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Why the printed surf mag still matters

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Published in:
Zigzag Surfing Lifestyle Magazine

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Recommended citation(APA):
Sims, C. P. (2024). Why the printed surf mag still matters. *Zigzag Surfing Lifestyle Magazine*, 48(1), 112-113.

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Published 30/1/24 in Zigzag Vol 48. Issue 1

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Title: Why the printed surf mag still matters

Subtitle: The primacy of the surf photograph in surf culture is why surf magazines have remained remarkably resilient in the digital age.

Abstract: Their large format, physicality and permanence makes surf magazines well suited to the presentation of still surf photography. A surf photo freezes a moment in the complex interaction between the surfer and the wave, allowing the viewer to engage with all aspects captured within the frame in great detail. The richness of detail provided in the still image not only illuminates the surfing aesthetic, it evokes memories and feelings of surfing experiences and cultivates a kinship with the subculture. The printed photograph is still considered the most hallowed medium of recording surfing, and through their superiority for showcasing surf photography, surf magazines are, therefore, both eloquent and resonant in their depiction of the surfing experience making them important contributors to the ongoing development and dissemination of surf culture.

Article:

For the most part, print magazines have been ineffective in their response to digital disruption but surf magazines have somehow remained remarkably resilient. There are many reasons for this. For example, my doctoral research demonstrated that printed surf magazines are more trusted and more influential than digital surf media, and because of this and some other factors, they are active contributors to the ongoing development and dissemination of surfing's subcultural norms and values. The surf industry depends on the successful dissemination of these subcultural norms and values to the wider public, so surf magazines also play an important role in the business prospects of the surf industry. In turn, the surf industry supports the printed surf magazine through advertising which they also use to demonstrate the authenticity of their links to surf culture. Thus, by supporting a channel that helps to perpetuate the appeal of surf culture, they are supporting their own business prospects, thereby creating a virtuous cycle. This is one reason why surf magazines still survive, but there is another.

In this article, I draw on a recent discussion with Gerry Lopez. The Pipeline legend suggested the printed photograph is the reason why printed surf magazines still resonate in the digital age. Let's unpack this.

One of surfing's greatest assets is its visual appeal. Compared to most other activities the surfing aesthetic is particularly enchanting. Capturing this aesthetic via still and video photography provides different gratifications. Surf video captures movement and the dynamic interplay between the surfer and the wave and a still image freezes the moment allowing the viewer to take the time to study every aspect in detail.

There's much research to support the fact that digital media is better suited to video than still imagery. Most digital content consumption takes place on a phone at a fast pace in an environment described as ephemeral, because it either gets buried by other content or disappears altogether. There is also research (including my own) that supports the contention that magazines are well suited to, among other things, the presentation of still photography. Their large format, physicality and permanence means that beautiful photos can be enjoyed at a slow pace, in great detail, and will still be there when you come back to it another time. As surfers, we have all experienced how a great surf photo in a magazine or book will grab and hold your attention, and because of this, surfers display an unusual affinity for the analogue in this increasingly digitised world. Let's delve into this anomaly.

The act of surfing is an instinctive, reactive response by the surfer as they traverse a breaking wave. Surfing academics Nick Ford and David Brown in their book titled *Surfing and Social Theory* (2006), contend that the act of surfing requires a presence of mind that, "denies that momentary reflection which allows the possibility of imprinting an image upon the mind's eye". The observer of surfing sees it from a similar perspective; a flowing series of idiosyncratic responses by the surfer to the changing form of the wave, which is over in a matter of seconds. The act of surfing on a wave is therefore an ephemeral event. It is an activity bound by space and time and leaves no trace of its existence.

A surf photo freezes a moment in that complex interaction between the surfer and the wave, allowing the viewer to take in all aspects captured within the frame – the sunlight, texture of the water, shape of the wave, surfer's posture, the position of the board, and the shards of spray emanating from it, as well as features of the background and the foreground. The richness of detail provided in the frozen moment illuminates the surfing aesthetic. More than just capturing the aesthetic, a surfing image is interpreted through the lens of our own surfing experience. We identify detail that aligns with our level of ability, sense of place, and kinship with the culture so the memories and feelings it evokes are unique to each of us. Lopez (2023) expresses this as an awakening experience.

Somebody once said, 'Nature speaks to you in a voice that's familiar to your soul'. In a surf magazine you have beautiful images - of something very natural - and they speak to your

soul. A lot of times you don't even know it, but a picture will awaken something deeper than what's in your mind. It activates your senses, your feelings, and your imagination.

The humble surf photograph is therefore both powerful and evocative. It can inspire performance, influence and inform your sensibilities about surfing and surf culture and elicit a powerful aesthetic and contemplative experience, which can be a stronger stimulant to action than words (which is why most surf ads preference photos over words).

So, to conclude, I propose that the printed photograph is still the most hallowed medium of recording surfing. And through their superiority for showcasing surf photography, surf magazines are both eloquent and resonant in their depiction of the surfing experience, making them important contributors to the ongoing development and dissemination of surf culture.

[Endnote]

Simsy, a former World Tour surfer, national team captain, SA Pro series champ and publisher of *Zigzag* between 1988 and 2007, is now Dr Craig Sims, an Assistant Professor at Bond University and publisher of *White Horses* magazine in Australia.

[Pullquotes]

Surf magazines still survive, but their current vulnerability should be a concern to the whole surf industry.

The humble surf photograph is both powerful and evocative. It can influence and inform your sensibilities about surfing and surf culture and elicit a powerful aesthetic and contemplative experience.

Surf culture matters not just because it is the foundation of a multi-billion-dollar global surfing industry, but it is a reflection of who we are.

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