

*How does the use of social media influence outdoor participants’  
perceptions of nature and of themselves?*

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## **Part I: Introduction**

*“Our urge to capture and share every moment of our trip has reduced the singularly sweet experience of cool water pouring off a desert cliff into a mere spectacle, its pixels repeated ad infinitum across digital platforms” (Jonathan Thompson).*

Has the sense of success in one’s endeavor of summiting a mountain been reduced to the captured view on a five inch phone screen? Has the validation of one’s life choices and the value of their adventurous partaking become amplified by the number of likes received on an Instagram post? Based off of extensive research and personal observation, these possibilities seem to be true. Digital natives, proficient users of technology and social media, are experiencing a shift in means of identity-creation, intentions of outdoor pursuits, and their perceptions of the value of direct experience and memory function, all due to an increasing dependence on social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.). The photograph has assumed a new purpose due to the rise of digital photo sharing. New media trends such as outdoor photography have arised and our reception of these new and powerful social norms has extended technology’s reach into the depths of nature. The high presence of idealized outdoor images in an individual’s social media feeds stimulates a conception, that to some degree, outdoor experiences have more value if they are validated on social media and if they can be used as a form of self-presentation.

## **Part II: Historical Context**

Domestic photography, a term used to describe the non-professional photographic activities of individuals, has evolved significantly. Starting in 1830 during the Portrait Path (1830-1888), the purpose of photography has shifted through the Kodak Path (1888-1990s) to the Digital Path (1990- present). Since the surge of consumer photography in the 1830s, the largest shift in the function and medium of domestic photography has occurred in the past two decades during the Digital Path. Digitally captured photos on camera phones have replaced film photography and new activities such as sharing, editing, posting, and commenting have taken upon a new, more accessible form, becoming a daily activity for most people in the developed world. As photography becomes more accessible, a large number of amateur and habitual photographers, known as snapshotters, now partake in photography, posting their captures alongside professionals on Instagram and other social media platforms.

## **Part III: Research and Analysis**

### *Section A: Psychological reasoning behind social media use and outdoor participation*

Our dependence on social media is directly correlated to the many gratifications of personal and psychological needs that social media use grants, as explained in the Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973; Rubin, 2009). Uses and Gratification Theory is an approach to understanding why people actively seek media in order to satisfy specific needs. This theory categorizes the needs that social media use fulfills into five categories: Cognitive needs, Affective needs, Personal Integrative needs, Social Integration

needs, and Tension Free needs. Cognitive needs are fulfilled when media is used for acquiring knowledge and information. Affective needs are satisfied through emotional relief/experiences through means of media. Social Integrative needs encompasses the need to socialize with friends, family and others in society. Tension Free needs includes casual use of media such as a way to pass time. The category that is most relevant to the popular adventure/outdoor photography trend is Personal Integrative needs which are the self-esteem, self-identity creation, and self presentation needs. This demonstrated relationship between the fulfillment of these needs and the habitual use of social media are similar to the findings of Dar Meshi of the Freie Universität in Germany who “found that individuals who gained positive feedback about themselves on Facebook showed stronger activity in the nucleus accumbens of the brain - a region associated with "reward" processing” (Meshi qtd. Whiteman 1). The habit of constant capture during outdoor adventures derives from the potential each captured photo holds of promoting one’s social standing, technological identity or satisfying other needs under the Uses and Gratification Theory.

Humans are creatures of habit. Erkki Kilpinen, University of Helsinki, explains, “Human thought and reflection need habitual action patterns as their necessary bases” (Kilpinen 46). Connecting back to the psychological needs under the Uses and Gratification Theory, these needs fall beneath Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory that categorizes basic human needs into five tiers: physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. The needs included in the Uses and Gratification Theory would be categorized in the psychological needs tier of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (MHN). Our instinctual tendency to assume habitual

action patterns seems to be the driving force behind both our use of social media and participation in nature, due to the fulfilment of psychological needs each activity offers. Dar Meshi of the Freie Universität in Germany also discovered a correlation between individuals who are addicted to or frequently use social media and stronger activity in the nucleus accumbens of the brain, a region associated with reward processing (Meshi qtd. Whiteman 1). As Dar Meshi related social media use to increased activity in the reward processing center of the brain, a connection has been identified between time and nature and alpha wave production in the brain. With the creation of portable EEG units which are capable of measuring types brain waves produced in different environments, neuroscientists have discovered that “the frontal lobe, the part of our brain that’s hyper-engaged in modern life, deactivates a little when you are outside. Alpha waves, which indicate a calm but alert state, grow stronger” (Florence Williams qtd. Worrall). The positive neurological reactions that occur during the use of social media or time in nature explain our addictive, habitual, and fond actions relating to social media or time in the outdoors.

The overlap of social media use and outdoor participation has initiated a phenomenon of social media-dependent outdoor enthusiasts. This new type of outdoor participants has caused an interesting and intricate combination of the psychological benefits of social media use and time in nature. To what degree is the overlap between outdoor participation and social media use/photography a beneficial relationship? How may the overlap of psychological benefits of both outdoor participation and social media use cancel each other out or create negative circumstances or results? In the following sections, I discuss the dynamic between social media

use and outdoor participation, analyzing both the benefits and negative results of the relationship between social media use and outdoor participation.

*Section B: The newly acquired value of a photograph*

As we become more favorable to digital photo sharing, high usage of social networking and continuous capture during experiences, specifically in the outdoors, a significant shift has occurred in the process through which we recall internalized information and our dependence on accessibility of external information. We now heavily rely upon digital photo archives to stimulate memories, rather than utilizing the primary function of memory, which is reflection. Due to our habit of photographing objects to capture the experience, we ultimately suffer a loss of intake of detail, requiring subsequent review of the image to recall the experience (Henkel qtd. in Fawns 50). This shift in our culture surrounding our dependence on social media and digital photography has thus decreased our memory function, our attention to detail, and our perception of and during the experience.

This cultural shift can be attributed to the evolution of digital photography, causing new technologies to arise such as a multitude of photo editing programs which have created popular tendencies of photo alteration. From a simple Instagram filter to professional photo editing tools such as Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop, our photo editing routine and continuous reception of manipulated photos seem to be causing a significant shift in our perception of reality. Christof Koch from *Scientific American* explains, neuroscientists and psychologists have discovered that “our consciousness provides a stable interface to a dizzyingly rich sensory world” (Koch). The stable interface consists of a set of vision systems that help us interpret reality. Yet what our

vision systems fail to protect us from is our seemingly inability to recognize the subjectivity of edited photos and their alignment with reality. In the article, *Digital photography and the question of realism*, by Antonia Bardis, she explains, “Innocent-looking representations of what resemble to be actuality, may in fact be inventive creations pointing only to an illusion. It seems to many that photography has lost something vital to its credibility as a medium. It has lost its connection with reality” (214). Now, as we live in a society which is overwhelmingly exposed to hypermedia composed of edited images, we may be becoming intentionally ignorant to our self-conscious fictionalization of images.

Controversy surrounding objectivity and photo manipulation in photojournalism has become a popular topic recently after the winning World Press Photo of the Year in 2013 received heavy criticism for the use of photoshop. As Olivier Laurent from the British Journal of Photography explains, photography has shifted from being a captured moment of what the photographer sees to a demonstration of what the photographer wished to see or an idealization representation of their experience (Laurent). What is the effect on our appreciation of the natural beauty of the outdoors if the majority of photos we take of the experience are destined to be edited and enhanced before they are shared? Have we become inauthentically passionate about the beauty of nature because of our photo enhancing habits?

Through the course of history, we have evolved to trust photographs to accurately document reality more than any type of image. David Tomas explains in the article *Digital photography and the question of realism*, “light - both natural and artificial – can thus be perceived as a custodian of truth. Seeing has become a cultural form of believing” (Tomas qtd. Bardis 210). Through the overwhelming presence of hypermedia in one’s daily life and the



cultural shift in our preferred form of believing, digital trends such as adventure or outdoor photography have a strong influence on the ways we perceive successful activity on social media as well as the purpose of outdoor expeditions. Author Antonia Bardis states in her article, “Having reached a point where we have become influenced far more by our own preconceptions rather than by direct experience due to a lifestyle dominated by the continuous flow of imagery, it became clear to a large number of artists that experience could no longer be original” (Bardis 213). This influence has ignited a social phenomenon surrounding our perception of the purpose of time in nature, successful techniques/themes of photography, and ultimately understanding how those trends can be utilized to promote one’s social standing on social media.

Thus arose the tendency and desire to capture the same trophy shot that popular Instagram users take in order to boost one’s presence and popularity on social media. Paul Zizka, a photographer based in Banff, Canada worries about what effects this trend has on creativity, “Why is everybody coming here and shooting the exact same trophy shots? Ninety-nine percent of the images come from the same ten locations” (Zizka qtd. Schaffer). Both Bardis and Zizka explain how the rise of digital photography has deeply penetrated current image culture and how digital photography/photo sharing has become a new art medium. Bardis shows, “Digital image files have no closure, that is they are always open at any time to almost effortless manipulation, rapid transmission and endless circulation...It is a medium, therefore, that encourages appropriation and which does not favor authorship of the authenticity of creation” (Bardis 214). What value do the photos we post have if they simply mirror digital trends? It seems as if the experiences we have may be as inauthentic as our trend following photos, if the intention behind outdoor excursions is posting a photo. Based on this evidence, it could be assumed that the

undeniable trust in photographs and the large presence of digital trends in one's life creates a pressure or subconscious need to document experiences in order to validate the value of experience.

'Direct experience' is frequently found through the viewfinder of a cell phone or camera more and more often. Photography and digital photo sharing have become a significant part in outdoor experiences for many individuals serving as a source of inspiration, a form of documentation, and a way to express opinions to a large audience. Grayson Schaffer jokes in his article about the newly acquired value that photographs have in the perception of an experience, "Did you have fun on your vacation? I don't know, I haven't developed the film yet" (Schaffer). Destinations have become mere backdrops and trips are now planned by which photos one wishes to capture rather than experiences desired to have. Chris Burkard, a professional photographer and famous Instagramer, shared his experience of visiting the well-known Horseshoe Bend, "I was a bit worried it was going to be a cluster of people trying to get the same shot at perfect light....and to be honest there kind of was. What was shocking though was that 100 feet in either direction, it was almost empty. Past that you were well beyond the tourist trail... It started to feel wild again" (Burkard). After elbow shoving and achieving perfect timing, Burkard shared his talented capture resembling adventure ecstasy, but perhaps it was fraudulent; the photo may give impression of natural serenity and a sense of wonder, but Burkard's experience of capturing the photo was far from being so. Burkard raises another interesting point, "We tend to sacrifice a meaningful experience by ourselves in nature in order to nail that perfect shot, even if it means we're surrounded by chaos" (Burkard). Blogger Mary Pilon has a similar stance as Burkard suggesting that the pure intention of capturing photos solely for

documentation has shifted to creating the illusion that the experience was enjoyable or perfect, a way of validating the experience (Pilon). Photos, have acquired a new sense of value, yielding extrinsic rewards to the photographer. Although Instagram has become a helpful travel-planning tool, its influence is encroaching on one's ability to value meaningful experiences over Instagram fame.

*Section C: Technological advancement's effect on the natural world*

Alongside Instagram, other outdoor adventuring companions such as Strava, an app that tracks outdoor recreation, Snapchat, etc... are becoming increasingly popular platforms to instantaneously share our adventures and the locations, a practice known as geotagging. According to Techopedia, "Geotagging is the process of adding geographical information to various media in the form of metadata" (Techopedia). With a single click, locations of photos posted on Instagram can be discovered by viewers. Has the high visibility of secluded, fragile outdoor locations on social media resulted in endangerment of the conservation due to increased and high traffic? Scott Rickenberger, a popular Instagrammer and blogger posed a similar question to his online followers: "Should we all be sharing the locations of the beautiful photos we share on social media, or should we withhold the locations in an effort to protect these fragile places and keep the outdoors a place of exploration and discovery?" (Rickenberger) The response was sizeable with varying answers. Some, like Instagram user @live.work.wander, claim that it is 'arrogant and selfish to keep the location to yourself' when posting photos from outdoor adventures as it is contrary to the spirit of sharing public land (@live.work.wander qtd. Rickenberger). Some believe that sharing the location of the photo distracts viewers from

observing the talent behind the photo, “As I see social media become more and more saturated with remote, fragile places, I think the true ‘art’ aspect of photography trumps ‘truth’” (Dylan Brown qtd. Rickenberger). Others believe popular accounts on social media and Instagram Influencers (users with many followers who get paid to advertise products) should not share the location of the photo because of the large audience that it would reach, potentially causing higher traffic in the location as well as closures or restricted access to the area. Whether or not we should publicize the locations of photos of the outdoors is an independent decision that reflects one’s personal values and beliefs. However, it is undeniable that high visibility of locations is correlated to higher visitor traffic which can have negative results such as damage to fragile landscapes or restricted access.

The high presence of idealized images in Instagram feeds may be a contributing cause of record high National Park visitors in 2016. Overcrowding, as explained by Brady McCombs, caused dissatisfied visitors resulting in negative actions towards fellow visitors or the land (McCombs). Expecting a quiet getaway or peaceful serenity, National Park visitors were upset by large crowds from the parking lot to trails to overlooks, causing visitor frustration and bad decisions. With increased traffic, National Parks are struggling to conserve the delicate beauty of mountains, desert canyons and wildlife habitat. In response to the increase of photo-hungry visitors, the people behind @YellowstoneNPs have created #yellowstonepledge as a way to educate visitors about guidelines that promote stewardship of the land and respect of wildlife. Digital photo sharing has undoubtedly increased the visibility of outdoor locations, correlating to increased traffic and diminishing moments of solitude in hidden gems in the wilderness.

With high visibility of iconic outdoor locations on social networks, we are now living in a time where secluded and private outdoor locations are nearing extinction. As Jonathan Thompson describes in his article, “Is Tech Ruining the Wilderness?” virtual Google Earth tours, Personal Locator Beacons, Instagram locations, hashtags, GPS and more now cover an expansive amount of land, increasing access to outdoor locations as well as limiting the number of locations to be discovered through pure adventuring. Aldo Leopold, considered to be the father of wildlife ecology, once proclaimed, “Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?” (Leopold qtd. Thompson) Jonathan Thompson reacts to Leopold’s bold question stating that “Today, those blank spots are cluttered with blog posts, websites, apps, compasses and digital maps, and your traveling instructions are delivered in Siri’s eerie voice. One app guides screen-gazers through Utah’s canyons; others, using names like PeakHunter, meticulously chart routes up peaks” (Thompson). Have these technological tools intruded on Leopold’s proposed spirit of adventure? What do we have to gain if we can no longer become lost? Thompson explains that it is when we are most disoriented, confused and blissed out in the wilderness when we can truly see where we are, as opposed to adventuring behind the safety net of technology. The value of experience in some cases has reduced to a shared photograph, rather than the personal growth gained through the trials of direct experience. It seems likely that the tremendous presence of technology in the modern world has altered, to an extent, the spirit of adventure, increased traffic in fragile, outdoor locations, and the depths of the wilderness can now be easily accessed from the comfort of a smartphone.

*Section D: The outdoor experience conceptualized in a new way*

Historically, individuals would partake in outdoor expeditions in order to ‘find oneself’ or to achieve manhood. Recently it seems as the purpose of outdoor expeditions has shifted to find one’s community or place in society. Gregory Heath illuminates the historical relationship between man and nature, “Prior to the digital age, it is likely that the relationship of the person to their surroundings would have been fairly described as ‘Cartesian’; that is a subjective, individual and discrete consciousness to an objective world, in this case a natural environment” (78). As digital photo sharing has become the preferred social-connection platform, it is easier than ever to find people with shared interests, especially when it comes to outdoor recreation and photography. By sharing outdoor adventures on social media, one instantly contributes to their technological identity, validating their outdoor activities through the public eye. Social media has become vital to fulfilling psychological needs and according to Anne Oeldorf-Hirsch, “Photography is also a ritual, moving beyond the information presented in the photo to an act that draws communities together around shared events, contexts and ideals” (Oeldorf-Hirsch 626). As outdoor photography/adventure photography continues to grow in popularity as a digital trend, a large online community is forming of outdoor Instagrammers. Heath continues to explain the effects of digital sharing of outdoor experiences, “The subject of experience is now linked to others in a radically new way, in a web of shared subjectivity. This is a phenomenon in process at present and as such is subjected to ebb and flow of competing perspectives” (Heath 78). As this large online community continues to grow, its photographic influence on the habits of outdoor participants become more dominant, thus increasing our dependence on social media and photography in outdoor experiences.

The tendency of continuous snapshooting is removing one from present experiences, extracting the value that the experience can contribute to our personal wellbeing and putting the value into our technological identities. It seems likely that we are becoming subconsciously ignorant to the pure psychological benefits of outdoor experiences like Ruth Lawrence explains, “Subjectivity of first-hand experience of the outdoors projects a sense of wellbeing and expanded horizon, or added dimension that captures new and invigorating insights” (Ruth Lawrence). It is understood by many but known and practiced by few today in time, the innate necessity of a relationship and appreciation of the outdoors. Gregory Heath explains in his article, “Reimagining the Outdoor Experience” how nature is essential to mankind, “To be completely human in moral, spiritual, emotional and cognitive dimensions requires an at-oneness with the fullness of the environment and not standing apart from it and especially not adopting a dominant position with regard to it” (Heath 71). The practice of photography or use of social media during or relating to one’s experience in nature could objectify the mutual relationship between man and nature.

Record high National Park visitation and flooding Instagram posts tagged under hashtags and locations on Instagram show that people are just as passionate about the outdoors as ever, yet the enormous technological presence in the lives of individuals is changing the types of benefits one reaps through outdoor expeditions from pure self-enlightenment to a form of self-presentation and self-promotion. In most instances, one chooses to go outside for reasons such as exercise or a way to relax, yet increasingly the outing does not seem complete without photographic evidence. When one’s passion for the outdoors is driven or increased by pursuing an extrinsic reward, such as capturing a trophy shot, to what extent is that ‘passion’ authentic?

Can it still be considered a passion of the outdoors? Carolyn Highland, a contributing author of Teton Gravity Research, illustrates this dependence on digital photo sharing, “I often ask myself when I go outside what my purpose is in doing so—what will it take for me to feel I have achieved what I set out to do? Sometimes it is to get a good workout, or relax, or simply enjoy the fresh air. And yet, sometimes I don’t feel quite satisfied until a photograph has come out of the adventure” (Highland qtd. Dunfee). This change in social consciousness surrounding the place of technological communications and participation in the outdoors is eloquently explained by Gregory Heath, “The experience of the outdoors and the importance of outdoor education is no less relevant to the achievement of a richly fulfilling life than it has ever been, but the conceptualization and contextualization of how this is understood is now, as a consequence of the shifts in consciousness and the pervasive insinuation of technology, radically different” (Heath 76). Although popular posts on Instagram and other photo-sharing apps promote outdoor participation and has been an effective way to share experiences, the type of motivation it embodies has changed the way we perceive the experience and its value when compared to historical perceptions of outdoor experiences.

## **Part VI: Conclusion**

Social media is clearly influencing outdoor participants’ perceptions of the purpose of outdoor participation through our dependence on social media for self-enlightening purposes, our strong reception of trends and norms concerning social-success and outdoor participation, and a cultural shift in consciousness of the value of direct experience. The rise of digital photography and online photo sharing have caused a fluctuation in the function of photography from a form of



pure documentation, to a way to promote one's social standing, a form of validation, and a tool to manipulate one's technological identity as one may please. The direct gratification of these critical social needs can manipulate one's perception of the purpose of outdoor experiences and undermine the value of the relationship between man and nature, ultimately changing our memory function and interactions with nature in a cultural and habitual way.

Is social media fulfilling the self-identity creation needs that the pure outdoor participation used to? It seems likely that our ever growing dependence on social media may be replacing the psychological benefits and improvements that dedicated time in nature stimulates naturally. Increasingly, the outdoors has shifted from a place purely of relaxation, quiet solitude, reflection and other necessary psychological well-being functions, to a tool of self-promotion and self-presentation, a mere backdrop.

The use of social media offers many benefits including creating and maintaining social relationships, a source of inspiration of morals, travel, and activities, a way to pass time, self-expression, memory stimulation, and a documentation of one's life. Apps such as Strava, tools such as Personal Locator Beacons, and information provided by Google Earth and Google Maps have allowed accessibility to outdoor locations, encouraging what is necessary to all human beings, time outside. The advance in technology has created many benefits yet the extent of usage and importance of technological tools, such as social media, has been overwhelming. The massive presence of media in one's life instigates a substantial influence that digital trends have on one, shifting the perception of social success and the purpose of outdoor participation.

We are living in a time in which social media and digital photography have a massive influence on our values, preconceptions, perceptions; this influence is so monumental that it is

changing our reception of detail during direct experience, our memory function, our usage of necessary cognitive functions such as selectivity and reflection, causing us to be significantly reliant on technology to perform these functions. It is important to realize that your daily scroll through your Instagram or Facebook feed is more than a mere pastime: it is literally changing our brain function and has a heavy influence on our self-identity creation and values. Social media and technology are so intertwined into our lives that it is deemed nearly impossible to remove their presence.

Can we blend an aesthetic that embraces our natural surroundings with the benefits of technological advances? Moving forward, this is the question to consider when forming a healthy balance between social media use, fulfilling crucial psychological needs, and outdoor participation. It is critical to ensure that we prioritize pursuing an intrinsic reward of being outside rather than an extrinsic reward. It comes down to whether or not your Instagram is about your life, or your life is about Instagram. The benefits of social media should not trump the benefits of time in nature, nor should our time be spent being preoccupied by monitoring how our lives look rather than just living it. Being a steward of the land translates to our use of the social power that social-media grants us. Awareness of our undeniable trust in photographs and our reception of media trends should be intentional, recognizing the effect they have on us and controlling the prevalence of their influence on our mindset and actions, especially while in nature.

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