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The Snowboard as a Change Agent ***A Case Study on Designs that Promote Change***

Abstract

As a celebrated product design, the snowboard has played an important role in influencing change in various sports, businesses, and contemporary subcultures. This case study takes a look at the history of the snowboard and some of its unique design features while elaborating on the role that the design of the snowboard has played as a change agent with a direct impact upon commerce, society, and the human condition.

A Case Study on a Design as a Change Agent

The snowboard has evolved to become an icon that has had an impact beyond its immediate intentions. Initially designed as a practical fusion of sledding, skiing, skateboarding, and surfing, its design features have matured and evolved over the years to surpass certain technologies and functional limitations of its predecessors. It has succeeded in introducing several unique design features that have played influential roles in spawning new sports, products, businesses, and an entire subculture of people who have developed a unique lifestyle rich with identity and social significance.

In this case study, the snowboard will be examined as a product design, cultural artifact, and as a change agent. A change agent is something that causes or accelerates a social, cultural, or behavioral change. Successful designs have the potential to become agents of change that evolve into cultural icons and complex social entities celebrated and embraced by large numbers in wide social circumstances. It is for this very reason that design and the creative process need to be recognized as influential factors defining and contributing to our society and humanity. Design is one of the basic characteristics of what it is to be human, and an essential determinant of the quality of human life (Heskett 4). The snowboard is a unique example of a design that was created from the demands of an emerging culture with little commercial aspiration. What began as a practical design eventually became a social phenomenon with deep influential roots and wide extending branches that are still spreading across generations around the globe.

For the purposes of this paper, I have utilized case study research methodology to determine the extents of the influence of snowboard design. Case study research is often an effective measure

for understanding complex social phenomena (Yin 2). It has allowed me to examine the snowboard as an element of design within its real-life context while trying to define the extent of its influence on other designs, sports, industries, and cultures. By gathering articles, market research statistics, and conducting interviews with snowboarders, developers, and editorial professionals, I have collected secondary and primary data helpful for understanding the scope of the snowboard's impact upon business, sports, and society.

A Brief History of the Snowboard: From Sledding to Snurfing

Early snowboard designers were initially influenced by four sports and their accompanying product designs: surfing, skateboarding, skiing, and sledding. Due to shared environmental contexts and similarities in practice and product design, most of the above mentioned associations can be clearly traced, but it should be noted that the influence of sledding on snowboarding is often understated and potentially the most significant of all four sports (Henninge 13 May 2004).

Evidence of sledding as the earliest influence upon snowboarding is nearly impossible to present since the origins of sledding date back thousands of years. Early accounts of people standing up on a sled are undocumented, making it unclear who should be accurately credited as the first snowboarder or the first snowboard designer. There are stories of World War I soldiers standing sideways on barrel staves in Europe and a video dating back to the 1939 of a gentleman named Vern Wicklund riding a snowboard-type sled sideways down a small Chicago hill, but these stories remain speculative in nature (Burton 5).

It isn't until December 25th, 1965 that we are able to accurately identify a designer who was influenced by sledding and directly responsible for an early prototype of the snowboard known as the "Snurfer." The designer was Sherman Poppen and his story began on Christmas morning, 1965, in Muskegon, Michigan:

"My wife was pregnant and told me I had to do something to get my two daughters out of the house or she was going to go crazy," said Poppen, who admitted he was fascinated by surfing, but had never tried it. "When I looked at that hill, I thought why not?" Remembering the past attempts of his daughter Wendy standing up on her sled, he hastily screwed two pairs of children's skis together with some doweling and fashioned a surfboard for the snow. Within a few days, all the neighborhood kids were begging Mr. Poppen for what Mrs. Poppen dubbed the "Snurfer" by mixing the word "snow" with "surfer." Six months later, Poppen licensed the idea to Brunswick Manufacturing, and over the next ten years, upwards of a million Snurfers were produced and sold through chain sporting goods stores and toy stores. (Burton 5)

Poppen's account of this original snowboard design demonstrates the influence of sledding, skiing, and surfing. His motivation for developing a new design stemmed directly from watching

his daughter's attempts at standing while sledding along with the idea of recontextualizing the warm weather water sport of surfing into the cold winter snow conditions in the hills of Michigan. Utilizing existing ski technology and sled designs available at the time he was able to build one of the first successful snowboard prototypes.

The concept of snowboarding and the design of the Poppen's Snurfer was so successful that it gave birth to an entirely new winter sports industry and inspired several key designers to test new shapes and design features. Some of the early pioneers of snowboard designers include Demetrije Milovich of Winterstick Snowboards, Chris Saunders of Avalanche Snowboards, Mike Olsen of Gnu Snowboards, Tom Sims of Sims Skateboards & Sims Snowboards, and the most popular and commercially successful designer: Jake Burton Carpenter of Burton Snowboards.

The Snowboard's Influence upon other Sports

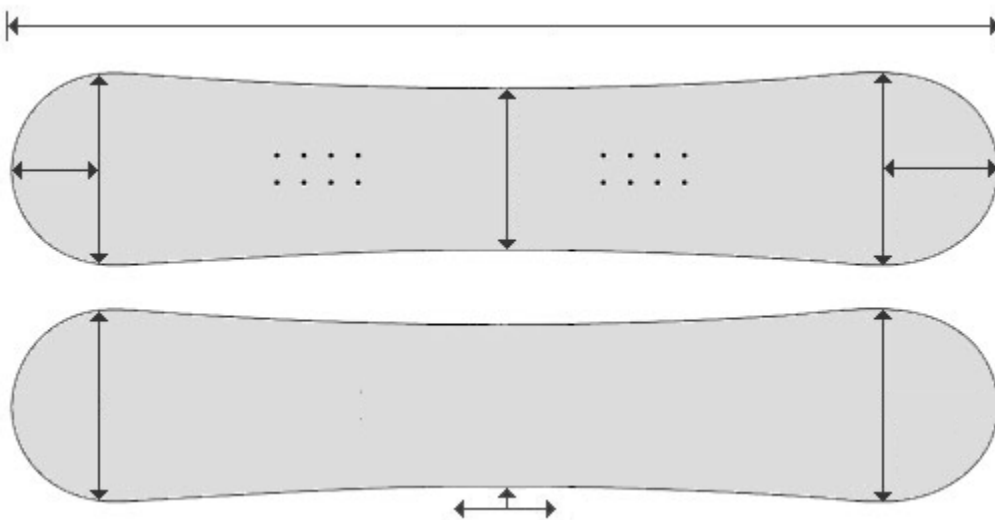
Snowboarding is now recognized as an official Olympic event. What started out as a recreational activity of a few individuals, eventually matured to become a highly competitive organized sport. As its popularity grew, its product design evolved and introduced several new design features that had an impact on several new and existing sports.

One successful and influential design feature is the use of strap bindings to keep the user's feet in place. Prior to the inception of the snowboard, ski bindings were designed to lock the heel and toe of each foot down to the ski, thus limiting the amount of flexibility between the skier's foot and the ski. Snowboard bindings, on the contrary, were designed with straps across the top of each foot in order to increase the flexibility between the rider's heel/toes and the surface of the snowboard. The result was an increase in both comfort and creative freedom. Soon after the success of strap bindings in snowboarding, they began to show up in other new sports such as wake-boarding and tow-in surfing. Jake Burton Carpenter of Burton Snowboards is responsible for designing one of the early wake-boarding and tow-in surfing binding prototypes using fixed rubber straps (Howe 11).

Another unique binding system introduced by snowboard developers is use of step-in bindings. Step-in bindings enable a rider to quickly fasten each foot to the snowboard without physically bending over and adjusting straps. The design consists of specially designed boots with soles that contain part of the binding mechanism that is necessary to attach the rider's foot to the board. Bicycle technology companies like Shimano contributed to these new step-in binding technologies for snowboards (Makie 10 May 2004). As bicycle designers worked with snowboard designers on new binding systems during the summer months, two new warm weather sports emerged: mountain boarding and down-hill mountain biking. Similar to skateboarding, mountain boarding utilizes binding systems from snowboards and applies them to large skateboards with

air filled tires capable of descending mountains and resorts in dry conditions. Down-hill mountain biking, derived from the more established sports of mountain biking and cycling, consists of descending a mountain on shock-enhanced bicycles specifically designed for the steep decline and rugged terrain of ski resort mountains. Many resorts now remain open in the off season allowing down-hill mountain bikers and mountain boarders to ride their lifts to the top of the mountains.

In addition to binding designs, perhaps the most important and most influential design feature showcased by snowboards is the parabolic shape. The parabolic shape is marked by wider ends and curved edges.



The parabolic design of the snowboard has helped to allow for easier turning while maintaining speed due to the snowboard's curved edges that decrease the turning radius. The parabolic shape of the snowboard was so successful that it subsequently influenced its predecessor sport of skiing into rethinking the shape of skis. Prior to the parabolic snowboard, ski designs consisted of straight edges from tip to tail. Once ski developers began to incorporate the parabolic form from snowboards into ski designs, new ski products began to emerge along with an entire new sub-culture of skiers. Some of these new ski products include ski boards, twin tip skis, fat skis, and mid-fat skis. These new ski designs resulted in a resurgence of interest and social hype surrounding the sport of skiing, most notably free skiing. Initially referred to as shaped or carved skis, today almost every form of contemporary ski embraces the parabolic shape. These new products enable skiers to push their creativity into new realms of expression on the mountains.

Recent market data results demonstrate that these new ski products that utilize the parabolic form have been steadily growing in popularity and have had a strong effect on industry sales and industrial design decisions within the winter sports industry. According to SnowSports Industries America alpine ski sales declined 5.3 percent to \$26 million in 2002, however midfat skis (up 28.1

percent to 14.6 million), fat skis (up 178.7 percent to \$880,990), twin-tip skis (up 180.1 percent to \$725,148), ski boards (up 55.5 percent to \$1.2 million) and junior skis (up 56.5 percent to \$1.6 million) all saw double digit gains in dollars (Transworld 3).

Snowboarding and the Board-sport Sub-culture

Snowboarding has evolved to become more than just an activity or sport – it is a way of life. It is a permanent part of an entire board-sport subculture of fashion and lifestyle. As a design the snowboard can be considered an icon that is part of a greater movement in society. Paul du Gay explains that design icons of this magnitude, which he refers to as cultural artifacts, have a purpose and meaning beyond their appearance: “Designed artifacts are there to do something... they are inscribed with meaning as well as uses.” (Du Gay 92).

One can argue that snowboarding and the board-sport culture are symbolically representative of a post-war Americana lifestyle responsible for bringing about social changes in the second half of the twentieth century through anti-establishment thought and political action (Persson 3). The early years of snowboarding paralleled movements in the 60's and 70's when an inspired generation of youth publicly promoted a free lifestyle with an emphasis on individual expression. These ideals were viewed upon by some as rebellious in nature, not only in art, music, and politics but also in leisure and lifestyle (Persson 3). This lifestyle and design rebellion could be traced over the course of the second half of the century socially through rising sub-cultures and emerging trends in music and dance such as punk rock, break-dancing, hip-hop, and the California board-sport culture spearheaded by skateboarding, surfing, and snowboarding (Persson 3, Keely 12 May 2004, McCarthy 10 May 2004, Wootton 10 May 2004). Patrick Burgoyne, author of BOARD Surf/Skate/Snow Graphics states that capitalism's disaffected, disinclined youth of the 1960's started the trend of turning to board sports and created a visual language of their own, as well as codes of behavior, dress, and ethics (Burgoyne 11).

A result that stemmed from this new lifestyle and sub-culture was the presence of clearly defined target markets for commercial business. Research commissioned by The Brand Council points out that 72% of 18-30 years old – the same demographic that accounts for more than 50% of the snowboarders on the mountains (SIA 2) – believe that the personality of the brand or product influences their decision on whether it is cool, and a fundamental element of that personality is honesty (Cheliotis 2). The personality of snowboarding – that of rebellion, functionality, honesty, and freedom – translates into a language universal to all subcultures that balances mainstream popularity with an underground image (Bryan 11 May 2004). In a related commentary on social phenomena and subcultures Paul du Gay references Jean Baudrillard by quoting him as stating:

Consumption is a system of meaning like a language...
commodities and objects, like words... constitute a global

arbitrary and coherent system of signs, a cultural system... marketing, purchasing, sales, the acquisition of differentiated commodities and objects/signs – all of these presently constitute our language, a code with which our entire society communicates and speaks of and to itself (Du Gay 91).

The original image associated with the snowboarding lifestyle eventually went through a commercial process of being translated into a defined semiotic language capable of setting new trends in the fashion and sport industries, most notably the winter sports industry. The measurable result is a demographic of consumers that are ideal for targeted marketing.

At the present time one can associate the snowboard and the snowboarding personality with the successfully stylized products of manufacturing embraced by big business in the fashion and winter sports industries. It is important to note that this was not always the case. Sherman Poppen, along with Jake Burton Carpenter and other early snowboard designers created the snowboard to meet their natural needs as athletes and outdoorsmen. The snowboard as a design emerged from a culture of people who instinctively merged surfing with skateboarding, skiing, and sledding for personal use in their own backyards, not to meet the demands of a potential customer base. The snowboard did not emerge from existing sledding or skiing manufacturers as a new product to raise revenue but instead from those who wished to improve the quality of their own lives. It is this unique quality inherent in the snowboarding culture and history that allows the snowboard to become such a celebrated icon of successful product design and a successful agent of change across society.

Conclusion

The snowboard and its design features has been an influential agent promoting several different changes in sports, business, and culture. The snowboard has evolved to become an icon that has had an impact beyond its immediate intentions. This design case study elaborated on a few examples of how the snowboard has performed as a change agent with an influential impact upon certain people and industries within our economy and society. The evidence provided demonstrates that specific design features of the snowboard have played an important role in spawning new sports, technologies, products, and an entire subculture of people who have developed their own unique lifestyle, rich with identity and social significance.

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