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Surfing, Subculture, and Influence

In this research I will be exploring graphic design in the surfing subculture and how it has been affected by its history and influences. I am interested in how the general feel and look of the surf art style developed and how its history has influenced the modern interpretations of the genre. This research will be focused on the three keywords of **Surfing**, **Subculture**, and **Influence**, how they relate to Graphic Design as a subject.

Keyword 1 is surfing; surfing is surface based water sport where someone would ride on a board typically made of a combination of wood and fiberglass to ride waves along the shore. Surfing is a world-renowned past time and recreational sport with competitions being held at an international level such as in the Olympics. Surfing is not a modern creation, there are records of people riding waves with wooden boards dating back three to five thousand years ago. However, the modern iteration of Surfing started a bit more recently than that with the native peoples of Hawaii and greater Polynesia. Unlike today the native Hawaiians did not consider surfing to just be a recreational activity or sport, it was akin to an art or form of self-expression referred to as “he‘e nalu” (wave sliding). He‘e nalu was practiced by both upper- and lower-class Hawaiians with the more skilled surfers typically being the nobility. It was not until after the colonisation of Hawaii that surfing started to become recognised and performed outside of Polynesian areas due to people like Duke Kahanamoku teaching and demonstrating the sport to people around the world. As surfing started gaining popularity in a bid to increase tourism both Hawaii and the greater United States of America began to market the area as a surfing hotspot. The revitalisation of surfing was largely condensed in three major areas, Hawaii, California, and Australia, all three of which still the reputation of premier surfing destinations.

As stated, before Surfing while seen as just a sport of hobby today was more traditionally an art or form of expression in ancient Hawaii. The commercialisation of surfing and surf culture has diminished the idea that surfing is an art in the eyes of many, but many surfers, both amateur and professional, continue to perceive it as an art form. “Every surfer has their own unique style,” said notable surfboard shaper Hayden Cox. In an interview with Pelican Hill Magazine “When you ride a wave, it’s an expression of how you perceive the world and no one rides a wave in a similar way... It’s as much a sport as a creative outlet.” (Robinson, 2015). As surfing grew in popularity it has inspired new forms of expression within itself, one method being the decorating of the surfboards themselves. While we have the native Hawaiians to thank for a lot of what we know as surfing today, this is a practice that did not originate with them as they typically did not adorn their boards with any markings or patterns save for that of the natural wood grain. It was instead born in post-World War 2 America; innovations in technology through the war lent themselves to the improvement of surfboard design. These new fiberglass coated boards allowed for more intricate patterns and brighter colours to be used than previously because of the added layer of protection and increased longevity.

As the popularity of surfing grew throughout the world the surfing subculture started to gain its own identity and own style taking influence from several other subcultures as well as Hawaiian imagery. This popularity increase did not go unnoticed by corporate America and the growing sport was soon used as a marketing tool to appeal to younger audiences. Industries such as tourism, music, airlines and film all attempted to ride this wave of popularity.



Figure 1. A poster for the movie “The Endless Summer” Illustrated by John Van Hamersveld (Van Hamersveld, 1964)

In figure 1 (Van Hamersveld, 1964) is an iconic movie poster in the surf/beach genre for the movie “The Endless Summer”. Considered by some to be one of the most recognisable pieces of surf art in the field of Graphic Design, it incorporates a lot of the ideals that were portrayed in surf culture at the time. Bright warm colours give a sense of relaxation and fun, the people silhouetted in the image look relaxed and casual but also ambiguous to give the reader a sense of projection that they could themselves in this situation. John Van Hamersveld’s work on “The Endless Summer” movie poster embodies a lot of the artistic side of surf culture’s designs; however, surf was not only used in artistic means but more corporate ones too. As surfing grew in popularity, more specialised brands and stores began to emerge which needed to pander to this audience. One such example is the Australian owned brand Billabong.



Figure 2. The Billabong logo (Billabong, n.d.)

Billabong was established in 1973 by Gordon Merchant as a clothing brand focusing specifically on surfer’s designs and needs. The most current iteration of their logo attempts to embody and appeal to the spirit of surf culture. The less formal typeface presents the brand as a more casual one by using less uniform type, letters overlapping, and a mix of heavy and light type weights make the brand feel less stuffy than more traditional ones. The emblem is that of two sets of two waves in a box, this is used as a visual indicator that this is a brand that offers water-based clothing, and the style of wave can be used to infer that this is a brand associated with surfing.

Keyword 2 is subculture, and it is a difficult word to define, studies have differed on a concrete definition of the term and continue to do so to this day. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a subculture as “A self-defining group within a society which holds different values and norms to those of the majority.” (oxford, n.d.). This effectively means that many subcultures are centred around opposing the norms of society of carving out a place they belong. Notable examples of subcultures include the 1960s hippy movement, the anti-establishment punks of the 1970s, the ever-popular goth movement, and the surfing subculture which is still popular today.

Many subcultures are seen as little more than their stereotypes to the public, and surfers are not immune to this. There are often two different categories of stereotypes, those from people outside the culture and those from people within. The stereotypes born within a culture are typically more accurate than those born outside. The typical surfer stereotypes from outside the subculture include a common physical representation of surfers being attractive tan people with blonde hair that essentially live at the beach, not wearing anything but casual clothes like flip flops and board shorts and have little to no aspirations outside of spending all day at the beach surfing. Whereas the stereotypes from within surf culture are less broad and more about different types of surfers based on their attitude or gear. A few of these representations are the artistic surfer who will often be seen painting and decorating surfboards or depicting the shoreline, the eco-friendly surfer who is more into the sport for the environmental protection side of things than actually surfing, or the high-end surfer who has all the best gear but never uses it for fear of scuffing it. Stereotypes are often not accurate because even though everyone in a subculture has a shared interest, they are all unique people.

Much like their other aspects, subcultures are unique in terms of style as well. Each subculture will naturally accrue its own aesthetics and stylistic choices in fashion, art, and design. A stark contrast in aesthetic decisions between groups can be seen between the hippy culture of the sixties, and the punk culture of the seventies. While hippy culture incorporates earth tones and pastel-based colours reminiscent of psychedelic visuals, punks are seen to have more harsh, sharp edges and darker colours.



Figure 3. Woodstock 1969 poster (Etsy UK, n.d.)



Figure 4. The Misfits "Bullet" album cover (The Misfits, 1989)

As can be seen in the stark contrast of designs in figures three (Etsy UK, n.d.) and four (The Misfits, 1989), both of the aforementioned subcultures had wildly different design attitudes. The hippy targeted Woodstock poster uses bright colours and psychedelic inspired typefaces to create a laid-back image that appeals to that demographic. Whereas the more edgy and controversial album cover of The Misfits' "Bullet" album was clearly meant to pander the anti-establishment punk movement by presenting itself with a purposefully inflammatory attitude to rile up people outside of the movement. While both of these examples wildly differ, there are similarities to be found in their anti-authoritarian outlook. Both styles sought to upset the status quo and challenge the people in power. Graphic Design has been used to spread the messages of subcultures and advertise the groups to people that share similar views that aren't already a part of them.

Keyword 3 is Influence, every action someone takes is shaped by outside influences whether we are conscious of it or not. Art is no different; our designs are inspired by the world around us. From existing designs you might see on a walk to work, or things as simple as the light hitting a building at just the right angle, influence and inspiration can be found wherever you look. Even a person's experiences mould how they interpret the world: someone who is involved in the subculture of punk would produce a different reaction than someone who participates in the hippie subculture when given the same stimulus. Most great artists use something as an inspiration to kickstart their creative process and give way to something new and unique to their own experiences. Therefore, it makes sense that something as influential and widespread as surfing has been the basis and inspiration for many artists to create their own works.

Just as subcultures influence art and other mediums, they are in turn influenced and shaped themselves. Modern surfing's influences date back to its Hawaiian roots, as there is a big sense of community and self-expression instilled and passed down through generations of Hawaiians that has spread to the wider surfing community. As surfing began to evolve beyond the scope of Hawaii, its roots in California in the fifties and sixties meant that the nearby Hollywood area took notice of this growing trend. As a result of this, they created a wave of beach and surf themed movies to exploit the growing trend. These movies often portrayed a more romanticised version of the culture to the rest of the world, essentially sterilising and glamourising surfing to be something it is not and presenting it to the world as if it were truth. Regardless of whether or not these movies portrayed the surf subculture accurately it is clear that this genre of film influenced the image surfing had to the wider world altering public perception of the sport. However, there were those that portrayed surfing to the world as more than just its sterilised Hollywood image. Duke Kahanamoku is a Native Hawaiian and five-time US Olympic medallist who is largely responsible for the popularisation of

surfing. In between Olympic competitions and after retiring from competing Kahanamoku travelled internationally to conduct swimming exhibitions, it was during these exhibitions that he also demonstrated his surfing abilities to those that came to watch. These showings of the Hawaiian sport (particularly his exhibition at Freshwater Beach, Sydney) were thought to be the birth points of surfing cultures in what are now known to be surfing hotspots. “Before I left that fabulous land, the Australians had already turned to making their own boards and practicing what I had shown them in the surf.” (Kahanamoku, n.d.) Even after his death in 1968, Kahanamoku remains one of the more influential people in surfing history. Several monuments have been erected in his honour most notably on Waikiki beach where a nine-foot bronze statue of him stands and remains a popular tourist destination.

While there are notable on surf culture as a whole there are also notable influences in surf-based design. One of the most prominent influences on surf-based design is that of native Hawaiian imagery. One commonly used piece of imagery is that of a hibiscus flower, a plant native to the Hawaiian region that has been known to symbolise emotions like friendship, passion, and love.



Figure 5. A Hibiscus Flower (Green Globe, n.d.)



Figure 6. A surfboard adorned with paintings of a Hibiscus. (Menehune surfboards, n.d.)

As seen in figures five (Green Globe, n.d.) and six (Menehune surfboards, n.d.), the hibiscus flower remains a staple of surf design to this day. Other natural parts of Hawaii are also used such as palm trees or the lily flower or even depictions of Hawaiian beaches or landscapes. However, there are more problematic appropriations of Hawaiian imagery that have become mainstay in surf-based

design such as that of “tiki” culture, which haphazardly pulls pieces of multiple Polynesian cultures together without much care for their meaning just to be used for aesthetic purposes. Hawaiian culture is not the only major influence on modern surf design, the psychedelic style popular in sixties America was also a big influence. One of the artists that popularised this meshing of genres was Rick Griffin. He was famously known for his comic strip in Surfer Magazine “Murphy”, as well as his later works on psychedelic posters for notable Jimi Hendrix and the Grateful Dead. While his later works were not directly in the surfing culture, his early works gave enough of a reason for future surf artists to look to him for inspiration.

After exploring these three keywords and how they relate to each other and graphic design I have found that surf culture has always been heavily connected to art and self-expression. Not just in an artistic sense but also in the way people actually surf. And while everyone’s style is unique, the outside perception will continue to paint the subculture with broad strokes. Depictions of surfing have evolved over time from the original Hawaiian art of surfing to the westernised idea that surfing is for beach bums to the now modern athletic depiction of surfers. This trend has shown that in order for surfing to become more positively shown to the general public a lot of the traditions have been reduced to little more than window dressing in order to appeal to wider market. These gentrified portrayals of surfing most commonly appropriate Hawaiian and other Polynesian nation’s traditions without any care for the cultural impact behind them. This is why my proposed question for the Independent Project is “The appropriation of surfing (and by extension Polynesian) culture by commercialised brands and how designers have a responsibility to use other cultures appropriately and with care.”

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