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Foucault, Technologies of Self, and the Media
Discourses of Femininity in Snowboarding Culture

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This article draws on Foucault’s concepts of discourse and technologies of self to analyze the relationship between young women and the media. More specifically, it sheds light on the various discursive constructions of femininity in the snowboarding media and examines the conditions under which female snowboarders learn to recognize and distinguish between different types of media discourses. It also examines the different ways in which women act on this knowledge, including the production of their own media forms. The article evaluates sexist discourses in the media and their effects on women’s snowboarding experiences and considers women-only media forms as a foundation for wider social transformation. Ultimately, Foucault’s unique conceptualization of power enables an account of the mundane and daily ways in which power is enacted and contested in snowboarding culture and allows an analysis that focuses on the female snowboarder as both an object and a subject of media power relations.

Keywords: Foucault; media; female youth culture; snowboarding

Michel Foucault has had a major influence on the reconceptualization of power in the social sciences and humanities, including sports studies. Since the early 1990s, scholars have engaged in fruitful analyses of the “discourses of discipline and pleasure” that relate to the sporting body (Whitson, 1989, cited in Andrews, 1993, p. 149; see Chapman, 1997; Cole, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Markula, 2003); some have used a Foucauldian perspective to analyze the media and, in particular, how they function as part of the “apparatus of technologies of domination” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 73; also see Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1995). Yet scholars have begun to express concern that research focusing on “technologies of dominance” results in “pessimistic representations of sport and exercise practices” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 48). Gruneau (1993), for example, proclaimed that such a focus can “too easily deflect attention from analyzing the creative possibilities, freedoms,
ambiguities, and contradictions” in sport (cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 48). Hence, rather than focusing on the media as a technology of discipline (which is only one form of power discussed by Foucault), I seek to draw more broadly on the French philosopher’s unique conceptualization of power and, in so doing, facilitate a discussion of the media as not only repressive, but also enabling and productive. Indeed, the media are not simply a judicial mechanism that limits, obstructs, refuses, prohibits, and censors. Thus, in this article I use Foucault’s concept of technologies of self to examine the ways in which power operates within everyday relations between people and the media.

In this article, I draw on Foucault’s concepts of power, power–knowledge, discourse, and technologies of self to analyze the relationship between young women and the media via a case-study approach based on the discursive constructions of femininity in the snowboarding culture. The article consists of two main parts. The first draws on the concepts of power, power–knowledge, and discourse to shed light on the multiple discursive constructions of femininity in the snowboarding media. The second part focuses on Foucault’s later work, particularly the concept of technologies of self. In so doing, I give greater consideration to female snowboarders as active participants and examine how they make sense of the multiple and contradictory mediated discourses of femininity in the culture. Here, I am especially interested in discourses of sexism, which are observable, to varying extents, in both the mass and the niche media. Not only do I evaluate sexist discourses prevalent in the media and the effects these have on women’s snowboarding experiences, I consider the possibilities of these actions as a foundation for wider social transformation.

According to Foucault (1985), “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (p. 8). For Foucault, such reflection was the essence of social change. For me, it provides the basis for voicing a long-ignored question: Are sexualized images of female athletes really at the heart of gender problems in contemporary sporting cultures?

### Discursive Constructions of Female Snowboarders

Although a plethora of media forms currently cover women’s snowboarding, the mass media (television, newspapers, and mainstream magazines), niche media (snowboarding magazines, films, and Web sites), and micro media (flyers, posters, homemade videos, and online zines) cater to different audiences and have different consequences and “markedly different cultural connotations” (Thornton, 1996, p. 122) for women in snowboarding culture.¹ In this part of the article, I illustrate how the mass media and niche media create and recreate multiple discourses of female snowboarders, respectively.

Although this discussion proceeds by analyzing discourses of femininity, its approach diverges from the methodology known as discourse analysis (Schiffrin,
Developed primarily by linguists, discourse analysis concentrates on verbal texts and on forms of social interaction. “While discourse analysis details the intricacies of communicative practices for their own sake, the methodology that has become known as ‘critical discourse analysis’ (CDA) explores what these reveal about power relations,” explains Macdonald (2003, p. 3). My approach here shares the critical discourse analysts’ aims of relating discourse to power. However, drawing on Foucauldian media scholar Myra Macdonald’s (2003) idiosyncratic conceptualization of discourse, it also differs in method in a number of ways.

Instead of focusing solely on the detailed structuring of individual texts, I focus on the evolving patterns of discourse traceable across the various forms of snowboarding media (e.g., magazines, Web sites, films, television, and newspapers). Whereas discourse historically refers to verbal communication strategies, my approach to discourse includes consideration of visual (e.g., photos of snowboarders in magazines), verbal (e.g., television interviews with snowboarders and dialogue in snowboarding films), and written (e.g., interviews and editorials in magazines and on Web sites) texts. Although I examine the micropolitics of the discourses of femininity in particular texts, I also map broader trends across the various forms of media. According to Macdonald (2003), a Foucauldian-inspired focus on media discourse “avoids both the narrowness of semiotic analysis, with its tendency to focus solely on the text, and the broad generalizations that often characterize ideological analysis of media representations” (p. 2). “Where ideological analysis begins with a specific issue (such as race, or gender, or sexuality) and works back through the evidence of media texts,” continued Macdonald (2003), an analysis of discourse “starts its enquiry with an ear to the texts themselves, and in a spirit of openness to the patterns that may emerge” (p. 2). Indeed, I have had an ear to snowboarding texts for the past 10 years; that is, I have consumed, read, watched, and occasionally produced snowboarding magazines, films, Web sites, and television coverage throughout this period. For the purposes of this study, however, I further refined many of the emergent themes on the basis of my 10-year analysis of snowboarding texts with a more purposeful investigation of the portrayal of women in snowboarding through the text and images presented in the various media. Furthermore, I integrated this analysis with a number of participant-observation phases in key snowboarding communities in New Zealand and North America and 37 informal interviews between 2004 and 2007, which further enabled me to examine the way in which discourses of femininity and female snowboarders are created, reinforced, amplified, interpreted, and negotiated. In other words, I focused on both the content of the texts and “the everyday life of media representations, their contexts of production and circulation, and the practices and discourses of reception that envelop them” (Spitulnik, 1993, cited in Frohlick, 2005, p. 177).

Although Foucault rarely wrote about the media, his approach to discourse suggests that attempts to investigate the truthfulness of media representations of female snowboarders can produce “only a wild goose chase” (Macdonald, 2003, p. 17). Thus, the following discussion is not a search for a singular “truthful” representation.
of the female boarder but rather an examination of multiple and competing discourses of femininity being produced in the snowboarding media. This discussion is guided by Foucault’s (1978) “cautionary prescriptions” for understanding the workings of discourse. Foucault was opposed to binary conceptualizations of power and thus precluded the possibility of dominant discourses ranging against other sets of relatively powerful alternative or oppositional ones. He warned that it was not a simple task to identify a specific discourse and explained that discourses are difficult to decipher, in part, because “multi[ple] discursive elements . . . can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault, 1978, as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 215).

Indeed, identifying with any certainty the prevailing or dominant discourses of female snowboarding is a difficult task. Compounding this difficulty is the rapid expansion of media outlets and distribution channels. Cultural understandings surrounding the identities of female snowboarders cannot be divided into accepted and excluded discourses. Rather, audiences confront numerous and even contradictory discourses. Put simply, although the mass and niche media undoubtedly influence the negotiation of femininities in the snowboarding culture, these negotiations “do not produce a simple dominating discourse” (Pringle & Markula, 2005, p. 472) of femininity. In the remainder of this section, I examine the various discourses of snowboarding femininity appearing in the mass media and niche media, respectively.

**Mass Media**

When the mass media first started reporting on snowboarding in the late 1980s, they tended to describe participants as young, White, hedonistic, rebellious men. Women rarely appeared, and when they did, journalists typically cast them as token “tomboys” or “wild women,” and in so doing reinforced the discourse of snowboarding as an activity best suited to young men. For example, in 1988, in one of the first mass media articles on snowboarding, *The Wall Street Journal* reported,

> Not many women think it is something for them to do. One of the best-known women in snowboarding circles is Lauri Asperas, a 25-year-old former schoolteacher from New York who lives in France and often takes her small dog, Toodles, along on the ride downhill. Last April, Ms. Asperas, who has a wild mane of dark hair and a tanned, freckled face, had her body painted and then donned a bikini, gloves and fur coat before hitting the slopes of Copper Mountain Resort in Colorado. On the way down, she shed the gloves and the coat before spinning a 360-degree turn in the air. “It was cool,” she recalls. (Hughes, 1988, para. 16)

Today, with increased participation rates and the rapidly closing performance gap between the top female and male boarders, the mass media pay female snowboarders greater attention. However, despite well-meaning strategies to promote snowboarding for girls and women, the widespread practice of foregrounding heterosexually attractive women tends to symbolically erase women who appear lesbian, bisexual, queer, or...
“unfeminine.” In so doing, the mass media’s representation of female boarders tends to be a routine manifestation of wider public and sporting discourses of femininity.

The sports media and associated commercial interests occasionally seize images of female athletes and place them at the “center of cultural discourse, at least temporarily” (Messner, 2002, p. 109). As Messner (2002) explained, the media “seem most likely to do so when there is high profit potential (and this usually means that the women can be neatly packaged as heterosexually attractive)” (p. 109). Torah Bright and Gretchen Bleiler exemplify such selective incorporation. Their roles as snowboarding superstars rest on a combination of athletic skill and marketability. Torah Bright is widely acknowledged as “one of Australia’s most recognized snowboarders” (Bliston, 2003, p. 111) and the “most exciting young snowboarder in the world” (Irish, 2003, para. 12). Among Bright’s high-profile mainstream sponsors are Boost Mobile (United States), Samsung (Australia), and Roxy (Quicksilver International); she is regularly featured in mainstream newspapers and magazines and on billboards and is a character in the Microsoft Xbox games *Amped 2* and *Amped 3*. One sports management and marketing firm even identified Bright as the “most photographed snowboarder in the world” (“Leading International Snowboarder,” n.d., para. 3). Although her newfound success is “a testament to the fact that she is much more than a pretty face,” her “fresh-faced good looks” have propelled her to “one of the hottest properties in the extreme sports world” (“Gravis Adds Torah Bright and JP Solberg,” 2002, para. 3).

American snowboarder Gretchen Bleiler is also a hot commodity in contemporary popular culture, and after winning a silver medal in the 2006 Winter Olympic half-pipe event, she was featured for the second time in *FHM* and *Maxim* magazines. In these photographs, she interestingly combines snowboarding icons (e.g., beanie, goggles, snowboard, and snowboard boots) with symbols of traditional femininity (e.g., bikini and passive and sexually suggestive poses). It should be noted, however, that in these images Bleiler does not submit to the male (or female) viewer but engages directly with him or her; Bleiler challenges the traditional male gaze by looking directly at the viewer and laughing. Nonetheless, mass media representations that emphasize female snowboarders’ physical appearances promote responses that position female boarders as sex symbols. For example, after ogling Bleiler’s *FHM* and *Maxim* spreads, one culturally naïve or satirical journalist wrote, “Who knew snowboarders were as hot as America’s Gretchen Bleiler? I thought they were all 5-foot tall Tomboys” (“Gretchen Bleiler in Maxim/FHM,” 2006, para. 1).

Fashion magazines (e.g., *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, and *Cosmopolitan*) often depict female models wearing boarding attire, posing with snowboards, or playing in the snow. By using flawlessly beautiful, unathletic models and placing them in static positions, magazines send the message that appearance rather than skill is the essential quality in judging women. This commonly promotes snowboarding as a fashion rather than as a fulfilling physical activity. *Transworld Snowboarding* journalist Tracey Fong (2000) expressed her distress at the appropriation of female snowboarding by
“mainstream money mongers” (para. 5) and complained of phone calls from fashion magazines and music, video, and art directors who “want . . . the latest trends” and boarding clothes to show off in their layouts and shoots (para. 5). When Fong (2000) asked whether the girls will be snowboarding, she received the same predictable replies: “No, we will have the girls wearing the clothes while playing in the snow looking cute” or “We’re going to have some really cool shots of the girls looking sexy and hanging out with some guys who just finished a hard day’s work riding the mountain” (para. 6). Such discursive constructions promote snowboarding as a fulfilling activity to be engaged in by men and a “cute” fashion to be consumed by women.

Some women’s magazines also reinforce snowboarding as an activity best suited to heterosexual pursuits. For example, an article featured in CLEO magazine (New Zealand) about journalist Tiffany Dunk’s (2000) first snowboarding experience during a trip to the Canadian Rockies included the following comments: “I knew I’d look cooler if I just stood around holding the board and smiling a lot” (p. 20); “Rico is my kind of teacher, helping me up when I fall and, most importantly, playing along with my incessant flirting” (p. 20); “I may have had a few problems finding my feet during the day but I had no trouble getting the hang of things at night. Good food, buckets of wine, and lots of men to flirt with—perfect” (p. 21). Mass media representations of female snowboarders typically support prevailing assumptions that “any girl on a board is either looking for a guy, there because her guy is, or trying to be one of the guys” (Blum, 1994, p. 9). In other words, the representation of female snowboarders and women’s snowboarding in the mass media tends to promote a discourse of heterosexual femininity in which women’s participation is based solely on consumption and the search for male approval.

**Niche Media**

In contrast to the mass media, which typically portray female snowboarders and women’s snowboarding as a hetero-sexy style or activity to be consumed, the discourses of female snowboarders in the niche media are diverse. Discursive constructions of femininity in the snowboarding niche media range from respected female athletes and cultural participants to female models in sexually suggestive poses. Indeed, the niche media are not a homogeneous category; various forms of niche media exist in snowboarding culture. Although the majority target young “core” male and female participants committed to the snowboarding lifestyle (e.g., Transworld Snowboarding, OnBoard Europe Snowboarding Magazine, and New Zealand Snowboarder), others cater to smaller niches, including young male enthusiasts (e.g., Blunt [now defunct]; see Thorpe, 2007), female boarders (e.g., Curl and http://www.powderroom.com; see Thorpe, 2006), or more mature audiences (e.g., Snowboard Life and http://www.greysontrays.com). Here I focus on the discourses of femininity in snowboarding niche magazines, particularly core snowboarding magazines.
Contemporary core snowboarding magazines currently tend to represent female snowboarders as respected participants in the boarding culture (see Wheaton, 2003, for similar observations in the windsurfing culture). However, this has not always been the case. “In the 1980s,” said U.S. professional snowboarder Michele Taggart, “women were only included in the magazines because of their cuteness and their beautiful hair flowing down the mountain” (cited in Howe, 1998, p. 64). Similarly, snowboarder and online zine journalist Alaina Martin (1994) wrote, “With the exception of some occasional tits and ass, there weren’t many girls [in the snowboarding magazines], maybe a token girl here or there but basically nothing” (para. 6). In fact, she “felt so left out. I needed someone to look up to, something to let me know I wasn’t the only one” (para. 6).

Thus, female boarders were initially subjected to what Foucault (1981) termed the processes of exclusion. However, with the recent growth of the women’s market (see Thorpe, 2006), advertisers and publishers have embraced the female boarder, featuring her in more advertisements, editorials, and photos. Jennifer Sherowski, senior contributing editor for Transworld Snowboarding, observed this trend: “Most companies are keen to tap into the new (or expanding) market area that female snowboarding provides, especially considering women really do enjoy things like shopping and spending money”; hence, “we are making a really big effort to include women in our editorial, and that’s including but not limited to, women’s columns” (personal communication, November 2005). The “Exposure-O-Meter” compiled annually by Transworld Business magazine, which calculates the total yearly editorial and advertising coverage in the two major snowboarding magazines (Transworld Snowboarding and Snowboarder Magazine) supports such claims. For the 2003–2004 winter season, Gretchen Bleiler ranked 16th in overall coverage and 10th in advertising coverage (Stassen, 2004). More recently, of the 100 most frequently featured boarders, female snowboarders constituted 11 in the 2004–2005 (Crane, 2005) and 13 in the 2005–2006 (Crane, 2006) winter seasons. In contrast, no female skateboarders ranked in the skating equivalent of this study (summary of Transworld Skateboarding, Skateboard Magazine, Skateboarder, and Thrasher Magazine), and only two women (Serena Brooke and Holly Beck) featured in the surfing Exposure-O-Meter (summary of Transworld Surf, Surfer, and Surfing Magazine) also conducted by Transworld Business magazine.

The strength of the female market has created new space in niche magazines for a variety of representations of female snowboarders. When compared with advertisements featuring male boarders, it appears that images of female and male snowboarders tend to share similar styles of photography (e.g., camera angles) and design. Women often adopt poses similar to those of their male counterparts, with both sexes starring at the reader, challenging their gaze. Very rarely do female snowboarders appear in revealing clothing or sexually suggestive poses. Rather, many of the female snowboarders featured in advertisements and editorials appear without make-up or other traditionally feminine markers. Furthermore, female snowboarders
regularly feature in action photos in editorials and advertising that reinforce their physical prowess rather than their physical appearance. Journalists also tend to show greater respect to female boarders than they did less than a decade ago and are increasingly using gender-neutral language to describe their achievements (e.g., “Tara Dakides is the toughest and most fearless rider . . . right now” [“Tara-bly Dangerous,” 2000, para. 3] and “Juliane Bray has more focus and determination than any other snowboarder I know” [Butt, 2006, p. 58]). In so doing, representations of female boarders in snowboarding niche magazines challenge traditional discourses of female athletes as passive and heterosexually available to the male viewer.

Yet the discursive representations of female snowboarders offered in niche magazines are not homogeneous. Rather, much like the female snowboarding population, the images of female boarders in advertisements and editorials are diverse. Some advertisements, for example, feature women solely in skill shots, and others combine skill shots with “lifestyle” photos of the female rider; the latter may or may not emphasize her femininity or physical appearance. Furthermore, whereas some professional female boarders opt to overtly use their femininity or gender capital in such advertisements and images, others demonstrate traditionally masculine traits (e.g., aggression) and prefer to emphasize skill rather than gender. Other images show women blurring the traditional boundaries of masculinity and femininity. The key point here, however, is that with the growth of the women’s niche market, female snowboarders are gaining greater control over their representation in niche magazines.

“There is a lot more legit coverage of women riders now than there used to be, and more focus on seeing all snowboarders as just ‘snowboarders,’ not girl snowboarders and guy snowboarders,” stated Jennifer (personal communication, November 2005). However, increasing the coverage of women in core snowboarding magazines “will always be a struggle,” she admitted (personal communication, November 2005). Despite huge market potential, female snowboarders still face a number of constraints. Coverage of female snowboarders continues to be limited in some niche magazines. As Ste’en, editor of New Zealand Snowboarder magazine, confessed, “We occasionally get criticism, inevitably it is from a girl, that we don’t have enough girl coverage” (personal communication, October 2005). However, he also pointed out the economic realities of photograph selections. Although Ste’en “keeps reminding the photographers to get good images of girls,” he also acknowledges that most of them “know from experience that a photo of a one foot air is not going to get picked [and paid for] over a 13 foot air” (personal communication, September 2005). Ste’en’s (and apparently the photographers’) assumption that women will typically perform at a lower standard (performing a 1-ft air) than their male counterparts (performing a 13-ft air), and thus are less deserving of photographic coverage, illustrates the constraints female snowboarders continue to face; that is, women should only be included in the niche media when they perform to male standards.
Although many niche magazines do cover female snowboarders and are offering an alternative discourse of femininity based on active participation and cultural commitment, the same sources also reinforce traditional discourses of heterosexual femininity by including advertisements that feature female models (as distinct from female snowboarders) in sexually suggestive poses (also see Henderson, 2001; Rinehart, 2005; Wheaton, 2003). Furthermore, magazines and Web sites feature images of heterosexually appealing women in nonsnowboarding situations including bars, hot tubs, and parties or as fans of male boarders. Editors often insert humorous yet demeaning comments on the physical appearance and sexual desirability of these women. In contrast, the sexual status of men or male snowboarders is almost never compromised.

In sum, the mass and niche media help produce and reproduce numerous, even contradictory, discourses of female snowboarding. Although the niche media provide space for a range of discursive constructions, including women as respected athletes and cultural participants, the mass media tend to focus on heterosexually attractive female boarders and promotes snowboarding as a fashion for consumption. The key point here is that these discourses then help shape women’s snowboarding practices and snowboarding bodies. The multiple discourses produced by the media systematically inform women’s knowledge of snowboarding and play a role in governing their statements and perceptions of snowboarding and gender. It is important to note, however, that these discursive constructions of femininity do not bend all females into a coherent snowboarding femininity (see Foucault, 1977; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Rather, the multiple discourses of femininity communicated via the snowboarding media might be regarded as what Foucault (1977) called “dividing practices” among female boarders. As Pringle and Markula (2005) explained, “Foucault (1977) asserted that dividing practices were constructed via the use of particular discourses to justify social and, at times, spatial divisions between various categories of humans” (p. 477). The dividing practices in the snowboarding media justify the fragmentation of female boarders (e.g., core boarders, girkies, or pro-hos), and in so doing support new niche markets essential for the continual economic growth of the boarding industry (see Thorpe, 2006).

As well as influencing women’s manifestations of cultural meaning, the mediated dialogues surrounding female snowboarders also influence the way “we frame our cultural understandings of future actors walking onto the stage” (Sloop, 1997, cited in Andrews, 2000, p. 126). Foucault termed the process in which humans get tied to particular identities subjectivation, and as Markula and Pringle (2006) explained, “He was particularly troubled with how being ‘known’ or categorized can act to constrain and subject people to certain ends, identities and modes of behavior” (p. 8; also see Foucault, 1983, 1988b). Mediated discourses that promote snowboarding as a fashion for young women, for example, might work to limit some women’s cultural membership to consumption rather than active participation. Some feminist scholars might reason that such discursive constructions of femininity in the media...
have a normalizing effect on female snowboarders, producing docile female bodies. However, I am cautious of such interpretations. I believe it is necessary to question the extent to which discourses of femininity, and particularly discourses of sexism, in the snowboarding media really do have a “discursive effect” on women’s snowboarding experiences: How do men and women make meaning of discourses of femininity and sexism in the snowboarding media?

Although many argue that the sexualization and trivialization of women in the media reinforce male domination via the workings of ideology, this interpretation sits at odds with a Foucauldian perspective. Foucault did not conceptualize discourses and relations of power as essentially positive or negative, thus “it is important not to pre-assign any practice as ‘liberating’ or ‘oppressive’ without a careful consideration of the cultural context where an individual women’s identity is formed” (Markula, 2003, p. 104). Indeed, adopting a Foucauldian approach, it would be erroneous to assume that sexualized images of women in the snowboarding media inherently repress female boarders. Rather, the “effect” of these images depends on the discursive lens through which men and women read them. Thus, to understand the effect of mediated discursive constructions of women in the snowboarding culture, particularly discourses of sexism, it is essential to consider the interpretations applied by boarders themselves.

Foucault’s early work, however, did not necessarily facilitate an explanation of how women make meaning of, or resist, these discourses. On the contrary, Foucault’s understanding of individuals, principally in terms of the operations of power and discourses on the body, has the effect of keeping female snowboarders in the position of passive victims to the snowboarding media. In his latter work, however, Foucault’s understanding of how power relations influence the behavior of individuals underwent a significant methodological shift as he moved his focus on the constitution of subjectivity via the workings of discourse to constitution via lived practices within power relations (Markula & Pringle, 2006). This shift introduces new tools for theorizing sport, the media, and discourses of femininity. Here I apply these tools to snowboarding culture.

**Technologies of Self and Female Snowboarders**

In his later years, beginning with the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1985) became particularly interested in the process by which individuals “think about themselves, act for themselves, and transform themselves within power relations” (Rail & Harvey, 1995, p. 167). Foucault labeled this process *subjectification*. In the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1986) expanded on the notion of subjectification and how it can be realized through what he called the “technologies of self.” Such technologies
permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality. (Foucault, 1988b, cited in Markula, 2003, p. 88)

Thus, in contrast to the objectifying process Foucault described in relation to technologies of power, technologies of the self emerge in the process of subjectification, the forming of oneself as a subject within power relations. But Foucault’s work does not indicate that an engagement in the technologies of self necessarily leads to a transformation of power relations or discourses. Rather, to paraphrase Markula and Pringle (2006), Foucault’s analysis examined how individuals react and make sense of “moral” codes around them, not necessarily how they change them (p. 145). For Foucault (1978), although the strategic coordination of resistance, like the coordination of power relations, is necessary to effect institutional changes, such changes will only ever “reconfigure—not dissolve—power relations” (Maguire, 2002, p. 305).

Although the technologies of the self can act as practices of freedom, that is, practices that an individual can use to transform him- or herself within power relations, certain conditions must apply. According to Foucault (1983), the first step in the technologies of the self involves the individual gaining an ability to problematize his or her identity and the codes that govern him or her. Only after such problematization can the individual engage in ethical work and practices of freedom, and develop practices of transformation (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In relation to the former, Foucault (1985) argued that ethical work—that is, the work that “one performs on oneself” in an “attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behaviour” (p. 27)—is inherently political because “caring for the self implies caring for others also” (Pringle, 2005, p. 271). Foucault stressed, however, that the ability to care for the self, as opposed to knowing the self, “revolves around a critical awareness of the various effects of regimes of truth” (Pringle, 2005, p. 271). Armed with knowledge of both the rules of play and an ethics of practice, the individual can then attempt to minimize harmful modes of domination within relations of power (Foucault, 1988b; also see Maguire, 2002). Furthermore, although Foucault (1987) was interested in the way in which the participant constitutes him- or herself in an active fashion, by the ethical practices of self, “these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents [her]self. They are patterns [she] finds in [her] culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on [her] by [her] culture, [her] society and [her] social group” (cited in McNay, 1992, p. 61). Indeed, the way in which women (and men) read the snowboarding media, and make meaning of discursive constructions of femininity, is informed by the broader social context, as well as particular understandings of youth culture, risk, female athleticism, commercialism, competition, and relations between men and women in the snowboarding culture. Such a conception of the self represents Foucault’s attempt to “attribute a degree of agency and self-determination to the individual without jettisoning his anti-essentialist view of the subject” (McNay, 1992, p. 62).
Although Foucault analyzed the technologies of self through the sexual ethics of the ancient Greeks and Romans, his “teleology of the self” is, according to Markula and Pringle (2006), still relevant today among those individuals who seek to “re-create an identity within the . . . apparatus of domination” (p. 143). Thus, the remainder of this discussion draws on Foucault’s notion of technologies of self to examine how female snowboarders make meaning of discourses of femininity in the snowboarding media. Although the mass and niche media offer a variety of representations of female snowboarders, here I am particularly interested in discourses of sexism, which are observable—to varying extents—in each of these forms of media. I divide this section into two parts. First, I explain how some women problematize the discourses of femininity in the snowboarding media, their identities, and the codes that govern them. Second, I illustrate, via the case study of women-only snowboarding videos, how some female boarders are investing in a double trajectory of critique and ethically informed practice. In so doing, these women engage in practices of freedom, practices that may ultimately create change within the discourses of femininity in the snowboarding culture.

Technologies of Self and Critical Awareness

Critical thought is at the core of Foucault’s understanding of technologies of self. Foucault (1984) was particularly interested in how people learn to problematize their identities by becoming more self-reflexive:

Thought is not what inhibits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem. (p. 388)

The critically self-aware individual questions what seems “natural” and inevitable in their identity; through this interrogation of the limits of one’s subjectivity emerges the “possibility of transgression” and with it the “potential for creating new types of subjective experiences.” (Markula, 2003, p. 102)

Developing the notion of technologies of self in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there are some parallels between Foucault’s understanding of critical thought and the consciousness-raising movement among feminists in the 1960s and Black South Africans in the 1970s (see Fanon, 1967; Sarachild, 1978). The key difference, however, is that “consciousness raising” was an attempt to initiate collective political action, whereas Foucault understood technologies of self as critical thought and individual action for the purpose of personal transformation within existing power relations. Foucault’s stance relates to his understanding of power as relations between people; hence, attempts to change the world on a large scale can only come about...
through individuals changing their personal actions and performances. Foucault’s focus was on local and micro, rather than macro, politics.

Some snowboarders articulate conscious problematizations of the discourses of sexism promoted in the mass and niche media. For example, an advertisement for a local ski resort featuring three female models with only stickers covering their nipples dismayed a committed New Zealand snowboarder, Sophie, to the extent that she refuses to “ever buy a season’s pass there again” (personal communication, October 2006). Canadian boarder Jaime thinks “it’s great to see lots of pic[tures] of tough snowboarder girls” in the core snowboarding magazines, but “models wearing make-up, tank-tops and posing with their snowboards” anger her (personal communication, September 2006). Interestingly, some male snowboarders also question the limitations of discursive feminine identities produced in the media. Committed Canadian boarder Derek, for example, is aware that “lots of ads in snowboarding magazines are quite sexual” but explained, “Ads with sexy models do not make me think less of female riders. There are many women who outperform the boys out there [on the mountain] and I recognize it, and I’m sure the other guys do too” (personal communication, October 2006). When asked to comment on an advertisement in a core snowboard magazine that features a naked female model taped to the ground with snowboarding stickers, Stephen, a committed New Zealand male boarder, viewed these images as “degrading.” Although admitting that it “might be [sexually] exciting,” he declared that he would not support this company (personal communication, October 2006). Arguably, this final decision to refuse to “support the company” is an example of a male snowboarder “attempting to transform oneself into an ethical subject” (Foucault, 1985, p. 27). Stephen has problematized the snowboarding media and engaged in some self-reflection, which has, in this case, led to ethical use of one’s power. By refusing to buy products from companies that sexualize women in their advertisements, some male and female snowboarders (e.g., Stephen and Sophie) are minimizing the effect of discourses of sexism in the snowboarding media.

Although hypersexual images of female models have always been a feature of niche snowboarding magazines, the appearance of American female snowboarders including Tara Dakides, Gretchen Bleiler, and Victoria Jealouse in male magazines such as *Maxim, Sports Illustrated,* and *FHM* is a more recent phenomenon. Like many other contemporary female athletes (e.g., Amanda Beard, Danica Patrick, Gabrielle Reece, and Maria Sharapova), these women proclaim to be aware of their commodity value and have no qualms about marketing their sexuality to boost their public profile and image and reap the financial benefits (see Thorpe, 2006, in press; also see Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Images that promote athletes’ heterosexual femininity, however, tend to be interpreted differently by women (and men) from different social and cultural backgrounds and in different historical contexts. The distinction between second- and third-wave feminism is insightful here.

Developing in the 1960s, second-wave feminism focused on the radical reconstruction or elimination of traditional sex roles and the struggle for equal rights.
Second-wave feminists built feminist organizations and fought for legislative changes regarding the family, sexual relations, reproduction, employment, and education. Women who view overtly sexualized images of female athletes through a second-wave discursive lens typically interpret them as diminishing women’s power, trivializing their strength, and putting them in their sexual place (Burstyn, 1999). Donna Lopiano, the executive director of the United States–based Women’s Sports Foundation, for example, proclaimed that “any exposure in a sports magazine that minimizes athletic achievement and skill and emphasizes the female athlete as a sex object is insulting and degrading” (cited in Drape, 2004, para. 6). Women born in the last quarter of the 20th century, however, have different experiences from those of previous generations. Many contemporary young women, and particularly middle-class women, for example, have access to opportunities, time, and support unknown to their mothers and grandmothers. Hence, it should come as no surprise that their feminist questions and strategies, and indeed interpretations of the media, differ from those of earlier generations.

Acknowledging that the material conditions that facilitate women’s agency—space, encouragement, and legislation—have changed considerably since second-wave feminism, younger feminists have developed a new strand of gender politics often referred to as “third-wave feminism” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, 2004; Heywood & Drake, 1997; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Although a detailed discussion of third-wave feminism is beyond the scope of this study (see Thorpe, in press), a notable difference between second- and third-wave feminists is that the latter feel at ease with contradiction. Third-wave feminism, which began speaking for itself in the early 1990s, is a product of the contradiction between ongoing sexism and greater opportunities for women. “We are the daughters of privilege”, claims Joan Morgan, a Black feminist speaking on behalf of the younger generation; “we walk through the world with a sense of entitlement that women of our mothers’ generation could not begin to fathom” (Morgan, 1999, cited in Heywood & Dworkin, 2003, p. 41). Although “sexism may be a very real part of my life . . . so is the unwavering belief that there is no dream I can’t pursue and achieve simply because ‘I’m a woman’” (Morgan, 1999, cited in Heywood & Dworkin, 2003, p. 41). This new social context fosters a third-wave feminism that explicitly embraces contradiction, hybridity, and multiple identities. Heywood and Drake (1997), for example, defined feminism’s third wave as “a movement that contains elements of the second-wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse and power structures” while also acknowledging and making use of “the pleasure, danger and defining power of those structures” (p. 3). From the third-wave feminist perspective, binaries like masculine–feminine, active–passive, strong–weak, violent–peaceful, and competitive–cooperative belong to essentialist gender natures that have long ceased to have relevance (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Indeed, among many young women, displays of “feminine physical attractiveness and empowerment” are not viewed as mutually exclusive or necessarily opposed realities but as “lived aspects of the same reality” (Messner, 2002, pp. 17-18). Thus, in contrast to second-wave feminists, many contemporary young women applaud hyperfeminine images of female athletes as a celebration
of women’s sexuality. According to third-wave feminists, bodies coded as athletic “can redeem female sexuality and make it visible as an assertion of female presence” (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003, p. 83).

Although young women (and men) are not united in their readings of sexual representations of professional female snowboarders, it is clear that some interpret these images through third-wave, rather than second-wave, feminist discourses; when combined with female athleticism, they are embracing rather than shunning women’s sexuality. Semiprofessional New Zealand snowboarder Hana believes that images promoting female boarders as “hot” are “good for the sport”; they promote snowboarding as “cool for chicks” and could even “encourage young girls to try snowboarding” (personal communication, September 2006). Continuing, Hana proclaims, “If the magazines include a sexy shot of a pro woman snowboarder, then it’s fine because it shows that she’s a talented snowboarder—and cute too—so, one up on the boys I say” (personal communication, September 2006). Similarly, Mel, another New Zealand female boarder, applauds Tara Dakides and Gretchen Bleiler, who were featured on the cover of FHM in body paint: “Good on them! If you’ve got it, which they clearly do (how hot is Tara’s lil’ butt!), flaunt it I say. It certainly doesn’t damage the industry or women’s snowboarding in any way, so go nuts ladies!” (personal communication, February 2006). When asked for her perspective on female snowboarders posing in FHM, Olympic snowboarder Pamela explained that under the early influence of a second-wave “staunch feminist/equal rights mum,” she opposed this choice (personal communication, February 2005). Today, however, she has a more third-wave perspective: “If you have a hot body you can do whatever the hell you want with it, so I actually think ‘good on them’” (personal communication, February, 2005). In another interview, Pamela supports Bleiler’s decision to pose for FHM and Maxim magazines: “I have to say ‘good on her.’ She has a strong, fit and athletic body, so it’s probably good for guys and other women to see that she is not a stick figure with balloon boobs” (personal communication, October 2006). Here Pamela demonstrates a critical awareness that Bleiler’s athletic body offers an alternative to discursive constructions that tend to celebrate the thin physique with large breasts as the contemporary feminine ideal. South African snowboarder Robyn also adopts a strong third-wave perspective in her reading of these sexual displays and asserts, “Women’s sexuality is a tool that gives us power over men . . . so go girls!” She applauds female snowboarders who “make money off males,” but admits, “It’s a pity they have to take their clothes off. If they could do it while keeping their clothes on it would be even better” (italics added) (personal communication, February 2005). Robyn supports women who capitalize on the financial opportunities available in a new economic and cultural system, and she understands these women’s actions as the result of strategic decisions rather than as exploitation or manipulation. Her comments, however, are contradictory in that she celebrates women’s sexuality as a tool for power in one breath and then advocates keeping their clothes on in another. Such contradictions are characteristic of many young third-wave feminists and, indeed, many of the female boarders interviewed for this study.
Second-wave feminist researchers have typically argued against images that sexualize female athletes on the grounds that they reduce women to docile bodies for the consumption of the male gaze. In contradistinction, many young, committed, female snowboarders, confident in both their sexuality and physical prowess, enjoy being (active) objects of the male gaze. Moriah, for example, proclaims, “To be honest, I love boys and I really like it when I know they are checking me out on the mountain” (personal communication, October 2006). She describes drawing the attention of “cute boys” via displays of physical prowess: “I love it when I ride up and [jump] over them. That makes it even better. Then they really like what they see” (personal communication, October 2006).

Nonetheless, as the following comments from Pamela illustrate, some women are cautious of discourses that caricature one form of femininity in both mainstream women’s magazines and core snowboarding magazines:

All girls grow up wondering why they didn’t turn out like Barbie or the chicks in the fashion magazines. Models constantly reinforce a thin image, which we all carry around in our heads, but we all learn to deal with it in different ways. Self-confidence is key and this comes from age, independence, and finding something in life where you can excel and feel proud—for some girls, like me, this is snowboarding.

There is a media image of the “ideal” female snowboarder, but it is definitely different from the models in most women’s magazines. In snowboarding magazines, there is a media image of a freestyle chick with long hair out of a beanie, matching snowboard outfit, a bit grungy, and riding hard with all the boys etc. I always felt like I was just doing my own thing, but heaps of young girls appear to feel the need to conform to this snowboarder “image” to fit in. (personal communication, October 2006)

Sophie is also very aware of the social pressures to conform to girly and ladylike stereotypes on and off the mountain. But she finds solace in the back country where “there are no rules. All you need to worry about is making the most of the fresh untracked snow in front of you. It is real freedom” (personal communication, October 2006). Simply put, some female snowboarders have become aware of the limitations of discursive femininity in society, and in snowboarding culture more specifically, and consciously negotiate their own subjectivity within the existing power–discourse nexus. The question here is where have these individuals (both women and men) gained this ability to critically evaluate discourses of femininity, and particularly discourses of sexism, in the snowboarding media?

Discourses are not the sole sources of knowledge. They are social constructions; thus, “we also arrive at knowledge through experience, through observation and through the evaluation of one discourse against another” (Macdonald, 2003, p. 37). Indeed, snowboarders constantly choose between competing versions of reality, and such choices involve “weighing up the competing . . . versions of reality on offer within our cultures” (Macdonald, 2003, p. 24). It seems that the more snowboarding experience and cultural knowledge an individual has, the more likely he or she is to
develop the ability to weigh up the competing versions of femininity on offer in the snowboarding culture and problematize some of these. Indeed, committed snowboarders are more likely to observe inconsistencies between their experiences on the mountain as active cultural participants and the representations of female models in the media as passive and sexualized subjects. Hana (personal communication, September 2006) illustrates how some core boarders distinguish between images and advertisements of women in the media that they perceive as truthful representations of their experiences as female boarders and those that are not: “I mostly only look at the photos of REAL women” in snowboarding magazines, those “female snowboarders doing sick [cool] moves.”

As for the odd cheesy ad that sexualizes women, well, that doesn’t really bother me. Almost every sport tries to use sex to sell, and I don’t think it overshadows the real women of snowboarding. Sometimes those cheesy shots of naked models disappoint me, they make it seem like girls are only good for looking naked, not snowboarding. But it doesn’t really bother me because I know different. At the end of the day, the only women in the snowboarding culture that get real respect are the ones that can ride well [italics added] (personal communication, September 2006).

Moriah concurs: “I don’t really care about ads that show models in little or no clothing posing with a snowboard, because I ride and those ‘babe’s’ don’t. These ads don’t change the fact that I love snowboarding” (personal communication, October 2006). As these comments highlight, there is a discourse of authenticity pertaining to “real” women in the snowboarding culture. Although committed female boarders tend to reject images that position women as passive and sexual beings, they celebrate those that show women as athletes in action. “It is awesome to see women going hard. I love seeing women riding big, steep mountain terrain. It makes me want to seek out the big stuff,” says Sophie (personal communication, October 2006).

Clearly, some core female boarders negate the discursive effect of overtly sexual images by drawing on “reverse discourses” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). Committed female boarders differentiate themselves from the “skanky,” “slutty,” “dirty” female models in the advertisements who they reason are not “real” female snowboarders. In so doing, they are engaging in a technology of self that acts to transform their senses of self to help them “attain a certain state of happiness” (Foucault, 1988b, cited in Pringle & Markula, 2005, p. 486). The key point I am suggesting here is that it appears that women who have experienced snowboarding as a fulfilling physical activity and who view their bodies as powerful and athletic are the ones best able to problematize such images. Committed female boarders are the most likely to weigh up the competing discourses of femininity in their culture and to distinguish between those who are representative of their own snowboarding experiences and those who are not (e.g., those who are passive and sexualized). In so doing, these women are able to effectively negotiate discursive constructions of femininity that might otherwise limit their subjectivity. Arguably, many of these women draw on discursive
resources from third-wave feminism (rather than second-wave feminism) and their lived experiences to critique these images.

However, although the majority of female participants interviewed for this study articulated a critical awareness of the sexual representations of female models in the snowboarding media, not all core boarders develop a critical consciousness. Mel, for instance, is a passionate New Zealand boarder who has worked in the snowboarding industry for more than a decade. She admits to reading core snowboarding magazines (e.g., *New Zealand Snowboarder*) “almost everyday” without ever noticing “anything wrong” with the representation of women (personal communication, October 2006). Mel believes that if a female boarder “doesn’t like ads that sexualize women, then they probably should not get into snowboarding” because women in the boarding culture need a “very open mind” to “accept a lot of things that you many not agree with” (personal communication, October 2006). As this example shows, not all core female boarders adopt a critical awareness of the discursive constructions of sexism in the snowboarding media; some even internalize the attitudes held by many of their male colleagues. Nonetheless, technologies of self or active construction of the self within a certain discursive context does not necessarily mean rejecting all the available discourses. Some female boarders, for example, accept “sexist” representations of models in the snowboarding media and construct their snowboarding identities within these discursive limits (e.g., Mel, Hana, and Moriah).

I find it interesting to compare how women read the same images and advertisements differently. For example, when asked to respond to an advertisement featuring a male professional snowboarder surrounded by female models dressed in revealing nurse uniforms, Hana proclaimed, “I think these sorts of ads are funny. I know these chicks don’t represent ‘women snowboarders,’ so it doesn’t really matter” (personal communication, September 2006). Similarly, Pamela describes this advertisement as “just another teenage boy’s fantasy” (personal communication, October 2006). “I barely notice these sorts of ads,” says Pamela, because “I don’t associate myself” with the female models featured in them. Jokingly, she asks, “Are they really women?” (personal communication, October 2006). Jaime, however, responded very differently:

I’ve definitely got issues with this one, because I’m a nurse! I mean, come on, this ad is totally brutal towards the nursing population, and there is nothing about snowboarding in this ad. Now that I’m a nurse, whenever there are images of a “naughty nurse,” we all take a stand. I guess I’ve sort of always been like that. Maybe that’s from being involved with a male-dominated job—forest fighting—for so many years. I have always had to stick up for myself and fit in with the guys, and snowboarding is no different really. (personal communication, September 2006)

Moriah, on the other hand, found the advertisement amusing in the way that it parodies an unspoken cultural truth, that is, “once a guy becomes a dope-ass [highly proficient] rider he’s got pro-hos [female groupies] on his jock [seeking sexual relations with
him]” (personal communication, October 2006). As this example highlights, the ability to develop a critical awareness of the discourses of femininity depends on the individual’s experiences and position within the existing power–discourse nexus. In sum, although they are the subjects of discourse, female snowboarders are not necessarily its victims. Female boarders confront numerous and even contradictory discourses, but in everyday life they actively participate in deciding which discourses activate them; the act of doing this is a matter of existing within relations of power with a degree of liberty to negotiate individual agency.

Technologies of the Self and Practices of Freedom

Snowboarders are not docile bodies who allow the media to constitute their subjectivities. Some female and male boarders find the discourses of sexism promoted in the snowboarding media problematic. However, mere critical thinking does not transform these discursive constructions of femininity. Thus, it is also important to consider how this critique works in practice. Although many of the boarders interviewed for this study articulated a critical awareness and problematization of discourses that sexualize women, the majority simply adopted “coping mechanisms” (Markula, 2003, p. 103). To preserve their enjoyment of core snowboarding magazines, they may ignore problematic advertisements. In other cases, the critique promotes a political response.

For example, although the sex-sells discourse pervades the contemporary snowboarding niche media, particularly the core snowboarding magazines, advertisements that sexualize women are becoming less frequent. This is partly because of the political responses of some boarders. Indeed, committed male and female snowboarders, journalists, and editors frequently voice their discontent with such advertisements. In 1994, Flakezine, a Web site dedicated to analyzing the snowboarding media, called an advertisement for Alpina Goggles sexist. The ad featured a large-breasted White woman in a black body suit, blue flannel, and Alpina Darksite goggles. According to Flakezine, Alpina’s marketing director subscribed to the “big boobs and beer” school of advertising, which subscribes to the formula “Give 14-year-old boys a boner and they’ll buy your product.” The Web site added, “While this style may work selling pay-per-view Wrestle Mania bouts to inbred white trash, it won’t work here in the snowboard world, thank God” (Sex Rot, 1994). More recently, in an article featured in the April 2006 issue of Transworld Snowboarding titled “Things Not Welcome in the 2006/2007 Season,” a group of young journalists, “the angry interns,” warned advertisement executives against using bikini- or thong-clad women in the magazine: Not only are they “insulting the people you’re trying to sell to by assuming they’ll fall for your sophomoric crap” but they falsely assume that snowboarders are “a bunch of sex-crazed goons” (p. 170). Girls such as Tory, a correspondent from Big Sky, Montana, also remind editors that they will not accept
overt or covert forms of sexism: “What does a girl in a thong have to do with selling shoes?” (Mail 15.5, 2002). These political voices of cultural discontent appear to have persuaded the decision makers in the media (e.g., editors and marketing directors): Such images continue to decline in frequency.

As this example illustrates, some snowboarders engage in conscious, active critique of the discursive constructions of sexism propounded by the snowboarding media and, in so doing, have taken the first step of technologies of the self. According to Foucault, it is only after such questioning that one can engage in ethical conduct or practices of freedom. But Foucault’s concept of technologies of the self is complex, and it is difficult to determine what practices of freedom might mean for the critically aware female snowboarder. Foucault was reluctant to talk about “resistance,” and he has been widely criticized for not offering clear guidelines on how to challenge the limitations of existing identity formation. Although Foucault’s work does not indicate that an engagement in technologies of self necessarily leads to a transformation of power relations or discourses, other scholars have read his work with “liberational” intent. For example, feminist scholars have embraced Foucault’s understanding of technologies of self for the “feminist analysis of transgressive practices for women” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 150). Moya Lloyd is at the forefront of this research.

Although Foucault offered only vague ideas as to how individual practices of freedom might change dominant discursive practices, Lloyd (1996, as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006) contended that his latter writings suggest a two-pronged strategy for action. Lloyd maintained that the technologies of self, when invested in what she called a double trajectory of critique and self-stylization, can motivate political activity and transgress women’s condition and thus act as practices of freedom. According to Lloyd’s (1996, as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 152) interpretation, any practice of femininity has “the potential to operate transgressively” if it is embedded in the “double act” of critique and self-stylization. For example, if an individual woman’s conscious critical efforts to make a political statement through dress can provoke “a critical, querying reaction” (Lloyd, 1996, as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 152), she has potentially problematized women’s present cultural condition, which may ultimately have an impact on power relations (Markula, 2003; Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Indeed, some women in the snowboarding culture demonstrate a critical consciousness of their positioning within media discourses and engage in active self-fashioning to “produce sites of contestation over the meanings and contours” of discursive constructions of femininity (Lloyd, 1996, as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 152). Snowboarding Olympian Pamela took delight in “shocking” her interviewers:

I would turn up and be really organized and wouldn’t dress like a snowboarder. They would be like “oh, we wanted you to have pink hair and heaps of piercings in your eyebrows and stuff.” And I was like, “sorry to disappoint you, but I’m really boring.”
There’s this crazy misconception of what a female snowboarder is, and I used to kind of delight in not being that just to really piss them off. (personal communication, September 2005)

The following comments from professional snowboarder Tina Basich also highlight how some women’s acts of self-stylization are allied to critique in the snowboarding media. Basich opposed “selling snowboarding stuff with images of girls in makeup and no shirts” (cited in Howe, 1998, p. 125). In the mid-1990s, Basich and fellow professional snowboarder Shannon Dunn featured in a series of advertisements parodying the dominant discursive constructions of femininity. In the advertisements, Basich and Dunn wore overtly feminine dresses and rollerskates. “Our Prom ads were completely revolutionary,” says Basich (2003), because they “show[ed] we weren’t afraid to be feminine” and “represented who we were becoming” (p. 104), that is, respected cultural participants with the confidence and ability to publicly question discourses of femininity in the snowboarding media. Thus, these women consciously problematized the dominant discursive construction of femininity in the snowboarding media and negotiated their own subjectivity within the existing power–discourse nexus. In their attempts to expand the discursive limits of snowboarding femininities in the media, these women engaged in ethical work and practices of freedom.

In the following subsection, I use Lloyd’s (1996, as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006) interpretation of technologies of the self in an analysis of female-produced snowboarding films. I argue that these films constitute practices of freedom as strategic alternatives to dominant male versions of snowboarding culture and riding styles. The following case study illustrates how some female snowboarders are, to paraphrase Rail and Harvey (1995), “thinking about themselves, acting for themselves, and transforming themselves” within media power relations (p. 167).

Practices of Freedom: Women-Only Snowboarding Films

Niche snowboarding films provide an important space for riders to display their skills and gain recognition from peers and the industry. But filming requires time and resources, both of which are expensive and limited. Photographers and sponsors have tended to privilege male footage. The attitude expressed by Dave, a committed Canadian snowboarder and part-time snowboard filmmaker, prevails within the snowboarding culture: “I only think that there should be female parts in videos if the girls can step it up to the next level” (personal communication, 2004). Simply put, filmmakers, male colleagues, and viewers expect female boarders to perform to male standards if they are to be included in these videos. Only a select few women earn invitations to film with male crews, and male filmmakers and boarders set the criteria for participation. Furthermore, these videos celebrate hypermasculinity as the dominant discursive construction; they culturally exalt those male snowboarders
who engage in risky behavior and sustain injury (see Frohlick, 2005). The key point here is that the select few women who are invited to feature in these videos are constrained within such discursive constructions; they must embody a hypermasculine approach to snowboarding and risk taking or, as Shannon Dunn put it, they have to “be like guys and that’s no fun” (Shannondunnsnow.com, 2002). The dominant discursive construction of hypermasculinity celebrated in these niche videos excludes and marginalizes women as active participants, and the majority of men as well (also see Frohlick, 2005; Wheaton, 2003).

Some female snowboarders are critically aware of the exclusionary practices involved in the production of snowboarding films and, in so doing, are taking the first step of technologies of the self. Having spent 2 years working for Teton Gravity Research, an action-sports film production company, Tiffany Sabol was well aware of company personnel simply “ignoring an abundance of film” that captured female talent (cited in Berkley, 1999, para. 2). Sabol weighted up the competing versions of femininity she observed in the snowboarding media and on the mountain, and in so doing, she found women’s exclusion from snowboarding films inconsistent with her own experiences. This critical awareness led her to a transformational practice: She cofounded the first women’s snowboard film company, Misty Productions—later renamed XX Productions—and coproduced Empress (Sabol, Rondenet, & Myers, 1999), Our Turn (Sabol & Rondenet, 2000), and Hardly Angels (Sabol & Rondonet, 2001). Similarly, Lauren Graham, producer of the all-female snowboarding video Shot in the Dark (Graham, 2003), admitted that although “it’s awesome . . . for a girl to get a couple of shots in a guy’s video . . . something really needed to be done with all of the film ending up on the cutting-room floor” (cited in Buckley, 2003, para. 2).

Thus, in an attempt to rectify the lack of female coverage in snowboarding films, several women, including Sabol and Graham, are engaging in ethical conduct or practices of freedom to improve women’s situation in the niche media via the production of all-female snowboarding videos. In so doing, they are taking the second step of technologies of self. Arguably, these films provide women with the opportunity to define their own criteria for inclusion, exhibit skills, create new meanings and values for women’s snowboarding, and challenge dominant gender discourses. According to its Web site, the female snowboarding video Dropstitch (Clyde & McKenna, 2004) aims to document girls who have taken a male dominated sport and made it their own against all the odds. Snowboarding brings out the best in them and helps them fulfill their aspirations and live their lives in an independent unconventional way—mirroring how modern women look at life in general. The film will celebrate the achievements of those girls at the forefront of the sport. It’s about bringing talent, inspiration and devotion to the general population, introducing snowboarding to girls who have never tried, and inspiring those who have, to follow their dream.

The goal of Misschief Films, another female production company, as described by professional snowboarder Alexis Waite, is “to help change people’s perception of
women’s snowboarding” (cited in “Team Report,” 2004). A press release offered further insight into the ethical motives behind the establishment of Misschief Films:

We feel like prior to this project women received little to no coverage in snowboard related media sources. With this project, it is our intention to foster more respect and recognition for women in the snowboard industry. The video will highlight the creativity, personality, and skill of each rider, while providing an inspiring, energetic, and girl-friendly tone to its viewer. Our goal is to provide global positive role models for women involved or interested in action sports, and hopefully foster more support for the women’s half of the industry (“As If,” 2005).

The production company Web site offers “girls looking for happiness that you can’t buy at the mall” the following solution: “It’s time to try Misschief Films where double-black diamonds are a girls best friend” (cited in Stassen, 2005, para. 1). According to cofounder Fabia Gruebler, Misschief Films is not only seeking to offer an alternative to male-dominated snowboarding films, it is also attempting to advance the careers of professional female snowboarders, allowing them to earn a living from boarding in films (Stassen, 2005). Misschief’s first film, As If . . . (2005) certainly had the desired effect. This film features the most respected female snowboarders and offers a platform for the display of female athleticism without being judged against male standards. Explicitly challenging women’s exclusion from aspects of snowboarding culture, and snowboarding films in particular, the back cover of the DVD states, “No, we’ll just watch the boys hit the jumps . . . AS IF!”

Although the women in As If . . . do not attempt to emulate male boarders, the film still celebrates their athleticism and their femininity. The introductory scene to Alexis Waite’s part is a good example of women confidently displaying distinctly feminine cultural identities. Dressed in a purple and black 1980s-style outfit (i.e., purple leg warmers, black hotpants, purple headband, and purple off-the-shoulder shirt), Waite performs an energized modern–jazz dance to the electronic “feminist pop” song “I’m So Excited.” The following scene shows Waite executing a series of spectacular maneuvers on her snowboard (in a pink snowboarding outfit). The combination of creative design and animation, a playful soundtrack, an innovative “girl-friendly” approach that emphasizes the fun and enjoyment inherent in women’s snowboarding experiences (in contrast to aggressive and competitive displays of physical prowess demonstrated in male-dominated films), and outstanding displays of female athleticism helped As If . . . become the “top-selling girls’ video of all time” in North America, Europe, and Japan after only 3 months of sales, and it almost outsold the top-selling male snowboarding video (“World’s Best Female Riders,” 2006, para. 4). One reviewer, present at the premiere night, acclaimed the occasion:

The place was packed. Yeah, all the girls were there, but so were all the snowboarder dudes, the industry heads, and the media. It was the place to be at nights end. The movie didn’t disappoint. The editing was tight, the personalities of the girls came through in their parts, and most importantly the riding was impressive and solid. The
movie got the crowd hyped, left us wanting more and f—king stoked. The movie is entertaining and legit. (Fast, 2005, para. 2)

Mel, a core New Zealand female boarder, similarly describes the Misschief girls as “sick [awesome]”: “They get me so amped [excited] to go riding. After watching their video you know for sure that being a female is no excuse to limit your riding” (personal communication, October 2006). There is, of course, an interesting contradiction here with Mel, who was earlier cited as being apolitical in her interpretation of the snowboarding media, yet who espoused a gendered position when discussing female-only snowboarding videos.

As the example of women-only snowboarding films illustrates, female snowboarders are not simply victims of media discourses. Rather, some female boarders have engaged in the “double act” of critique and self-stylization (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 152) to shape and reshape cultural images and meanings of the individual and collective female snowboarder. In so doing, these women have provoked “a critical, querying reaction” (Loyd, 1996, cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 152), as seen in Mel’s comments above and the following comments from Zane, an American male snowboard cinematographer:

Before this Misschief thing, girls pretty much just did competitions, and they never filmed like the boys do. . . . But, ya know, we never really questioned this . . . it was just the way it was. Then, with this film, a lot more girls are getting to film video parts and getting to be creative with the things the guys have done for the past few years. I think the Misschief girls will get way more sponsorship dollars next year because of how stoked everyone was on it this year. I also think we will start seeing more women in the men’s videos. (personal communication, November 2005)

By provoking “a critical, querying reaction” (Lloyd, 1996, as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 152), women-only snowboarding videos have problematized women’s current cultural condition, particularly the expectation that female boarders must act “like guys” and perform to male standards if they are to be included in snowboarding films, which may have an impact on power relations in the snowboarding media and culture.

But with only a few women engaging in practices of freedom in relation to the snowboarding media, it is necessary to consider who are the most likely to do so. Markula and Pringle (2006) asked a similar question in their study of the fitness industry. Following Foucault (1983, 1988a), who rejected the notion of individuals “possessing an innate ability to . . . problematize their identities and to develop practices to change it” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 170), Markula and Pringle (2006) located “critical awareness of discursive practices” and the drive toward “alternative practices” in “knowledge and experience” of one’s immediate world (p. 170). This seems to hold true in snowboarding culture. Although all female boarders are part of creating discourses, not all women have an equal opportunity to maneuver within the
power relations of the snowboarding media. Marginal, less committed participants are not necessarily the key creators of change because they have limited knowledge and opportunity to shape the actual media, and consequently their comprehension of alternative practices is rather small (see Markula & Pringle, 2006). A marginal female snowboarder angered by an overtly sexist advertisement, for example, can do little more than refuse to purchase the products of the particular snowboarding company, write to the editors of the snowboarding magazine in which the advertisement appeared, or post comments on a snowboarding Web site. More experienced and professional female snowboarders, on the other hand, have more knowledge and opportunity to shape the snowboarding media by creating their own media forms; using interviews, photo shoots, or advertisements as opportunities to publicly question discourses of femininity in the snowboarding culture; or discussing their concerns with colleagues in the snowboarding industry, including niche media editors, journalists, and photographers. Indeed, the women most likely to develop a critical awareness of the exclusionary practices in niche films and engage in alternative practices tend to be those who have spent many years in the sport, culture, or industry. However, as previously discussed, not all women with the opportunity to maneuver within these power relations choose to do so. The key here is critical awareness, and the likelihood of a female boarder developing such a consciousness is highly dependent on both her life (e.g., education, parental and peer influences, generation, and occupation) and her snowboarding experiences. Simply put, the margin for resistance varies depending on each individual female boarder’s life experience and position within the power–discourse nexus (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

In problematizing women’s current cultural position in the niche media, some female snowboarders have engaged in ethical conduct or practices of freedom and produced a “site of contestation over the meanings and contours of identity, and over the ways in which certain practices are mobilized” (Lloyd, 1996, as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 152), which may in turn have an impact on power relations in the snowboarding media and the broader boarding culture. However, it is important to note that the technologies of the self are always “based on the models available by one’s culture” (Chapman, 1997, p. 218). Of course, producing female-specific media is not a new strategy per se, but a practice that enables women to experience a degree of liberty within the limits of the existing power–discourse nexus. In particular, although women-only snowboarding films offer an alternative representation of femininity in the snowboarding culture, they are produced with the financial support of snowboarding companies that continue to see female snowboarders primarily as consumers and a key niche market. Thus, although female snowboarding films can act as a practice of freedom by expanding the limitations of what it means to be a woman in the snowboarding culture, the dominant discourses of femininity in the snowboarding media continue to hold strong. Simply put, female-only snowboarding videos do not change the modes of domination.
It is perhaps worthwhile to recall that according to Foucault, although the strategic coordination of resistance is necessary to effect institutional changes, such changes will only ever “reconfigure—not dissolve—power relations” (Maguire, 2002, p. 305). Indeed, although female-only snowboarding films offer an alternative to male-only videos, some women may find the discourses of femininity being promoted in these films equally as limiting. For example, a 50-year-old female snowboarder may find the youthfulness of these films restrictive, and a New Zealand Maori female boarder may find the Whiteness of these films limiting. Female-only snowboarding videos are not necessarily disconnecting the feminine identity from the power–discourse nexus. Rather, they are reconfiguring existing power relations. Foucault’s thoughts on technologies of self, and his unique conceptualization of power, therefore, help us appreciate the agency and autonomy of female snowboarders “without falling into idealist fantasies of sovereign subjects and pure, utopian freedom” (Maguire, 2002, p. 311).

Fresh Questions With Foucault

Using Foucault’s concepts of power, power–knowledge, and discourse, the first part of this article illustrated how the snowboarding media, as a social institution, help regulate the production and circulation of statements and perceptions of what it means to be a female snowboarder. However, the media are not simply a judicial mechanism that limits, obstructs, refuses, prohibits, and censors. Rather, the media are only “one terminal form power takes” (Foucault, 1978, p. 92) in the snowboarding culture. Thus, in the second part I used Foucault’s concept of technologies of self to examine the ways in which power operates within everyday relations between people (snowboarders) and institutions (the media). In other words, Foucault’s unique conceptualization of power enabled an account of the mundane and daily ways in which power is enacted and contested in the snowboarding culture and allowed an analysis that focused on the female snowboarder as both an object and a subject of media power relations.

Ultimately, the goal of the second part of this article was to embrace Foucault’s challenge “to detach from established knowledge, ask fresh questions, make new connections, and understand why it is important to do so” (Cole, Giardina, & Andrews, 2004, p. 207). In so doing, I have illustrated that representations typically deemed sexist in the snowboarding media are not inherently oppressive. Rather, the effect of these images depends on the discursive lens through which men and women read them. Although young women (and men) are not united in their readings of the snowboarding media, many are interpreting the media through third-wave, rather than second-wave, feminist discourses; when combined with female athleticism, they are embracing rather than shunning women’s sexuality. On the basis of this discussion, it might be argued that the time has also come to begin asking “fresh questions” (Cole et al., 2004, p. 207) about the sexism formula in the sports media and
its effect on the gender relations in contemporary sport more broadly. If this were so, a Foucauldian perspective could certainly facilitate such a task.

Notes

1. The mass media tend to be produced by nonsnowboarding journalists and producers for a mass audience with little knowledge of snowboarding, whereas niche media tend to be created by journalists, editors, photographers, and filmmakers who are, or were, active snowboarders. Niche media communicate snowboarding discourses and cultural knowledge and are the most instrumental to snowboarders’ cultural identity construction. Snowboarding historian Susanna Howe (1998, p. 107) identified photographers and filmmakers as “the real image makers” because their work “creates the dream that is snowboarding” and “sells lifestyle,” and Doug Palladini, publisher of Snowboarder magazine, described snowboarding magazines as the “Bible” for core boarders (as cited in Howe, 1998, p. 104). For a discussion of the different cultural connotations of mass and niche media in club cultures, windsurfing and skateboarding cultures, and snowboarding culture, see Thornton (1996), Wheaton and Beal (2003), and Bruce, Falcous, and Thorpe (2007), respectively.

2. During my snowboarding career in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I occasionally coproduced, and was featured in, short snowboarding films, one of which aired on XSTV, a New Zealand extreme sports television program, in 2003. I am also currently a senior contributor to Curl, a New Zealand female surf, skate, and snowboarding magazine and Web site, where I am continuously working to increase the visibility and raise the profile of New Zealand’s female snowboarders. I also use this as a space to share some of my research with a broader audience. My involvement with Curl continues to be an insightful experience.

3. Notably, Foucault did briefly discuss the important role of magazines in the communication and development of cultures and lifestyles. In relation to the homosexual culture, he wrote, “Something well considered and voluntary like a magazine ought to make possible a homosexual culture, that is to say, [make available] the instruments for polymorphic, varied and individually modulated relationships” (Foucault, 2000, p. 139). In other words, magazines can playfully make suggestions about lifestyles, or in Foucault’s terms mode of life, without being overly prescriptive. Certainly, snowboarding magazines (as well as films and Web sites) are efficient communicators of cultural knowledge within snowboarding culture.

4. Scores for the ‘Exposure-O-Meter’ are calculated using the following system: cover, 2,000 points; pull-out poster, 2,000 points; threefold action gatefold, 1,500 points; spread, 1,000 points; full-page column, 700 points; full page, 500 points; half page, 200 points; quarter-page or less action shot, 125 points; and lifestyle or “mug shot,” 100 points (see http://www.twsbiz.com/twbiz/archive/exposure).

5. One such example appeared in an April 2003 article in Snowboarder Magazine. “Defending Champs and Hooter’s Girls Look Good on Opening Day” (2003) carried a photo of nine teenage females smiling and posing on the snow, as if for a cheerleading team photo.

6. Foucault (1983) said of the relation between productive power and the subject, and the subject’s location in productive power: “This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (p. 212).

7. Here discursive effect refers to “a momentary production of a phenomenon, such as the production of objects, subjects or conceptual understandings” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 29).

8. Although many female snowboarders avoid adopting the feminist label, in many ways they are living exemplars of third-wave feminism—they subtly draw attention to feminist issues and goals in their everyday lives. The following excerpt from an interview with Pamela Bell, New Zealand’s first snowboarding Olympian, is insightful: Pamela: “I think we [female snowboarders] are powerful, positive, and able to effect change in our sport—we just have to go out there and make those changes ourselves and create the difference.” Interviewer: “So, would you consider yourself a feminist?” Pamela: “Yes absolutely—but due to bad press over the word feminist I’ll go in for equal rights if that’s ok by you” (personal communication, February 2005). For a detailed discussion of third-wave feminism and snowboarding, see Thorpe (in press).
9. Of course, another Foucauldian interpretation could be that these women have been suitably disciplined by dominating discourses of femininity. This example highlights a limitation of Foucault’s work; that is, it is often difficult to differentiate technologies of discipline and technologies of self, which he has admitted typically operate at the same time.

10. A reverse discourse often uses “the same vocabulary” as a dominating discourse but produces an opposing strategy or social effect (Foucault, 1978, p. 101).

11. Pamela also admitted to being “incensed enough to react to sexist media a few times” (personal communication, October 10, 2006). In particular, she recalled writing to “Phil Erikson [director] at New Zealand Snowboarder in the mid 1990s when he ran a particularly appalling ad (for something that he was importing at the time) with a bare-breasted mermaid. My point was that the ad didn’t have much to do with snowboarding. I kinda got [branded] as a bit of a ‘feminist’ but then, that is the backlash that you just have to deal with I guess” (personal communication, October 2006).

References


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