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Understanding Millennials' Motivations to Visit State Parks: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

State Park's scenic stretches of flowing rivers and large lakes are popular for canoeing, kayaking, and tubing, but how much of these interests' millennials are not much explored. This exploratory study aims to understand millennials' motivations to visit state parks and the influence of social media pictures of such outdoor activities. The push-pull theory is being used to understand the motivational factors such as sightseeing, relaxation, and amenities using secondary data. Preliminary results suggest a big gap in state parks' information reaching millennials' via social media. The study is unique as it focuses on millennials' motivations to visit state parks, which is not much studied.

Keywords: State Park**,** Millennials, Millennials Motivation, Outdoor Attractions, Social Media

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a worldwide decline in national park visitation. The recent data on annual visitation by National Park Services (n.d.) provide evidence of the declining numbers of visitors in state parks. Whether it is based on the different categories of visitors or types of state parks, there is negative growth in every category as compared to the previous year, see Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of visitors by category of visitors - 2017 to 2018

	2018	**2017**	**Difference**	**% Difference**
Recreation Visits	318,211,833	330,882,751	-12,670,918	-3.98
Recreation Visitor Hours	1,401,420,191	1,446,970,688	-45,550,497	-3.25
Non-Recreation Visits	170,330,751	172,112,736	-1,781,985	-1.05
Non-Recreation Visitor Hours	92,456,496	94,678,396	-2,221,900	-2.40
Concessioner Lodging Overnights	3,106,897	3,437,279	-330,382	-10.63
Concessioner Camping Overnights	1,354,739	1,447,861	-93,122	-6.87
Tent Camper Overnights	3,539,141	3,734,119	-194,978	-5.51
Recreation Vehicle (RV) Overnights	2,474,784	2,460,834	13,950	0.56
Backcountry Overnights	1,922,028	2,074,773	-152,745	-7.95
Miscellaneous Overnights (Groups and Aboard Boats)	1,518,566	1,610,127	-91,561	-6.03
Non-Recreation Overnights	34,612	38,752	-4,140	-11.96
Total Overnight Stays	13,950,759	14,803,755	-852,996	-6.11

Source: Adapted from Annual Visitation Summary Report of National Park Services

With an aging population and constantly increasing demand on the natural environment, the need to engage a technology-driven, young generation in conservation and nature is more important than before (Ramsay, Dodds, Furtado, Mykhayletska, Kirichenko, & Majedian, 2017). By encouraging younger people to connect with nature and learn about the environment, it is expected that state parks will see a spike in the number of visitors. Millennials have entered or are in the process of entering into the workforce and are incredibly technologically savvy. These two factors position this demographic to influence economic and tourist-related trends. An understanding of their motivations will help better planning by the state parks.

Millennials have grown up in a technology-driven era, which has resulted in this generation highly dependent on it (Moscardo, Murphy, & Benckendorff, 2011). Today, the use of social media is so common that the internet has become a platform for users to share information with others (Li & Wang, 2011; Thevenot, 2007). The increasing popularity of social media allows users to share blogs, photos, videos, and reviews with other users, which influences those user's decision making (Gretzel, 2006; White & White, 2007). Thus, it is intuitively assumed that millennial's decision-making can be influenced by making better use of social media marketing strategies such as appropriate platforms and images on social media (Ramsay et al., 2017).

The annual visitation data from National Park Services (n.d.) suggest that except for international historic sites, all the other 17 types of state parks have negative growth in the number of visitors to the parks, see Table 2. Just one example from Pennsylvania, Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site, suggests that the traffic count has drastically reduced from the previous year, see Table 3 (National Park Services, n.d.).

Established in 1927, Cook Forest State Park is an 8,500-acre Pennsylvania state park in Clarion, Forest and Jefferson Counties and has been identified as a National Natural Landmark with its stands of old-growth forest. A scenic 13-mile stretch of the Clarion River flows through Cook Forest State Park and is popular for canoeing, kayaking, and tubing. Cook Forest also offers recreational activities such as hiking, biking, camping, horseback riding, and several more in addition to those stated. For the 2017 year, The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DNCR) estimated that around 492,460 tourists visited Cook Forest, which shows its economic impact on the region (Pennsylvania DNCR). Cook Forest has more than six colleges and universities within two hours of travel time by road. Because of this proximity with universities in Pennsylvania, this study utilizes student populations as surrogates for millennials. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand the motivations and influences of millennials to visit state parks (e.g., Cook Forest).

Literature Review

Social media marketing is a form of Internet marketing that utilizes social networking websites as a marketing tool (Punithavathi & Vasudevan, 2018). Social media is reshaping how tourists find their next place to visit. Social media has changed tourism in a way that marketers and the destination itself no longer have control over how people view the destinations (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013). Studies have been conducted to investigate the extent to which social media appear in search engine results in the context of travel-related searches. Social media constitute a substantial part of the search results, search engines direct travelers to social media

sites (Xiang, & Gretzel, 2010). The role and use of social media play a huge part in decision-making when an individual chooses a destination of travel (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013).

Table 2. Comparison of visitors by type of parks - 2017 to 2018

	2018	**2017**	**Difference**	**% Difference**
International Historic Site	12,001	11,872	129	1.07
National Battlefield	1,857,039	1,964,826	-107,787	-5.80
National Battlefield Park	3,531,060	3,662,129	-131,069	-3.71
National Historic Site	8,664,509	9,668,115	-1,003,606	-11.58
National Historical Park	33,161,620	35,241,069	-2,079,449	-6.27
National Lakeshore	2,711,828	2,662,737	49,091	1.81
National Memorial	38,111,959	40,645,496	-2,533,537	-6.65
National Military Park	4,347,012	4,698,928	-351,916	-8.10
National Monument	22,180,695	23,332,194	-1,151,499	-5.19
National Park	85,878,500	87,610,269	-1,731,769	-2.02
National Parkway	29,846,041	31,415,912	-1,569,871	-5.26
National Preserve	3,427,318	3,446,867	-19,549	-0.57
National Recreation Area	51,022,484	52,107,818	-1,085,334	-2.13
National Reserve	142,250	130,276	11,974	8.42
National River	4,915,331	5,003,218	-87,887	-1.79
National Seashore	18,325,744	18,472,367	-146,623	-0.80
National Wild & Scenic River	1,385,082	1,473,844	-88,762	-6.41
Park (Other)	8,691,360	9,334,814	-643,454	-7.40

Source: Adapted from Annual Visitation Summary Report of National Park Services

Table 3. Traffic Count: Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site (June)

	2018	**2017**	**Difference**	**% Difference**
At Dry Run Road Trailhead	2,409	2,677	-268	-11.12
At Main Entrance	1,866	2,489	-623	-33.39
At Picnic Area	2,317	2,666	-349	-15.06
At Staple Bend Tunnel	1,748	2,138	-390	-22.31

Source: Adapted from Annual Visitation Summary Report of National Park Services

The overall image tourists and residents have of a destination can greatly influence how these individuals experience the destination, and whether they are inclined to return or recommend the destination to others. The overall impression is a key factor in visitors' decision-making, but other environmental factors, such as scenery, climate, and friendliness of locals, are

also salient when determining destination image and rate of return (Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017). Adventure and excitement were found to be strongly correlated to visitors returning to a destination. Cleanliness, safety, and hospitality were also strong factors when visitors considered returning to a location (Akin, Shaw, & Spartz, 2015). Experiential marketing is becoming a new trend. Attractions such as kayaking, hiking, biking, and camping are popular among millennials if marketed appropriately (Henry, 2016). For the tourism industry, it is important to convey and communicate the identity of a place using the tourist destination website. According to Perez and Del Bosque (2014), identity can be conveyed through visual manifestation. Thus, similarly, a tourist destination website is influenced by the identity of the place. This link between identity and website is potentially useful for marketers as it can represent a dimension of difference that is impossible for competitors to duplicate (Foroudi, Nazl, Ageeva, Foroudi, Dennis, & Melewar, 2018).

Through websites such as Flickr, users can share pictures of a destination visited, and while sharing the photos, flicker users have the ability to add a geotag to the pictures. A geotag will allow other users to not only see the pictures that are uploaded but also see the exact location of those pictures. These technological features help users to visit specific destinations (Wood, Guerry, Silver, & Lacayo, 2013). Research has shown that repeat visitors to a location are more likely to return than first-time visitors, therefore repeat visitors use social media and travel websites to share and promote their experiences and make recommendations (Akin, Shaw, & Spartz, 2015).

In a study, Kesterson (2013) found that university students in the millennial age range in Arkansas were "Highly Likely to Visit" State Parks. In total, the results showed that out of 424 students surveyed, 320 were likely or highly likely to visit a state park in Arkansas. These findings suggest that millennials travel to state parks can be used to fulfill the need for adventure without being tied to history. Millennials are defined broadly as being tech-savvy and using technology when making travel plans and ideas. Marketing to this demographic using such a medium may be a way to overcome barriers and attract this key tourist segment who in turn may help increase environmental protection (Ramsay et al., 2017). Nikjoo and Ketabi (2015) found that tourists who identify their vacation as an "escape" tend to travel to places with a more relaxing and comfortable atmosphere. Other push factors (factors that create customer demand) influence include destinations with recreational and cultural opportunities for knowledge and the perceived social status of the individual (Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015). Thus, this study proposes to answer two broad research questions:
1. What are the motivations for millennials to visit state parks?
2. What influences millennial's decision to visit state parks?

Methodology

This exploratory study utilized a descriptive research design to understand and describe millennial's behavior and influences towards outdoor activities. A survey consisting of 21 questions was adapted from literature (Kesterson, 2013). Images on outdoor activities were shown to the respondents in some questions. Respondents showed their interest in the outdoor activities portrayed in the images/picture on a five-point Likert scale. This survey was developed

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using Qualtric's trial account and was disseminated by posting the link on Facebook pages of the authors and their colleagues to reach prospective participants. The goal of spreading the survey in this manner was to reach as many students as possible, and gain at least 100 usable responses for pilot testing. One hundred and three (103) people took the survey within a month. Multiple regression was used to analyze the data.

Data Analysis

Twenty (20) responses were disregarded from data analysis. Thirteen (13) responses were eliminated because respondents gave their grade level as "Other," indicating that these respondents were probably not within the demographic group the authors aimed to study. Four responses were eliminated because the data were incomplete and could not be fully analyzed. Three responses were eliminated because the respondents indicated that they have never visited Cook Forest. These responses could not be included because their input would not give a clear image of the motivations of millennials to visit the specific location in the study. Multiple regression and correlation matrix were used to analyze the remaining data.

Results and Discussion

Results were compiled to assess the effects of each variable on key areas affecting millennials' motivation and influences to visit Cook Forest. One of the key findings suggests that there is a big gap in State Parks information reaching the millennials' even though they use social media (less than 15%). The results from the pilot study show that most millennials' despite being close to a State Park, did not even visit it, which showed that respondents were least interested in outdoor activities in state parks (less than 30%). Most of them did not show a positive response towards images showing State Park and outdoor events. Due to the above reasons, limited results from the pilot study are discussed below.

Table 4. Regression Influence of Social Media Posts & Revisit Intention

	Coefficients	**Standard Error**	**t-stat**	**p-value**	**Lower 95%**	**Upper 95%**
Intercept	2.92	0.45	6.47	6.89E	2.02	3.81
SM-3	0.32	0.2	1.62	0.1	-0.07	0.7

For example, see the regression analysis results in Table 4, with the variable Influence of Social Media Posts and Revisit Intention, as the test variable. This regression resulted in a P-value of 0.161, which is not statistically significant; it did result in a positive coefficient of 0.315. The result does not support the assumption that increased and more focused use of social media would likely positively influence tourism to Cook Forest. Another finding suggests that a high number of respondents reported Instagram as their most used social media platform (72%). Responsiveness of individuals to posts such as the number of interactions or likelihood of sharing a post with others could be analyzed to determine which forms of social media are the

best for influencing tourists by tourist destinations. The regression from the pilot data does not support the assumption that increasing the social media presence of state parks, would help generate more tourism among millennials, this could be due to the lack of the appropriate number of sample size.

Conclusion and Implications

The pilot study results will inform a larger study to be conducted at a later date. This pilot study revealed a big gap in state parks information reaching millennials' even with social media. Though the findings need to be validated through further study, the current findings suggest that state parks need to develop a better social media marketing strategy to attract millennials. Platforms such as Instagram is more popular among millennials than Facebook.

This study has huge implications on the government exchequer as revenue earned from state parks is direct earnings for states. The current status of visitors is in decline, which can be improved by utilizing social media and influencing the young generation such as millennials.

Limitations to be considered when assessing these results are fourfold. First, data collection was limited to students as this was a pilot study. Second, not all students were willing to participate in a survey that they knew little about, which shows Cook Forest needs to increase awareness among millennials in their local community. Third, due to the use of Qualtric's trial account, not all features were available to be used in this survey, including the inability to access more than 100 responses. Fourth, there were time and resource constraints to design the questionnaire and collect data as it was a class project.

Further research could be done to find out the responsiveness of tourists between various forms of social media, frequency, and types of recreational/vacation-based activities that millennials prefer to engage in.

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