“Just Do It”: Consumption, Commitment, and Identity in the Windsurfing Subculture

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Debates about changing contemporary Western societies have emphasized the increasingly fluid and fragmented nature of identities, suggesting that people draw their sense of identity from increasingly diverse sources, including sport and leisure lifestyles. Drawing on ethnographic work on windsurfing subcultures, this article explores the ways in which participants create and perform (sub)cultural identities through their “new sport” consumption and its attendant lifestyle. The paper identifies the main features of the windsurfers’ status system, illustrating that demonstrating commitment, not the conspicuous display of equipment or subcultural style, is central to the meanings the windsurfers give to their participation and subcultural identity. The paper concludes by examining to what degree purported features of contemporary postmodern culture, such as a loss of self-identity, are reflected in such seemingly “image-based” new sport consumption practices.

Dans les débats entourant le changement au sein des sociétés occidentales contemporaines, la nature toujours plus fluide et fragmentée des identités a été accentuée, ce qui suggère que chez les gens, le sens de l’identité est aujourd’hui davantage dérivé de sources diverses, incluant le sport et le loisir. Empruntant aux travaux ethnographiques sur les sous-cultures de la planche à voile, cet article porte sur les façons dont les participants créent et “performent” leurs identités culturelles par le biais de la consommation de leur “sport nouveau” et du style de vie qui lui est associé. Sont également identifiées les caractéristiques principales du système de statut des véliplanchistes. Ce système illustre que c’est le fait de démontrer son engagement plutôt que le fait de mettre en évidence son équipement ou son style sous-culturel qui est central aux significations que les véliplanchistes accordent à leur participation et à leur identité culturelle. L’article se termine en examinant jusqu’où point les caractéristiques de la culture contemporaine postmoderne (e.g., la perte de l’identité personnelle) sont reflétées dans les pratiques de consommation du sport nouveau.

“Fractured Identities”

The concept of identity has become central to debates about changing contemporary Western societies (Hall, 1992; Hall & Du Gay, 1996). Theories about the destabilization of social categories and the increased fluidity of social relationships have triggered interest in the conception of more “fragmented identities” (Bradley, 1996, p. 23). Kellner (1992) writes lucidly about this “fracturing” of identity in the transition from traditional to modern to postmodern society. Whereas

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in traditional society identity was relatively fixed and stable (based on a range of identifiers such as work, gender, ethnicity, religion, and age), in late modernity "identity becomes more mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflexive, and subject to exchange and innovation" (Kellner, 1992, p. 141). Postmodern society is depicted as a fragmented, depthless, image-based society, lacking authenticity of experience and challenging collective identity and space. It is argued that with the acceleration of change and increasing cultural complexity, the desire for a unified and coherent sense of self has been undermined (Kellner, 1995). Importantly for this paper, the possibilities of different sources of identification have expanded, in particular the increased significance of consumption practices such as sport and leisure lifestyles in the communication and maintenance of self-identity for growing segments of the population (see, for example, Bocock, 1993; Miller, 1987).

The importance of consumption, and specifically leisure, as a source and expression of identity is not a new conception. Veblen (1970), writing in the 19th century, proposed that consumers use commodities as markers of social position and cultural style. However, in contemporary Western consumer culture the significance of material objects for identity creation is quantitatively and qualitatively changed. Consumption, lifestyles, and self-identity are profoundly linked (see Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991). As Warde (1994) outlines, one central feature of the social theories (of late modernity and postmodernity) forwarded by Bauman, Beck, and Giddens is

the notion that, today, people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they possess and display. They manipulate or manage appearances and thereby create and sustain a "self-identity." In a world where there is an increasing number of commodities available to act as props in this process, identity becomes more than ever a matter of the personal selection of self-image. Increasingly, individuals are obliged to choose their identities. (p. 878)

This relationship between consumption and identity has become a key indicator for examining the changing social terrain in late-modern/postmodern society (Hetherington, 1988). While the lifestyles of the urban middle classes have been the main empirical emphasis and point of illustration (O’Connor & Wynne, 1996; Savage, Barlow, Dickens, & Fielding, 1992), other types of groupings, such as alternative lifestyles and subcultures based around sporting identification, are also useful exemplars. As Beezer (1992) claims,

The adoption of subcultural identity, whether through the visual signs of dress ... or by the less visible commitments to specialist activities and interests, is a way of asserting cultural identity and a sense of community in a society fragmented by divisions of class, race and gender. (p. 114)

In this paper I examine the adoption of subcultural identity in one such activity, windsurfing.

**Lifestyle Sports: “Image Is Everything”?**

In the emergence of new individualized forms of lifestyle sports, such as windsurfing, mountain biking, and snow boarding, consumers (of both sexes and a
wide range of ages) seek a particular and desirable lifestyle. Windsurfing, like many active leisure activities that have emerged and become popular in the milieu of consumer culture, is an individual sport (like jogging, aerobics, and so on). “New sports” are seemingly part of the apparent expansion of individualism in sport participation and consumption (see Allison, 1986; Henley Centre, 1993; Jacques, 1997; Whannel, 1992).

These activities are packaged and perceived as sports “for the cool by the cool, where fashion and music come head-to-head to produce the sort of off-the-wall action that allows the grazing generation to snack at leisure” (Roberts, 1999, p. 7). As such, these texts display many features of the postmodern landscape. That is, a depthless image-based culture, seemingly without substance or meaning experienced as fragmented and discontinuous (Jameson, 1991), replicated in postmodern selves “allegedly devoid of the expressive energies and individualities characteristic of modernism and the modern self” (Kellner, 1995, p. 236). However, while critics have highlighted the conspicuous consumption characteristics of “new sports,” particularly their associations with the expansion of consumer capitalism, few empirical studies have investigated how participants negotiate and experience such image-based identities:

When a sociologically circumscribed group has no other aim in life but to live in a world of waves or snow, when an entire life is devoted to one moment of ecstasy, it is time to consider the most intimate ways by which human beings build their own cultural landmarks and make them meaningful. (Midol, 1993, p. 27)

This paper draws on research grounded in the lived culture of windsurfing. It examines the meanings, experiences, and pleasures of this practice for those who participate in it. From my involvement in the sport, and the ethnographic empirical research that this paper draws on, I will argue that windsurfing is much more than just a media spectacle or intermittent recreation; participants are involved in a multilayered leisure subculture. Participation in this lifestyle is displayed in a range of symbols such as clothes, speech, car, and associated leisure activities; however, for the dedicated, often-obsessive participant, windsurfing participation is a whole way of life in which windsurfers seek hedonism, freedom, and self-expression. For “core” members (Donnelly, 1981), windsurfing dictates their leisure time, their work time, their choice of career, and where they live. This article will examine the ways in which these core windsurfing participants (male and female) create identities through their leisure consumption and its attendant lifestyle, challenging the notion that for the windsurfer “image is everything.”

Methodology

The ethnographic research I draw on focused on a windsurfing community on the South Coast of England, between 1994–97, in which I adopted an “insider role” based on my established participant role within the group and familiarity with the context (Wheaton, 1997). Observations centered on the windsurfing beaches as well as other sites where the windsurfers gathered socially, such as pubs they frequented after a day on the beach, windsurfing car boot sales (where participants buy and sell equipment), shops, trade shows and events, barbecues at the beach, and informal gatherings at windsurfers’ houses.
The analytical themes that emerged from the main setting were developed with formal in-depth interviews ($n = 24$) and observations at other locations, reflecting a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which emergent ideas or directions are incorporated into subsequent research questions. This approach meshes theorizing and data collection—data analysis, theory building, and testing were integral to data collection.

The main aim of the formal interviews was to refine and develop the analytical themes that had emerged in the (ongoing) observation phase, as well as potentially produce new areas of inquiry. Interviewees were members of the British windsurfing community selected on the basis of their positioning in the subculture, that is, their gender, age, and level/type of subcultural involvement. While some interviewees were windsurfers from Silver Sands, the main setting, many windsurfed at other locations in the south and west of England and some more globally. For example, one particular gap in the emergent observational data was the experiences of the marginal participant; therefore, in the formal interviews, I targeted newcomers and those who were exiting the subculture, adopting a form of snowball sampling. Likewise, since men—specifically white, middle-class men between the ages of 15 and 60—dominated the windsurfing culture, I deliberately interviewed more women than men (15 women and 10 men, respectively). This was because women’s experiences were underrepresented during the participant observation phase, and I was particularly interested in the experiences of women windsurfers. A few key informants were selected who had access to distinctive forms of insider knowledge, or who acted as gatekeepers to sections of the subculture.

Most interviewees were conducted on a one-to-one basis. The style adopted was informal and interactive, an approach that has been termed a “conversation with a purpose” (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). While a predetermined range of theoretical topics informed the direction of each specific interview, these issues and questions helped me to direct rather than lead the interview (see Spradley, 1989). Interviewees were encouraged to be spontaneous and interactive, focusing on their individual experiences.

In addition, I conducted observations at other windsurfing communities in the UK and abroad, including the Hawaiian Island of Maui, the windsurfers’ Mecca. This strategy allowed for the comparison of participants’ behavior in different contexts, and at different times, to identify patterns of behavior spatially, contextually, and temporally.

**Subcultural Identity: Insiders and Outsiders**

Cultural identities derive from the multitude of social relationships we are engaged in and the resulting roles we perform. However, central to this enactment are the ways in which we perceive others as locating us. “Identity is about belonging,” about what we have in common with people, and what differentiates us from others (Weeks, 1990, p. 88); identity is thus about both similarity and difference. The following two phrases are illustrative of the differences between the occasional recreational windsurfers who are outsiders to the subculture and those who are subculture members:

**Do you windsurf? [Novice/outsider]**
Yes, I am a windsurfer [Insider]

In the former phrase, “windsurfing” is referred to as an activity—the “act of windsurfing.” In the latter example, the participant labels him/herself as a “windsurfer.” Active windsurfers identified with the role of being a windsurfer; becoming a windsurfer involved learning, employing, and proclaiming a collective subcultural identity through their leisure consumption and its attendant value system and lifestyle. As Stuart Hall (1990) discusses, identity is about becoming as well as being. Likewise, sporting subcultural identity is not fixed; it is a dynamic process undergoing constant transformation (Donnelly & Young, 1988). As the newcomer progresses from outsider to insider (the process of becoming a windsurfer), the emphasis shifts from constructing an identity intended to signify his or her membership to the outside world, to ceasing to value that audience and valuing members of the subculture (Donnelly & Young, 1988).

The windsurfers’ identity is marked by a range of symbolic markers, extending from clothing and the specialist equipment used to vehicles driven, as well as the less “visible” aspects of style like argot. For example, windsurfers had their own jargon to describe the windsurfing experience as well as equipment and techniques, such as a “cheese-roll,” which is a type of jump. These symbols are distinctive and identifiable from both mainstream and other sports cultures, although some forms of expression, such as the numerous terms to describe waves and wave breaks, and other cultural artifacts are shared with the surfing culture from which windsurfing originated.

The specialist subcultural media, particularly windsurfing magazines, play an important role in this process of differentiating the subculture and constructing its distinctive identity. I will explore some of the ways in which windsurfers display their subcultural affiliation and individuality through the choice of symbolic goods and their subsequent customizing. However, it is my contention here that other less visible characteristics, such as forms of “insider knowledge,” the use of space, and especially the value system, are more important parts of the process of identity formation, particularly in the formation of status hierarchies within the subculture. As Sarah Thornton’s (1995) research on (dance) club cultures in the UK highlights, the internal hierarchies—or differential statuses—within subcultures are central to “subcultural processes,” yet these have been given comparatively little attention. Thornton (1995) reproaches, “few scholars have empirically examined the systems of social and cultural distinction that divide and demarcate contemporary culture” (p. 7). Thornton usefully appropriates Bourdieu’s (1984) work on distinction (the notions of cultural capital and taste) to coin the term subcultural capital, similar to status as appropriated by the Chicago school (see Gelder, 1997a). Thornton’s approach informs this research on sport subcultures, specifically her examination of the ways subcultural groups distinguish themselves against others, as well as differentiate among themselves, creating internal hierarchies of participation, knowledge, and taste.

In this analysis of the processes through which windsurfers construct and negotiate their collective (sub)cultural identity, I emphasize the different ways in which insiders and outsiders understand and display symbols of subcultural involvement or identification, as well as analyzing their meanings within the stratified layers of the windsurfing subculture. While a full examination of these complex
and often contradictory practices is beyond the scope of this paper. I will outline how, in this very visual, spectacular, and seemingly market-driven sport culture, commitment to the activity is central to insiders’ creation of subcultural status and authenticity.

**Subcultural Status**

The following discussion examines the windsurfers’ value system to illustrate the different ways in which participants created and signified subcultural status, ranging from sporting prowess to the role of equipment and subcultural style.

**“Beach Cred”**

Windsurfing prowess was an essential element of subcultural capital. Status in the windsurfing culture was achieved primarily by being a good windsurfer—the better the windsurfer, the higher the subcultural status. Being good or, in subcultural argot, a “hot” or “rad” sailor was based primarily on his or her level of skill. Those who performed the most difficult maneuvers with the most style were considered the most skilled:

If they are a good sailor, they are treated with respect. [John, advanced windsurfer]

Well, status is how good you are, if you can do a water start, carve jibe, you have a certain status because of that. [Mike, intermediate windsurfer]

Other attributes also were important to gain beach status, or “beach cred” (beach credibility), such as having a “go for it attitude,” being willing to attempt hard and dangerous maneuvers (“being rad”) even if they fail, and being prepared/able to go out in all conditions, particularly the windiest days, and the most dangerous sea conditions:

I mean you look at people who are really good at what they’re doing, but also very brave in what they are doing as well, so you really admire people who go out in difficult conditions and things like that. . . . The people who you know can do lots of different sailing and things. What you do is you look at people who are doing something you know is difficult, and take guts as well. [Sarah, intermediate windsurfer]

As interviewees suggested, it was important to take on challenges without concern for the consequences:

Being good or being game for a laugh. [Luke, advanced windsurfer]

Windsurfers watched each other but specifically watched the best windsurfers at the beach, termed the local “hot shots.” Being looked at or watched is a recurring part of the windsurfers’ narratives. However, often the personal identity of the hot shot was unknown—as Debby discussed, it was an amorphous identity:

For instance in the Dominican Republic, I can remember there was one guy—he had one sail, and one board, and he was the most fantastic sailor. And you didn’t—you had no idea who it was—he was just brilliant.
Danger, excitement, and lack of attention to safety are fetishized in the "go for it attitude" (see Fiske, 1989). Windsurfers, like surfers, "value escape from society and flirting with danger" (Farmer, 1992, p. 247). As Farmer notes, such "unfounded risk taking" opposes the values of the dominant culture. Correspondingly, windsurfing, like many other new sport cultures such as skateboarding, snowboarding, and surfing, has an antimainstream competition ethos (see Beal, 1995; Booth, 1995; Borden, 1998; Humphreys, 1997; Pearson, 1979; Wheaton, 1997). Nevertheless, beach cred was gained by out-performing the other sailors at the beach. At all beaches that I observed, the better windsurfers competed to be the local hot shot:

Silver Sands is a vast beach, yet people see it necessary to perform in one area, again vying for status . . . it happens where ever you go—everyone wants to be the hot shot. [Alex]

Competitiveness over status predominated toward windsurfers at the core. It was most evident among elite men whose sense of self was most firmly embedded in the windsurfing activity as well as among younger men whose masculine identity, it could be argued, was most fragile and who, therefore, needed to prove themselves as men (see Wheaton, 2000).11

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I’ve seen him sail when he has broken his harness, and he is still out there for another hour, sailing in the waves in really strong wind. He just gets on and does it. [Emma, emphasis added]

In addition to skill and attitude, commitment to the activity was central to attaining subcultural status. Those individuals who tried hard and improved, irrespective of their proficiency level, gained respect:

I mean Mark got really respected, he was always known as the first one out on the water, and the last one in. He would be out from 11 a.m. to dark . . . and really improved—he really put the time in. [Amy]

Windsurfing is a notoriously hard sport to learn, and to become a proficient windsurfer requires considerable commitment in time, effort, and, to continue to progress, money. The majority of elite windsurfers were very committed; commitment and skill level were connected. Hard core was a term used by the windsurfer to signify high subcultural status, as well as connoting a particular attitude and image.12 Nevertheless, terms like total respect or hard core depended on that individual’s positioning in the subculture—their ability level, age, and gender. For example, nonelite and particularly older individuals who tried hard (were seen to be “having a go”) gained respect:

He is still doing it with the same apparent dedication, commitment and enthusiasm he had 10 years ago. [Emma]

However, if a younger person claimed to have total respect for an elderly windsurfer, the younger windsurfer admired their commitment and envied their ability to keep windsurfing. But as John clarified, it was a different type of respect than they had for elite windsurfers:
Yeah. I mean—you’d notice it, and you’d think ya, I’d like to do that when I’m 65, but you’d be more interested... in watching the other guy, because it’s going to be more exciting to watch, and you might learn something. [John]

A cardinal sin was for an individual to portray that they were a committed windsurfer by talking about it and going through the motions of being a windsurfer, but not actually doing it. As Donnelly (1981) suggests, those individuals whose level of commitment is low are only partially recognized as subculture members by more committed members. Correspondingly, individuals whose level of commitment was low recognized and acknowledged this status difference:

I thought I was a committed windsurfer, but no way, not in comparison to, because, I have worked with people who really are windsurfers, and that is their only life. [Jo, marginal participant]

Consequently, as a female researcher studying a very male-dominated subculture, my role as an active and competent windsurfer was vital in gaining access. At beaches where my identity as an active “windsurfer” was known, my attempts to “hang out” at the beach for observational purposes were greeted with comments like, “Are you an actor or a windsurfer.” Without demonstrating commitment to the activity, I would not have gained full access, particularly to the “core.”

“Commodity-Orientated Subculture”

The consumption of objects—specifically the equipment or kit—is central to windsurfing and other new individualized “lifestyle” sports. As Midol and Broyer (1995) observe in their analysis of the “whiz sport” culture, which includes windsurfing,

this culture has defined itself through the appearance of newly created objects... repetitive and almost compulsive commitment to these objects. (p. 208, emphasis added)

Like the surfing culture, from which windsurfing originated, windsurfing is a “commodity-orientated subculture” (Stratton, 1997) in which consumer capitalism is key to its inception and growth. As Stratton (1997) argues, surfing supports “two fundamentals of American capitalism, consumerism and individualism” (pp. 183-184). This expansion of capital is particularly evident in the commodities linked to these activities such as equipment and clothing.

In the windsurfing culture, the windsurfing equipment is the key visual signifier of subcultural identity. Whether at the beach or outside of the beach environment, a wind surf board on the car roof rack signified that person was a windsurfer:

But you felt like a real clan. If you saw someone coming the other way, you’d flash your lights. [Scott]

The centrality of the windsurf equipment to the windsurfing experience and identity was illustrated by the way many interviewees, when asked about how and why they got into the sport, charted their own windsurfing careers or histories in terms of their equipment:13
So I did that for a bit, just sort of slowly got more into it. Then I got rid of the Alpha and got the Challenge Flex, and then Alice bought me the Ecstasy, I think. And I got a second-hand Screamer. And we got shot of the Alpha, and then after the Screamer came the AHD 282, yeah, that's right I got shot rid of the Screamer, and got the AHD 282, and then, but by this time I was like sailing quite a lot—really by the time I got the Ecstasy and the Screamer, it was nearly all short-board sailing, and it was, um, like whenever I could go. [John; the italic text represents pieces of equipment]

Knowledge about windsurfing equipment was a particularly important component of subcultural capital. The windsurfers I observed spent an inordinate amount of time talking about windsurfing equipment, the pros and cons of a particular product's performance, new innovations, stylistics, different brands, and so forth:

I think it's a bit intimidating when you, you're learning or when you don't know anything about it—because the thing about windsurfers is that they talk about windsurfing, a lot, and they talk about kit a lot, and it's all like it's in code. [Debby]

When they were not talking about windsurfing equipment, participants were reading about it in windsurfing magazines or browsing in windsurfing shops and car boot sales. As Dant (1996) suggests, the windsurfer (board) is a "mythic object": it has a subcultural symbolic value, or "aura" (Tomlinson, 1990), that is greater than its functionality.¹⁴

In 1985 I worked all summer in a cafe to afford a Wailer 291 board. And I bought a 4.2 RAF sail—a beautiful sail, the colours in it were so exotic. [Jason]

The board's symbolic and aesthetic value is most apparent in the creation of the "custom board" with its personalized, often intricate designs and artwork. Certain manufacturers of boards received more status, and members with high subcultural capital were able to distinguish these trends, which varied between seasons and even between locations and subgroups of windsurfers:

People are very good at being able to sort of pick out what the "in" boards are. [Debby]

Willis' (1978) ethnography of the motorbike club outlines how the motorbike acted as a kind of "totem" (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1986), a symbolic code that signified a certain kind of working-class masculinity (Connell, 1995). As Lury (1996) argues, reviewing Willis' study in the context of material culture,

an individual member's relation to the use of the motorbike provided the basis for hierarchies within the group. So, for example, members who, while technically very skilled mechanics, were very cautious riders were placed low on this internal hierarchy, while members who risked life and limb were rated highly by other members... in this way, members' relations to each other were mediated through a particular understanding of the bike as a totem of working-class masculinity (p. 17).
Likewise, the windsurfer (board) could be described as a totem of a kind of middle-class white masculinity. Like the totemic use of the motorbike described by Willis, internal status hierarchies were based around the display, and especially use, of the windsurfing equipment. For example, as more committed and proficient participants had higher status, correspondingly, forms of windsurfing that require more skill and commitment in time to achieve that skill level, such as “short board sailing,” were ascribed a higher status. Thus, the type of boards used by more advanced participants, such as short boards, signified higher skill level and thus had more distinction than the boards used by beginners. However, as the next section will exemplify, in the windsurfing culture, skilled use, not display of the equipment, was fundamental to obtaining status in this culture.

“Equipment Junkies”

Despite the centrality of windsurfing equipment to the activity, and the expenditure required to get involved in the sport, members couldn’t “buy” their way into the core of the subculture. In Bourdieu’s terms, the relationship between economic capital and (sub)cultural capital is more complex than a direct exchange. An antimatationalism ethos was evident from the windsurfers’ attitudes to those individuals who purchased equipment they considered to be beyond their proficiency or who tried to demonstrate their subcultural membership or status just by displaying their equipment. Every interviewee declared that a visiting windsurfer with the most up-to-date board, sail, and wetsuit might turn heads on the beach, but prestige in the group was based on performance alone—who was good and who “went for it.” The windsurfer with all the expert equipment wasn’t respected unless he or she shined out on the water:

They have tried to take the cheque book route into windsurfing, and that is a definite no. [core advanced windsurfer]

I don’t notice kit, but if you went out and did a forward loop on it they would notice you more for that. [intermediate windsurfer]

It doesn’t matter if you are rich or not, or have a Porsche, if you are a crap windsurfer it doesn’t matter. [marginal windsurfer]

Although some less core windsurfers perceived that having the most up-to-date or the most technical equipment intended for more skilled sailors signified that they were “real” windsurfers (see also Dant, 1996), the core windsurfers viewed it as a “novice blunder”—a mismanagement of the identity construction process (see Donnelly & Young, 1988). Emma, for example, recounted with embarrassment that as a beginner she wanted to be proficient enough “to sail the shortest possible board,” the type of board used by more advanced windsurfers. In her enthusiasm to gain and demonstrate her sporting proficiency, she incorrectly assumed that the shorter the board she used, the higher her status. As Donnelly and Young (1988) observed in the climbing subculture, the conspicuous display of equipment and other symbols of identification is the first stage of identity construction; as they become more experienced,

they gradually become conscious that such behavior is not “cool.” . . . Overt display is a rookie error that highlights the subcultural values of coolness and understatement. (p. 230)
Likewise, windsurfers’ terms for such individuals included *fashion victims* and *equipment junkies*, again demonstrating that subcultural status was based around prowess and commitment, not conspicuous consumption, such as:

The people who take every bit of their equipment to the beach, everyday. And they pull out all of it, and lay it out in front of their van. [Alex]

However there were variances in this anti-consumption ethos, such as between geographical locations and types of windsurfing activity, which I will briefly exemplify.

Those forms of the windsurfing activity that were the hardest to learn (requiring most commitment in time) and that were more hazardous, such as wave sailing, were considered the most exclusive and most extreme “subworlds.” As Stephen, an elite sailor pronounced,

Wave sailors as a whole have my utmost respect, because it frightens the life out of me. [Stephen]

The wave sailors tended to have less respect for speed or slalom sailors who they stereotyped as lower in skill: “good at sailing in a straight line but not much else” [John]. However, the root of this low status was that slalom or racing equipment was more expensive than wave equipment and more consumption orientated than wave sailing. Slalom sailors could, to an extent, buy equipment to enable them to sail faster, whereas in wave sailing, performance was less related to the quality of the equipment. As a wave sailor commented while watching a national racing event, “The retail value of the boards on just that one section of the beach was enough to buy a house, a quiver of surf boards and a ticket round the world” (Field notes).

In this research, geographical variance was most evident comparing windsurfing communities in the West Country and the South Coast of England. In the West Country the anti-consumption ethos was stronger. As Emma explained,

They get on and do it on whatever kit they have. Kit is not at all important ... you probably would have more status if you had a tatty wetsuit. [Emma]

This difference seemed to be a function of the varying “economic” status (what Bourdieu terms the “economic capital”) of participants at these different locations. In the West Country, participants tended to be less economically privileged, thus windsurfers had less prestigious and lower quantities of equipment. Emma described their attitude as a “reverse snobbery,” with participants attempting to windsurf more proficiently than the person who had newer or more expensive equipment, thus proving that you could be a good windsurfer without spending excessive amounts of money. For example, James, an elite windsurfer from the West Country, was smug about owning so little equipment:

One sail, one mast, one board. Go to the beach, sail with a 5.0 (five meter sail) until it gets too windy, and then put on some more down-haul. [James]

Conversely, the participants on the South Coast were the wealthiest group of participants that I observed, and correspondingly the anti-consumption ethos was less apparent there than at any other recreational location I visited. As one interviewee put it, Silver Sands was considered an epicenter of conspicuous consumption of windsurfing equipment:
There’s a hell of a lot of new kit there. When you sail anywhere else, nobody has got so much new kit as people have at Silver Sands. [Debby]

These varying statuses that created divisions between subgroups of windsurfers, types of windsurfing activity, and different geographical locations seemed to be partly attempts to retain the exclusivity of their part of the subculture and its identity.

To summarize, while the equipment was central to the windsurfing experience and a marker of involvement, conspicuous consumption of the kit and resistance to material consumption coexist within this cultural space and among the same group of (middle-class, white, predominantly male) participants. In the next section, I will briefly examine windsurfers’ adoption and display of subcultural style in the form of clothing and fashion, a form of conspicuous consumption that popular discourses characterize as an essential part of “surf culture.” Nevertheless, I will argue that the uniqueness of the subcultural identification of the committed windsurfer was not based on subcultural style. This discussion will further exemplify the complexities of this relationship between consumption, resistance to consumption, and subcultural identity.

**Style Denial**

Subcultural theorists within the Birmingham School’s cultural studies tradition have tended to read subcultural style, as the most “self-absorbing” features and symbols of subcultures (Gelder, 1997b, p. 374), especially in relation to creating group identities. Furthermore, this concern with style and fashion in creating and performing cultural identities in late modernity, particularly among youth groups and the urban “new middle-classes,” is more widespread. As Craik (1994) argues,

Fashion became a tool of prestigious imitation among most social groups, the specific character of which was flavored by techniques of gender; fashion and consumer knowledge’s, competencies and habits; and by the circumstances of different lifestyles. Clothes were a key to the modern consumer’s sense of identity. (p. 206)

The homogeneity in windsurfers’ visual appearance, especially of the young, core, elite, male windsurfers, was frequently recorded in my field notes. At all the beaches I visited, the windsurfers wore the same “uniform”: board shorts, T-shirts, sandals, and sunglasses of the same shape and brand (Oakley’s and Arnet’s were “in” during the mid-1990s). Many wore jewelry—leather thongs with stones, shells, and beads around their necks and wristbands such as silk woven friendship bracelets. This apparent lack of heterogeneity or individuality was not because I could not “read” or appreciate the subtleties in people’s adoption of subcultural style. My interviewees concurred that there was a recognizable subcultural style, which newcomers soon became quite competent at reading:

When you first go you don’t realize that they’re scruffy in a particular way— everybody just looks quite scruffy. And then you start to notice—and then very quickly you start to notice that actually they’re a sort of—certain clothes that people wear... So whether it’s the type of clothes, as in board shorts, or whether it’s the sunglasses, or even something simple like you know—you
notice what shoes people wear, there’s like a uniform—there is definitely a uniform. [Debby]

In my field notes, I described numerous incidents of the ways insiders were able to identify other windsurfers on the basis of their visual appearance even away from the beach environment, such as at car boot sales, in pubs, and so forth. Only the “neophyte” windsurfers (Donnelly & Young, 1988) would make the faux pas of wearing “imitation” surf clothing, such as the fluorescent shorts and T-shirts with surfing picture or slogans sold in high street stores or pseudo surf brands such as “Fat Willy’s” surf shacks.¹⁸

Yet even though subcultural style existed and was adopted, albeit to varying degrees among almost all serious windsurfers, once I began formal interviews, I detected reluctance for interviewees to talk about windsurfing style and particularly fashion:

I don’t buy “Oxbow” for the label, it’s because I like warm comfortable things. [Core male, aged 30–35]

Yeah I tend to wear that style of stuff because it’s appropriate for the activities. [Core male, aged 35–40]

I soon became sensitized to the different ways in which interviewees refused to admit to wearing windsurfing clothing, particularly (although not exclusively) among the committed males over the age of 30. This resistance intrigued me; men who were literally decked in windsurfing brand T-shirts, shorts, watchstraps, shoes, and sunglasses denied that they (rather than “other” people) wore “surfie style” and “branded” clothes.

It is my contention that this “style denial” was related to the reduced exclusivity of surf style. That is, during the late 1980s and early 1990s in the UK, “beach wear” and particularly surf style, exploded into mainstream men’s fashion as part of a wider differentiation and fragmentation of the male fashion market (Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996). When surf style became incorporated into mainstream fashion, the distinctiveness and exclusivity of the windsurfers’ subcultural style decreased, which seemingly contributed to style becoming a less important aspect of subcultural identification and, thus, style denial. Style denial was, I conjecture, a form of (verbal) “symbolic” resistance to the incorporation of surf style into mainstream fashion and its subsequent commercialization.

However, for the purposes of this discussion I want to highlight that while windsurfers did buy and wear branded clothing, they didn’t want to be seen as “buying into an image.” Windsurfers used terms such as fashion victims and fashion surfers to describe those individuals who tried to display their subcultural identification via surf style, the same term used to describe those individuals who displayed their equipment:

The materialistic side, isn’t it, fashion surfers and all that, and that side to people... the ones that live in London, with loads of cash. [James]

Subcultural style was the way in which pseudo-surfers (or fashion surfers) as well as newcomers and beginners (and younger men and women) displayed their subcultural involvement. This dichotomy between commitment, or doing it, and those people who associated themselves with the lifestyle through conspicuous
consumption was very apparent in the narrative of James, a very committed male windsurfer:

[Being a fashion surfer] is when you are trying to associate yourself with it because you are not actually doing it that much. People like Maggot and Pete, you don’t see them in the stuff, but then out of all the people, they are the ones that are living the images that other people are trying to get . . . they are doing it and don’t wear all the clothes. It’s advertising, isn’t it. Look at adverts like the Simmer style, you look at these people like Rush Randle and Mark Angulo [in the adverts]—they are living the life, so if you wear our clothes you can live the life. But that is just for people who can’t live the life because they are living in Plymouth, or Southampton, or the city, and only get to the water once a month . . . when you are trying to associate yourself with it because you are not actually doing it that much. [James, emphases added]

For insiders, but particularly committed windsurfers, items like the windsurf board, as well as other articles of equipment, such as the wetsuit and harness, were the primary signifiers or symbols of subcultural membership. Those interviewees who did not deny that subcultural style constituted a part of their subcultural identity tended to be the marginal participants, that is, those individuals who were in the process of constructing an appropriate subcultural identity, as well as some younger men. As Angela, a “windsurfing widow,””¹⁰ explained, she soon realized that clothing was the way that outsiders and newcomers signified membership. It was, however, an identity that confirmed membership to nonwindsurfers, rather than being accepted by established members of the group:

Oh, ya ya. Wearing a label on a T-shirt made me feel a lot more, like you say, that I fitted in a lot more. Initially that’s how I felt, but now I am actually—I don’t feel like that now—I feel that I can walk about in a pair of leggings and a plain t-shirt and I wouldn’t be any different. [Angela]

The exclusivity of the windsurfers’ subcultural identity was established through the value system, which emphasizes commitment to the activity and I described as a “culture of commitment.””²⁰

A “Culture of Commitment”

Commitment, as I have demonstrated, was essential to subcultural status. However, for core participants, for whom windsurfing was “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 1992), commitment to windsurfing extended to become an organizing principle in their whole lives; it affected the participants’ whole lifestyle. As John, a keen windsurfer in his late 30s commented,

And then of course what happens is the more you get into windsurfing, you don’t really want to do anything in case it’s windy . . . What comes with doing this windsurfing is that actually this whole different life. [John]

This relationship between subculture, lifestyle, and commitment was central to understanding the internal distinctions and stratification of subculture members and the meanings they gave to their sport consumption. Examining indicators of
"commitment" to the windsurfing subculture and its associated lifestyle illustrated the extent to which dedicated windsurfers attempted to organize their whole lives around this leisure activity. As Donnelly (1981) suggests, friendship patterns, time, and money are key indicators of commitment. However, others specific to this subculture included lifestyle rituals like watching the weather forecast, where participants lived and how far they drove to the beach, and the effect of their windsurfing career on employment and career development.

Stephanie, a female in her early 40s, was, in her own words, an obsessive windsurfer, yet she was by no means atypical of core windsurfers. She lived and worked by the water, working part-time to give her the lifestyle flexibility needed to commit to becoming a serious windsurfer. Stephanie argued that she would not obligate herself to any social occasions, just in case there was a chance she could be windsurfing. Windsurfing, as she vividly described, dictated almost every aspect of her, and her partner's, life:

Most of our best friends are windsurfers. It's like people who don't windsurf are from another planet really, or, you know, they have to tolerate you, or you tolerate them. But like my family, you know Christmas is all around the weather forecast . . . and they just have to want to know what you are doing at New Year, and I said: "don't know yet, depends on what the weather is doing." . . . I just refuse point blank to have a meal in the middle of the day. I will not. I mean I am terribly selfish about it, and they just—I think all his family think I'm selfish . . . I mean sitting around in the middle of the day eating a meal if it's windy is my idea of hell, you know. I won't do it . . . They'd be hurt, yeah absolutely, well I just tell people that I put windsurfing first, and that's it, and if you don't like it, stuff it. You know it's an addiction and it's a way of life. [Stephanie]

Midol and Broyer likewise observed that "Their commitment seems obsession and their emotional and mental approach explains why their uncontrolled fun 'training' is essentially a solitary affair or shared with a few others" (Midol & Broyer, 1995, p. 208). Although participants spent inordinate amounts of time and effort, this commitment was a commitment to physical and mental pleasure:

It's almost a spiritual thing . . . the feel good factor is so high—even if you've had a bad spell it's better than not sailing at all—you know, like the buzz I get, the endorphin sort of buzz. The simple physical feeling it gives you is great I think, and the mental spin-off . . . I don't know a single other sport that's been able to give me those sorts of things. . . . So, I think it's just, it's terribly life enhancing. [Lisa]

Contrary to Bourdieu's (1984) suggestion that the common feature of such "new bourgeois sports" is that they are mainly pursued for their "health-maintaining functions," people windsurfed primarily for short-term gains. The rewards in windsurfing were based primarily on short-term sensations, as well as "their social profits" (Bourdieu, 1984), a similar concept to status and peer approval. What binds these windsurfing communities is a shared understanding of the pleasure of windsurfing: the buzz gained from blasting along the water for the first time, or progressing to sail at 30 miles an hour, or jumping 10 feet into the air. Windsurfing participants were not concerned with their health, longevity, and self-preservation
but denoted a relationship between body and self that emphasized intense but short-
term experiences and the self-actualized “inner” or “felt” (not “displayed”) body
(see Featherstone, 1983). As Midol and Broyer (1995) observe, these are “playful
practices” grounded in the “here and now”:

This new generation replaced the morality of guilt by a pleasure seeking in
the present moment, a search for thrills experienced by athletes as they go
even faster and higher. (p. 207)

For Fiske (1989) such attitudes to pleasure, freedom, and danger represent a
potentially subversive challenge to mainstream culture; “danger of the waves are
part of the politics of pleasure” (p. 66). In his Foucauldian analysis, such (embod-
ied) pleasures that escape the norms of discipline and conformity are agents of
subversion that create a “privatized domain beyond the scope of power” (Fiske,
1989, p. 64). Rojek (1995) similarly claims, “The hedonist is seeking ways of
escaping from the confines of ‘normality’” (p. 116).

New Sports, Consumption, and Identity: Conspicuous Commitment

Postmodern sport and leisure is depicted as being dominated by commercial
consumption, lacking depth of experience, “spectacular and very visual” (Crouch
& Tomlinson, 1994, p. 312). These are the common representations and percep-
tions of extreme or “lifestyle” sports like windsurfing, images that are predomi-
nantly provided by my media culture. For example, advertising campaigns for prod-
ucts such as Pepsi Max\textsuperscript{31} and Sprite offer a bricolage of transient images of ex-
treme sports, images that affirm that if you want to transform your identity and
become “one of them” (Kellner, 1995), you need to focus on image, style, and
fashion:

Media culture (thus) provides resources for identity and new modes for iden-
tity in which look, style, and image replaces such things as action and com-
mitment as constitutive of identity, of who one is. (p. 249)

Yet in the windsurfers’ own narratives, looking like you were “doing it” did
not equate to attaining subcultural status or procuring a subcultural identity. As I
have demonstrated, windsurfers subcultural capital was based on windsurfing prowess,
commitment, and skill (windsurfing competence), not just money spent on the
activity. Although economic capital is essential to get involved in the sport, mem-
bers can not buy their way into the core of the subculture. Individuals whose lifestyle
revolves around windsurfing and who commit time and effort in the activity have
higher statuses among group members. Although image and style do play a part in
constructing a subcultural identity, for the core participants themselves, rather than
novices, outsiders, or particularly media representations of the subculture, less
visible characteristics and, in particular as this paper has demonstrated, commit-
tment to the activity were more important parts of the process of subcultural iden-
tity formation.

For postmodern theorists, media culture is a privileged site for the “implosion
of identity and fragmentation of the subject” (Kellner, 1995, p. 234). The
increased significance of media culture in providing the means and components to
constitute identity (Kellner, 1995) is undeniable; nevertheless, empirical work on
sport in postmodern culture needs to go beyond the surface and spectacle, analyzing texts and selves, their significance and meanings. As Gelder recognizes, “The effect of a style . . . can often be emphasized at the expense of the nature and behavior of the participants who put it to use” (Gelder, 1997b, p. 378).

The empirical work presented in this article suggests that for at least some section of society, we have increased freedom to “play with” our identities and that such postmodern identities may increasingly be constructed from the images and practices of consumption and leisure. However, identity has not been subsumed by hyperreality nor a global mass mediated sign economy. Contrary to claims that in postmodern culture, fluid “postmodern tribes” dominate (Featherstone, 1991) and stimulation supersedes experience (Urry, 1990), windsurfers’ identities featured aspects—such as commitment—considered to be constitutive of “modern identities” (see Kellner, 1995). This is not to argue that new sport cultures, like windsurfing, cannot be regarded as a postmodern phenomenon, however, the existence of a “culture of commitment” goes against the assertion that “postmodern leisure is, as it were, existence without commitment” (Rojek, 1995, p. 7). The apparent postmodern implosion of tastes, recycling of styles, and dominance of commercial consumption represent one coexistent part of the postmodern experience (see Gotttdiener, 1995). In these individualized, privatized, and seemingly market-driven cultural spaces, the subcultural communities expressed—in their own terms—a sense of subcultural authenticity and localized resistance to “conspicuous consumption” and materialism. This is a cultural space that exists between the oppositions of production and consumption, similar to the “self-generated leisure consumption” described by Crouch and Tomlinson (1994), in which people make their own culture and contribute to the construction of their own identities. Thus as Lash (1990) suggests, while popular postmodernist culture exalts “consumerist values,” which “tends to undermine the work ethic” (p. 29),

The result however has not always been “possessive individualism,” but the formation of more localized collective identities, based on the shop floor or the community. (p. 30)

This study, which illustrates the existence of these “collective identities,” suggests that in postmodern society, identity does not disintegrate but is “subject to new determinations and new forces” (Kellner, 1992, p. 174).

References


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**Notes**

1Haraway (1990) and Bradley (1996).

2While consumption is the focus here, clearly there are other arenas in which expressions of identity have been examined as important cultural and political issues, notably questions of cultural hybridity, ethnicity, racism, gendered identities, nationalism, and new social movements.

3While recognizing ongoing polemics about the use of “subculture” as a theoretical category, particularly its opposition to the mainstream, which is increasingly hard to identify and delimit, I contend that subculture remains a useful analytical and descriptive category for mapping this sporting context. It is not my intention here to contribute to a definition of subculture or any of the other sociological terms such as neo-tribe or lifestyle that also address questions of individuality, difference, collective identity, and lifestyles, but to delineate some of the cultural issues.

4I am drawing here on Donnelly’s (1981) characterization of achieved sport subcultures, in which he outlines levels of membership from the core to the marginal member. By adopting these terms, I am acknowledging that such differences are, in part, a way that members (and often researchers) authenticate a certain set of experiences, namely privileging the core. However, I suggest that it is a useful ideal-typical device to help map the experiences of individual members with different levels of involvement and particularly the relationship between commitment and identity in the group (see Wheaton, 1997).

5I have discussed the male domination and masculinization of the culture in Wheaton (2000). Difference in ethnicity (as opposed to the ethnicity of whiteness) were not investigated, as the majority of participants and all the interviewees were white.

6As Thornton (1997, p. 473) argues, academics have tended to “position media as incorporating or co-opting rather than aiding in the formation of subcultures.” Yet for the subculturalists themselves, such mass media forms have “markedly different cultural connotations” (Thornton, 1995, p. 122). Thus, as Thornton (1995) highlights, it is vital to differentiate between mass media and specialist subcultural media.

7Parts of this section of the paper discussing forms of subcultural status (and the section titled “Culture of Commitment”) is reproduced in Wheaton (in press), *Windsurfing: A Subculture of Commitment in to the Extreme: Alternative Sports Inside and Out* (S. Sydnor, R. Rinehart, eds.), SUNY Press.
I have indicated the skill level, gender, or age of the participant where it is relevant to the analysis.

This amorphous identity is similar to Fiske’s (1989) concept of the “de-individualised” surfer in his analysis of surfing magazines.

Windsurfing prowess, like surfing, has a subjective dimension to it. The aesthetic and subjective character of being “a good windsurfer,” was especially apparent in wave sailing, which is the closest form of the windsurfing activity to regular surfing. Elite wave sailors frequently referred to other wave sailors’ “styles,” or individualistic ways of performing and expressing manoeuvres. This subjective element contributed to competition over status in the subculture.

This competitiveness between elite men to demonstrate their sporting supremacy, contributed to the exclusivity of the culture based on “prowess,” alienating and excluding participants who were less skilled, less committed, and “less go for it,” as well as reducing camaraderie and support among the men.

“Hard core” is not specific to the windsurfing subculture but used by surfers (see Farmer, 1992) and skateboarders.

An analysis of windsurfing magazine content highlighted that in both editorial and advertising texts, the equipment is the main focus.

Fiske (1989) likewise notes the symbolic value of the surfboard.

Of course, proficiency, particularly at the elite level, tends to reflect access to resources, especially the time and money to participate.

Alex, who had traveled extensively, suggested that conspicuous consumption was more apparent in the UK (and other European nations like Germany) than in Australia and the USA.

Adding downhall is a way of decreasing the power on the sail, which is necessary when the wind gets stronger. However, once the wind strengthens considerably, his alternative would have been to use a smaller sail.

Fat Willy’s surf shack is a chain of shops in the UK that sell surf style clothing to the nonsurfing public. They also produce car stickers, another signifier of the nonsurfer.

Windsurfing widows, who usually did not windsurf themselves, often used style to signify their involvement. For a discussion of windsurfing widows, see Wheaton & Tomlinson (1998).

Adopted from Tomlinson (1993).

Pepsi Max is a diet Pepsi packaged and promoted for the UK market. The television and magazine advertising during 1998–1999 drew on a variety of extreme sport imagery, playing on stereotypes of North American youth, to address the male consumer. To my knowledge Pepsi Max is not available in the USA. Likewise, Sprite commercials on British television, and in some magazine advertising during 1998-1999, used snowboarding imagery.

Drawing on Laing’s (1997) analysis of punk.

Similarly, Beal (1994) argues in her study of skateboarders that this type of localized resistance is closely associated to Scott’s (1990) notion of “infrapolitics” because of its emphasis on “generating a self governing activity” (Beal, 1994, p. 265).

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