CURATING NEW UNDERSTANDINGS OF OUTDOOR ADVENTURE: A CRITICAL
ANALYSIS OF #MICROADVENTURE CONTENT ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

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ANALYSIS OF #MICROADVENTURE CONTENT ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

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Outdoor adventure participation is often associated with individual and community benefits

(Coventry et al., 2021; Prince, 2020; Zwart & Ewart, 2022); yet, the 21st century culture of

outdoor adventure in the United States remains socially inequitable and environmentally

unsustainable (Dashper & King, 2021; Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022; Taylor et al., 2021).

Stemming largely from the historical development of Romantic 'wilderness' ideals and

American settler colonialism (Goodman, 2023; Hixson, 2013; Wald et al., 2019), dominant

discourses of outdoor adventure—which are circulated widely on social media platforms (Lajnef,

2023)—are often underpinned by notions of social and environmental conquest in the outdoors

(Gray et al., 2018; Stanley, 2020; Whitson, 2021). Themes such as social privilege,

individualism, and exploitation in the outdoors are often reinforced on social media channels,

perpetuating an inequitable and unsustainable '*conquest culture*' in outdoor adventure (Noble

2018b; Whitson, 2021). This thesis explores the representation of an emerging topic in the

outdoor field, microadventures—which are described as simple, local, and affordable adventures

(Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020). The purpose of this of study is to critically

examine how #microadventure content on Instagram and Facebook reinforces or resists themes of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and socio-environmental exploitation—commonly seen in U.S. outdoor adventure. A central research question was addressed: How is the "regular day" (Lopez et al., 2018) #microadventure content on Instagram and Facebook reinforcing or resisting the dominant presence of conquest discourses in the outdoors? A methodology of qualitative critical social media content analysis grounded in Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding was used to explore the research question. 56 #microadventure posts were collected over a "regular day" of social media usage (Lopez et al., 2018), 'deeply read' (Macnamara, 2005), and categorized according to my interpretation as a researcher-audience member (Hall, 1973). Findings were split; around half of the posts perpetuated conquest culture, while the other half displayed discourses of resistance—showing potential for improved holistic sustainability, accessibility, and inclusivity in the outdoors (Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022). Framed as a critique of neoliberalism, discussion of the findings interrogates how conquest culture is perpetuated by representations of adventure in the U.S. social media landscape. I conclude that there is an ongoing need in the outdoor field to: (1) consider how outdoor adventure is represented through photographs and on social media, especially in terms of where we seek 'sublime' natural beauty, (2) confront recurring themes of conquest culture in outdoor adventure, specifically related to the prevalence of whiteness and pattern of material overconsumption, and (3) celebrate representations of microadventures that extend beyond the scope of traditional outdoor adventure and uplift groups devoted to promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and sustainability in the outdoors.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"Indeed, the representation of the lone White male staring off into vastness remains one

of the most commonly seen and repeated media images related to activity in the

outdoors" (Roberts, 2018, p. 25).

Images simultaneously capture and construct social realities; in the crafting of an image,

we frame the world through our own lens, providing insight into our personal cultures and lived

experiences (Hill & Helmers, 2012; Ibrahim, 2015). Often in the form of photos or illustrations,

images are powerful vessels of communication because they transmit ideas without the

constraints of written language (Mitchell, 2002). Contemporary U.S. culture relies on the

circulation of images to share information, tell stories, and present the aesthetics of a particular

concept (Ibrahim, 2015), and Americans often do this on social media platforms (Maher et al.,

2016). Seven out of ten Americans use social media for entertainment or networking purposes,

and the two most popular platforms are Facebook and Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2021).

With such expansive usership, social media sites are a vital entry point into collective

understanding of emerging social phenomena (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Lajnef, 2023). One

novel phenomenon that has recently developed is that of *microadventures*—short-term, local,

and affordable outdoor endeavors (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Humphreys, 2014; Roberts,

2018).

With the potential to center more sustainable, accessible, and inclusive forms of outdoor

adventure, microadventures disrupt a current culture of outdoor adventure in the U.S. that is

socially inequitable and environmentally unsustainable (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow &

Mackenzie, 2020; Stonehouse, 2022). Through a focus on local and affordable outdoor activities, microadventures can serve as an act of resistance to the dominant discourses of social and environmental *'conquest culture'* in the outdoors, which emerged largely in part from the historical development of Romantic 'wilderness' and American settler colonialism (Goodman, 2023; Hixson, 2013; Wald et al., 2019; Whitson, 2021).

Development of Conquest Culture in Outdoor Adventure

Romantic 'Wilderness'

Scholars in the outdoor field suggest that ideas tied to conventional understandings of adventure can be traced back to the cultural legacy of the Romantic period, a philosophical movement that emerged in Europe during the late 1800s (Beames & Brown, 2016; Roberts, 2018; Wald et al., 2019). The Romantic period marked a transition away from rationalism, or thinking that actions should be based on reason, to a paradigm that suggests knowledge is defined by individual experiences and emotions (Berlin, 2013). Works emerging in the Romantic period focused on several themes including escapes from mundane city life to pristine 'wilderness,' physically demanding challenges to showcase 'rugged individualism,' and the 'sublime'—a concept that describes a nature-based, awe-inspiring, and emotional experience (Berlin, 2013; Loynes, 2010; Moore & Strachan, 2010; Farley, 2005; Roberts, 2012; Zweig, 1974).

While Romantic-era works made significant contributions to the environmental movement in America (Berlin, 2013; Roberts, 2012), motifs associated with ideal 'wilderness' explorations are underpinned by social privilege, individualism, and exploitation. Largely produced by—and for—affluent, White males, stories and images of ideal 'wilderness' expeditions emphasize travel away from one's home, physical challenge, and domineering

exploration of 'uncivilized' environments (Bolton, 2008). With its historical penchant for remote and sublime expeditions, I turn a critical lens on a body of outdoor adventure literature that typically venerates Romantic ideals (Roberts, 2018). I argue that the concept of the ideal Romantic 'wilderness' engendered a norm of social and environmental conquest culture in outdoor adventure; thereby manifesting a 21st century culture that is marked by social privilege, individualism, and exploitation (Roberts, 2018; Smith, 2019; Wald et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2019).

American Settler Colonialism

Continuing beyond the Romantic period, I suggest that ideas associated with American settler colonialism also contributed to the development of conquest culture in outdoor adventure. American settler colonialism is a system of oppression defined by imperial expansion and genocide of indigenous communities (Wald et al., 2019). The goal of American settler colonialism was to displace native populations with European settlements (Hixson, 2013). Often characterized by westward expansion and Manifest Destiny (i.e., the divine 'right' to establish new territory) American settler colonialism is tied closely to the notion of exploring the Romantic 'wilderness' (Bolton, 2008). The idealization of exploring 'wilderness' areas had many lasting consequences, with the most significant being the perpetuation of social and environmental exploitation in conquest culture. An emerging concept within the outdoor field, microadventures, may provide a potential response to conquest culture.

Microadventures: A Potential Response to Conquest Culture

Microadventures are short-term outdoor experiences that emphasize local, affordable, and carbon-light outdoor experiences (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Humphreys, 2014; Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022)—a shift away from traditional adventures

that necessitate expensive gear, specialized knowledge, physical ability, and extensive travel to actualize. Examples of microadventures include backyard camping (Morris & Orton-Johnson, 2022), local bike rides (Spencer et al., 2019), and picnic dinners at the park (Humphreys, 2014). While there is a growing body of scholarly literature related to microadventures, general audiences can also benefit from knowing more about microadventures. One space to educate the public about microadventures is on social media.

Microadventures and Social Media

Given the prominence of virtual communication in the digital age, social media networks provide a viable arena for the promotion of microadventure content (Lajnef, 2023), but the effectiveness is contingent on *how* microadventures are being represented in these spaces. While meaningful representations of microadventures may increase the visibility of short-term, local, and affordable outdoor adventures (Beames et al., 2019; Humphreys, 2014; Stonehouse, 2022), potentially leading to a more accessible, inclusive, and sustainable culture of outdoor adventure; misrepresentations of microadventures may be reinforcing dominant discourses of conquest culture, thereby perpetuating the cycle of unequal representation and participation, violence and discrimination, and resource-intensive activities in the outdoors (Goodman, 2023; Hixson, 2013; Wald et al., 2019; Whitson, 2021). With this dilemma in mind, a primary aim of this study was to look at the representation of microadventures on social media.

Purpose of Study

Few studies have considered the representation of microadventures on social media in the context of conquest culture, therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically examine how #microadventure content on Instagram and Facebook reinforces or resists themes of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation—commonly seen in U.S. outdoor

adventure. Overall, I hope that by bringing a critical awareness to ways in which outdoor microadventures are being represented on social media, the outdoor field can make an intentional transition towards presenting more accessible, inclusive, and sustainable modes of adventure to the broader public on social media. Beyond the scope of this study, I intend for this work to invite a critical inquiry of 'traditional' outdoor adventure and inspire a new generation of culturally-responsive, resource-light, and financially-accessible microadventures.

Research Question and Methodology

A central research question was posed in this study: How is the "regular day" (Lopez et. al, 2018) discourse surrounding microadventures on Instagram and Facebook reinforcing or resisting the dominant presence of conquest discourses (social privilege, individualism, and exploitation) in the outdoors? I addressed this question using a methodology of qualitative critical social media content analysis informed by Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding. The final subsection of this chapter provides a roadmap for the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Roadmap

Chapter 2 provides a literature review that covers topics related to the themes of conquest culture in U.S. outdoor adventure, microadventures, and social media. Chapter 3 details my qualitative social media content analysis methodology. Chapter 4, the final chapter of this thesis, includes a copy of the manuscript: *Confronting and (re)constructing 'conquest culture' in outdoor adventure: A critical analysis of #microadventure content on Facebook and Instagram*, which is being submitted for consideration in the Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership, Special Issue: Coalition for Education in the Outdoors 2024.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose and Overview

The purpose of this literature review is to investigate the themes of conquest culture, explore the topic of microadventures, and provide more information about the current status of social media research in the outdoor adventure field. I begin by providing an overview of the themes of conquest culture in outdoor adventure, noting how each theme relates to current issues seen within 21st century U.S. outdoor adventure. Next, I expand on the topic of microadventures, sharing benefits and current applications. Then, I provide more information on the uses, limitations, and potentials of social media networks to represent microadventures in the context of 21st century United States culture. I conclude this review by identifying a gap in the literature: few studies have explored the representation of microadventures on social media in the context of conquest culture.

Themes of Conquest Culture in Outdoor Adventure

This section of the literature review will focus specifically on how the intertwined historical development of idealized Romantic 'wilderness' and American settler colonialism contributed directly to the establishment of dominant discourses surrounding social privilege, individualism, and exploitation in the outdoors.

Social Privilege

Social privilege is defined as financial and political advantages that certain members of a population hold on the basis of their socially-constructed identities related to race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, age, and/or religion (Black & Stone, 2005). Scholars within the outdoor field have noted that the 21st century culture of adventure is associated with a high

degree of social privilege; typical adventure expeditions require financial resources, leisure time, specialized gear, and physical ability (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020)— privileges that most people in America do not have (Dashper & King, 2021; Dorwart et al., 2022; Lieberman et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2019). This long-standing culture of physically demanding, multi-day expeditions that require ample time and resources (i.e., social privilege) to complete has been linked back to the influence of the Romantic philosophy in outdoor education (Roberts, 2018).

The Romantics defined wilderness as a place that is removed from city life, and contains 'natural' or 'remote' environments (Berlin, 2013). Thoreau and Muir, two Romantic-era American Transcendentalists, argued that wilderness had 'redemptive' and 'pristine' qualities (Roberts, 2012). The concept of 'pristine' wilderness areas disconnected humanity from outdoor environments because, in contrast, city environments were seen as unclean and corrupt, far-removed from the 'pure,' 'untouched' wilderness areas (Callicott, 1998; Cronon, 1996; Nash, 1982). While writers like Thoreau and Muir intended for the idea of a pristine, far-removed wilderness to be a motivator of environmental protection, the Romantic idea of escaping mundane city life to experience pristine 'wilderness' environments and take on physically demanding activities requires social privilege (e.g., free time, knowledge of outdoor adventure locations, physical ability, and money to purchase gear). Social privilege in outdoor adventure has many negative repercussions in the 21st century culture of outdoor adventure, one of which includes unequal representation in outdoor media and unequal participation in outdoor spaces.

Unequal representation and participation. In 21st century conquest culture of outdoor adventure, identities that hold social privilege in the U.S. context, such as being male (Gray et al., 2018; Kennedy & Russell, 2021; Roberts, 2018), able-bodied (Stanley, 2020), heterosexual

(Stanley, 2020), and affluent (Smith, 2019) are often represented, while social identities that typically face discrimination and oppression are underrepresented (Finney, 2014; Outdoor Foundation, 2022; Roberts, 2018). Unequal representation of social identities in outdoor media may be contributing to what Mills (2014) notes as the "adventure gap"—the pattern of unequal participation in outdoor adventure across social groups in the United States.

Participation in the outdoors is unequal across gender, race, class, and ability spectra in America (Alvarez et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2021; Outdoor Foundation, 2022; Pike & Beames, 2013; Wald et al., 2019). According to the Outdoor Foundation (2022), an organization devoted to making the outdoors accessible for all, 72% percent of all U.S. outdoor activity participants are White (p. 8). Furthermore, males participate at a higher rate than females (Outdoor Foundation, 2022, p. 9). In addition to the majority of outdoor adventure participants being White males, the average annual income of an outdoor participant in 2021 was $70,635, which is over $10,000 more than the average American makes (Outdoor Foundation, 2022, p. 15).

While many national organizations (e.g. The Black Outdoors, Unlikely Hikers, Outdoor Asian, Latino Outdoors, Natives4Nature, Outdoor Afro, and Pride Outside), are working to diversify outdoor representation and participation (National Parks Conservation Association, 2020), scholars note that there is still a need to address the predominance of social privilege in 21st century U.S. outdoor adventure (Dashper & King, 2021; Dorwart et al., 2022; Lieberman et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2019). Outdoor equity and accessibility scholars suggest that microadventures may be a practical way to facilitate diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the outdoor field (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020). In the next subsection of this literature review, I expand on the second theme of conquest culture: individualism.

Individualism

Romantic-era depictions of adventure typically showcase a solo (often male) adventurer—exemplifying the prominence of individualism in Romanticism and the connection to modern conquest culture (Figure 1; Berlin, 2013; Farley, 2005; Loynes, 2010; Mortlock, 1984; Roberts, 2012; Zweig, 1974). Roberts (2018) writes that the characteristic image of "the lone White male staring off into vastness" (p. 25) persists as one of the most repeated images in outdoor media. The image of a solo male adventurer directly showcases the Romantic-era narrative of 'rugged individualism,' defined as the independent pursuits taken on by physically strong people in dangerous 'wilderness' environments (Roberts, 2012).
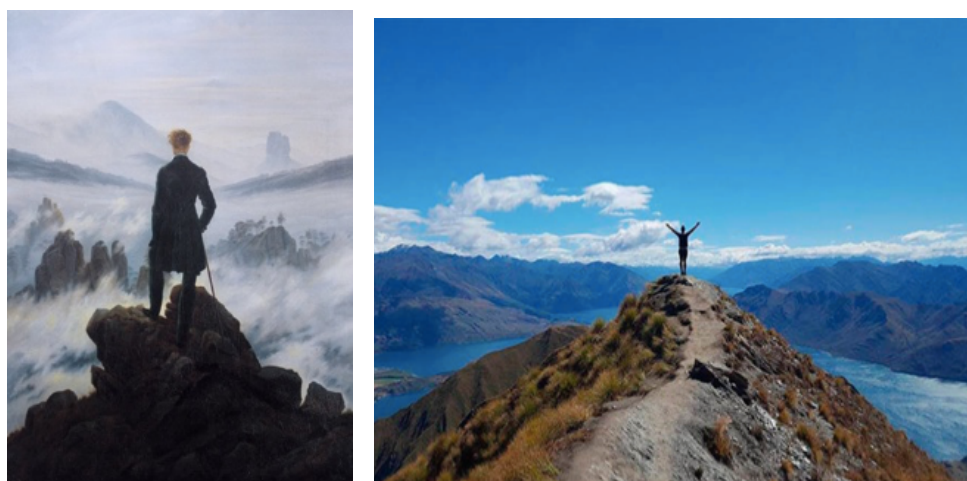
Figure 1. Side-by-side comparison of a Romantic-era depiction (screenshot on left) of outdoor adventure (Friedrich, 1818) and a modern conception (screenshot on right) of outdoor adventure (Smith, 2019, p. 2).

The danger of the 'rugged individual' narrative is expressed clearly by Jarvis (2007): The concept of "rugged individualism" in the wilderness is linked to individual identity because in order to survive the "rugged and dangerous" wilderness environments, a person needed "physical strength and endurance"—qualities that were commonly related to masculine experiences (p. 150). Jarvis (2007) extends her statement by arguing that emphasizing the importance of

wilderness experiences simultaneously highlights individuals with masculine identities and able

bodies, thus, engendering a culture of exclusivity in outdoor adventure based on individual

experiences.

Roberts (2012) broadens Jarvis' (2007) thinking, stating that a focus on individual

experiences in the culture of outdoor adventure may disregard the social factors of identity

formation, especially those dealing with issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.

Ignoring the complex ways in which social factors impact experiences in outdoor 'wilderness'

environments in the United States underpins discrimination and marginalization (Finney, 2014;

Lynch & Moore, 2004; Taylor et al., 2021). Moreover, by remaining ignorant to the complex,

socially-derived facets of identity formation, individual experiences become detached from

larger questions of power and privilege in the outdoors (Roberts, 2018), which, consequentially

undermines the fraught history of violence and discrimination in outdoor spaces in the United

States (Finney, 2014).

Violence and discrimination in outdoor spaces. Outdoor places in the United States,

(e.g., forests, parks, lakes, and pools) have historically been sites of violence for people of color,

people in the LGBTQ+ communities, indigenous peoples, and people living in poverty (Finney,

2014; Stanley, 2020; Wald et al., 2019). In *Black Faces, White Spaces* Finney (2014) argues that

the tumultuous histories of slavery and Jim Crow laws in the United States have contributed to a

social understanding of 'wilderness' that is tainted by violence and discrimination against people

of color. Harrowing acts of violence in the outdoors, such as lynching, became intimately

associated with cultural narratives about 'remote,' 'isolated,' and 'lonely' wilderness areas that

are defined by fear, pain, and suffering. Finney (2014) writes that elements of outdoor

environments, such as trees, are "painful symbol[s] for many black people, reminding them that

the color of their skin could mean death" (p. 60). These collective cultural narratives surrounding racialized violence in the outdoors continued throughout the 20th century and were made worse by the existence of racially segregated parks (Free, 2009), pools (Rodriguez, 2022), and green spaces (Kephart, 2022). Rodriguez (2022) notes that the harmful history of segregation in the outdoors has negatively impacted the 21st century culture of outdoor recreation, continuing the complex intersection of social and environmental injustice in the United States.

In the modern day U.S., the pattern of violence and discrimination in outdoor spaces has continued through the disinvestment of public parks in Black and brown neighborhoods, violent police practices, environmental injustice, and direct acts of violence against people in outdoor spaces (Rodriguez, 2022; Taylor et al., 2021). For example, numerous threats and attacks on men of color in the outdoors have been seen as recently as the 2010s and 20s (Taylor et al., 2021): A White woman threatened Christian Cooper with police action while he was birdwatching, a White man profiled and murdered Ahmad Aubery while he was jogging outdoors, a White police officer wrongfully killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice while he was playing in a park, and a man fatally shot Trayvon Martin while he was walking home from a convenience store (Taylor et al., 2021). The aforementioned patterns of violence and discrimination in outdoor spaces suggest that there is a need for more culturally-responsive practices in the outdoor field that focus on outdoor accessibility and inclusivity in 21st century outdoor adventure (Roberts, 2012).

The need for outdoor accessibility and inclusivity. Many scholars argue the necessity of promoting accessibility and inclusivity in the outdoors (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). Outdoor accessibility and inclusivity researchers, Taylor et al. (2021), assert "the right to be physically active outdoors, to play, and to gather in parks as community is essential for health" (p. 24). While scholars across the medical, educational, environmental, and

sociological fields agree that time spent outdoors is beneficial to overall health and wellbeing, there is still evidence to suggest that most people in the United States spend limited time outdoors (Li et al., 2022; Louv, 2011; Warber et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2021).

Defined as "Nature-Deficit Disorder" (NDD) by Louv (2005), spending limited time outdoors negatively impacts sensory use, attention span, emotional regulation, and physical health. Literature from the medical and psychological fields supports Louv's (2005) claim— people who do not spend enough time outdoors are at higher risk for developing myopia, becoming obese, experiencing depression, and having impaired social skills (Cohen et al., 2019; Driessnack, 2009; French et al., 2013). In more recent years, scholars have pointed out that NDD disproportionately impacts marginalized communities of color, suggesting increased need to address the historically-rooted pattern of violence and discrimination in the U.S. in outdoor spaces and consider more accessible and inclusive practices in the outdoor field (Alvarez et al., 2022). Microadventures scholar, Roberts (2018) proposes that microadventures are a potential way to promote such practices. In the following section, I will explore the final theme of conquest culture, exploitation, which looks deeper into complex socio-environmental harms.

Exploitation

In addition to social privilege and individualism, conquest culture also encompasses themes of social and environmental exploitation. A specific element of the Romantic philosophy that underpins exploitation is the idea of the 'strange lands' journey, in other words, traveling from one's home environment to a far-away 'wilderness' area (Roberts, 2012). By creating a divide between one's home environment and a wilderness area, the Romantic philosophy insinuates that one must travel away from home in order to experience 'true' nature (Cronon, 1996). But, this 'strange lands' journey comes with social and environmental costs (Callicott,

1998; Cronon, 1996; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Nash, 1982). There have been several

documented instances of social exploitation, including violence against indigenous peoples

(Alvarez et al., 2022; Wald et al., 2019; Woods, 2017), cultural appropriation (Whitson, 2021),

and ecosystem commodification (Beames et al., 2019). In terms of environmental exploitation,

the voyage to "strange lands" requires carbon-intensive travel and resource demanding

expeditions, which poses a great threat to earth's resources in the context of the global climate

crisis (Beames et al., 2019; Stonehouse, 2022; United Nations, 2023).

Violence against indigenous peoples. One dire consequence associated with social

exploitation in conquest culture is violence against indigenous peoples (Callicott, 1998; Cronon,

1996; Gómez-Pompa & Kaus, 1992; Wald et al., 2019). Modern scholarship has continued to

critique the 'wilderness' construct as it relates to the exploitation of indigenous lands and

populations (Alvarez et al., 2022; Wald et al., 2019; Woods, 2017). Writers suggest that formal

definitions of 'wilderness' are inherently exploitative, as these definitions were crafted by people

with patriarchal, anthropocentric views that served to reinforce the dualism between wilderness

and 'civilization' (Bartel et al., 2021; Finney, 2014; Gómez-Pompa & Kaus, 1992; Nash, 1982;

Woods, 2017). The U.S. government passed the Wilderness Act of 1964 to "protect" areas

outside of cities, but in doing so, devastated entire Indigenous nations through the removal of

communities that were inhabiting designated 'untouched wilderness' areas (Gómez-Pompa &

Kaus, 1992). This pattern of marginalization and violence is still seen on public lands today

(Alvarez et al., 2022; Wald et al., 2019; Woods, 2017).

Cultural appropriation and ecosystem commodification. Often marketed as an

adventure tourism experience, journeys to 'strange' and 'exotic' places maintain the harms of

commodification—the systematic viewing of human and natural resources as material goods

intended to create profit, which further perpetuates exploitation (Beames et al., 2019; Weber, 1922/1968). Both Beames et al. (2019) and Coccossis (2016) consider how adventure travel and tourism degrade local cultures due to the threats of commodification. Beames et al. (2019) noted that traditional cultures face being exoticized and over-commercialized for the sake of tourism. Calling it the 'Disneyization' of tourism experiences, Beames and Brown (2017) suggest that the commodification of adventure pursuits and outdoor experiences is harming the system as a whole by providing experiences that are manufactured, depersonalized, and inauthentic. Similarly, Coccossis (2016) asserts that unrestrained tourism degrades cultural heritage sites, impairing local self-sufficiency for the sake of economic gain. The amount of human resources (e.g., local workers, guides, transportation drivers) that are required to make adventure travel possible cannot be understated (Beames et al., 2019). Several scholars note that opting for local microadventures may help to maintain balanced global economic growth and mitigate the potential for exploitation of financial, environmental, and human resources (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Rawles, 2013).

Resource-intensive adventure. The ideal Romantic 'wilderness' was noted to be an environment that was removed from one's home, and required traveling long distances to reach (Berlin, 2013; Roberts, 2012). Traveling to remote wilderness for adventure pursuits is something still seen in 21st century outdoor adventure (Roberts, 2018). While the popularity of multi-day trips in 'wilderness' areas is beneficial to many aspects of the outdoor field (e.g., landscape exploration, team building, personal resilience, cultural appreciation), this form of adventure travel is resource intensive and unsustainable in the context of the global climate crisis, a complex situation caused by increased carbon emissions from human activities (Beames

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et al., 2019; Ebi et al., 2021; Díaz-Pérez, 2021; Rawles, 2013; Stonehouse, 2022; United Nations, 2023).

Traditionally conceived multi-day outdoor adventures—such as backpacking, rock climbing, and whitewater kayaking trips—require extensive car and plane travel, specialized gear, and single use plastics for food and waste (Beames et al., 2019). Taking part in these resource-intensive expeditions creates carbon emissions that directly contribute to the global climate crisis (United Nations, 2023). Despite the long-term esteem of multi-day expeditions in Romantic 'wilderness' areas (Roberts, 2018), transitioning to more carbon-light modes of adventure is needed as the outdoor field faces challenges associated with climate change mitigation and adaptation (Gaston & Soga, 2020; Rawles, 2013; Stonehouse, 2022; Transition Network, 2023).

Towards More Sustainable, Accessible, and Inclusive Adventure

While themes of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation— currently characterize representations of outdoor adventure in the United States, *microadventures* present an opportunity to provide more accessible, inclusive, and sustainable forms of adventure (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Humphreys, 2014; Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022).

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Microadventures

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Microadventures are short-term, local, affordable, and carbon-light outdoor experiences (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Humphreys, 2014; Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022). The term 'microadventure' was popularized by writer Alastair Humphreys (2014) in, *Microadventures: Local Discoveries for Great Escapes*. Humphreys' (2014) publication promoted the idea of documenting and showcasing microadventure endeavors. Soon

after the release of Humphreys' (2014) book, microadventures started to gain recognition on popular news outlets and social media platforms with features on CNN (Morley & Yasukawa, 2014), the acclaimed family and outdoor podcast, 1000 Hours Outside (Yurich, 2022), and New York Times Well (June 23, 2023).

Humphreys' (2014) publication helped to popularize the term 'microadventure' among general audiences, and scholarship from the outdoor field surrounding microadventures has continued to progress. Researchers note that microadventures may be more accessible, inclusive, and sustainable than typical multi-day, travel-intensive expeditions because they use less time, financial, and environmental resources to complete (Beames et al., 2019; Stonehouse, 2022). In contrast to conquest culture, microadventures provide accessible, locally-relevant, group-oriented, and carbon-light adventure opportunities (Beames et al., 2019; Humphreys, 2014; Rawles, 2013) that could potentially deconstruct recurring themes of social privilege, individualism, and exploitation in the 21st century culture of outdoor adventure in the United States. In the following subsections, I will explore three potential benefits of microadventures and provide examples for each: (1) accessibility (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Roberts, 2018), (2) inclusivity (Morris & Orton-Johnson, 2022; Spencer et al., 2019), and (3) sustainability (Rawles, 2013; Stonehouse, 2022).

Accessible Adventure

The concept of microadventures provides a promising development for outdoor accessibility (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Roberts, 2018). Microadventures are intended to be simple, affordable, and approachable for all skill levels and adventure interests (Roberts, 2018). Eliminating barriers that are common in the 21st century conquest culture of adventure (e.g., time, money, knowledge) may help to make adventure more accessible for more people (Taylor

et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2019). In this subsection, I highlight how local microadventures in "nearby nature" provide more accessible adventure options because they do not require significant time, money, or travel to complete (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020).

Nearby nature. Goodnow and Mackenzie (2020) propose that local microadventures allow people to connect with the "nearby nature" in their home environments. Nearby nature might include the parks, greenspaces, plants, or habitats that encompass residential life and are located close to one's home. For example, Hauser (2020) documents a runner who ran a marathon in his 21-foot backyard garden during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period, a time when people could not travel away from home. This local microadventure did not require any travel, therefore was relatively accessible for the runner. Hauser (2020) notes the newfound appreciation people gained for local landscapes during the pandemic, signifying how accessible microadventures in local locations can be meaningful.

Similar to Hauser (2020), Goodnow and Mackenzie (2020) suggest that the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a rise in local, nearby nature explorations. Goodnow and Mackenzie (2020) extend Hauser's (2020) thinking by including Hollenhorst et al.'s (2014) concept of "locavism" in their paradigm for microadventures in a post-pandemic world. Locavism, or small-scale travel to local ecosystems (Hollenhorst et al., 2014), captures a similar meaning of nearby nature, but emphasizes the local travel component. Both concepts, nearby nature and locavism, showcase that close-to-home microadventures can facilitate nearby place-based connections (Johnson, 2010; Sobel, 2004) and accessible exploration of local environments (Goodnow and Mackenzie, 2020) without the need for ample time, money, or travel to complete.

Inclusive Adventure

In the 21st century conquest culture of adventure, there is a focus on individualism and Romantic-era narratives such as "rugged individualism" (Roberts, 2012). Microadventures, on the other hand, have been noted to be inclusive of all skill levels, adventure interests, and abilities (Goodnow and Mackenzie, 2020). Inclusive microadventures are especially important in the context of the outdoor accessibility and inclusivity movement, as they may provide culturally- and historically-responsive adventure outlets in response to conquest culture (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). In the following subsections, I explore several examples of inclusive microadventures in both community settings and education settings.

Community settings. In community settings, microadventures have been associated with improved holistic health outcomes and self-reported feelings of fulfillment for participants of all ages (Morris & Orton-Johnson, 2022; Spencer et al., 2019). Spencer et al. (2019) noted that participation in e-biking microadventures was positively correlated with older adults' self-reported mental health and wellness. Elderly populations are not typically included in cycling adventures because of safety concerns or physical abilities, but the e-bike microadventures allowed for more people within the older adult population to participate in cycling (Spencer et al., 2019). The majority of participants in the study reported positive feelings of discovery, achievement, excitement, and satisfaction, with one participant noting that the e-bike experience gave him a, "Strong sense of nostalgia—made me feel young again" (Spencer et al., 2019, p. 131). Overall, the e-bike microadventure allowed for older adults to be included in cycling adventures, demonstrating how microadventures can provide more inclusive adventure alternatives.

Similar to Spencer et al. (2019), Morris and Orton-Johnson (2022) observed how backyard camping microadventures could improve family dynamics and social-emotional wellbeing. In their study, Morris and Orton-Johnson (2022) surveyed people about their at-home camping practices and locations during the COVID-19 pandemic and also examined how the use of social media allowed for at-home microadventure experiences to be shared within the larger community. Morris and Orton-Johnson (2022) found that at-home camping microadventures allowed for all members of a family, especially children, to feel included in an adventure experience. Additionally, researchers found that through hashtags such as "#homecamping," "#funoutdoors," and "#makingmemories," people who participated in at-home microadventures were able to include wider audiences in the conversation about their adventure. Lastly, Morris and Orton-Johnson (2022) reported that at-home microadventures allowed participants to reconceptualize camping from something that typically took place "out there" to something that can take place "right here" (i.e., at home) (p. 21). This finding signifies how microadventures can encompass a wider, more inclusive, understanding of adventure. In both Spencer et al.'s (2019) and Morris and Orton-Johnson's (2022) studies, a wide range of people in various community settings were able to find benefit from microadventure experiences, signifying the potential for inclusive microadventures. Next, I will discuss the potential of inclusive microadventures in education settings.

Education settings. In education settings, researchers have noted increased social connections and inclusion among both students and teachers who participate in microadventures (Brown & Flaumenhaft, 2019; Wilson & Kumli, 2019). Brown and Flaumenhaft (2019) developed a microadventure curriculum for elementary-school aged children that had experienced some form of trauma in their lifetime; researchers found that after participating in

the microadventure-focused curriculum, students reported increased feelings of autonomy and empowerment in the classroom. One teacher reflected on their experience with the student-led microadventure curriculum, stating: "students have more power to tell us how they feel about a class, about the school, what they may think will work better" (p. 18). Brown and Flaumenhaft's (2019) findings are significant in the context of inclusive microadventures because they exemplify how student-led microadventure experiences in school settings can be empowering for young students who have experienced trauma that may not typically feel included in education settings.

Likewise, Wilson and Kumli (2019) asked students to document microadventure participation as part of an undergraduate course. They noticed the variety of self-determined definitions and expressions of outdoor adventure, and highlighted how microadventures allowed a large population of students to connect with the outdoors in unique ways (Wilson & Kumli, 2019). Most students chose to go for a walk or hike for their microadventure, and defined 'adventure' as something that "included elements of exploration, risk, learning, and fun" (p. 256). In contrast, one student in Wilson and Kumli's (2019) study decided to microadventure in the city, stating, "I believe that the categories of wilderness and civilization are colonial concepts. The traditional idea of an adventure from a colonial worldview is for someone civilized getting submerged in and then conquering nature, the wilderness" (p. 256). Both Brown and Flaumenhaft's (2019) and Wilson and Kumli's (2019) studies found that participating in microadventures increased feelings of empowerment, improved group dynamics, deepened personal relationships with outdoor environments, and redefined the meaning of 'adventure' for populations in education settings, potentially demonstrating how the concept of microadventures can present more inclusive forms of adventure.

Sustainable Adventure

Scholars note that microadventures may provide an outlet for economically, environmentally, and culturally sustainable outdoor recreation and adventure (Stonehouse, 2022). In response to the global climate crisis, microadventures demonstrate a way to sustain adventure amid changing landscapes and answer the call for more environmentally-conscious practices in the outdoor field (Beames et al., 2019; Stonehouse, 2022). The following subsection will look closer at how carbon-light microadventures can provide more sustainable adventure opportunities (Rawles, 2013).

Carbon-light adventures. Transitioning to a more sustainable outdoor adventure model prioritizes the longevity of environmental, economic, and cultural systems (Purvis, 2019). As previously noted, this is important in the context of the global climate crisis (Taylor et al., 2021; Ward, 2022) because extreme weather patterns, loss of biodiversity, and degraded ecosystem health will inevitably change how people are able to adventure in outdoor spaces (Ives et al., 2018; Talukder et al., 2022). For example, long-distance backpacking trips may not be an option in areas with an increase in unpredictable wildfires or unreliable water sources (Rose, 2011). Several scholars suggest that transitioning to more carbon-light forms of adventure may be a beneficial alternative (Rawles, 2013; Stonehouse, 2022).

Rawles (2013) speaks to the importance of carbon-light microadventures, noting how reframing adventure to focus on human-powered travel to nearby places, local food, and fewer equipment purchases can help to bring benefit to adventure. Suggesting that participants "celebrate" (p. 154) the concept of less resource intensive adventure, Rawles (2013) remarks that carbon-light adventures can "give us opportunities to step out of our normal cultural field" (p. 156). Moreover, Rawles (2013) urges readers to consider a "new normal" of adventure that

encompasses a new, carbon-light way of being that will not contribute to the earth's demise (p. 157). Carbon-light expeditions signify a noteworthy benefit of microadventures: the potential for sustainable adventure; which is especially important in the context of the global climate crisis and in the exploitative conquest culture of outdoor adventure (Beames et al., 2019).

The Potential of Microadventures

Microadventures present a potential way to disrupt the current conquest culture of outdoor adventure because these small-scale adventures are potentially more accessible, inclusive, and sustainable than traditional adventure expeditions—which are often dominated by discourses of social privilege, individualism, and exploitation (Beames et al., 2019; Humphreys, 2014; Roberts, 2018). By incorporating more microadventures into the larger understanding of adventure, outdoor scholars, educators, and enthusiasts alike can validate the importance of local, short-term, and affordable adventures. In doing so, public representations of microadventures can be a potential vessel to promote sustainability and accessibility, pushing back against the persistence of conquest culture in typical representations of the outdoors and outdoor adventure participation (Finney, 2014; Roberts, 2018; Wald et al., 2019; Whitson, 2021). But, as microadventures become more popular, it becomes increasingly important to monitor *how* microadventures are being represented and promoted by general audiences—especially on popular social media platforms. The final section of this literature review will look at social media and microadventures.

<div align="center">

Social Media

</div>

As microadventures grow in popularity, social media content creators have the potential to showcase accessible, inclusive, and sustainable practices in the outdoors. But, this opportunity comes with potential downfalls—social media spaces are often reproductions of the same

systemic oppressions seen in 21st century American life (Benjamin, 2019). Several scholars note that digital algorithms used in social media reinforce racism, xenophobia, and capitalism by constructing biased depictions of people, places, and consumer products (Benjamin, 2019; Kotliar, 2020; Noble, 2018a).

Despite these drawbacks, several scholars note the potential of social media networks to be spaces for advocacy and community building (Lopez et al. 2018; Stanley, 2020; Whitson, 2021). Social media platforms connect people across physical, linguistic, and social barriers (Maher et al., 2016). Networks such as Facebook and Instagram allow users to readily access and share information—approximately 72% of the U.S. population uses some form of social media and most Americans consider social media to be part of their daily routine (Pew Research, 2021).

Given the myriad of perspectives on social media usage, these digital networks are viable arenas for social research (Cousineau, 2021; Schultz & McKeown, 2022). But, in order to better understand how social media (mis)represents social reality, researchers must investigate *how* digital discourses are constructed through verbal and visual discourse (Cousineau, 2021). In the following sections, I will provide an overview of social media research, consider social media and the outdoor field, and conclude with a gap in the literature: few studies have considered representations of microadventures on social media.

Overview

In early social media research, scholars note the networking and identity-building capacity of online communities (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Currently, researchers are exploring how people build relationships around shared interests and maintain digital discourse on social media platforms (Lajnef, 2023). Using methodologies rooted in digital ethnography, researchers can investigate social movements, the formation of social groups, and ideas surrounding collective

action (Cousineau, 2021; Lopez et al., 2018). In addition to learning more about group identities, social media researchers can examine how social media affects individual identities, gaining insight into how social media sites shape how people view their bodies, personal relationships, and leisure time (Schultz & McKeown, 2022).

The following section will provide an overview of social media and the outdoor field. I will present a brief outline of the debate around social media that exists within the outdoor field and then highlight scholarship within the field that illuminates the divide. Specifically, I will discuss presentations of gender, identity, and landscapes on social media, and then I will consider microadventures in the context of social media research (Gray et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Stanley, 2020). I conclude by pointing out a gap in the literature, which is that little is known about representations of microadventures on social media.

Social Media and the Outdoor Field

Social media usage is a contested topic, especially in the outdoor field (Arts et al., 2021; Conti & Heldt Cassel, 2020; Gray et al., 2018; Shultis, 2015). While some scholars propose that social media networks can inspire real-world connections and help to build community (Arts et al., 2021; Manca, 2020; McGlynn-Stewart et al., 2020; Papademetriou et al., 2022), others in the field suggest that using social media technology in the outdoors exposes the harms of surveillance, commodification, exploitation, and exoticization (Gray et al., 2018; Noble, 2018b; Smith, 2019). Whitson (2021) cites that outdoor organizations often "draw heavily from romanticized American Indian imagery" (p. 311), circulating harmful stereotypes of indigenous communities. Likewise, several researchers point out that the construction of social media sites reflects the modes of oppression seen in "real-world" spaces (Noble, 2018a; Kotliar, 2020).

Alongside these debates, conversations around how user-generated visual content informs the social construction of outdoor experiences have developed in recent years (Arts et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2018; Smith, 2019). Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook allow for users to craft their own discourse around the outdoors while simultaneously engaging with others' stories—a distinct difference from one-way interactions with outdoor advertisements or mass media images (Arts et al., 2021). Yet, even though the active process of uploading and sharing photos of the outdoors allows for a diverse array of perspectives to be shared, the circulation of images on social media may also serve as a method of reinforcing stereotypes, hindering the recent push for increased social inclusion and environmental awareness in the outdoors (Büscher, 2016; Gray et al., 2018; Smith, 2019).

Presentations of gender, identity, and landscapes. Within the outdoor field, several studies have looked at presentations of gender, identity, and landscapes on social media, which is relevant in the context of this research which is focused on evaluating representations of microadventures on social media. Notably, Gray et al. (2018) looked at self-presentations of gender in the outdoors on social media, identifying the ways in which women co-create identity through viewing and posting images online. Stanley (2020) considered "unlikely hikers," exploring how fat hikers, solo hikers, and hikers of color utilize social media through a lens of queer mobilities. Finally, Smith (2019) studied adventure travel social media spaces, pointing out the drawbacks of landscape commodification and aestheticization. These three studies raise questions related to presentations of gender, identity, and landscapes on social media, and signal the relevance of social media in the outdoors.

Social media and microadventures. It is notable to point out that accounts devoted to microadventure endeavors have started to become popular on Facebook and Instagram; in

addition, posts about microadventures have been made by popular outlets such as The New York Times (New York Times Well, June 23, 2023). While this may be a positive moment for the promotion of microadventures, the threat of recirculating dominant discourses stemming from Romantic 'wilderness' and American settler colonialism related to social and environmental conquest is apparent. With that, it becomes important to evaluate the discourse surrounding microadventures in social media spaces.

Gap in the Literature

While many studies have looked at the benefits and drawbacks of social media and the outdoors (Arts et al., 2021; Conti & Heldt Cassel, 2020; Shultis, 2015), and several others have delved deeper into topics related to presentations of gender, identity, and landscapes (Gray et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Stanley, 2020), a gap in the literature exists surrounding studies that have conducted an analysis combining microadventures and social media in the context of conquest culture. Therefore, the purpose of this of study is to critically examine how #microadventure content on Instagram and Facebook reinforces or resists themes of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation—commonly seen in U.S. outdoor adventure.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

Overall Approach and Rationale

Using Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding as a framework, I approached my research process from an audience member's point of view in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of social media dialogue (Macnamara, 2005). I used qualitative critical social media content analysis as methodology to analyze a "regular day" of #microadventure content on Facebook and Instagram (Lopez et al., 2018, p. 6). I chose to use qualitative methods for a more embodied and personalized insight into the cultural production of knowledge related to #microadventure content (Macnamara, 2005).

My rationale for this work stems from the prevalence of social media in 21st century and the potential of #microadventures to disrupt conquest culture in outdoor adventure (Lanjef, 2023; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Roberts, 2018). The purpose of this of study is to critically examine how #microadventure content on Instagram and Facebook *reinforces* or *resists* themes of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation—commonly seen in U.S. outdoor adventure. I posed a central question to guide my analysis: How is the "regular day" discourse surrounding microadventures on Instagram and Facebook *reinforcing* or *resisting* the dominant presence of conquest discourses in the outdoors?

The following sections will detail my qualitative critical social media content analysis methodology, data collection process, and data analysis procedures. I conclude with a statement regarding my choice to pursue Western Carolina University's "Manuscript Thesis Option," signaling my inclusion of the completed manuscript, *Confronting and (re)constructing 'conquest culture' in outdoor adventure: A critical analysis of #microadventure content on Facebook and*

Instagram, in Chapter 4. Findings and implications of this study are included within the manuscript.

Qualitative Critical Social Media Content Analysis

The purpose of social media content analysis is to elucidate how social media, a fundamental part of modern social life, affects collective values, beliefs, and cultures (Lai & To, 2015). According to Stanley (2020), social media content analyses provide researchers an unobstructed view of how people behave in real life. Social media "texts," found in the form of publicly posted visual content, captions, comments, and linked hashtags, function as sites of cultural knowledge production (Gray et al., 2018, p. 157). Through a process known as encoding and decoding, social media content analyses allow researchers to symbolize an audience-level perspective to make meaning of visual artifacts and draw inferences about themes conveyed in the images (Hall, 1973; Macnamara, 2005). The following subsections will describe the historical development of content analysis, social media content analysis across disciplines, social media content analysis in the outdoor field, and Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding. At the end of this section, I provide a section on researcher reflexivity to contextualize my role as a researcher-audience member (Hall, 1973; Tracy, 2010; Pillow, 2003).

Historical Development of Content Analysis

Social scientists have been conducting content analyses of mass media since the early 1900s (Macnamara, 2003). Max Weber was one of the first critical theorists to utilize the methodology to study 'cultural temperance' (Hansen et al., 1998), and Harold Lasswell (1927) introduced the idea of systemized content analysis in his study of propaganda. The use of content analysis methods increased over the course of the 20th century with the rise of movies, television, and news media broadcasts (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Lasswell et al. (1952) comment on the

historical significance of content analysis, noting that this method provides researchers a technique for deciphering the discourse surrounding a specific subject at a specific time. A form of content analysis has developed in recent years with the rise of social media (Lai & To, 2015), and has been used across many disciplines to study mass media related to personal image and social relations. I will discuss social media content analysis across disciplines in the next subsection, concluding with a transition to social media content analysis in the outdoor field.

Social Media Content Analysis Across Disciplines

Social media content analyses have been used widely across the social sciences to evaluate socially embedded, often embodied, concepts in digital spaces (Lai & To, 2015). Through this methodology, researchers are able to attain a more robust understanding of how messages are being constructed online, how messages are being circulated, and how these messages might affect audiences (Macnamara, 2005). I will highlight several examples of social media content analyses from the public health, marketing, social justice, sustainability, and tourism fields in the following paragraphs to illuminate the broad application of the methodology. At the conclusion of this subsection, I will narrow the focus to social media content analysis in the outdoor field.

Researchers in the public health field and related medical disciplines have studied images under the hashtags #bodypositivity, #fitspiration, and #quarantine15 (Cohen et al., 2019; Lucibello et al., 2021; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Marketing researchers have also used social media content analysis to investigate branding strategies and audience preferences; for example, Vassallo et al. (2018) looked at junk food marketing and the impact on social media users. Additionally, researchers studying methods of social justice advocacy have analyzed content on social media to explore social movements. For instance, Lopez et al. (2018) surveyed

one day of #feminism posts on Twitter, and conducted a critical content analysis of relevant tweets. They found that posts under #feminism were used to "wield, shield, and troll feeds on feminism," and made suggestions for examining digital leisure spaces in more depth (Lopez et al., 2018). Each one of these studies was conducted for the purpose of gaining insight into rhetorical motivations and digital communication strategies in social networking spaces (Lai & To, 2015; Macnamara, 2005).

In addition to studies related to public health and general marketing, recent researchers have used social media content analysis to explore issues surrounding sustainability and tourism, two fields related to my analysis of #microadventure content. For example, analyses have been conducted using content related to the global youth climate movement (Molder et al., 2022), depictions of sustainable fashion (Milanesi et al., 2022), and portrayals of slow tourism (Le Busque et al., 2022). Within the broad scope of social media content analysis research, many pertinent studies have been conducted in the outdoor and leisure fields that further justify why content analysis is fitting for my research. The following subsection will detail several of these studies.

Social Media Content Analysis in the Outdoor Field

Gray et al. (2018), Smith (2019), and Stanley (2020) each conducted a social media content analysis related to the outdoor field. Gray et al. (2018) looked at representations of women in the outdoors on Instagram by analyzing content collected from the tags #NatureGirls and #outdoorwomen. Similarly, Smith (2019) conducted a content analysis to interrogate the commodification of landscapes on Instagram. Finally, Stanley (2020) investigated an online community of self-proclaimed 'unlikely hikers' using a method of discourse analysis to explore prominent discourses in those users' posts. All three of these studies utilized qualitative social

media content analysis to gain greater insight into people's relationships with their communities and outdoor environments. While the researchers' insights are socially constructed and bound by the context of the research, inferences drawn from the meaning-making process of content analyses can be strengthened using Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding. More about the theory is included in the next subsection.

Theory of Encoding and Decoding

Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding asserts that social communication is a cyclical process of message creation and interpretation. Hall (1973) writes that creating, or 'encoding,' a message, as well as interpreting, or 'decoding' a message involves the understanding of language. Language, according to Hall (1973), is built through a series of culturally-derived 'codes' that signal meaning and are able to build interactive social discourses (Hall, 1973, p. 2). Through the discursive process of encoding and decoding messages, dominant discourses begin to take clearer forms; from here, content analysis researchers have the opportunity to draw inferences about themes conveyed in cultural texts (Macnamara, 2005).

With Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding in mind, social media content analyses researchers can take on a researcher-audience member point of view in order to better understand the 'communication events' taking place on social media platforms and draw inferences from themes conveyed in the images (Macnamara, 2005). Embodying a researcher-audience member perspective allows for an analysis of digital artifacts that is realistic and sincere according to Tracy (2010). Given my own participation as a researcher-audience member, I have included a section on researcher reflexivity below in order to provide more information about my own context within the conversation of #microadventure content.

Researcher Reflexivity

Like most Americans, I am an active participant on Instagram and Facebook (Pew Research, 2021). I often post and view digital content related to outdoor adventure, environmentalism, and local pursuits on my pages. In my daily process of encoding and decoding posts related to activity in the outdoors, I continually witness the circulation of 'adventure' discourses on social media (Hall, 1973). To understand my role as a social media researcher-audience member in more depth, I reflected on the "subjective values, biases, and inclinations" I hold as a researcher (Tracy, 2010, p. 840).

Reflexivity is defined as the intentional consideration of how our own social identities inform our work as researchers (Olive, 2020; Tracy, 2010); it is the admittance that the research process is inseparable from personal experience, knowledge, and bias (Pillow, 2003). Guided by the feminist work of Probyn (1993) and Olive (2020), I will be intentionally reflexive throughout my research process by reflecting on how my own identity as a person who is female, cis-gender, White, upper class, and able-bodied impacts my participation in the outdoor field and influences how I understand 'adventure.' By positioning myself as researcher-audience member in the #microadventure conversation, I am inviting a more organic data collection and analysis process—a valued, but often difficult, aspect of qualitative research undertakings (Tracy, 2010). To provide more transparency, the following subsection will address my access to data and ethical considerations of this study. The next section will provide a robust description of my data collection methods.

Access to Data and Ethical Considerations

In terms of access, I am a user of Instagram and Facebook, so I used my personal accounts to collect images. Using guidance from Paulus et al. (2014), I exclusively analyzed

images that were already posted publicly. This study did not need IRB approval because all images collected will be those that were already posted publicly. To respect the account holder's autonomy and original content, I maintained the username associated with each post and credited the content creators. I did this to honor the brand promotion and networking potential of social media sites and social media research. The next section will detail my data collection methods.

Data Collection

Lopez et al. (2018) states that data collected in social media content analyses is unique from data co-constructed with participants or created by researchers—it exists prior to the research study and is unaltered when observed in a research setting. Described as being "non-interactive," social media content analysis sampling methods are non-intrusive (Lopez et al., 2018), and the data collected gives researchers an unobstructed view of how people communicate in daily life (Stanley, 2020). With the goal of analyzing a "regular day" of social media content related to microadventures, I collected data on an intentionally random day from both Instagram and Facebook. In addition to having publicly accessible content, I chose to use Instagram and Facebook because they are the most popular social media platforms according to number of daily users (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Furthermore, my choice to deliberately collect data on a "regular day" is supported by the work of Lopez et al. (2018), who aimed to analyze tweets tagged #Feminism on a day without notable cultural events leading up to or preceding it. "Regular day" content, according to Lopez et al. (2018), reveals an organic depiction of the discourse and is a suitable entry point for researchers wanting to investigate the social understanding of a particular topic. In the following subsections, I will provide a description of my sampling strategies, sample size, and how I collected a "regular day" of #microadventure content. The final section of this chapter includes

more detail about my data analysis procedures.

Sampling Strategies

My sample was taken from the "Top posts" of the #microadventure page on both Facebook and Instagram. "Top posts" are determined based on when the post was made, how other users have interacted with the post, and if the content meets the platforms' "Recommendation Guidelines" (Meta, 2023). The choice to select content from the "Top posts" page was also deliberate in that these posts are currently being engaged with by many users, and are, therefore, more visible to audiences on a "regular day" (Gray et al., 2018; Lopez et al., 2018). I chose to use the #microadventure because it uses clear and direct language related to the topic of study, which was deemed crucial in Gray et al. (2018)'s similar analysis.

Sample size. I collected a total sample size of 56 posts: 28 posts from Facebook and 28 from Instagram. I chose the number 28 because this is the maximum amount of "Top posts" shown on the hashtag pages on Instagram, therefore this may be the number of posts viewed by a user on a "regular day." It was fitting to collect the same number from Facebook. Furthermore, a sample size of 56 is justified as it is large enough to encompass a distinct array of posts, yet small enough to allow for in-depth analysis of individual posts. A similar sample size was used in two related studies, Gray et al. (2018), who obtained and analyzed 63 photos, as well as McGuirk (2017), who analyzed 50 photos.

A "Regular Day" of #microadventure Content

Data collection took place on October 31, 2023 at 11:00 a.m., a "regular day" and typical time of my personal social media usage. To collect my data, I searched #microadventure on Instagram and Facebook. Next, I navigated to the "Top posts" page and ensured that posts were filtered by "Top posts," the default setting on both Facebook and Instagram (as opposed to

"Recent top posts"). Then, I opened the top 28 posts on Facebook and the top 28 posts on Instagram, and took a screenshot (or screen recording) the post. Screenshots and screen recordings included the post location, visual content, number of likes, caption, and hashtags as a way to capture the nuanced discourses being presented (Stanley, 2020). An example of a #microadventure search on Facebook and Instagram is provided below in Figure 2.

For Instagram posts with multiple images, I collected only the first image included in the post as a way to maintain the sample size. If there were duplicates of the same images on Facebook and Instagram, I collected both. To save the collection of data, I uploaded the screenshots and screen recordings in Google Photos for ease of future access during the data analysis phase.
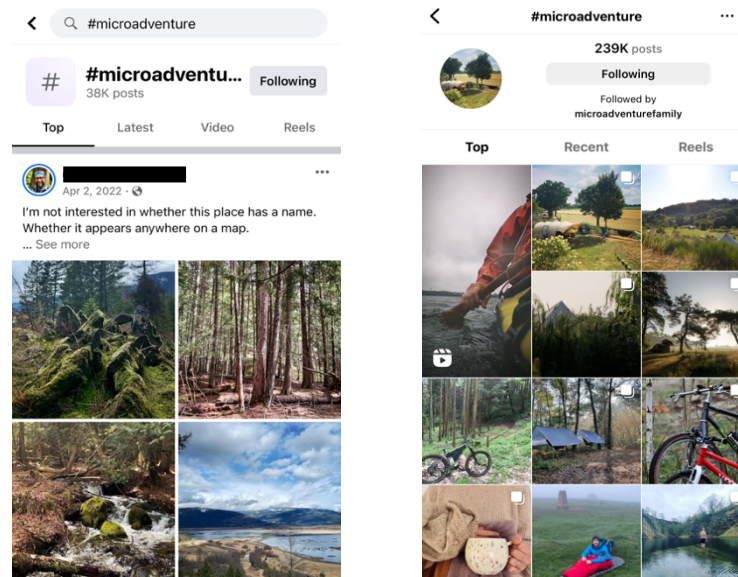

Figure 2. Screenshot of top #microadventure posts on Facebook (left) and Instagram (right). User data has been stripped from Facebook post.

Data Analysis

After collecting the 56 #microadventure posts, I began data analysis on November 20, 2023. My data analysis procedures were informed by Macnamara (2005), who justifies the

rationale for qualitative social media content analyses. Macnamara (2005) states that qualitative

content analyses are polysemic, meaning that they are open to interpretation by various audience

members. This means that in interpreting an image, one must also pay attention to the full

rhetorical situation—the audience, timing, media, and envisioned purpose—of the post. While

this method of qualitative analysis has been criticized as unscientific or unreliable, Macnamara

(2005) insists that in the close reading of visual texts, readers gain insight into the deeper

meanings and intended messaging of analyzed content. This sentiment has been matched by

others in the field (Gray et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Stanley, 2020), therefore a method of

qualitative data analysis was justified in the context of this study. My data analysis procedure

consisted of two parts. The first looked at my emotional responses and interpretations of each

post and the second involved sorting the posts into one of two major categories: *reinforce*

conquest culture or *resist* 'conquest culture.'

Data Analysis: Part One

The first portion of my data analysis assessed my emotional response to each of the posts.

Hall's (1973) framework suggests that an audience member's personal interpretation of the post

is what *truly* generates meaning, therefore my content interpretations were organic and sincere

(Tracy, 2010). Grounded in Geertz's (1973) theory of 'thick description' and Macnamara's

(2005) concept of 'deep reading,' I paid close attention to the visual and textual elements as one

cohesive piece of rhetoric (Macnamara, 2005). I considered three questions when looking at each

post: (1) what am I seeing?, (2) how does this post make me feel?, and (3) what meaning am I

decoding from this? To do this, I carefully examined the speaker, setting, subject, and caption of

each #microadventure post. I provide an example of this process below (Figure 3).
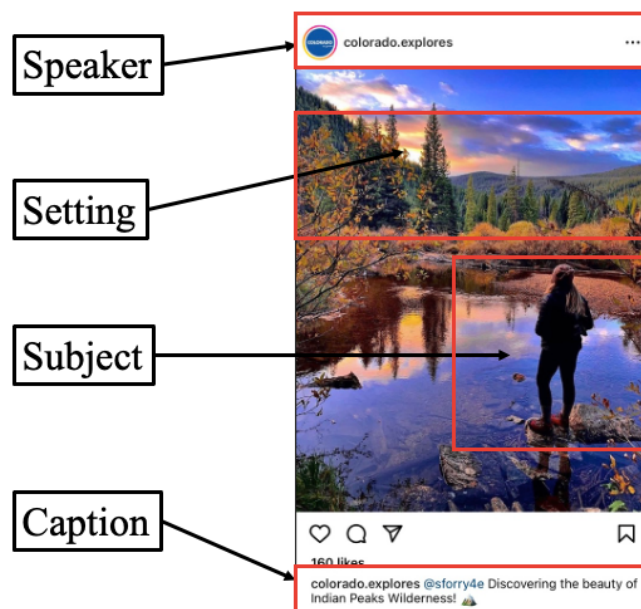
Figure 3. As a researcher-audience member, I looked at the speaker, setting, subject, and caption of each post to address the three guiding questions and 'decode' the messaging in the post. Screenshot of post made by @colorado.explores (Colorado, 2023).

To address the three guiding questions: (1) what am I seeing?, (2) how does this post make me feel?, and (3) what meaning am I decoding from this?, I carefully examined the speaker, setting, subject, and caption of each #microadventure post. For example, in Figure 3 (a sample post that was not part of the data set), I saw that the post had a solo subject in a pristine, remote setting. The setting is comprised of a completely 'natural,' or non-built environment, yet the landscape looks to be highly altered by filters that make the colors of the sun, sky, and water appear much brighter than they would in real life. Noticing this made me feel that the content creators were attempting to make the mountainous setting more beautiful and appealing than it appears in real life—adding an element of 'glamor' to the wilderness setting. This sentiment is bolstered by the textual element of the post, which refers to the 'beauty' of the 'Wilderness.'

Therefore, the meaning I 'decoded' is that the aesthetic of adventure is defined by the social privilege of being able to travel to visually appealing remote landscapes, the importance of showcasing solo adventure, or 'rugged individualism,' and the desire to exploit natural environments to meet human standards of beauty. This 'perfect' and 'pristine' aesthetic of outdoor adventure relates back to the Romantic idealization of wilderness as it speaks to the larger implication of how natural 'beauty' is defined in 21st century outdoor adventure. In this sample post, I noted a reinforcement of conquest culture. Below, I provide an example post from the actual data set (Figure 4) along with a visualization of how I documented the responses to each question in an Excel spreadsheet (Table 1) as a way to provide more transparency in the process.
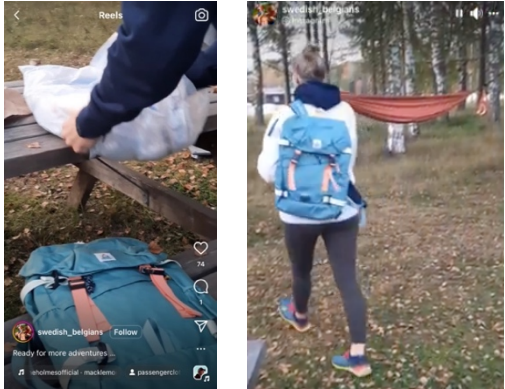
Figure 4. Sample post from @swedish_belgians. My reading and reaction to the post is summarized below in Table 1.

Table 1. My readings and reactions to sample post from @swedish_belgians.

1. What am I seeing?	2. How does this post make me feel?	3. What meaning am I decoding from this?
Woman opening a package with a new bookbag, fleece jacket, tee shirt. She SHREDS through the packaging, leaving paper and plastic shit	Big mad…can somebody say greenwashing? I was heated when she started rifling through the packaging, but then I became *enraged* when she put on all the new items and literally SKIPS out of the frame. So much waste. SO	Materialism; capitalism; greenwashing. Relates to environmental exploitation, a main

everywhere. After showing each item to the camera, she puts on the merchandise and skips away.	many resources go into making that gear. One tree planted is not going to help the climate situation. 10/10 would not recommend.	theme of conquest culture.

I documented my responses to the three questions for each of the 56 #microadventure posts in an Excel document. Upon doing so, I was able to relate posts to ideas within the Romantic philosophy, American settler colonialism, or current microadventure literature. From there, I could determine how themes present within the posts either 'reinforced' or 'resisted' conquest culture. I will discuss this process in the following subsection.

Data Analysis: Part Two

The second stage of my data analysis involved categorizing the posts into one of two major categories—*reinforce* conquest culture or *resist* conquest culture—according to the messages I 'decoded' (Hall, 1973) from them. In the context of my own interpretations, posts that reinforced conquest culture displayed themes of social privilege, individualism, and/or socio-environmental exploitation in a marginalizing, intimidating, or otherwise divisive way. For example, in Figure 4, I note how the 'unboxing' video displayed environmental exploitation because of the large amount of plastic packaging and glorification of new gear. The theme of materialism was prevalent, which relates to larger themes of capitalism in the outdoor adventure field. Furthermore, I noted the theme of greenwashing, which is a marketing tactic used to make a product *seem* environmentally friendly, when in reality the product still requires ample resources to manufacture and distribute. Altogether, this post is an example of a reinforcement of conquest culture.

Alternatively, posts that resisted conquest culture conveyed a discourse of resistance that either: directly confronted themes of conquest culture (i.e., social privilege, individualism, and/or exploitation) or provided a counter-discourse that reconstructed motifs within conquest culture in

a new or subversive way. For example, several #microadventure posts used text in the caption to

provide clear acts of resistance to work culture and capitalism. In a post made by Lilly (2023),

scrolling text displayed messages such as, "Life is way more important than work," which

clearly shows a message of resistance. Additionally, posts that employed more covert forms of

resistance showcased #microadventures that centralized around family-friendly adventure, urban

cityscapes, 'slow' leisure, and examples of enjoying new food and drink as adventure.

Collectively, these posts provided a counter-narrative to conquest culture, which I read as an act

of resistance. Once I labeled all posts as 'reinforce' or 'resist,' I divided the data into two

separate Excel spreadsheets to get a clear look at each category.

After dividing the data into two separate Excel sheets (reinforce or resist), I reviewed my

answers to the three guiding questions, and reflected on the specific elements (i.e., visual or

textual theme related to the speaker, setting, subject, or caption) that stood out to me as a

researcher-audience member. I made note of recurring themes through a recursive journaling

process, wherein I looked through my responses to the three questions several times to pull out

major themes. I defined major themes as visual and/or textual elements that were repeated

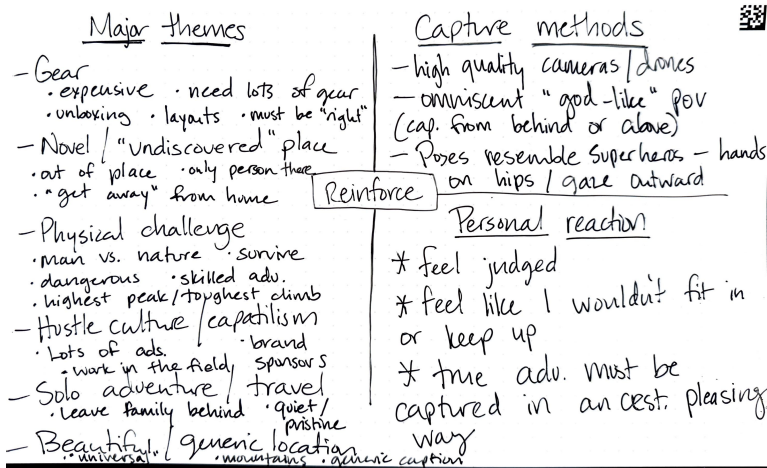frequently by content creators. An example of one journal entry is shown below in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Handwritten journal for 'reinforce' category created to visualize major themes, camera angles, and personal reactions.

Noting major themes and then highlighting example qualities of each theme allowed me to summarize the data set while simultaneously noting specific ways in which I saw the theme being portrayed. For example, I saw that a major theme of the reinforce category was gear (Figure 5). I noticed that when #microadventure content creators made posts related to gear, they often portrayed them in a flat 'gear layout' manner and noted the brand, price, and model of each piece of equipment. Additionally, these posts conveyed the need to purchase lots of gear, and put emphasis on new gear through 'unboxing' videos wherein people shared videos of themselves opening and showcasing brand new equipment (as seen in Figure 4).

Using an additional method of journaling added substance to my data analysis process in that it allowed me to reflect on my initial readings and reactions as a researcher-audience member. Overall, using a two-part data analysis and journaling in conjunction allowed me to identify several major themes within the data set and organize my findings, which are detailed in the manuscript, *Confronting and (re)constructing 'conquest culture' in outdoor adventure: A critical analysis of #microadventure content on Facebook and Instagram*. The manuscript is contained within Chapter 4 of this thesis. More details about the manuscript thesis option are included below.

Manuscript Thesis Option

Per the Western Carolina University Experiential and Outdoor Education Handbook, I have chosen to complete the manuscript thesis format option. This option requires Chapters One, Two and Three, plus a full-length journal manuscript formatted to the requirements of a specific journal. The following chapter contains my complete manuscript, which I have chosen to submit to the *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, Special Issue: Coalition for Education in the Outdoors 2024.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONFRONTING AND (RE)CONSTRUCTING 'CONQUEST CULTURE' IN OUTDOOR ADVENTURE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF #MICROADVENTURE CONTENT ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

Manuscript submitted for consideration in *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, Special Issue: Coalition for Education in the Outdoors 2024

Word count: 9393

Confronting and (re)constructing 'conquest culture' in outdoor adventure: A critical analysis of #microadventure content on Facebook and Instagram

Underpinned by Romantic wilderness ideals and American settler colonialism, recurring themes of *'conquest culture'* in outdoor adventure—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation—are carried out on social media. This study explores how an emerging topic, microadventures, may reinforce or resist these dominant discourses in outdoor adventure. Facebook and Instagram posts tagged "#microadventure" were collected and analyzed using a qualitative critical social media content analysis informed by Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding. We found that half of the posts reinforced conquest culture, while the other half resisted. The discussion of our findings, framed as a critique of neoliberalism, seeks to interrogate how conquest culture is perpetuated by representations of adventure in the U.S. social media landscape. Our findings suggest the need to deconstruct market-driven, colonial tendencies in outdoor social media by (1) confronting dominant conquest discourses and (2) (re)constructing neoliberal tendencies in the outdoor field.

KEYWORDS: *microadventure, outdoor adventure, inclusive adventure, social media content analysis, outdoor media*

Outdoor adventure is often associated with physical, mental, and social benefits (Coventry et al., 2021; Prince, 2020; Zwart & Ewart, 2022); yet, participation in outdoor adventure remains unequal across sociocultural identities and income levels (Outdoor Foundation, 2022). Furthermore, media representations of outdoor adventure participation continue to center around what we term *conquest culture* discourses in U.S. outdoor adventure, which can be defined by dominant themes of social privilege (Beames et al., 2019; Finney, 2014; Taylor et al., 2021), individualism (Roberts, 2012; Roberts, 2018), and exploitation (Beames et al., 2019; Stonehouse, 2022; Wald et al., 2019). These representations—which are commonly circulated via social media platforms (Lajnef, 2023)—perpetuate the dominance of social and environmental conquest in the outdoors (Gray et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Stanley, 2020; Whitson, 2021). Entrenched in the ideals of Romantic 'wilderness' and exacerbated by the history of American settler colonialism, conquest discourses continue to negatively implicate outdoor adventure in the United States through neoliberalism, a market-driven economic and social system (Goodman, 2023; Hixson, 2013; Wald et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2019; Whitson, 2021).

This study explores the presentation of *microadventures*—an emerging topic in the outdoor field—on social media and aims to investigate how #microadventure content functions within the larger discourse surrounding outdoor adventure. Noted as local, short-term, affordable, and carbon-light outdoor endeavors (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Humphreys, 2014; Stonehouse, 2022), microadventures exemplify a *potential* approach to expanding accessibility, sustainability, and inclusivity in the outdoors, for they are less time-, travel-, and resource-intensive than traditional multi-day adventures (Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022). Little is known about the representation of microadventures on social media platforms. Therefore, the purpose of this of study is to critically examine how #microadventure content on

Instagram and Facebook reinforces and/or resists themes of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation—commonly seen in U.S. outdoor adventure. Specifically, the central research question was: How is the "regular day" (Lopez et al., 2018) discourse surrounding microadventures on Instagram and Facebook reinforcing or resisting the dominant presence of conquest discourses in the outdoors? We used critical social media content analysis informed by Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding as a methodology and argue that #microadventure posts need to deconstruct market-driven, colonial tendencies in outdoor social media by (1) directly confronting dominant conquest discourses and (2) (re)constructing neoliberal tendencies in the outdoor field.

Literature Review

In this literature review, we argue that discourses stemming largely from the historical development of idealized Romantic 'wilderness' (Berlin, 2013; Roberts, 2012) and American settler colonialism (Hixson, 2013) contribute directly to the existence of conquest culture in contemporary outdoor adventure (Goodman, 2023; Wald et al., 2019). Noticing several discourses that persisted throughout the 19th-century Romantic period to the 21st-century modern age, we collectively define conquest culture as the dominance of social privilege, individualism, and exploitation in outdoor adventure. Following this, we present several social and environmental consequences of conquest culture in the context of neoliberalism, suggesting that visual representations of microadventures on social media (Gray et al., 2018; Lajnef, 2023) may provide an opportunity to confront and reconstruct dominant discourses within conquest culture (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Roberts, 2018). We conclude the literature review by noting a gap in the literature: few studies have evaluated representations of microadventures on social media.

Development of 'Conquest Culture' in Outdoor Adventure

Social Privilege, Individualism, and ties to Romantic 'Wilderness'

The current conception of outdoor adventure in the U.S. is rooted in ideas established during the Romantic period, a philosophical movement that emerged in Europe during the late 1800s (Beames & Brown, 2016; Roberts, 2018; Wald et al., 2019). While Romantic-era ideas—including the importance of multi-day expeditions, physical challenge, and natural beauty—have contributed to the success of the outdoor programs, they simultaneously disseminate social privilege (Beames et al., 2019) and individualism (Roberts, 2018).

The Romantic idea of escaping mundane city life to experience pristine 'wilderness' environments and take on physically demanding activities requires time, equipment, and physical ability (Beames et al., 2019), privileges that most people in America do not have (Dashper & King, 2021; Dorwart et al., 2022; Lieberman et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2019). Additionally, Romantic-era depictions of adventure typically showcase a solo (often male) adventurer, exemplifying the prominence of individualism in Romanticism and the connection to modern conquest culture (Figure 1; Berlin, 2013; Farley, 2005; Loynes, 2010; Roberts, 2012; Zweig, 1974).
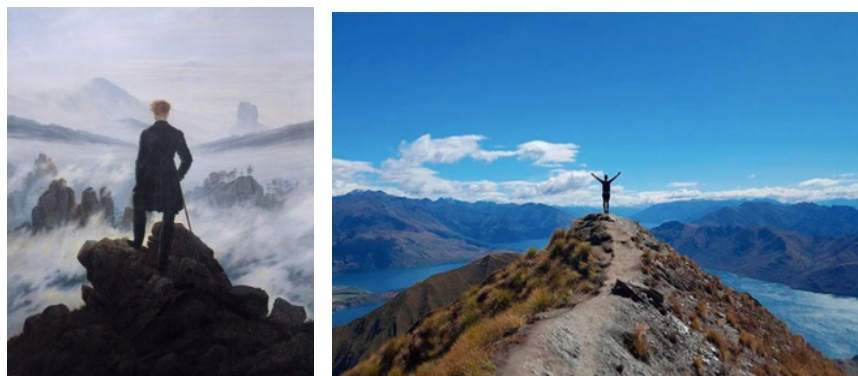

Figure 1. Screenshot of a Romantic-era depiction of outdoor adventure (Friedrich, 1818) compared to a screenshot of a modern conception of outdoor adventure (Smith, 2019, p. 2).

Roberts (2018) writes that the characteristic image of "the lone White male staring off into vastness" persists as one of the most repeated images in outdoor media (p. 25). Circulating images of adventure that reinforce conquest culture underpins exclusivity and marginalization in the outdoor community (Gray et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Stanley, 2020; Whitson, 2021), extending the harms of social privilege and individualism. The final element of conquest culture, exploitation, will be discussed next in the context of American settler colonialism (Bolton, 2008; Wald et al., 2019).

American Settler Colonialism and Social and Environmental Exploitation

American settler colonialism is a system of oppression marked by imperial expansion and genocide of indigenous communities (Wald et al., 2019). Directly connected to the notion of social and environmental exploitation in conquest culture, the goal of American settler colonialism was to displace and exterminate native populations with European settlements (Hixson, 2013). Often characterized by westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, the divine 'right' to establish new territory, American settler colonialism is tied closely to the notion of Romantic 'wilderness' (Bolton, 2008). The idealization of exploring 'wilderness' areas had many lasting consequences, with the direst being the genocidal exploitation of indigenous lands and peoples (Alvarez et al., 2022; Wald et al., 2019; Woods, 2017).

Modern scholarship has continued to critique the 'wilderness' construct as it relates to the exploitation of indigenous lands and populations (Alvarez et al., 2022; Wald et al., 2019; Woods, 2017). Writers suggest that formal definitions of 'wilderness' are inherently exploitative, as these definitions were crafted by people with patriarchal, anthropocentric views that served to reinforce the dualism between wilderness and 'civilization' (Bartel et al., 2021; Gómez-Pompa & Kaus, 1992; Nash, 1982; Woods, 2017). For instance, the U.S. government passed the

Wilderness Act in 1964 to "protect" areas outside of cities, but in doing so, devastated and

displaced entire Indigenous nations through the destruction of communities that were inhabiting

designated 'untouched wilderness' areas (Gómez-Pompa & Kaus, 1992). This pattern of

marginalization and violence is still seen on public lands today (Alvarez et al., 2022; Wald et al.,

2019; Woods, 2017).

In summary, elements of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and

exploitation—were perpetuated by the historical development of Romantic 'wilderness' ideals

and American settler colonialism. The following subsection takes a closer look at modern day

consequences associated with the complex development of conquest culture in the context of

U.S. neoliberalism.

Consequences of Conquest Culture and Neoliberalism in the Outdoor Field

We frame the consequences of conquest culture around neoliberalism for the purpose of

connecting how social privilege, individualism, and exploitation are directly reinforced by

neoliberalism—a pervasive social and economic ideology in the U.S. (Cahill & Konings, 2017)

that encourages "entrepreneurial freedoms" (p. 2) and is marked by "strong private property

rights, free markets, and free trades" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). While it is understandable that the

outdoor industry must remain viable in the neoliberal market, unchecked privatization and

commodification of adventure experiences has far-reaching social and environmental

repercussions (Beames et al., 2019; Roberts, 2012; Warner et al., 2019).

Recent reports note that participation in the outdoors is unequal across racial and gender

lines (Outdoor Foundation, 2022); and outdoor programs in the United States, such as camps and

outdoor schools, are financially inaccessible for many (Roberts, 2018). Furthermore, public

spaces, such as parks, are often sites of violence for people of color, people in LGBTQ+

communities, indigenous peoples, and people living in poverty (Finney, 2014; Stanley, 2020; Wald et al., 2019). Additionally, Beames et al. (2019) raise environmental concerns, noting that typical multi-day outdoor adventures require extensive travel, specialized gear, single-use plastics for food and waste, and land use. Taking part in long-distance travel for multi-day expeditions creates carbon emissions that directly contribute to the global climate crisis (United Nations, 2023). Moreover, the Romantic idea of a 'strange lands' journey to far-away, 'exotic' wilderness destinations (Roberts, 2012) increases the potential risks of cultural appropriation and environmental commodification often seen in adventure travel and tourism (Beames et al., 2019; Coccossis, 2016).

Each of the above consequences contextualizes the need for more inclusive modes and representations of adventure. Recent literature (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022) suggests that microadventures are a promising response.

Microadventures

Microadventures are short-term outdoor experiences that emphasize affordable, carbon-light, and personally-meaningful expeditions to nearby places (Beames et al., 2019; Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022). Examples of microadventures include walking on a city greenway, biking to a local restaurant, or bird watching at home (Humphreys, 2014). Microadventures are unique because they do not require specialized equipment, extensive travel, or ample time to complete—signifying a move away from the current culture of outdoor adventure (Beames et al., 2019).

Microadventures are growing in popularity; local, sustainable, and affordable adventure outlets are becoming more appealing to those in school, community, and outdoor program settings (Brown & Flaumenhaft, 2019; Morris & Orton-Johnson, 2022; Spencer et al., 2019;

Wilson & Kumli, 2019). Across the outdoor field, microadventures can benefit program

sustainability, accessibility, and inclusivity (Roberts, 2018; Stonehouse, 2022). But, as

microadventures become more popular, it becomes increasingly important to consider how they

are being represented by general audiences—especially on social media platforms.

Social Media

As microadventures grow in popularity, social media content creators have the potential

to showcase accessible, inclusive, and sustainable practices in the outdoors. Social media

platforms connect people across physical, linguistic, and social barriers (Maher et al., 2016).

Approximately 72% of the U.S. population uses some form of social media and most Americans

consider social media to be part of their daily routine (Pew Research, 2021). However, this

opportunity comes with potential downfalls—social media spaces are often reproductions of the

same systemic oppressions seen in 21st century American life (Benjamin, 2019). Several

scholars note that digital algorithms used in social media reinforce racism, xenophobia, and

capitalism by constructing biased depictions of people, places, and consumer products

(Benjamin, 2019; Kotliar, 2020; Noble, 2018a). Despite these drawbacks, several scholars note

the potential of social media networks to be spaces for advocacy and community building

(Cousineau, 2021; Lopez et al. 2018; Stanley, 2020; Whitson, 2021).

Given the prominence of virtual communication in the digital age, social media networks

provide a viable arena for the promotion of microadventure content (Lajnef, 2023), but the

effectiveness is contingent on *how* microadventures are being represented in these spaces. While

meaningful representations of microadventures may increase the visibility of short-term, local,

and affordable outdoor adventures (Beames et al., 2019; Humphreys, 2014; Stonehouse, 2022),

misrepresentations of microadventures may be reinforcing dominant discourses of conquest

culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation (Goodman, 2023; Hixson, 2013; Wald et al., 2019; Whitson, 2021). In order to better understand how microadventures are being (mis)represented on social media, we investigated the digital discourse surrounding microadventures using Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding as a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: Encoding and Decoding

Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding asserts that social communication is a cyclical process of message creation and interpretation. Hall (1973) writes that creating, or 'encoding,' a message, as well as interpreting, or 'decoding' a message involves the understanding of language. Language, according to Hall (1973), is built through a series of culturally-derived 'codes' that signal meaning—which, in turn, build interactive social discourses (Hall, 1973, p. 2). Through the discursive process of encoding and decoding messages, dominant discourses begin to take clearer forms; from here, content analysis researchers can take on a researcher-audience member point of view and draw inferences from social media posts. With this understanding, we used Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding as a framework to investigate an existing gap in the literature: that few studies have conducted an analysis of the representation of microadventures on social media. The overall purpose of our study was to critically examine how #microadventure content on Instagram and Facebook reinforces and/or resists themes of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation—commonly seen in U.S. outdoor adventure.

Methods

Using qualitative critical social media content analysis methods informed by Hall's (1973) Theory of Encoding and Decoding, we analyzed a "regular day" (Lopez et al., 2018, p. 6)

of #microadventure content on Instagram and Facebook. We posed a central question: How is the "regular day" discourse surrounding microadventures on Instagram and/or Facebook reinforcing or resisting the dominant presence of conquest discourses in the outdoors?

Qualitative Critical Social Media Content Analysis

The purpose of qualitative critical social media content analysis is to elucidate how social media, a fundamental part of modern social life, affects collective values, beliefs, and cultures (Lai & To, 2015). According to Stanley (2020), social media content analyses provide researchers an unobstructed view of how people behave in real life. Social media "texts," found in the form of publicly posted visual content, captions, comments, and linked hashtags, function as sites of cultural knowledge production (Gray et al., 2018, p. 157). Through decoding (Hall, 1973), social media content analyses allow researchers to symbolize an audience-level perspective to make meaning of visual artifacts and draw inferences about themes conveyed in the images (Macnamara, 2005).

Data Collection

Lopez et al. (2018) state that data collected in social media content analyses is unique from data co-constructed with participants or generated by researchers: It exists prior to the research study and is unaltered when observed in a research setting. Described as being "non-interactive," social media content analysis sampling methods are non-intrusive (Lopez et al., 2018), and the data collected gives researchers an unobstructed view of how people communicate in daily life (Stanley, 2020). "Regular day" content, according to Lopez et al. (2018), reveals an organic depiction of the discourse and is a suitable entry point for researchers wanting to investigate the social understanding of a particular topic. With the goal of analyzing a "regular day" of microadventure content, we collected data on an intentionally "random" day

from both Instagram and Facebook. Lopez et al. (2018) made a similar choice to analyze on a "random" (p. 6), or arbitrary, day because doing so allows researchers to see a "customary usage" (p. 6) of a particular hashtag. We chose to collect data from both Instagram and Facebook because, in addition to having publicly accessible content, they are the most popular social media platforms in the United States, based on the number of daily users (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Sampling Strategies

Our sample was taken from the "Top posts" of the #microadventure page on both Facebook and Instagram. "Top posts" are determined based on when the post was made, how other users have interacted with the post, and if the content meets the platforms' "Recommendation Guidelines" (Meta, 2023). The choice to select content from the "Top posts" page also was deliberate in that these posts are those that are currently being engaged with by many users, and are therefore more visible to audiences in the context of Lopez et al.'s (2018) definition of a "regular day." The choice to select posts from the "Top posts" is also supported by Gray et al.'s (2018) work, wherein they used a similar convenience sampling method. We chose to use the #microadventure because it uses clear and direct language related to the topic of study, which was deemed crucial in Gray et al. (2018)'s similar analysis.

Sample Size

We collected a total sample size of 56 posts: 28 posts from Facebook and 28 from Instagram. We chose the number 28 because this is the maximum amount of "Top posts" shown on the hashtag pages on Instagram. Therefore, this may be the number of posts viewed by a user on a "regular day." It was fitting to collect the same number from Facebook. Furthermore, a sample size of 56 is justified as it is large enough to encompass a distinct array of posts, yet small enough to allow for in-depth analysis of individual posts. A similar sample size was used

in two related studies, Gray et al. (2018), who obtained and analyzed 63 photos, as well as

McGuirk (2017), who analyzed 50 photos.

Access to Data and Ethical Considerations

Considered by Tracy (2010) to be a valuable aspect of qualitative research, using

personal areas of knowledge as a researcher-audience member adds sincerity and validity to the

meaning making process. Thus, I (Author 1) used my personal Facebook and Instagram accounts

to conduct this study, collecting publicly posted content that was presented via my account's

"Top posts" algorithm. To respect the account holder's original content, we maintained the

username associated with each post to credit content creators. This study did not need IRB

approval.

A "Regular Day" of #microadventure Content

Data collection took place on October 31, 2023 at 11:00 a.m., a "regular day" of personal

social media usage. To collect the data, we took screenshots (or screen recordings) of the 28

posts on the #microadventures "Top posts" pages on Facebook and Instagram. Screenshots and

screen recordings included the post location, visual content, number of likes, caption, and

hashtags to capture the nuanced discourses being presented (Stanley, 2020).

Data Analysis

Hall's (1973) framework suggests that 'decoding' is a process derived from personal

knowledge, so the first portion of data analysis involved documenting my (Author 1) reactions to

each post as a researcher-audience member. Grounded in Geertz's (1973) theory of 'thick

description' and Macnamara's (2005) concept of 'deep reading,' I paid close attention to the

visual and textual elements presented in each post. I considered three questions when looking at

each post: (1) What am I seeing?, (2) How does this post make me feel?, and (3) What meaning

am I decoding from this? In the second stage of analysis, I noted if I was interpreting the post to be reinforcing conquest culture or resisting conquest culture. From here, I compiled my reactions to posts from each category (reinforce or resist) to gain a holistic view of significant themes, which will be discussed below.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis resulted in a nearly even split between posts that reinforced dominant discourses of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation—or resisted these discourses. Seeing that the findings were balanced, we present the findings in such a manner, identifying how specific choices made by content creators reinforced or resisted conquest culture, and how these choices impacted my (Author 1) reaction to each post as a researcher-audience member. For both categories, we share sample posts and share my (Author 1) readings of and reactions to each post. In the discussion presented after each category (reinforce or resist), we tie my (Author 1) 'decoded' (Hall, 1973) interpretations of posts to larger critiques of neoliberalism in the outdoor field (Warner et al., 2019).

Our discussion is framed as a critique of neoliberalism, a social and economic philosophy that emphasis free-market policies and pervades U.S. systems (Harvey, 2005), for the purpose of connecting how conquest culture is directly reinforced by neoliberal values and limits accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability efforts in the outdoor field (Warner et al., 2019). Throughout each section of discussion, we point out the prevalent harms of neoliberal thinking and note how resistance discourses may progress the outdoor field beyond the patterns of elitism, privatization, and commodification (Roberts, 2012; Warner et al., 2019). We conclude with recommendations for confronting and (re)constructing conquest culture in outdoor adventure via social media.

Reinforcing Conquest Culture via #microadventure

Nearly half of the #microadventure posts collected *reinforced* the three dominant discourses of conquest culture: social privilege, individualism, and exploitation. Example posts and reactions are detailed below.

Social Privilege

There are many barriers to outdoor adventure in the U.S.—from lack of time, money, and access to greenspaces (Taylor et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2019), to the prevalence of violence and discrimination in outdoor spaces (Finney, 2014; Wald et al., 2019). Thus, participation in outdoor adventure comes with a high degree of social privilege (Taylor et al., 2021). We 'decoded' (Hall, 1973) social privilege in posts that lacked specificity and context, as this ambiguity keeps knowledge within the outdoor community and insinuates that #microadventure experiences are exclusive. By not providing location specific information, social media users are not able to easily replicate the adventure represented, thereby creating a separation of private knowledge versus public knowledge, and working against the idea of accessibility microadventures. For example, several posts (shown in Figures 2 and 3) showed an outdoor experience, but did not include any location- or activity-specific information.

Author 1 reaction: "Man and woman sitting on beautiful bank… lots of gear featured. No mention of HOW or why this is a microadventure. Looks like a normal macroadventure to me."

Figure 2. Screenshot of sample post (Hornsey, 2022) that does not include activity-specific information, maintaining insider knowledge in the outdoor community.
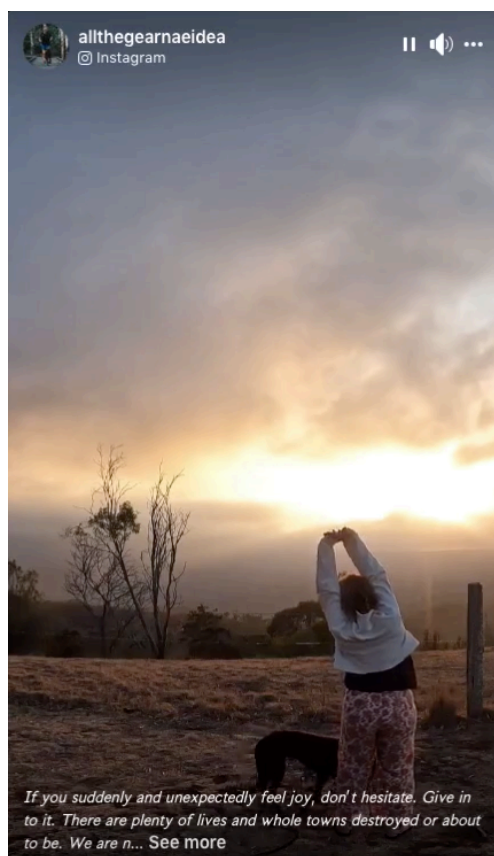
Author 1 reaction: "Girl on unnamed overlook with sunset, dog, van. Very typical hippie vibes. She even strikes a yoga pose at the end to encapsulate the feeling of 'outdoorsy.' To me, it doesn't seem much different than the 'lone White male staring off into vastness.' Where was the photo taken? Is this a place people can get to easily?"

Figure 3. Screenshot of example #microadventure post (Pendergrass, 2023) that does not include location information, serving to privatize knowledge about places to adventure.

Additionally, I (Author 1) decoded the discourse of social privilege in posts that displayed #microadventure activities that required physical ability and specialized knowledge. The caption, "Would you roll or send this 7ft slab?," posted by Tess (2023), is riddled with mountain biking jargon: 'roll,' 'send,' and 'slab.' As an outsider to the mountain bike community, this post left me feeling left out and confused—worried about the daunting physical challenge presented in the post. Specifically, posts of this nature go against the intended accessibility of microadventures because they emphasize extreme physical challenges and skill. My (Author 1) response to the post is detailed in Figure 4.
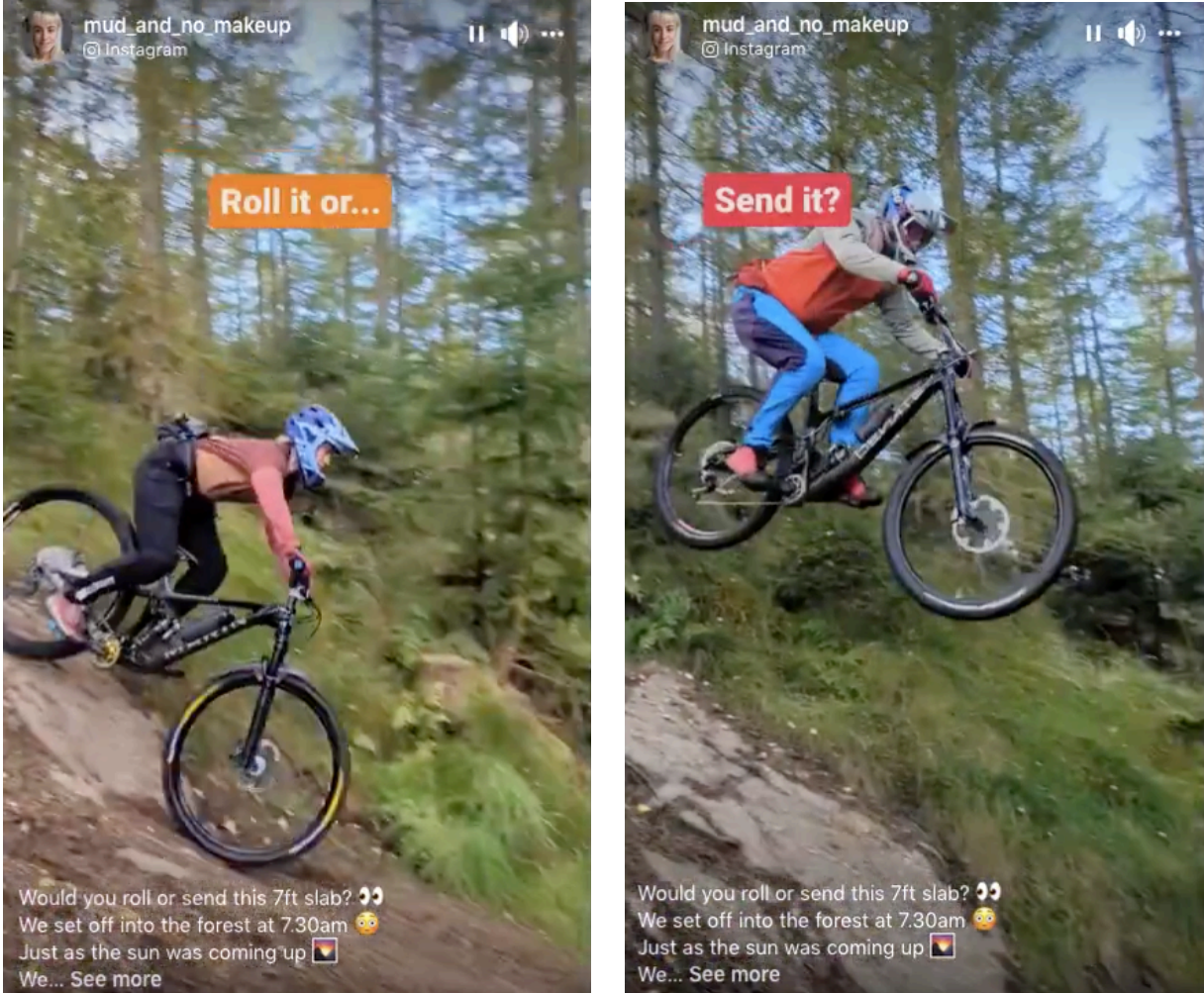
Author 1 reaction: "This video makes me feel like if I were to 'Roll it' I'd be judged for all of eternity. These women seem like the get up and grind type - even noting that they 'set off into the forest at 7.30 am.' Pretty intense. This isn't for me."

Figure 4. Screenshot featuring the caption, "Would you roll or send this 7ft slab?," posted by Tess (2023) demonstrates the high level of physical ability and specialized knowledge to participate in the mountain biking community.

As seen above (Figures 3 and 4), sample posts that reinforce social privilege in outdoor

adventure exude exclusivity and elitism, thereby sending the message that participants must rely

on existing knowledge and ability to embark on adventures. This knowledge is powerful in

representations of adventure, as it portrays competency in outdoor settings. Participants with

time, financial resources, ability, and proficiency are able to portray competency, whereas those

with limited knowledge are unable to do so. This competency, in turn, can be decoded by

audience members as a divisive way to reinforce the neoliberal value of traditional class power in outdoor adventure (Warner et al., 2019). Emphasizing traditional systems of class power in outdoor adventure can negativity impact the field's potential to lead social justice efforts (Rose & Paisley, 2012), and can maintain conquest culture in the outdoors.

Individualism

Posts that reinforced the dominant discourse of individualism in the context of conquest culture in 21st century outdoor adventure often featured a solo adventurer captured from an omniscient, 'god-like' point of view. For this theme, we would like to highlight the importance of camera angles and location in addition to subjects within the posts. Sample posts (shown in Figures 5 and 6) include images captured via drones, fellow adventures, or onlooking camera crews, and frame adventure as a solo, highly individualistic pursuit.
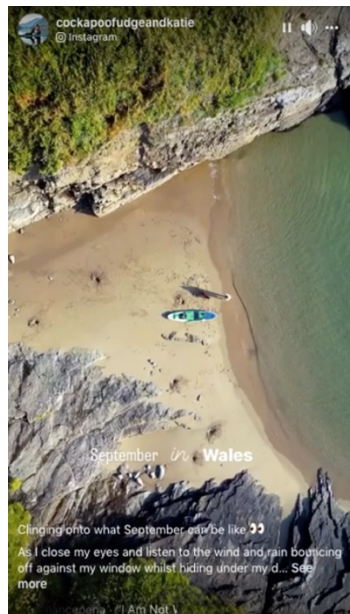
Author 1 reaction: "The overhead footage is cool, but pretty impractical. Those are expensive and who is afforded the opportunity to go out onto a beach like that by themselves??? That is amazing. I want this SUP experience."

Figure 5. Individualism shown through omniscient camera angles and aerial capture methods. Screenshot of video posted by F U D G E & His Humans (2023).
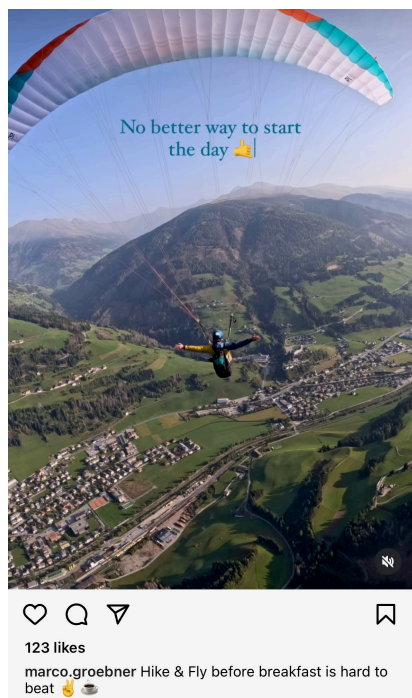
Author 1 reaction: "Paragliding before breakfast?? What kind of world is this man living in? He very casually has an entire team (film crew/gear people) to support his morning shenanigans. Not accessible. Not micro."

Figure 6. Individualism framed by an onlooking, highly skilled, camera crew. Screenshot of video posted by Gröbner (2023).

Noted as a value of Romanticism (Berlin, 2013; Loynes, 2010; Roberts, 2012), American settler colonialism (Bolton, 2008; Hixson, 2013), and neoliberalism (Warner et al., 2019), individualism contributes to conquest culture in outdoor adventure. As seen in Figure 5, we note how the 'god-like,' omniscient camera angles contribute to individualism by framing the image of solo adventure. By simultaneously alluding to the Romantic-era "lone White male staring off into vastness" (Roberts, 2018, p. 25) and illuminating the neoliberal value of individual power (Harvey, 2005), high-quality footage and aerial camera angles capture 'picture-perfect' adventure, an element of the "Disneyization" of leisure experience (Beames & Brown, 2017).

Disneyization, a theory that investigates the practices of neoliberalism in leisure experiences, is defined by five factors, one of which, surveillance, associates the importance of performing leisure with *being seen* performing leisure (Beames & Brown, 2017). Citing Thorstein Veblen's idea of "conspicuous leisure" (2007/1899, p. 35), Beames's and Brown's

(2017) theory of Disneyization articulates how photographs of adventures can "serve to confer social status" (p. 856) and show "displays of wealth" (p. 857) through public sharing, especially on social media platforms. The final element of conquest culture provides another example of how publicizing consumption is driven by neoliberal values and directly reinforces conquest culture in outdoor adventure.

Exploitation

Conquest culture implicates both social and environmental exploitation. The process of manufacturing outdoor gear is carbon-intensive and contributes to the global climate crisis, (Beames et al., 2019) yet, many #microadventure posts sensationalized 'gear layouts' and equipment purchases. Figures 7 showcases an example gear layout post and Author 1's response to the content.

Author 1 reaction: "A 'gear layout' post… lots of gear to see here. (And he lists every single piece just to make sure we know). Is he including the long list to inform us? Or to show off the gear? Or to suggest that you need all that stuff to go out on a camping trip? …screams financial privilege."

Figure 7. Example gear layout. Screenshot of post made by Jones (2023).

As seen in Figure 7, gear layout posts tagged #microadventure illuminate the value of material goods in outdoor adventure. Showcasing gear reinforces competency in the outdoors

and contributes to an 'outdoorsy' aesthetic, which is highlighted via public social media posts. We decoded gear-focused posts to be reinforcements of the materialism associated with the idea of "conspicuous leisure" and the importance of being seen purchasing, owning, and using 'proper' gear in outdoor spaces (Beames & Brown, 2017).

Circulating content on social media focused on gear consumption has immediate impacts on both social systems and the environment (Beames et al., 2019). Extolling materialism in the outdoor field privileges those with the financial capital available to purchase such goods, which are often expensive, and reinforces the idea that public displays of gear unequivocally constitutes competency in the outdoors. Furthermore, the carbon costs of gear manufacturing and the implications of "greenwashing" contribute to the outdoor field's underlying—yet ironic—lack of attention to the global climate crisis (Stonehouse, 2022). The following section transitions to present and discuss posts that resisted discourses of conquest culture.

Resisting Conquest Culture via #microadventure

#microadventure posts that resisted conquest culture did so in two ways: overtly (e.g., through direct callouts or confrontations) or covertly (e.g., by showing more diverse representations of adventure or introducing an expansive definition of 'microadventure'). While the majority of posts resisted conquest culture covertly, we include a description of overt resistance first to showcase the importance of the encoder pairing textual elements with visual elements of posts to guide the viewer in the 'decoding' (Hall, 1973) process.

#microadventures as Overt Resistance

All posts that overtly resisted conquest culture used textual elements, either through captions or overlayed text, to directly name barriers to outdoor adventure. Overtly naming and addressing systems of oppression is an effective form of resistance because it announces the

intentions of the encoders, thereby preventing misinterpretation during the decoding process.

Thus, when I (Author 1) interpreted posts with clearly defined messages of resistance, I was able

to decode them accordingly. Sample posts (Figures 8 and 9) show overt resistance to capitalism,

9-to-5 work culture, hustle culture, and/or 'the grind.'
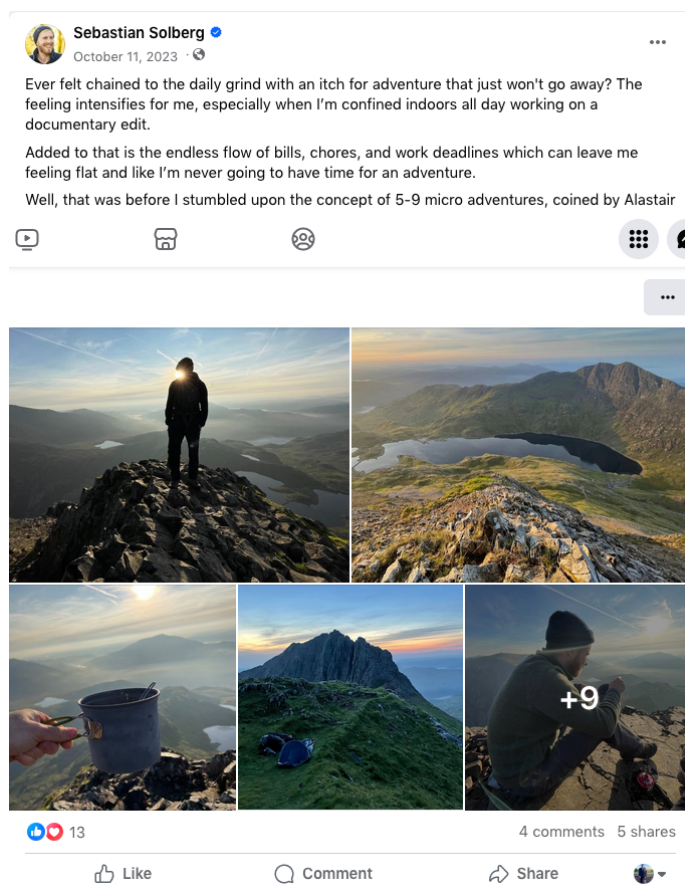
Post caption: "Ever felt chained to the daily grind with an itch for adventure that just wont [*sic*] go away? The feeling intensifies for me, especially when I'm confined indoors all day… Added to that is the endless flow of bills, chores, and work deadlines which can leave me feeling flat and like I'm never going to have time for an adventure. Well, that was before I stumbled upon the concept of 5-9 micro adventures" (Solberg, 2023).

Author 1 reaction: "Photos are of typical lone White male, lake, camp stove, rocks. BUT the meaning totally changes with the caption. '5-9 adventures are all about embracing simplicity, spontaneity, and the raw beauty of the outdoors.'"

Figure 8. Screenshot of Solberg's (2023) post shows use of text in caption to directly confront work culture.
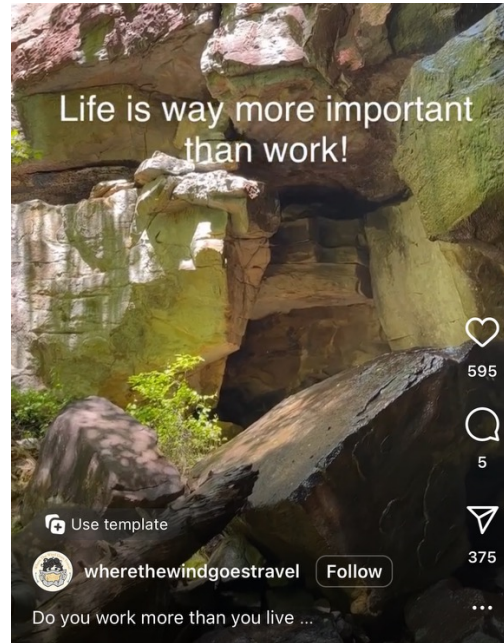
Post caption: "Do you work more than you live? Do you feel like the adventure and fun parts of life need to be big events that can only happen once a year and need to be planned for months?

I want to encourage you to chance [*sic*] your mindset. Embrace the micro adventures that really fill up your life with joy.

1- Go on a walk in the evening with your love to watch the sunset

2- Invite friends over for dinner where everyone brings their own takeout

3- Eat your lunch at a local park rather than eating in your office

4- Get a local Air BnB for an overnight stay for a change of scenery

5- Do one of the touristy things in your city that you've never done, even though you live right there!

Adventures don't need to be big ordeals, embrace the small adventures!" (Lilly, 2023)

Author 1 reaction: "Main takeaways for this one: Fit adventure into the everyday; adventure in your local places; find joy through adventure; resist work/hustle culture. I think the caption really stole the show on giving prime examples of microadventures."

Figure 9. Screenshot of Lilly's (2023) post shows use of text in caption to directly confront work culture.

Through direct addresses, content creators were able to clearly communicate a message of resistance to work culture through photos that, when seen without a caption, may have looked like a more 'typical adventure.' In my response to Solberg's (2023) post (Figure 8), I note: *"Photos are of typical lone White male, lake, camp stove, rocks. BUT the meaning totally changes with the caption."* Being able to direct the audience to a message of resistance is essential, especially when communicating how the complex relationship between neoliberalism, capitalism, and work culture influence 21st century outdoor adventure in the U.S.

@wherethewindgoestravel's (2023) post (Figure 9) tells viewers directly: "Fxck [*sic*] the work life balance" and "embrace work life imbalance." Rose (2022) describes confronting work culture as "explicitly anti-capitalist" (p. 3), and Figure 9 provides an example of how leisure spaces may challenge neoliberalism. We highlight the importance of the direct textual callout because it helped Author 1 to decode the message of resistance, drawing me closer to the 'encoded' (Hall, 1973) message of the post. While we were able to explicitly understand messages present within overt acts of resistance, we gained an even more robust understanding of #microadventure posts as acts of resistance when they were covert. Next, we delve deeper into the more subliminal messages that we interpreted to resist dominant conquest discourses.

#microadventures as Covert Resistance: Accessible Adventure

Contrary to the lack of context and specificity seen in #microadventure posts that reinforced conquest culture, posts that covertly resisted the dominant discourse of social privilege in the outdoors include location and activity-specific information. As a researcher-audience member, Author 1 interpreted this to be a welcoming and educational approach. Noting how having more information about an activity can increase levels of comfort, build skills, and inform expectations of outdoor adventures, we considered how detailed posts can help to serve

as free guides and encouragement for microadventure experiences. In Figure 10, I (Author 1)

show a #microadventure post that provides specific details and location information.

Post caption: "Last call! Savor city summer moments and urban nature while it lasts☀️

📍Brookside Gardens, Silver Spring Maryland
📍 Washington National Cathedral DC
📍 Bartholdi Fountain and Gardens DC
📍 U.S. Botanic Garden DC" (Sara, 2023).

Author 1 reaction: "Caption invites people to seek out adventures near Washington, DC. I love this. Appreciation for cityscapes and the built environment. We need these ecosystems too! This video actively bridges the gap between humans and nature by showing 'urban nature,' which some people may have never considered before."

Figure 10. Screenshot of #microadventure post that includes location information, which increases accessibility to adventure by bridging knowledge gaps and educating the public.

Unlike #microadventure posts that reinforced social privilege in outdoor adventure by

gatekeeping knowledge through vague, often decontextualized, images, #microadventure posts

that promoted accessible adventure did so in a way that provided potential outdoor participants

with ample information about #microadventure experiences. For example, posts may have

included navigation information, example things to do, or promotions of public greenspaces

(such as in Figure 10). As a viewer of the content, I (Author 1) felt that having more information

could help to ease anxieties and manage expectations about a new adventure—diverging from

the traditional idea of adventure being 'risky' and 'daring' (Roberts, 2018).

Warner et al. (2019) writes that conceptualizing risk differently is a way for the outdoor field to address the "image of rugged individualism that resembles imperialistic and colonial discourses, many of which relate well to neoliberal ideologies" (p. 8) and move towards more culturally-responsive programs in the outdoor field. Some even suggest decentralizing risk and transition to more inclusive, community-based approaches (Breunig, 2017). The following section shows example #microadventure posts that elicit inclusive community building in the outdoors through social media representations.

#microadventures as Covert Resistance: Inclusive Adventure

Stanley (2020) notes that groups of 'unlikely hikers' found community in online spaces. Similarly, #microadventure posts that covertly resisted the dominant discourse of individualism in 'conquest culture' did so by documenting group-oriented outdoor activities. More importantly, these expeditions were captured from a first-person point of view (i.e. selfie style) using low-quality technology, diverging from the aerial footage and high-quality production typically seen in #microadventure posts that reinforced individualism in outdoor adventure. Even though these posts were arguably less visually appealing than #microadventure posts that were captured by drones or film crews, the experiences represented look more approachable and genuine. In Figure 11, we present two posts that utilized first-person camera angles to capture #microadventure experiences.

Author 1 reaction: "Like it. Pretty normal thing to do when you run into a friend – take a selfie. Shows the positive elements of friendship, daily adventures, and walking" (VILDMARK.CO.UK, 2023).

Author 1 reaction: "This video is cool. I'm not big into cycling, but this account makes off road cycling trips look so fun…" (Armstrong, 2023).

Figure 11. Screenshots of posts with first-person camera angles, low-quality images, and group/family oriented posts that capture inclusivity.

Recent literature suggests that when people adventure as a group, they experience increased levels of connection and belonging (McAnirlin & Maddox, 2022; Morris et al., 2022; Prince, 2020). Similarly, Cousineau (2021) notes that people can form meaningful social connections in online spaces. Together, it can be noted that circulating images of group-oriented activities on social media can help to construct more inclusive representations of adventure—both online and face-to-face (Stanley, 2020; Gray et al., 2018).

Moving away from the individualism typically seen in representations of outdoor adventure (Figures 5 and 6) is important in the context of deconstructing neoliberal tendencies in the outdoor field. Warner et al. (2019) argue that such collaborative outdoor experiences can build civic engagement and increase social awareness. Mediating social justice efforts through

outdoor adventure is important when considering how the outdoor adventure field can transition from an individualistic pursuit to a community-focused, sustainable endeavor.

#microadventures as Covert Resistance: Sustainable Adventure

Twenty-first-century outdoor adventures are resource-intensive; travel, equipment manufacturing, and expenses associated with adventure programs contribute to a lack of environmental sustainability in the field (Beames et al., 2019; Stonehouse, 2022). Exploiting natural resources for the sake of 'adventure' has been a persistent theme since the Romantic period (Roberts, 2018; Smith, 2019; Wald et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2019). Significantly, many #microadventure posts presented modes of adventure that did not require travel, activity-specific equipment, or expensive programs, contrasting the persistent discourses of social and environmental exploitation embedded in macroadventures. Reconstructing the 'image' of adventure by showcasing playful activities, family friendly adventure, slow leisure, local tourism, and/or food and drink may aid in the transition to a more sustainable future, as people tend to build social norms through information presented on social media (Lanjef, 2023). Several instances of this collective (re)building of outdoor adventure culture are shown below (Figures 12, 13, and 14).
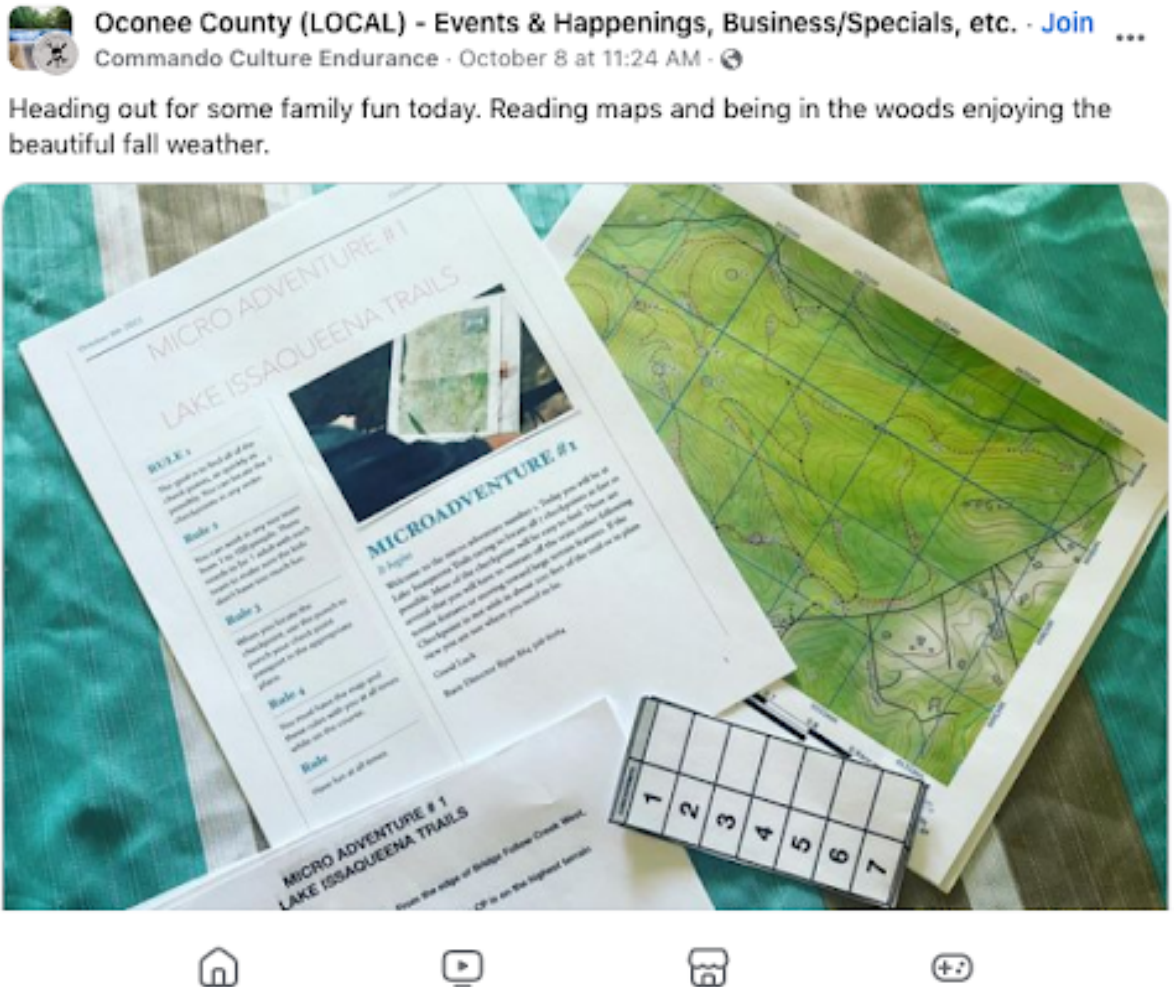
Author 1 reaction: "This is a great idea! Looks like a fitting example of a family oriented/local microadventure. I like that they gamified the adventure -- this is appealing to me as I like to spice up hikes I go on a lot"

Figure 12. Screenshot of #microadventure post resists 'conquest culture' by reconstructing the purpose of traditional activities (Oconee County, 2023).

Author 1 reaction: "We see a medley of family adventures. Playground, cooking on a campfire, swings, frog on a kids back, slides, vegetable garden. Shows adventures that 'real people with real lives' do 'wherever they happen to live.' … simply BEING and PLAYING outside."

Figure 13. Screenshot of #microadventure post (Ginny, 2022) resists 'conquest culture' by reconstructing the 'image' of adventure to showcase playful activities and family friendly adventure.

Author 1 reaction: "Video (poor production value) shows a storefront and a large man wearing a shirt saying 'I'm here because I was told there would be mead.' I see distillation equipment and the company name, Contrivance Meadery.

I love this!! Embrace the non-outdoor microadventures. Trying a new beverage is definitely an adventure. This FB page could attract a local crowd!"

Figure 14. Screenshot of #microadventure post (Explore Seattle Southside, 2023) resists 'conquest culture' by reconstructing the 'image' of adventure to showcase local tourism, and/or food and drink.

In Figures 12, 13, and 14 it can be noted that the term #microadventure was used to encompass a variety of activities that are not typically included in the conventional scope of adventure. Figure 12 shows a traditional activity, map and compass navigation, but presents it as a group-oriented experience, moving away from the insistence on 'rugged individualism' in the outdoor field (Roberts, 2012). Likewise, Figure 13 shows a medley of family activities, which Author 1 decoded as *"simply BEING and PLAYING outside"*—a shift away from paying for commodified adventure experiences (Beames & Brown, 2017). Figure 14 encapsulates the idea that microadventures have the potential to expand the definition of adventure (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020) and pushes against the 'one size fits all' approach of neoliberalism and the Disneyization of outdoor experiences (Beames & Brown, 2017) by showcasing a novel, beverage-focused microadventure at a local business.

Together, Figures 12, 13, and 14 provide examples of how #microadventure posts can deconstruct the notion that adventure must constitute conspicuous acts of consumption-focused, rugged, solo, or 'Disneyfied' experiences. Instead, they represent the value in adventures that do not require specialized skill, knowledge, or ability, and emphasize the power of social media to educate people about local adventure possibilities.

After seeing #microadventure posts that covertly portrayed sustainable adventures, we were inspired to consider adventures that were closer to home and would take less time, carbon, and gear resources to accomplish. This sentiment is matched by the thinking of several scholars (Goodnow & Mackenzie, 2020; Stonehouse, 2022) who promote the exploration of nearby nature to inspire place-based connections and increase knowledge of local places.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of our study was to critically examine how #microadventure content on

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Instagram and Facebook reinforces or resists themes of conquest culture—social privilege, individualism, and exploitation—commonly seen in U.S. outdoor adventure. After 'decoding' (Hall, 1973) 56 #microadventure posts, we found a balance between posts that reinforced or resisted conquest culture. Therefore, we conclude that there is an ongoing need in the outdoor field to: (1) consider how outdoor adventure is represented through photographs and on social media, especially in terms of where we seek 'sublime' natural beauty, (2) confront recurring themes of conquest culture in outdoor adventure, specifically related to the prevalence of whiteness and pattern of material overconsumption, and (3) celebrate representations of microadventures that extend beyond the scope of traditional outdoor adventure by uplifting outdoor liberation groups. Below we provide specific, action-oriented recommendations for outdoor leaders, content creators, and organizations with the goal of moving our theoretical critique to practical application.

Consider

Our findings challenged us to reconsider *where* we seek the sublime as outdoor educators, leaders, and participants. By reevaluating the notion of what is considered 'beautiful' in outdoor settings, we envision a visual reconceptualization of the 'adventure aesthetic' that includes: themes of urban wilderness, cityscapes, and residential areas. We feel that this might decouple a beneficial aspect of the Romantic legacy, appreciation for sublime natural beauty, from harms associated with conquest culture. As we consider a new 'aesthetic of adventure,' we also feel that it is necessary to directly confront recurring themes of conquest culture in outdoor adventure through education-focused language on social media and practice conscious consumerism in order to deconstruct the prevalence of whiteness and pattern of material overconsumption in the conquest culture of outdoor adventure.

Confront

Within the broader context of conquest culture, we identify the entanglement of whiteness and settler colonialism (Carter & Rose, 2024), and material consumerism (Rawles, 2013; Stonehouse, 2022) in the outdoors as being the most deleterious drivers of socio-environmental oppression perpetuated by the outdoor field. We urge organizations to confront hegemonic whiteness and colonial tendencies by transitioning the conversation away from ability (Carter & Rose, 2024) and towards collaboration and equity. From our findings, we recommend that organizations use inviting, education-forward language on social media to create posts that center group- and community-focused outdoor adventure.

Additionally, we prompt outdoor adventure program leaders and participants to make a commitment to decreasing their carbon footprint by intentionally designing expeditions that require less travel, specialty equipment, and single-use plastics. Supported by the findings of Rawles (2013) and Stonehouse (2022), we recommend outdoor organizations do this by:

- Strategically planning human-powered transportation routes to adventure locations
- Hosting continuing education and training programs online to eliminate travel
- Creating networks for gear rental to mitigate new purchases
- Purchasing local food to minimize the carbon cost of food transport
- Planning to use reusable food/waste storage containers in the field

As a final recommendation, we encourage outdoor adventure leaders and participants to celebrate all #microadventures by validating and welcoming all adventure interests and abilities.

Celebrate

We recommend turning to place-responsive and culturally-relevant (Wattchow & Brown, 2011) practices, and embracing microadventure experiences that encompass modes of 'slow'

leisure (Breunig, 2022), family and group leisure (McAnirlin & Maddox, 2022; Morris et al., 2022; Prince, 2020), and food and drink as adventure. Specifically, we recommend partnering with and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion-focused outdoor groups, such as Black Afro, Natives4Nature, and Latino Outdoors (National Parks Conservation Association, 2022), in both virtual and real-world spaces. We hope this research on #microadventures serves as a call to continually celebrate all levels of engagement in the outdoors—including the many ways we work, play, shelter, and live in the outdoors—in order to imagine a more equitable and sustainable future.

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