

Information Needs and Behaviors of Hikers

The Information Needs and Behaviors of Hikers

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Information Communities: Creating, Sharing & Using Information

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Abstract

Hikers seek out important information such as trail conditions and weather reports to be able to safely enjoy this serious leisure activity. The ability to have safe access to, and the ability to safely enjoy, natural resources such as areas apt for hiking (national and state parks for instance) can often be negatively affected by the systemic oppression of marginalized groups. In examining the hiking community, crucial issues relating to access and equity can be examined. Hikers who operate within a patriarchal society with documented racial disparities may have additional safety concerns and as such are less likely to glean the same amount of enjoyment from hiking as those who do not carry the burden of inequity. Having access and information pertaining to hiking and outdoor recreation are two crucial factors that libraries and information professionals can step in to help address. When information professionals actively acknowledge and address a lack of access and equity of natural resources in America and examine their own means to create and provide it to all, they act as a powerful equalizer.

Introduction

Hikers are serious leisure enthusiasts who explore the outdoors - frequently through trails - on foot or assistive device and for recreational purposes. Hikers fit the definition of information communities issued by Fisher and Bishop, "Thus, an information community is a group of entities that blurs the boundaries between information seekers, users, and providers, recognizing that a single person or institution can embody multiple segments of the information life cycle" (Fisher & Bishop, 2015, p. 22). Within the framework of affinity, interest, and proximate groups hikers are brought together by the common interest of exploring the outdoors and share information and goals (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). Hiking is normally done in areas that support such activity and those who live near areas with access to hiking trails are more likely to participate. Understanding the information needs and behaviors of hikers is important to ensuring that accurate, relevant, and timely safety information is made available to hikers in the arenas that they will find and utilize it. Understanding these factors allows information professionals to better assist hikers. In examining the information needs and behaviors of hikers, this paper will address issues related to access and the equity of information and resources as they pertain to the hiking community. It will examine how access to, and enjoyment of, recreational natural resource can be unfairly limited by factors such as gender or race.

Literature Review

Prevalent Models and Theories

Anders Hektor's model of information behavior has great applicability to the perspective and needs of the serious leisure community (Hektor, 2001). Hektor's model is grounded in everyday activities and brings that groundedness to its application in serious leisure. The level of specificity Hektor's model allows in its analysis of serious recreationalists' information behavior

is clearly and intelligently articulated within the eight information activities it sets forth (Hartel et al., 2016).

Hyatt's study considers the information needs of thru-hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail and how the models of Savolainen, Kuhlthau and Wilson could be applied to them (Hyatt, 2016). The study found that the autoethnographic methodologies used (including recorded field notes) were useful to the research on thru-hikers' information needs.

Access and Equity of Information and Resources

A flaw in much of the research is that the demographics studied are all similar. This could reflect a researcher bias or an unwillingness of other demographics to be studied. All could be considered negative underlying symptoms of a society that is patriarchal and struggles with issues regarding race.

Coble's research delves into the assertion that hikers who hike alone, especially as women, often experience the same fears and combat them through preparation and obtaining information (Coble et al., 2003). That study discusses how fear influences solo hiking by lessening, adding to, or maintaining the experience. The methodology used in this research was a pilot test of interview questions, as well as semi-structured, in-person and phone interviews conducted and recorded with 20 hikers: women and men, between the ages of 20 and 50.

It was determined that the mental benefits of solo hiking were in league with those experienced by participants in other leisure activities, centering around feeling calm and in control (Coble et al., 2003). To achieve these benefits, solo hikers needed to identify and negotiate their fears of the activity. The study asserted that women and men may experience some of the same fears while hiking alone, but often experience them in different degrees and different undertones. Men and women also tend to utilize different fear-negotiation strategies.

All interviewees in the study were Caucasian. This opens the door to research on racism and implications on the accessibility of resources and outdoor education and experiences to people of color in America. The fears studied were those of the 20 Caucasian interviewees and the study does consider if it incorporated the potential fears of other demographics.

Similarly, the uniformity of participant demographics (Caucasian) in Rickard's study raises questions to the accuracy of results (Rickard & Stedman, 2015). Issues must be considered such as the accessibility of National Parks to other demographic as well as the effects of racism in job markets with positions that offer Paid Time Off. Many of those surveyed were on vacation.

Kodym's study focuses on prolific smartphone use and how that creates greater access to information, yet it does not address the issue of what may be considered an exclusionary practice to those who cannot afford smart phones or high data plans (Kodym et al., 2017). Without the means to afford these tools, people become shut out of easy access to large swathes of information.

Information Professionals and Hikers

Anders Hektor's model and its application to serious leisure is an apt tool for information professionals to conduct and understand research (Hektor, 2001). This also allows them to have a research tool based in practical application with well-defined aspects. This can help information professionals easily transition from more theoretical and academic realms of thought and study to the aspects of everyday life that make up the material wishing to be studied (Hartel et al., 2016). Using Coble's research, information professionals can better assist solo hikers by looking at the types of fear and negotiation strategies examined and using that to compile community resources (Coble et al., 2003).

Serious recreationalists seek information from various sources, including websites and libraries (Ernest & Culbertson, 2005). This implies that libraries need to prominently utilize the internet and its resources to increase their relevancy. Libraries have become places for free internet access, curators of online databases, providers of online resources and education to their communities, and have bolstered themselves and their users with the internet's rise.

The depth Kodym's study goes into regarding technology and hikers (potential motion-detected displays, displays with cameras) raises concerns about privacy (Kodym et al., 2017). If motion detecting cameras are used as a matter-of-course at trailheads, what are the privacy restrictions on the data gathered? This is an arena of legality, digitization, and an ethical debate on data ownership. Privacy is an important issue for information professionals and a key aspect of what many do on a daily basis.

Ensuring that protections for users' privacy are built into future practices, laws, and policies is a battleground that information professionals stand on the front lines of. Information professionals help users, such as hikers, find information. This study raises many difficult questions about the means used to gather information and the ability to provide information (Kodym et al., 2017).

Methodology

The research for this paper was obtained through searching academic databases provided through the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library such as OneSearch and the Library and Information Science Collection. LIS databases were searched for articles pertaining to the information needs and behaviors of hikers. Keyword searches such as "information seeking", "leisure community of hikers", "leisure activities", "information retrieval", "hikers" and "online

communities" were used. At one point, the researcher questioned their search methods and reached out to the university's designated course librarian for guidance. The librarian provided search suggestions and wider key words usage, as well as clarifying what Boolean operators they would use. The assistance received was professional, concise, and helpful. This was well-modeled behavior of professional librarians for the researcher. When locating research-based sources, the researcher used the search limiter in these databases to only show results for peer-reviewed articles. Materials on serious leisure provided in the course modules were also used and highly relevant to this paper. Community-based resources played an important part in conveying relevancy of the information presented. Information on libraries and hikers was pulled directly from the websites of individual library systems. The websites of government and regional organizations were also used to further support findings.

Discussion

Information Needs and Behaviors of Hikers

Bates defined information behavior as "the many ways in which human beings interact with information, in particular, the ways in which people seek and utilise information" (Bates, 2010, p. 2381). This unfolds in the ways in which hikers systematically seek out the information needed to engage in this serious leisure activity. The hiking community has concerns such as aggressive animals on trails, weather conditions on the day of the hike, or gear recommendations for specific trails. Hikers need information that is "present, accessible, and accurate about specific land areas" (Ernest & Culbertson 2005, p. 88). These concerns are often addressed to the best of hikers' abilities beforehand. Looking at key areas of information hikers need leads to examining how hikers seek out that information.

Hikers Using Emerging Technologies

Hyatt shows that the hiking community seeks out geographic information via a wide variety of means, such as “Digital maps, GPS routes, reading web and picture blogs, studying Google Earth” (Hyatt, 2015, p. 20). The hiking community also seeks out and creates relevant information online through informal group discussions between hikers, such as message boards and discussion groups (Ziegler et al., 2014).

Information boards at trail heads are sometimes equipped with scannable smart phone points. This provides helpful and uniform information about that trail to the hikers (Kodym et al., 2017). Outdoor outfitters, like REI or Sierra Trading Post, often provide blogs and forums full of ideas for hiking adventures, and the necessary gear to enjoy them. The National Park Service aligns itself with organizations like Find Your Park, to allow hikers to search for trails by location and park.

Library Services Provided for Hikers

Many libraries encourage patrons to hike on local trails or national or state parks, by loaning backpacks, or hiking kits. These backpacks contain resources such as free passes into parks, hiking guides, maps, binoculars, and safety brochures, all procured through federal grants (Wachter, 2018). Libraries are *creating* access to parks for those who may not have been able to afford entrance fees. They are providing information crucial for hikers, such as maps, guides, and ideas for those who may not have known where to find this information, or that it was available or needed. Libraries are leveling the playing field of hiking by providing *access* and *information*.

These backpacks are meant to encourage exploration and active participation in the outdoors, as well as to help users develop a sense of curiosity and enjoyment related to hiking. This practice leans heavily into the theory of active learning, as described by philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952). Active learning is used to engage people through meaningful interactions with the material and concepts at hand. The strong correlation between learning and doing (which is closely intertwined with constructionist learning theory) is on full display when the learner creates meaning by actively participating in experiences (Booth, 2011). The hiking kits provide guidance and tools for patrons to be able to learn about hiking and trails through their own experiences on these trails. This is a fantastic use of applied active learning theory.

Expanding the framework to look at services libraries provide to hikers on an international scale, there are programs that combine U.S. and international libraries. StoryWalk is a program created by the organization Let's Move in Libraries. In the children's departments of over 300 public libraries across Canada and the U.S., StoryWalk events are held where pages from a picture book are placed at strategic points along a path outside (Let's Move in Libraries, n.d.). The pages often are paired with interactive activities for the story time group, as they walk the trail to hear the story with a librarian. This is a great first exposure for children to the concept of hiking. The program's technique intertwines the benefits of story time for children and the benefits of being outside and enjoying nature. In this way, these public libraries are simultaneously fostering a love of reading and a love for the outdoors and hiking in their children patrons.

There is also a library program in Vermont in which a small group of library supporters pay set fees for a tour of Ireland organized by the Craftsbury Public Library. All costs of the tour

benefit the library (Craftsbury Public Library, n.d.). The tour focuses on walking areas in Ireland apt for hiking, taking in the beauty of the natural surroundings, and viewing historical sites on foot. In this way, the Craftsbury Public Library is promoting outdoor recreation, supporting public libraries, and international aspects of library service and hiking. The library's website provides information on the outdoor components involved and information that is always pertinent to hikers: typical weather conditions, suitable clothing choices, as well as the geographic aspects of the land to be explored (such as beaches, cliff-areas, and hill-areas). This allows participants to set expectations going into the trip about their physical ability and comfort level with this outdoor recreation.

Regardless of the country they are in, libraries in areas with natural resources that make them ideal for hiking are more likely to incorporate outdoor and hiking related programs for their patrons. In inner-city libraries, libraries in sprawling urban areas, or libraries with prevalent safety issues such as crime or heavy road-traffic, creating programming that exposes patrons to the benefits of outdoor recreation becomes more of a challenge. Some outdoor programming ideas for libraries facing these challenges are: forming a partnership with local outreach and outdoor education organizations to do events off-site, or if a safe and suitable courtyard or patio is available, utilizing that outdoor space to host programs that focus on map-reading, or creating art with maps, or setting up a pretend hike for kids that really leans into humor and silliness (for example, "Hey look! We are hiking over this mountain now, guys!" as the librarian leads them over a picnic table, etc.). This would connect laughter, enjoyment, and safety with outdoor spaces. These activities are a part of the multi-faceted goals of libraries, which include providing access and information to patrons and encouraging patrons to be informed about and explore

their world. These are goals that can be easily applied to the hiking community and their information needs.

Issues Faced by the Hiking Community Worldwide

Women live in a patriarchal culture and in this are typically subject to more violence and less assistance (Rosenfeld, 2009). This drastically influences the fears that women have, the ways in which they negotiate that fear, and the benefits they can reap from many activities (Coble et al., 2003). Solo hiking is a very apt example of this cultural phenomenon. Women who frequently hike alone tend to be socially programmed to think of their safety in terms of attack: what or who may attack them, where an attack is more likely to occur, how to possibly prevent this, and how to react. The benefits of hiking alone are often weighed down in consideration of these concerns.

On an international scale, the issues hikers face regarding gender, race, and safety continue to expand. There are especially far too many horrendous instances of women hiking solo who are brutalized and murdered, across the globe. The three countries with the largest gap in safety between men and women are the U.S., Italy, and New Zealand (Crabtree & Nsubuga, 2012). Please read the following paragraph with caution as it contains graphic content on violence against women. When investigating instances of brutality against women travelling alone worldwide, reporters relayed the following:

In December, the bodies of Louisa Vesterager Jespersen, 24, of Denmark and Maren Ueland, 28, of Norway, were found with knife wounds in their necks in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Danish officials called the murders an act of terror. That same month, the Briton Grace Millane disappeared in Auckland, New

Zealand, on the night before her 22nd birthday; she was found slain days later. In 2015, a 19-year-old British backpacker was gang-raped by bikers in Thailand. In March, an Australian man was convicted of kidnapping and raping a Belgian traveler seeking work after keeping her locked up in his pig shed for two days. (Specia & Mzezewa, 2019, p. 2)

Modern journalism and news show that there is an alarming rate of instances of violence against women travelling alone, and in disproportionate numbers: women of color (Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women, n.d.). These instances are a symptom of overreaching patriarchal values that assert the flawed and dangerous perceptions that women are lesser, are not equal in their humanity to men or in their worth as people (Rosenfeld, 2009). This is a symptom of justice systems that do not take the rape and murder and brutalization of women as seriously as they need to (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, n.d.). These examples show us what marginalized groups are dealing with every day across the globe: fear for their safety, fear of not being taken seriously, fear of being failed by the justice system, or being attacked and their attacker going free (Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women, n.d.). It is also grossly documented in news articles, statistics, and in community organizations for survivors of sexual violence, that when survivors disclose that they have survived sexual violence, reactions to that disclosure are often negative towards the survivor (Sexual Trauma Awareness and Response Center, 2019). These fears effect how people interact with the world: to go to the grocery store at night, to go on a date with someone off a dating app, to go on a hike alone and deal with these fears, in addition to the factors that any hiker has to deal with: weather, gear, routes, timing.

All hikers, regardless of gender or race, should be able to enjoy the many benefits of hiking without the fear of violence (Coble et al, 2003). This applies to anything in life, but especially to activities like hiking that are often very isolated. Information (the accuracy of, spread of, and ready availability of) is a key part of addressing and fixing any problem. Information professionals can act as a crucial resource in creating change.

Library systems and information professionals are expanding their perceptions of what exactly, a library is. Marie Ostergaard, head of community engagement at the Aarhus Public Library in Denmark says that the spaces, the libraries, that they are trying to create are, “the “living room of the city,” and as such...less focused on books and more focused on human needs” (Morehart, 2016, p.1). This is an apt reflection on what libraries are and can be, and on the role of librarians and information professionals that grow and change with the needs of their users.

Information professionals are in a well-positioned place to help create a more balanced world that is safer not only for hikers but for all: especially women and people of color. The ushering in of the #MeToo movement shone a light on eons of entrenched, systemic, violence against women and gave those who survived it a voice (me too, n.d.). Information professionals can do that as well by highlighting the information found on the dangers of patriarchy, by being familiar with the resources available to women and people of color such as self-defense courses, outdoor recreation areas that may have a habitual history of violence, or groups of hikers that support each other with safety plans and strategies. They can be beacons of support for a safer and more equal community to enjoy the outdoors in.

Conclusion

The information needs and behaviors of hikers focus largely around safety. Hikers familiarize themselves with information such as routes, weather reports, gear recommendations, online and technology-based tools, and available resources. These are all information needs and behaviors that are trying to achieve the same goal: to safely enjoy a recreational activity. The goal of safety is automatically carried into a realm with additional and more dire considerations for marginalized groups or groups historically subject to higher rates of violence and oppression.

Libraries have taken an interest in helping their patrons enjoy outdoor recreation. Libraries have created programs for children such as StoryWalk that combine a love of the outdoors and a love of reading. Libraries have helped bridge the gap to access to natural resources by providing free passes to national and state parks, inside of loanable backpacks containing hiking equipment and safety information. Libraries have encouraged international participation in library support, travel, and enjoying the outdoors by planning trips for supporters. This shows that libraries saw a need in their patrons who wanted to enjoy outdoor recreation but required assistance in doing so. Libraries rose up to meet that need.

This researcher hopes to see more libraries acknowledging, highlighting, and addressing inequalities in access to, and safe enjoyment of, natural resources and outdoor recreation to marginalized groups. Libraries are a powerful force and act as a great equalizer. If libraries further turn their attention to leveling the playing field of safe access to outdoor recreation for all, there is no limit to what they may achieve and the benefits to their patrons they could provide.

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