

Not All Those Who Wander Are White:  
The Role of Identity and Brand Partnerships on Social Media within the Movement of  
Diversifying Outdoor Recreation

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## **ABSTRACT**

Outdoor recreation has a fundamental lack of diversity among its participants. This has been an issue for a long time, however, has failed to be addressed by outdoor brands and organizations. Activists are working to change this issue by changing public opinion by sharing their experiences online. This leads to the question: how does the role of identity and brand partnerships affect social media activism in this space and how do people react to it? To study this, a textual analysis was conducted analyzing the Instagram accounts of activists on the issue. By analyzing through an intersectional lens, this study evaluated the way the activists spoke about their identities, compared brand partnerships, and looked at comments on their posts. It found that the role of identity creates a better understanding of the necessity of the movement, that brand partnerships are most impactful when they are authentic to the activists' mission, and that the activists have an important role in creating spaces for others to discuss the issue. These findings are critical to informing the next steps for those in the outdoor industry and affirm the importance of the work being done by activists on this issue.

## INTRODUCTION

J.R.R. Tolkien once famously said, “not all those who wander are lost.” Now, one is likely to see that quote on bumper stickers or in Instagram bios, as it has since become the unofficial backpacker’s motto. While it is true that all who wander are not lost, these “wanderers” have been, mostly, white cisgender men. The rich history of the great movement of people to the recreational outdoors rarely included non-white people, people of a lower socio-economic class, or women. This exclusion, combined with forces of modern-day societal discrimination and oppression, creates a perfect storm for minorities to feel discomfort when breaking into the field of outdoor recreation.

I am studying social media activists working to diversify the outdoors because I want to explore the role of identity and brand partnerships in their activism. The purpose of my study is to better understand the ways that activists can use public relations to their advantage and to see how these activists perceive the role of corporations in working towards diversifying the outdoors.

The topic of diversity is at the center of many conversations happening within the movement of people outside and in the quickly growing outdoor industry, both online and in outdoor spaces. Through personal experiences and the experiences of close friends, I recognize that this issue is prevalent in nearly all outdoor and recreational spaces. Having been one of few women at the climbing gym or in avalanche instruction, I realized that the people who show up in outdoor spaces are often homogenous. They are predominantly white, male, straight, able-bodied, and wealthy enough to be able to afford expensive gear or take time off work to go on intricately planned outdoor adventures. This is a disservice to all involved, and especially to those who have not been included. The issue is systemic and is a result of a long history of the

outdoors being considered white spaces (Finney, 2014). This is then reinforced by a lack of representation in media depicting people in the outdoors and the failure to employ a diverse workforce by institutions such as the National Park Service (Finney, 2014). Carolyn Finney's principal work, *Black Faces, White Spaces, Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, completely breaks down this issue. Finney examines a study from 1985-87 called the Public Area Recreation Visitor Study by Hartmann and Overdeest (2014). The study reports that during this time period 94% of visitors to National Parks were white and 2% were African American. While this study is dated, and one can hope that those numbers have improved, it was not until 1999 that the National Park Service began addressing the "real and perceived barriers that keep people of color from seeing the national parks as belonging to them" (Finney 2014). In *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Finney argues that Black people are "once again, at the back of the proverbial green bus".

After the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 following the death of George Floyd, many individuals, organizations, and corporations began a process of reflecting on systemic injustice. This looked different for everyone and every organization, but for those in the outdoor industry, it meant reckoning with why and how outdoor organizations uphold, consciously or not, the lack of inclusivity and diversity in the outdoors. While many companies have begun the challenging work of redressing their failures in this area, there is still much room for improvement.

Meanwhile, there are grassroots movements and activists inextricably tied to this issue, and these grassroots voices should inform how large-scale outdoor organizations and corporations move forward. This is the respectful and meaningful course of action because large-scale organizations and corporations are also homogenous and new to this issue, and

therefore need to draw on the diverse perspectives of those who have already been engaged in this fight. I am hopeful that by studying how activists are going about making a difference, how their identity affects the way they are making a difference, and taking an intersectional lens to this issue, I will produce research that informs recreational companies in their approach to diversity initiatives and help in creating meaningful, lasting change to the culture. As more and more consumers see brands as major influences in their lives, these brands have the opportunity to change the way people think about the issue of who belongs outside. This is critical because outdoor spaces and public lands truly belong to everyone.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Social Media Activism*

Social media activism is an effective way to drive social movements and generate positive publicity about social or political issues. It can be defined as “a form of participation in social movements via electronic communication technologies such as social media” (Yilmaz, 2017). Social media activism is perhaps the latest “trend” on popular platforms. Activism has long taken many forms and activists have always been savvy media practitioners that know how to effectively reach an audience. It is reasonable, however, to assume that this recent rise in social media activism stems from the incredible online outpouring of solidarity, rage, and action that followed the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protests in the summer of 2020. It is also necessary to acknowledge that this happened during a global pandemic, so canvassing, in-person protesting, and other traditional means of activist organizing were not options for many people. Because of this, both seasoned activists and the new generation alike took to Instagram, Twitter, and many other social platforms to get loud and express the strong feelings many were having about the state of policing in the United States. This period has had lasting effects on the ways activists now organize and build support for their causes, whatever those causes may be.

Social media activism is a relatively new phenomenon that was triggered, or at least enhanced, by the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. There are many reasons why this has taken off, as explained by Hyehyun Hong and Yeuseung Kim in their article *What makes people engage in civic activism on social media?* (2021). Their main finding is that this rise in online activism can be attributed to the barriers that engaging in civic activism online removes when compared to traditional civic activism. Participating in social movements online typically has a lower cost and is significantly easier (Hong and Kim, 2021). Participants are also



motivated by the idea that they could create meaningful political change (Hong and Kim, 2021). Interestingly, the study noted that young, female, white liberals are most likely to engage in social media activism (Hong and Kim, 2021). These findings, combined with the backdrop of a global pandemic during what was the largest social movement of Generation Z's lifetime thus far, make it very clear to see why this trend of using social media for activism is a phenomenon that is not likely to go away any time soon. Out of this, the social media activist is born. The social media activist takes the duties and characteristics of a traditional activist and moves them online.

Critics of social media activism have called it “slacktivism” and argue that it only exists for the gratification of its participants (Yilmaz, 2017). Critics also argue that social media activism does not actually create any kind of palpable effect (Yilmaz, 2017). There is evidence, however, that this form of activism increased participation in social movements or gave them the momentum needed to accomplish goals. Particularly in Arab countries, social media organizing and activism are credited with being the “most important initiator of the democratic transformation” (Yilmaz, 2017). Another example of the success of social media activism is in regard to the 2003 protests of the Iraq War, where protest participation was largely due to online networks (Yilmaz 2017). Yilmaz (2017) also cites online organization as a “salient tool” in order for social movements to “achieve a larger public sphere.” In *The Role of Social Media Activism in New Social Movements*, Yilmaz concludes that “the contribution of social media to the mass mobilization in terms of social movement and its power in the diminution of barriers of time and space should not be denied.”

### *Activism through Brands and Strategic Communication*

Brand activism is prominent, and for outdoor brands, understanding this topic is more important than ever, especially to the field of public relations. Brand activism should be at the heart and soul of every company right now because it is something that consumers are beginning to look for when choosing which companies to support or become loyal to. Daniel Korshum (2021) identifies the two essential characteristics of brand activism as being a publicly stated position and advocacy. He also argues that brand activism is “trending” because of the current political climate (Korshum 2021). Most importantly, however, he explains that customers consider brand activism when evaluating a brand, so engaging in brand activism authentically is more important than ever (Korshum 2021). The main key strategy intentionally used by brands involves seeking to “persuade individuals and other organizations to join their side” in an attempt to create support for whatever cause they are promoting (Korshum, 2021).

As Generation Z begins to have more buying power in the market, it is important to note that studies find that the generation values corporate social responsibility enough for them to choose to reward companies that participate in it, even if it is more expensive (Narayanan, 2022). With this being said, any outdoor company or organization absolutely needs to embrace working to make the outdoors more diverse and inclusive. This is a critical moment in the perception of outdoor sports and outdoor spaces, and as this movement continues to build, brands do not want to be laggards as they work to keep up with the industry and popular culture. When brands go to make strategic communication goals about the issue, it will be important that the actions brands take are driven by what grassroots activists see as appropriate.

The idea of subcultures provides an interesting complication to this issue. Subcultures are defined in the Oxford Reference as “A self-defining group within a society which holds

different values and norms to those of the majority. This may be represented by specialized types of material culture or the differences in the way material culture is used.” Many scholars consider the community around outdoor recreation to be a subculture. This provides complications because subcultures can have certain ways of thinking, and not always be welcoming to outsiders. Additionally, there is no guarantee that this subculture will listen to corporations, activists, or anyone for that matter.

Activists may use public relations strategies to help advance their cause. This could be a subconscious practice, or it could be intentional. Erica Ciszek (2017) provides an interesting discussion on the ways that public relations research can actually intersect with research on the communication of social change in *Activist Strategic Communication for Social Change: A Transnational Case Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Activism*. Ciszek (2017) seeks to conceptualize “activism as a form of strategic communication” (p. 705). While the specific social movement she studied was different, many of the same principles can be applied to the idea of making the outdoors more inclusive and diverse. Some of these principles include the way that “activists plan and implement strategies and tactics through the production of strategic communication for social change” (Ciszek, 2017). Ciszek (2017) also identifies the similarity between public relations practitioners and activists in terms of the way they utilize symbolism to “challenge and redefine cultural discourses.”

Libby Lester’s *Media and Environment* discusses the ways in which activists generate earned media, a foundation for public relations practices (2010). She discusses the manner in which activists draw media attention by creating “a novelty or ‘point of difference’ that journalists could write about,” which in turn generates awareness around the activists' campaigns (Lester, 2010, p. 131). Framing this sort of activist tactic as a public relations tactic makes it

obvious that activists are savvy public relations practitioners, whether intentionally or not. For an activist, generating coverage in the media adds credibility to the movement and is an effective way of increasing awareness of the situation.

### *Diversity and Inclusion in Outdoor Recreation*

The lack of diversity in outdoor spaces can be attributed to historical and societal oppressions that have created a situation in which the great outdoors do not truly belong to all. The people who most occupy outdoor spaces through outdoor adventure, sports, or recreation are often a very homogeneous group. Traditionally, this group is white, cisgender male, heterosexual, wealthy, and able-bodied. This is no accident. As is argued by Carolyn Finney in her book *Black Faces, White Spaces, Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, this is a direct result of historical and societal oppression. Finney also adds that large, outdoor-related agencies such as the National Park Service uphold this trend with a lack of representation in media depicting people in the outdoors and a failure to employ a diverse group of people.

Even the late Representative John Lewis, who was considered one of the most courageous activists in the civil rights movement and marched alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. felt as though national parks and monuments did not truly belong to everyone. Laura Burd Schiavo (2016) further examines this issue by introducing the idea of the “complexity of identity” that is often overlooked when examining the issue. Many researchers are quick to cite the low number of non-white park visitors, however, Schiavo (2016) argues that “the simplistic assessment of who uses the park system, and the ascribed meaning of these statistics, fail to acknowledge the complexity of identity; overstate the significance of visits to the National Park

Service Sites; imply prescriptive idea about national belonging; and underestimate the potential for interest and empathy across identity groups”. Schiavo (2016) also suggests that this behavior may actually be counterproductive and could potentially alienate the public, especially publics that view their identities as “less unidimensional” than some messaging from the National Park Service makes it out to be. This issue is complex and requires a thorough understanding of a long, complicated history combined with complicated societal dilemmas that exist to this day.

This issue is in fact not unidimensional at all. Aylward and Mitten (2022), by interviewing Mirna Valerio, brought to light how intersectionality plays a large role in this issue as well. Valerio is described as a “fit, heavy African-American marathoner, ultramarathoner, and trail runner” who simply does not fit within the typical outdoor stereotype. Valerio describes receiving death threats and being told she “doesn’t belong in the outdoors because she’s fat,” (Aylward and Mitten 2022). While this heartbreaking example is just one in a larger trend of those not fitting into the outdoor stereotype being discriminated against, Aylward and Mitten (2022) describe how it raises questions about equity in outdoor organizations and specifically, in outdoor education.

As for the industry as a whole, it is not one to be overlooked. According to the 2022 State of the Outdoor Market Report from the Outdoor Industry Association, the industry accounted for 4.3 million jobs, \$689B in gross output, and 1.8% of the US GDP (Davis). The report also noted that while diversity is increasing in the United States, outdoor participants do not reflect the same diversity levels as the general population (Davis, 2022). Lastly, the report notes that 54% of Americans participated in some form of outdoor recreation in 2022 (Davis, 2022). As this industry holds so much market power, the lack of diversity within it has far-reaching effects on many Americans.

## *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality provides complications for this issue. Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading civil rights advocate, and scholar. The Oxford Reference (2013) defines the term as

“The theory that various forms of discrimination centred on race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, and other forms of identity, do not work independently but interact to produce particularized forms of social oppression. As such, oppression is the result of intersecting forms of exclusionary practices. It is thus suggested that the study of identity-based discrimination needs to identify and take account of these intersectionalities.”

This provides complications as outdoor activists and organizations take on the issue of making the outdoors more diverse and inclusive. It is not just an issue of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. in the outdoors but is instead an issue of all of these phenomena, not independently, but together.

These ideas bring us to the notion that social media activists can use public relations strategies to work towards diversifying the outdoors through a discussion of identity. Additionally, these activists can also use brand partnerships to advance their mission. Studying this, public relations practitioners, and outdoor brands and organizations alike can better work towards making the outdoors truly “for all.”

The social media activist takes the duties and characteristics of a traditional activist and moves them online. They have new challenges added though. Could they be considered influencers? How do they navigate an online world that encourages people to share personal

experiences as a force of good? Could this culture of shared personal experience actually help push the movement forward?

In reviewing existing literature on topics related to these questions, a few things stand out. Social media activism is on the rise due to its convenience and lack of barriers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hong and Kim, 2021). Meanwhile, Erica Ciszek (2010) works to conceptualize activism as a form of strategic communication, meaning activists could certainly use Public Relations strategies, whether consciously or not. On the topic of diversity in the outdoors, Carolyn Finney (2014) contextualizes the issue in a long history of systemic racism in the outdoors and argues that Black people are “once again, at the back of the proverbial green bus”.

Outside of academia, there is a lot of media coverage about the lack of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors. Multiple noteworthy trade publications such as *Outside* and *Backpacker* magazines have written on the issue. Additionally, the issue has been written about in noteworthy national publications such as CNN and The Atlantic. This issue seems to be relevant in the national dialogue on topics including outdoor recreation and social justice. In the outdoor industry, however, this issue is more than just relevant and is top of mind for many brands and organizations. For these reasons, it is surprising that there is so little academic research on the topic. While the discussion in the media is great and gives non-academics exposure to information on the issue, the history and societal factors that play into it, and what outdoor entities from national parks to businesses and nonprofits are doing, or failing to do, to address it. These works are great contributions to the topic, however, academic research is crucial to any social justice movement or school of thought, as it positions it in a way that can

provide more credibility to the claims made by activists and the way the issue is discussed in the media.



## **METHOD**

In order to further examine the issues raised by the source literature discussed above, I looked into three main research questions. They are: (1) When people on the margins of a culture enter a space embedded in that culture, how do they represent their identity and its role? (2) How are those people leveraging their unique voices in brand partnerships? and (3) How do people in general react to someone on the margin of a culture entering that space?

To examine these questions, I conducted a textual analysis of the Instagram accounts of various social media activists working to diversify the outdoors. A textual analysis, as defined by Alan Mckee (2003), is “a methodology - a data-gathering process - for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live.” McKee (2003) also importantly defines text as anything we make meaning from. In keeping with this definition, I will be evaluating the captions of Instagram posts and, when relevant, the photos in the posts themselves.

In the textual analysis, I looked for trends in how the activists discussed pieces of their identity, as well as whether and how they mentioned and worked with brands. Through textual analysis, I would like to contribute research that reinforces the idea of activism as a form of strategic communication while also further exploring the role of identity within identity-based social movements. I looked for any notable trends within the text and kept reviewing posts until I started seeing the same results, then stopped as I had reached a saturation point.

As this is a study around an issue of diversity and inclusion, it was important to evaluate a diverse pool of social media activists. The online activists I evaluated are Pattiegonia, Mirna Valerio, and Emilé Zynobia Newman. Based on a review of the existing literature, the research

method addressed the research question by specifically looking for mentions of pieces of an activist's identity, and also evaluating the context of the text those pieces are mentioned in. The research examined relevant text regarding the way the activists perceive the issue of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors, as they are experts in the subject. Additionally relevant to my inquiry, the research explored the ways the activists work with outdoor brands and businesses' inclusivity and diversity initiatives. Lastly, it was important within the study to pay attention to how intersectionality plays into this issue, as the analysis of the project is framed in that theory. These topics informed my conclusion to the research questions, and the questions are largely informed by an analysis of existing literature.

This study evaluated Instagram posts and articles published in the 2022 calendar year. This time period allowed for enough material to have sufficient content to analyze, while also keeping to a time frame during which the movement gained considerable momentum and that is consistent across multiple profiles. It is important to note that this study did not result in generalizable findings and it is not the goal of this project. This is a qualitative study that was looking to better understand the conversation around identity within social media activism and brand relationships within the identity, all around the issue of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors. I chose to look specifically at Instagram because it takes up approximately 9.62% of the market share of social media platforms (GlobalStats, 2023). While Facebook and Twitter hold a larger market share, it seemed most relevant to look at a platform that is more focused on photographs and other visuals in the context of a movement largely centered around representation. By looking at these types of texts, the study provided a comprehensive analysis of the role of identity within the movement, as portrayed by the activists themselves and as portrayed in mainstream media.

To begin, I identified activists that are working to diversify the outdoors and who are on the margins of groups typically associated with recreating in the outdoors. Typically, those recreating are straight, white, able-bodied, cisgender men of a higher socio-economic class. I wanted to evaluate those who did not fit this traditional mold. I went about this by extensively researching marginalized groups within the outdoor culture and then using Instagram to look for accounts of people who were intentionally working to take up space in the outdoors despite not conforming to the typical profile of someone who is outdoorsy. I wanted to choose activists with a significant following, ideally at least ten thousand followers.

I began going through the Instagram profiles of these activists and looked at every single post of the 2022 calendar year. I looked in the photos and captions for any discussion of their identity, inclusion in the outdoors, and ideally how those two pieces interact. I recorded many specific quotes for examples of these points in an excel file. I then coded the mentions of those topics into main categories such as body positivity, race, gender, general posts about inclusivity in the outdoors, and more. Next, I looked at any brand partnerships with the accounts, divided those posts up by brand, and evaluated both the quality of the posts and the engagement with the posts compared across the brand category. This allowed me to evaluate the ways that partnerships with different brands may create variations in engagement, and to analyze how identity may tie into these trends. I also began to sort through comments on the posts specifically about identity to see the ways in which people respond to this type of vulnerability on social media. Lastly, I looked for any articles on the brand partnerships I was studying and analyzed those for additional comments that may provide helpful context and insights.

After gathering this data, I began analyzing, looking for trends, and contextualizing this information. This information requires contextualization within the culture of the outdoors and

the movement of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors. Without this contextualization, many of the most important statements made within the data would lose the significance they carry in the appropriate context.

### *Reflexivity*

As a qualitative researcher, the way in which I interpret data will be influenced by my identity and life experiences. Reflexivity, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, is “the fact of someone being able to examine their own feelings, reactions, and motives (= reasons for acting) and how these influence what they do or think in a situation.” I remained mindful of this as I moved through the research process, and in the interest of being reflexive, I would like to acknowledge my identity before moving into any analysis of the data collected.

I am a white cisgender woman who was raised in Norfolk, Virginia. I attended a private middle and high school and was raised in a left-leaning household. Some consider this area the American South, while some would just call it the Mid-Atlantic. I am extremely fortunate to be getting my undergraduate degree at a well-respected university and have benefited greatly from many privileges regarding my identity and upbringing. I am 21 years old, and I have so much more to learn in life. All of my experiences and background in conjunction with my identity have significantly shaped how I understand the narratives generated by the activists whose profiles I am examining. Everything I am studying within this project is through my perspective, which has been shaped by all of the pieces discussed and will ultimately affect how I analyze the critical pieces of this project.

As a qualitative researcher, I strive to understand topics such as these subjectively. It is incredibly important to note that the pieces of identity evaluated in this project are completely

socially constructed, as is mine. Given this, I am going to connect my own identity and experiences, as anyone would, as I seek to make meaning of the identity pieces of this project. This position should be disclosed by anyone engaging in qualitative research, but is especially important here, because a critical component of the analysis of this project includes evaluating people of different backgrounds and lived experiences, and how those pieces matter as they move through the movement of diversity and inclusion in outdoor recreation. As I have noted what I'm bringing to this project and what sort of lens I am viewing these texts through, I would like to note that I will also be using a lens of intersectionality throughout. This lens helps me to be intentional in seeing beyond myself and my experiences to examine and interpret what I am seeing. By working to ground this project in an intersectional framework, I am able to be reflexive.

## ANALYSIS

*Mirna Valerio (she/her)*

After reviewing the profiles of the social media activists, there is a lot of data to analyze, beginning with the profile of Mirna Valerio. Mirna is a black woman who identifies as plus-sized. In the year 2022, she made 206 Instagram posts and had around 150,000 followers on the app. Her handle is @themirnavator, which perfectly captures her contagious sense of joy and inspiration. Of the 206 posts, 16 specifically discussed her identity as it relates to the outdoors or inclusion in the outdoors. Those 16 posts were broken up into categories of posts about body positivity, race, gender, and inclusivity in the outdoors in general. Valerio's feed is typically filled with photos of her smiling, looking joyful, and nearly always outside (Figure 1A).

Within the posts about body positivity, some posts discussed the way she is treated as a plus-size woman in the outdoors, while others discussed struggles she has had finding gear and apparel that suits her body while still fulfilling the technical needs of the equipment. In a post where she reviews a pair of ski pants, Valerio shares that she's "on [a] quest to find more variety in quality, well-designed, highly designed ski gear for us plus-sized folks." She later shares the joy of finding clothes that suit her needs as a plus-sized woman in the outdoors. Valerio posts

"Heyyyy plus sized, curvy, thick, thicc, voluptuous, Rubenesque, and zaftig folx!!!! This Wildcat Waterproof Insulated Jacket from @llbean has been my skiing go-to for temps 15 degrees and above. It's available up to size 3X. Performance outerwear that fits, is technical, and is functional is hard to find in plus-sizes and this coat here fits the bill!"

(Figure 1B). Many outdoor brands do not carry plus-size options, and the sheer excitement of simply finding a comfortable-fitting pair of pants is obvious in this post. Those in the comments shared a similar joy, too, as they expressed their thanks to Valerio through comments such as "Thank you for posting a plus size outdoor gear guide!!!" and "Thank you for posting where you

got those pants! ... it is so challenging to find snow pants for our curves!” While also asking for more recommendations with comments such as “What ski boots do you recommend ?? I am having a hell of a time finding something to fit wider calves on a woman.”

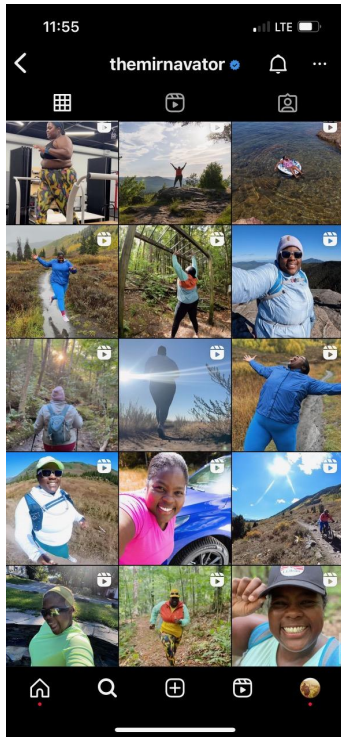


Figure 1A



Figure 1B

Other posts from Valerio are more of a clear expression of frustration with the culture of the outdoors and running not being welcoming to those whose body does not fit the idea of a typical runner. She shares

“Do you interrupt fat folks when they’re at the gym or out on a run to say things like:  
KEEP IT UP. DON’T BE DISCOURAGED! MY BODY LOOKED LIKE YOURS  
ONCE, YOU’LL GET THERE, KEEP GOING!  
DO YOU DO THIS?

PRO TIP: Don’t do that shit. It’s dehumanizing, mean, presumptuous, awful, patronizing, condescending, and stigmatizing.

Your intentions for interrupting my workout don’t matter. It is your behavior, actions, and words that make impact a person’s wellbeing that matter.

Personally, my body does some BADASS shit, and I begrudge anyone who thinks that they know what it can or cannot do by simply looking at me, WHILE I AM RUNNING. Like, bro DO YOU NOT SEE THIS INCREDIBLE PIECE OF MACHINERY MOVING ME THROUGH THIS SPACE?? BACK TF OFF.

You don't know why ANYONE is out running, so how bout you stick to your workout, I stick to mine, and you keep it moving?

This is a real thing that happened.”

Clearly, this type of behavior is prevalent in outdoor spaces, and Valerio does not hesitate to call it out. These types of comments create barriers to people engaging in outdoor sports where they feel they do not necessarily belong or look like others participating in the sport. This caption is extremely powerful, but demonstrates a very different tone from the usual cheery and positive voice that Valerio uses online.

While clearly frustrated, Valerio also shared uplifting messages and sources of inspiration for those intimidated by the idea of entering this community. She shares messages such as “climbing is for every body” and “a runner’s body is a body that runs. This is not complicated.” These messages are much more in line with the overall tone of Valerio’s profile, which usually offers an uplifting message encouraging people to get outside, enjoy nature, and enjoy where their bodies can take them, regardless of size. This message was reinforced in Valerio’s 2018 Outside Magazine opinion piece titled “My Body Is Not An Obstacle.” In the article, Valerio recalls a difficult trail run and shares an intimate reflection of participating in the race as a plus-size woman. She recalls:

“This body that society and even some fellow trail runners viewed as a black hole of incapability is a rich center of power and strength, if not speed. This body is deemed a failure to many who judge it by its face value. It is devalued even, protested, and placed in the category of the unseemly. But take her out in the wild and she proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that instead of embodying burden, she is a powerful force.”



This message shows how much the culture of the outdoors upholds very certain ideas of how someone should look to participate in those activities. For Valerio, just showing up is an act of resistance.

Valerio occasionally mentions her identity in terms of her race and gender on her profile as well. For instance, when she was posting about a bike trip she took through Kenya, she said she “felt very seen and acknowledged in [her] blackness.” It is important to contextualize this statement, in the sense that biking is an extremely homogeneous sport, with most road, gravel, and mountain bikers being white. Taking a bike trip through Kenya, where Valerio was surrounded by people that actually looked like her, validated her identity in a way that a typical bike trip in America may not. The outdoors should be an affirming, confidence-boosting place for all; however, being an outlier makes it much more difficult to have this experience. Around the same time, Valerio posted a picture of her with her hair braided and said “Got my hair done. First braids since 1995. Black hair is so beautiful. This trip has reminded me that black is indeed beautiful!” This expression of identity in a sphere as public as an Instagram account with such a large following is extremely empowering for those looking to express their identities in areas where such identities are not always as welcomed. She also shares about her experiences skiing and snowboarding with people of color, acknowledging that such experiences are very much outside the norm for Valerio. She says, “awesome to be in community with POC skiers and snowboarders in a beautiful atmosphere of community, joy, and inclusion.” While it is amazing that this sort of community exists, community, joy, and inclusion should perhaps be the norm in a sport that people do simply for fun. This sort of candidness and openness about her experiences as a black woman in the outdoors is so powerful both for people looking to break into the space

and especially for people needing to perhaps change their mindset about who can enjoy the outdoors and who can be an outdoor athlete.

Lastly, Mirna Valerio discusses in more general terms why and how the outdoors could and should be more inclusive. Specifically, she praises a festival in Richmond, Virginia, for hosting an outdoor event that is “not exclusive, for all levels of experience, and you choose your own kind of adventure.” Speaking much more generally on the issue, she encourages her followers to “get outside if you can, folks. We need the outdoors.” While on face value, this sentiment seems very simple, this statement carries so much weight within the topic of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors. The fact is that many people of color, people of larger size, and people from lower income levels either do not have the access or resources necessary to enjoy the outdoors, or they are not welcomed into those spaces. Because of this, this simple call to action carries so much weight.

As for brand partnerships, Valerio lists the following brands in her bio: Lululemon, L.L.Bean, Leki, Hydroflask, Salsa Cycles, InsideTracker, Darn Tough, Garmin, and Ford Bronco. This collection of brands is frankly quite random, and that is reflected in the varying levels of engagement that the posts with these brands get. For example, she regularly gets between 5,000 and 15,000 likes on posts with Lululemon, however, she rarely gets more than a thousand likes on posts with Ford Bronco. For Valerio, some brand partnerships are for the purpose of helping the brands create more inclusive sizing options, and those brand partnerships tend to perform better. It seems approximately a quarter of Valerio’s posts are in partnership with a brand, although nearly every one of her posts mentions a brand in some way as she usually tags all the brands of the clothes she is wearing in her posts. Valerio often ties her brand partnerships back to the mission of her account. For example, in a post for Inside Tracker, a health and

wellness app, Valerio focuses entirely on dispelling common misconceptions about women's health. People perceive these types of partnerships well, as one user commented "every time I'm able to buy clothes that fit me and feel good from L.L.Bean and Lululemon, I say a little thank you for the work you've put in for us. You've made a big difference and I appreciate you so much. I've been hoping for plus size lulu bras for awhile! I'm excited!"

This sort of vulnerability on social media, specifically in the comments of such a prominent social media figure, is rare. This indicates that Mirna Valerio has worked to create a culture of vulnerability through her posts and comments, setting the example to exhibit and uphold a positive, supportive culture online. People share extremely personal and meaningful comments such as "Thanks so much for all you do for people of ALL sizes who may not yet have found as much joy in their bodies as you have in yours." On posts about brands, people shared remarks such as "Thank you for representing the plus sized community. This helps me want to love my body." Valerio's audience, as well as nearly all audiences, want to feel seen. Often, people are annoyed by influencers as they add to the overwhelming amount of ads one must sort through every day; however, when consumers see people who look like them engaged in brand partnerships, perhaps they actually feel seen by the brand.

On Valerio's posts, every single comment is either positive or neutral. While it is a possibility that Valerio is filtering out negative comments, it is important to note that when she is featured on other accounts with brands, the sentiment of the comments are more mixed, with even some outrageously negative comments. One user said "get out of here with this bullshit. I'm gone. You just lost a customer" in response to a post made by either Strava or New England Magazine (Valerio's post about the comments does not clarify which post specifically had this comment on it). While it is hard to draw conclusions without knowing for sure whether or not

Valerio is filtering out negative comments, it is worth considering that perhaps people that have such a negative reaction to someone like Valerio entering the ultra-running community, just choose not to engage with her account on Instagram.

It is worth considering, also, that perhaps brand partnerships that users would not expect to see may perform better. For example, Lululemon has a reputation for not being very inclusive in terms of sizing or model/influencer diversity, so when people see that brand partnership in action, they are more surprised. The sense of surprise may elicit more of a reaction from social media users, encouraging more engagement with the post. Meanwhile, Ford Bronco does not have a reputation in terms of diversity and inclusivity or a lack thereof, so people are not surprised when they see the partnership, therefore not eliciting as much of a response. So while partnerships that align with the mission of the activist or influencer perform well, it is possible that brand partnerships where there is tension may also be productive.

Overall, Valerio's account is well-received by her followers, and she is very open about the way her identity, and its intersection with outdoor culture, is not always easy. While she shares her struggles, she also shares words of encouragement, and most notably is always smiling. The social media presence of someone who does not fit the typical model of an outdoor athlete enjoying, and even thriving in, the outdoors, is so powerful to the movement of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors as it dismantles the stereotypes and misconceptions held by so many within the culture of outdoor sports and activities.

### *Pattiegonia (she/he/they)*

Pattiegonia is a drag queen who uses the art of drag to raise awareness about issues such as climate change, diversity, and inclusion in the outdoors. Sitting at approximately 513k

followers, Pattiegonia was the second social media figure evaluated for this project. After evaluating all 118 of their posts from the 2022 calendar year, some trends emerged regarding identity, brand partnerships, and public reaction to the use of drag in outdoor activist spaces. Pattiegonia describes themselves as an “outdoor and diversity advocate.” While much of their activism is done through entering the outdoors as a queer person and then sharing about that experience online, they also use strategies such as fundraising, brand partnerships, and making funny videos.

Most Pattiegonia posts that discussed diversity in the outdoors fell into three categories: fundraising, identity as a queer person in the outdoors, and general inclusivity. The fundraising posts included the founding of a nonprofit working on issues of climate change and diversity called Outdoorist Oath, securing a \$100,000 donation from The North Face to Brave Trails, “an organization inspiring LGBTQ+ youth to discover a sense of belonging outside”, and 10 scholarships for LGBTQ2IA+ people to go on a backpacking trip.

As for the posts where Pattiegonia specifically discusses their identity, the tone ranges from lighthearted and goofy to intensely personal and reflective. There is a post that is simply a compilation of memes that the creator thinks are funny, captioned with “it is my hope that these memes resonate with the gays, the outdoorsy, and the gay outdoorsy” (Figure 2A). There is also a post after a day of climbing in drag with professional climber Alex Honnold, who is also in high heels captioned “WHAT a day. i love life. i love gay. thank u so much @samuelcrossley for documenting such incredible memories” (Figure 2B). These posts are significant because they normalize being queer in the outdoors, something that is, unfortunately, unusual in media typically depicting outdoor excursions or expeditions. While these posts may not seem as meaningful on the surface level, they are extremely important for destigmatizing drag and queer

people in the outdoors, as well as for demonstrating representation in sports that are typically quite homogenous.



Figure 2A



Figure 2B

Pattiegonia also makes hilarious, over-the-top videos that call out shortfalls of inclusivity in the outdoor community. For example, Pattiegonia created a video titled “how 2 go outdoors: a tutorial” which features them in drag sharing helpful tips such as “hydrate” (Figure 2C), “wear your sunscreen” (Figure 2D), and “frolic!” (Figure 2E). Also sprinkled throughout the video is advice such as “don’t be homophobic” (Figure 2F), “don’t be racist” (Figure 2G), and “or xenophobic, ableist, sexist, or transphobic” (Figure 2H). This video does not shy away from addressing the issue of intolerance in the outdoors, in perhaps the most direct way examined yet. This is not out of character for Pattiegonia, as they are often incredibly straightforward and blunt when calling out issues of bias. The video still maintains a lighthearted tone, as is often the case with their posts.



Figure 2C



Figure 2D



Figure 2E



Figure 2F



Figure 2G



Figure 2H

There are also many moments that are far more personal and vulnerable on Pattiegonia's Instagram page. There are intimate posts about the way they have learned to embrace their queerness, posts standing up to bullies, and posts that thoughtfully discuss queerness in nature.

Pattiegonia shares:

“LIFE UPDATE: i feel like i'm in bloom. i feel in my queerness more than ever before. i feel more confident in drag, i feel fulfilled with a queer chosen family & a community of people across the world. you, yes that's you. thank you.  
what once started as a joke ass instagram account wearing high heels outdoors has bloomed into a whole new sense of self, identity, life, place, purpose and responsibility... and most of all, a new found sense of curiosity. see...  
as queer kids growing up nature was weaponized against us. we were told...  
“your queerness is unnatural – it's wrong”  
but now we know...  
queerness is nothing but natural  
queerness can be found in every ecosystem  
and on every continent in the world  
this is why i believe queer people feel so connected to the outdoors...because nature is queer and so are we”

This deeply personal testimony from a queer influencer with a very large following is so important to the goal of making queer people in the outdoors feel seen, heard, and represented. Being vulnerable on social media is never easy, but when Pattiegonia opens up to their followers, especially in the context of a homogenous outdoor culture, it is in and of itself an act of protest and resistance. This public portrayal of their deeply personal identity and sense of self has powerful resonance within a movement of people examining, testing out, and sharing how it feels to enter a culture not typically accepting of their identities. In response to this post, people were extremely supportive, but also demonstrated a high level of vulnerability in the comments. One follower shared “wow I was told so many times that my queerness was unnatural... thank



you for the work you do! I feel validated, seen, and heard.” This only exemplifies how great a need there is for this sort of public exploration of identity and sense of self.

Pattiegonia also connects queerness to nature, a fascinating topic that is also very relevant to the issue of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors. They share:

“When I look at nature, queerness is everywhere. The flowers in my backyard cannot pollinate each other without bees. So they're multi-species sexual. They literally have carriers that carry their pollen from flower to flower - that is so queer! The more time I spend out in nature, the more I'm reminded of just how natural I am. And that's really reassuring coming from a kid who was told that they were unnatural.”

This dialogue, while not straightforward, is an invitation to queer people everywhere to enjoy nature, and is a concerted effort to help queer people feel at home in nature, even though they may not typically feel welcomed into the space. By talking about the ways queerness occurs in nature, coupled with sharing photos and videos of themselves in nature, Pattiegonia is intentionally making space for queer people in the outdoors. Sharing their identity online is truly the most powerful piece of this, from an outsider's perspective.

Comments on Pattiegonia's posts are mostly positive or neutral, but when they are featured on another brand's account, or when they create a joint post with another account, comments are not as kind. People share remarks such as “This WAS a great resource and learning page for children. But this is not ok,” “Maybe North Face will realize that going woke is the worst thing for their company,” and “Y'all just lost my business.” While these sentiments would be unacceptable in any context, it is important to note that the rhetoric in conservative media around drag queens right now is especially inflammatory, and many conservative lawmakers have introduced bills looking to ban drag programs, especially for children (Murray, 2023).

Pattiegonia sometimes turns these rude comments into a joke, brushes them off, or mocks them, usually in drag. But one post of the 118 analyzed stood out from the others. The post shared some of the worst comments yet, threatening to “hunt down” Pattiegonia, finding their address, and even saying “kill it with fire.” In the caption, Pattiegonia says:

“i’ve known bullies my whole life but the past few days have been a whole new level and i think there’s a lesson we all can learn here.

queer people don't need your love, queer people don't need your sympathy. what we need is your allyship. not just this month but all 11 other months, all 365 days of the year. not just to send a loving DM but to use your voice and your privilege to stand up for the LGBTQ community. especially those most marginalized in it.”

This sort of direct call for action, and for allyship, especially within the outdoor community, is so powerful because it is so rare. The community around the outdoors is frequently asked to stand up for the earth, for the climate, or for the places they love to explore. Rarely are they asked to stand up for the more marginalized members of the outdoor community who are under attack - people who enjoy the same things they do about a day out hiking, skiing or climbing. This call to action prompts more “mainstream” outdoor enthusiasts to stand for the principle that nature should be for everyone to enjoy.

Pattiegonia also makes more general statements about a need for better diversity and inclusion in the outdoors. They express, “together we can do so much for planet, inclusion and adventure to build a better and different outdoors.” These expressions are powerful when standing alone, but even more powerful in the context of Pattiegonia’s account.

As for brand partnerships, Pattiegonia does not have brands listed in their bio, although, of the posts evaluated, they referenced partnerships with Hydro Flask, LifeStraw, Aspiration, The North Face, The Audubon Society, Hoka, Tazo, Dropps, and Visible Mobile. Nearly all of these posts were in the form of giveaways for their followers. Giveaways with brands that were more

outdoorsy, therefore aligning more with their page, typically performed better than posts that were not. For example, the post with Hydroflask earned 15,000 likes, the post with The Audubon Society earned 67,000 likes, and the post with Hoka earned 17,000 likes. The posts that stood out in terms of engagement, however, were posts where Pattiegonia leveraged their unique brand voice within the brand partnership. For example, they created a joint post with The North Face that reads “Nature lets you be who you are, so we’re hosting a Summer of Pride together with @pattiegonia (she/they) to celebrate you and all the beautiful ways you get outside.” This post did well with engagement, earning 29,000 likes and many comments. Posts with brands not related to the mission of Pattiegonia’s account typically did not perform as well. For instance, a post with Tazo, a tea company, only gathered 3,000 likes, a post with Dropps, a sustainable laundry detergent company, also got around 3,000 likes, and a post with Visible Mobile, a wireless company, got a mere 2,000 likes. This shows that when Pattiegonia is able to connect their unique voice to the work that the brand is doing within the brand partnership post, both them and the company benefit, as engagement with brand-aligned posts such as these was significantly better.

### *Emilé Zynobia (she/her)*

Emilé Zynobia Newman is a creator, influencer, and activist with a far smaller following and social media presence than the other creators analyzed. However, she provides a different perspective on this issue and is far more straightforward in her discussion of the issue than others, making her a figure relevant to this study. Her handle is @curlsinthewild, she had a little over 11,000 followers in 2022, and only posted 21 times that year, far less than the other creators

evaluated for this study. While she posted less, she had many meaningful posts that are important to understanding this topic and answering the research questions presented.

Newman is a Black woman who spent much of her childhood in Jackson, Wyoming. She is a professional snowboarder sponsored by Backcountry.com. Newman is pointedly critical of the outdoor industry, and openly expresses frustration with the industry's lack of diversity, as well as the facade of progress outdoor brands sell to the public. She says:

“Aye, I’m too damn educated to be a part of your minstrel show. You may see me and the work I’ve been a part of and assume that I’ve been able to break into the industry. And by extension, think this reflects the progress the snow sports industry is making in elevating and supporting different identities and lived experiences. Don’t let the presence of my likeness in a store or ad fool you. It doesn’t mean a brand has done or is doing the work. Diversifying whose represented on your web and catalogues will never be a stand in for the real work. I invite you all to look at the make up of who still controls all the internal levers. Or note how many projects or brands continue to support the person of color they didn’t want to “tokenize” the year before. I’m new to this space but from here on out you can trust that the brands I align with will better reflect my values and dreams for the world.”

This declaration was made toward the beginning of 2022, and addresses many of the research questions posed by this project. She is calling out that just because she, one Black woman, or any other one person, has been able to break into the industry, doesn’t mean that anyone can, that the problem is solved, or that the fundamental top-down changes that need to happen are actually occurring.

Newman calls for an examination of “who still controls all the internal levers,” suggesting that until outdoor companies hire a more diverse workforce, including c-suite officials, merely projecting an image of diversity through the images in their catalogs and

websites will not be enough. She also positions tokenism as an excuse that companies use when considering diversity initiatives, not as a genuine reason to not begin initiatives such as these.

Perhaps the most powerful declaration in this post is Newman’s commitment to only work with brands she feels align with her values. It is rare to see influencers limit themselves in this way, and is substantiated by the fact that in the year 2022, Newman only collaborated with one brand, a very different approach than the other figures evaluated for the project. The comments on this post are extremely positive and supportive (Figure 3A).

Newman also touches on how her identity as a woman has affected her experiences in the outdoors. In a post about an all-women’s splitboarding trip to Denali (Figure 3B), she writes “as women, the doubts we experience are reinforced and fed back to us in what can feel like a never ending loop. So lucky to indulge in my power with such a fierce, funny, frisky group of ladies.”

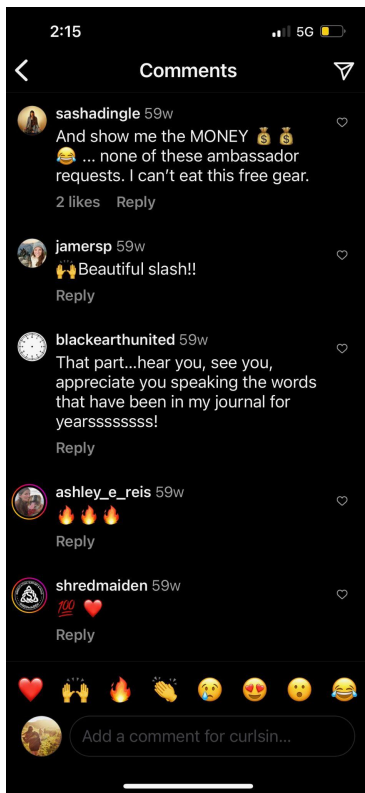


Figure 3A



Figure 3B

This is a common phenomenon for women in many circumstances, but has an especially consequential effect in the context of the outdoors. An adventure as intense as splitboarding on the United States' highest mountain requires focused and skilled decision making that can affect the safety of the entire group. When the doubts that are normal to anyone in such a risky situation are then reinforced by societal norms surrounding gender, these doubts can make it extremely hard to thrive in a context where confident and sound decision making is of utmost importance. Stereotypes about women's inferiority in recreational activities are just one aspect of normative culture that may negatively affect one's experience in the outdoors. This is why recreating with people of a similar identity, or at least in groups with better representation, can be so powerful, as it allows these norms to fade away.

Discussing this phenomenon that occurs on many outdoor adventures is so important to this movement as it brings these issues to light. Newman's identity is crucial in examining and highlighting to the public the way stereotypes can have such a tangible impact, and crucial in identifying how intersectionality plays a role in the movement to diversify outdoor spaces. While she discusses how doubt reinforced by gender norms affects her, it is pertinent to also acknowledge that she is, at the same time, navigating stereotypes surrounding her race, other potential aspects of her identity, and not only all of those pieces separately but also how they intersect. The comments on this post were also all positive and supportive in their sentiment.

One of Newman's last posts of 2022 referenced her work on an inclusive ski and snowboard film. She says in the post "inclusivity isn't a trend," which speaks volumes to the current state of the outdoor industry. Outdoor brands are finally stepping up their game in terms of diversity in and around their company, but Newman firmly points out that brands should be doing this for the right reasons, not just because other companies are doing it or because of

current societal pressures. Brands should be doing this because they truly care about making the outdoors more inclusive, and that significant internal examination and change needs to accompany and reflect any outward signs of diversification, such as with models or influencers.

## **DISCUSSION**

By examining three social media activists within the movement of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors, this project sought to understand the role of identity within their activism, how they leverage their unique voices in relevant brand partnerships, and how people react to those on the margins of outdoor culture entering it and speaking openly about their experiences, both positively and negatively. By contextualizing these questions within the culture of the outdoors, the goal of this research was to understand how identity and intersectionality affect activism and provide insights for brands in the outdoor industry looking to improve their own diversity initiatives through partnerships with activists and influencers.

There were some key takeaways from all of the accounts regarding the role of identity within their activism. Identity, and its exploration online, is crucial to this movement. It makes the movement personal and easier for people to empathize with, while also drawing attention to why people should care. When activists share intimate experiences about the ways in which their identity has been held against them, it elicits a natural reaction in others to care about that and want to change it. Without these stories being shared, people in the mainstream may not necessarily understand why this movement is so critical to the culture of the outdoors being more welcoming to all. All of the creators studied shared stories or observations about how the outdoors has not always been welcoming to them, or how their identity has made it harder to feel welcomed. This allows people of a similar identity who may be feeling the same way to know that they are not alone in that feeling. Seeing someone online who has overcome such obstacles to inclusion may instill confidence in a similarly situated person, allowing them to tackle the awkwardness of being the only person that looks like them in a space, too.



All three creators also discussed how it felt to recreate with people of similar identities to them. Mirna Valerio discussed feeling validated in her Blackness during a bike trip across Kenya, Pattiegonia called climbing alongside another drag queen “incredible memories,” and Emilé Zynobia Newman said she was able to indulge in her power in an all-women’s trip to Denali. This is a significant commonality between all three profiles reviewed and reinforces the call for better representation and inclusion in the outdoors. It is not always necessarily obvious how it may feel to be in a space with people who look like you, especially when that experience is rare in a context such as the outdoors. The fact that all three activists talked about such positive experiences in those types of environments further demonstrates the need for better diversity and inclusion within the space.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that all of these people studied, given their identities, are part of a group, the subculture of people who like to recreate in the outdoors, who traditionally reject people of their identities. This is precisely why talking about identity is so important. When, in any way, entire aspects of identities are being rejected due to stereotypes, simply existing in those spaces where the rejection is occurring is an act of resistance. What is even more powerful, though, is that these activists are openly discussing the ways this rejection of their identities has affected them, and their experiences.

As for brand partnerships and the unique voices of activists within that space, there were some findings consistent across the accounts analyzed. First, it is crucial to acknowledge that findings were somewhat harder to apply for Emilé Zynobia Newman because she only had one brand partnership within the year of posts analyzed, however her declaration of “you can trust that the brands I align with will better reflect my values and dreams for the world,” could arguably be a finding in and of itself, as this study did not identify any other creators who overtly

placed such conditions on their brand relationships. While the other two creators both engaged in multiple brand partnerships that can be compared, Newman's stands alone. Declaring her insistence on quality over quantity arguably increases the impact of her one brand partnership, Backcountry.com, as it suggests that they are approaching their joint initiatives in a way that is meaningful and intentional, at least through the eyes of Newman.

For the other two, Mirna Valerio and Pattiegonia, the key finding from a brand perspective is that the more the brand aligns with the mission and values of the account, the better the posts perform in terms of engagement. I believe this is because authentic partnerships are better received on an intrinsic level, but especially because authentic partnerships integrate well into these profiles and therefore are not detrimental to the follower's experience with the account. In a sense, the followers push these creators in the right direction. When they post something that does not align with their account, typically engagement is low. If engagement is low, it is not beneficial to either the creator or the brand. When these posts are less impactful, they lose value economically to the brand and will likely not be repeated. However, when a post about a brand partnership performs extraordinarily, the brand and creator are likely to keep the partnership going and create more posts. It is as if the followers have a say in what kind of partnerships seem authentic, valuable, and are interesting, therefore pushing the creators in the followers' preferred direction through engagement such as likes, comments, and shares (or a lack thereof). There is also a financial impact to this, as many creators do social media for a living, so if they see more success when they select more authentic partnerships, they are incentivized to continue in that direction.

In general, consumers are inundated with advertisements. It is estimated that people are exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 ads each day (Simpson, 2017). They are everywhere,

especially with the rise of social media influencers. People are often annoyed by, or at least not receptive to, obvious forms of advertising. But with respect to the brand partnerships on the accounts studied here, that does not appear to be the case. As such, a significant finding is that advertisements in the form of activist-aligned brand partnerships are generally well-received. I believe this is because audiences want to feel seen by a brand, and when a brand partners with someone who looks like the consumer, the consumer, by extension, feels seen by the brand. This is especially true when, as in this context, people of certain identities typically do not feel seen by brands of that kind, and are finally being acknowledged perhaps for the first time by the brand.

Lastly, while brands may have valid concerns about potential backlash from consumers because of issues such as tokenism or virtue signaling, such consumers are actually incredibly receptive to brands when they move beyond empty gestures and put in actual effort by making their partnerships more diverse and inclusive. While tokenism is still an issue brands need to be vigilant about, this study did not find any such accusations against brands based on their partnerships with the activists studied. It did, however, see tokenism called out as an excuse brands use to not work to make strides in areas like diversity and inclusion.

In regards to the third and final research question, how do people react to someone on the margin of a culture entering that space?, the results are a little more complicated. Very few posts on any of the three profiles examined, if any at all, had negative comments of any kind. In fact, the comment sections in the posts were very positive, encouraging, and supportive. There are two potential explanations for this. The first is that the creators are sorting out and deleting negative comments in order to preserve their accounts as spaces dedicated for uplifting others and spreading positivity within the movement. The other possibility is that people who are not

receptive to the goal of increasing diversity in the outdoors just aren't following accounts like theirs. It is impossible to verify which is taking place, or if it is some combination of the two, without speaking to the creators themselves.

When the creators do face ugly comments, however, it is typically when they are featured in posts by other accounts, brands, or organizations. This exposes them to a larger demographic of consumers, and unfortunately, a larger demographic increases the odds of someone disagreeing with what they are doing. While it is hard to imagine a way for someone to find a problem with simply making a space more inclusive, many are finding a way, and are vocal about their opinions. The most common negative comment was something along the lines of "you just lost a customer." The creator that faced the most negativity, in my opinion, was Pattiegonia. This is almost certainly due to the fact that drag queens are currently the punching bag of the far right, with many bills being introduced by lawmakers looking to ban drag in the presence of minors or even altogether. This hostility towards drag is heightened by inaccurate and inflammatory rhetoric swirling around alt-right media.

Another finding from this research question is that when creators shared very vulnerable posts about their identity or their struggles, they were often met with a similar level of vulnerability in the comments. For example, when Mirna Valerio wrote about having a hard time finding outdoor gear that fit her properly, there was an outpouring of similar stories in the comments section. This indicates that many people are having common experiences and are looking for someone to address them, as they often aren't addressed at all. They want to feel seen and do feel seen by creators such as these, which only further underlines the importance of the discussion of identity within this movement. Lastly, it indicates that these creators have a large say in setting the tone of these conversations online and the type of community they create

within it. Creating a space where people with similar struggles can see how other people are handling these issues and can share their own stories creates a unique online community, as it is rare to see people online be as vulnerable as many are within the comment sections of these accounts.

All of these findings, while important in their own ways, collectively further demonstrate the need for more academic research on this topic to reinforce the push by activists and athletes to create a more diverse and inclusive outdoors. These findings also demonstrate why identity is truly at the core of this movement, and why it needs to stay in the heart of it as well.

## CONCLUSION

This study intended to advance academic research around the fundamental issue of a lack of diversity and inclusion in outdoor recreation. The study examined literature on the topics of diversity in the outdoors, online activism, activism as a form of strategic communication, and brand activism. After creating a thorough and sound understanding of these topics, I focused on three primary research questions: (1) When people on the margins of a culture enter a space embedded in that culture, how do they represent their identity and its role?; (2) How are those people leveraging their unique voices in brand partnerships?; and (3) How do people react to someone on the margin of a culture entering that space?

To answer these questions, I employed a textual analysis of the Instagram accounts of three social media activists on the issue of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors: Mirna Valerio, Pattiegonia, and Emilé Zynobia Newman. In evaluating their profiles, I analyzed the ways in which the activists discussed their identities, paying close attention to discussions of how their identity works as a function to aid in their activism. Additionally, the study compared and contrasted and sought to find trends within the types of brand partnerships the activists chose, paying particular attention to which partnerships performed better and why, as well as how that performance was tied to the unique voices of the activists. Lastly, the study evaluated the comments in an attempt to better understand how people react when those on the margin of a culture enter the space traditionally occupied by that culture.

The study produced three key findings: (1) The role of identity is powerful and its discussion is critical to the movement in terms of creating an understanding of its necessity; (2) Brand partnerships are most beneficial when they are authentic to the mission of the brand and

the activist; and (3) Activists have an important role in creating online spaces where people can feel seen and share stories relevant to the movement.

### *Expanding the Research and Limitations*

This study has so much potential to be expanded upon, and in many ways has left me with more questions than answers. The most interesting and obvious way to expand the study would be to interview these activists. It would be interesting to explore how these actors view themselves. Do they even view themselves as activists, or do they see themselves as influencers, social media personalities, or some combination of the three? How do they view their own identities and the ways in which those identities play a role in their activism? This study only examines the pieces of identity put forward by the actors, and diving into some of the less obvious pieces through comprehensive interviews would add a lot of depth and quality to the implications of this study.

It would also be interesting to expand the research into the reactions of those within the culture of outdoor recreation being exposed to people who are not typically present in that space. Perhaps this could be done through a survey, or perhaps a focus group where people are shown examples and asked to talk about their reactions.

One limitation of this study is that as qualitative research, its findings cannot be generalized in any way. This is simply an exploration of the topics presented. There are also obvious limitations to only being able to analyze the pieces of identity publicly shared by these figures; however, there is a case to be made that exploring only what is shared is important too, as that is what the overwhelming majority of people who cross paths with these figures will ever be exposed to. These creators collectively have well over half a million followers, not to mention

the audience they reach through brand accounts when they participate in partnership posts, so this exposure is not insignificant.

### *Implications*

These findings create implications for both social media activists and brands looking to participate in brand partnerships. From an identity perspective, this study shows that talking about identity, especially within a movement that is inextricably linked to it, is a valuable way for activists to advance the movement. It is especially important, also, to continue to advocate for better representation in outdoor recreation and to keep embarking on expeditions with people who have shared identities. The power of participating in outdoor recreation in a group of all women or all people of color cannot be overstated, and what is even more important is sharing these experiences and speaking about the transformative nature of such experiences, in order to empower others to enter outdoor spaces. The door to trying many of these activities and sports is not as wide open as it should be for marginalized groups. As social media activists share how it feels to engage in outdoor recreation as a woman or as a person of color, especially in a group of people that actually reflect their qualities, they are actively pushing the door open wider, making it easier for those in marginalized groups to take the leap into trying these activities.

There are also considerable implications of the study with respect to the role and duties of corporations within the push to make the outdoors more diverse and inclusive. The first is that if brands want to participate in the conversation through brand partnerships, they should find activists and influencers that truly align with their mission. If they can't find an activist or influencer that aligns with their mission in a way that is authentic to the movement, they should likely consider re-evaluating their place in the movement or their brand values. Brand



partnerships that are authentic and align with the activist benefit all parties involved. They benefit both the brand and the activist because the posts perform better, making the posts more worthwhile for the brand while elevating the interaction rate for the activist.

Tokenism and virtue signaling are often concerns cited when a person or organization is looking to expand its diversity and inclusion programs. These concerns are valid; however, this study examined thousands of comments and did not come across any accusations of tokenism or virtue signaling within brand partnerships with these activists. This suggests that brands should not allow such concerns to hamper their diversity and inclusion efforts. In fact, the only mention of tokenism was from one of Newman's posts, where she says brands should no longer cite such concerns as an excuse not to do the work necessary to make the changes so many have called for in the outdoor industry.

Lastly, as the discussion points out, consumers are seeking to feel seen by brands, and this is best accomplished through representation. For all these reasons, this project reinforces the call to action for outdoor recreation brands to get involved in this movement to make the outdoors more diverse and inclusive. Opening recreational activities to all, regardless of identity, benefits both the companies and the people they seek to serve. Additionally, some of the posts evaluated directly encourage brands to become involved and take a stand on this issue. It is also important to note that while there are many calls for action, some of those calls specify that the changes need to be systemic and embedded in the culture and hiring practices of the company as well.

As the outdoor industry is rapidly growing, and as the United States population continues to become more diverse in terms of race and gender identity, these companies need to evolve both for reasons of social responsibility and survival. Consumers want to see brands being

responsible corporate citizens now more than ever, and are moving away from brands that are not. Additionally, from the perspective of brand survival, companies should strive to capture every market and cannot afford to leave whole groups of potential consumers behind.

On a far more important level, however, the largest implication of this project is that people want to be in nature, and they want to feel welcomed in it. The heaps of comments idolizing the outdoor adventures these creators embarked on and posted about in 2022 make clear that the people we do not typically associate with recreational activities want to be a part of the outdoors. They want to experience all of the natural wonders America has to offer and is so well known for, and their absence is not due to a lack of interest, as many may have assumed, but rather to a lack of inclusion. Every human deserves to feel like they can find a home for themselves in nature and to be able to connect with their most pure and primitive self. A version of themselves that does not just sit between four walls held captive by electronic devices. Spending time in the great outdoors has proven physical and mental health benefits, and the failure to make this space open and welcoming to everyone has consequences for society as a whole.

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