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Performing Leisure, Making Place: Wilderness Identity and Representation in Online Trip Reports

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Introduction

Efforts to understand leisure as a spatial practice are surprisingly recent. It is only in the past decade or two that leisure studies has devoted much attention to the vital role of place and spatial practices for understanding how leisure is performed and experienced, how leisure related identities are constructed and affirmed, and ultimately how through these performances leisure places are made and remade (Crouch, 1999). A quick glance through the indexes of major theoretical works on leisure from the early 1990s (e.g., Rojek, 1993), show a remarkable absence of spatial terms. Prior to the mid-1990s what little work being conducted on leisure, identity and place was largely centered on identifying place attachment and place meanings associated with leisure settings. This work followed a cognitive-attitudinal approach in which place meanings and affinities were treated as already formed mental entities (Van Patten & Williams, 2008). Similarly, work examining leisure as an identity affirming practice has relied heavily on cognitive approaches to characterizing leisure as an arena for cultivating and expressing identity (Haggard & Williams, 1992).

In this chapter we explore an alternative approach anchored in narrative or discursive theorizing (e.g., Derrien & Stokowski, 2014; Di Masso et al., 2014) to examine social media as an emerging venue for leisure performance and place making, specifically the content of online trip reports about visits to selected wilderness areas in Colorado, USA. Having noticed online trip reports through our own casual Internet searching about outdoor recreation places, it piqued our interest in how place-making and identity affirmation were being played out in the blogosphere. To examine this new arena as a source of narrative data we began an investigation of online communication related to the recreational use of four wilderness areas in Colorado. Our aim was to investigate how online trip reports might provide insights

into new forms of practice at the intersection of identity, narrative, place experience, and new media technology – an evolving recreation experience of cybernetic space.

In the analysis that follows we will present a frame for this chapter, touching on what past scholarship has made of the previously mentioned concepts of place experience, narrative, identity and new media technology. Specifically, the purpose of this chapter is to apply developments in discursive social psychology to the study of place-making as a discursive practice that is increasingly performed through social media. Accordingly meaning is understood as a social act performed and negotiated within a community. This study of how individuals appropriate, perform or apply certain meanings to specific acts, events or objects has come to be known as discursive social psychology. An emerging venue within which leisure can be examined as a discursive performance involves the use of online media to both construct narrative identities and negotiate the use and meaning of leisure places.

Background

Though place is relatively new to leisure studies, the study of leisure as a venue for identity affirmation has a somewhat longer pedigree (Kelly, 1983). Early research on identity was often preoccupied with questions of affect and self-evaluation. This slowly evolved to include a broader focus on the idea of the self-expressive functions of leisure and the pursuit of 'self-affirmation' in which people strive to affirm or validate self-images that they deem desirable and congruent with a subjective sense of self (Haggard & Williams, 1992). According to self-affirmation theory, individuals have at their disposal a variety of identity affirmation processes including displays of signs and symbols of their identities, selective performance of jobs, tasks and hobbies that permit identity expression, selective affiliation with others whose appraisals are identity relevant and supportive, interpersonal behaviours designed to shape such appraisals, and cognitive strategies such as selective attention recall and interpretation of self-identity affirming information. In other words, one's choice of leisure activities, self-displays, performances and affiliations derive their significance from their capacities to represent or reflect various aspects of identity.

As an agentic practice, identity affirmation can be interpreted as a deliberate and reflexive project to build and sustain a coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative. Moreover leisure as an identity affirmation practice needs to be set in the larger context of modernity and globalized social relations (Williams, 2002). As Giddens (1991) argues, assembling and maintaining a coherent identity narrative is a particularly daunting challenge in the face of modernity's disorienting qualities. He notes that although modern identities are actively performed and reflexively constructed 'this

task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities' (Giddens, 1991, p. 3). Coming more from psychology Bruner (1990) similarly describes how identities have become reflexive projects involving both the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we tell to others. 'The object of a self narrative is not its fit to some hidden reality but its achievement of external and internal coherence, livability and adequacy' (Bruner, 1990, p. 112).

Giddens and Bruner were writing about this 'puzzling diversity of options' in the early 1990s, well before the enormous growth of networked, mobilized social media. Commenting only a few years later, Cronon (1995, p. 45) provided an early, prescient commentary on how social media technology might impact wilderness experience: 'We live in a time when the proliferation of networked computers, ... the anarchic world of the Internet, and so many other features of the electronic universe make it increasingly possible to inhabit a cultural space whose analogues in nature seem ever more tenuous.' Hine (2000) encapsulated a similar view when noting how the Internet involves new ways to conceive of time and space and 'a questioning of dualism such as the real and the virtual, truth and fiction, the authentic and the fabricated, technology and nature, and representation and reality' (p. 5). Both Cronon and Hine were writing in the relative 'Middle Ages' of the Internet and the rise of social media as ubiquitous aspects of everyday life. Since that time, we have seen much that even they could not have imagined then, and we have gained new insights and perspectives not possible at the beginning of this new century.

As but one example of these new social media practices, 'blogs' have been an important online communicational element that, despite challenges from even more recent social media developments (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr and Twitter), reveal more possibilities with every passing year. In particular, blogs allow the individual the control and protected space of the personal homepage, while being open to dialogue with others. Blog visitors are essentially given the opportunity to eavesdrop on an open diary and are encouraged to comment and add to an ongoing discussion on the topic and blog content (Schmidt, 2007). At a larger level blog posts and the wider discussions they sometimes engender may evolve to form a distinct identity known as a 'blog community', linked by a common interest in the topic, conversation and stimulating characteristics of particular, unique blogs (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008).

That is not to say that blogs are an anything-goes free-for-all (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; Schmidt, 2007). Like any communicational form and community, successful blogs (in terms of deep and/or wide followings) elicit various levels of structure seen as authentic, even inevitable, by their followers. The result has been not just new *objects* of communication, but new 'communicative events' or *processes* of meaningful narrative and self, open to participation and observation. Blogs 'can serve as a lens to observe

the way in which people currently use digital technologies and, in return, transform some of the traditional cultural norms' (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008, p. 67). Wilderness trip blogging is not a simple *reflection* of unmediated experience with nature. It can present a meaningful experience *in-and-of-itself*. For example, Mitra (2008) examined blogs and related communication posted to the Internet site 'Desipundit: The Best of the Indian Blogosphere' which compiles blogs by people who originated in India. She notes how without prior direct experiences with real places, the interactivity in and around the Desipundit blogs would probably not have been possible. But as this community of communication is established a window is opened to a new experience – a sense of travelling and dwelling 'in the space discursively created by the blog' (p. 471). Mitra calls this realm where discourses of the material and the virtual blend together, 'cybernetic space' (p. 460). Cybernetic space could not exist without either analogue or digital experience. Humans may exist in various locations along a continuum between the opposite poles of experience with a real world and experience with an online world, but most people, especially bloggers engaged in the trip reports we studied, blend both realms.

Finally, the theoretical and methodological principles of discursive social psychology provide a powerful lens through which to examine wilderness trip blogs as a place-making practice and identity performance. Discursive social psychology represents an increasingly visible research approach within social psychology (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), leisure studies (Champ et al., 2009; Derrien & Stokowski, 2014; Van Patten & Williams, 2008), and the study of place (Di Masso et al., 2014; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). One of its central tenets is to reject cognitive explanations which reduce linguistic behavior to 'a product of mental entities or ... other cognitive furniture such as attitudes, beliefs, goals, or wants' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 157). Rather, discursive social psychology is noted for its focus on how people construct versions of social and psychological reality through the use of language and verbal accounts and descriptions of various sorts. These verbal accounts constitute 'a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 138) and construct individual identities (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). Rather than focusing on attitudes as predictive of behaviors, narrative performers are seen as both building up and marshalling a repertoire of interpretive frames, scripts, or tropes of the phenomena to account for their actions.

As Korobov and Bamberg (2004) argue, however, even discursive social psychology is susceptible to potentially problematic 'already-given' mental entities – such as interpretive repertoires, frames, or scripts – that it seeks to avoid. They instead adopt what they call an *agentive* approach in which discursive resources are not so much given but rather accomplished through 'narrative positioning' in which individuals strategically perform a discursive

script among those available, which when practiced over time become part of a repertoire to be employed in varying contexts. They argue that repertoires are not so much *performed* (e.g., as with attitudes and other mental entities) but rather *performed* (e.g., in this case through blogging). Thus as examined in this chapter, online trip reports can be examined as a set of interpretive repertoires, frames, or scripts (as a set of stylized place meanings and practices) as well as individual rhetorically accomplished identity affirming performances.

Analytical approach

For analytical purposes our qualitative approach to the textual material contained in blog posts builds progressively upon four interpretive elements: memes, strips, narratives and discourse. We begin at the finest level with the notion of 'meme' (from Dawkins, 1989) as our foundational target. Meme, here, refers to a 'basic unit of meaning' identified and described by the researcher. Next memes can be linked to form broader 'strips' (Goffman, 1986) of meaning-rich associations of basic meanings. For example, the individual memes 'hiking', 'trail' and 'dog' may be linked together in the idea that one hikes the trail with her dog. Third, strips can be linked to describe broader narratives of storied experience (Somers, 1994). This is the level around which one begins to organize coherent sense of self-identity as a consistent, cogent life narrative (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998). For instance, perhaps the dog-owning recreationist (actor) may have suffered a significant loss in the recent past (challenge). Hiking with her canine companion (deployment of resources) in an undeveloped setting (context) helps her regain a sense of a balanced identity as she strides into the future (desired outcome). Fourth, we identify patterns of memes, strips, and narratives that form overarching discourses that perform as umbrellas of meaning that make the interpretive repertoire available to actors in a discursive community. Discourses are paradigmatic meaning systems, something Hall (1997), drawing from Foucault, referred to as clusters or formations '...of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society' (p. 27). They also establish norms of behaviour associated with recreation places. Returning once again to our grieving hiker, one might reasonably imagine demonstrating that her quest is lodged in relation to a discourse of late modernity, which provides a model for maintaining a coherent sense of self through significant experience in undeveloped, natural settings.

We applied these four levels of coding to what Lindlof and Taylor (2011) called the 'practices' and 'performances' of communication. Practice is essentially the *structure* of communicative acts – the normative forms and styles in which media texts are routinely presented. For instance, one usually

opens an online wilderness trip report to find a title, location, activity date, and often other concrete details, such as miles travelled, elevation gained and total time expended. These facts and statistics are typically followed by an introductory statement with trip goals and other perfunctory remarks about anticipation and preparation. Photos (and increasingly, links to videos) of what the author considers important moments and elements of the journey, usually accompany a chronological, textual recounting of the trip. Often the ending offers reflection as the author assesses the level of success, lessons learned and plans for the future. Many of these posts include commentary at the end from people who have read the reports, with occasional responses from the authors themselves. It is not unusual for outside commenters to seem to know the authors, but it is also just as common for those commenting to apparently not know the author. Most of the statements are congratulatory for succeeding in the face of a difficult challenge, and/or for having done a good job producing the report. Other commenters will include new information about the wilderness area based on their own experience there. And occasionally, commenters will engage in good-natured teasing directed at the author, making light of something they have reported.

These online practices play an increasingly important role in place-making by communicating a set of social and material practices through which people iteratively create and (re)create a shared experiential geography, and establish norms and expectations for use and management of given leisure spaces. In contrast to the structural aspects of trip blogs, identity-rich aspects of wilderness trip reports lie expressly within what Lindlof and Taylor (2011) would call their *performances*, events they consider 'creative, local, and collaborative' (p. 4). Here, the meaning of mediated texts is not seen to be merely the result of normative structures, or simply a reflection of some underlying reality. Meanings are largely a function of the text's presentation and interpretation. In a *gestalt* sense, we see performance as the ways in which the memes and strips, including those that make up the structures of practice, were combined to constitute (as interpreted) narratives, which may further be imagined to connect with deeper, broader societal discourses.

The case of '13er Dude'

To illustrate the identity and place-making aspects of trip blogs we will draw from one trip report from our broader study by a man we describe as '13er Dude'. The name is the result of this poster's enthusiasm for slightly more diminutive peaks – the '13ers' – mountains whose highest points lie *below* Colorado's most celebrated summits, those above 14,000 feet known as the '14ers'. Below we offer a narrative/discursive explanation for 13er Dude's rationale for setting his climbing goals a little lower than the norm. But first, a brief discussion of the structural practice presented in his trip reporting.

The banner across the top of 13er Dude's trip report is based on a logo for '14ers.com', a website devoted to reports about climbing Colorado's highest peaks. The report's upper left-hand corner contains a box with some of the logistics mentioned earlier: peaks 13er Dude reportedly climbed, elevations, climbing date and report date, all lending his text an empirical, scientific feel.

Next, the rather humble headline, 'San Juan Solitude—the 13ers' hints at an important narrative developed later. From here 13er Dude states his goal, summing Colorado's 637 ranked peaks over 13,000 feet. Having already successfully bagged the taller peaks, his plan for the summer was climbing the remaining peaks – most of them shorter 13,000-foot mountains. This report offers highlights and insights gained from several weeks of almost nonstop climbing.

One can immediately see the density of observable primary memes and how 13er Dude linked them to form basic strips. For instance, the report almost immediately names target peaks, heights, a departure date, the trip reporter (13er Dude) himself, specific trip goals, lower 13ers, the summer climbing season, 13er Dude's home, and a subtler concept, perhaps, fewer climbers. Moving down into the report, one continues to observe other basic memes, presented in a linear continuum representing the trip's progression. Not all these memes are textual, including pictures of spectacular scenery: rocky peaks set against blue skies, high angle views down steep slopes, snow-choked gullies and couloirs, high grassy plateaus, a topaz lake, an inviting cave, and multi-coloured wildflowers. It is notable, especially considering the key narrative discussed later, that out of the 20 pictures, only five contain images of the climbers – all in various poses along key points in the climbs (and one of those climbers was 13er Dude's regular adventure companion, his dog). The other images represent mostly massive spaces, completely devoid of humans.

Most of the 14 comments at the end were the usual congratulatory, celebratory and supportive. A couple reached the level of worship. 'I remember running into you at Barr Camp years ago,' one person wrote, 'and I commented that you remind me of Harrison Ford. You still do. I think I'll start calling you "Indy." All you need is that hat!' Another commenter aptly referenced at least four memes that are variously mixed into strips that contribute to a primary, dominant narrative prominent in the trip report:

Funny how solitude and peak-bagging are *supposed* to go together but you never find that until you're off the main 14er circuit and Centennial circuit. Nice intro, Steve! I think a lot of us relative 'newbies' benefit from hearing about the old-timers from years gone by about how this sport has changed and continues to change. I really enjoyed reading this report and gawked over the 'original' summit registers.

The four memes include solitude, peak-bagging, lesser mountains (i.e., 13ers), and history. First, we consider history. The commenter is referencing a story 13er Dude related in his report in which he describes finding an 'original' 1934 climbing register placed on a 'ranked' 13er by a famous San Juan Mountaineer:

The entire first page was filled with names from the summer of 1934 (over half were women). The top of the next page was signed by Mike Garret in 1984: a 50 year hiatus! The second page had just filled. There were as many climbers in the 1984–2008 window as there were in the summer of 1934. All the determined peak baggers whose names we all know were there... The only register that ever excited me more had the original signatures of Dwight Lavender, Frank and HL McClintock, Bob Orrmes and, of course, me! That register is on an unranked 13er, but it is in such a popular area it probably won't be there much longer.

13er Dude's enthusiasm for the historical significance of these registers evokes a sense of the sacred and he seems thrilled to associate, literally, his name with these forefathers (and foremothers!) of climbing's past. For him the place identity is still very strongly tied to this rich peak-bagging history that emphasizes the 14ers (see Blake, 2002).

Returning to the commenter's meme-rich statement (above) the writer also mentioned peak-bagging and solitude. 13er Dude integrates both into his performance with the explanation that many climbers ignore the lower mountains (again, another important meme for the narrative we are identifying), and another reference to history:

...most peak baggers still haven't gotten around to climbing the lower 13ers. With no peaks in the top 300 in my sights, it happens that not too many people will be trudging around the areas that I want to visit. What a throwback the climbing of 20 years ago this trip turned out to be! Solitude, solitude, solitude!

We could think of these memes in terms of past, present, and future. 13er Dude claims legitimacy by connecting his experiences to a past he implies is highly authentic. He notes that climbers in the late 1970s and early 1980s 'expanded the paradigm' of the sport. He connects that past to the present by literally juxtaposing his name (and experiences) alongside those of his heroes. 13er Dude evokes the future when, throughout his report, there is a playful sense of elitism linked to the idea that the right to experience these special places and historic treasures (the registers) must be earned. He actually withholds some details of his climbs, proudly stating that he is making it more difficult for the lesser informed (the illegitimate recreationists) to follow in his footsteps. Future climbers must be deserving of

the right to experience the past and present authenticity of climbing the 13ers!

And there are many more examples of foundational memes that link to form strips in 13er Dude's report. For example, he integrates the peak-bagging meme with his aversion to sharing his wilderness experiences with others – outside of the people (and dog, 'Cooper') he has chosen to accompany him (they are deemed legitimate and worthy). In this way he puts a complexifying spin on a seemingly simple idea like peak bagging – particularly peaks slightly lower than the famed fourteeners. His quest is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve a measure of solitude. It is also a route to achieving a sense of companionship, which supports Gurak and Antonijevic's (2008) notion of 'community' in Internet-based communications. We see it in 13er Dude's pictures – some playful – of his trip mates, and even his dog. And we sense it in his descriptions of the trip – which highlight his dog's climbing moxie:

My dog, Cooper, joined me for 42 mountains; he took a few rest days (I worried his paws might be getting tender) and he got left behind two days (Lavender/Moss and Babcock/Spiller) where I thought it best he stay at the car. Also, I tied him up a few times a couple hundred feet below a difficult summit finish and he immediately learned to take a nap while I tagged the top and returned to retrieve him. Mind you, he can comfortably scramble some pretty hard stuff (into the mid class 4 range) and even silently endured a 15' free rappel as I lowered him down an overhang when Mark and I (well, REALLY Mark!) made bad route choices on a harder 12er.

In this way, 13er Dude is utilizing the meme of his dog, Cooper, which is linked with other memes, such as, 13er Dude, the mountains they climb, the act of being left behind, of scrambling, rappelling, hard 'stuff', and so on. Together this forms a strip we could call '13er Dude's relationship with his mountain talented dog'.

But what of this central narrative that we have been promising will tie these memes and strips together? Following Bruner and Kalmar (1998), our actor, 13er Dude, presents an ideal of the legitimate wilderness/mountain climbing experience (the goal). As discussed, the best climbing experiences include targets (peaks yet to be bagged and recorded), that are achieved with close companions, but ideally no one else, and all the while recognizing that past climbers established the sport for us, including developing routes and techniques still used today. These goals are not always easily achieved. We have not quoted and paraphrased every aspect of 13er Dude's report, but he repeatedly shares his experiences, deploying resources (time, energy and reasoning) to overcome a series of challenges that threaten to keep him from his goals. These goals include: avoiding strangers (threatening solitude);

occasional dangerous weather (thunderstorms, heavy rain, and lightning); lack of appropriate equipment (e.g., ropes, crampons); family issues which interrupted the trip; bad maps listing inaccurate routes; his dog's foot problems; and the march of time (i.e., looming end of climbing season).

Finally, what statement can we make about the fourth dimension of 13er Dude's online text, the overarching discourse (or discourses) associated with this identity presentation? As noted, 13er Dude mentions earlier climbers who 'expanded the paradigm,' which hints at his own sense of Hall's (1997) directive that we also seek to link our interpretations to broader sets of discursive formations. Mullins (2009, p. 237) evoked this spirit when he wrote:

The physicality and meaning of a place ... are not simply individual but are fluid, ever-changing and highly contestable social processes. Very little research in recreation and leisure studies ... addresses how place meanings come to be shared collectively within society. As learned and shared ways of acting in and comprehending one's surroundings, skilled activities likely contribute to sharing narratives of past movement that flow from, contribute to and ignore particular socio-environmental histories.

In sum, the self-presentations contained in trip reports appear to be playing an increasing role in making and contesting place by providing models for others to emulate, modify and even contest. Such reports illustrate the role of online communication as a venue in which narrators participate in the process of place making. These narrators do more than reiterate the material character of the place, they discursively (re)construct what it means and how it should be used and experienced. For example, 13er Dude re-creates peak-bagging of the 14ers as a central feature of Colorado wilderness identity, ironically by focusing both on his admiration for the early explorers who first conquered many of the highest summits and, at the same time, highlighting what he saw as some of the overlooked virtues of the lesser summits.

Conclusion

What do the memes, strips and the central narrative identified in 13er Dude's trip report indicate about collectively shared meanings of wilderness or these specific places within society? First, they illustrate the role of discursive practices in process of place making. By posting tales of their activities, impressions, and feelings online – in the form of texts, maps, photos, and so on – wilderness visitors have expanded the audience for their performances, promoting an ongoing, evolving dialogue of place and meaning. The dialogue has moved beyond the historical writings of advocates such as Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold and the governmental and formal venues of

wilderness policy making to include a vibrant user community collectively (re)defining what it means to experience these places.

Second, 13er Dude engages in a number of behaviours in his report that point to seemingly modern discursive themes of a unitary psycho-socio identity. As Haggard and Williams (1992) pointed out, he is self-expressive, he exhibits self-affirmation of an identity, he does this through the display of signs and symbols, he presents a selective affiliation with others who affirm his identity (both in his trip report narrative and in the follow-up comments), he demonstrates selective attention and recall (as in, he does not relate *everything* that happened during his three week trip). Ultimately, he is engaged in a reflexive project to build and maintain a coherent biographical narrative.

Following discursive social psychology, 13er Dude's trip report illustrates the agentive techniques and strategies individuals and groups may deploy to advance this notion of a modern identity. 13er Dude utilized a repertoire of online tropes, scripts and frames of experience to represent his material activities, which we tried to map into identifiable memes, strips and narratives. This performed narrative positioning, reflexively engaged with the audience and us as researchers, provides some measure of cultural coherence, livability and a sense of adequacy to his identity narrative. Gurak and Antonijevic (2008) help us understand that the normative practice of online communicators like 13er Dude, illustrates the human desire to express identity, to do so in community, and in such a way that temporally structures past and present experiences. Though perhaps driven by the 'ontological' insecurity of living in a hyper-modern age (Giddens, 1991) 13er Dude nevertheless employs the tools it makes available to perform and present a coherent identity narrative built up from myriad meaning elements (memes and strips) to form a culturally relevant and identifiable identity narrative. 13er Dude does not seem challenged or daunted by his media ecology. There is a sense of joy and accomplishment in his performance. But we cannot deny that something is happening when 13er Dude shares his memes, strips, and narratives online that goes beyond the original material experience of his wilderness outing. Mitra (2008) helps us to see that blogs do not simply reflect reality: the presentation is meaningful in-and-of-itself. And yet, to varying degrees, online communication always depends on material experience, and thus occupy a halfway point – not completely material, not completely virtual, something new that draws from both – a space discursively created, yet dependent on place. Interestingly, Gurak and Antonijevic (2008) wrote about the way in which online communication is uniquely positioned to '...transform some of the traditional cultural norms' (something demonstrated in 13er Dude's promotion of a legacy of a more authentic paradigm of past climbing practices). 13er Dude can feel and live this philosophy while out climbing in the field, but the concentrated, linear, storied and available nature of his trip report elevates his ontology to new levels of awareness.

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