

# **Cutting Edge – Pervasive Gender Issues in Snowboarding**

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## **Thesis Statement**

Snowboarding has a distinct culture of its own that makes it welcoming to people from all walks of life, but does this mean it's one of the few, or maybe only, sports without gender inequality? Most research concludes not. In fact, snowboarding is far from free of inequality. Though women make up half a prospective market, snowboarding brands leave them out of their marketing, out of their merchandise, and out of their offices.

As a sport that developed in tangent with the Women's Liberation Movement, it could have easily grown into a gender-neutral activity, yet it's female participation has plateaued at around 35% for the last two decades. Why did the long-standing gender roles of traditional sports, just starting to be dismantled at the time of its conception, permeate snowboarding to its core? How can this revived set of masculine values be broken down to make snowboarding more accessible and inviting to everyone?

I plan to create a brand, business plan, and marketing strategy that works to end these inequities by focusing on women in the ad campaigns, in the brand identity, and in the product line. As a newcomer to the culture, I hope to contribute a fresh perspective to create something that feels natural to the culture but also breaks the current graphic landscape. Including a brief history of snowboarding, my research will focus on how gender and sport intertwine in a broader sense outside of just snowboarding and gender discrimination permeates all levels of the snowboarding culture. The purpose of this research is to lead to a better understanding of female involvement in snowboarding and develop ideas on how participation can be increased to promote gender equality.

## **A Brief History of Snowboarding**

Though the origins of snowboarding are somewhat debated, many can claim to have stood on sled as they slid down their favorite snowy hill, it is widely acknowledged that Sherman Poppen invented the precursor to snowboarding as we know it today. Inspired by seeing his daughter sled down a hill standing up, Poppen's designed the 'Snurfer,' a prototype to the modern snowboard. The Snurfer was created simply by bolting two skis together; in a later version, Poppen's added a rope to the front for steering. A year later, Poppen's licensed the idea, and 'snowboarding' slowly began gaining traction.

Enter Jake Burton. Vermont. 1977. A Snurfer enthusiast, Burton would take the rudimentary idea of snowboarding that was in place and develop the modern snowboard. Unlike Poppen's, Burton's version would require specialized boots and binding. Burton Snowboards is now the largest snowboarding company in the world.

Alternative sports (i.e. snowboarding, skateboarding, surfing, etc.) developed as alternatives to mainstream competitive sports and the values they stood for. While these mainstream sports were driven by competition and external motivators like rewards and records, alternative sports emphasized fun, self-expression, and risk taking (Sisjord, 2009). Even snowboarding equipment, much like surf boards and skateboard decks, allow for individual expression that skis simply don't have the surface area for. Professional competition, of course, did develop later within these sports, however snowboarding developed as a leisure activity, highlighting anti-competition and camaraderie.

Because snowboarding differed so greatly from the culture surround skiing, it became a form of counterculture, a way to distinguish oneself from their parents. Snowboarding largely developed so quickly from the interest of young, middle class, white men, who still make up the

majority of snowboarding participants (Anderson, 1999, as cited in Modlin, 2011). This particular demographic audience, during the '70s and '80s when snowboarding first began to gain larger participation, may give insight into why male-domination has permeated the sport since its conception.

## **Gender and Sport**

Most alternative sports were established long after female athletes began gaining more access to sports. Because they didn't have the cultural or social connotations of sports that had long-standing gender expectations, they could have grown as a gender-neutral sport, yet snowboarding has been dominated by men since its birth. Because these 'extreme' sports developed on the cusp of social counterculture movements, they would have been prime breeding ground for a sporting culture that was more flexible. Instead, many scholars theorized that the idea of masculinity within these sports linked to "a crisis of White, American masculinity wrought on by a changing economy and shifting gender roles over the last 25 years" (Kusz, 2004; Robinson, 2008; Wheaton, 2004; as cited in Parmett, 2015).

In *Extreme America: The cultural politics of extreme sports in 1990s America*, Kusz believes that the masculinity developing in these alternative sports "has revived a set of traditional American masculine values and pursuits: rugged individualism, conquering new frontiers, and achieving individual progress" (p. 197). Other scholars believe this idea of a hegemonic account of masculinity within alternative sports fails to identify a multiplicity of forms of masculinity. These forms vary over different contexts, being multifaceted in the culture.

In sports in general, there has always been a cognitive dissonance between the ideals of sport and the expectations of femininity. "For many years it was commonly believed – and it may still be firmly anchored in popular wisdom today – that certain types of sport and exercise were

suitable for women while others were unsuitable, and that the same applied to men” (Pfister, 2010, p. 234; as cited in Modlin, 2011). Men’s sports emphasized strength, aggression, and competition, while women’s sports emphasized grace and beauty. This distinction was “symbolic proof of men’s superiority and right to rule” (Connell, 1995; as cited in Thorpe, 2007). It wasn’t until the 1950s that female athletes began gaining access to sports that were formerly off limits.

Though female athletes have come leaps and bounds from where they were in the ‘50s, gender inequality is still deeply problematic in competitive and recreational sports. Furthermore, while competitive sports rely heavily on gender segregation, many believe “separating the genders creates a stigma that the two genders are not equal” (Modlin, 2011). On the other hand, when a sport like snowboarding is so heavily saturated with male snowboarders, especially as an extreme sport that emphasizes aggression and risk-taking, some scholars believe some level of gender segregation will remove barriers and allow female snowboarders an opportunity to infiltrate the culture (Sisjord, 2009).

### **Gender Issues in Snowboarding**

As female athletes began making moves in the 1950s and snowboarding gained traction in the late ‘60s, female snowboarders didn’t really become visible on the slopes until the 1980s; moreover, they didn’t start to benefit from the commercialization of snowboarding until the late ‘90s (Thorpe, 2007). From 1988 to 1997, female participation grew 133%, and by 1998 approximately 29% of snowboarders were female. In 2007, that number has risen to somewhere between 30-40% and leveled-out around there .

As female boarders began taking up space in the ‘90s, they found camaraderie and support through each other, a distinction between the isolation many women in surfing and skateboarding experience (Thorpe, 2007). Soon brands began producing products for women

and boards that accommodating the average female shoe size, weight, and stance. Sims launched the first women's professional snowboard in 1994, and the next year, many brands followed suit. Female-centric companies emerged to market to the new demographic. Cold as Ice was a clothing and accessory company for the female snowboarder, while Chorus, a company started by five professional female snowboarders, manufactured innovative boards for women that were just as high-quality as the men's.

But what happened to these brands? In a time just before every business deal was documented online, they seemed to fall off the face of the earth. Some products from around 20 years ago can be found on eBay, but no websites, no mention of the company closing down, hardly any mention of the companies ever existing outside of a few specific academic texts. It seems they faded away as the larger brands like Burton established subdivisions for the female snowboard, i.e. Burton Girls.

While these subdivisions are nice, they also feel like an afterthought -- an "otherness" forced upon women in the culture. Furthermore, the women's snowboards they advertise are typically of lesser quality under the presumption that women don't ride as hard as men. Despite this, they are still the same price of men's boards while displaying graphics that many women participants find overtly feminine and stereotypical (Thorpe, 2007).

Comparing men's and women's 2019/2020 season snowboard sections on 14 different retailer websites, including Burton, Arbor, LibTech, and Capita, not a single company offered as many board options for women as for men. On average, the retailers offered three times more snowboard options for men. Only two companies offered unisex boards, Arbor and Never Summer; the latter offering only unisex options.

Aside from equipment, snowboarding has had its ups and downs gender inclusion. In 1988, snowboarding had its first male and female division in a half-pipe competition in Vermont.

This was ground-breaking based surfing and skateboarding standards, where competitions resisted allowing women to participate. However, this wasn't exactly common place. In the late '90s and early 2000s many competitions invited only men to participate, and if women were invited, it was only to compete partially or after the men had competed. In fact, participants from a workshop held by the Norwegian Snowboard Federation (NSBF) brought up that many female boarders had a lack of 'snowboarding self-esteem.' Because they are perceived as 'second class snowboarders,' especially in competition, women often feel neglect or lack of respect from speakers, who might comment on a snowboarder's clothes instead of their skills (Sisjord, 2009). In a later study, the NSBF concluded that to increase female participation, competition formats for females only should be developed and existing formats should be reorganized to deplete barriers within the sport (Sisjord, 2012).

The first noted NSBF workshop, held in 2009, allowed female snowboarders a place to discuss gender issues and ideas for further female participation in snowboarding. In the study, the idea that women on the slopes are more passive and easily fall into a spectator role in a male-dominated context was a common perception among the participants (keep in mind, the majority of the participants in this workshop were female snowboarders). It was theorized that because snowboarding developed without rules to guide activity, it may require more self-positioning than traditional sports that maintain organization. The female participants also stated that they looked to male AND female snowboarders as sources of inspiration and improvement, whereas the males only looked to other males. These results indicate that men are the 'experts' and make up the 'core' of snowboarding, more easily gaining respect for "their role in defining and creating" the activity (Sisjord, 2009).

Returning to the subject of masculinity in snowboarding that was touched on earlier, the unique culture that has developed in extreme sports promotes male superiority through

symbolic violence. “The masculinity of snowboarding appears common sense through the emphasis on male physicality and power with a focus on war, violence, injury and risk taking” (Thorpe, 2007, p. 87). This glorification of violence can be seen in all snowboarding media. Magazines often feature photos of male injuries and include questions in interviews looking for gory details. Men are also systematically encouraged to de-emphasize pain and ignore injury, while instead taking serious risks. Because the media emphasizes the risks men take and the injuries they receive while ignoring women’s risks and injuries, they are further exemplifying men as the more dedicated rider, who are also more courageous and stronger (Thorpe, 2007). In a survey conducted on gender perception in snowboarding, nearly 100 participants with a fairly even gender distribution agreed that male snowboarders are ruder, more irresponsible, and noisier. Despite this, nearly all the participants said that female snowboarders are inferior, a few said they are equal, and not a single one said they are superior.

## **Conclusions**

Snowboarding has grown exponentially for a sport that has only been around for half a century. While growing pains are expected, in 2019, the gender inequity isn’t something that can be ignored any longer. Plateauing at around 35% for female involvement for nearly ten years, it’s time to start implementing new plans to include women. I believe including more female-centric spaces and media for women in snowboarding will aid in removing barriers that will allow women at all levels to feel more comfortable making a space for themselves with the culture. More direct inclusion will better the condition for female snowboarders, in general and competitively, and encourage more non-snowboarders to try it out without feeling like an imposter in a male-dominated industry.

For my capstone project, I plan to create a brand, business plan, and marketing strategy that works to end these inequities by focusing on women and diversity in the ad campaigns, in the brand identity, and in the product line. I want this brand to have meaning and attract a specific audience that is being ignored within the snowboarding culture. Within the brand, I will design a logo, brand identity (typefaces, colors, motifs), website, apparel, and ten snowboards for female snowboarders that avoid the stereotypical visuals that penetrate the current trends in women's gear.

For the exhibition of my project, I will design and build a pop-up shop exhibiting my snowboards and apparel while maintaining the identity and general aesthetic of my brand. I will research traditional retail design and develop a plan for creating my own space that will not only generate sales, but also create an experience for the customer. This plan include displays, furnishings, lighting, flooring, music, and layout.

“If instead [women] got a welcoming experience, it would change their mind and just branching out and not focusing so much on the core of speaking to women who are already in the sport, but talking to moms and talking to young girls. Let's raise our girls in the mountains and show them that they are capable of being out there, so more little girls see that it's possible to be tough, brave, and strong...”

Kimmy Fasani, Pro Snowboarder



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