

# Women's outdoor adventure experiences on Instagram: Exploring user-generated content

Little is known about how everyday women self-present their outdoor adventure experiences, and how these compare to mainstream media, which often reinforces narratives of hegemonic masculinity. To better understand how everyday women portray their outdoor adventure experiences, we examine user-generated content on Instagram associated with the hashtags #womenoutdoors, #womeninadventure and #shewentwild. In total, 1154 posts were collected. Analysis revealed that Instagram facilitates a 'DigiPlace' that contributes to new understandings and ways of being outdoors for everyday women. More specifically, our work indicates that the ubiquity of social media helps to reshape the nature of female participation in outdoor adventure activities as well as giving everyday women greater visibility in outdoor landscapes.

Keywords: outdoor adventure recreation; outdoor and adventure media; gendered adventure; women; social media; Instagram; DigiPlace.

## Introduction

Outdoor adventure experiences and spaces, and who has access to them, are often established by media representations prior to individuals ever setting foot in the outdoors. Yet, being outdoors has the potential to positively influence the health, well-being and sense of empowerment of many would-be adventurers. Mainstream media utilises and reinforces gender stereotypes, both actively through written words and passively through imagery, thereby maintaining gender differences and inequality (Trolan, 2013). Thus, media does not just reflect reality, but actively shapes the ways in which reality can be understood and practiced (Zink & Kane, 2015).

Magazines, films, social media and other forms of *outdoor media*<sup>1</sup> provide points of reference regarding 'appropriate' behaviour, particularly for those who are new to the outdoors (McNeil et al., 2012), and is produced and consumed in ways that either align with or trouble notions of 'legitimacy' (Stanley, 2020).

Outdoor media persistently reinforces a 'playful, white masculinity', whereby women are often portrayed as passive and consuming subjects, rather than active participants or conquerors of wilderness environments (Frohlick, 2005). Women who do prevail in outdoor pursuits are

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<sup>1</sup> The term *outdoor media* is used to signify media associated with outdoor and adventure recreation participation but may also include adventure tourism activities.

often depicted as superwomen or extraordinary (Weatherby & Vidon, 2018), while experiences of *everyday women*<sup>2</sup> or those whose bodies deviate from the socially sanctioned norm are often overlooked within mainstream media.

These absences continue to maintain social, political and economic inequality within outdoor and adventure spaces (Comrie & McMillan, 2013). Whilst many studies have indicated that lack of representation may limit particular individuals' participation in outdoor activities, recent research demonstrates that individuals are turning to social media to showcase and amplify their own outdoor experiences through self-presentation (Gray, Norton, Breault-Hood, Christie & Taylor 2018; Stanley, 2020; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). In the last decade, social media sites (SMSs) have enabled people to produce and share knowledge, emotions and experiences far more widely than in the past (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011; Thorpe, 2017). Accordingly, the ubiquity of digital devices and SMSs, such as Instagram, afford opportunities for everyday people to create and promote visual representations, countering normative depictions of what it means to be 'outdoorsy'. From this, everyday women can begin to associate with the outdoors and adventure differently, potentially holding implications for increased participation.

In light of media's potential to both reinforce and challenge hegemonic discourses, it is imperative to continue to examine the interplay between media affordances, representations and experiences of the outdoors. However, research investigating outdoor media and, in particular, women's user-generated outdoor social media content and the notion of self-presentation is still in its infancy (Frazer & Anderson, 2018; Gray et al., 2018; Kling, Margaryan & Fuchs, 2018; Lyu, 2015; Stanley, 2020; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018; Zink & Kane, 2015). Calls have been made for further exploration of user-generated content (UGC) on SMSs as well as actual participation behaviours and preferences, particularly through a gendered lens (Frazer & Anderson, 2018; Kling et al., 2018; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). When compared with the images and stories supplied by traditional outdoor media, UGC may glean new insights around what influences outdoor participation, as well as provide a means to challenge what companies deem to be important to portray (Kling et al., 2018).

This research focuses on the demand side of outdoor adventure experiences through an examination of women's UGC on SMSs. Specifically, through a social constructivist lens, we analyse the ways everyday women represent their outdoor experiences through Instagram posts

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<sup>2</sup> Within this study we understand *everyday women* to be women who are not professional adventures or influencers (>2000 followers), and do not own/work for businesses associated with the outdoors.

associated with #womenoutdoors, #womeninadventure and #shewentwild. This study analyses a significantly larger data set compared to similar studies (e.g. Lamont & Ross 2019; Gray et al. 2018; McKeown & Miller 2019) and unlike previous studies, it examines women's participation in a range of outdoor adventure activities regardless of their geographic location. It also scrutinises both the caption and image posted. Therefore, the significance of this research lies in its ability to provide a much broader analysis of UGC that advances our understandings of outdoor adventure, but also reveals potential affordances of social media platforms. Specifically, Instagram facilitates a 'DigiPlace' (Stinson, 2017) where women challenge and/or reproduce gendered assumptions about the outdoors, enhancing visibility of women in outdoor landscapes, with potential implications for increased participation.

To set the context for this analysis, we first review literature around outdoor media and representation as well as introduce the concept of self-presentation. We then briefly explore media affordances, in particular the idea of DigiPlace (Stinson, 2017), before finally outlining our choice to use Instagram as the platform through which to conduct this research.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Female Representation in Outdoor Media***

Despite the growth in, and the mainstreaming of, outdoor adventure activities as an alternative sporting culture, Zink and Kane (2015) argue that outdoor media has escaped the level of scrutiny that sport media has received with regards to its power and the realities that are being constructed through it. In particular, a substantial amount has been written on gender inequity in a variety of sport media outlets, including TV, print, online and social media, and the findings of these studies bear similarities to those found in emerging studies on outdoor media. For example, much of the mainstream media, in both traditional sports and outdoors, perpetuates a 'social imaginary' (Castoriadis, 1987) that recognises sports and the outdoors as white, heterosexual, able-bodied and masculine spaces (Frazer & Anderson, 2018; Frohlick, 2005; Kling et al., 2018; Stanley, 2020; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). In contrast, non-white, female, queer/gay, fat, disabled and other deviant bodies were/are rarely represented (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020; Cater, 2000).

If women are included in media representations, such research indicates they are seldom shown alone in the outdoors, actively participating in an activity, or portrayed as dirty and unkempt. Instead women are depicted walking with children, passively looking at a view, or holding a piece of equipment, rather than being involved in the activity that uses that equipment (Kling et al., 2018; McNeil et al., 2012). Imagery has also been found to insinuate women's

desires for the luxurious side of adventure travel, as they are posed in a spa or engaging in shopping activities (McNeil et al., 2012). Such advertisements and media representations reify heteronormative expectations and play into stereotypical gender roles regarding women and consumerism. Further to this, when women are shown partaking in an activity, they are often participating in 'soft' activities within the outdoors, such as horseback riding, canoeing or hiking (Frazer & Anderson, 2018; Kling et al., 2018; McNeil et al., 2012).

Often portraying women with a male partner and/or placed in the background behind men, outdoor media depicts women as novices, requiring teaching or assistance from a man while engaged in outdoor recreation (Kling et al., 2018; McNeil et al., 2012). Not only does this indicate that the male is superior and stronger, it also implies that women only choose to participate in challenging outdoor and adventurous activities alongside a man. Such images also suggest only one type of couple in the outdoors, thus erasing queer bodies and their relative experiences (Stanley, 2020). Furthermore, the outdoors are often conceptualised as an escape from motherhood and family commitments for women, whereas men are promised the challenge of physically demanding outdoor adventure experiences (McNeil et al., 2012). Such conceptualisations further serve to position women in the background of outdoor pursuits, and not in the same central frame that privileges men.

Outdoor media has also been found to prioritise professional adventurous women, rather than everyday women. However, the physical accomplishments of professional women are often either downplayed or depicted as the endeavours of unique women who require feminisation (McNeil et al., 2012; Vodden-McKay & Schell, 2010). Emphasis is often placed on heteronormative imaginaries and eroticism, where the aesthetics of a female athlete/outdoor professional conform to Eurocentric ideals of what a woman must be as both an outdoor professional *and* a woman (attractive – white, nice hair, appropriate body shape), or her family life and relationships are highlighted rather than her athletic and professional skills and accomplishments (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; McNeil et al., 2012; Trolan, 2013; Vodden-McKay & Schell, 2010). By comparison, everyday men are depicted within these mediums as triumphant and strong, achieving goals in the outdoors. Such advertisements can suggest that only women who are exceptional or who measure up to masculine standards of success can engage in such demanding activities. Furthermore, research demonstrates that sexualised images of women, particularly in a traditional sport context, are used as a means of reader enticement rather than a portrayal of female athleticism or competition (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011). The lack of coverage or acknowledgement of women actively participating in the outdoors leads the lay consumer to believe that female outdoor professionals/athletes are not as important, accomplished or as

worthy of being acknowledged as their male counterparts, and thereby their own participation in these activities is inferior (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; Trolan, 2013). This limited coverage limits the potential for strong women to be positive role models for everyday or novice participants.

What is apparent, and alarming, throughout much of the aforementioned literature are the powerful normatives that operate within outdoor and sport media, marshalling what we expect a 'hiker' or 'climber', or more broadly an 'outdoorsperson' or 'adventurer', to be and look like. Still persistent, is the practice by mainstream media to produce, reproduce and sustain hegemonic patriarchal ideals. Specific to outdoor media is the continuation of depicting women as passive participants or consumers of soft adventure and outdoor recreation. Whilst many studies suggest that this may constrain women's participation in outdoor experiences, recent research contends that women are turning to social media to challenge and resist these hegemonic discourses through means of self-presentation (Gray et al., 2018; Stanley, 2020; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018).

### ***Women's self-presentation in the outdoors***

Self-presentation is the process of packaging and editing the self to distribute positive impressions to others (Goffman, 1959). Lyu (2016) explains that, for some, this will involve enhancing the quality of photographs or manipulating their appearance in 'selfies' to match societal ideals before sharing them online. This practice is also known as self-objectification, whereby individuals treat their appearance as objects to be evaluated by others. On SMSs this happens through 'likes', 'shares' and favourable comments from those who are consuming this content. Anticipation of these 'social returns' (Boley, Jordan, Kline and Knollenberg, 2018) or peer feedback might obscure the physical 'reality' of which users post, but it is a reality nonetheless. Therein, virtual audiences can generate rationale for taking selfies in front of landmarks, proof that one has travelled somewhere (Boley, 2018; Lyu, 2016) or underpin acts of identity curation. In the context of this research, women present themselves within specific outdoor adventure contexts to position themselves as a climber, hiker or mountain biker, for example.

Analyses of SMS pages, groups and hashtags associated with female outdoor enthusiasts indicate that women reinforce traditional gender assumptions found in mainstream media (Gray et al., 2018; Stanley, 2020). Grey et al. (2018) found that some women self-presented on SMSs as actively participating in the outdoors, but still portrayed a traditional, Western aesthetic of beauty and were often seen accompanied by male partners and/or children. Within sports literature, female athletes have also been found to self-objectify as they posted suggestive and

sexualised images of themselves (Kim & Sagas, 2014; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Additionally, these studies suggest women reinscribe passiveness by conforming to Goffman's (1976) classic characteristics of gendered advertisements. The reasons for this are unclear. However, it might be that these women are trying to emulate what they have seen in mainstream media (i.e. imagery of well-groomed and passive engagement) as appropriate sport/outdoor behaviour (McNeil et al., 2012).

In contrast, other women use SMSs, like Instagram, to contest mainstream media representations and social imaginaries of what an outdoors or sporty woman should look like by showing realistic, inclusive and empowering digital portraits (Gray et al., 2018), including images of deviant bodies – fat, gay, queer, women of colour and those who participate alone (Chawankasy, 2016; Stanley, 2018; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). Women have presented themselves as strong, vibrant, actively engaged, connected to nature, challenging themselves and overcoming adversity (Chawankasy, 2016; Gray et al., 2018; Stanley, 2018). In some cases, women attempt to accumulate social capital and demonstrate their significance by engaging with outdoor adventurous spaces that traditional media promotes as 'extraordinary' and 'masculine' (Weatherby & Vidon, 2018).

Curating a public self through SMSs may influence female participation in the outdoors by troubling dominant narratives about women and these spaces. Accordingly, diverse outdoor women and athletes use media affordances to challenge invisibility, and to inspire and support others. In this way, Gray and colleagues (2018, p.166) believe that 'social media gives people the chance to change the cultural narrative' and to use self-presentation in a positive and empowering way. Such digital representations – and the narratives associated with them – can contribute to an activism and amplification aimed at diversifying the outdoors (Stanley, 2020), thereby re-framing access and participation both within and beyond physical outdoor and adventure spaces. With this in mind, we use the following section to explore the fluidity between actual and virtual outdoor adventure spaces and how social media platforms and related digital technologies facilitate this.

### ***The outdoors as a 'DigiPlace'***

In this new era of the 'virtual', experiences in the outdoors occur as much in the so-called statusphere and blogosphere as they do in the biosphere (Stinson, 2017). Indeed, digital technologies are now central to our meaning making. In Western countries, digital devices have become embedded into our everyday activities and embodied in how we live in the world (Hine, 2015), so much so that sociologists have pointed out that we are now living in a 'digital society'

(Lupton, 2015, p. 2). Although assemblages of personal digital information are only ever partial and continuously changing portraits of individuals, ‘they are beginning to have significant impacts on the ways in which people understand themselves and others...’ (Lupton, 2015, p. 709), and delimit new ways to relate to outdoor adventure.

Human engagement with the natural world is increasingly being mediated by digital devices and electronic media. This is made evident in the expanding literature around the outdoors and new media technology (e.g., Büscher, 2014; Leather & Gibson, 2019; Stinson, 2017; Thomas & Munge, 2017). Much of the current outdoor and nature-based research related to electronic devices predominately focuses on one of two sides of the nature-digital debate: new media technologies are a disruptive force which further disconnect people from the natural world (Pergams & Zaradic, 2008); otherwise, they operate as a conduit or ‘go-between’ to facilitate human-nature connections through processes of access and enhanced learning (Leather & Gibson, 2019; Thomas & Munge, 2017). Stinson (2017), however, argues that we must not be preoccupied with the dichotomised framing of what he refers to as ‘Wilderness 2.0’ because it assumes wilderness as a fixed ontological reality, separate from humanity, that can simply be connected to or disconnected from. Instead, wilderness should be understood as a social construct continually re-created in different cultural contexts (Stinson, 2017; Burbules, 2006). Therefore nature – along with the outdoors – is not static. The ability to access and co-create information in ‘real’ outdoor spaces via digital devices blurs the lines between the ‘actual’ and the ‘virtual’ (Barreneche, 2012), illuminating novel and changing ways for mediating, knowing and exploring these liquid worlds (Brubules, 2006).

This emerging digitised mode of wilderness, and in our case outdoor adventure, can be likened to the concept of ‘DigiPlace’ (Zook & Graham, 2007). The outdoors as DigiPlace highlights how:

‘the physical, tangible world combines with virtually accessible information and creates not a fixed setting for interaction, but a lived, fluid, and subjective space, shaped by space, time, and information. In other words, DigiPlace represents the simultaneous interaction with software (information) and ‘hardwhere’ (place) by an individual’ (Zook and Graham, 2007, p. 468).

Such digital interactions therefore afford new mobilities and accessibilities, likely influencing individuals’ experiences of outdoor adventure. Stinson (2017) explains that the emergence of ‘cyborg-recreationists’ tethered to their mobile devices has facilitated this new ontology of ‘wilderness as DigiPlace’, whereby participation in the ‘actual’ wilderness is increasingly oriented toward the production of digital content in the form of photos, videos and

the like. Simultaneously, the consumption of these representations in 'cyberspace' mediate perceptions of the wilderness and outdoors in the 'actual' physical world (Stinson, 2017). In this sense, DigiPlace can reshape the nature of participation in outdoor adventure activities, while the affordances of SMSs may also democratize outdoor adventure experiences and the marketing of them.

## **Methodology**

Anchored by this new ontology of the outdoors, our epistemology draws from social constructivism (Crotty, 1998) as we seek to explore everyday women's subjective experiences of outdoor adventure, and how these are shaped by societal and cultural norms. Specifically, we examine content that *everyday women* have posted on Instagram to represent and share their outdoor adventure experiences. We consider how Instagram provides a social setting for these women to construct understandings and meanings of outdoor adventure. Meraz (2009, p.682) explained that SMSs, like Instagram, are 'architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration, and community'. Within these digital contexts, individuals have an imagined, often limitless, audience to whom they extend aspirational identities, reflections of their practices and subjective evaluations of the environment around them (Hine 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; McKeown & Miller, 2019). Thereby, social science researchers increasingly recognise online interactions as fertile sources for understanding sub-populations of our society (Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010; Lupton, 2015; Laestadius, 2016; Lugosi & Quinton, 2018).

Virtual methodologies and methods afford researchers the ability to move beyond a single physical space and into a more fluid and connective form of data collection (Hine 2015; Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). Terms like netnography (Kozinets, 2010), were coined to conceptualise online research employed to understand social and cultural phenomena in digital communities and contexts. Though Kozinets (2010) insists the distinct need for human presence in netnographic enquiries, recent studies illuminate the malleable approaches and methods used for a variety of online settings from passively 'lurking' in cyberspaces (Jeffery, Ashraf, & Parris, 2019), actively participating in real-time online conversations, to analysing public-domain social media content (McKeown & Miller, 2019; Stanley, 2020). Aligning with the latter, our adapted netnographic approach is passive, focussing on the demand side of outdoor adventure through an examination of UGC of women's experiences on Instagram.

### ***Instagram and Outdoor Research***

Instagram is one of the largest online SMSs, with more than one billion monthly active users worldwide. It is predominantly used by younger adults under the age of 30 and by a greater number of women than men (Statista, 2020). Unique in comparison to SMSs (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, Marco Polo), Instagram users include keywords, commonly referred to as hashtags, in their posts to aid discoverability and reach (Stanley, 2020).

Despite its popularity, Instagram has received relatively little attention as a research context across the social sciences compared to other social media platforms (Laestadius, 2017; Marwick, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2015). Within the outdoors and adventure literature specifically, studies utilising Instagram are limited. Exceptions include: Lamont and Ross (2019) who explored cyclist discourses using the hashtag #fromwhereiride; Stanley (2020) who investigated Instagram as a form of activism for so-called 'unlikely hikers'; Weatherby and Vidon's (2018) analysis of multiple online sources (including Instagram) to understand women's power in wilderness landscapes; and, most related to our study, Gray et al.'s (2018) research, which examined women's self-presentation on both Facebook and Instagram associated with the hashtags #naturegirls and #outdoorwomen. Our research differs from Gray et al.'s in that their data set was very narrow (they analysed nine posts associated with #outdoorwomen), compared different social media platforms and largely focused on identity and the curation of 'self' of popular, established individual SMS users. In the following section, we describe our approach to data collection and analysis, and the ethical considerations we adhered to when analysing Instagram data.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

In this study, we consider women's representations of outdoor adventure on Instagram using the hashtags #womenoutdoors, #womeninadventure and #shewentwild. We chose these hashtags because they included the words 'adventure', 'wild' and 'outdoors', and it was anticipated that semantic differences may yield different content, despite their apparent overlap. They were also popular, thus further justifying their inclusion in this study.

To collect data, we used Picodash, a social media management tool created to help search and analyse Twitter and Instagram content by location, hashtags or users (Picodash, n.d.). We used Picodash to extract only publically available content from

Instagram that included one of our three chosen hashtags and was posted during one of two time periods: 9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> July 2018 and 25<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> January 2019. These periods were chosen as they included each day of the week and captured both summer and winter seasons in both hemispheres, which we felt may have had possible implications for outdoor adventure behaviours. By not collecting data in real time, we provided users with time to remove posts or make posts and profiles private. To facilitate this, data was collected retrospectively in May 2019. Data linked to these hashtags (e.g. user handle, date and time stamp, photo, caption, other hashtags used) were retrieved and exported into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

In total, 1154 posts were collected across the three hashtags: #womenoutdoors (615 posts), #womeninadventure (99 posts) and #shewentwild (440 posts), yielding a sizable data set compared to other similar studies (e.g. Lamont & Ross 2019; Gray et al. 2018; McKeown & Miller 2019). We were guided by purposive sampling and posts that were no longer publicly available, or an account that was no longer active, were removed from the dataset. Additionally, content posted by businesses, organisations, influencers and professional adventurers, as well as posts that were related to a brand or not communicated in English, were removed. After this data cleaning process, 568 posts remained for analysis.

To analyse these posts, we employed inductive thematic analysis (Veal, 2019), allowing the themes to emerge unprompted from the data. To begin, we focused on the smaller data set #womeninadventure and divided it equally amongst the authors to pilot our analysis techniques and generate initial codes based upon the image, text caption and additional hashtags included in each post. We then discussed our initial coding and checked that it corresponded with each other's own interpretation of the data.

The other two hashtag datasets were much larger. To ensure consistency between coders, we first analysed 100 posts each from #womenoutdoors, and then moderated 20 posts of each other's allocated dataset. Where disagreements with interpretations occurred, these were explored further and, when needed, we re-analysed the data to enhance its rigour and credibility. We applied the same process to the third and final hashtag #shewentwild. Where additional hashtags were included, for the most part they related to geographic location (e.g. #ExploreMontana, #Scotland, #RockyMountains) or hinted at subtle activism (e.g. #blackwomenhikers). Whilst we recognise that the inclusion of these hashtags is of meaning to the individual poster,

these were often buried amongst other hashtags and we therefore deemed them to be subsidiary themes and so they were excluded from the analysis.

Once data from all the hashtags had been analysed, four overarching themes emerged: Doing, Growing, Being and Waiting. The theme Doing captured more active posts; Growing evidenced content that showed participation and development; Being reflected more passive and identity-related content; and Waiting captured the moments ‘in-between’ adventures. We further considered the themes and sub-themes to discuss the need to converge, diverge or abandon individual ones. To aid this, we adopted a content analysis approach and counted the frequency of the main themes and sub-themes attributed to each post for both time periods for each hashtag. This proved to be fruitful as it revealed that the frequency of each final theme was consistent regardless of the time of year or the hashtag. We were left with the aforementioned themes across the three hashtags, each with emergent sub-themes (see Table 1).

Table 1 about here.

## **Findings**

In this section of the paper we contextualize our themes and sub-themes by drawing on textual examples (hashtags and captions) as well as visuals (photos) from the posts we analysed. In representing our findings, we purposefully anonymised identifiers such as usernames and handles. Instagram’s terms of use state that ‘public information can also be seen, accessed, re-shared or downloaded’ (Instagram 2018). Because of the open-access nature of these posts, along with the time elapsed between the posting and analysis of data, which allowed users to remove unwanted posts, we chose to include some of the women’s original images as part of our findings. However, as women had not shared content for the purpose of being research participants, we developed pseudonym Instagram handles to establish anonymity and further distance women’s identities from these images, including photographs of faces. These pseudonym handles also indicate which hashtag the post was collected from along with a numeric that signifies the row number on our data spreadsheet (e.g. @shewentwild46).

## **Doing**

Many Instagram posts featured a caption, photo and/or additional hashtag(s) that revealed a strong emphasis on ‘doing’. These women often presented themselves in-situ, as active participants in the outdoors. Three sub-themes emerged in this category: *Exploration*; *Connecting (to and with)*; and *Activism/Action*.

In many of the posts, a mix of curiosity, novelty and determination was reflected in women’s desires for **exploration**. For example, @womenoutdoors542 captioned a photo of herself atop an SUV proclaiming her love of exploring new ways of using her vehicle and camping equipment. Very often, posts like this included hashtags that used the word explore (e.g., #womenwhoexplore, #exploreoutdoors, #exploremore and #neverstopexploring), but without explicitly mentioning ‘exploring’ in the caption itself. For example, @womenoutdoors562 made use of ‘explore’ hashtags (see Figure 1) in her post about hiking.



Figure 1: Exploration of the outdoors @womenoutdoors562

Quite often, the ‘explore’ hashtag, was used alongside other hashtags that referred to an element of strength, courage or challenge. Users @womeninadventure32 and @womenoutdoors379, for instance, refer to other hashtags such as #forceofnature and #bewilder, while others refer to wilderness and remoteness. This may reflect a desire for some women to portray an image of exploration in a ‘harder’ sense, as opposed to a ‘softer’, benign side of exploration driven by curiosity and wanderlust.

For some women, their pursuits were about **connection**. Many discussed actively connecting to something, someone or somewhere whilst engaging in their outdoor adventure experiences. Some of these posts emphasised a degree of gratitude

and took a reflective or contemplative tone (@shewentwild5, Figure 2). Similarly, other posts used hashtags such as #homeofmyheart or #favourite place (e.g. @womenoutdoors574), while others included a series of hashtags that identified place as important (e.g., #colorado #coloradical #coloradotography #wildcolorado #visitcolorado).



Figure 2: Connecting to place @shewentwild5

Other women posted about connections with people, be it family (@womenoutdoors507), friends (@womeninadventure4), or relationships (@womenoutdoors430), often featuring photos or captions that described or depicted these individuals as central to their experience.

The final sub-theme of this category relates to *activism* which was notable for its unexpectedness and inherent assumptions of motility and reach. Users posted on topics ranging across race (@womenoutdoors581), sexual orientation (@womenoutdoors588), pollution (@woenoutdoors310), women's safety (@womenoutdoors114), politics (@womenoutdoors264), and public access to natural spaces (@womenoutdoors103). Some posts made an explicit call to action through the use of hashtags like #doyourbit, #diversifyoutdoors and #keepitpublic. It was evident that these women were actively encouraging others to take action for a cause, and in many cases using other hashtags alongside the aforementioned ones, presumably to achieve greater reach for their message.

## Growing

Closely connected to *doing*, we found women also used these hashtags to express notions of personal growth through *building skills, motivating and teaching others, celebrating achievements, and overcoming challenges*.

Women used Instagram to emphasise the opportunity to **build skills** in the outdoors as a means of achieving personal growth (e.g. @womeninadventure29, see Figure 3). Other women posted at a more basic level, merely acknowledging a need to refresh technical skills. For instance, @shewentwild22 shared a photo of a map accompanied by the caption, 'Nice laid back day today...getting some micro nav practice in'.



Figure 3: Skills development @womeninadventure29

In a similar vein, we found some posts to be **motivational or educational**. Many women used the #shewentwild, #womenoutdoors or #womeninadventure hashtags as a way of inspiring personal growth in others as they shared teachings and insights about their own outdoor adventure pursuits. For instance, @womenoutdoors383 poses questions about finding oneself in nature, while @womenoutdoors190 posted a lengthy caption about goal-setting and then offered a reflection on her own personal development. Other women make use of specific hashtags with #motivation or #inspiration in them to reflect an intention to motivate or inspire their followers. Finally, some women uploaded posts that commented on training, techniques or further

educational insights. For example, @womanoutdoors98's post included a picture of her in a snowy field in Greenland with a caption that detailed the 'art of layering winter clothes', while other posts provided detailed information on the purpose of specific equipment or techniques they use themselves (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Extending advice around injury prevention @womeninadventure58

Unsurprisingly, some of the content about growth was related to *celebrating achievements*, be it altitude gained, miles run or cycled, water temperature swum in or peaks climbed. User @womanoutdoors388 celebrates 'bagging' another peak through the combination of her caption and use of the hashtag #peakbagging (see Figure 5).

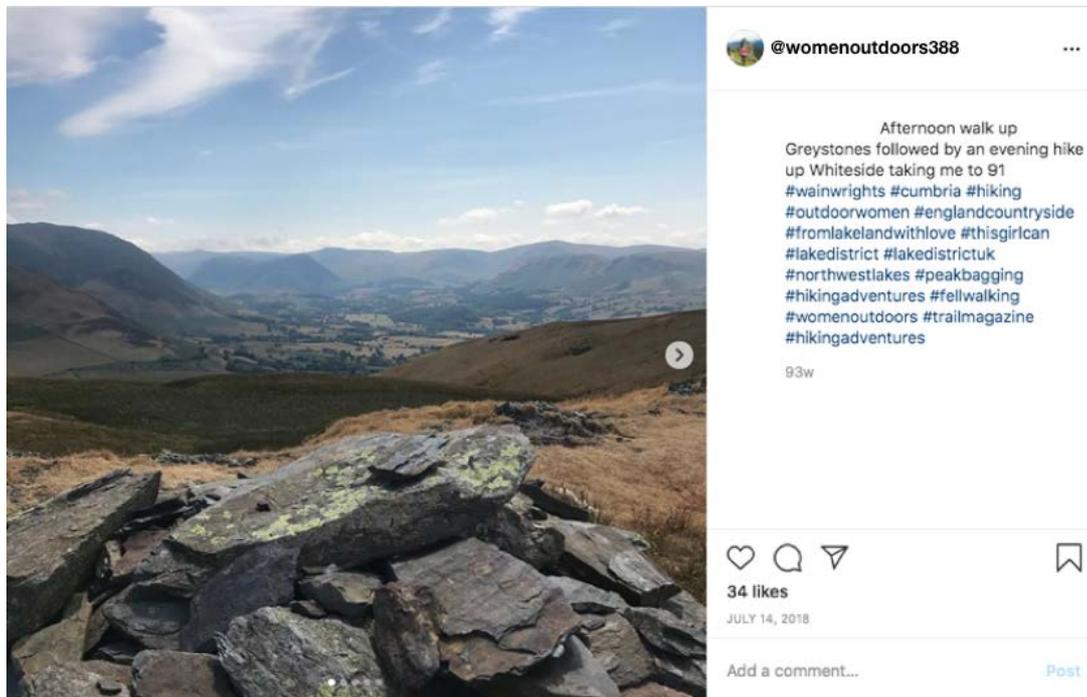


Figure 5: Celebration of reaching the summit @womenoutdoors388

The explicit listing of numerical tallies and hashtags that indicate specific ‘goals’ or challenges (e.g. #summit, #peakbagging etc.) reflects notions of identity creation, a theme we pick up on later. On the other hand, @womenoutdoors533 shares a photo of a seemingly non-descript bridge to highlight the sense of accomplishment: ‘20 miles in 8 hours.... I know I’m not the only one who feels all the feels when they finally get to the Pemi suspension bridge!’. Our analysis found both overt and covert acknowledgements of recognising and celebrating one’s achievements, highlighting the nuances of posts made by the everyday woman.

In parallel with posts about personal achievements, many women created and shared content that illustrated *overcoming challenges*. This sub-theme highlights the way in which women build personal resilience through overcoming physical and mental challenges while engaging in outdoor adventure. This was especially true in @womenoutdoors586’s post (see figure 6). In other posts, the challenges women overcame ranged from personal circumstances such as pregnancy (@shewentwild26) and social isolation (@shewentwild159), to the natural environment (@womenoutdoors562) and equipment failure (@womenoutdoors10). It was apparent from posts in this category that everyday women tend to present a largely unassuming narrative around self-fulfilment and achievement when they post about overcoming challenges.



Figure 6: Overcoming challenges while climbing @womenoutdoors586

### ***Being***

Many of the posts depicted more passive engagement in the outdoors, reflecting a state of ‘being present’ or existing in the moment. ‘Being’ was the most salient and largest theme across the three hashtag datasets. Sub-themes included: *Expressing emotion/appreciation*, *Fostering well-being*, and *Creating and curating identity*.

Some of the most frequently shared content were women’s candid ***expressions of emotion or appreciation*** about their outdoor adventure experiences, be it the specific activity they were engaged in, the people they were with, or the landscapes and views they encountered. Posts included various hashtags such as #loveyourworld, #beautifulviews, #happiness, #bliss or #onehappylady which highlighted women’s emotions or additional thoughts about their experiences (e.g. see Figure 7, @shewentwild140).



Figure 7: Euphoric mountain biker @shewentwild140

In addition to illustrating excitement towards outdoor adventure activities, women expressed joy, awe and gratitude for simply being in nature and outdoor spaces. In her post, @shewentwild271 describes being mesmerized by the layers of the natural landscape (see Figure 8). Similarly, @womenoutdoors82 shared a photo of a sunrise and captioned it with: ‘Speech LESS...you can leave me here! Bye!’. Finally, it is interesting to note, in the context of ‘Being’ there were no posts that mentioned negative emotions. Rather, the focus of posted content was exclusively on the expression of positive emotions.



Figure 8: Appreciation of the outdoor landscape @shewentwild271

A sizeable proportion of posts indicated a *fostering of well-being*, whereby users highlighted the associated restorative or mental well-being benefits of the outdoors and outdoor adventure (e.g., #begentlewithyourself, #inthemoment, #betterthantherapy, #mentalhealthwarrior). For instance, @womeninadventure71's content included a photo of herself submerged underwater and a caption that reflected her recent open water swim: 'It's been a good day. No filter needed in the Cornish sea. My heart is full again. I feel replenished. Sea therapy and friendship'. In other posts, a level of escapism was expressed: 'Let the sea set you free' (@womenoutdoors223). Although not frequent, some women indicated the need to escape the responsibilities of parenting and used the outdoors for meaningful #timealone and #solitude, ideas that reflect some current literature (e.g. Doran, Schofield and Low, 2020). For example, @shewentwild179 posted: 'Hey mum guilt, could you just go away for a second so I can try and enjoy some solitude!', demonstrating the importance of care towards 'self'. This idea links to a notion of 'selfhood', which connects to the next sub-theme of 'creating and curating identity'.

For some women, *creating and curating identity* was seen to be an influential factor in the content that was shared. Here, additional hashtags were used to help identify who these women believed themselves to be, as well as their own capabilities

(e.g., #adventurer, #wanderer, #badass, #sheshreds). Additionally, some posts displayed an overt demonstration of strength (see Figure 9), or explicit messages about oneself: ‘Being badass doesn’t come easy’ (@womenoutdoors445).



Figure 9: Demonstrating strength @womenoutdoors25

Other users posted content that clearly perpetuated existing heteronormative stereotypes by presenting themselves in a sexualised and playful light, such as the photo posted by @shewentwild111. This post featured three young women in their underwear, ski gear by their feet, in the middle of a snowy mountain range and a caption that read, ‘Riding the chair lift for the gram [fire emoji]’. The inclusion of the “for the gram” hashtag clearly links this content to identity creating practices, as this phrase indicates an explicit performance for their virtual audience. On the whole, posts of this nature were limited and much more prevalent in the #shewentwild hashtag.

### ***Waiting***

The final overarching theme that emerged was ‘waiting’. More specifically, analysis revealed that some content was shared during moments in-between activities in the outdoors. These posts acknowledge the temporal nature of adventure and its rhythmic patterns, and perhaps demonstrate a purposeful self-(re)presentation of these in-between moments. In this category, sub-themes of *Reminiscing*, *Dreaming*, *Planning and Preparation* and the *Mundane* were all elucidated.

We found that a number of posts strongly emphasised *reminiscing*, conceptualised as the historical reflection on past outdoor adventure activities. Women's posts reflected on the previous experience itself (@shewentwild17), time passed since a given experience or expedition (@womaninadventure100, see Figure 10.), challenges overcome (@womeninadventure69) or relationships formed (@shewentwild26). Posts were often supplemented with hashtags, including #throwback or #takemeback, highlighting a fondness with which women recalled their experiences.



Figure 10: Reminiscing a climbing trip @womeninadventure100

In contrast to reminiscing, a number of posts featured content connected to *dreaming*. While some users made specific reference to dreaming (see Figure 11, @womenoutdoors232), others posted inspirational prose. For instance, @womeninadventure31 posted: 'We are forgers of dreams and crafters of opportunities! We are mountain people!'. Similarly, after posting an inspirational quote from a prominent businessman, @womenoutdoors456 noted: 'In the end this time will be a drop in the ocean when I'm living the life i [sic] built.'. These examples highlight this sub-theme as distinct from reminiscing as women embraced a more forward-thinking outlook.



Figure 11: Dreaming of adventure @womenoutdoors232

A small number of women used Instagram to share the work being undertaken to *plan or prepare* for their next adventure, expedition or activity. Posts commented on tasks such as route or destination research. For instance, @shewentwild72 posted a photo of a woman overlooking a vast mountain valley with a caption that read: ‘Looking for the next epic adventure... where will we find it? ...’. Other women described kit maintenance (@womenoutdoors281), while some simply expressed anticipation in the final hours before departure (e.g., @womenoutdoors600). Posts in this sub-theme demonstrate that the hashtags analysed are not just used to depict women actively engaged in activities but also document the ‘in-between’ moments, and how these activities contribute to self-(re)presentation.

Finally, analysis revealed posts about seemingly *mundane* aspects of women’s adventure lives (e.g., walking the dog at the park, film watching, etc). Some women posted about activities in which they partook in between outdoor adventures. For example, @womeninadventure74 described attending an adventure film night, illustrating other, less active, leisure activities but still adventure-related. Similarly, @shewentwild218 shared her experience of backyard camping (see Figure 12), alongside the hashtag #intentionalliving, perhaps emphasising a desire to continue an outdoors focused lifestyle into the future. In many ways, such posts add a temporal dimension and punctuate the rhythm or tempo of women’s outdoor adventure self-(re)presentation.



Figure 12: Mundane adventures in the backyard @shewentwild218

Collectively our findings demonstrate the myriad ways in which *everyday women* engage in outdoor adventure and experience the outdoors as a ‘DigiPlace’. The themes of Doing, Growing, Being and Waiting illustrate ways in which #shewentwild, #womenoutdoors and #womeninadventure are used to (re)present the self in both direct and indirect ways, and more broadly delimit new ways to relate to the outdoors.

## Discussion

Our analysis highlights the ways SMSs like Instagram re-create the outdoors as a DigiPlace, whereby women can engage in both ‘actual’ and ‘virtual’ experiences of outdoor adventure. These digitally mediated experiences contribute to a new ontology of the outdoors, revealing diverse ways of ‘being outdoors’. More specifically, our findings show how, through the varied and diverse assemblages of content posted by everyday women, Instagram has emancipated their engagement with, and relation to, the outdoors and adventure (Lupton 2016; Stinson 2017). Furthermore, they support the notion that social media can offer affordances that increase access to the outdoors (Stanley, 2020) through augmented realities as well as new associations of what it means to be ‘outdoorsy’. This re-presenting of the outdoors challenges gendered and heteronormative stereotypes that persist in contemporary media portrayals of women outdoors (Zink and Kane 2015) and has potential implications for increased participation.

Growing numbers of scholars have recently drawn attention to the passive, heteronormative, clean and ‘soft’ portrayals of women in mainstream media (Frazer & Anderson, 2018; Kling et al., 2018; McNeil et al., 2012). Our findings add volume to the voices that question these stereotypes, challenging the frequency with which they continue to be used in mainstream media outlets. While some research has noted a tendency for female representations of adventure and the outdoors to be ‘luxuriated’ (McNeil et al., 2012), our findings demonstrate that for many women, self-representation centres on active portrayals of ‘doing’, emphasising exploration, strength and courage, and ‘growing’ through achievement and self-fulfilment through overcoming challenges. However, it was interesting to see that although women disrupted gendered stereotypes of passivity, at the same time they reinforced existing social imaginaries of such spaces being masculine. For instance, many women used numbers and figures to demonstrate the intensity and notoriety of the challenge – hereby conquering nature to amass social capital (Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). The dichotomous nature of this finding is echoed by other studies (e.g. Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2013). Such depictions and performances link closely with the sub-theme, ‘creating and curating identity’ and lead our findings to point towards a burgeoning ‘outdoor imaginary’.

Our analysis also revealed that creating an identity, and more specifically ‘being outdoors’, are layered experiences that involve not only the conquest of, or engagement with, the outdoors but also a sharing of these outdoor adventure experiences. It was clear that some women used Instagram to purposefully curate a desired, and perhaps aspirational, identity or experience. This aligns with Lyu (2016), who notes that acts of self-presentation (as well as self-objectification) entail the packaging of one’s appearance for other’s (virtual) consumption, and the pursuit of a ‘social return’ (Boley et al., 2018). Although arguably all posts could be linked to identity creation to greater or lesser extents, our findings show that for everyday women SMSs provide a platform for empowerment and positive self-portrayal where women can give voice to personal achievements, or communicate feelings or emotions. This is in contrast to the populist influencer studies of Gray et al. (2018) and organisational focus of Weatherby and Vidon’s (2018) work. Although Lyu (2016) noted that self-objectification sometimes involves manipulating one’s appearance through the enhancement of photographs, in our study the prevalence of the Instagram turn-of-phrase #nofilter reinforced the desire from the everyday woman to be seen in an authentic, natural light.

Furthermore, our findings support the work of Gray et al. (2018), who noted women's self-portrayal on social media as active participants. However, our findings diverge when considering the content of the posts analysed. Although detailed content analysis including semiotics and photographic composition was largely beyond the scope of this study, Gray et al. (2018) discuss how women often, directly or indirectly, include male partners and/or children in their posts (Gray et al., 2018). Our findings, however, demonstrated an absence of this. Indeed, the posts demonstrated how many everyday women express feelings of escapism in the outdoors and a reprieve from their everyday lives. The notion of 'escapism' and strong connections with being outdoors was weaved throughout the theme of 'Being' and 'Growing', illustrating a desire for women to foster their own well-being, be it mental or physical. Herein, women gave themselves permission to just 'Be[ing]' in nature; hone physical competences that fostered growth; and actively connected to and through the outdoors; 'DigiPlace' by 'Doing'. Moreover, these solo outdoor pursuits are curated and shared on Instagram (sometimes instantly), seeking reciprocal 'liking', commenting and appreciation. Ironically, platforms and mobile devices have made 'escapism' more challenging, but perhaps more importantly facilitates female transcendence, by way of access to a 'DigiPlace', and social well-being.

Building on this paradox of need for solitude and connection, another clear thread to emerge from our findings related to motivation and inspiration. Many women's posts reflected a desire to share their solo pursuits and experiences to motivate and inspire others. Our analysis revealed that this happened at different levels, with some users attempting to motivate others with more basic sentiments around positivity and motivation, while others framed their motivational message against a backdrop of skills development. In comparison, others offered deeper, more personal and contemplative reflections of their own personal experiences. Access to a mobile device can provide women access to their social network from almost anywhere in the world, establishing points of connection with the people whom they wish to be heard by or connected to. Whilst it was not possible to determine what degree of motility such posts might have on the broader population of Instagram 'followers', it is enlightening to witness such calls to action that could serve to diversify and mobilise users of the outdoors (Stanley, 2020).

Finally, the outdoors as 'DigiPlace' (Stinson, 2017) gave root to an emergent yet important theme of activism and access. Although not previously reported in similar

studies, activism emerged almost as a by-product to posts using the #shewentwild, #womeninadventure and #womenoutdoors hashtags. A prominent thread running through these posts was concerned with accessibility. The sharing of these experiences on Instagram democratises the representation and marketing of outdoor adventure and gives everyday women greater visibility in outdoor landscapes. Moreover, digital devices reshape the nature of female participation in outdoor adventure activities, blurring the lines between the 'actual' and the 'virtual' (Zook & Graham, 2007) whereby 'physical' access to outdoor landscapes is not required to experience ways of 'being outdoors'. Our findings emphasise greater consideration is needed for the in-between and mundane instances of being outdoors, in particular their relationship with temporal aspects of rhythm and tempo, and how these constructs influence the nature of participation in adventure activities.

## **Conclusion**

Outdoor media has been found to reinforce and reproduce a hegemonic masculinity, which may limit particular individuals' participation in outdoor adventure activities. Despite this, few have scrutinised the images and stories supplied by outdoor media (see Frazer & Anderson, 2018; Kling et al., 2018; Zink & Kane, 2015). Similarly, studies that examine how marginalised groups, such as everyday women, self-present their outdoor adventure experiences through UGC is in its infancy (see Gray et al., 2018; Stanley, 2020; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). Therefore, little is known about how the media produced by both the supply of and demand for outdoor adventure experiences differ and how mainstream outdoor media influences participation. To build on this limited pool of knowledge, this research focused on the demand side of outdoor adventure experiences through an examination of 'everyday' women's UGC on Instagram.

Our analysis demonstrates how Instagram creates a DigiSpace where women can engage with the outdoors, albeit virtually, and challenge the gendered and heteronormative narratives that permeate contemporary media. Women present themselves as active and successful participants of outdoor adventure, participating without male partners and/or children, portraying strength, courage, fulfilment and empowerment, all devoid of self-objectification. Four overarching themes, each with associated sub-themes that related to women's self-presentation, were identified during

analysis: actively *doing* and *growing* through outdoor adventure participation, *being* present in outdoor spaces and in the moment, and *waiting* and anticipating future outdoor adventures.

Whilst it is considered that social media data, including Instagram data, affords valuable insights into the self-disclosed lived experiences of those under study, we recognise that this data is not a transparent window into people's intentions, opinions and ideas and acknowledge that users may post content that has been created with the intention of soliciting likes and comments from their followers (Laestaduis, 2017; Manovich, 2012). As such, this work is not intended to provide an objective or generalisable assessment of women's opinions and experiences of outdoor adventure. However, our findings contribute to the emergent body of knowledge on this subject, which we hope will grow as more scholars question the gendered and heteronormative stereotypes portrayed by outdoor media and their influence on participation. Furthermore, it is important that the literature does not remain static. As the media, including SMS evolves, particularly with regard to the increasing use of visual-based rather than text-based posts, as well as the cultural settings in which the outdoor adventure activities take place, women's representation in the media and their self-presentation on SMS may change.

Future research could incorporate audience research, including the comments made by others in response to female outdoor recreation UGC. Specifically, explorations of these SMS interactions with those who post content would be valuable in gaining a deeper understanding of intentions and motivations for posting vis-à-vis users' relationship with contemporary media. Whilst activism emerged as a less prolific sub-theme, there is value in researching how people use SMSs to raise awareness around topics such as race, sexual orientation, environmental issues and access to natural spaces. Similarly, we echo Zink and Kane's (2015) call for a broader analysis of how the media influences access to outdoor adventure for other socio-demographic groups, and across different countries, cultures and age groups. Related to this, is a need to conduct further detailed content analysis of images, in particular on the semiotics and composition of UGC, especially exploring the inter-sectionality of gender, age, ethnicity, accessibility and sexual orientation. Furthermore, an analysis of media related to specific outdoor adventure activities would deepen our understanding of user interactions with and barriers to participating in outdoor and adventure activities. Further analysis of content produced by influencers would also present an interesting

line of enquiry. Finally, the findings of our study suggest a connection with subjective well-being and self-determination, yet the application of these positive psychology theories is missing in outdoor adventure research. This is despite their potential for understanding the role outdoor adventure plays in enhancing individuals' and communities well-being (Houge Mackenzie & Hodge, 2019).

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