

ABSTRACT

MAZESKI, HANNAH. Examining Representation and Inclusion on National Parks Facebook Posts. (Under the direction of Dr. Kathryn Stevenson and Dr. Bethany Cutts)

The National Parks Service (NPS) mission is to preserve and protect nature, share natural beauties, and educate current and future generations. Yet the social construction of nature, resource management, and recreation upon which the parks were founded are exclusionary. As a consequence, non-dominant identities continue to be underrepresented among both employees and visitors. As of 2020, only 21% of full-time NPS employees were people of color and women held less than 50% of full-time positions. At the same time, park-based recreational activities often privilege dominant-group preferences for outdoor recreation and ideas of nature. Social media has the potential to be the first encounter between the public and a national park.

Therefore, it may play a significant role in portraying the values of the NPS. As of 2021, the NPS uses Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube to share information on over 400 NPS locations. However, it is unclear what Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion RDI ideals are being conveyed to the public through social media. To better understand whether social media posts reinforce dominant-cultural characteristics of the US, we conducted a content analysis of messages from 9 national parks' Facebook pages to identify the presence of written and visual content aimed to signal inclusion. This includes, but is not limited to the following non-dominant social identities in the US: people of color, women, and gender non-binary, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and differently-abled people. While national parks' social media accounts operate individually, their collective impact has the potential to portray who the National Parks System benefits. Some of our findings indicate discrepancies between how the NPS is communicating about certain identity groups when compared to others and between the

frequency of posts and US population proportion. These results indicate opportunities to change social media communication patterns in ways that better include underserved identities.

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Examining Representation and Inclusion on National Parks Facebook Posts

by
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family. To my mom and sister who have always supported me and told me to never question following my dreams. They have encouraged me to chase my passions, even when it means moving across the country multiple times and living three time zones away from them. To my brother, who as a fellow grad student that shares the stresses and excitements of what that means.

BIOGRAPHY

Hannah Mazeski was born in a small town in Oregon where she grew up with a deep appreciation for the outdoors. She completed her undergraduate degree in Environmental Technology and Management at NC State University in 2019. During her last semester she decided that she wanted to move away from the physical science-based curriculum and move more into social sciences.

After a short break, she returned to university to pursue a Masters of Science. Driven by the belief that everyone deserves to be in the outdoors if they so desire, she shifted her focus to Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management and she rejoined the wolfpac to research inclusion in national parks social media pages.

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“Because everyone – regardless of their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status – should have the opportunity to experience and thrill in nature if they are so inclined.”

- James Edward Mills, *The Adventure Gap* (pg. 38)

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CHAPTER 1

Examining Representation and Inclusion on National Parks Facebook Posts

Introduction/Literature Review

U.S. National Parks are home to some of the most beautiful places in the country and are often framed as a public good maintained for the benefit of all U.S. citizens (Wozniak & Buchs, 2013). The National Park Service (NPS) was officially created in 1916, under President Woodrow Wilson (“Quick History of the National Park Service” n.d.), and as a bureau of the Department of the Interior, is largely funded through federal income tax authorized by congress (Josephson, 2021). As a publicly facing and funded entity, it is important for the NPS to function as a representative bureaucracy that “matches the general population on salient indicators of diversity, such as race, ethnicity, or gender” (Pitts, 2005, pg. 616). Encouragingly, the NPS “About Us” page on their website speaks of serving and working with various communities, celebrating local heritage, and creating opportunities for youth and families to enjoy the outdoors. Similarly, the NPS and the National Parks Foundation have partnered with and created organizations that are meant to make the parks, and other outdoor spaces, more accessible and welcoming for all (“Our Work,” n.d.). These include organizations like Every Kid Outdoors, Outdoor Afro, and the Hispanic Access Foundation.

Though these efforts should be celebrated, measures of NPS visitor ship and employment suggest that the parks system is not always successful at being open or accessible to all (Schultz et al., 2019). On the contrary, the most recent NPS sanction visitation report showed respondents were overwhelmingly white (~80%), while minority ethnic and racial respondents constituted just over 20%, despite making up 40% of the U.S. population (Vaske et al., 2014). Similar patterns are seen in employee composition. As of 2020, 78.5% of full-time permanent

employment positions were held by white people (“By the Numbers,” n.d.). Additionally, the employment report showed that there were only two areas of work where women outnumbered men - administration and cultural resources - while jobs such as park ranger and engineering remain male-dominated (“By the Numbers,” n.d.). The report did not account for any other identities, though past research tells us that identities such as LGBTQ+ status (Argus, 2018), and (dis)ability (Stanley, 2020) face barriers and social standards that interfere with their involvement in the outdoors. Overall, these statistics suggest that NPS likely faces large areas for improvement with respect to its charge to fully serve the US population.

In acknowledgment of the disconnect between the NPS’s mission and the actual trends on display, the NPS created the Office of Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion (RDI) in 2012 (Schultz et al., 2019). Many of the RDI initiatives directly address the inequalities we see in the parks and outdoor world and they offer accommodations like special programming, braille alternatives, sign language interpreted tours, and wheelchair-accessible camping sites (“Disability History,” n.d.). The office also fosters employee resource groups such as the Council for Indigenous, Relevance, Communication, Leadership, and Excellence (CIRCLE); Hispanic Organization on Relevancy, Advising, Leadership, and Excellence; and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Employee Resource Group (“Employee Resource Groups,” n.d.). These are employee-led groups that celebrate identities and foster inclusive values (“Employee Resource Groups,” n.d.). Similarly, the NPS regularly recognizes marginalized groups through Heritage Celebration Months. These months, like Black History Month and Women’s History Month, are times that are meant to celebrate the historical and societal contributions of the groups and educate others (“What Are Heritage Months?” n.d.).

The NPS efforts to address inequalities and historically marginalized groups are admirable, and by and large, are consistent with proven ways to invite underrepresented audiences to the organization. For instance, the creation of support groups, ally networks, and partnerships with other DEI organizations are all supported strategies for increasing diversity and inclusion (Jones, 2016). While the efforts of the NPS are visible, there have been few efforts to evaluate their efficacy. One of the only studies evaluating NPS diversity and inclusion efforts offers an extensive catalog of RDI programs and provides insights into the effectiveness of the RDI initiatives (Shultz et al., 2019), which showed that the NPS increased new annual RDI programs from just 16 in 2006 to 256 by 2016. Further, nearly 70% of the RDI programs introduced were ongoing (Shultz et al., 2019). One finding shows that the inclusive programs had a strong emphasis on identities like race, gender, and age while less focus was given to identities such as religion and sexual orientation (Shultz et al., 2019). As this is one of the only studies of which we are aware, more research could continue to shed light on the design and impact of diversity and inclusion efforts within the NPS in support of its' goals of serving the entire American public.

One understudied, but potentially serviceable metric to evaluate NPS efforts around diversity and inclusion is social media. In the United States, 72% of people use at least one form of social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), including the national parks. Presently, the NPS uses Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube to share information on over 400 NPS locations ("Social Media," n.d.). Social media can enhance the spread of information and allows communications to reach a far greater audience (Mehrai et al., 2014). Now, social media is often used and developed as a metric for performance and engagement (Peters, et al. 2013; Turnbull & Jenkins, 2016). However, social media has yet to be used as a way to assess RDI efforts of

national parks or specifically, as an evaluation of content related to historically excluded and non-dominant identities of the U.S. Examining the degree to which NPS social media posts are consistent with their ideals would provide a framework for the NPS to self-examine their own RDI efforts, as well as serve as a roadmap for similar agencies to make changes on one of the most publicly facing, visible, and easily accessible communication points.

This study is the first to use social media as an assessment tool to explore how NPS RDI beliefs are reflected in their public communications. This is important because the NPS states their desires to be inclusive and has taken steps to do so, however, there seems to be no investigation as to whether they reflect these messages on their social media which are very visible platforms. The core research question is, to what degree do NPS Facebook posts equally, equitably, and inclusively represent identities? We draw from the Social Identity Wheel (“Social Identity Wheel,” n.d.) to define social identities including race, gender, and sexual orientation. Additionally, we also include Veterans as an identity category as past research has included this category in RDI assessments of the NPS (Shultz et al., 2019). The Identity Wheel is used in helps participants reflect on their own identities and how those identities fit into the social structure of the world (Chow et al., 2019)

The evaluation of social identities on social media platforms has the potential to operationalize distinct definitions of equality, equity, and inclusion. In this case, we define inclusion as a discussion of identities irrespective of the heritage month. For instance, if the NPS were to only discuss African Americans during Black history month, this may be interpreted as a performative, rather than inclusive, approach. The NPS has stated a mission to increase inclusivity, value diverse ideas and backgrounds and establish personal connections to all

Americans (“Office of Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion, n.d). With this framework and the NPS goals in mind, we offer three specific research questions:

- A. R1: To what degree do NPS Facebook pages represent social identities equally?
- B. R2: To what degree do NPS Facebook pages represent social identities equitably?
- C. R3: To what degree does the timing of identity discussion in NPS Facebook posts indicate inclusivity?

Methods

Sampling

We chose to examine the Facebook pages of eight individual national parks-- Cuyahoga Valley, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Great Smoky Mountains, Acadia, Rocky Mountain, Yellowstone, and Zion. These parks represent the highest visited nationwide parks within 2020 that also have verified Facebook accounts (“Visitation Report,” n.d.). Verifications on social media are marked with a blue check and indicate the account has been authenticated by the social media site (Grome, 2021). We also included the National Parks Service Facebook page, which has over 1.6 million followers and is meant to represent the entity of the NPS as a whole. With high visitation numbers, these parks receive significant attention, attention that we felt would reflect in visitation to their social media pages, making them good candidates for sampling.

Data Collection

Using Brandwatch, a digital consumer intelligence company with access to online platforms and billions of data sets (Wu, n.d.), we pulled all posts from the nine Facebook pages between September 1st, 2020-September 1st, 2021. Since the goal of the project was to analyze the messages of NPS Facebook pages, we eliminated all posts that were not posted or shared directly from the selected Facebook pages. To ensure we were only analyzing original posted content, we

also removed all comments or replies from the downloaded data. This process yielded 4,469 posts.

Coding

The next step was to select those posts that focused on humans, rather than nature or informational text about the parks. For example, many posts coded under “Nature” were about different animals or plants that could be seen in the various parks such as black bears, bald eagles, or buffalo. Posts coded under “Information” primarily had to do with hours of operations, road closures, or park rules. Human-centric posts referred to one person or a group of people, some highlighted historical figures while others talked about current employees or patrons of the park. We focused on human-centric posts (n=1,195) for further analysis, as we were interested in what the national parks were saying about social identities (Figure 1).

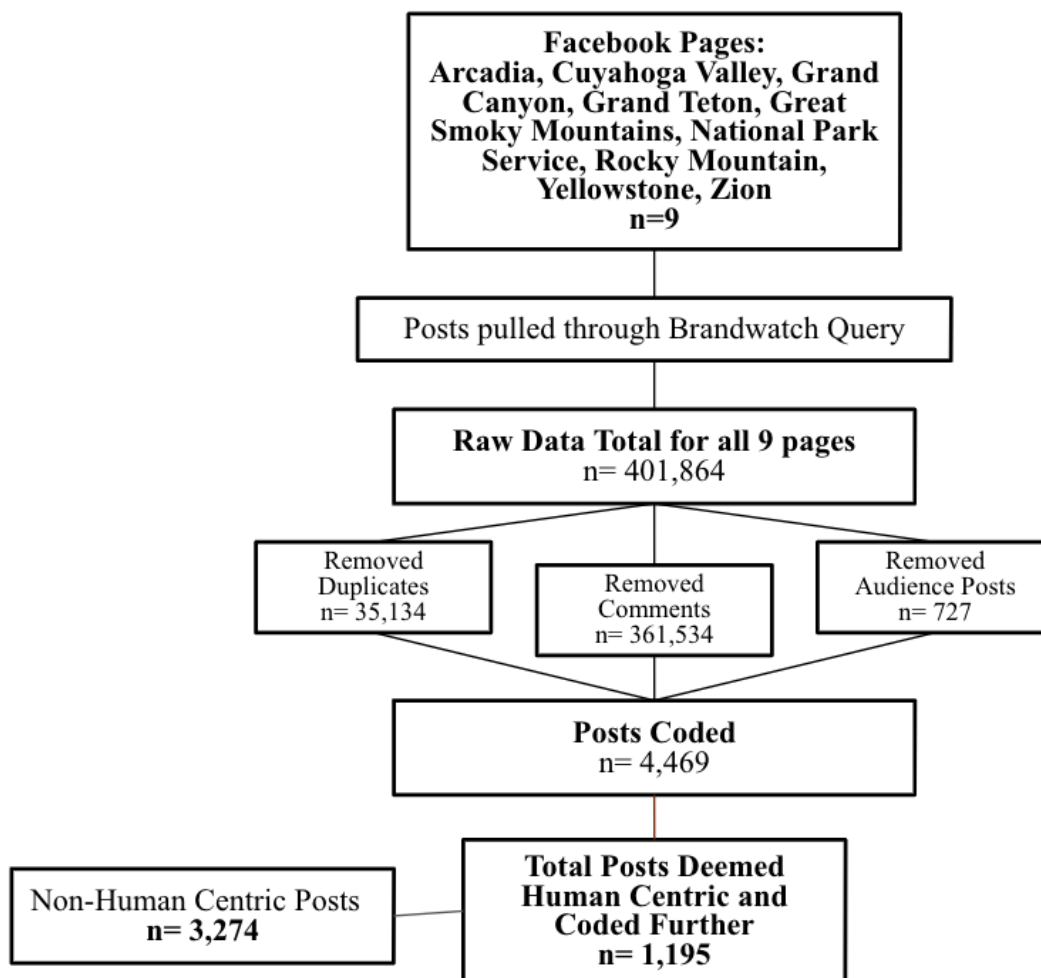


Figure 1.1: Coding Flow Chart

To answer our research questions, we performed a content analysis, a useful approach to addressing larger data sets that can be applied to visual, textual, and audible analyses (Stemler, 2015). We used an integrative coding process in which we set initial codes based on the Social Identity Wheel and added emergent codes and language to capture nuances from the posts themselves. This coding process included coding for the types of identity (e.g., attending to race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), categories within each identity (e.g., African American, Native American, white, etc.), and timing of the posts (e.g., within the celebratory month or not).

To address Research Question 1, we measured equality of content as we compared the proportions of each identity to identity–related posts overall (ie. What percentage of posts talked about gender?). For Research Question 2, we addressed equity by investigating the degree to which the identities present in the NPS Facebook posts correlated with the diversity of the U.S. population, drawing on data from the US Census. We did this by comparing the number of actual posts for each identity to the number of posts that would exist if quantities reflected proportions of the US population. We also explored the language used to address each identity as we compared the implicit versus explicit content of the posts. Explicit posts directly used words such as she, him, Black, Asian, etc. to send a clear message of who was being talked about. Implicit posts did not use such language and instead needed context clues or even the aid of a search engine to find out information on who was being mentioned. The goal was to access if there was a difference in how identities were being presented, as a change in the way the identities are discussed could defy the idea of equitable treatment.

Finally, to address inclusion with Research Question 3, we compared the proportions of posts about historically marginalized identities in the U.S. in and out of their celebratory months. We also looked at the volatility of each identity by measuring the degree of variation in number of posts from month to month. Chi-square analyses were performed for all research questions. Data for research questions 2 and 3 was analyzed further using Fisher's exact approach for post hoc analysis of Chi-Square (Shan & Gersenberger, 2017).

Results

Out of the nine Facebook pages, there are 1,195 human-centric posts that contain 1,720 codes, due to the nature of our coding process where each post could be coded with more than one category. For instance, a single post highlighting Rosa Parks would be assigned codes for

race and gender (R1) or as female and African American (R2). Out of the 1,195 posts, the Grand Canyon has the highest number of human-centric posts (n=265) while Zion has the least (n=63). The National Parks Service page consists of 257 posts, Cuyahoga Valley 170, the Great Smoky Mountains 105, Yellowstone 103, Rocky Mountain 82, Arcadia 78, and Grand Teton 72. Gender (n=771) and race (n=561) are the two social identities most frequently mentioned while Religion (n=7) was the least.

Our results associated with research question 1 indicate large differences in the frequency of mentions between social identity groups (Table 1.1). The posts overwhelmingly attended to gender (44.8%) and race (32.6%), with under 10% of posts attending to other forms of identity (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: Proportion of Posts by Identity

Social Identity	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	771	44.8%
Race	561	32.6%
Indigenous Identity	155	9.0%
Age	101	5.9%
Unidentified	51	2.9%
Ability	43	2.5%
Ethnicity	34	2.0%
First Language	22	1.3%
National Origin	13	0.8%
Sexual Orientation	13	0.8%
Religion	7	0.4%

Similar trends held when examining the equity of the types of identity mentioned within each identity category for research question 2. Specifically, Men (n=482) are talked about more than women (n=287) and there were only two posts that suggested gender non-binary (n=2). The racial identity of White/European (n=413) was the most prevalent, and Asian/Pacific Islander was the least (n=22). Black/African American was the second-highest racial identity mentioned (n=126), while Indigenous identities were mentioned in 155 posts and Latino/Hispanic ethnicity in 34.

The findings regarding research question 2 also show differences between the proportions of posts for each social identity compared to their proportions of the US population. Women, Black/African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, and Youth are all talked about in proportions greater than that of their share of us population. While Ability, LGBTQ+, and Elderly are drastically underrepresented. One sample Chi-square tests were performed for all identities in order to assess the reflection of identities in posts compared to that of their population proportion ($\chi^2(1, N = 2) = 8.94, p = .003$ for ethnicity Latino/Hispanic; $\chi^2(3, N=4)=3661.41 p < .001$ for racial identities White/European, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black/African American, and Native American; $\chi^2(1, N=2)=179.23 p < .001$ for Ability statuses; $\chi^2(1, N=2)=27.40 p < .001$; and $\chi^2(1, N=2)=329.38 p < .001$ for age Elderly and Youth). The only identity category not significantly different from population proportion is gender, with both proportion of Men and Women posts not significantly differing from their proportion of US population.

Further, there are differences detected in how certain identities are talked about. Posts about people of White/European identities were predominantly implicit, with no true mention of their race or origins. However, when compared to posts of identities such as Asian/Pacific

Islander and LGBTQ+ status, we see that the language is entirely explicit, with each post stating that they were about such identities. These differences were seen in varying degrees between all identities (Figure 1.2).

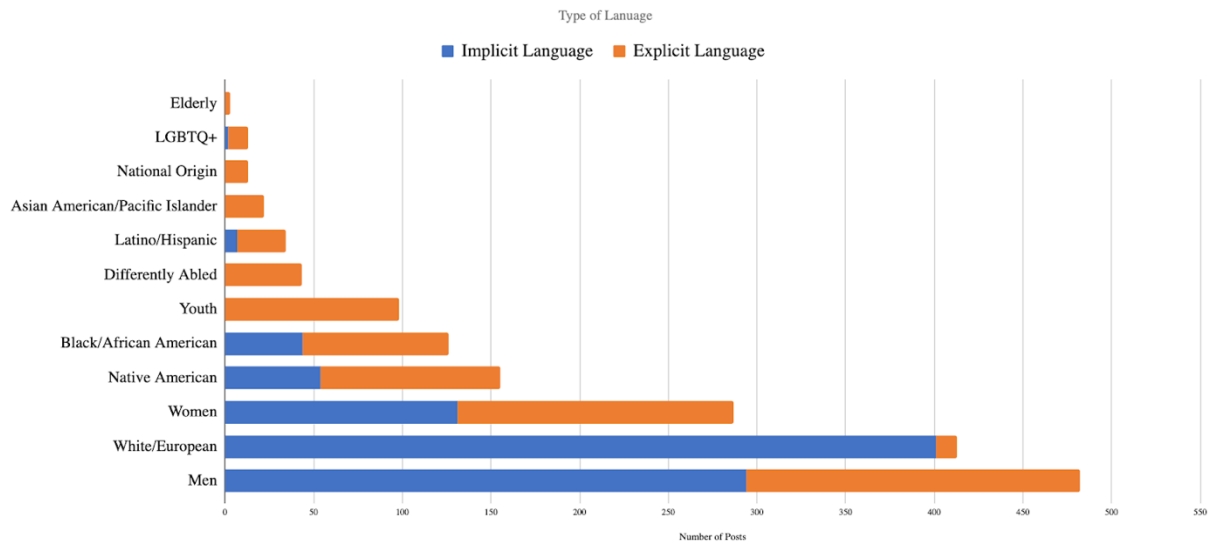


Figure 1.2: Implicit vs. Explicit Posts by Identity

Finally, for research question 3, we see that the timings of communications don't fully reflect inclusion. The frequency of posts varies greatly from month to month, however, changes for identities like men, White/European, and even Women, average less change than other identities like Latino/Hispanic (Table 1.2). When looking for explanations for such a result, a noted factor is that there are significant spikes in the number of posts for many social identities in their corresponding heritage or celebration months (Figure 1.3).

Table 1.2: Volatility of posts for one year based on change per month

Social Identity	Analyzed Volatility
Veterans	260%
Latino/Hispanic	173%
Asian/Pacific Islander	69%
Native American	59%
Black/African American	48%
Women	11%
White/European	11%
Men	6%

Figure 3: Identities by Month

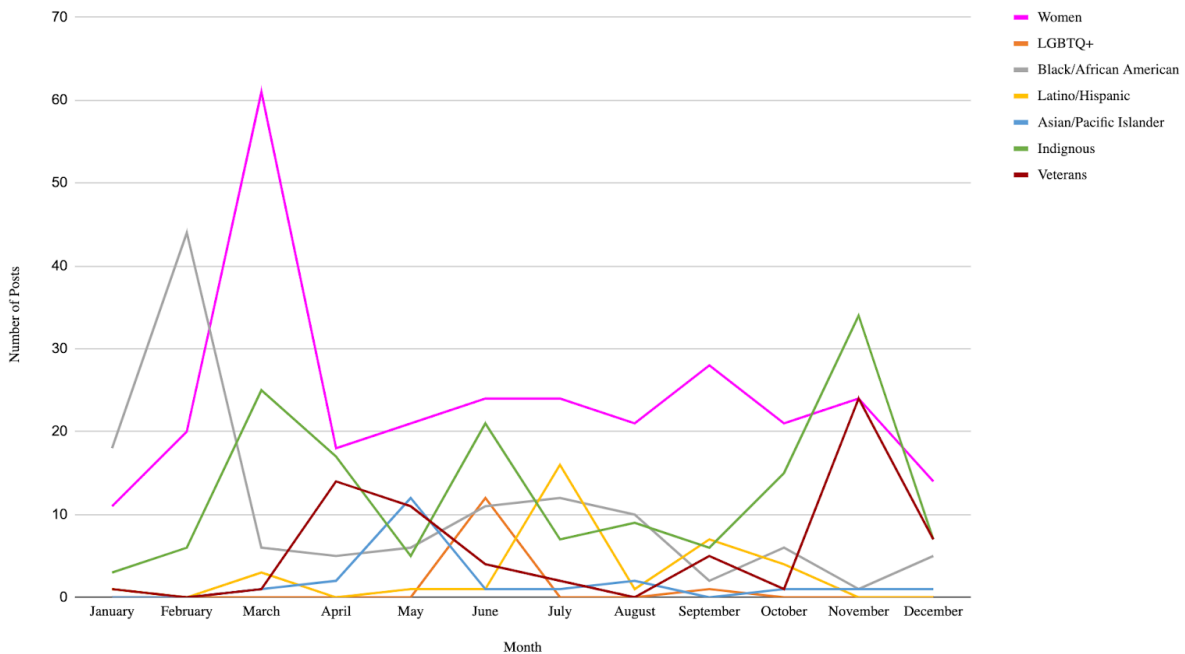


Figure 1.3: Visualization of posts per month for identities with heritage months

When comparing the number of posts in celebration month vs. out, for Women we see that 21.25% of posts occur in March, Women's History Month, alone. While, 21.94% of posts about Indigenous Identities occur in November, American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month. Also in November, a spike occurs for Veterans due to Veterans Day, with 34.29% of all veteran-related posts occurring then. February, Black History Month, holds 34.92% of all posts

about Black/African American identities. In July, the NPS celebrated Latino Conservation Week and the month contains 47.06% of posts related to Latino/Hispanic identities. Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month occur in May when we see 54.55% of posts about Asian/Pacific Islander identities. Finally, the most drastic in the month vs. out-of-month measure we see is with LGBTQ+ identities where 92.31% of related posts occur in June, Pride month (Table 1.3, Figure 1.3).

Table 1.3: Posts in month of celebration vs out for identities with heritage months

Social Identity	Celebration Month	In Month	Out of Month (remaining 11 months)
Women	March	21.25%	78.75%
Indigenous Identity	November	21.94%	78.06%
Veterans	November	34.29%	65.71%
Black/African American	February	34.92%	65.08%
Latino/Hispanic	July	47.06%	52.94%
Asian/Pacific Islander	May	54.55%	45.45%
LGBTQ+	June	92.31%	7.69%

Further, one sample Chi-square tests were performed for all identities with heritage months to assess if there was significant difference between the twelve months of the year ($\chi^2(11, N = 12) = 72.46, p < .001$ for Woman; $\chi^2(11, N = 12) = 78.89, p < .001$ for Indigenous Identity; $\chi^2(11, N = 12) = 99.71, p < .001$ for Veterans; $\chi^2(11, N = 12) = 99.71, p < .001$ for Black/African American; $\chi^2(11, N = 12) = 83.89, p < .001$ for Latino/Hispanic; $\chi^2(11, N = 12) = 64.18, p < .001$ for Asian/Pacific Islander; and $\chi^2(11, N = 12) = 120.85, p < .001$).

Discussion

Findings show that social identities are not equally represented on national park's Facebook pages. The social identity categories race and gender are discussed most frequently

while other identities such as sexuality and religion are talked about much less. Further, identities within these categories did not receive equal attention with White/European and men receiving a much higher quantity of posts when compared to other identities. For months that are celebratory in this country for historically marginalized groups, we see noticeable and statistically significant spikes in the number of posts in the identities corresponding to the celebratory month. These results tell us that the conversations the NPS are having on their Facebook pages are not equal among identities, nor are they equal when comparing identities' proportion of posts to identities' proportion of the US population. Our results also indicate that NPS posts are not inclusive of many identities year-round, instead only focusing on them during the time frame that the US has deemed important.

Defining diversity primarily through gender and race is not surprising given the popular discourse of today's society, however, it points to an important and achievable area of growth for the NPS. Even in research, more focus has historically been placed on certain aspects of diversity, such as race while other identities have been overlooked (Mapes, 2020). We see that the majority of human-centric posts from the NPS are about gender and race. However, considering a broader definition of diversity ensures that we are being conscious of everyone's individualities and more organizations are starting to take note that diversity is more than just race and gender (Whitelaw, 2010). The NPS defines diversity as “people of different backgrounds, perspectives, thoughts and beliefs” (“Office of Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion,” n.d.). This definition is encompassing; however, it is not reflected in their posts as they do not fully include all identities. The first step the NPS could take is to increase their discussion of identities other than race and gender and focus on the less prevalent identities seen in their posts, religion, sexual orientation, and national origin.

The lack of representation of many social identity groups as it relates to the NPS is not a new finding (Santucci et al., 2014) and our results suggest that ensuring social media posts are reflective of the US population may be another step the NPS can take to make their outreach efforts match their stated goals of equitable representation. We were not concerned by the higher proportion of posts for historically marginalized communities like Native Americans or Asian identities when compared to the proportion that of their proportion of the US population. After all, historically national parks were often idealized for white patrons and were created after the removal of Native Americans from their lands (Mowatt, 2020). However, the NPS could work to equalize their discussions around all identities by increasing the conversation around identities such as differently-abled and sexual orientation. Highlighting the lesser present identities is important because representation revolves around seeing oneself reflected in the world and the opportunity to find belonging (“Why Representation Really Matters,” 2020). Outdoor recreation has been dominated by white, and most often male, faces (Weatherby & Vidon, 2018, Little, 2002, Finney, 2014), and lack of representation can not only hurt self-esteem or self-image (Martins and Harrison, 2012; Finney, 2014; Niehaus, 2018) but can send messages that one doesn’t belong (Stanley, 2019). Increasing representation is a step toward being welcoming to all and would help the NPS stay true to some of their RDI-stated beliefs.

Our findings may offer some guidance on where to focus their efforts. As Stanley (2019) concludes, amplifying the presence of underrepresented groups online and on the trails, is of utmost importance to challenge the historical narrative of who belongs in nature and what they look like. The first and most basic step is to increase visibility. Women have been fighting the narrative that the outdoors is a masculine space using social media by posting pictures of themselves in natural landscapes as well as creating groups like *Women’s Wilderness*

(Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). Similar efforts have been proven successful with groups like Outdoor Afro (Finney & Mapp, 2014). Moving forward, the NPS (or other park agencies) needs to be intentional of who they are posting about while consciously working to highlight the groups that have not been historically present. This would be a start to address underrepresentation with efforts have proven to be efficient Stanley, 2019; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018).

The significant spikes in the number of posts for identity groups within celebratory months is perhaps an honorable start for acknowledging and respecting different heritages, but it also points to a potential area of growth for the NPS. Sole emphasis on identities during limited times of the year may not correspond with the NPS's mission of being an entirely inclusive entity. There are concerns about how some choose to approach heritage months, teaching tactics for heritage months can oversimplify cultures and even reinforce stereotypes (Menkart, 1999; King & Brown, 2014). Additionally, they cause many histories and stories to be whittled down to fit into one honorary month, instead of being a part of the conversation year-round (Chiariello, 2015). As it currently stands, all of the identities that the NPS honors in celebratory months or weeks such as Black/African American, Native American, and Latino, receive the majority of their posts in those corresponding times. When looking at social identities like men or White/European, there are no months that stand out in such significant ways. Working to include all identities year-round would decrease the appearance of performative diversity while also working to address the issue of underrepresentation that exists year-round.

This study evaluating social media as a signal of commitment to inclusion and representation, has revealed several areas of potential growth for the national parks to work towards being more inclusive and increasing representation. The NPS, and many other park

agencies, operate on the federal spectrum, which means that policies can change with administrative terms. However, the recommendation made are realistically achievable even during changes of leadership, they revolve more around being conscious of what messages are being put out into the world and making an effort to include those who have historically not been.

For future research, there are several directions that this work could go. For one, more exploration into the different groups within each identity, or in other words, the diversity within each social identity. There was a limitation on incorporating intersectionality into this study. While the social identity wheel is a useful tool that encourages reflection upon one's identities and how they impact the social world, it does not clearly incorporate intersectional. Intersectionality emphasizes that human beings can't easily fit into one category (Hankivsky, 2014). The existence and interactions of race and gender are perhaps the roots of intersectionality as an academic focus (McCall, 2005) and it is an important part of feminist theory (Goertz et al., 2010). Social identities are not one offs and incorporating intersectionality would make the study stronger by reflecting the world more accurately.

Another area for more research would be to perform a greater discourse analysis of the language used. While a preliminary look was taken towards the use of implicit vs explicit language, connecting to communication theories and dedicating more time to the specific words themselves would strengthen the understanding of possible micro-biases present.

Conclusion

This research represents a first step to offering a framework for evaluating DEIJ efforts through social media. While this study focused on the NPS, the framework could be applied to other organizations that post about social identities on the regular. The first step to a more

inclusive social media presence is being intentional about who you are posting about. Not being intentional about who is being posted about can lead to domination by one or two social identities. The second is to pay attention to when posts about social identities are being made. Heritage months are a great way to honor various identities, but all identities deserve attention year-round. Finally, being responsive to the audience and area that are being served. If you are trying to appeal to a national audience, then your posts need to represent the diversity of the US population.

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CHAPTER 2

Why Representation in the Outdoors Matters

Researchers are often asked to justify the importance of our work. Why we choose to study what we study and how it may help the greater good. As a graduate student, I was asked “why does it matter,” on a weekly basis and often spent more time having to justify why I wanted to study inclusion and representation in the outdoors, than actually talking about my research. While formulating appropriate answers, I always defaulted to talking about representation and really why that matters in the context of the outdoors. Representation is what connects meaning, language, and culture, doing so mostly through assigning signs and patterns with specific meanings (Hall, 2013) it can be thought of as group compositions, allocation of power, or visibility (Grollman, 2013). Representation, or lack thereof, has impacts on human psychological like self-esteem or self-image (Martins and Harrison, 2012; Finney, 2014; Niehaus, 2018) and exists in every facet of life. We think of representation as what/who we see on TV or in comic books (Martins and Harrison, 2012; Kirkpatrick & Scott, 2015), who is leading the classrooms of American Elementary students (Niehaus, 2018), what our workforce looks like (Smith et al., 2017), and etcetera.

It wasn't until I was in college that I even thought of representation in the context of outdoors spaces. I grew up in Oregon, where outdoor activities seem to be a birth right. Babies are put in carriers and brought on hikes; children are on stand-up paddle boards before they can even walk. While I faced my fair share of stereotypes due to my gender/sex, I never questioned if I belonged in the outdoor recreation world. A huge reason for that is because I saw people who looked like me participating in the outdoor activities that I was interested in. I am a white woman who looks similar to the majority of women that I would see in the outdoor advertisements. So,

on top of already living in an area that cultivated outdoor enthusiasts, I also saw myself reflected in ads on a daily basis. My ease of belonging is most likely not something I would have felt if I didn't match the dominant skin color of the outdoor world. A past study evaluated the presence of black versus white models in three popular outdoor advertisements and found that white models were depicted in outdoor spaces at a significantly higher percent than black models (Martin, 2004).

Outdoor advertisements are far from the only area where there is lack of representation in. I grew up always hearing about how John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt were the outdoor activists to honor. However, once you become aware of the whitewashing of dominant narratives you start to see where the relationships and history of people of color in the outdoors has mostly been overlooked or oversimplified (Mills, 2020; Theriault & Mowatt, 2018) while at the same time, the history of the white men has been romanticized. There is a large section of environmental history that until recently, has received little to no attention. For instance, the story of the buffalo soldiers was not commonly shared until the 2000's (Finney, 2014). By not honoring people of color in environmental history, you are taking away the opportunity for someone to see themselves reflected in that space. Overall representation is important because when you don't see yourself reflected in the world around you, you can question where or if you belong (Thomas, 2020; Nam, 2019)

It was like I woke up one day and realized just how whitewashed the outdoors are, and I know the fact that it took me into adulthood to figure it out just confirms the privileges I have. But realizing that is what made me want to look more into inclusion and representation in the outdoors. There are a lot of issues that bar people from the outdoors including financial constraints, lack of transportation, and fear of safety. These are all worthy topics that also need to

be addressed, however, the convenient thing about representation is that is considerably easier to start making a change. In the age of social media, representation is already being tackled by groups that have historically been left out of the outdoor realm (Stanley, 2019; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). It can start with one post, one picture, on reshare.

The final part of “why does that matter” is we need the outdoors to be a more welcoming space so that people continue to value them. Besides moral obligations, increasing the diversity in the outdoors would help ensure that future generations will continue to care and participate in outdoor recreation. Personally, I just believe that everyone deserves to belong.

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