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Economics of Snowboarding

Introduction

Since its emergence in the US in the late 1960s and 1970s, snowboarding has become a highly visible feature of popular culture. Images, narratives and representations associated with snowboarding as a cultural form are rich, evocative and wide reaching. Between 1988 and 2003 snowboarding participation increased by 385%. Some estimates suggest that there are 70 million snowboarders in the world.

During the 1990s, television and corporate sponsors were appropriating the alternative, hedonistic and youthful image of the snowboarder to sell products to both youth and mainstream markets. During that period, snowboarding increasingly became controlled and defined by transnational media corporations. Nevertheless, commercialization and institutionalization of snowboarding has angered many during the decades. One of the major role models in snowboarding, Craig Kelly compared commercialization of his sport to prostitution. For many early adopters

of snowboarding, it was a sport of self-realization, a way of life, even an art and an opportunity to free themselves from constraints of normal life.

For many early snowboarders, competitive boarding stood in symbolic juxtaposition to “soul boarding”. On the other hand, corporate sponsors and media conglomerates have profited enormously from the commodification of snowboarding’s perceived irresponsible and uncontrolled image.

Theory on life cycles of snowboarding

The classical life-cycle theories of business enterprises have been formulated by Churchill and Lewis¹. It consists five stages of development, namely: Existence, survival, success-disengagement /success-growth, takeoff and finally the stage of maturity. One modification of classical life cycle theory is the theory of adopter categories, invented by Rogers.² That fits well into the development process of snowboarding as it spread through influential personalities as innovators and adopters, finally becoming the most rapidly expanding winter sports during the 1990s.

1. Innovators. Innovators are willing to take risks, have the highest social status, have financial liquidity, are social and have closest contacts and interaction with other innovators. First innovators of snowboarding were Vern Wicklund, Harvey and Gunnar Burgeson in 1939 and later Sherman Poppen in 1965 as an inventor of “snurfer”. Later most important innovators of modern snowboarding were Jake Burton Carpenter and Tom Sims during the 1970s.
2. Early adopters. These individuals have the highest degree of opinion leadership among the adopter categories. Early adopters have a higher social status, financial liquidity, advanced education and are more socially forward than late adopters. Regis Rolland was the most influential early adopter and role model in Europe during the 1980s.
3. Early majority. They adopt an innovation after a varying degree of time that is significantly longer than the innovators and early adopters. Early majority have above average social status, contact with early adopters and seldom hold positions of opinion leadership in a system. This stage was reached in Finland during the 1990s.
4. Late majority. They adopt an innovation after the average partici-

pant. These individuals approach an innovation with a high degree of skepticism and only after the majority of society has adopted the innovation. Late majority are typically skeptical about an innovation, have below average social status, little financial liquidity, have limited contact with others in late majority and early majority and little opinion leadership. In Finland, snowboards were sold in all sport shops in Finland during the 2000s. It had become a mainstream sport with a high visibility in social culture.

5. Laggards. They are the last to adopt an innovation. Unlike some of the previous categories, individuals in this category show little to no opinion leadership. These individuals typically have an aversion to change-agents. Laggards typically tend to be focused on “traditions”, have lowest social status, lowest financial liquidity, are oldest among adopters, and are in contact with only family and close friends. During the 2010s the sports of snowboarding has been in decline, in spite of its increased visibility in the media. Nowadays there are less snowboarders in the ski resorts than before.

Skiing was elitist, a sophisticated sport for those fortunate who had money during the 1970s. Snowboarding was a challenge to that. Snowboarders listened punk- and later rap-music and hiked illegally up to the mountains as they were not allowed to use ski lifts and enter the ski resorts. Famous slogan of rebellious early snowboarders was: “Snowboarding is not a crime.” During the late 1990s, snowboarding became the mainstream sport.

First it was a rebellious lifestyle; afterwards it slowly became a mainstream sport. The tipping point of the development was when snowboarding finally got a Winter Olympic sport status at Nagano in 1998. Its popularity (as measured by equipment sales) in the United States peaked in 2007 and has been in decline since. In Finland the popularity of snowboarding has followed the similar development process, as seen in the figure 1. The popularity of snowboarding among the young population peaked somewhere during the turn of the millennium and among the adults a little later.

The way of life in snowboarding came about as a natural response to the culture from which it emerged. Early on, there was a rebellion against skiing culture and the view that snowboarders were inferior. Skiers did not easily accept this new culture on their slopes. The two cultures contrasted each

other in several ways including how they spoke, acted, and their entire style of clothing. Snowboarders first embraced the punk and later the hip-hop look into their style.³ The narrative of snowboarding is full of images and media coverage. As noted by Erwin Panofsky⁴, images represent deep cultural narratives and include multi-layered cultural messages. Snowboarding sub-culture became a crossover between the urban and suburban styles on snow. The early stereotypes of snowboarding included “lazy”, “grungy”, “punk”,

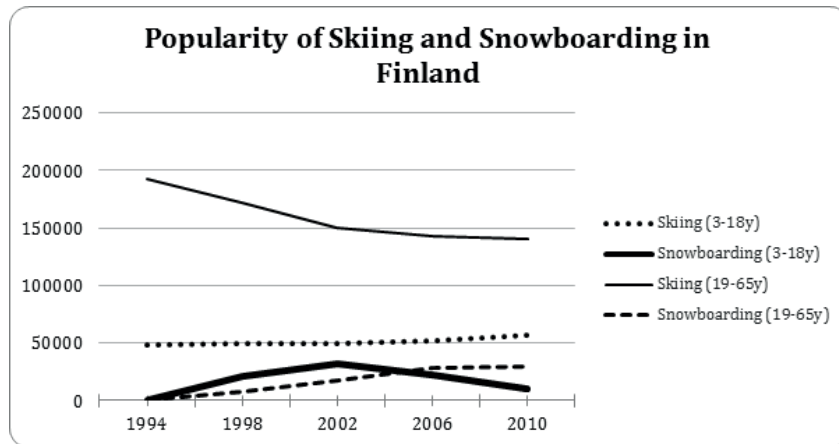


Figure 1. Popularity of Skiing and Snowboarding in Finland during 1994-2010 (number of devotees). Data source: *Kansallinen liikuntatutkimus 2009–2010, aikuiset*. Suomen kuntoliikuntaliitto, SLU:n julkaisusarja 6/2010 and *Kansallinen liikuntatutkimus 2009–2010, lapset ja nuoret*. Suomen kuntoliikuntaliitto, SLU:n julkaisusarja 7/2010.

“stoners”, “troublemakers”, and numerous others, many of which are associated with skateboarding and surfing as well. However, these stereotypes may now be considered out of style. Snowboarding has become a sport that encompasses a very diverse international crowd and fan-base of many millions, so much so that it is no longer possible to stereotype such a large community. Reasons for these dying stereotypes include how mainstream and popular the sport has become, with the shock factor of snowboarding’s quick take off on the slopes wearing off. The typical stereotype of the sport is changing as the demographics change.

Struggle between ideology and money

During the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s snowboarding was the most rapidly increasing sports.⁵ Snowboarding represented a new kind of sport, which tried to find alternatives to traditional kind of sports and their values.⁶ This new bourgeois movement of leisure time was called “The New Leisure Movement”.⁷

Snowboarding industry developed through several important personalities. Two of the most important figures were Jake Burton Carpenter and Tom Sims. Jake Burton Carpenter built up the empire that now dominates the snowboarding industry and accounts for about 50% of all snowboarding equipment sales. Tom Sims was the first inventor of modern snowboarding and during the first decades his Sims Snowboards Company was one of the biggest names in the sport. Jake Carpenter continues to run the Burton Company, which has grown into one of the world’s largest snowboard and snowboarding-equipment manufacturers.

It is interesting to note the differences between Carpenter and Sims. Carpenter was by nature as an East-coast businessman while Tom Sims (1950–2012) was a West-coast surfer. Sims and Burton dominated the market back in the late 1980s and 1990s. Regis Rolland was one of the biggest names in European snowboarding, bursting onto the scene with the seminal “Apocalypse Snow” movie series before becoming a serious snowboard entrepreneur. Apocalypse snow movies were big forerunners for the entire snowboarding industry.

Additional major personalities inside snowboarding history include famous snowboarders. The most important of influential snowboarders was Craig Kelly (1966–2003). Jake Burton is quoted saying, “When I started listening to Craig that was when my company became successful and really took off.” He added, “... when the rest of the industry listened to Craig, that was when the sport really took off.” Over his 15-year professional career, he won 4 World Championships and 3 US Championships. In an interview⁸ he said: “Snowboarding makes me happy”. He was continuously searching for new experiences. Happiness, new experiences and fun were his drivers. Kelly was first using Sims snowboards, but by signing financially a very generous contract, he joined Burton team. He became a globally recognized symbol of snowboarding and one of the best marketing tools for Burton snowboards.

After Craig Kelly, Shaun Palmer (b. 1968) dominated the sport. He used Sims boards. He represented a rebellious punk-style snowboarder who had problems to fit into official rules of snowboarding industry. On the other hand, his rebellious public image also helped snowboarding industry to gain more media visibility and increase equipment sales. The “punk-image” of Palmer was cleverly harnessed for increasing Sims snowboard sales.

Maybe the last influential snowboarder, still representing the old school of rebellious life style snowboarders was Terje Håkonsen (b. 1974 in Norway), who boycotted 1998 Olympics despite the fact that he would had the best chances to win the competition. He did not accept the idea of snowboarding becoming Olympic sport. When half-pipe was introduced as an Olympic event during the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, Håkonsen boycotted the qualifiers. Håkonsen, as well as many other snowboarders, were unhappy with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), particularly because they had chosen the International Ski Federation (FIS) to organize qualification instead of the snowboarders’ own federation, the International Snowboarding Federation (ISF). Håkonsen considered this to be a theft of the sport. Håkonsen refused to enter into the Olympics because he believed that the IOC comprised a group of mafia-like officials and he protested against snowboarders being turned into “uniform-wearing, flag-bearing, walking logos”. According to Håkonsen, snowboarding is great because it is so different from other sports. After gaining Olympic status, it got too serious, transforming boarders for regular athletics training, competing, and working in gyms.⁹

After Kelly and Palmer, the new generation of snowboarders emerged. Those “new school” snowboarders were born in the 1980s and were “native” in the sense that they had started the sport as very young of age. The most famous personality is Shaun Roger White (b. 1986), who is two-time Olympic gold medalist. He holds the X-Games records for gold medals and highest overall medal count, and has won 10 ESPY Awards. That new generation had no problems with fitting their sport in the values and rules of traditional organizations such as FIS. They also accepted the consumerism and Olympic status of the sport without doubt. Snowboarding had become a winter sport like cross-country skiing, with coaches and formal rules and organizations. Media sources identified Shaun White as the most popular athlete at the

2010 Winter Olympic games in Vancouver. NBC coverage of the men's half-pipe final drew over 30 million viewers in the US alone.¹⁰

Consumerism and the market of dreams

Snowboarding has moved culturally from individualistic life-style towards associations and the organizations of big events. As noted by Anna-Liisa Ojala¹¹, these regulative and normative elements are contradictory to snowboarding's traditional ethos, which cherishes freedom and artistic sensibility.

Snowboarding represents a free and self-realizing consumer with an impressive manner. Snowboarding can be seen to work as a representation for new consumers even with different kinds of products and companies. Snowboarders fit into the role model of the "brave new consumer" rather than the worn-out conception of a businessman. Cultural landscapes that influence the meaning of an object are assembled during the development process through various mediators. The users, even in user-centered design, actually mere representations of users, ensembles of the cultural images, values, and visions that are part of the product. Tanja Kotro and Mika Pantzar call these new consumers as "snowboard kids". They present that concept in their paper in following manner: "In the future ... young, androgynous heroes of adventure are replacing these well-organized businessmen." They use the term "snowboard kids" to refer to this new consumer ideal which is characterized by freedom, self-realization and risk. Snowboard kids are very important in reflecting, and possibly furthering, a more general change in culture.¹²

It is not only simple technical details, product features or design principles which are transmitted by these products. They contain whole philosophies of life to be exported or imported. Several companies, like for example Suunto, Nokia and Sony, later used the youthful image of snowboarding. Changing the cultural landscape of the product promotes new kinds of consumers. Whenever a company invents a new good, it simultaneously constructs a consumer. Characteristic heroes are taken more and more from youth culture and from images of ultimate survivors. What is "up-to-date" is created in the pages of magazines when these actors

speak to each other, create and exchange their worlds. Cultural landscape is based to a great extent on mediators such as magazines, exhibitions, TV, movies and research institutes as well as on random discussions with friends and colleagues.¹³

Nobody is seriously suggesting nor believes that by using a certain high-tech appliance one will become a pro in extreme sports. However, an essential part of the pleasure of a product comes from playing with the image as long as it is fun. Snowboarding as an image serves dreaming perfectly but it also easily becomes a restricting model for the user.

Conclusions

The narrative of snowboarding began a little over four decades ago with a new piece of equipment that appealed to the hedonistic desires of X generation. Many early adopters regret snowboarding having sold itself out to the corporate world and been subjected to the forces and constraints of the commercialization process. In Finland snowboarding gained rapidly vast popularity. Ski resorts in Middle- and South-Finland are small but excellent environments for half-pipes and ski parks. Even from the beginning, snowboarding was allowed in Finnish ski resorts. Ski Resort Talma in Sipoo was the first ski resort in Finland to build pipes and parks especially for snowboarders. It became a huge success. Emergence of snowboarding can well be said to save financially the small ski resorts of Finland.¹⁴

Development of snowboarding follows the classical life-cycle model of business enterprise. Snowboarding, as all sports, is a part of cultural and social landscape with values and properties, which may not be inter-generationally shared. In essence, snowboarding was a cultural representation of the iconography of the generation X. Additionally, without a doubt, snowboarding phenomenon was a huge financial and marketing success.

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