

**Friends, Not Enemies: Rethinking the Relationship Between Social Media
and Nature**

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The outdoors are a place to escape and disconnect from the modern world. Many outdoor enthusiasts seek respite from their stressed, technology-driven lives. With more and more Americans working on computers and spending time on mobile devices, there is a great need to use the outdoors to take a break from time on screens. The outdoors and technology are traditionally seen as separate and incompatible spaces. A cell phone outdoors can ruin the experience.

However, technology and the Internet are becoming increasingly powerful tools that are essential to daily life. They are also becoming a way to research and access information about outdoor recreation opportunities, both for folks already in the outdoor community and those who are joining it for the first time. Though there are negative effects of time spent on screens, this new electronic medium can also be a tool to educate individuals about the outdoor opportunities near them. With this broader outreach, the outdoor industry can attract new members to outdoor recreation and foster a more diverse community.

This paper explores the current perceptions of electronics, particularly social media, in relation to time spent in nature; some current applications of this technology; and an overview of ways to use these tools to attract new outdoor recreationalists. This paper will challenge the current view of the Internet and social media as harmful, and reframe it as a tool for outdoor industry professionals to assist in client education and outreach.

Perceptions of Social Media

The narrative around social media use, particularly its use by teenagers, has been predominantly negative. Studies have shown correlations between social media use and depression, loneliness, and self-esteem (Appel et al., 2016; Liu & Baumeister, 2016), though data is inconclusive whether these correlations are because of social media, or social media use is a result of these states (Aalbers et al., 2019). Regardless, negative affect is often attributed to time on social media.

This belief has been perpetuated by news coverage and journalism media. An analysis by Stern and Odland (2017) showed that news stories about teenagers and social media overwhelmingly portrayed the interaction as negative, with teenagers showing no agency or control over their online interactions. They found that “the overarching ideology identified in the news coverage was that teenagers and social media are engaged in a dysfunctional relationship” (p. 511). The news accounts centered around a general view of these virtual interactions, which portrayed social media as a dangerous place which needed the supervision of parents (Stern & Odland, 2017).

Parents are typically the audience of these news articles, and tend to believe that interactions their children are having on social media are negative (Stern & Odland, 2017). Madden et al. (2012) found that “most parents of teenagers are concerned about what their teenage children do online and how their behavior could be monitored by others.” Parents are often concerned about who their teenagers meet online, what information about their child can be found on the internet, and how that information could affect the child in the future (Madden et al., 2012).

A child or teenager’s relationship to new media has also been attributed to spending less time outdoors. Richard Louv (2008) in his book *Last Child in the Woods*

cites time on screens and on the Internet as a main activity that children substitute for nature play (p. 10). However, Louv also describes a societal shift away from the freedom of unstructured nature play as parents and communities became wary of children spending time outdoors unsupervised (p.29). News rules and restrictions could have encouraged children to spend less time in nature, and technology and screen time filled the gap.

Houge Mackenzie et al. (2017) found that screen time and phone use can be a barrier to outdoor participation. The teenagers who participated in their study reported that spending time watching videos or playing games could hinder time spent outside, and that phones could distract from their experiences once they were outside. A notification on their phone could draw them out of the natural environment and draw them into the online one, and they might “never come back” (p. 143). Teenagers can see that social media can have a negative impact on their lives - in fact, 24% say social media has a mostly negative impact (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). However, they may not see it as overwhelmingly negative as their parents.

The perception by older generations who did not grow up with social media is often one of caution or fear. Parents are apprehensive about the lives that their teenagers lead online, often without their knowledge. Many fail to acknowledge that seeking privacy away from parental eyes is a key development during the teenage years, not because their teenagers have something to hide online (Stern & Odland, 2017).

Youth Experience

Teenagers’ relationship to social media is a regular part of life for this age group, and their perception of its impact is not the same as the perception of older adults. Anderson and Jiang (2018) found that while some teenagers think social media has a negative

impact, 45% didn't think social media had any positive or negative affect on their life. 31% said they thought it had a positive impact. While adults who did not grow up with social media largely perceive the relationship between social media and teenagers as one that is dominated by social media without control by the individual, in fact Stern & Odland (2017) found evidence that teenagers are not only in control of their social media interactions, but are actively curating them. "Identity work and social goals drive media interactions and outcomes, not the other way around" (p. 519).

Because of the discrepancy between parental attitudes and their lived experience, a lot of teenagers don't think that adults understand their relationship to social media, and therefore are ill-equipped to help them navigate the potential hazards of it (Goodyear & Armour, 2019). They are using social media to positively create their own self-image and connect with their peers. "Social media operates as an active digital space for young people where relationships, identities, and intimacies are formed, and where learning can occur" (Goodyear & Armour, 2019).

Increasingly, it appears that young people are using social media more for this learning experience and social connection than for the nefarious purposes that adults believe. This connection spans across many different backgrounds. There is almost equal use of cell phones (95% of teenagers) across socio-economic class, race, gender, and minority groups (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). The ubiquitous use of technology, including the 45% of teenagers who say they are online on a 'near-constant' basis (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), gives young people opportunities to learn from and connect with their peers across physical and societal barriers, a tool that did not previously exist in such a broad medium.

In addition to teenagers being connected through cell phones, 84% of young adults in the United States age 18-29 use a social media platform in 2021 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Social media has incredible reach, with multiple platforms offering different content and experiences for users across the country. In spite of perceptions by parents, social media has a lot of reach across demographics for teenagers and young adults. This kind of technology is now a staple of life for these age groups, and is not something that will simply 'go away.' Since the lived experiences of many young adults shows the potential for positive interactions and learning opportunities via social media and the internet, there is great potential to harness the power of this medium to provide information about the outdoors to a wider audience.

Potential Benefits

A special report by the Outdoor Industry Association highlighting the effects of COVID-19 on outdoor recreation in 2020 found that there were many new participants to outdoor recreation that year due to the pandemic. These participants were younger, more diverse, and more likely to live in urban areas than the traditional outdoor participant (Outdoor Foundation, 2021). While people were cooped up inside and spending more time on screens as work and school became virtual, the outdoors became a much more appealing choice for their leisure time. Activities such as walking or hiking, jogging, and biking that could be done close to home were the main activities that new outdoor participants picked up (Outdoor Foundation, 2021).

The broader outdoor industry has recognized that its participants are largely white, male, and affluent (Outdoor Foundation, 2019), and many companies and organizations have begun working to make the outdoors more diverse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the individuals who began recreating outdoors for the first time

were largely the underrepresented groups that increased the diversity of outdoor participants. This is encouraging news for the industry that is consciously working to promote inclusion and diversity.

With this goal closer than ever, it is important to look at how the outdoor industry can continue to grow from the progress made during the pandemic. Looking at ways in which participants learned about outdoor recreation can provide valuable information about outreach and attracting more participants in the future.

Outdoor Industry Association (2021) found that many participants learned about outdoor opportunities near them either from prior participation, from friends or family, or via social media (see Figure 1).

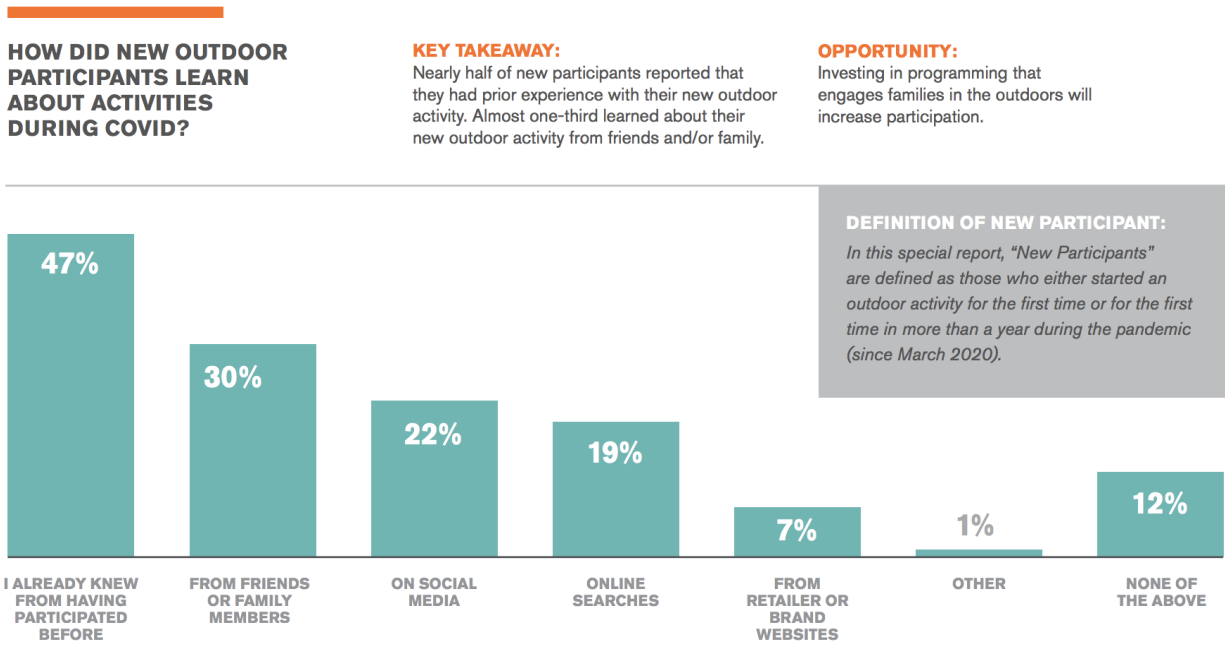


Figure 1. How did new outdoor participants learn about activities during COVID? (Outdoor Foundation, 2021)

Research has established that there are multiple barriers to entry for underrepresented groups outdoors. One key barrier is the lack of exposure or

participation in the activity while growing up, and not having family members or close friends who recreate outdoors (Dorwart et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2019). This lack of exposure within their community can prevent underrepresented groups from accessing information or seeing themselves as belonging in outdoor spaces.

Outdoor Industry Association (2021) found that for those participants who hadn't previously recreated outside or weren't introduced by friends or family, the main way they learned about outdoor recreation opportunities was through social media (22% of participants). This new way of learning about outdoor recreation opportunities overcomes the barriers to entry for minority groups and other underrepresented groups in the outdoors. With these findings, Outdoor Industry recommended that industry professionals use social media to educate the public about places to recreate, specifically focusing on information about close to home places to get outside, information and training about outdoor activities, and creating a network of local outdoor participants to create communities (Outdoor Foundation, 2021).

Instagram Communities

Many organizations are already using social media for this purpose. Many outdoor agencies have social media accounts on most platforms and post updates for their followers about outdoor opportunities. A prominent name in this area is the National Park Service (@nationalparkservice), who connects with potential visitors by providing entertaining facts, visitor information, Leave No Trace principles, and information about what to bring on a hike. Using both their larger NPS account and the individual accounts of parks, they reach a broad audience with information about their public lands. They are making these spaces more accessible; a person looking to make the trip to the park can find out important information from their home on an easily

accessible platform. Their approach to connecting with their participants and providing valuable information is an excellent example of embracing the prevalence of social media as a way to reach more people and draw folks into the outdoors (Hurrdat, 2015).

Other accounts are designed specifically to create communities for underrepresented outdoor recreationalists, including @blackpeoplewhohike, @unlikelyhikers, @nativewomenswilderness, and many others. There is an Instagram page for practically every group of ‘outdoorsy’ people. These accounts are a great way for folks to interact and find others like them. Since underrepresented groups are not portrayed in outdoor media (Martin, 2004; Kloek et al., 2017), having a space to see their own identities represented can present a powerful message that they belong in the community. Social media is increasingly a place to share resources and teach others about opportunities near them. This can be an accessible, free, and friendly way to learn about the outdoors without relying on the top-down, often overpriced classes or educational resources from corporations.

Use by Organizations

Other non-profit organizations are using social media and internet marketing as a main avenue for outreach. The group Latino Outdoors uses social media and a strong online presence to boost their community and spread the word about their programs, which are focused on connecting Latinx outdoor recreationalists (Flores & Kuhn, 2018). Houge Mackenzie et al. (2017) and Schwab et al. (2020) are exploring the benefits of using youth-driven social media marketing to get youth outside in ‘park poor’ areas, or areas without easy access to green spaces. They’ve found that using social media as a way to advertise and provide information about outdoor spaces can be a useful way to provide recreation opportunities to youth in urban areas (Houge Mackenzie et al., 2017).

Youth participating in the study suggested that “effectively organizing information about outdoor activities and enticing locations, facilitating social opportunities in natural areas, and/or incentivizing time spent outdoors” could be a way to attract underserved populations (p. 143).

Based on the Houge Mackenzie et al. (2017) study, Schwab et al. (2020) tested this method. They had a focus group of youth and university students create a 30 second YouTube video about the benefits of natural areas, and showed it to youth. They found that after viewing the video, youth had a more positive view of time spent in nature. They concluded that “social media messages are an effective strategy to influence elements of attitudes, social norms, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intentions” (Schwab et al., 2020, p. 41).

Having a presence online is beginning to be the norm for marketing the outdoors to young people. NatureRx, a nationwide movement to improve college student mental health through spending time in nature, promotes using websites and apps to increase student awareness of green spaces near them. Their recommendations for starting a branch of NatureRx on a college or university campus involve cultivating a website and app for student outreach to make the outdoors on campus more accessible (Rakow & Eells, 2019). Rather than hosting events or actively working with students, these passive opportunities to educate students on how to get outside can be more effective and accessible, and can create a connection between students and nature on their own time.

With the switch to virtual classes and virtual engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities and colleges struggled to engage students online. As a way to provide outreach and programming to students, some departments used Instagram as a vital tool. Ithaca College’s Residential Life used social media accounts to advertise

virtual events, post information and announcements on Instagram stories, and host livestreams where students could participate without needing to be on Zoom, the video meeting platform where all classes were held at Ithaca College for the Fall 2020 semester. Using this platform encouraged student engagement even during a virtual semester, where other forms of engagement were limited.

With mounting evidence that using social media as a tool can actively engage youth and young adults, promoting nature via technology may be an important avenue to increasing interest in the outdoors. With the ability to reach diverse communities and underrepresented groups, providing advertising and informational resources can be an important way to increase access to the outdoors.

Using Social Media as a Tool

There are many ways to use social media to reach an audience or to advertise a brand. Increasingly, it is a platform being used by companies to sell products and reach new customers (Scott, 2017). However, it can also be used as an outreach tool for outdoor educators and recreationalists to provide resources and education to potential participants. These best practices can help organizations expand their online reach and promote their organization to their audience.

When using a social media site to reach participants, it is important to know the target audience. Youth and young adults favor sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, while older adults tend to use Facebook more often (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). YouTube is used frequently by all age groups: 95% of young adults say they use YouTube (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Choosing a platform that best works with the desired audience and content is important. If providing educational resources and 'how-tos' is a main objective, YouTube videos are often the best platform. Additionally, using other

web-based platforms such as websites and blogs can provide a space to offer more in-depth content than may be available on Instagram or other social media platforms.

In addition to using a specific site, there are additional tools on each platform that can increase engagement with an audience. Using features such as 'stories' or livestreams can provide more interaction with the audience and reach more individuals. In addition, commenting, replying to comments, and 'liking' posts by users can be a way to engage with the audience and create a more personal connection and community online. By combining these tools, an organization can create a broad online presence that is fully interactive and engaged with its audience.

Partnering with other organizations online can also be a helpful tool. By doing 'takeovers,' where accounts post on each other's pages, can show the interconnected community of outdoor recreationalists. Promoting giveaways can also be a tool to draw traction and attention to your page. These kinds of incentives for participation can at first draw individuals in, and then the organization can continue to engage with them after these promotions are finished.

Having online accessibility is an important consideration for organizations. Making sure websites are easy to use and navigate, that images are high contrast and provide 'alt-text' for visually impaired users, and that links and titles are descriptive and helpful will improve the user experience and help promote diversity within the audience. The easier it is to find information, the more helpful it is to the user, and the more users a page will attract. Easy to follow and well-formatted guides can be a valuable resource to potential outdoor recreationalists.

The goal of an organization when using social media should be to create a comprehensive online presence that provides value to their audience. This allows for

new groups to discover the organization and find resources that can help them in their own journey towards outdoor recreation. Hurrdat (2015) provides several recommendations for an outdoor industry organization to strive for in using social media. They suggest connecting with the audience and providing value. By communicating and replying to the audience, users feel connected and part of the community, as well as comfortable reaching out for resources from the organization. Sharing resources and content that is helpful and informative is also a cornerstone to helping folks access the outdoors. Helping individuals find tips and tricks, gear, trails and open spaces, and transportation can increase the diversity of outdoor participation, and provide information to groups that don't have prior exposure in this area. By developing these avenues for individuals to find out more information, the outdoor field can expand upon the recommendations made by Outdoor Industry Association (2021) and draw a diverse and inclusive group of participants to outdoor recreation.

Conclusion

As more individuals try to find outdoor spaces to recreate and take a break from screens, the outdoor industry has the opportunity to rise to the occasion. Providing resources through the Internet and social media platforms can help reach new audiences and spread information to traditionally underrepresented groups in the outdoors.

The pervasiveness of social media has spread across the country to many demographics and groups, and has become an accessible and irreplaceable tool for navigating daily life. Social media is here to stay. Younger generations who have been raised with social media view it differently than older generations - they know technology can be their enemy, but they also see it as their friend. It can be a tool.

There's been a shift in the outdoor industry to using the media and technology available to reach wider audiences and help spread information about the outdoors and recreation opportunities to the public. Organizations are using the pervasiveness of social media to their advantage. The industry needs to rethink its perception of what impact media can have on the outdoors, and how it can be used to diversify participants and get people outside.

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