

Social media in parks and conservation areas: A case study of “virtual visitors” from the Facebook page of Yellowstone National Park

Zachary D. Miller, Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University, USA, zdm9@psu.edu

Wayne A. Freimund, Ph.D., Clemson University, USA

Social media has fundamentally the way the people engage with organizations, including agencies like the National Park Service (NPS). Many organizations are trying to benefit from the huge number of people that can be reached through social media. However, we know almost nothing about the “virtual visitors” that engage with park and conservation area organizations on social media. In this presentation, we discuss some of the first empirical research conducted on virtual visitors, including their characteristics, motivations, and preferences (Miller & Freimund, 2017). Additionally, there is a perception that social media is a great tool for engaging with younger populations who may not find parks as relevant. This research explores virtual visitors’ demographics, motivations, activities and engagements on social media. It also explores differences between millennial (born 1981 to 2000) and non-millennial virtual visitors related to these concepts.

Background

Social media in the NPS began in 2011 when the director issued a memorandum providing guidance on the purpose of social media in the organization (Jarvis, 2011). In this memorandum, social media would be used in the NPS for: 1) interpretation and education, 2) civic engagement and public involvement, and 3) communicating the NPS mission to a broader society. The powerful potential of social media tools is demonstrated by the number of people a single post can reach. For instance, a single post by Yellowstone National Park reached over 13 *million* people (Miller & Freimund, 2017). However, with this novel and powerful communication tool comes many questions about its use.

Facebook is the most dominant social media platform, with over 70% of all internet users registered on the site (Duggan et al., 2015). Facebook users tend to engage with the platform daily, and use continues to grow in frequency (Duggan et al., 2015). Although originally intended for college students, the Facebook population has diversified in respect to age. For instance, 31% of people age 65 and older in the US use the platform (Duggan et al., 2015). As opposed to Twitter and Instagram, Facebook allows users to choose their level of engagement with their peers, organizations, and businesses (Miller & Freimund, 2016).

Research on motivations for engaging with organizations on Facebook is lacking (McCorkindale & Distaso, 2013). However, the limited research that exists suggests that socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information seeking are key reasons for engagement (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Additionally, expression of support and information gathering were also noted as key motivations for engagement (McCorkindale & Distaso, 2013). None of this previous research was related to park and conservation areas.

Kanter and Fine (2010) outline several different ways organizations can communicate with people via social media. This includes three types: 1) the fortress, 2) transactional, and 3) transparent. Fortress approaches include age organizations that have strict protocols and

include an “us” and “them” mentality. This results in a unidirectional approach to communication, where information is projected from the organization, but is not received from the outside. Transactional approaches are more fluid in communication, but still view outsiders of the organization as serving a purpose, such as furthering a mission or providing donations. A transparent approach views everyone, including those outside the organization, as helping to define and achieve the goals of the organization.

Millennials are a digitally savvy segment of the population born between 1981 and 2000. They have markedly different preferences for interacting with organizations online (McCorkindale & Distaso, 2013). Understanding these differences can help organizations and agencies create more engagement with this important group.

Methods

We sampled people who “like” the official Yellowstone National Park Facebook page by creating a post on the wall of the page with a link to a survey. This method obtained 1,610 completed surveys from a population of about 815,000. Comparisons showed that the sample was reflective of “engaged” virtual visitors. The survey focuses on motivations, engagement behaviors, and communication preferences. We used data reduction techniques (i.e. principal components analysis) to explore the structure of the data. We also used independent *t*-tests to assess differences between millennials and non-millennial virtual visitors.

Results

The analyses showed that virtual visitors had three motivations for engaging with the page, which were called social, affective, and education and entertainment motivations. Millennials had significantly lower social and affective motivations. We also found two forms of engagement, including passive and active engagement. Active engagement was much less common. Overall, millennials were significantly less engaged for both passive and active forms of engagement. Patterns of communication preferences (see Kanter & Fine, 2010) were similar. Overall, virtual visitors preferred higher levels of engagement, and disliked forms of communication that were strictly user-generated. Millennials significantly differed on two forms of communication preferences.

Discussion

A huge majority (93%) of virtual visitors had already visited Yellowstone National Park, and thus were very similar to in-park visitors. This suggests that virtual visitors are using social media as a reflection tool as part of the multi-phasic recreation experience. Compared against the NPS goals for social media, it appears there is room for improvement in achieving other goals, such as communicating the NPS mission to a broader audience. We provide several suggestions, including on-site social media engagement, as a way to do this. Additionally, the collective results of this study suggest millennials are less engaged than non-millennials on the social media page, which is a counterintuitive finding. Several suggestions for increasing millennial engagement via social media include promoting “free agents” and providing millennials with opportunities to tell their stories via the social media platform. Future research suggestions include refining and developing basic information on virtual visitors, techniques for improving outreach to underserved or desirable populations, understanding park managers use and perceptions of social media, and merging past research and management techniques with social media.

References

- Duggan, M., Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2015). *Social Media Update 2014*. Pew Research Center, January, 18.
- Jarvis, J. (2011). *Social Media – Interim Policy* [Memorandum]. Washington, D.C.: Department of Interior: National Park Service.
- Kanter, B., & Fine, A. (2010). *The Networked Nonprofit: Connecting with Social Media to Drive Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- McCorkindale, T., & Distaso, M. W. (2013). How millennials are engaging and building relationships with organizations on Facebook. *Journal of Social Media in Society*, 2(1), 66–87.
- Miller, Z. D., & Freimund, W. (2017). Virtual visitors: Facebook users and national parks. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 35(3), 136–150.
- Park, N., Kee, K. F., & Valenzuela, S. (2009). Being immersed in social networking environment: Facebook groups, uses and gratifications, and social outcomes. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 12(6), 729.