance of identity. Since the literature shows that consumers utilise media to construct and validate their self-identity, and this research shows that magazines rank highly for the gratification of identity, it follows that magazines are an effective tool for brands to convey their symbolic meanings to a customer base seeking to construct or validate their self-identity. This includes the targeting of Gen-Z whose intense need for identity formation starts during adolescence in the Identity versus Role Confusion life stage (Erikson, 1950).

## Surf Culture

As a subculture, surfing's influence upon mainstream society is felt well beyond its size, with evidence of this dating back to 1959 with the first Hollywood surf movie, called "Gidget," which began an accommodation of, and empathy for, the surfing subculture (Stratton, 1979). The Australian public's fascination with surf culture is supported by McGregor (1966), who described the extent to which surf culture pervaded Australian mainstream consciousness at the time:

All the mass media and channels of publicity have thrown their weight behind the surfies: the Sunday newspapers carry surfing supplements, disc jockeys plug surf music remorselessly, the advertising agencies flatter and glamorize the beach life. They know what the coming thing is (p. 296).

The extent to which surfing's cultural values and symbolisms appeal to the general public has a causal effect on the success of the businesses that comprise the surf industry. This is supported by Ford and Brown (2005) who observed surfer-founded businesses like Billabong, Rip Curl and Quiksilver have developed "lucrative niche markets" (p. 56) by successfully articulating surfing's cultural "values and symbolisms ... to the wider non-surfing society" (p57). So how effectively the surfing subculture is articulated and disseminated is worthy of consideration.

Exactly what constitutes an *authentic* culture is widely debated and surfing is not unique in this regard (Roberts & Ponting, 2018). Taylor (2007) describes surf culture as having an anti-bourgeois ethos and counter cultural roots, which, Stranger (2010) contends has been defiled or diluted by the commodification of surf culture. Stranger (2010) explains however, that surf culture has the quality of being grounded in something real – the act of riding waves - which he describes as the "pursuit of an ecstatic communion with nature" (p. 118). He argues this is the foundational layer that underpins the surf industry's commodification of the subculture, through the marketing of branded functional and lifestyle products by the surf industry (Stranger, 2010). This commercial layer is supported by a symbolic layer created by what Roberts and Ponting (2018) refer to as, "subcultural, specialist media" (p. 230) and argue therefore, that surf culture is a "socially constructed and socially contested phenomenon" enabled in part by "surfing-subcultural media" (p. 234).

The surfing subculture is broadcast to the wider non-surfing public through a variety of channels such as; event and athlete sponsorship, surf clothing, movies, and the mainstream media through their occasional coverage of various aspects of surf culture. The surfing-subcultural specialist media comprises websites, social media pages, television channels, magazines and surf movies. However, pertinent to this study, as indicated by the data reported earlier, is the extent to

which magazines contribute to the maintenance and dissemination of surf culture, and the way in which Gen-Z relates to surf magazines.

### **Surf Culture and Magazines**

Of the media sources studied, the surf magazine is unique in that it is a lasting physical repository of surf-related editorial and advertising packaged in a contained environment. To this end the entire magazine is an authentic reflection of surfing at that point in time - a time capsule of surf culture. Surf magazines are not unique in this regard, some websites and social media pages can be just as pure and unadulterated in their representations of the surfing lifestyle, however, according to this research, surf magazines have an important additional quality, namely; trust, a U&G motive that has a surprising relationship with Gen-Z.

### **Media Trust**

Trust in media is one of the growing challenges of the modern age, with Edelman (2018) describing it as "the existential challenge of our times". The annual Edelman Trust Barometer which measures trust across 18 countries in four institutions, namely; Media, Government, Business and the Non-Government sector (NGOs) found that media was the least trusted institution in 2018 and 2019 (Edelman, 2019). Within the media sector, however, the latest (2019) report finds that traditional media is most trusted and social media least trusted of the five categories of media surveyed (being traditional media, search engines, online-only media, owned media, social media). This is supported by the findings of this research project.

### **Trust in Magazines**

When analysing the motive of *Trust* (i.e. They have more trustworthy content than other sources), the whole participant group ranks magazines first ( $M = 3.62, SD = 0.921$ ). When broken down by age, Gen-Z ( $M = 3.99, SD = 0.836$ ) and the older cohort ( $M = 3.49, SD = 0.914$ ) also rank magazines first. The standard deviation scores shown suggest this ranking is clear and concordant.

The survey also measured content preferences, presenting the five content categories shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2***Content Category Abbreviations*

Full name	Abridged name
Surf Conditions or Forecasts	Conditions
Surf Travel Destinations	Travel
Surfing Technique and Equipment	Technique
Interviews and Profiles of Famous or Iconic Surfers	Interviews
Competition	Competition

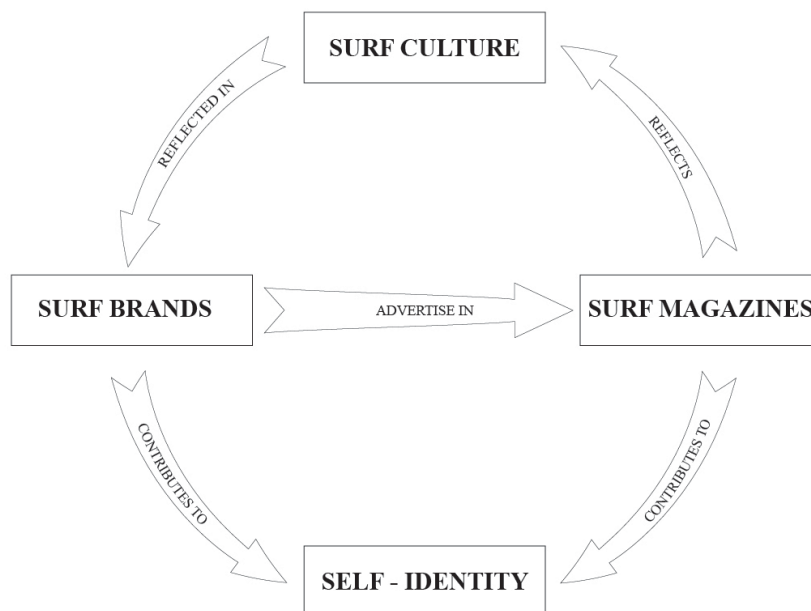
The results showed that Gen-Z prefer to use social media to access four of the five supplied content types, namely: Travel, Interviews, Competition, Technique, the only exception being Conditions, which they prefer to access via websites. It is a widely known fact that social media is a primary content resource for Gen-Z, however the survey results also reveal the finding that although Gen-Z uses social media the most, they trust it the least. Social media ranks last ( $M = 3.50, SD = 0.992$ ) out of the four media sources for *Trust* by Gen-Z. The older cohort trusts television the least ( $M = 2.64, SD = 1.154$ ) with social media ranking second last ( $M = 2.77, SD = 1.079$ ). This dichotomy of high use but low trust will be explored in the qualitative study, which will be completed before the end of the year.

## The Nature of the Influence of Surf Magazines

It has been shown that the need for identity construction and validation is most compelling at the age of youth, and that magazines rank highly for the gratification of this need. It has also been shown that magazines are a trusted media source contributing to the development and dissemination of the subculture upon which the surf industry trades. A summary of how these factors link to form a matrix in which magazines, surf brands and youth are inextricably linked, is provided below and is depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Model of Interactions Between Surf Magazines and Surf Culture, Surf Brands and Identity Formation*



Surf brands compete for market share by differentiating themselves to attract customers. Their customers are individuals who seek symbolic meanings in the ongoing construction of their identity, especially during the age of youth. Individuals achieve this through active consumption of goods and services that reflect the symbolic meanings they are attracted to. Symbolic meanings are validated through social experiences and media sources. The surf magazine is a media source that is well suited to both the construction and validation of an individual's identity as a surfer.

Surf brands have a vested interest in the aspirational appeal of the surfing subculture, upon which identity construction can be based. A surf brand's success is tethered to perception of their connection to authentic surf culture. Authentic surf culture is underpinned by the act of riding waves



but is supported by representations made in the media. Surf magazines present an unadulterated capsule of authentic surf culture, trusted by surfers of all ages, including the digitally connected youth. Given the above, it is reasonable to conclude that surf magazines are an integral part of the matrix that links youth, identity, and authentic surf culture. By utilising magazines to promote their symbolic meanings, surf brands are supporting a business logic that helps to perpetuate authenticity and the appeal of surf culture, creating a virtuous cycle that supports their own business logic.

Ends

The author's research concerns generational change in media choice with specific emphasis on Generation-Z's influence on the future of surf magazines. It is a mixed methods study based on an online survey completed by over 1,000 Australian surfers aged between 15 and 65+, and a series of interviews, which are yet to be conducted. Other interesting findings include an aging surf population as well as a lower participation rate in Generation-Z compared to other age groups.

This information may not be reproduced in whole or part without the author's prior written consent. Contact Craig Sims: [csims@bond.edu.au](mailto:csims@bond.edu.au)

## Reference List

- Browning, D. (2008). *Adolescent identities: a collection of readings*. Analytic Press.
- Carter, C. (2013). *Come away with me: The uses and gratifications of leisure travel magazine readership*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Edelman, R. (2018, January 21) The Battle For Truth. Edelman.com. <https://www.edelman.com/post/the-battle-for-truth/>
- Edelman, R. (2019, February 7) 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer. Edelman.com. <https://www.edelman.com.au/research/trust-barometer-2019/>
- Elliott, R., & Wattanasuwan, K. (2015). Brands as symbolic resources for the construction of identity. *International Journal of Advertising*, 17(2), 131–144.
- Erikson E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Ford, N., & Brown, D. (2006). Surfing and Social Theory: Experience, Embodiment and Narrative of the Dream Glide. In *Surfing and Social Theory*. Routledge.
- Hull, S. W. 1976. *A Sociological Study of the Surfing Subculture in the Santa Cruz Area*. MA
- Humphreys, D. (1997). 'Shredheads Go Mainstream?' Snowboarding and Alternative Youth. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 32(2), 147-160.
- Thesis. California: San Jose State University. <http://facs.scripps.eddsurf/srf-thes.html>. [20th October 1997].
- Jere and Davis (2011). An application of uses and gratifications theory to compare consumer motivations for magazine and Internet usage among South African women's magazine readers. *Southern African Business Review* 15 (1), 1-27.
- Jarratt, P. (2010). *Salts and suits*. Hardie Grant Publishing.
- Jenkins, R. (1996) *Social Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Markus, H. & Nurius, P. (1986) 'Possible selves', *American Psychologist*, 41 (9), 954-969.
- McGregor, C. (1966). *Profile of Australia*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Napoli, P.M. (2003). *Audience economics: Media institutions and the audience marketplace*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pride, W. (2007). *Marketing : core concepts and applications* (Asia-Pacific ed.). John Wiley.
- Roberts, M., & Ponting, J. (2020). Waves of simulation: Arguing authenticity in an era of surfing the hyperreal. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 55(2), 229–245.
- Stranger, M. (2010). Surface and substructure: beneath surfing's commodified surface. *Sport in Society: The Consumption and Representation of Lifestyle Sports*, 13(7-8), 1117–1134.
- Stratton, J. (1985). Youth Subcultures and their Cultural Contexts. *Journal of Sociology*, 21(2), 194-218.
- Taylor, B. (2007). Surfing into Spirituality and a New, Aquatic Nature Religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 75(4), 923–951.
- Thompson, J.B. (1995) *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.