Action Sport NGOs in a Neo-Liberal Context: The Cases of Skateistan and Surf Aid International

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Abstract
Sport nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have flourished in the contemporary moment, particularly situated within neoliberal global politics. In this article we focus on the relatively recent proliferation of action sport-based social justice advocacy groups. Drawing on extant materials from our ongoing research on two action sport-related social justice movements—Skateistan and SurfAid International (SAI)—we illustrate some of the unique strategies employed by these organizations to survive, and indeed thrive, within a neo-liberally-dominated world. In so doing, we hope to raise new questions for critical scholars interested in studying sport-related NGOs into the 21st century.

Keywords
social justice, neoliberalism, action sport

Skateistan is a revolution in sports for Afghanistan and an opportunity to raise up children in a better environment countering drugs and terrorism. The only solution that leads Afghanistan toward peace and stability is sport. (General M. Zahir Aghbar, President of the Afghan National Olympic Committee, former Head of the Afghan National Police, cited in Welch, 2010)

SurfAid’s unique cutting edge solutions to alleviate the human suffering in the Mentawai Islands, and now Nias Island, promoting community-based solutions and tapping into the inherent values in the surfing community—individualism,

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courage, dynamism, and adaptability—is an example of humanitarian service that deserves widespread recognition. (Taj Hamad, Secretary General, presents Surf Aid International with the 2007 Humanitarian WANGO Award, 2007)

Sport-related social movements have been attempting to draw attention to key political, social, and cultural issues (e.g., the women’s sport movement, American civil-rights movement, the antiapartheid movement, and efforts to eliminate Native American mascots), and initiate social change at local, national and global levels, at least since the 1960s (see for example, Davis-Delano & Crosset, 2008; Jhally, 2006). In the early 21st century, however, sport-related social movements appear to be more prolific, creative, and variegated than ever before. A growing number of sociologists are producing detailed examinations of an array of “new” sport-related social movements (e.g., Harvey & Houle, 1994; Sugden, 2008; Wilson, 2007), with particular emphasis on sports potential for “promoting development and peace” (Giulianotti, 2011, p. 51; also see Armstrong, 2004; Calloway, 2004; Chawansky, 2011; Darnell, 2010; Kidd, 2008; Saaavedra, 2009; Sugden & Wallis, 2007). In this article we build on and expand this body of scholarship through an analysis of two alternative, extreme or action sports-related social movements.

Action sports have grown remarkably in both their acceptance and participation rates over the past four decades (Booth & Thorpe, 2007; Rinehart, 2000; Wheaton, 2010). Since the mid- and late-1990s, action sports participants have established non-profit organizations and movements relating to an array of social issues, including health (e.g., Boarding for Breast Cancer—educational programs for female surf, skate and snowboard enthusiasts), education (e.g., Chill—providing underprivileged youth with opportunities to learn to snowboard, skate and surf; Umthombo Surf Stars—providing street children in South Africa with opportunities to participate in beach-related activities, and training for future employment in ocean-related activities, i.e., surfguards, scuba-diving, surf-shop), environment (e.g., Protect Our Winters [POW]; Surfers Environmental Alliance [SEA]; Surfers Against Sewage [SAS]; see Heywood & Montgomery, 2008; Laviolette, 2006; Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2007), and anti-violence and conflict resolution (e.g., Surfers for Peace—an informal organization aimed at bridging cultural and political barriers between surfers in the Middle East).

Some action sport-related NGOs—such as Chill, Surfers for Peace, and Umthombo Surf Stars—can be broadly categorized within the Sport, Development and Peace (SDP) sector in that they use participation in action sports such as snowboarding, skateboarding or surfing as an “interventionist tool to promote peace, reconciliation, and development in...locations across the world” (Giulianotti, 2011, p. 50). For other action sport-related NGOs—such as Boarding for Breast Cancer and Surfers Against Sewage—however, the connections to the actual physical activities of action sports are more symbolic; they are founded by action sport participants who use preexisting structures and connections within and across local, national, and global sporting
cultures and industries to raise-awareness and fundraise for issues they deem to be socially significant. Although some of these action sport-related social justice organizations remain at the grassroots level and are relatively unknown beyond the local community or outside the action sport culture, others are gaining recognition from mainstream social justice and humanitarian organizations for their innovative efforts and creative strategies to produce new forms of passionate politics in local and global contexts.

Action sport-related nonprofit organizations and social movements are a relatively new topic of scholarly investigation. Some researchers are drawing on psychological theories and concepts to explain humanitarian and empathetic responses among action sport participants (see Brymer & Oades, 2008; Brymer, 2009; Brymer, Downey & Gray, 2009; Wymer, Self, & Findley, 2008), but their approaches tend to oversimplify decontextualize, and romanticize the relationship between action sport participation and activism. Here we adopt a more critical, contextual approach. In so doing, we build on Wheaton’s (2007) recent work on environmental activism among British surfers. Adopting a sociocultural critical approach toward action sport-related social movements, Wheaton (2007) acknowledges the complex relationships between alternative and lifestyle sports, identity, consumption, politics, and new forms of media, and describes lifestyle sport participants as “individualistic and reflexive consumers, often politically disengaged yet environmentally aware and/or active” (p. 298; emphasis in original). Building on Wheaton’s (2007) thesis, we argue that, to gain a better sense of the nuances and contradictions operating within and across these organizations, we need to consider the broader neoliberal context within which they have always existed.

In this article we explore critically the affective use of action sports as vehicles for the relatively recent proliferation of sport-based social justice advocacy groups. In so doing, we recognize action sport-related NGOs as exemplars of the relatively new outcry for action sport enthusiasts to become “involved” (even if in a very fleeting and superficial way) in the worlds they appropriate and use for their leisure practices. Though we generally want to understand how individuals and groups may exploit action sport social justice commitments, and how the groups may emerge, gain critical mass, survive, and flourish, our more specific project is to interrogate how two social justice nongovernmental organizations—Skateistan and SurfAid International (SAI)—exist within a neoliberally dominated world. We wish to examine linkages between the social retrenchment of neoliberalism with a simultaneous proliferation of affective and media-massaging strategies, and to examine the growing dominance of fragmented, single-cause social justice programs within a context of dramatic governmental withdrawal from provisions of humanitarian and humanistic programs. Adopting an inductive approach that builds on previous research and locates these organizations in the larger, macro context, we hope to raise new questions for those studying sport-related NGOs.
Locating NGOs in a Neoliberal Context

In the early 21st century, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have three basic characteristics: They are nonprofit, consist at least partially of voluntary citizens’ groups, and depend in part on donations from private citizens or on voluntary activities (Vedder, 2007). Many NGOs have been characterized as groups that seek to “relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development” at local, national, and/or international levels (World Bank, 1989, cited in Vedder, 2007, pp. 2-3). But as Willetts (2006) points out, “virtually all types of private bodies can be recognised as NGOs,” as long as they are “non-profit-making and non-criminal,” “independent from government control,” and are not “seeking to challenge governments as a political party” (cited in Beacom & Levermore, 2008, p. 115). Arguably, NGOs’ disalignment with governments reinforces and legitimizes much of their neoliberal agenda: Governments can covertly sanction their operations while overtly distancing themselves or, in some cases, delegitimize them to their own citizenry, while supporting them covertly. In other words, NGOs in the early 21st century provide an additional layer of obscurity in the increasingly complex relationship between governments and private industry.

Neoliberalism, Governmentality and Activism

We concur with Stuart Hall (2011), who recently argued that, although neoliberalism has become a loaded term that “lumps together too many things to merit a single identity,” there are “enough common features to warrant giving it a provisional conceptual identity” (p. 10; emphasis in original). As Giroux (2004) reminds us though, neoliberalism is both “an economic theory and a powerful public pedagogy and cultural politics” (p. xxv). As an economic theory, proponents of neoliberalism generally seek “cutting expenditures of public goods such as education, health care, and income assistance in order to enhance corporate profit rates” (King, 2006, p. xxvi). Since the late 1970s, Western governments (particularly the United States and United Kingdom) have increasingly been drawing in the purse strings for programs supporting basic human rights, both in their own countries and abroad. This playing out of the neoliberal agenda clearly opened spaces that governments heretofore had satisfied, and that humanitarian- and social-justice-oriented NGOs might/must now fill (Harvey, 2007). As Reimann (2005) points out, the push toward a “neoliberal, privatized approach to development and relief” was reflected in a marked increase of donor dollars for “advocacy NGOs” such that “by the late 1990s, $1.6 billion was annually spent on international programs by American foundations alone” (p. 38). The trend toward privatization of humanitarian and social justice groups was reaching a zenith just as the millennium approached, and, as governments absented themselves from providing social needs, “the deliberative use of voluntary labour by advanced liberal states [became a] part of this responsibilization process” (Lacey & Ilcan, 2006, p. 38). Then
came 9/11, and the upsurge in a cynical and affective use of tragedy to justify acceleration of the neoliberal agenda and worldview (Denzin & Giardina, 2006).

As King (2006) argues, the “emergence of a reconfigured ‘neoliberal’ state formation in which boundaries between the state and the corporate world are increasingly blurred,” works to elaborate the “interests of the other” (p. xi). Continuing, she adds that, in this context, “politicians...[see] philanthropy and volunteerism as morally and economically viable solutions to newly created gaps in the social safety net” (p. xxvi). Similarly, Harvey (2007) argues that NGOs—as attempts to be leveling mechanisms (at least in the western world)—have helped fill the social and humanitarian spaces left in this neoliberal context:

Non-governmental and grassroots organizations (NGOs and GROs) have also grown and proliferated remarkably under neoliberalism, giving rise to the belief that opposition mobilized outside the state apparatus and within some separate entity called “civil society” is the powerhouse of oppositional politics and social transformation (p. 78).

Arguably, the necessity for commitment of non-state-affiliated individuals to social justice causes—including nonaffiliated entrepreneurs, and those working from within such organizational structures as academia, government, or business—has been exacerbated by the effects of the neoliberal turn in the past 30 years. As this reliance on NGOs has increased, it has simultaneously naturalized their proliferation as “public pedagogy and cultural politics” (Giroux, 2004, p. xxv).

One of the defining terms of the post-9/11 rapprochement between governments and start-up NGOs is that organizations and philanthropic causes must stand on their own (see e.g., Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2007; King, 2006). Much like the so-called “rugged individualists” of Modernist lore, many contemporary NGOs have come to resemble independent, for-profit organizations more than they do altruistic NGOs. Ironically, although the “diverse tasks of government are redirected from state bureaucracy and distributed to various organizations, agencies, individuals, and citizens [sic] groups” (Lacey & Ilcan, 2006, p. 35), this “process of responsibilization is part of an advanced liberal rationality of power that is being developed to stimulate agency while simultaneously reconfiguring constraints upon the freedom of choice of the agent” (p. 39). So, while agency is stimulated (and simulated), actual freedom of choice lessens. How these NGOs may operate becomes less and less their choice, and more and more umbrellaed by governmental policy, which includes an ever increasing marketization of the NGOs themselves. Perhaps equally alarmingly, however, the cyclic and predictable nature of neoliberalism and degree of participation in democratic social justice NGOs is one that obscures the fundamental nature of governments focused on a *sum-num bonum* principle, and surely of democracies: It is a requisite that they instil within their charter provisions social justice for all. Simply to rely on the haphazard nature of NGOs, or the opportunism of New Social Movements (NSMs), should not be a guiding principle of more stable, long-sighted governments and/or organizations.
It is also important to note that, post-9/11, Western-based activism is not only neo-liberally focused, but it also comes from a hegemonically privileged position: Western-based activism is typically not viewed as criminal activity. Advocacy activist groups generally remain aware of the possibility that their actors/agents may become conflicted with local authorities (both governmental and “nongovernmental”). However, the perception persists within the Western press that groups reinforcing hegemonic western worldviews must be—and will be—protected. The sense of privilege granted to (mostly Western) activists leading advocacy NGOs is founded in a web of contacts that they and their organizations have with other like-minded Western organizations and individuals. New technologies have made these connections much more seamless. And, of course, if the visionaries of such seemingly benign movements (or their people) do get arrested, hurt or killed, their absence will be noticed in Western press and by governments. So, despite the publicly ambivalent stance by most governments toward NGOs, there is still a residual aura of privilege surrounding their movements. These are not “rugged individuals.” This point is particularly salient when discussing sport social justice organizations, such as Skateistan, which work to advance some values oppositional (Westerners would term them “progressive”) in the host culture (e.g., empowerment of Afghan girls and young women via sport participation, education, and employment).

This tacit sense of privilege may be, indeed, a residual force of goodwill toward many western nations from the world community simply because of the degree of horrific imagery of the Twin Towers’ destruction (see e.g., Denzin & Giardina, 2006, 2009; Giroux, 2002; McLaren, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). Indeed, though the Bush administration frittered away much of the cultural and symbolic capital accrued from world dismay (and empathy) at the acts of terror on the United States, many of the world’s peoples have supported the “antiterrorist” proclamations and programs promulgated by Western states. Sloganistic, patterned, and jingoistic articulations, as well, link into the sustenance of the dominant neoliberalist-orientation within Western 21st century nation-states.

Many NGOs and their key proponents are publically celebrated for their altruism and commitment to promoting development and peace in communities around the world. “At their best” contemporary NGOs can certainly act as “a progressive element in the dialectic of global and local, empowering individuals and communities to face, resist, and transform the unequal relations of neo-liberalism” (Klees, 1998, p. 49). But, we should remember that this is both a conflicted and conflictual world. According to Klees (1998), the ability of NGOs to achieve such goals is being “seriously compromised” as they themselves become increasingly “co-opted by neoliberalism” within the rhetoric of “privatized government” (p. 49). Despite efforts by some “progressive” NGOs to “remain true to their own agenda,” in a market saturated with NGOs, it is typically those organizations that take “a more compromising, apolitical stance” and meet the “development agenda of their funders” or, at least, “[do] not directly challenge it,” that have the best survival rates (Klees, 1998, p. 50). As a seemingly innocent and assumedly positive social force, sport-related NGOs have proliferated within this neoliberal context.
Action Sport-Related NGOs: Skateistan and Surf Aid International

Within the context of a post-9/11 neoliberal activism, sport has become a particularly effective vehicle for exploiting affect. The affective capital that Western-related (particularly United States) groups and individuals gained from the twin tower tragedies “taught” some to use it to their short-term advantage (Denzin & Giardina, 2006). In this context, sport-related NGOs gained further momentum. As Levermore (2008) points out, the trend of using sport as a “new engine that complements development assistance” (p. 183) by various types of NGOs is relatively recent. Levermore refers in this instance to *mainstream* sports (e.g., football/soccer, basketball) as vehicles for development—and yet, newer action sports (e.g., surfing, skateboarding) also are being used by some NGOs to further their aims. In the remainder of this article we examine the development of two action sport-related NGOs—Skateistan and SurfAid International—and some of the creative affective and corporate-inspired strategies they employ to survive and flourish within this neoliberal context. Our analysis is informed primarily by interviews with a key member of each organization, and our reading of an extensive array of secondary sources, including magazine, newspaper, and online articles, as well as television, radio and online videos. The interviews provided particularly valuable insights into the operations within these organizations, and for helping us critically assess some of the rhetoric on the official websites and repeated across many sources of mass media.

According to the organization’s website, Skateistan is an “independent, neutral, Afghan NGO” that provides skateboarding tuition, and art and language education, to “urban and internally-displaced youth in Afghanistan” (“What we do,” 2011). But skateboarding is just “the carrot” to “connect with kids and build trust” says founder and executive director Oliver Percovich (personal communication, September 8, 2011). The organization began in 2006 as a series of small, relatively informal skateboard coaching sessions. But, in 2009, with US$1 million in local and international donations and land gifted by Afghanistan’s Olympic Committee, the organization built a 19,000 square foot indoor skateboard park—Kabul’s largest indoor sports facility. Since the opening of this skatepark, Skateistan has registered more than 500 Afghan boys and girls, and currently has more than 350 regular students (“Financial Overview,” 2011). In 2011, Skateistan began offering similar skateboarding and educational programs for children in Cambodia (“About Us,” 2011). Later that year, Skateistan was gifted a large plot of land in Mazar-e-Sharif (northern Afghanistan) and, with funding from the Denmark embassy, began construction of its second facility (“Skateistan Gets,” 2011). Skateistan is receiving international acclaim for its efforts, winning the 2009 Peace and Sport Nongovernmental Organization Award, and in 2011 was short-listed for two “Beyond Sport” awards—“Sport for Education” and “Sport for Conflict Resolution.”

The official Surf Aid International (SAI) website touts a nonprofit humanitarian organization dedicated to improving the “health, well-being and self-reliance of people
living in isolated regions connected to us through surfing” (SAI official website, 2011). The SurfAid Malaria Control Project officially began in 2000 with a small group of surfing volunteers providing insecticide-treated mosquito nets to a handful of villages near surfing locations in the Mentawai Islands (an archipelago positioned 150 kilometers to the west of Sumatra, Indonesia). Despite humble beginnings and some financial difficulties in the early years, SAI has undergone rapid growth and expansion. The devastating tsunami that struck the region in December 2004 was a pivotal moment in the development of SAI. Due to its location and established infrastructure (e.g., medical supplies, health clinics, relationships with local boat captains able to guide frigates carrying provisions through intricate inshore waterways), SAI played a critical role in the early emergency response, which gave SAI “a huge global profile” that enabled further growth and expansion, particularly in the area of emergency preparation, and water and sanitation projects (SAI Chairman, Steve Hathaway, personal communication, October 27, 2008). Today, SAI consists of five separate projects, including the Malaria Free Mentawai Program, Community-Based Health, Emergency Preparedness, and the Katiet Village and Schools Program. The stated goals underpinning these projects are three-fold: (a) “To improve the health of community members using a sustainable, community-based approach”; (b) “to assist vulnerable communities in preparation for future disasters”; and (c) “To support, fund and advise local organizations committed to improving the quality of life of community members” (“SurfAid Annual Report,” 2006, p. 3). In 2007, SAI received the World Association of Nongovernmental Organizations (WANGO) Humanitarian Award, and continues to gain accolades from the surfing industry and other international nongovernmental organizations.

Skateistan and SAI both receive the bulk of their funding from three main sources—foreign governmental agencies, global skate and/or surf-related transnational companies, and individual donors, including skateboarders and surfers. Since 2007, Skateistan has relied primarily on funding from foreign embassies (i.e., Denmark, Germany, and Norway), with further assistance from private donations and fundraisers, to support its activities and expansion, which cost approximately US$229,000 per annum (“Financial Overview,” 2011). SurfAid has also received support in various guises (i.e., financial, technical, and publicity) from an array of sources, including governmental and health organizations, surf industry organizations, major action sports industry manufacturers (e.g., Billabong, Quiksilver), as well as elite professional surfers, musicians and artists. In 2011, funding from governments, the global surf industry and private donors totaled more than US$4 million per annum (“Annual Report, 2010/2011,” 2011). Further support is provided by volunteer affiliate SurfAid Boards in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

For both Skateistan and SAI, the lionshare of funding comes from governmental organizations and corporations. Although this is not explicitly recognized in their public persona (e.g., websites, marketing), considerable amounts of time and resources are committed toward developing and maintaining relationships with key individuals and groups within governments and corporate organizations. The strategies employed by action-sport related NGOs for obtaining funding from governmental organizations,
foundations and corporations are important and worthy of further attention. In this article, however, we focus on the distinctive relationships between Skateistan, SAI and the action-sport communities, that we argue are part of their appeal to foreign governmental and corporate funding agencies.

As with many action sport-related social justice organizations, Skateistan and SAI have closely aligned themselves with the skateboarding and surfing communities, and in so doing, have increasingly gained support from the skate and/or surf cultures and industries. Skateistan and SAI have both developed highly creative, collaborative relationships with skateboard and surfing companies. For example, skateboarding companies—Blackbox Distribution and TSG—have provided Skateistan with skateboarding equipment (e.g., skateboards, wheels, trucks, and bearings) and safety gear (e.g., helmets and wrist-guards), and host various awareness- and fund-raising events in an array of countries (i.e., Australia, Germany, and the United States). Similarly, global surf conglomerates—Quiksilver and Billabong—fund separate Surf Aid projects.

Both organizations have, however, experienced difficulties at the local, national, and international levels, which prompted them to consider alternative approaches toward achieving their goals. As SAI Chairman Steve Hathaway explains, the founders of the organization were originally surprised to find that core surfing culture is “not exactly peppered with humanitarian values”:

In the early days we tried to raise money from surfers on boats with promo pamphlets, and we would talk to them, but all they really wanted to do was go surfing. . . . A 22 year-old surf-rat doesn’t really care about global issues. We don’t get our support base from younger surfers, they are just not aware and mature enough. . . . We get a lot of support from older surfers. . . . As they get a bit more affluent. . . and they start seeing things beyond the surf break. . . they start wanting to give something back. (personal communication, October 27, 2008)

Recognizing the limit of funding from individual surfers, SAI has aligned more and more with governmental support systems. During the first few years, SAI received no grants and relied almost entirely on small donations and personal and corporate membership. Following the 2004 and 2005 tsunamis in the region, however, SAI was awarded aid monies from various foreign governmental and corporate organizations interested in contributing to globally recognized disaster relief. By 2008, 63% of SAI multimillion dollar annual financial support was coming from grants and foundations, such as AusAid, NZAID, and United States Agencies for International Development, and 19% from corporate sponsors, such as Billabong and the Quiksilver Foundation (“SurfAid Annual Report,” 2008).

This, of course, begs the question of why, if the bulk of the funding comes from governmental organizations, SAI marketing campaigns have continued to target the surfing community? Here, we suggest the connection of NGOs with their sporting culture is important for winning symbolic (if not economic) capital, and creating the illusion of critical mass. Another important question then, is why, in an increasingly
competitive NGO marketplace, do foreign governmental organizations support action sport-related NGOs such as SAI and Skateistan? Perhaps not surprisingly, both foreign governments and corporations are not particularly forthcoming in revealing their “agendas” for investing in action-sport related NGOs. Although it was not our intent in this article to uncover the motives underpinning such investments, we suggest that the connection between these NGOs and the seemingly pure (typically noncompetitive, individualistic, nonnationalistic) and playful physical activities of surfing and skateboarding may be appealing to governmental agencies that see these sports as apolitical, and thus “safe” channels for investing, and thus manoeuvring, within these volatile countries.

Interestingly, Hathaway recognizes the novelty value of SAI to nonsurfing donors and organizations:

We now have merchant bankers from Australia and other donors who aren’t even surfers, but who really like the organization. I think it’s because we’re all a bit crazy. We aren’t a regular NGO, there’s no doubt about that, and perhaps because of that, we are able to achieve a bit more (personal communication, October 27, 2008).

However, Hathaway notes that the focus of branding of SAI as a surfing-related NGO is shifting as the intra- and inter-organizational dynamics change:

On the one hand we have the founders and volunteers who got into it through surfing, and we are branded through surfing in lots of ways, but we now have more people inside who say, “I don’t give a shit about surfing, I just want to be part of an organization that achieves something.” I have just finished our latest five year strategy and it actually tones down the whole surfing thing (personal communication, October 27, 2008).

Indeed, with the majority of funding now coming from nonsurfing organizations, SAI has become increasingly “conscious of not jamming this surf marketing image up the flag-pole all the time” (personal communication, October 27, 2008).

According to Klees (1998), however, the reliance on external funding is the “Achilles heel” of many contemporary NGOs. “Instead of forging partnerships with funders and communities, NGOs become contractors implementing the funder’s agenda in the community” explains Klees (1998, p. 50). SAI and Skateistan both recognize foreign governmental monies as integral for the development and day-to-day operations of their programs, and thus have responded by making compromises to their overall goals to accommodate (some) of the requests made by foreign aid organizations. For example, much of the post-tsunami funding awarded to SAI was earmarked for projects outside of their original focus on community-based health programs: “we sort of got locked into the E-Prep and some of that hard edge stuff. . . which is not really where we came from and not really where we wanted to be” (Hathaway, personal communication, October 27, 2008).
Since 2007, Skateistan has relied primarily on private funding from the governmental embassies, and private donations and fundraisers, to support its activities and expansion. The construction of the indoor skatepark facility in Kabul was funded by the embassies of Canada, Denmark, Germany, and Norway, dozens of skate-related fundraisers around the world, and grants from Nike Gamechangers and Architecture for Humanity (Sinclair, 2009). Although the embassies of Denmark and Norway “graciously provided” funding for running costs (approximately US$300,000 per annum) of this facility since 2009, Percovich has become increasingly sceptical of the involvement of foreign aid organizations:

At the moment, the funding from different government sources is a necessary evil. We tell them as much... We had the Danish development minister come here [and] the German foreign minister also came a couple of weeks ago... one of the things I said to him was, “since the 1960s you can’t actually consider aid from western countries to less developed countries as being successful. Most of those countries become more corrupt, they haven’t gone forward... so let’s be really honest at this point—is this something that is going to continue on for a long time?”

Continuing, Percovich described his frustrations working with foreign aid organizations who not only require extensive documentation—“we don’t want to spend our time writing reports to somebody—we’d rather be doing it”—but also attempt to define their priorities—“they say we need to ‘do women’s empowerment’ and they put a whole lot of money there” (personal communication, September 8, 2011). “The people sitting far away in Canberra or Berlin or London or Geneva” are the ones “holding the purse strings” and the power to “decide what is then best for someone sitting in some suburb in Kabul, only basically they have no idea whatsoever”; they “don’t actually know what is needed for me to be effective” (personal communication, September 8, 2011).

In contrast to SurfAid, Skateistan is moving away from seeking funding from grants and foundations, and toward a more “self-sustainable” corporate approach (Percovich, personal communication, September 8, 2011). In his own words,

We are really trying as hard as possible to break out of begging for money, getting the money, spending the money, going through another year cycle. The way Skateistan started was me getting T-shirts printed up and running around and having a little bit of petrol for the generators to go on for another two weeks. It was very much grass roots and while we expanded very, very fast, we’re trying to still have the ability to raise money ourselves. (personal communication, September 8, 2011)

With this aim in mind, Skateistan is strengthening relationships with for-profit skateboarding companies to help develop the Skateistan brand by coproducing, marketing, and distributing helmets, skateboards, t-shirts, scarves and knee-pads
worldwide; many of the graphics featured on these products are designed by Skateistan students during art classes (Nerenberg, 2010; “Skateistan Shop,” 2011).

For Percovich, the “exposure” gained via the Skateistan brand has been invaluable for “gaining credibility within the skate industry” and “winning people over as supporters,” which he deems much more valuable than the “actual money and royalties” of the products. Continuing, he describes the potential of the Skateistan brand to connect symbolically, if not economically, with the next generation of humanitarian “supporters”: “young people associate much more strongly with brands than virtually any other specific project, so if we could enter their psyche in that way, that’s definitely the way that we want to go,” adding “it’s not just about directly what money we’re generating this year, it’s about a much bigger picture about how we can be sustainable over the next 10-20 years and how we grow” (personal communication, September 8, 2011). Percovich is careful to add that, while the branding of Skateistan is being used to “connect with western audiences and western youth and to raise money” for their projects in Afghanistan, it remains “an overseas activity”. Overt branding and Western skateboarding fashions is carefully monitored at the Skateistan facility in Kabul: “We don’t have any music influences, we try not to have any dress influences. . . they can’t own Skateistan branded equipment unless they win it in a skateboard competition.” Continuing, Percovich critically reflects: “we can’t pretend that we’re not influencing them culturally at all, but we’re trying to minimize that because. . . if [the children] start taking what is seen as western cultural cues they’ll be stopped from coming here very fast” (personal communication, September 8, 2011).

Observing the trend toward “humanitarian branding” more broadly, Chouliaraki (2010) describes many contemporary NGOs “moving from an explicit marketing of suffering as a cause” toward an “implicit investment in the identity of the humanitarian agency itself,” a style “inspired by practices of corporate branding” (p. 118). But, in requiring no time or emotional commitment to the cause of suffering, “humanitarian branding obeys a market logic that is unable to defend a political vision of justice and social change, or to inspire a sustained form of moral agency” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 119). According to Chouliaraki (2010), “the main implication” of this trend is that, “rather than challenging the historical patterns of injustice inherent in the moral economy of scarcity, which these organizations have so accurately diagnosed, the post-humanitarian style may be reinforcing them” (p. 122). Recognizing both the potential benefits (e.g., autonomy, self-sustainability) and risks (e.g., accusations of being driven by financial, rather than altruistic, motives) of the shift away from government funding and toward developing the brand of Skateistan, Percovich admits proceeding with caution: “we’ve also got to be careful to not somehow tarnish credibility as well. As soon as you enter this direction of doing things it might make it easier for people to point the finger and say hey you’re just in it for the money; I can definitely assure you that I’m the lowest paid executive director in Afghanistan” (personal communication, September 8, 2011).

In an increasingly competitive market, action sport-related NGOs must adopt a dynamic and flexible approach, sometimes radically revising their original aims and
philosophies (and branding strategies) in response to social, political, economic or environmental changes, and/or subsequent requests made by major funding bodies (e.g., post-tsunami funding for emergency preparation programs; an emphasis on girls skateboarding programs in the name of “women’s empowerment”). In some cases, as seen in Percovich’s decision to shift away from governmental funding and toward more humanitarian branding, these strategies are employed with a reflexive understanding of the complexities within and across local, national, and international contexts. Yet for many action sport-related NGO officials, winning the resources required to continue their day-to-day operations as well as plan for future developments, while maintaining a sense of autonomy and integrity, is a complex business that requires careful negotiation with an array of actors with different political motives. Drawing on Klees’ (1998) economic theoretical analysis of NGOs, it appears that SAI and Skateistan’s increasingly intimate relationships with governmental and for-profit organizations, respectively, and corporate-inspired communication strategies, resonate strongly with the neoliberal focus on market-oriented solutions.

**Affective Marketing and Action Sport-Related Activism**

Humanitarian organizations have long employed marketing and communication styles that seek to evoke affective responses, or more specifically the “registers of pity” (guilt and indignation, empathy and gratitude), as a “motivation for action” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 114). In her analysis of the communication styles employed by contemporary NGOs, however, Chouliaraki (2010) observes a shift away from “emotion-oriented campaigns” toward strategies of “corporate branding” that develop the “aura” of the brand rather than telling the audience how to think, feel and act (p. 118). As the number of NGOs proliferated during the 1990s and early 2000s, campaigns increasingly evoked “cynicism, fatigue and suspicion” among their audiences (p. 117). The current style of humanitarian communication, however, draws on an array of aesthetic and textual strategies—and new media—that prompt the viewer to reflect (if only briefly) on their own lives (and position of relative privilege), and to develop a “moral agency” in which they decide which social cause(s) and campaign(s) are most deserving of their attention, and perhaps support. This mode of communication breaks with earlier appeals that assumed “emotions and their universal discourses operate in a moral economy of abundance”, that is, an “economy where everyone can, in principle, feel for and act on distant suffering in an unrestricted manner,” and instead assumes that emotions operate in an “economy of scarcity” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 120). Of course, although organizations may proclaim that they are simply responding to the needs of contemporary consumers, they, and others, also work to create such emotional paucity.

To survive, and indeed thrive, in an environment with increasingly scarce financial resources and limited emotional capacities, NGOs are embracing new media technologies, and drawing inspiration from the marketing strategies of for-profit organizations.
Indeed, many NGOs are embracing the capacity of the Internet, to “engage individual users in fleeting and effortless, but potentially effective, forms of solitary activism” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 121). According to Chouliaraki (2010), this new style of humanitarian communication “privileges a short-term and low-intensity form of agency” that is “no longer inspired by an intellectual agency but momentarily engages us in practices of playful consumerism” (p. 107).

Action sport-related social justice nongovernmental organizations employ an array of new media to achieve critical mass, and procure larger amounts of (wealthy) stakeholders and monetary support. In so doing, they engage varying logics of dominantly affective rhetoric for “without emotion no appeal to action could be legitimate” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 118). As we pointed out in an earlier piece (in this case, regarding SAI), action sport-related NGOs are creatively engaging an array of affective technologies to evoke affective responses (e.g., guilt, empathy) from audiences and potential donors (Thorpe & Rinehart, 2010). To help garner “support” from the global skateboard and surf cultures and industries, Skateistan and SAI marketing and media personnel have employed various strategies, including highly affective origination stories, the use of personalities, and various new social media. Such approaches are revealing of broader trends in humanitarian communication away from “registers of pity” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 114), and toward “building new forms of sympathy” through the creative use of various technologies of affect (Thrift, 2008, p. 253).

Origination Stories and the Use of Personalities

As with many contemporary NGOs, Skateistan and SAI both trade on the “cult of personality”—what sports scholars David Andrews & Steven Jackson (2001) categorize as “the ubiquitous and expansive economy of sport celebrities” (p. 5). As well as using the endorsement of skate and surf culture celebrities (e.g., Tony Hawk, Kelly Slater), Skateistan and SAI marketing and media personnel have produced carefully constructed “origination stories” that focus on the personal journey of a key individual (see “Our story” on the Skateistan website, and “Founders Story” on the SAI website). According to the dominant narrative reproduced across a plethora of mass and niche media sources, Skateistan began in 2006 when Australian skateboarder Oliver Percovich went to Kabul, Afghanistan, with his girlfriend Sharna Nolan who had taken a position with the Afghanistan Reconstruction and Evaluation Unit. As the story goes, as soon as Percovich started skateboarding in the streets of Kabul, he was “surrounded by eager children begging to learn how to skate” (“Ramp it up,” 2010). Using the three boards he had brought to Afghanistan, Percovich “developed a small school giving free skate lessons to street children” (“Ramp it up,” 2010). Over the following months he “scrounged” US$7000 in donations to buy more skateboards and equipment and set up some basic activities for the growing number of interested youth, and enlisted the assistance of two of his Australian skateboarding friends to help further develop Skateistan (Zucchino, 2009). With the help of Nolan, he wrote a detailed proposal that attracted further donations, including US$15,000 from the

origination stories and the use of personalities
Canadian government. When Nolan went to Hungary to complete a second Master degree, Percovich stayed on in Afghanistan where he continued to coach and counsel his skateboarding students, and actively seek further funding to build an indoor skate-park.

In 1999, New Zealander Dr Dave Jenkins (MD) took a break from his job as educational director of a multinational health organization in Singapore and, with a group of friends, chartered a luxury yacht in the surf Mecca of the Mentawai Islands with one sole purpose: “to find perfect waves” (“SurfAid Frequently,” no date, para. 2). According to the dominant narrative, Jenkins found more than perfect waves during his trip: After a surf-filled day he ventured beyond the “palm-fringed shores of this so-called surf paradise” and, to his horror, discovered “dreadful misery, poverty, and death” (“SurfAid Annual Report,” 2006, p. 4). On entering the local village he found babies, children and adults suffering and dying from malaria and other preventable diseases. The radical disjuncture between the hedonistic pursuit of surfing and the extreme poverty of the local peoples had a profound affect on Jenkins: “My experience vividly demonstrated the disparity between our lives as rich Western surfers visiting and playing on the Mentawai reefs, and those of the reef owners who so often suffer and die just meters from our luxury charter yachts” (cited in Barliotti, 2002, p. 4). Deeply troubled by the “inequity of lifestyles” Jenkins left the Mentawai Islands inspired to do something to help the local people. Within months, Jenkins left his six-figure salary, sold his house and, with a small group of like-minded surfing friends, established SurfAid International.

Despite obvious differences in the Skateistan and SAI “origination stories,” some interesting commonalities can be observed. Both NGOs were established by highly educated, white Western male action sport participants who experienced a dissonance when they were confronted by the poverty of local residents encountered while pursuing individualistic (and hedonistic) leisure pursuits—skateboarding and surfing—in exotic and foreign destinations. Percovich and Jenkins both enlisted the assistance of their action sport friends (who also had valuable professional skills) to found the organization. The contributions of these “friends” and other key individuals are, however, often less visible in these origination stories. Despite considerable variation in the early media coverage of these organizations, today these origination stories are repeated across print and online magazine and newspaper articles, and television and video features, such that they have become “cultural truths” widely accepted by those within, and many outside, these organizations. The key point here is that these origination stories are not the result of a haphazard story-telling process. Rather, they have been carefully crafted by the organizations’ founders and marketing personal with the aim of creating a “narrative” that would captivate the imaginations and evoke empathy from potential supporters. Although Percovich and Jenkins feature strongly as the protagonists in the origination stories, SAI and Skateistan also employ an array of other marketing strategies to connect with surfers, skateboarders and other potential donors, including the highly emotive stories and images of the individuals they are helping. As we will show, however, responses to such technologies of affect typically take the form of “playful consumerism” (Chouliaraki, 2010) rather than “highly
disaggregated political performances” with the potential to have “real political bite” (Thrift, 2008, p. 254).

**New Media and Technologies of Affect**

A discursive analysis of available interviews, press releases, websites and articles reveals how Skateistan and SAI staff and supporters (e.g., journalists, company owners, professional athletes) take “affect and entrancement” into their workings in an attempt to not only inform, but also evoke empathetic responses from those within the broader action sport industries and cultures (Thrift, 2008, 253). Many of these documents and texts are indeed “dripping with affect” (Thrift, 2008, p. 254). The Skateistan website, for example, provides a link a YouTube video, produced and directed by Orlando Von Einsiedel, entitled “Skateistan: To live and skate Kabul” (Von Einsidel, 2009). This nine-minute video follows Murza, a 17-year-old male, and Fazila, a 12-year-old girl, as they tell their own stories of how Skateistan has affected their lives. Many of the techniques of a “politics of affect” and a “politics of hope” as described by Thrift (2008), are present in this emotionally laden film, which *Dogtown and Z Boys*’ director Stacy Peralta said, “brought tears to my eyes and made me realize why I’ve ridden a skateboard all of my life” (quoted in “Watch the Nine-Minute,” 2010). The striking, matter-of-fact contrasts between war-torn Afghanistan, a dismembered donkey head, abandoned and bombed out automobiles and buildings, and children simply riding skateboards, is, by any estimation, emotionally dense. The simple statement, “I don’t want war anymore” voiced by one of the children, is powerful, simple, and honest. Of course, the solutions—as “war” in Afghanistan is linked to world powers—are perhaps not quite as simple as the film portrays, but the film evokes a sense of hope and optimism for change, with skateboarding a vehicle.

Both Skateistan and SAI employ an array of new technologies to encourage (primarily Western) skateboarders and surfers to reflect on their positions of privilege and evoke affective responses from potential donors. However, the marketing strategies employed by these organizations differ considerably based on an array of factors (e.g., cultural demographics of potential donors; philosophies, aims and activities of the organization). Arguably, the differing relationships Western skateboarders have with Afghanistan, and surfers have with the surf Mecca of the Mentawai islands, also inform the approaches employed by these organizations to connect with their supporters. Whereas texts produced by Skateistan seek to inspire a sense of hope and possibility by focusing on the positive changes for Afghan youth being brought about by the organization (e.g., the empowerment of Afghan girls via skateboarding), SAI documents often emphasize the disjuncture between the privileged surfing lifestyle and the poverty of those living in the Mentawai islands.

Common affective discourses identified in the various SAI documents and texts, for example, include guilt, cultural debt, and imagined community responsibility:

> Despite the soulful image of the sport, surfers are too often “takers.” In places like the Mentawais they go and “take” the surfing experience but don’t give back to
the locals—locals who have nothing and urgently need help. The surfing world owes a debt of gratitude to these people. (Dave Jenkins, cited in Barilotti, 2002)

Of course, the affective response to such discourses can “never be guaranteed” (Thrift, 2004, p. 68). The technologies of affect being employed by Skateistan and SurfAid staff and supporters can have various effects ranging from apathy to cynicism, to the production of empathy. Yet, even when affective technologies are successful in evoking empathy, responses inevitably vary from the consumption of empathy to the practice of empathy.

Affective Responses to Action Sport NGO Campaigns

Contemporary humanitarian campaigns typically provide an array of options for those wishing to offer their support. Yet, the internet has increasingly become the preferred “vehicle for public action on distant suffering” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 117). In contrast to some earlier humanitarian NGO campaigns, which involved a prolonged registration process and a long-term commitment (e.g., sponsoring a child over many years), many internet-based campaigns encourage potential supporters to simply “click your mouse” for an immediate, onetime payment; such signs of “support” typically require very little commitment or emotional investment. According to Chouliaraki (2010), such “speed and on-the-spot intervention[s]” are “instrumental” in addressing the key problem of “the non-sustainability of grand emotions towards a cause for any length of time”, but this “no-time engagement with technology” also suggests that “expectations of effortless immediacy, the most prominent element of consumer culture, are increasingly populating the moral imagination of humanitarianism” (p. 117; emphasis in original).

Various scholars have examined how the Internet enables sport-related NGOs and social movements by enhancing their campaign tactics (Lenskyj, 2002), attracting funding and donor support (Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009), and supporting collaboration amongst organizations (Hayhurst, Wilson, & Frisby, 2011). As these studies reveal, many new sport-related social movements—including nongovernmental organizations, not-for-profit organizations, and commercial organizations—are drawing on an array of new technologies (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Skype, personal Blogs) to produce political demonstrations quickly, with very little infrastructure, and often from a distance (Wilson, 2007). The Internet also plays an integral role in the development, communication, and fundraising efforts, of action-sport related NGOs. According to Percovich, the Skateistan website has always been an important tool for garnering global support and recognition: “We’re very active on Facebook and Twitter. . . even when the organization was very very basic. . . there was the Skateistan website that had photos on there that connected with people” (personal communication, September 8, 2011). Continuing, he describes the ability to “document and share” their work in Kabul with a global audience via the website and other visual media as “just as important as the activities. . . because not everybody can come and see with their own two eyes what we were doing” (personal communication, September 8,
2011). For Percovich, the value of the Skateistan website is more than its “ability to win awards and bring money in”; but also for its “connecting effect” between “Afghan youth and youth around the world”:

... if they can share stories with each other and they can share experiences. ... I think that breaks down a lot of barriers, a lot of misunderstanding. I do believe that’s a really important tool in the interaction between the Muslim world and non-Muslim world. (personal communication, September 8, 2011)

It is important to note, however, that although the Skateistan website offers Western consumers an unlimited flow of information—stories, photos, videos, and art (and commodities)—featuring and/or produced by Skateistan participants, the media consumption by Afghan youth is carefully controlled.

Today, the Skateistan and SAI websites remain consistent with their consumer-based philanthropic models of communication. In their online and physical marketing campaigns, Skateistan and SurfAid both encourage participants to support their organizations via donation or by purchasing one of a number of membership or donor options. SAI memberships range from US$25 basic membership to US$1,000 VIP patron, and the SAI website features a “Donate” icon that offers the option of one time or monthly payments, as well as tax deductible workplace contributions. The Skateistan website also encourages visitors to “click here” to become a volunteer or to donate. Clicking the “Donate Now!” icon opens a fresh page that provides an array of options for easy one time direct debit payments, as well as opportunities to donate to particular projects (e.g., monthly payments of US$60 to support a child—particularly girls and young women—to go to the school). Both organizations encourage participants to consume Skateistan or SurfAid-related commodities (e.g., SurfAid “band together” wristband, surf-leash, T-shirt, DVD, Skateistan-branded helmets and kneepads, Afghan scarves, and hoodies) because, in the words of Jenkins, it “feels great”:

With SurfAid, you can build personal satisfaction and an increased sense of well-being from helping others who are less fortunate. ... It’s been proven that philanthropy stimulates endorphins. It’s just good physiology, by far the best drug there is. Just how good do you want to feel? (cited in Barillotti, 2002, p. 265)

Ironically, making a donation to SurfAid or Skateistan is not portrayed as an authentically altruistic act, but rather as an opportunity for individuals to consume short-term “personal satisfaction” and “well-being.” Clearly, Skateistan and SAI marketing personnel have an intimate understanding of the individualistic, narcissistic, and consumerist sentiments that prevail within a neoliberal world and that have been embodied by many of their target audience (and potential donors).

Technologies of affect do, however, prompt some to engage in empathetic practices. For example, Santiago Aguerre, cofounder of surf conglomerate Reef, describes how an article written in 2002 by surf journalist Steve Barillotti about SAI that
appeared in *Surfer Magazine*, evoked a strong emotional response that prompted him to reflect and then act:

I had tears in my eyes while I was reading this article. . . I thought of my kids, and I imagined what it would be like if half of my kids would die in the next few years because of something that could be cured for the cost of a six pack of beer or a surf leash. The article woke me up. . . and I felt the responsibility to help. (cited in Wilson, 2010, para. 8)

Interestingly, this quote illustrates the potential of the “new style of humanitarian communication” discussed by Chouliaraki (2010), that “breaks with pity” and instead seeks to evoke “moral agency” via “momentary estrangement and playful self-reflection” (p. 121); the article prompted Aguerre to think about his own children and, in so doing, put the suffering of the Mentawai children into a more familiar, and thus accessible, context.

Aguerre’s response took two forms. First, he wrote an affect-laden and passionate letter to the editor of *Transworld Surf Business* asking the magazine to “help” by giving them “consistent editorial coverage in *Transworld Surf Business*” (Aguerre, 2002). Second, he called the organizers of the upcoming Surf Industry Manufacturers Association Summit (SIMA) and, drawing on his cultural and social capital, negotiated a time-slot (in an already full agenda) for Jenkins and Chief Executive Officer Andrew Griffith to present their current work and future goals to key industry stakeholders (see Thorpe & Rinehart, 2010). Some individuals, such as Aguerre, are mobilized to engage in empathetic practices that create new opportunities for action sport-related NGOs. For the majority, however, their empathetic responses to technologies of affect appear as a “simulacrum” of support (Baudrillard, 1994): A “like” on a Facebook page, or wearing a SAI branded wristband or a Skateistan t-shirt, are symbolic gestures of support requiring little emotional engagement or economic commitment. Such support may seem relatively superficial, yet it works to create the illusion of critical mass, which then appeals to action sport-related companies, and/or governmental organizations that are able to provide real financial aid.

**Conclusion**

Many action-sport related NGOs feature unique characteristics that give them a certain degree of legitimacy and cachet with governments and with other nongovernmental organizations. In this article we have offered a glimpse into the creative strategies and new technologies being employed by two action sport-related NGOs to evoke highly affective—yet momentary—responses among their followers, and gain financial support from governmental agencies and action-sport related companies. The tactics employed by action sport-related NGOs vary depending on the aims and stage of development of the organization, as well as the local, national and international contexts within which they work. Put simply, as action sport-related NGOs develop they
often become more closely intertwined with governmental and for-profit organizations—
more stable entities, in their view—and in so doing, their freedom of choice of strategies
to do what they originally intended—for raising awareness, obtaining funding,
and initiating change—lessens. As with many contemporary NGOs, the agenda of
action sport-related NGOs are “determined within a hegemonic world system” such
that “even progressive NGOs are co-opted, and even good strategies have a difficult
time of success” (Klees, 1998, p. 51).

Drawing on Klees’ (1998) economic theoretical analysis of NGOs, we recognize
action sport NGOs as “contested terrain in the struggle for social transformation”; they
are both a “progressive force” and a “neo-liberal tool” (p. 51). The enduring commit-
ment and innovative strategies employed by Skateistan and SAI founders, employees,
and volunteers to initiate social change at the local level for Afghan children and
youth, and the Mentawai people, respectively, is certainly laudable. However, to sur-
vive, and indeed thrive, in a competitive market saturated with NGOs and shrinking
funding, such organizations are increasingly developing intimate relationships with
governmental and/or for-profit organizations, and employing corporate-inspired com-
munication strategies, that resonate strongly with the neoliberal focus on market solu-
tions (e.g., individual responsibility, entrepreneurialism, global trade, transnational
corporate branding, the need for sustained economic growth and ongoing develop-
ment). Moreover, the very need for, and proliferation of, such NGOs obscures the
increasingly complex relationship between governments and private industry, and
relieves (at least in the short-term) governments from their responsibilities to provide
programs supporting basic human rights, freeing them to focus on enhancing corpo-
rate profit rates.

In sum, we propose that, to understand the multiple forms of power operating on,
through and within, action sport-related NGOs we must continue to search for new
theoretical and conceptual schema that help us locate them within the broader neolib-
eral context. Indeed, as we widen the lens through which we examine these organiza-
tions, we are prompted to ask a new set of questions: As praiseworthy and heroic as
their efforts may appear, why is it (and should it really be) the responsibility of action
sport participants to create organizations to initiate changes in foreign countries? Why
are these “gaps” in social resources and facilities—so obvious to some socially con-
scious travelling Westerners (e.g., Percovich, Jenkins) such that they simply cannot
ignore them—not the responsibility of governments? Why do Western governments
and transnational corporations really support action sport-related NGOs? We suggest
that the use of sport as a vehicle for propagating and legitimizing neoliberally based
NGOs is itself a practice that needs to be examined more fully as part of a larger net-
work of strategies that serve to extend the powers of the already powerful.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Ollie Percovich and Steve Hathaway for so generously offering
their time and insights. The enthusiasm of Percovich, Hathaway, and their colleagues, to create
positive social change is truly admirable.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. In this article we use the term “action sports” rather than extreme, alternative or lifestyle sports, as this is currently the preferred term used by many participants and industry members who reject the moniker of “extreme” imposed on them by mainstream media and transnational corporations during the late 1990s.
2. Much of this research looks to causal relationships between the individual and sport, and the individual and social justice-based movements. For example, Brymer and Oades (2008) argue that individuals learn “courage and humility” through participation in action sports, which “transforms the human tendency for anthropocentricity and replaces it with ecocentricity and the realization of true courage and humility” beyond the sporting context (p. 124).
3. It is beyond the scope of this article, but an interesting question regarding social justice campaigns might be to examine passionate commitment to causes in the face of simultaneous government retreat from their summum bonum humanitarian and humanistic roles.
4. For a different perspective on the humanitarian and empathetic responses among individual action sport participants see Brymer and Oades (2008), Brymer (2009), and Wymer, Self and Findley (2008). Although we tend to see more truth in Hathaway’s observations, it is beyond the scope of this article to make broad statements about the affective and political responses of contemporary privileged western youth participating in action sport cultures such as surfing and skateboarding. We recognize these sporting cultures as far from homogenous groups and thus participants vary in their responses to such campaigns.
5. In this paper we reveal some of the challenges experienced by SAI and Skateistan in their dealings with governmental and corporate organizations. However, it was not our aim to access the “true” motives of action sport-related NGO founders or employees, or the agendas of supporters. Indeed, we are critical of whether the “true” motives can ever really be accessed; when asked to explain their commitment to, or investment in, a particular action sport-related NGO, many tend to resort to company rhetoric, which we suspect may be due to an array of factors (e.g., lack of understanding of ones underpinning motives, changes in motivation over time, or distrust of reporters and researchers). Highly reflexive and forthcoming with their insights and opinions, however, Percovich and Hathaway might be considered anomalies in this regard.
6. As this comment alludes, there are certainly risks involved for volunteers and children attending Skateistan classes. Percovich acknowledges these risks—“we are doing educational and sport activities with girls which probably doesn’t sit so well with a large sector of the population,” but explains, “we’re not naive about it, and there are certain risks
involved in being here, but we’re careful. We take a very pragmatic approach to get as much information as possible to minimize risks wherever possible.” Female employees and volunteers are offered security to and from the facility, and staff are careful not to travel during high risk times (e.g., daylight hours). But, the general Skateistan strategy is to “keep ignoring them [the Taleban] and connecting with the kids.” Tragically, as this article was in press, four young Skateistan students were killed in a suicide bomb blast near NATO headquarters where they were ‘hawking’, “selling gum, trinkets, and scarves to military personnel, diplomats and aid workers”, to earn an income for their families (Leiby, 2012, para. 5). This incident reveals the everyday risks facing children, youth and Skateistan employees living in Afghanistan.

7. There is, however, an important distinction to be made in Chouliaraki (2010) and Thrift’s (2008) understandings of the ways affect is being choreographed and strategically engineered in social marketing campaigns. Whereas Thrift (2008) sees technologies of affect as having the potential to evoke sympathies that may lead to a “politics of hope” and broader social change, Chouliaraki (2010) is less optimistic.

8. Of course, NGOs do not have complete control over where their origination stories go. In some cases, the media plays an important role in shaping the dominant narrative. For example, during our interview with Percovich we asked him to comment on the inconsistencies we had observed in media coverage of the development of Skateistan and particularly the involvement of his (now ex) girlfriend. Percovich admitted his frustrations that some media had exaggerated her contributions in their version of the Skateistan origination story: “there’s a lot of media that was somehow playing up her role through the development process, but she actually wasn’t there that much. It was simply this female perspective, [that was] especially [appealing to] the moviemakers” (personal communication, September 8, 2011).

9. We find it interesting that Percovich and Jenkins decided to establish their NGOs in foreign countries, despite there being identifiable social needs in their own countries. Indeed, there are many underprivileged Australian youth who may have benefited from an educational skateboarding-related program (Robinson, Long, & Lamb, 2011), and ongoing health inequalities in New Zealand, particularly among Maori, Pacific Island and low socioeconomic groups, requiring further medical attention and investment (Blakely & Simmers, 2011). It seems there is particular appeal in “helping” the exotic “Other” (Said, 1979). This is a topic worthy of future research.

10. For example, an interview with Hathaway revealed a more complex narrative with many individuals making valuable contributions to the development of SAI: “SAI officially began in 2000, but a group of us had been doing boat trips up in the Mentawai’s surfing since 1995, before the industry really began, so we really had an affinity with the place. Andy Griffiths was one of the originals really, even before Dave. There is a guy, Andy Lucas, who. . . is a doctor who used to work at Gisborne Hospital, and is an absolute maniac surfer who just loved it. He and Griffiths did the first trip up there; they got a fishing boat in Padang, and went out to Subaru and surfed a bit around there, and distributed some mosquito nets, totally off their own bat, walking around the coast, it was pretty adventurous. Then Dave went up there following on that and got totally involved” (personal communication, October 27, 2008; emphasis in the original).
11. This does not mean, however, that in our critical analysis of such origination stories we should overlook the passion, perseverance, and personalities of individuals such as Percovich and Jenkins. During our conversation, Hathaway proclaimed that, although many others have contributed to the development of SAI, Jenkins has become “a kind of Messiah figure, but he didn’t develop this image. It’s just him. He is a cataclysmic character. He is just out there. He is a brilliant, passionate fundraiser” (personal communication, October 27, 2008).

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