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Making Waves: the Global Reach of a Cornish Village

SURFING | BRANDS | GLOBAL | SUBCULTURE | NETWORK



ABSTRACT

'GLOBALISED CULTURAL SENSIBILITIES' ARISE FROM THE INCREASINGLY WIDESPREAD MOVEMENT OF IDEAS, OBJECTS, PEOPLE AND TEXTS, ACCORDING TO THEORIST GEOFF STAHL (1999), WHOSE WORK ON RETHINKING SUBCULTURES CALLS FOR A MORE NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF 'TASTE CULTURES' OR MINORITY INTEREST GROUPS.

One such group defies classification into established definitions of subculture, operating in local, global and digital networks of meaning. It is the subject of this paper and of my wider research: surfers. The visual and material culture of surfing is far from homogenous, in spite of its enormous economic potential having been exploited by mass production and corporate sponsorship. While products from global manufacturing giants can be found on almost any beach with a break, local businesses based in tiny communities can make significant contributions to the look and feel of surf clothing, boards and paraphernalia. This paper discusses the rise and fall of the big three surfwear brands – *Rip Curl*, *Quiksilver* and *Billabong*, and contrasts their fortunes with a small but influential brand based in St Agnes, North Cornwall.

Home to an international environmental pressure group, *Surfers Against Sewage* (SAS), and head office of a specialist surfwear company with worldwide online sales and a shop in London's Soho, St Agnes' cultural reach is truly global. This quiet village of 4000 residents also boasts the Annual International Bellyboarding Championships, sponsored by the *National Trust*. The *Surf Lifesaving Club* is twinned with Manly Beach, Sydney. So is St Agnes a global village? The casual visitor's first view of the area would not give this impression; despite the plethora of surf related businesses, this is no tourist trap. Rather the area comprises the self-styled 'Badlands', where 'locals only' surf breaks are jealously guarded against incomers. Yet this tiny village, a community bound together by a shared love of surfing, has far-reaching influence on the mainstream fashion associated with surf culture, explored and theorised in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

England's South West peninsula is widely perceived to be the centre of UK surfing (Mansfield et al. 2011). Focusing strongly on the culture emerging from surfing, rather than the activity itself, my ongoing PhD research at Falmouth University investigates connections resulting from the flow of people, goods and ideas (Stahl 2003) to and from the South West in the development of domestic surfing culture.

This paper discusses how the tiny village of St Agnes in North Cornwall, a community bound together by a shared love of surfing, has far-reaching influence on the mainstream fashion associated with surf culture.

Firstly, the paper briefly sketches out how the pastime of surfing came to be adopted in the region, and with it, a rich visual and material culture, albeit one that is not universally

shared, as surfing remains a minority pursuit. Discussion will then focus on an evaluation of the applicability of some established theoretical perspectives on minority interest groups to St Agnes, its local style and its international significance. Finally, the paper will argue that in the digital age, diffuse and far reaching minority taste communities might be better understood as networks of human and nonhuman actors (Latour 2005, anchored to places and spaces both physical and digital).

SURFING CONTEXT

Australian Sociologist Kent Pearson (1979) discusses the development of modern surfing as taking place on the two edges of the Pacific, but surfriding, as it was first known, was also happening far away from Australia or the west coast of the USA. On the Atlantic Swell in the south west of England, as early as 1914 (Mansfield et al. 2011), riders surfed on wooden boards or 'bellyboards'. With the development of Great Western Railways' (GWR) branch lines to the region in the 1920s, mass tourism took off, with surfriding a popular and heavily promoted activity as can be seen in this GWR poster from 1927 (figure 1). Providers of swimwear and beachwear as well as surf-related souvenirs and ephemera increased to meet the demand, the tradition of dry-land surf style having been initiated by '...the father of modern surfing...', Hawaiian, Duke Kahanamoku (Mansfield et al. 2011: 17). In the 1930s shirt manufacturers *Kahaa* paid 'The Duke' a royalty for every 'Aloha' silk shirt sold, in return for wearing them in public (Kampion 1997) (figure 2). This deal prefigures today's surfwear sponsorship and provides the initial connection between lifestyle surf apparel and the now clichéd references to Hawaii such as the sunset and the hibiscus flower motif.



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In the UK, the arrival of Australian life guards and their Malibu boards in Cornwall in the late 1950s prompted a demand for board manufacturers and shapers as well as an enthusiasm for surf, and Surf Life Saving Associations, dozens of which were founded throughout the decade. Wetsuit makers set up in the region after neoprene by *DuPont* had proved effective as underwater insulation for divers in the 1950s, allowing year-round enjoyment of the waves. A surf industry was emerging in the region, importing and producing kit and ephemera as well as, crucially, lifestyle clothing displaying surf brands.

Some of the most popular imports came from Australia. The 1980s saw a surge in interest in surfing as Australiana swept the UK with a tide of soaps, films and pop music, as well as sporting events including surf competitions, reaching British screens. Many young people took up surfing while taking advantage of working visas to Australia for those under the age

of 26, who on return to the UK, found their way to the South West to enjoy the waves, bringing with them a taste and a market for mainstream Australian surf wear brands such as *Rip Curl*, *Billabong* and *Quiksilver*. These labels had started out as surf enthusiasts' kitchen table enterprises providing specialist kit such as double-stitched board shorts, with sufficient strength and coverage to withstand athletic manoeuvres on waxy boards. By the late 1990s they were multinational companies with profits in the tens of millions, supplying branded t-shirts, day wear including dresses and jeans, watches and even wallets: products connected to surfing by little more than a label and an already clichéd aesthetic repertoire of conch shells, shark teeth and the ubiquitous hibiscus flower. In 2012, *Billabong* was failing, its shares near worthless, having '...lost its mojo and sense of identity' (Knight, 2012:unknown) and in 2015 *Quiksilver* filed for bankruptcy in the USA. Only *Rip Curl* remained afloat in the 'spectacular wipeout' (Johnson 2013) of what had become some of the world's biggest sportswear brands.

ST AGNES AND SURFING CULTURE

Surf brands may have fallen out of favour in the new millennium, but surfing itself was by then ingrained into the daily lives of many living in the south west; none more so than the inhabitants of St Agnes, North Cornwall. According to the 2011 census, St Agnes and Perranporth community network is home to 17,400 residents (Cornwall Council 2013). The village (see figure 3) is home to 3,900 people, encompassing a small commercial centre with a range of independent businesses, several of which directly relate to surfing, located on the steep sides of the valley leading to the shingle beach at Trevaunance Cove. The beach itself flanked on both sides by rocky outcrops, almost disappears at high tide, and the rip current on the West side on the bay further confirms that this is not a pleasure beach. It is a surfer's beach, at the heart of what is locally nicknamed 'The Badlands'.

The name, which according to local legend could once be seen spray-painted on street signs, appears incongruous in this picturesque locale, but to South West surfers it signifies the 'locals only' breaks in Trevaunance and nearby Chapel Porth. Surf writers Chris Nelson and Demi Taylor explore the nature of the name and quote Steve Bunt, one of the original St Agnes surfers and owner of Best Ever surfboards. Bunt says:

I think it was between 1981 to '85...We didn't like the outsiders coming in and taking over our break really. We decided to make it the 'Badlands' – put people off. It was bad Karma to come down and surf here. It really did work and it still does. There are a lot of people who won't come down and surf around Aggie because it's the Badlands.

(Stranger4, 2004)

This is a community tightly bound by a shared love of surfing and activities associated with it, and by a longstanding local surf heritage. *St Agnes' Surf Life Saving Association*, founded in 1953, was the second in the UK and currently runs classes,



staffed by volunteers, for six age groups a week, every week from May to October. Two commercial surf schools also use the cove as well as hundreds of unaffiliated local surfers, many of whom have enjoyed success on the British and World competitive stages.

An Australian, the late 'Chops' Lascelles, whose boards continue to sell worldwide, opened one of the first board shapers in the UK, in St Agnes in 1976. In 1990 the world renowned environmental pressure group, SAS was founded and remains based in St Agnes at *Wheal Kitty Workshops*, along with the cold water surf clothing company *Finisterre*, described in *The Independent* as 'achingly fashionable' (Dugan 2009). The significance of surfing is to the community here is clear, and surfing is, elsewhere, a minority pursuit. So how useful is the concept of subculture to understanding this community?

EXPLORING SUBCULTURE AND ST AGNES

Early approaches to subculture, like those from the *British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* (BCCCS) in the 1970s, tend not to apply to St Agnes. These Marxist analyses of youth subcultures such as 'Mods' theorised the means by which they were able to resist the mainstream through dress, speech, music and ritual. While we may be able to discern distinction in preferences shared by St Agnes surfers, this is by no means a 'youth' subculture: three generations surf the Badlands breaks. Sociologist Neil Campbell (2004: 16) argues that youthfulness is no longer confined to the young, suggesting that the category of youth subculture might be expanded to accommodate those who fail to move on, '...baby boomers... refuse to let go of 'youth' as a lifestyle choice and hold onto it through their choices of music, fashion and their struggles over body image.'

The notion of resistance is more difficult to apply to the St Agnes surfing community, in which 'parent culture' and youth share values. For the BCCCS, social class, race and gender are 'problems' to which subculture is a solution (Hall et al. 1976), and there is little sense of deviancy or dispossession related to these issues in the surf community. Nonetheless, one could argue that there is resistance here: surfing is a leisure pursuit, in many ways at odds with Western work ethic. Canniford & Karababa (2013) argue that since the activity first appears in Western discourse there is evidence of attempts to 'tame' it, to shift its focus from leisure activity to competitive sport in order to make it comply with Western ideals of organisation, hierarchy and reward. They also believe that the activity has never been fully incorporated into the mainstream, or as they puts it, 'civilised' (Canniford & Karababa 2013).

This notion is well illustrated by SAS, founded to raise awareness of water pollution. This is now a well-respected environmental pressure group whose mission is to protect marine environments worldwide. Initially though the group faced opposition from local businesses, which were unwilling to acknowledge the problem or afraid of publicising it, particularly with edgy stunts involving giant inflatable faeces. SAS's outsider status was confirmed as unanswered calls were attributed to staff having left the office, to surf the breaks below. In 2006, 'Let My People Go Surfing' by Yvon Chouinard, founder and CEO of adventure sports brand *Patagonia*, exhorted employers to allow workers to pursue out of work passions during working hours in the name of productivity. Capitalism may be trying to incorporate surfing, but locking up the office to catch a wave remains an

unorthodox working practice, albeit one enjoyed by SAS and a number of businesses discussed in this paper.

Surfing is also incorporated into capitalism through the exchange of material goods associated with surf culture, which forms a central pillar of the local economy in St Agnes. Studies of subculture, which take a Gramscian approach focus on the role of consumption (Hebdige 1979) and offer a useful lens through which to view the patterns of adoption of the visual and material culture of surfing in St Agnes. But as Stahl (2009) argues, a focus on consumption in subculture ignores production or at least ascribes it to parent culture, but today the digital economy is opening up spaces for subcultural production that could not have been considered by Hebdige (1979). This position is reinforced by Angela McRobbie's (1998) study of the fashion industry in London, in which she argues that mass production and mass consumption account for only part of the fashion system in London as a whole, and that a sizeable minority of producers operate successfully within the existing capitalist hegemony, supplying consumer goods to cater for a plethora of tastes. Hodkinson (2003: 286) argues that '...the onset of the Internet served to consolidate and strengthen subcultural boundaries...'. Discussing online subculture NetGoth (2003: 296) examines the '...potential of the medium to bring together those motivated enough to find...' specialist material related to the subculture that might otherwise have eluded them. Hodkinson's (2003) work focuses on online communication rather than the digital economy. In St Agnes, the surfwear designers, boardshapers, events and pressure groups are surely the producers of (sub)culture, the artefacts of which are then disseminated globally via digital transactional paths.



Clothing brand *Finisterre* has exploited the digital economy to acquire a global reach. Founded in St Agnes in 2002 by Tom Kay, the brand addresses the needs of cold water surfing, practiced in the chilly Atlantic waters of Cornwall, Canada and even Alaska; the company sells to these areas. Sweaters, jackets and hats such as those in figure 4 are also available in *Finisterre* shops in Falmouth, Cornwall and Braunton, Devon, where they sit between outlets stocking more conventional surf gear, and direct from the workshops in St Agnes' wheal Kitty, adjacent to SAS when the waves allow. *Finisterre*'s high end, sustainably produced kit is ostensibly technical wear, but is increasingly worn as fashionable street clothing. Interviewed by the Daily Express in 2014, founder Tom Kay commented, 'There is a clearly a global market for limited edition, stylish but highly practical products...' (Frost & Kay 2014). Kay's confidence reflected the recent launch of a flagship store in London's Soho, creating a visible presence in one of the world's most renowned fashion centres, although the company has no plans to relocate their head office or workshop away from sleepy St Agnes.

Could *Finisterre* lose its specialist cachet if its' products are worn on the street by non-surfers? Theorist David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (2003), drawing on the work of Jean Baudrillard, argues that the profusion of co-existing styles drawn from the subculturalist wardrobe have lost all meaning and lack political substance, and that the contemporary subculturalist has no tie to any authentic movement but merely displays 'difference' in dress, meaning that difference itself becomes, paradoxically, homogenous. However, Muggleton and Weinzierl's (2003) approach is of limited use in regard to St Agnes, as it remains fixed on the idea of resistance, albeit to a mainstream which no longer exists. Muggleton and Weinzierl's (2003) postmodern subculturalists are teenage rebels truly without a cause, style without substance, whereas the St Agnes surfing community is a group of all ages, formed by a shared interest in and practical knowledge of a minority pursuit.

Sarah Thornton's 'Club Cultures' (1996) draws on the minority pursuit of the nineties rave scene, developing Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Nice's

(1984) notion of cultural capital, in which the social value is acquired through knowledge of culture and its articulation in consumer goods, known as 'habitus', or in common parlance, 'lifestyle'. Thornton (1996) argues that subcultures amass and display 'subcultural capital' through a habitus, which is distinct from the majority and lacking in exchange value therein. The same author (Thornton 1996) discards the notion of a simple, linear resistance against an overarching structure such as class or gender and the media as its instrument of oppression, arguing that the media are instrumental in creating, defining and affirming a subculture. These ideas can be applied to the St Agnes community, in which understanding and engagement with surf culture represent a local currency of cool, and the digital micro media, controlled by subculturalists themselves, contribute to the discourses which create subcultural value. 'Carve', the UK's biggest selling domestic surf magazine is owned and edited by a St Agnes resident. *Finisterre*, SAS and the *World Bellyboarding Championships* (WBBCs) all maintain a heavily subscribed web presence with an international following via social media

platforms, as well as blogs featuring short films and music, images and commentary.

Geoff Stahl (2003) develops Thornton's (1996) use of Bourdieu (1984) to propose a new means of understanding subculture. He asserts that existing definitions of subculture are based on a linear model of oppression and resistance, which is insufficient to understand the actions of subculture in a global context (Stahl 2003). Stahl (2003: 32) argues that today there is an ever increasing flow of '...goods, people and ideas across local and national boundaries'. Making reference to the development of online communities, he calls for a theoretical framework which '...must move beyond a valorisation of the local as site of authentic relations and heterogenous cultural production, and the demonization of the global as abstract homogenizing juggernaut.' (Stahl 2003: 39) Stahl's (2003) proposal, that 'communities of taste' in the digital world will transcend the local, appears to apply to the St Agnes community in respect of its global reach. but surfing itself has to take place in a location where you can surf, and a surfer who does not surf is a subculturalist who fails to 'walk the walk' and therefore lacks authenticity.

Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990: 21) argue that authenticity in subculture is about being versus doing:

Members who adopt the trappings of a subculture without embracing the lifestyle and values underpinning it are seen as 'doing' — that is, they are insincerely putting on a front (e.g. looking like a punk) in order to look the part. In contrast, authentic members are those that are engaged in 'being.' They imbue subcultural values as a lifestyle and earn their authentic status over time by paying their dues.

Thus the subcultural appeal of the visual and material culture produced in the area might well lie in the location itself, the self-styled 'Badlands' where waves are jealously guarded. Emerging here is a clear link between physical space and meaning, between what the French Philosopher Bruno Latour (2005 might term material and semiotic 'networks'. Latour and Porters' (1993: 15) 'We Have Never Been Modern' proposes that these two realms are not separable, and that complex issues in culture can be best understood by examining the intricate webs of discourse around science, politics and popular culture, in which natural and 'social' phenomena must be viewed not as separate threads but as 'hybrids'. Surf culture is a hybrid: it is a social phenomenon but one which is dependent on the vicissitudes of natural phenomena. Thus the development of surf clothing, boards and visual ephemera is explored and developed in discourses of science, fashion, politics, economics and even spirituality (Westwick & Neuschul 2013). Latour's (1993 'hybrids' are part of 'heterogenous networks' in which human and non-human 'actors' come together to create material and semiotic meaning. The relationships between actors must be constantly 'performed' if the network is to avoid collapse, and alterations between performances and relationships between actors in the network result in constant change in material and symbolic meanings.

Surf culture, then, can be analysed by using Actor Network Theory (ANT), as a network of symbolic and material meanings generated by the performances of related actors, both human and non-human. An example might be the relationship between *Wheal Kitty Workshops*, the physical building in which SAS and *Finisterre* share a home, the Atlantic swell and

the human beings who, on looking down on it from the building, choose to shut up shop and surf. Developments in surf culture, such as the rise and fall of international surfwear giants *Billabong*, Latour (1993) would have us believe, are the result of the introduction of new actors or the failure of existing relationships in the network.

SUBCULTURE AND WORLD BELLYBOARDING CHAMPIONSHIPS

To illustrate the usefulness of Latour's (2005) ANT to understand communities of taste, I want to turn to the annual WBBC, held on Chapel Porth, a St Agnes beach (figure 5). Now sponsored by the *National Trust*, the event was first held in 2003 by surfers Martyn Ward and Chris Ryan as a tribute to a Londoner who, until his death, visited the cove annually with a wooden board he had bought in the area during his youth. Today the WBBC website and online application process attracts competitors and spectators from around the world. The rules forbid 'modern' surfing equipment such as wetsuits and leashes, and all competitors use plywood boards like those for the region's first 'surf ride'. Vintage boards and more recently vintage swimwear are celebrated, with prizes awarded and pop-up vintage shops appearing alongside the changing rooms and tea tent.

The event is a fascinating 'hybrid' of the material and the semiotic. In the journal *Fashion Theory*, De Long et al. (2005: 24) in their essay 'Hooked on Vintage!' comment that consumers buying and wearing vintage must have '...an ability to discriminate the authentic product, and revalue it in a new setting'. The notion of authenticity is much discussed and contested in the study of subculture, a debate briefly touched on earlier. De Long et al. (2005) also judge authenticity to be significant in this context and apply

ST AGNES HAS AGENCY IN CREATING SURF CULTURE, AND LOCAL BUSINESSES ARE FAVOURED HERE, WITH A LOYALTY THAT STRENGTHENS THEIR SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL AND FURTHERS THEIR GLOBAL REACH THROUGH DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND COMMERCE.

Virginia Postrel's (2003) analysis to the pleasures to be had in finding and being seen in vintage clothing. They draw out a complex relationship between meanings found in the garments themselves in respect of authenticity, which Postrel (2003) enumerates as purity, tradition and aura; and feelings derived from this authenticity, described as sensory pleasure, connection to time and place, and self-expression (De Long et al. 2005). Applying ANT here, 'meaning' and 'pleasure' cannot be considered separately, deriving from both the materiality of the objects and the significance they have accrued over their long lives and from their current use. Discourses around commerce, fashion, history and gender cannot be separated from the personal stories of acquisition and display, from the specific places and spaces in which they unfold.

The WBBCs is an event that derives its global appeal from a similar network of materiality and meaning. The raw materiality of the location and its tides determine the possibility of the bellyboarding actually taking place and contribute to the articulation meaning that De Long et al. (2005) attach to the notion of 'vintage'. The vicissitudes of the weather and the waves confer an unpredictability, which coupled with the counterintuitive ban on wetsuits in often frigid conditions contributes to the air of eccentricity around the event, described by one participant as 'celebrating British bonkersness, really' (Interview 06/09/15). 'Originality',

and 'uniqueness' are celebrated in the boards, often hand-made and customised, which proclaim themselves 'Original Surfboards', alluding to the first surfing activity in Britain. Many reproduction boards are for sale on the day, as is membership to the *National Trust*, sponsor of the event, again weaving together the material world of sales and marketing with the semiotic realm in which nostalgia is more commonly thought to reside.

Furthermore, the WBBCs have come about through the performance of actors in wider networks of surf culture, as well as overlapping networks of fashion and tourism. Human actors, like the participants who plunge into Atlantic waters wearing nothing but a knitted one-piece, as well as the non-human actors such as the knitted one-pieces, the vintage and reproduction boards must perform in order to maintain the stability of the network. The performance and the actors are subject to change, for example, in future there might be a scarcity of vintage swimwear, owing to its growing popularity; without this actor the WBBC network, and the wider networks too would alter and shift. The importance of the internet as an actor cannot be underestimated: the WBCCs enjoy a lively online presence and national and international competitors enroll online, expanding the reach of the network into the digital realm. In the wider network of global fashion, the location of St Agnes itself is an actor; the materiality of the local environment

and the meanings associated with it are inseparable from the inhabiting minority taste groups.

ST AGNES SURFING SUBCULTURE

Established theories of subculture, then, can only be partially applied to this fascinating, tightly bound community. Spanning three generations and relatively affluent, it does not appear to be an oppositional group, resisting the confines of mainstream, or parent culture through style, music, argot and ritual. There is none of the jarring visual discord of Punk or the hedonic signifiers of the rave scene in the community. The local look is clean, outdoorsy, colourful but conservative: to all intents and purposes, conforming to mainstream fashion and taste, with for some, a fondness for vintage, which is quirky but hardly oppositional. But there is a difference in style between those from St Agnes and those from 'upcountry'. Residents of Aggy, as it is affectionately called, favour brands with a connection to surfing, in and out of the water, all the time. And these brand affiliations do not necessarily signify a mindless hegemonic absorption of consumer culture marketed as subculture chic: St Agnes, as we have seen has agency in creating surf culture, and local businesses are favoured here, with a loyalty that strengthens their subcultural capital and furthers their global reach through digital communication and commerce.

The state of this 'heterogenous network' (Latour 2005, itself part of a wider network of surf culture and overlapping networks of fashion and taste, is shaped and reshaped by the performances of human and non-human actors, by activists and outdoor jackets, designers, surfboards, webforms and waves. Their material form and associated meanings coalesce around the slippery but seductive term, 'authenticity'. It is this authentic connection to the surf that lies behind the global reach of St Agnes. Through online sales and digital presence, organisations and businesses in this tiny community are able to reach clients worldwide, but retain 'authenticity' by remaining anchored to the local area, a tight knit community where the surf is so precious that the moniker 'The Badlands' was invented to keep outsiders at bay.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: GWR Poster advertising Newquay, Cornwall, 1927. Courtesy of the National Railway Museum.

Figure 2: Duke Kahanamoku in Aloha shirt, Daily Telegraph Australia (1967).

Figure 3: St Agnes Village, c2010 Photograph courtesy of Visit Cornwall.

Figure 4: 'Sastruga' jacket 2016, courtesy of Finisterre.

Figure 5: World Bellyboarding Championships, Chapel Port, St Agnes (Ripley 2015).