

**The Voices Heard: Representation of Women and Minorities in the Outdoors in
Traditional and New Media**

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Abstract

This paper looks traditional and new forms of media as they relate to creating and disseminating the culture of the outdoors and outdoor recreation. By examining the literature surrounding existing images and how they portray women, people of color, and traditionally underrepresented groups in outdoor recreation, the paper discusses the ways in which culture can be both constructed and perpetuated by media. This paper explores images in traditional media, such as magazines and advertisements, and those in new media including webpages, social media, and films. In studying the representation present in these forms of media over time, conclusions can be drawn about underrepresentation of women and people of color, and how this perpetuates a white masculine ethos of the outdoor community. Research has found progress in representation over time through the use of social media, the internet, and video sharing which allows new voices to be heard and the narrative of outdoor culture to be shifted.

Keywords: outdoors, recreation, diversity, inclusion, women, minorities, media, social media, film, magazines, advertising

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The outdoors has long been a space celebrated for its vastness, challenge, and solitude. From this historic view of the wilderness as ‘sublime’ to the rise of adventure sports and testing oneself against nature, outdoor spaces have celebrated a masculine ethos of “rugged individualism” and challenge (Bogardus, 2012; Gray et al., 2018; McNeil et al., 2012). Media has perpetuated the image of the strong mountain man who goes into nature alone to find challenge and triumph in the unforgiving wilderness.

This view of nature and the white masculine identity of the outdoors has permeated into the culture of outdoor spaces. The wilderness, National Parks, and outdoor recreation are seen as spaces for strong and individualistic white men (Martin, 2004). Intense, active, and risky recreation or sports are dominated by young men able to push their bodies and willing to take risks to accomplish a goal. This culture has trickled down from the early dominance of men in the outdoors and now pervades outdoor recreation culture, leaving little space for women, people of color (POC), LGBTQ+ individuals, those with disabilities, or other underrepresented groups (Dorwart et al., 2019; Frohlick, 2005; McNeil et al., 2012).

These individuals have long been part of the outdoors. From the first park rangers in the National Parks – a group of black soldiers known as the Buffalo Soldiers – to early female advocates for the Appalachian Trail, the unsung stories of the non-white, non-male outdoors person are now being uncovered (Borichevsky, 2020; Mason, 2019; National Parks Group, 2013). From conservation to adventure sports, women and minorities have shaped the history of the outdoors. Female pioneers in adventure sports such as rock climber Lynn Hill and Grand Canyon oarswoman Georgie White proved that women could excel at all the activities men had

traditionally deemed too intense for women (Mortimer & Rosen, 2014; Teal, 1994).

Women and people of color broke through cultural barriers to find their place outside, but their stories often go unheard. The dominant narrative remains one of white, masculine, heteronormative identity (Frohlick, 2005). Many barriers exist to minority participation, including the perception of the outdoors as a White space, the lack of outdoor role models (individuals who ‘look like me’), and a lack of experience or exposure growing up (Dorwart et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2019). Women face other barriers, including stereotypes of women as passive outdoor participants or as caregivers and mothers (Godtman Kling et al., 2018; Lee Frazer & Anderson, 2018; McNeil et al., 2012).

These barriers are especially present in the media. From magazines to social media, media and advertisements pervade our everyday lives. These images perpetuate stereotypes about participation in the outdoors and help create the culture of outdoor recreation. Martin (2004) concludes “there exists a reciprocal relationship between media images and society; the ‘Whites only’ conception of wildland places and wilderness recreation found in magazine advertisements is both a consequence and a cause of the racialized identity in the outside world” (p. 528). As media tends to portray the dominant culture, if mostly white men are going outside, most images will consequently be of white men. However, as young women and POC look at these images and do not see themselves represented, they may be less inclined to try the sport or venture into wilderness spaces. The relationship between media and society is intertwined and an important indicator of cultural perceptions, both by women and minorities as well as society at large. Media that perpetuates these stereotypes discourages participation by creating a space that certain groups do not feel included or feel like they belong. Cultural norms and stereotypes dictate behavior and will either encourage or discourage participation in outdoor recreation,

largely influenced by cultural identity and social mores that are both created and perpetuated by media (Dorwart et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2019). By examining the images present in media relating to outdoor recreation, new perspectives can be gained about the existing culture in the outdoors and how this culture is perceived and perpetuated.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between media and the culture of the outdoors. Through examining the current media climate using magazines, advertisements, webpages, social media, and films, this paper will look at how the outdoor community portrays minorities, POC, and women, and whether this portrayal encourages participation.

Literature review

The outdoors and outdoor recreation are spaces that often develop their own community. Groups of individuals who share the same passion create a group or identity, often based around a particular activity. Outdoor recreation activities and adventure sports are often the center of these communities. The early climbing community in Yosemite was tight-knit and exclusive, and considered its own counter-culture (Mortimer & Rosen, 2014). Backpackers and thru-hikers often create close groups to share resources and information (Borichevsky, 2020). Each outdoor activity has its own specific community and group of participants - its own social world. Bogardus (2012) defines a social world as “a set of common or joint activities or concerns bound together by a network of communication” (p. 287). In this digital era, those networks of communication can involve the media and social media almost exclusively, which opens up many different cultures and subcultures within the outdoor industry. As Bogardus (2012) says, “In contemporary society, communication networks are extensive, and accordingly, innumerable social worlds exist” (p. 287). New groups can be formed entirely virtually and can lead to new outdoor communities popping up frequently. These new groups allow women and minority

groups to form their own social world, such as Instagram communities like @she_explores and @blackpeoplewhohike. Some social worlds online can promote diversity, giving communities that may not have a traditional place in outdoor media a voice. However, the larger narrative of outdoor participation and representation does not reflect the communities and social worlds that can be created online.

Martin (2004) described a *racialized outdoor leisure identity*, an identity which was “a stereotyped composite of who visits wildland areas, and by extension, who belongs there” (p. 517). Through various cultural influences including societal perceptions of acceptable or dominant leisure activities based on one’s race and ethnicity, racial and ethnic experiences, or personal experience within leisure experiences, Martin (2004) argues that one develops a leisure identity and ‘leisure socialization.’ Martin (2004) continues, “the mass media is one of the primary means by which images and stereotypes are disseminated and perpetuated, and the engine that drives the media is money (in the form of advertising)” (p. 518). This paper will look at multiple forms of media, including advertising, print sources, and new media to examine the ways in which these racialized outdoor leisure identities and social worlds effect the culture of the outdoors.

Print sources

Magazines and advertisements are a common form of media for the outdoors. Magazines have long been a popular form of advertising and a main stream media outlet for both outdoor publications and general lifestyle magazines. Numerous studies show that images in magazines, both lifestyle and outdoor-focused, are not representative of actual recreation participation. Martin’s (2004) study looked at *Time*, *Ebony*, and *Outside* magazines between 1985 and 2000 to gain a general understanding of how magazines portrayed Black people outdoors. Because of the

wide range of audiences between the three magazines, the author concluded that this gave a broad and representative sample of advertisements aimed at Black versus White individuals as they were portrayed outdoors. The author found that *Ebony*, a magazine marketed mostly to the Black community, depicted Black people in the outdoors only 1% of the time, while *Outside* depicted Black folks outside only 12% of the time. Of all advertisements portraying individuals outside, *Outside* only showed Blacks in 1% of advertisements. *Time* had no images of Black folks outside. In all magazines, White individuals were portrayed much more frequently outside than Black individuals.

McNeil et al.'s (2012) more recent study looked at *Outside* magazine as well as the popular outdoor magazine *Backpacker* between 2008 and 2009. They specifically looked at images of women in advertisements in these magazines, not only to see how many times they were pictured, but what kinds of activities they were participating in. They found that while women appeared in 46% of the advertisements that included people, they were more commonly shown in passive or less risky activities such as shopping or relaxing, or in groups, often with a male guide. They found that the women pictured had "low levels of engagement" (p. 45) including admiring a view or simply holding a product instead of using it, especially compared to male counterparts using the gear or actively participating in the activity. The researchers also found that the women were pictured as needing guidance, usually from a man: i.e. a man studying a map and pointing the woman in the right direction, or a male hiking guide leading women in tours of the area (p. 47). Women's engagement in the images was also pictured an escape from home and motherly duties, or a way to "mimic the home in the outdoors" (p. 45). Some images showed women highly engaged in their outdoor activities, especially professional athletes. The advertisements of women who were portrayed in this way suggested these

individuals were “unique and require feminization” (p. 45). Efforts were made to humanize and feminize the women who were highly participatory or professional athletes, including showing a them ‘getting a bite to eat’ after an athletic feat. The advertisements perpetuated established gender norms, and though women were present, did not portray them as active participants or experienced outdoorspeople.

Zink and Kane (2015) also looked at women’s portrayal in advertising in New Zealand media. They found similar results. Though New Zealand population data indicates a high number of women participants in outdoor recreation, their presence in advertising media was not spread evenly among the magazines they surveyed. They found that, especially in traditionally masculine sports such as fishing and surfing, images of women were significantly less than men, with ratios of 7.5:1 and 20:1 respectively. However, the authors also found some magazines represented women in nearly half of their images, and that the number of pictures with women had increased over time.

Both internationally and domestically, minorities have not fared as well as women in terms of the number of representative images. Kloek et al. (2017) state: “evidence suggests that it has been typical for the media either to utilize stereotypes disparaging minorities or to completely exclude them” (p. 1035). Their research looked at images in advertising material for Dutch nature conservation publications and identified white vs. non-white imagery in these magazines. They found that 94% of all images featured people who were exclusively white. They found that 4% were mixed white and non-white, and that only 2% were exclusively non-white. This was a broad study across four magazines that spanned from 2005-2014. This study suggests that media in the Netherlands fails to portray a representative sample of minorities and people of color, similar to Martin’s (2004) research.

A study conducted by Lee Frazer and Anderson (2018) analyzed three US print publications – *Backpacker*, *Rock and Ice*, and *Climbing* magazines from 2011 to 2014 – for images of people of color. Similar to Kloek et al.’s (2017) research, they found a vast majority of images featured white individuals. Ninety-eight percent of the pictures were of white people. Small percentages (1.4% to 3.9%) of the images featured people of color and varied by magazine. Lee Frazer and Anderson (2018) also investigated the presence of women in these magazines, finding “*Climbing* and *Rock and Ice* [to have] 29% and 24.5% of images, respectively, appeared to represent females,” while *Backpacker* had more representation with 39.9%. In contrast with these findings, the researchers noted that “of the 143 million individuals who participated in outdoor recreation in 2013, 46% were females and 30% were non-White” (p. 272).

In 2019, the Outdoor Foundation found that Americans who participated in outdoor activities were 73.7% Caucasian and 53.9% male. For many decades, publications and advertisements have underrepresented the presence of women and minorities outdoors. It can be inferred that most publications do not equally represent the actual demographics of outdoor participants.

New media

New media is comprised of social networking platforms and websites (Dumont, 2017). In many cases, websites are beginning to replace magazines and print publications, especially in regard to tourism and advertising. Around the globe, websites are becoming an increasingly common form of media for the outdoors, especially focusing around travel tourism and leisure.

In Sweden, the masculinity associated with the outdoors affects the advertisements seen in travel websites. Godtman Kling et al. (2018) found that there was not only a disparity in the

number of women portrayed in the advertising media, but also a stark contrast in activities that women participated in. Reflecting the findings of McNeil et al. (2012), Godtman Kling et al. (2018) found that “of the women portrayed by website images, 20% were depicted as passive, whereas only 4% of the men were portrayed as passive. More concretely, women were more often pictured when receiving a spa treatment or admiring the scenic view” (p. 242). Images of women focused more on family and motherhood, including picnicking and barbequing, while men were more frequently shown in traditionally masculine activities such as “fishing, hunting, rock climbing, or mountain biking” (p. 239).

Not only are women portrayed by companies and mainstream media less frequently and more passively than men, but outdoor women also face social pressure on how to present themselves on social media. Many images of women in the outdoors portray their activities as passive or use gender norms to portray sexualized versions of themselves (Gray et al., 2018). A quick look at Instagram accounts focused around #vanlife, a social media movement where individuals move into converted vans and post pictures of their wide-ranging travels, often feature images of women in bikinis using their outdoor shower or lying on the bed inside their vans in scant clothing. While the hashtag often shows images of mostly women, they are carefully curated images of an idealized lifestyle, and the vast majority of images feature white women. Ethnic minorities are far less represented.

Though social media now plays an impressive and growing role in outdoor media, few studies have been conducted about representation online. Gray et al. (2018) explored women’s portrayals of themselves outdoors on their social media platforms. They discussed “curating a public self” (p. 156), where women choose how to represent themselves in their social media images. The online persona versus the offline participation in outdoor recreation may be

different, and social media encourages the curation of specific images to portray the individual in a desirable light. Grey et al. (2018) “were troubled by the burgeoning use of social media to curate a public self through idealized eyes, particularly on Instagram” (p. 165). They argued that women were pressured to conform to gender norms, and their photos came under more intense scrutiny than their male counterparts. However, they also found that social media held a lot of power for women to construct their own identities and defy gender and cultural norms if they chose. The images that they studied showed a relatively more diverse representation of women than mainstream media, including the magazines and websites previously mentioned. Gray et al. (2018) found that women’s social media posts were outside of the traditional view of the outdoors:

It is striking over 50% of all posts were about being together in nature. This goes against the traditional ‘rugged individualism’ that permeates the often hypermasculine world of outdoor pursuits.... Of those posts of women together in nature, 57% included children....

It is also important to note that 34% of the images of women being together outdoors included women of color (p. 159).

The traditional, masculine ethos of being alone in nature does not necessarily fit the ways in which women and minorities connect to the environment. Community and family are often a very important aspect of life for women and POC, and the idea of ‘rugged individualism’ may not be appealing to these groups (Flores & Kuhn, 2018). Social media gives individual the option to portray this new outdoor ethos if they choose.

Indeed, it seems that social media has the power to provide more representation for traditionally under-represented groups in the outdoors. There is great potential to build a unique social world specifically for women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, Native and

Indigenous groups, intersectional identities, and others. Instagram has numerous online communities, including @blackwomenoutdoors, @she_explores, and @unlikelyhikers. Not only do many of these communities focus on dispelling cultural norms and stereotypes, they are places of empowerment for many who may not traditionally feel welcomed into the outdoor environment.

Gray et al. (2018) found that many posts from outdoor women had an inspiring impact on the online community. Women would begin to see themselves as someone who inspires others. They found that “women have the opportunity through social media connectivity to offer an alternative path forward or broaden the range of representations,” (p. 166) which may provide access for others to see an alternate ideal or model of an individual’s place in the culture of the outdoors.

Social media is already used by a majority of the population, especially among youth. Many individuals across a wide range of populations use social media daily, especially teens and young adults (Houge Mackenzie et al., 2017; Schwab et al., 2020). “Access to smartphones [is] nearly equal across race and ethnicity (94-95%), and very similar across income levels” (Schwab et al., 2020, p. 31). This ubiquitous use of technology and social media among teens and young populations provides potential for a more diverse population in the outdoors. Gray et al. (2018) found that social media displayed nearly 20% more diversity than regular media. With more diversity in race, ethnicity, and income level online, they have more potential to find a community they feel comfortable in or post about themselves and their activities. Both Schwab et al. (2020) and Houge Mackenzie et al. (2017) explored how this wide platform could be used to inform and advertise to underserved and underrepresented populations to encourage outdoor participation. While these groups face many barriers to participation, including living in ‘park

poor' areas or not having a vehicle to travel to different destinations, there is opportunity to use social media as an educational tool, providing resources and maps, as well as multi-language advertising about outdoor recreation and participation (Houge Mackenzie et al., 2017; Schwab et al., 2020).

Other groups are using the power of social media to connect and form their own communities. The group Latino Outdoors uses social media and a strong online presence to boost their outreach and spread the word about their programs, which are focused on connecting Latinx outdoor recreationalists (Flores & Kuhn, 2018). Through its nearly ubiquitous use, social media is presenting a platform for more voices to be heard, new social world to be formed, and the narrative of what the outdoor enthusiast looks like to be re-written.

Film

With the rise of the internet and social media, there has also been a rise in digital video sharing. YouTube is one of the most common social media platforms used by teens and youth (Schwab et al., 2020). Platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo have helped spur the democratization of film and provide niche films to a wider market. Traditionally, outdoor films, particularly those focused around adventure sports such as rock climbing, have been obscure and out of the view of mainstream media (Dumont, 2017). However, in recent years, outdoor and adventure sports films are becoming more mainstream. Lowell and Mortimer's (2017) *The Dawn Wall* was one of the first climbing films to reach mainstream popularity, as the ascent itself was broadcast on national news and the film became available on Netflix (Dumont, 2017). In 2019, *Free Solo*, a film about Alex Honnold's rope-less ascent of Yosemite's defining rock face, El Capitan, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature (Chin & Vasarhelyi, 2018). It catapulted rock climbing into mainstream film media and reached a wider audience than

traditional rock climbing or other outdoor films.

However, these films show a much less diverse image of the outdoors. In *The Dawn Wall*, both climbers are white men with significant outdoor experience. Alex Honnold, the star of *Free Solo*, is also a white man. These movies focus on exploits of man conquering nature, completing extraordinary physical feats. They perpetuate a rugged, masculine outdoor ethos and feature few women. With the exception of Beth Rodden's successes in *The Dawn Wall*, the women in these movies are less often portrayed as active participants in the sport, regardless of their actual participation and climbing prowess. Even Rodden is used in the film as a key to Caldwell's motivation and ultimate success in the Dawn Wall ascent (Lowell & Mortimer, 2017).

Such portrayals are typical of the outdoor film industry. Frohlick's (2005) study of films shown at mountain film festivals concluded that most of the films featured the same narrative. They "echo and reformulate older versions of the hegemonic male adventure hero – white, heterosexual, bourgeois, athletic, courageous, risk taking, imperialist, and unmarked" (p. 178-179). There was little representation in the film festivals of women as main characters, or even as filmmakers. "Men are by far the majority of filmmakers, speakers, and subjects starring in the films" (Frohlick, 2005, p. 178).

Overtime, however, awareness has shifted, and other filmmakers are beginning to use platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo to have their voices heard. A typical mountain or adventure film festival catalogue will now hold not only the standard adventurous, risk-taking, adrenaline seeking white man, but also other narratives (Banff Centre, 2020). Stories of women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other minority communities are becoming more common. Many short films have won accolades at film festivals that depict these diverse and

powerful new groups. The film *Venture Out* highlights a company that provides backpacking trips exclusively for those within the LGBTQ+ community, especially transgender folks and youth (DiNicola et al., 2020). The popular climbing film tour, Reel Rock, has begun to feature women and people of color more prominently in their tour. A quick search on the internet will find a variety of films, created by and about individuals from multiple identities and all walks of life. The media story is beginning to change as more filmmakers gain a voice and an audience from online-based video sharing platforms.

Many studies have found great discrepancies between the representation of women, POC, and minorities in the media compared to their actual participation rates. This underrepresentation not only creates barriers for entry for underserved populations, but perpetuates a rugged, individualistic, masculine stereotype of outdoor culture. However, limited research into the effects of social media and online content-sharing platforms show a wave of new voices that are beginning to take back the narrative. Women and minorities are able to have their voices heard, join communities and create social worlds, and shift the narrative to one more focused on the things they value, such as community and family.

Discussion

Traditional forms of media portray women and minorities much less than their white male counterparts, and often the participation seen is passive instead of active. For decades, this has portrayed a message about the outdoors and who belongs in it. These publications and media have reinforced a white masculine ethos that encourages the conquering of nature and stark individualism in the outdoors (Bogardus, 2012; Gray et al., 2018; McNeil et al., 2012). Analysis of traditional media revealed that images often portrayed white people 94% or more of the time. Women were often portrayed 30% of the time or less. People of color were shown more often

portrayed in group settings, rarely without the presence of a white individual (Godtman Kling et al., 2018; Lee Frazer & Anderson, 2018).

This imagery is not representative of actual outdoor participation. Outdoor Industry (2019) found that participants in outdoor recreation were 53.9% male and 73.7% Caucasian. As mainstream media, including magazines and advertising, perpetuates an image of the outdoors as a largely white, masculine space, it discourages minorities and women from participating in outdoor recreation. Viewing the outdoors as a ‘white people’ space, the lack of role models in the outdoors and lack of exposure as a child were some of the main reasons for a lack of minority participation in outdoor recreation (Dorwart et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2019). If the main media that individuals see does not show someone who ‘looks like me,’ it could have negative impacts in participation in outdoor recreation.

Magazines and advertisers need to continue to promote diversity within their publications. Slow changes are happening as awareness begins to increase about the lack of diversity in the outdoors (Zink & Kane, 2015), but companies should be conscientious of who their media portrays, if it is representative, and if it is reaching their full demographic.

There is increasing evidence that magazines, print sources, advertisements, and web pages are not the main sources of media anymore, nor are they the most popular. Social media has become wide spread and is becoming a platform where more people can share their voices. It also seems to more accurately reflect actual participation in outdoor recreation. Gray et al. (2018) found that 30% of images were of people of color, which aligns with Outdoor Industry’s (2019) findings. As more individuals share their images and stories on social media platforms, there is more opportunity for underrepresented groups to find representation and others who look like them. There are communities and social worlds developing that previously didn’t have a

platform. Film and video are becoming increasingly diverse ways to share stories. However, gender norms and stereotypes, as well as increased scrutiny for females on social media platforms, can still perpetuate a white-masculine outdoor environment (Gray et al., 2018). Further work is needed to create a culture within the outdoors that is open and inviting for everyone.

Conclusion

From early in the history of the outdoors, the strong white man – independent, solitary, a conqueror of nature – was the image of the outdoor community. Adventure sports and recreation perpetuated this image, creating stark underrepresentation in media and discouraging participation by minority communities. Now, the internet and social media is beginning to give a voice to those who may not have had one in the past. This new media is democratizing mainstream communications and giving new creators an opportunity to share their stories. New groups are finding their voice.

Representation problems continue even within social media. Women continue to be scrutinized and post staged photos of themselves to create their own desirable public image. Groups focusing on black individuals have dramatically less followers and exposure than more popular, often white-washed accounts. Film festivals still celebrate mostly male figures accomplishing risky, adrenaline-filled athletic feats. This may be due to greater participation in these activities by white males, due to a historic culture where they dominated the space. As Martin (2004) mentioned, media can have a reciprocal relationship with the culture, being both a product and a perpetuator of it. White males have traditionally found images of themselves in the outdoors, and therefore may feel more encouraged and welcome to participate.

The influence of media is persistent, wide-spread, and powerful. Media influences the

daily lives of nearly every American. It will disseminate inequitable information as long as those inequities persist. With a conscious effort by advertisers, magazines, and companies, some of these barriers and inequities can be corrected. Social media is also proving to be an increasingly powerful tool to give traditionally underrepresented groups a voice. It allows for more content creators, more filmmakers, and more stories to be shared. Representation in the media encourages participation by giving individuals role models, exposure and changing the narrative that the outdoors is a 'white space.' Women, people of color, and other minorities are out there in nature: they just need a platform for their voices to be heard.

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