

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Zen and the Art of the Selfie Stick: Blogging the John Muir Trail Thru-Hiking Experience

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### ABSTRACT

For cultures around the world, a journey, particularly one undertaken by foot through landscapes that are simultaneously natural and cultural, is both a metaphor for the discovery of the self and the divine and an embodied practice in the physical realm. Here we analyze twenty-six publicly available blogs of thru-hikers of the John Muir Trail in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, U.S.A. Cognizant of the critiques of the intrusion of technology into wilderness areas, we examine how the communication medium of travel blogs becomes a vehicle for both self-reflection and for sharing spiritual experiences, and how the act of blogging merges virtual and corporeal communities formed among hikers. It is in the intersection of these social networks and mobile communication technologies that we find suggestions of changing relationships between a subculture of tech-savvy and highly connected hikers sometimes called “flashpackers” and the physical landscapes through which they travel.

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“The way to solve the conflict between human values and technological needs is not to run away from technology. That’s impossible. The way to resolve the conflict is to break down the barrier of dualistic thought that prevents a real understanding of what technology is – not an exploitation of nature, but a fusion of nature and the human spirit into a new kind of creation that transcends both.”

— Robert M. Pirsig (1974, p. 298)

(Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values)

## Introduction

In his classic work *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig (1974) takes readers on an epic cross-country motorcycle journey while grappling with philosophical conundrums and exploring the spaces where technology and art merge. While admitting that he knows little about either Zen or motorcycle maintenance, he contrasts the Romantic emphasis on total immersion in the moment, where everyday tasks become spiritual experiences, with rationalism embodied by impersonal technology indifferent to human emotion or philosophy. Ultimately, he shows through metaphor that technology can be a vehicle for self-reflection or even spirituality, and that even a trip taken by motorcycle can become a journey of self-discovery or a rite of passage. For cultures around the world, a journey is both a metaphor for the discovery of the self and the divine and an embodied practice in the physical realm.

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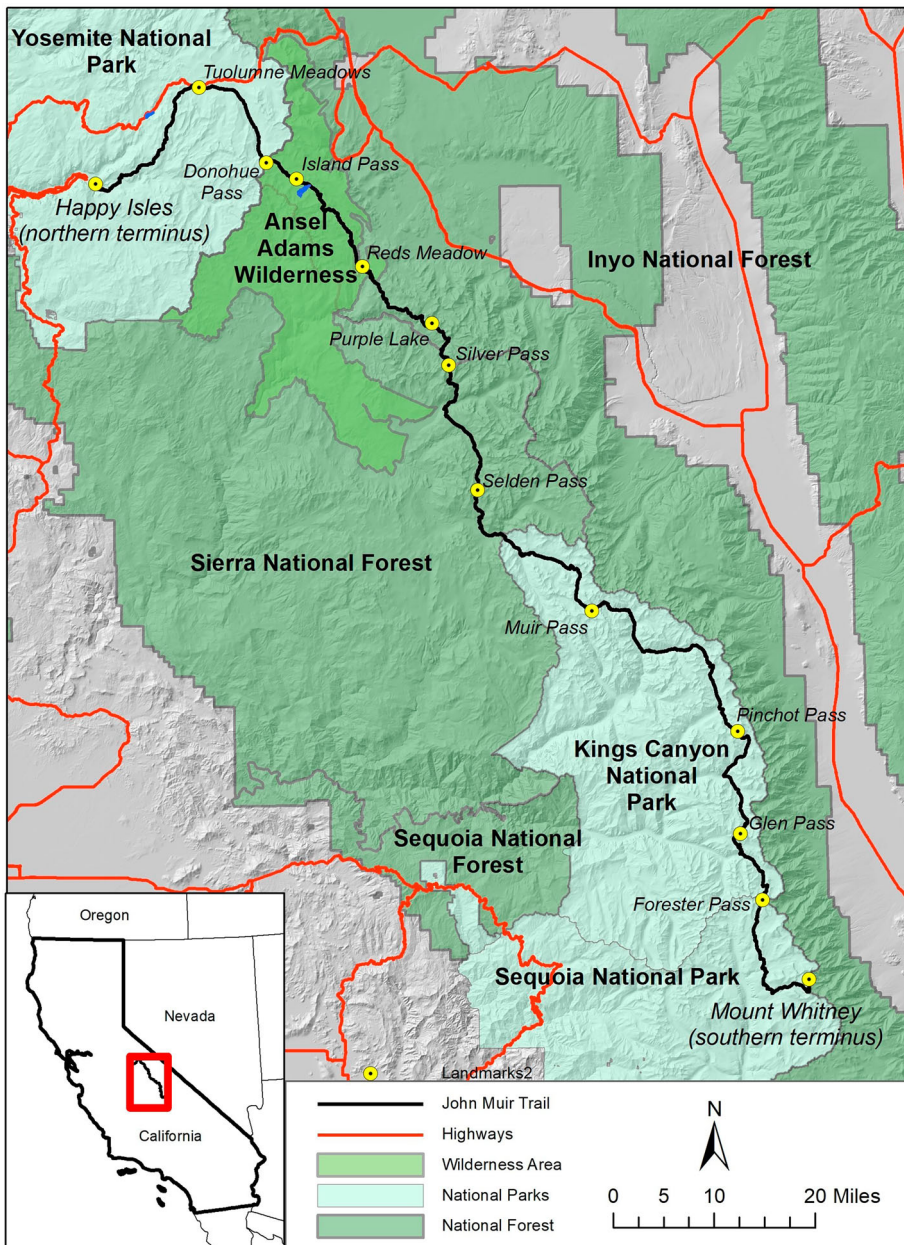
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Many cultures also place importance on intentional immersion in and long-distance hikes through cultural landscapes that are simultaneously “wild” and imbued with human values, meanings, and memory. These experiences are simultaneously physical and spiritual, and they often result in changed perspectives and a clarity of purpose (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Ptasznik, 2015; Turner, 1969; Turner & Turner, 1978; van Gennep, 1960). These types of transformative experiences have renewed importance in the modern world as people seek meaning, and many such journeys re-enact ongoing attempts of people to understand the meaning of the human relationship with nature (Frey, 1998; Maddrell, della Dora, Scafi, & Walton, 2015; Stronza, 2001). Because of the importance of these journeys to the individuals that undertake them, there are numerous sites on the internet where one can read detailed blogs of natural immersion and long-distance hiking experiences. Such blogs remain a largely unexplored resource for understanding environmental thought and personal nature experiences (with the notable exceptions of Champ, Williams, & Lundy, 2013; Germann Molz & Paris, 2015; Hitchner, Schelhas, Brosius, & Nibbelink, 2018). In this article, we analyze twenty-six publicly available blogs of thru-hikers (those who hike from one end of a trail to the other) of the John Muir Trail (JMT), in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, U.S.A., a ~211-mile trail that mostly overlaps with the Pacific Crest Trail (see Figure 1).

Similar to Pirsig’s explorations of the spaces where art, philosophy, and technology intersect in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, we examine how the communication medium of travel blogs becomes a vehicle for both self-reflection and for sharing spiritual experiences, and how the act of blogging merges virtual and corporeal communities formed among hikers. This research builds on previous studies (Champ et al., 2013; Germann Molz & Paris, 2015; Hitchner et al., 2018; Mascheroni, 2007; Stinson, 2017; White & Wilbert, 2009) of how the creation and maintenance of blogs and other shared online social media sources such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram influence hiking experiences in places where people often go specifically to “unplug” and lead to the creation of multiple and often overlapping social networks among hikers. Here we contend that for some (not all) long-distance hikers, the use of social media, particularly blogs, during multiple phases of a long-distance hike (before, during, and after the hike) encourages self-reflection and a sense of community with other hikers that they meet both on the trail on the internet.

Social media shapes wilderness experiences, and our data shows that its use can lead to a more meaningful personal and social thru-hiking experience, as well as a deeper connection with the landscapes through which hikers are travelling. Understanding how different users of recreation areas employ and share social media such as public blogs is a vital component of appropriate management of wilderness areas. Our analysis of one type of visitor to wilderness areas, thru-hikers that create and share thoughtful and reflexive blogs, contributes to the discussion by illuminating influences, motivations, and inner experiences of hikers that are not visible, for example, in Instagram photos taken on the edge of a cliff with a selfie stick, on brief Twitter posts that celebrate reaching a summit, or in books written years later chronicling their adventures.

Critiques of the intrusion of technology into wilderness areas and people’s wilderness experiences are numerous and well-documented (Holden, 2004; Greenwald, 2000; Kaufman, 2010; Shultis, 2000, 2001; Strong, 1995; Welser, 2012). For example, Welser (2012, p. 147) writes about how “technological development is leading to unintended yet inevitable degradation of wilderness areas and the demise of the potential for wilderness experience on Earth.” He notes the role of social media in spreading enthusiasm for visiting natural areas, leading to overuse of these areas, as well as the use of GPS and other mapping technologies in reaching formerly inaccessible (for most people) wilderness areas. While some technologies, he notes, such as satellite phones and rescue beacons have saved lives, they have also encouraged people to commit reckless acts they would not otherwise attempt. For many people, the act of immersing oneself in natural areas without technology results in a new perspective that “transcends the boundaries of our current social world” (Welser, 2012, p. 148) and forces creativity and independence, while the presence of technology robs people of the experience of self-reliance and the opportunity to directly experience nature.



**Figure 1.** John Muir Trail.

Other scholars, such as Miner (2012, p. 156) note that much of the literature focusing on the negative impacts of technology on wilderness areas and experiences is “at best irrational and subjective, and at worst elitist . . . . A neo-luddite, romanticized notion of wilderness has caused technology to be vilified and rejected in a skewed, illogical, and broad-brush manner.” He states that opposition to technology in wilderness is based on several outdated and harmful myths, such as that wilderness experiences are better if they are more difficult or dangerous (Miner, 2012, p. 157). He claims (Miner, 2012, p. 156) that technology has enhanced experiences in nature and created more advocates for wilderness areas; therefore, natural resources managers and others should embrace

technology rather than fight it (Agrawal, 2005; Stinson, 2017). Miner (2012, p. 156) notes that technology is a continuum where a GPS personal navigator is not very different from a map and compass, and that the question of where to draw the line, and who gets to draw it, is thorny at best.

The act of engaging with blogs, social media, or other ICTs (information and communication technologies) while on the John Muir Trail, or creating a blog afterwards from notes and memories, is in many ways the modern equivalent of the pen and paper used by earlier explorers and naturalists such as John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and William Bartram. However, it is also fundamentally different in that these online postings can reach many more people much more quickly (and in places with connectivity, in real time). As noted by Mascheroni (2007, p. 541), communication technologies used by hikers to connect with other people result in “mobile social spaces which are not embedded in any particular physical place, but move with the traveler” and in “fluid, intersecting social networks consisting of interactions with families and friends back home, relationships with the travelers’ community (both with fellow travellers met on the road and unknown others) and with local friends.” These spaces of social mobility created by communication technologies, she argues (Mascheroni, 2007, p. 541; see also Moores, 2003) allow people to live in multiple worlds at once. Social relationships too, she argues (Mascheroni, 2007, p. 541), “are pluralized by these diverse intersecting mobilities.” It is in the intersection of these social networks and communication mobilities that we find suggestions of changing relationships between a subculture of tech-savvy and highly connected hikers sometimes called “flashpackers” (see Germann Molz & Paris, 2015) and the physical landscapes through which they travel.

A history of scholarship on the social construction of nature (for example Cronon, 1996; Escobar 1994, 1999; Nash, 2001) has shown that nature is continually re-created through human interactions with the environment, and that “wilderness is not a static and essential reality that can simply be connected to or disconnected from” (Stinson, 2017, p. 176). Instead, Stinson (2017, p. 176) suggests the emergence of “a new ontology of augmented nature, made possible by the articulation of elements of the non-human environment, new media and communication technologies, and practices of outdoor recreation.” Building on his idea of this new ontology, which he calls “Wilderness 2.0,” (Stinson, 2017), we explore the ways that the act of blogging affects the experiences of people thru-hiking the JMT through content analysis of the blogs themselves. While we would also like to interview thru-hikers who keep blogs, we contend that analyzing blogs independently offers a different perspective than would be gained from in-person interviewing. People might be more open and reflective in blogs, as they are usually written in private spaces (even if for public consumption). Blogs also capture multiple phases of the journey, including preparation and post-trip reflections, as well as documentation of experiences while hiking. They can therefore present perspectives not available through other means of data collection, including in-person interviews. Our results presented here offer insights into the role that blogging technology plays in terms of serving as a mediator of wilderness immersion activities and as a platform for connecting with other hikers, both online and in real life. We also propose that blogging serves as both a link to a virtual social community from which people draw (and share) encouragement as well as a mechanism for some hikers to more clearly document and fully engage with the physical landscape than they otherwise would.

## Background: ethnographic analysis of Thru-Hiker Blogs

Anthropology can help understand the “full story” of what happens to those who engage in all forms of tourism (Stronza, 2001, p. 278), and ethnographic analysis of travellers’ narratives is a key method of investigating the meaning of their experiences. As noted by Doostdar (2004, p. 653), “calls are increasingly being made for an ethnographic and anthropological approach to the study of computer-mediated communication and online communities” (see also Escobar, 1994; Hakken, 1999; Hitchner et al., 2018; Miller & Slater, 2000; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Blogs, or weblogs, are web-based personal journals, with disparate entries uploaded by individuals in chronological (or reverse



chronological) order (Banyai & Havitz, 2013; Dearstyne, 2005; Panteli, Yan, & Chamakiotis, 2011). The act of blogging allows bloggers to simultaneously engage in social interaction and control the content and frequency of their postings, as well as their own self-presentation (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Panteli et al., 2011). Backpackers keep blogs for a number of audiences: family and friends they know “in real life” (often abbreviated “IRL” in online postings), people with whom they maintain personal but virtual friendships (i.e. have never met offline), unknown audiences (i.e. readers of blogs who read and sometimes respond to blog posts but are not known personally to the bloggers), and the bloggers themselves (Panteli et al., 2011). Motivations for writing for these different audiences can shift; some bloggers begin blogging in order to update friends and family of their whereabouts and experiences but change their writing style in response to comments from unknown blog readers or as the act of blogging becomes a more personal means of self-expression (Panteli et al., 2011). As noted by Panteli et al. (2011, p. 373): “From the bloggers’ perspective, the blog has developed from simply a communication means to a means for showing presence to different groups of people as well as for one’s self.”

We have chosen to analyze blogs in order to understand how thru-hikers of the JMT craft these blogs as edited versions of reality for multiple purposes and for multiple audiences. Based on this analysis, we explore the broader question of how the process of writing blogs about wilderness experiences such as thru-hiking the JMT reflects and influences both inner spiritual experiences and shared social experiences both online and on the trail. Bosangit, Hibbert, and McCabe (2015, p. 5) state that: “Blogs are increasingly drawn upon as naturally occurring introspective accounts, which are not subject to the reflexive interference that may result from interviews” (see also Keng & Ting, 2009). They also cite other studies (such as Tung & Ritchie, 2011) which found that when interviewed, tourists only recalled positive emotions related to their experiences as a tourist, while tourists’ blogs reveal a wider range of emotions including “being scared, disappointed, disturbed, and depressed” (Bosangit et al., 2015, p. 11). Travel blogs are written voluntarily and not for commercial or research purposes; thus, they are seen as more accurate interpretations and reflections of the authors’ perspectives, priorities, and ascribed meanings of their experiences (Nelson, 2015; Volo, 2010). However, travel blogs have a number of limitations as a resource for tourism research. For example, not all locales are equally represented, as long-term travellers are more likely to blog. There is also considerable variation in the content of blogs and among types of bloggers, and blogs are by nature edited and subjective versions of reality and cannot be verified (Nelson, 2015). Of course, not everyone blogs, and not every blogger is eloquent or reflective. However, despite these limitations, blog analysis does offer a unique perspective, as the blogs offer insights into hikers’ thoughts that are often barely edited and sometimes published in real time.

## Methods

We chose to analyze blogs related to thru-hiking the John Muir Trail, because while there are many blogs about thru-hiking longer trails such as the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian Trail, focusing on a less-represented but highly iconic trail was both more manageable and more conducive to our research aims, as we assumed people may be particularly reflective about hiking a trail named for John Muir. We selected blogs to analyze based on the following criteria: 1) blogger’s intention to thru-hike the JMT (though not all were successful), 2) sufficient length of blog/number of entries (at least 10), and 3) self-reflective nature of blog posts (not just a description of gear and list of waypoints and campsites). This was a subjective process, in no way random or statistically generalizable. We analyzed twenty-six blogs that met these criteria. Most of these were found through the Trail Journals blog forum ([www.trailjournals.com](http://www.trailjournals.com)), which is a popular online forum that sorts blogs by long-distance trails around the world. In some cases, blogs on thru-hiking the JMT that met our research criteria contained links to external trail blogs by the same authors, and we read and extracted quotes from these more personalized and less formulaic blog sites as well. We used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to conduct content analysis of the main themes that

emerged from the blogs, and we linked these themes to ideas encountered in the extant literature on how hikers use social media to record and share their experiences and how the act of blogging while in remote places affects people's experiences. We were particularly interested in the ways that hikers expressed ideas about their motivations for blogging, the virtual worlds they encountered through reading and writing blogs and the intersection of these online communities with interactions with other hikers on the trail, and the physical act of blogging while in remote and cultural landscapes. Our coding reflected these main themes and the sub-themes (e.g. gendered issues related to blogging and hiking) that we discovered as we read and coded the blogs.

As is conventional with social science research, we have coded the names of the participants, in this case bloggers unaware of our study. Although publicly available blogs are considered open access, we have chosen to use codes,<sup>1</sup> as it is standard practice in our discipline and because the names of the bloggers are not relevant to this research. We have lightly edited several of the direct quotes for the sake of clarity and correct spelling and punctuation; we have retained original markers of emphasis such as capital letters or italics as they appear on the blogs.

## Results

### *Motivations for blogging*

As noted, long-distance hikers keep blogs for a variety of reasons and audiences, which may shift throughout the duration of the hike, in addition to pre-hike preparation and post-hike reflection. We found that JMT thru-hikers stated that they started a blog and wrote blog entries for several reasons. Some did it mainly to keep friends and family informed; for example, one hiker wrote: "I am hoping to keep up on this so my friends and family can follow me on my adventure!" (HB18). As with any passion that requires copious amounts of time, effort, and money, long-distance hikers often struggle to explain to others what motivates them to undertake such physically strenuous activities in remote areas. Some use the medium of a blog to help convey their motivations and document the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual rewards that they experience during the hike in an effort to help others understand. For example, one hiker thanked his wife for her support and said that his blog was a way to help her understand his need to hike. He wrote:

Even though she didn't understand why I would want to spend two weeks sleeping, eating, and ahem defecating in the woods, she sent me off with a kiss. She doesn't understand my need to go into the woods and leave a lot of the world behind, but maybe after reading this journal she will have a better idea. (HB23)

Several hikers noted that starting a blog before the hike would help motivate them to complete the hike, through self-imposed peer pressure. One hiker wrote: "If I start telling everyone NOW, it will make it harder for me to make excuses and quit later this year. The more people who believe in me, the better! I can't wait!" (HB2). Another stated:

With the posting of this journal entry, I have made a commitment to hike the JMT. Hopefully it's a commitment on which I can and will follow through. Maybe this journal will help me follow through by providing social pressure to finish what I have started. (HB23)

Some hikers created blogs for personal reasons, often as a vehicle for self-reflection or a way to understand one's self and one's path in life. One hiker stated that reading other blogs encouraged him to hike the JMT in the first place and that he viewed blogging as a path to self-discovery while hiking (HB23). Another noted the role of trail blogs as a source of inspiration and motivation for other potential JMT thru-hikers. Noting the lack of recent trail journals, this blogger stated:

The 2015 JMT Trail Journalists look like a skeleton crew. What are overworked midwesterners, adrift in the bleakness of February, supposed to read to remind themselves that not everywhere and not everything is flat? My hike this year, if it happens at all, isn't going to be epic. I'm putting up a journal for it anyway, because I think there should be journals! ... (HB25)

Several hikers used a trail journal to work out their feelings about the hike. In one case, where a hiker did not complete the intended thru-hike, she notes that the journal is not a forum for complaints, but seems to serve more as a vehicle for self-reflection on what went wrong:

It has taken me a while to get to this final write up of the short 30 miles I did of the JMT. I wanted to sort out my feeling about it before I started ... Though the views and scenery were astounding, I have to say this was one of the worst trips I have ever done after planning it for so long. It was discouraging, and I felt nothing but complete relief to get off the trail. It was absolutely not at all what I had envisioned things to be like ... What I learned from this trip is that you have to pick your hiking partners well ... if you want total solitude, you go solo. I also learned that I am not a thru hiker. I am just not built to do it ... The biggest thing I learned was that unless you try something, you will have no idea if it's something you are meant to do. I am a peak bagger. Long distance hiking is just not for me. (HB18)

She goes on to note that the act of reflecting on her experience, though disappointing, helped her to focus on the positive aspects of her experience. She writes that: "I am glad I got the opportunity to do what I did of this trip and will never forget what I got to see. The negativity and the pain from the pack heaviness are just small parts now of what this trip was. I learned my limitations and abilities and will carry that with me" (HB18). While writing about her experience was humbling, through it she turned a potential failure into both a learning experience for herself and an affirmation for others that this type of arduous journey is not for everyone. This act of sharing her experience and reflections on social media served as both a deliberate learning experience in which emotions and lessons are distilled and analyzed and as a mechanism to connect with and encourage others.

Others also wrote about their desire to blog specifically in order to connect with people in various ways. One woman wrote:

Of course there is that part in me that loves to get some attention ... We humans have the need to feel loved and accepted and recognized. Another part of me just loves to make other people smile, to touch their hearts in one way or another ... If we all had the courage to let our hearts be touched, to really feel, to really see what we're longing for and dreaming of, if we all were brave enough to follow our own path, then I think our world kinda would be a different place. So I write about hiking, about my inspiration, about nature, because I hope in one way or another, it will make a tiny difference, it will make someone smile or cry or laugh, or maybe it will encourage someone to finally follow his/her dream (HB26).

Writers write for many reasons, but fundamentally, writing is a vehicle for self-understanding and a means to connect with other people. We maintain that the medium of blogs is a familiar one for many people, especially young adults, and that they are simply using new technologies to fill basic human desires to share their experiences with other people.

### ***The social world of blogging: new trail friends online and IRL (in real life)***

As noted, the act of blogging is intensely and intentionally social, and several hikers mentioned the different types of communities and connections that formed as a result of blogging. Many hikers who posted their blog entries while on the trail commented on how the support received by readers encouraged them to continue when they encountered difficulties, fears, or extreme fatigue. Others who wrote their blogs after completing the hike noted how the act of writing with the intention to share motivated them to keep going. Several also noted that reading the blogs of others encouraged them to hike solo and not to be dependent on hiking partners; the act of hiking alone often made the trip more feasible and the hikers more reflective.

Recognizing the role that other hikers' blogs played in helping them to plan their own hike, some hikers created blogs with the expressed purpose of assisting others who plan to hike the JMT as a way to repay the kindness of others. One person wrote: "It's been interesting reading everyone's Trail Journals! Some have been inspiring and others just highlight how tough this trail can be for those who come in underprepared or take it too lightly" (HB19). Another stated:

It took a while to get my journals edited and uploaded, but I committed to getting this done. I learned so much from others who took the time to complete their journals, I wanted to do the same so hopefully a future JMT hiker finds something interesting or useful from my journal. (HB6)

Some also offered additional help via private messages. For example, one hiker wrote:

And if there's anything more you wanna know (Should I bring rainpants? Can I go with a tarp? How am I to charge my camera batteries? I love oatmeal, now what? Should I bring a bear bell? What the fuck is a wag bag? Should I filter my water? How should I wash my clothes? Should I bring soap and sanitizer? You wanna go on a hike with me?) just add a comment below this post or shoot me a pm [private message]! I'm always happy to help. (HB26)

Almost every blog provides detailed lists of gear and commentary on what worked well and what did not. Pack weight is such an important issue, and it must often be balanced against budgetary constraints, as the lightest gear is often also the most expensive. While some bloggers are self-professed "gearheads" who directly or indirectly admit to gear fetishization, others are more interested in what they can leave behind and what they can "make do" with. The act of providing advice regarding specific articles of gear (or less costly alternatives) and more general guidance on hiking the JMT contributes to the creation and maintenance of a virtual community in which members support and encourage one another.

Several bloggers mentioned that they had been reading other hikers' blogs, and some talked about the experience of meeting people in person that they already "knew" through online interaction (though reading blogs, commenting on blogs, or email communications). In some cases, this led to an online social community that occasionally transcended the boundaries of the blogosphere and created friendships in the real world. One hiker wrote:

As we were walking out, I saw a woman who looked familiar to me. It was [name] from Australia hiking the JMT with her partner [name]. It was great to meet her in person as we'd been following each others' journeys on trailjournals.com. (HB7)

Several bloggers noted social markers such as buttons or gaiters signifying membership in a particular online group, helping people identify one another on the trail. One person wrote that some other hikers "recognize the Yahoo JMT discussion group buttons we are wearing, and stop for a chat. They mention [name], a lead moderator for the group, is a day or so ahead of us with a small group" (HB13). Another blogged:

I did meet several Ladies of the JMT on the trail, often identifiable by the group's signature purple paisley gaiters, designed by Dirty Girl. [Name] hikes in a colorful bonnet. [Name] swears abundantly and sews her own gear. I loved talking with anybody on the trail, but it's extra cool to meet other solo women. So what a treat to find myself among all these hikers tonight. (HB22)

Discussion about blogs and other online social media led to interesting encounters and communities of support on the trail, further blurring the lines between virtual and real experiences and interactions. Several female bloggers discussed the way that social media groups provided needed support and information specifically for women, fostering a sense of community. One wrote:

Before the hike, I joined several hike-centric Facebook groups, including Ladies of the JMT and Women of the PCT, mainly to research weather and gear. The general JMT and PCT groups have more typical internet snark, criticism, and the occasional sexist comment, but the women's group is almost wholly positive, patient and supportive. On the regular forum, you might see a woman post something like "I am wondering about hitching a ride from X campground to Y town, I hear it's pretty safe. Do you think that'll work?" and some guy replying "Only if your hot lol". No thank you. But the ladies— the ladies will encourage the hiker whose shin splints are devastating, whose partner dumped her a week before Day 1, who is plus-size or new or nervous or older, as well as the confident, exuberant and experienced. Thanks to the women's forums, a gal can also show up at the trailhead already equipped with friends and contacts, the social network as applied to roughing it. (HB22)

Another woman recounted an uncomfortable incident on the trail when a man commented to her that he found separate forums for women to be unnecessary because men and women have the same



needs in the wilderness. Her diplomatic response was that: “I don’t profess to know what it’s like to be a man and he should not profess to know what it is like to be a woman” (HB16). Online solidarity among hikers was a key motivator for creating, reading, and sharing blogs, and these blogs were simultaneously a form of information-sharing among hikers and a vehicle for shared introspection that often aimed to “go deep” and find the commonality of the human condition. Even in cases where readers of hiking blogs never met in person, meaningful social interactions still occurred in the virtual realm.

### ***The act of blogging in remote mountains***

Some hikers wrote about the process of blogging while hiking in remote country. Some carried a laptop, tablet, or phone to type entries on a daily basis, while others kept written journals which they later transcribed. Others wrote the blog entries after they returned from the hike. In each approach to writing blogs, hikers used technology while on the trail in different ways. Several others noted that while they planned to keep up with their blog while hiking, they also recognized that it might not be possible due to time and connectivity constraints. One person wrote:

I hope you join me for my journey. I’ll try to be a good blogger. However, I’m not sure how much updating I’ll be able to do while on the trail. My internet access will be much more limited than on the AT, and I’ll have fewer opportunities to charge my phone (and hence, type and post) . . . . So don’t fret if there aren’t any posts for a while. If I don’t publish during the trip, I’ll release the writing afterwards, bit by bit. (HB22)

Several bloggers noted that at times, they consciously chose not to let technology interfere with their experiences. Some wanted to produce a blog after the trip so as not to bring too much technology to their journey. One hiker stated that he planned to use old-fashioned writing methods while on the hike but to use technology later to enhance his shared writing about his experience: “My actual journal will be written after the trip, since I don’t plan to carry a phone. I will keep a written journal as I hike and will need to transcribe it later. That will also make it easier to add photos” (HB11). Some people brought technology, but were intentional about using it, or not. One hiker wrote that just because something can be captured by technology and shared with other people, it may not need to be:

Sometimes I don’t photograph the glowing moments, even if my phone is handy. *This is just for me*, I think, predicting that Dollar Lake will, under the influence of memory, expand into a mythic beauty greater than two-dimensional reality, amplified by being unquantified. Perhaps some things are best left unshared. (HB22)

Writing about the journey, both during the hike and afterwards, initiates a process of self-discovery and reflection. The passage of time since the hike, after reintegration into society and normal life after experiencing the liminal period of trail life, particularly allows a hiker to write about the experience in a way that is different than what they may have written while hiking. For many, physical exhaustion can limit the desire to write during the hike, and imagination and reflection can give meaning and coherence to the disparate memories from the hike. One person wrote:

I am typing up my journal now more than a month later, at home, having been back at work for 2 weeks and off the trail for 3. I’m using my notebook and daily log, photos, my memories supplemented by [name]’s. And yet I’m surprised to read the above. I had forgotten the fatigue, the aching, and much else. Some of the photos barely raise a flicker of recognition . . . . Despite the fast fading memories, I still feel very different on the inside, and find that I’m still calmer and have a different perspective. So the effects are complex, and overwhelmingly positive, overall. But there was pain, as my notebook records, even if I have forgotten it now! (HB17)

In this hiker’s case, the act of creating a blog some time after the hike recalled memories of the experience that she might have otherwise forgotten. Blogs, and other forms of technology and social media, serve not only as a medium for sharing experiences but also as a mechanism for further self-reflection. The creation of such blogs, we contend, resulted in memories of the hike becoming more deeply embedded in the conscious mind of the hiker. The challenges involved in creating blogs in remote areas added a new technological component to the wilderness immersion experience;

while technology can be distracting, it can also serve as a motivator to more deeply observe, experience, and reflect upon nature.

## Discussion: narrating the wilderness experience through blogs

Telling stories about travels is as old as humankind. One pervasive discourse in Western culture is that of travel as an adventure in which the journey is seen as a means to self-reflection and formation of identity (Nelson, 2015). Ptasznik (2015) examined narratives of thru-hiking in modern literature, and notes that works for popular audiences such as *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed (2012) and *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson (1999) contribute to a modern genre of thru-hiking novels and creative non-fiction. Travel narratives are generally created from memory and are “edited versions of reality, constructed accounts that may be rearranged, idealized and embellished upon” (Nelson, 2015; see also Desforges, 2000; Rickly-Boyd, 2009; Wearing, Stevenson, & Young, 2010). Narratives serve as a means by which travellers reflect on their experiences and present those reflections to others, so they contribute to both internal and external processes (Nelson, 2015, p. 537). Bosangit et al. (2015) discuss how the narrative structure of blogs reveals how bloggers reflect on the transformational nature of travel and how travel affects self-identity. Specifically, they examine how people give meaning to their experiences, and what elements contribute to the process in which events become meaningful for people (see also Schmitt, 1999). Travel blogs reveal the ways that stories are told; they show what elements of the experience provoke self-reflection and how tourists ascribe meanings to events and experiences.

The self-reflective nature of the blogs that we have chosen to analyze reveal how the experience of long-distance hiking on the JMT helps them put other aspects of their lives into perspective and see to see more clearly the issues, goals, people, and relationships that are most important to them in their regular life off the trail. Authors of narratives, in this case travel bloggers, present themselves as actors in the story, and portray themselves favourably (Bosangit, Dulnuan, & Mena, 2012; Nelson, 2015), though as we have seen, blogs also allow people the opportunity to humbly reflect on their own failures and limitations. They write about these limitations in order to come to terms with them but also as a way to connect with other people and to encourage them to engage in activities which are most suited to them.

Blogs, as we have seen, also lead to the creation of social communities, both online and in real life. Bohn (2012, p. 48) notes that: “the shared ideals of backpackers form the basis of a nascent imagined community or cultural group, albeit one which is inherently mobile, spatially unbounded, and whose membership is fluid” (see also O’Reilly, 2006; Sørensen, 2003). Panteli et al. (2011) note that backpackers have long relied on distant, non-face-to-face methods of communication such as postcards and letters, and now they often use blogs and other social media to maintain connections with family and friends. New types of social relationships are emerging with the rise of social media and other ICTs (information and communication technologies), including friendships and long-lasting relationships among people who have never met in person (Panteli et al., 2011). Blogging, for both bloggers and blog readers, contributes to a sense of shared identity among backpackers and about the positive aspects of becoming part of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983; Panteli et al., 2011) of JMT thru-hikers both on and off the trail. As our results show, some hikers have intentionally used identity markers to signal their participation in specific online groups, and they have also cited blogs and online forums, such as those dedicated to women’s concerns, as systems of support to overcome their own difficulties during an attempted thru-hike of the JMT.

Research on how people portray and exchange information about people, places, and events and ascribe meanings to them can contribute to knowledge about how “virtual worlds reshape social space and social interactions” (Panteli et al., 2011, p. 374). The audiences for blogs, people known and unknown to the bloggers, influence blog writing, as bloggers respond to readers’ comments and change their style after acquiring a broader readership. In turn, the act of blogging has the potential to shape experiences, both social and internal. The process of writing attunes the senses, strengthens the memory, and encourages self-reflection. Blogging allows hikers to become the heroes of their

own stories and also to genuinely work through personal issues, become more open to transformative experiences, and to engage in social interactions they might not otherwise experience. Some might view the act of blogging about wilderness activities such as thru-hiking negatively, feeling that it detracts from the immersion experience of the individual hiker or remove elements of adventure for future hikers by providing them with detailed information about the trail. However, we take a broader view in that social media and other ICTs are now ingrained in the daily lives of many people, and the use of them is second nature no matter the context. Counter to the argument that they may encourage overuse of limited resources, we maintain that their influence is no greater than recent popular books and movies such as *Wild* and *A Walk in the Woods*. Further, reading and writing blogs about thru-hiking trails such as the JMT enriches experiences and helps potential hikers come to the trail more knowledgeable and prepared and encourages hikers to be more thoughtful, reflexive, and understanding while on the trail.

## Conclusion

The act of blogging about foot travel such as thru-hiking the JMT, while usually solitary, creates and maintains a virtual community that expands and merges bloggers' social circles. Virtual friendships have real implications for bloggers and blog readers alike, and the acts of blogging and posting on social media affect hikers' experiences on and off the trail. The interplay of these private and shared experiences of both hiking and blogging directly affects the hiker-bloggers themselves, the social communities of hikers (or would-be hikers) that are formed both on the trail and in virtual social spaces, and the physical environments in which these hiking and blogging experiences are rooted.

Further research is needed to better understand the impacts that social media as a form of communication has on individual wilderness experiences, and we plan to follow this preliminary blog analysis with interviews with the bloggers, as well as readers or followers of the blogs, and ethnography on the JMT itself, which will include interviews with hikers and park and campsite managers as well participant observation of the long-distance hiking experience. As Stinson (2017, p. 186) notes, "The emergence of a new class of cyborg-recreationists tethered to Internet-connected digital devices has facilitated the re-creation of a new ontology of wilderness as Digi-Place: an augmented reality that blurs the lines between the 'actual' and the 'virtual'." We contend that this is not a bad thing, but simply a reconfiguration of the relationships of a subset of tech-savvy and highly connected hikers, commonly called flashpackers, with the natural world. In carrying their social networks with them as they traverse cultural landscapes, and in merging these virtual social networks with real-life interactions, they share experiences with multiple audiences in new ways. In doing so, they reflect on their experiences and record them in ways they may not have without the use of blogging technology. While debate about the positive or negative impacts of the hyper-connectivity of people engaged in wilderness immersion activities is ongoing, it is imperative that natural resource managers understand the ways that users create and share online media. The results of our exploratory study are not intended to advise regulations on social media use, but to critically examine how technologies that are ultimately value-neutral can have significant impacts on the experiences of different types of visitors to wilderness areas and on their interactions with the physical landscape.

## Note

1. We have numbered the blogs 1–26 and used the prefix HB, which stands for "Hiking Blog." For example, the second blog we analyzed would be coded as "HB2."

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