

The Media Influence on National Park Experience

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Abstract

Within this research paper, the topic of media influence on national park experience and attendance will be discussed. Through defining necessary terms throughout the paper, the main argument of social media positive force on national parks is made. Through media, the National Park Service can adequately disclose information, educate the public, and form relationships that lead to repeating visitors. All of this will be discussed in the paper that follows.

The Media Influence on National Park Experience

Every year, millions of tourists go to national parks. The natural beauty and potential for adventure outside of the normal draws people in daily. With the introduction of social media outlets, people's expected experience is different. Throughout this paper, the topic of social media's influence on people's attendance and expected experience will be dissected. First, the topic of national parks will be discussed. Next, the media will be defined and its benefits will be discussed. Last, media's use in national parks will be highlighted. National parks experience has been shaped by the introduction of certain media outlets and social media.

National Parks

Background Information

Before analyzing any data, one must answer the question : "what is a national park?" By definition, a national park is "an area of special scenic, historical, or scientific importance set aside and maintained by a national government and in the U.S. by an act of Congress." (National Park) In simple terms, national parks are any area under federal care. Federally protected land was a project of Woodrow Wilson in 1906. He created the National Park Service while Ulysses S. Grant established the first ever national park, which happened to be Yellowstone National Park. The U.S. National Park Service has been entrusted with the care of the vegetation, wildlife, and the traveler's experience. These national parks range from 13.5 acres to .2 acres in size and wildlife can call over 419 federally protected areas home. Through secure entrances, the Park Service can easily record traffic coming into the park. According to the National Park Service

website, 318,211,833 people visited the parks in 2018. (Frequently) In comparison, the number of visitors in 2000 was 285,891,273 people. (Frequently)

Common Experience

National Parks are highly regarded areas from cultures around the world. “More recently, the tourism market is attracted to immersive, secluded, and adventure- driven activities to nature based destinations.” (Thomsen) For adventure based activities, national parks are the perfect destinations. Some of these experiences include watching Old Faithful blow, raft through the Grand Canyon, admire the redwoods in Sequoia, or hike in Zion. The spread of the parks allows for different experiences every time. From the coasts of California to the tip of Florida to the top of Maine, the national parks contain every demographic from dusty deserts to snow capped mountains to lush greenery. “Wolves, grizzly bears, orcas, and eagles still rule the animal kingdom” (Lomax) which allows for people to fully immerse themselves in nature. Besides the scenery and wildlife, people run to national parks for their own health. People who frequent national parks for exercise and leisure have longer lives, are less likely to struggle with obesity, and have lower anxiety and depression levels. (Leahy) In the study in 2002 by Tinsley, Tinsley, and Croskeys, they wrote that visitors seek “... a sense of immediate pleasure and the opportunity to engage in a simple, non- challenging activities without the need for a complicated planning or the necessity of a long- term commitment.” (pg. 217) The national parks allow for simple activities such as hiking, fishing, and camping. While the need for complicated planning is not necessary, people who travel for longer periods of time reach towards the media for hints on what to do and where to go.

Media

What is Media?

In a general sense, media is any connection between two or more people or groups. This can be through direct dialogue, mass media, or, in today's society, through social media. (Miller) has broken down media into four characteristics. "First, social media platforms are web-based applications. Second, social media is centered around user generated content. Third, user-specific profiles for both individuals and groups are created and managed by a service. Lastly, social media services connect people to networks of other people and groups." Through social media, the term "virtual visitor" has been introduced into society. This term refers to any person or device that subscribes or follows a federally protected media platform. Online accounts have the chance to both actively and passively interact with other accounts. Active interaction looks like commenting or posting, while passive interaction is where an account simply "scrolls" or views posts. Media posts give insight to people's wants, plans, passions, and potential behaviors. The words they search and the accounts they follow give a look into the adventures they want.

Travel Influencers and Websites

Online, people have access to many resources outside of the National Park Service to plan their trips and receive information that pertains to visitors. Every year, the average number of visitors is rising in part due to "available information and services online." (Thomsen) 64% of visitors mentioned an online blog while speaking on the planning of their trip. (Thomsen) People born in the 70's or before often rely on their personal connections while people in their 80's on tend to rely on online blogs. (Thomsen) Social media is a place to showcase one's travels and online blogs have become a key player in sharing travel experiences with others. (Thomsen)

With the snap of a camera, people can geotag their location and share their experiences to the masses.

One of the biggest influences on social media trends lies in the hands of opinion leaders. These often come in the form travel influencers, people who post in exchange for deals on travel or who post about travel, and vloggers, people who video their travels in an effort to have a video blog. Two YouTube channels have successfully figured out this lifestyle. Kara and Nate are a married couple who travel the world using “travel hacks” and have gone to over 100 countries. (YouTube) Currently, they have over 1.37 million subscribers who tune in roughly once a week to watch uploaded videos of Kara and Nate’s travels. (YouTube) Another high subscriber channel is The Bucket List Family. This is a family who sold everything in an effort to travel the world and have the most immersive lifestyle possible. (YouTube) They currently have 1.04 million subscribers. (YouTube) These couples and families provide a sense of wonder and motivate others to leave behind the normal to chase a wonderful adventure. Because of these types of Instagram accounts and YouTube channels, travel has become a more common desire in the average American’s life. This can also be seen in the recent “van- life” movement. Because people desire a lifestyle of adventure and travel, the national parks have seen a surge in visitors.

Benefits of Media

Audience Size

Through social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, national parks can reach larger audiences than ever before. There are 3.5 billion people with social media accounts worldwide and the average American spends around 114 minutes daily on social media platforms. (STATISTICA) This gives opinion leaders and national parks an ample amount of

resources to reach people. Concerning national parks, the majority of interactions - 93% - have visitors who are Caucasian, well educated, and young to middle- aged. (Miller) In an effort to reach the masses in real time, Yellowstone National Park has implemented media tools such as Snapchat filters and “instameets” over Instagram. (Miller) “However, a bigger audience does not mean an intended audience, nor such engagement always have the desired effect.” (Miller) Just because one has the outlet for connection does not always mean that the connection will be active. Outlets such as Instagram and Facebook can not give an accurate number of how many people who passively interact with the account and the number of people who simply see an advertisement. These outlets give a correct number of the people who interact with posts or of followers. Because of this, marketers can not give specific demographics for people who see media posts, social or traditional.

Interaction with Visitors

The purpose of every social media is to bring connection. The founders of social media networks saw the need for connection online when in person connection might not be possible. While people want to connect with their close friends, they also seek information from opinion leaders and the final company. Through things such as Instagram Lives and around the clock access to media, people can ask questions or give their opinion. The National Park Service uses media to interact with potential visitors before their trip by answering any questions and giving information on what is in that specific park. During their trip, the National Park Service uses signage, brochures, and group messages to deliver information or time- sensitive news.

Interaction with visitors is not limited to before their visit and during their visit. It extends into their post visit. “Post- trip communication via travel sites and social media sites can be a

catalyst for trip reflection and sharing of experiences. This in turn can translate to a return visit 10 years later.” (Thomsen) Through communication post trip, people can continue to discuss their experiences while planning for the next visit to a national park. This also allows for people to hear other’s experiences in a word of mouth type knowledge. (Thomsen)

Media in National Parks

Outdoor versus Online

In today’s business driven world, people might not make the time to actually pack up and go to a national park. When they cannot bring themselves to the parks for any number of reasons, the park’s media team brings the park to the people. This allows families a similar experience from the comfort of their own homes. On the National Park Service’s Facebook page, they often are posting videos from different parks, educating people on wildlife and greenery, and even shares animal jokes. (FACEBOOK) Amid the COVID- 19 pandemic, the National Park Service decided to close down certain areas to public entry. Despite this closure, the National Park Service is expertly handling the situation. They have been posting how people can bring the experiences of the parks to their very own home and offering a “Create your own National Park” kit for children quarantined in their homes. (FACEBOOK) On the National Park Service’s Instagram, viewers are taken down the Blue Ridge Parkway while park rangers are answering questions asked by the followers. While the National Park Service has done an amazing job giving a look into the national parks, it does not come close to the outdoor experience one gains by going to the parks. The benefits that come with the outdoor experience include increased physical activity, a social experience, and better mental health. (Leahy) (Thomsen)

National Park Service’s Media Presence

In 2007, Leahy ran a study in an effort to see the potential that media has on those groups so she advertised a walking trail in Acadia National Park. Leahy used methods of media such as brochure, a “hike of the week” in a popular tourist newspaper, a TV public service announcement, internet ads, posters, and bus placards. She came to the conclusion after interviewing many people before and after the media that the media that visitors don’t have to interact with attract the most for target markets. Leahy did not look for a dialogue but simply to educate the masses about the trail. (Leahy) Today, the National Park Service recognizes the desire for social media platforms and has over 240 media platforms to reach audiences. Due to their online presence, 45% of tourists stated that the main reason for visiting a national park was because national parks are well known even to the point of one tourist stating “If I don’t come to Yellowstone, why would I travel to the Western United States?” (Thomsen)

The National Park Service puts time and money towards the media in an effort to educate the masses, provide a glimpse of life inside the parks to city bound people, and create jobs. (Miller) Social media networks give the National Park Service a central communication network, allowing them to transmit time sensitive information to people within the parks. Media also provides a platform to educate the general public. “In 2019, TravelStorysGPS, an organization that produces travel apps for destinations and works offline as an audio guide, is piloting a program catering to tourists who visit National Parks.” (Thomsen) This education is passed from online to word of mouth and impacts the visitors behaviors.

Visitors Behavior

When educated properly, people behave differently. Concerns about crowding, destruction of nature, and dangerous wildlife behaviors are valid. Being improperly educated can

bring overcrowding and hurt to the local economy. (KRUCZEK) Research has confirmed that the behavior of visitors is just as important as the number of visitors. (KRUCZEK) Parks around the country, and even the world, have been closed down for short periods of time in order to clean the natural life and allow regeneration of the wildlife. (KRUCZEK) The perception of travel also plays a large role. In Thomsen and Tenny's research, they discovered that Chinese cultures see international travel to the states as a status symbol. (Thomsen) Because of this, these tourists are more likely to care for the environment and leave their space better than they found it. While the National Park Service uses social media platforms to do this, they also use more traditional forms of media such as newsletters, sign posts, and pamphlets. (Thomsen) (Leahy) Through the media, the National Park Service can educate visitors on how to behave in the terrain and even protect visitors. National Parks use these media to alert of fires, flooding, or dangerous land formations so that visitors can beware those areas.

Conclusion

This paper did not discuss the media influences to differing races, genders, or ages. While there is plenty of research to identify these obstacles, the topic is not discussed in this paper.

In conclusion, the media has an influence on every aspect of people's lives, including national parks. The National Park Service uses their media for entertainment and for education. The average consumer will use media for entertainment, education, and community. Media has raised awareness for national parks and their infrastructure while entertainment to the masses through live videos and online activities. Because of the Covid- 19 pandemic, national parks have seen a significant decline in attendance, but because of this, the parks will have time to regenerate. When the parks have clearance to open again to the public, the parks will see a

massive influx of visitors and they must prepare for this currently. Due to their aggressive media midst the pandemic, they will be prepared for this and communicate the details well.

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