

Suffering and Storytelling – Exploring Extreme Leisure Through Trails, Trials, and Tales

by

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Authors Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to better understand the motives and outcomes associated with a punishing yet profound leisure experience. A thru-hike was chosen as a venue through which to explore the motives and outcomes associated with extreme hiking behaviour. Thru-hikes are those in which hikers complete a trail all in one effort. In this case, I was interested in thru-hikers' posts on a website (Whiteblaze.net). It is popular among thru-hikers pursuing a 2,190 mile (3,525 km) hike of the Appalachian Trail (AT). I used thematic analysis to analyze posts within a specific forum on Whiteblaze.net as well as thirteen personal blogs. CATPAC II was used to assist me in my analysis and three themes emerged from within the posts. The first and most prevalent theme focused on the supportive nature of the AT hiking community. Thousands of posts were written by hopeful hikers who sought information. Their questions were invariably answered by several experienced hikers who had already completed a thru-hike. Others posts were written by those currently on the trail. They reported how family, friends, other hikers, miscellaneous posters and even townspeople along the trail supported them through acts of kindness (trail magic) and posts of encouragement. The second theme that emerged focused on the setting. The setting was key to both the challenge and the reflective capacity of the experience. Their reports spoke to the often visceral experience offered by the trail. Many commented on both the difficulty (the effort) and the beauty (the reward) of the trail. The final theme focused on this difficulty. Participants both accepted and expected pain and suffering during the pursuit and devoted a great deal of energy into preparing for that challenge. Much of the communication on this site was devoted to that preparation. Overall, the community emerged organically to aid in the completion of daunting yet extraordinary task. The implications of such an experience for both research and practice are discussed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

We were alone on the edge of the world, peering into blackness. Night still had its grip on the Grand Canyon, and only a faint scrim of pinkish yellow lined the horizon. Seven trail miles and 4,600 vertical feet below us, the Colorado River snaked, bottle-green and cold, through some of the oldest exposed rock on the planet. The air was 35 degrees [F], with a light breeze; the three of us stood shivering in shorts and thin wind jackets, headlamps flickering. Somewhere across the unseen chasm, the North Rim loomed indifferently in the dark, waiting for another day to dawn.

At five minutes after 6 a.m., we dropped into the abyss. (Arnold, 2013, para. 1)

In this narrative, Katie Arnold described a particularly gruelling hike in the Grand Canyon. While any such hike is noteworthy, the hike that Arnold described is extraordinary. She traversed 42 miles of the Grand Canyon from rim to rim and back again (R2R2R). Her story of the adventure focused on her active search for challenge, scenic beauty, hardship, perseverance, and by her own admission, bragging rights.

This thesis explores the types of experiences sought by Arnold. It uses a social networking site and blogs posted by hikers who are either considering or have completed hiking the Appalachian Trail. This hike demands much of its participants yet, as these sites suggest, they are both willing and even eager to undertake those demands. This section briefly reviews the leisure literature in uncovering the source of this eagerness. It outlines the role of the setting, challenge, and the importance of others in the process. Together, I suggest they form a potent source of motivation. What remains to be seen, however, is the nature and extent of these

influences for this hiking community. These are the issues that are explored in this thesis.

The Importance of the Setting

Natural settings have played an important role in many leisure pursuits and hiking has been noted as one of these activities (Frumkin, 2001; Hansmann, Hug, & Seeland, 2007; Kaplan, 2001; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Svarstad, 2010). Consider a recent blog post recounting one individual's experience of hiking the R2R2R in a single day. This blog post extols the virtues of the experience and reports the restorative power it offered. Much of this power emerged from the setting in which the activity occurred. The poster, using the fictitious name Guts Like A Girl, described how:

As the years pass, I realize that I grow more and more into a person that is best on the trails. The outdoors change you and you are always better for it. I remember standing at the top looking at that beauty and not believing that I had just travelled the entire canyon... and as much as I was proud, I was also reminded of how small we as people are, but with so much potential to do great things. I carry the words of John Muir in my blood, "The mountains are calling, and I must go (Wilson, 2015, para. 9).

Such descriptions create an often compelling narrative that is inspirational for both the participants and those who hear the story. This poster's narrative focused on the profoundly tranquil, reflective, and rejuvenating (Svarstad, 2010) aspects of hiking in natural settings. Yet we know too that the pursuit may also be taxing and even painful at the same time (Mitchell, 1983). Indeed, this satisfaction may be a result of both the setting in which the pursuit occurred and the challenge inherent to the pursuit itself.

The Importance of Challenge

Returning to the Arnold narrative above, the importance of hardship was central to her journey within the canyon. She recounted the relentless vertical ascent, the blazing desert sun, and her extreme desire for water. She stated “I wanted to drink the wind, that's how thirsty I was” (Arnold, 2013, para. 22). She knew the task would be difficult, even gruelling, yet she sought it out. And she is not alone. There are many instances where leisure enthusiasts seek out complexity, difficulty, and even suffering as they make their leisure choices.

In 1990, Csikszentmihalyi reminded us that this search for complexity may actually represent a quest for balance. He argued that many of us seek optimal experience by juggling complex demands and skill level. Balance between the two, when achieved, can be profoundly moving. Such experiences have been described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as flow experiences. During flow, the individual utilizes his/her skills to overcome the challenge that awaits (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The individual becomes particularly attentive, focused, and immersed in the experience. This is why Csikszentmihalyi (1990) referred to flow experiences as “optimal”.

Rob Schultheis (1988), a long-time hiker and climber, relished such experiences. In The New York Times (online) he described his expedition to the top of Yosemite National Park:

The steep granite wall of Pywiack Dome, an 800-foot high chunk of rock in Yosemite National Park, glitters in the afternoon sun. I am 150 feet up its sheer face, thin air beneath my heels, supporting my weight with clenched toes within my thin climbing shoes on “ledges” of rock not much wider than a saltshaker (p. 1).

As a highly skilled hiker and climber, Schultheis (1988) was using skill and strength to overcome an extremely challenging climb. In doing so he looked to test his limits. He chose a sheer face thus rendering the balance between challenge and skill more difficult to achieve. If he was able to negotiate the balance and find success, he may have achieved greater fulfillment. Indeed, after the fact, Schultheis (1988) described the experience as profound and rewarding while noting the exhilaration and deep satisfaction he had gained. The complexity of these sorts of leisure experiences suggest that there is a dynamic interplay between the setting, the challenge, and the participant. This interplay seems to be an integral component of the leisure experience.

The Role(s) of Others

An individual's decision to engage in a leisure episode is often very much influenced by others (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1986; Byrnes, 1998). Indeed, we may look to others (Bandura, 1986; Rosenthal & Bandura, 1978) for comment and direction (Byrnes, 1998). Bandura (1977) has described the process of observing others as social modelling. It is others within the community that give an individual a direction, tell the individual how to get there, and then help the individual celebrate his/her success.

Two theories, the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Cognitive Theory, and one model, the Self-Regulation Model, highlight the importance of other individuals in determining behaviour and performance (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1986; Byrnes, 1998). Specifically, Bandura (1986) suggests that other individuals can act as models who may play the role of the instructor, motivator, prompter/evaluator, and/or constructor. Instructive models may pass on their knowledge, values, behaviours, and skills to the observer (Bandura, 2004). Social models may

also be motivational. When an individual observes another accomplish his/her goals, they are positively motivated to pursue similar actions. Through what is called social prompting, others may direct, guide, and support our behaviour. We may also rely on these individuals for advice, helpful tips, and to evaluate our actions. When others assess and approve of our actions we may be reassured that they are appropriate.

Finally, through observation, we begin to construct our own beliefs and understandings. Indeed, the notion of social construction suggests that individual beliefs and understandings are developed socially, through interactions with others. Social worlds, characterized by informal interactions and communications among various individuals, provide a space in which individuals may come together around a shared interest (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Levy 1989; Unruh, 1980).

The role of social media. More and more this space can be electronic in nature. Recent technology allows for newer forms of social observation (termed symbolic modelling) that can transcend the immediate environment (Bandura, 2001). Various types of social media, blogs and social networking sites in particular, offer a case in point. For example, Matthew Karsten, an adventure traveller, highlighted his very profound hiking experience along the Caminito del Rey (The King's Little Pathway) in Spain. He used his personal blog to bring the reader along a journey that involved clinging to vertical canyon walls with missing sections that appeared "ready to crumble at any moment" (Karsten, 2014, para. 2).

Karsten (2014) chose to share his story online in the form of a blog. Of particular interest to this study are the comments and feedback he received from his readers. Over 100 readers commented on his post. Many were impressed by such a feat, some shared their own

experiences, and others asked for advice and support. Karsten's stories not only entertained the readers but also provided instant, invaluable information to others contemplating the same arduous journey. This seems a striking example of social modelling promoted through electronic means.

This discussion offers three insights of interest to this thesis. First, leisure enthusiasts may seek leisure that is, by design, challenging. Second, participants often seek to relay their leisure experiences to others. Books, articles, and increasingly social media, are used to report, notify, persuade and perhaps impress others of the feats they have performed. Finally, this reporting function can guide and direct other participants who then guide and direct even more participants.

Why would someone attempt a leisure pursuit (often promoted as relaxing and comfortable) that is so daunting, so dangerous, and so challenging? Why do some people seek extremes in their leisure choices? What is the appeal of telling and retelling the story of the experience through online discussions and blogs? Keinan and Kivetz (2010) suggested that such endeavors are a largely utilitarian exercise in which participants seek to consume collectable and noteworthy experiences. Their intent is to "add items to their experiential CV" (p. 947) so that they may check off activities on a leisure based "bucket list". As such, participants are willing to forego pleasure in order to heighten their own reputation and status from the resulting experience.

This explanation seems incomplete however. It suggests that seeking extreme experiences is very much an exercise in memory management. Participants collect and seek to remember extreme experiences. While this is likely very true, the checklist notion does not seem to explain

the deep and profound outcomes reported by participants like those listed above. Surely there is a hedonic as well as utilitarian aspect to these activities.

Keinan and Kivetz's (2010) notion of "collectors" describes the individuals of extreme events who are willing to forego pleasures in order to enhance bragging rights from the resulting experience. I am more interested in those who do not simply forego pleasures. I am interested in those who actively seek challenge as a way to enhance their experience. It is known, for example, that individuals with a strong sense of efficacy continually set higher, more challenging goals for themselves. Perhaps this helps explain Arnold's choice to traverse the Grand Canyon in a day. More difficult challenges "create new motivating discrepancies to be mastered" (Bandura, 1994, p. 265). Perhaps the search for higher and more difficult standards drives these individuals; the individual desires to overcome such a standard. Upon completion, participants may foster feelings of self-satisfaction and fulfillment (Bandura, 1989, 2001).

The reporting of the experience (through blogs, etc.) may be related to that search in many ways. Participants may seek to report on that satisfaction; relay that sense of fulfillment to others. Perhaps the more hardship, the greater the desire to tell the story. Conversely, others aspiring to achieve the same lofty goals may seek to learn from those same posts.

So this thesis explores leisure experiences by those who desire challenge as a way to enhance the experience itself. It explores the stories told by those who seek challenge-based activities that are themselves fulfilling. Within those stories I hope to discover the conditions that encourage the search for hardship in leisure experience. This is not a thesis about hiking but rather a thesis about experiences, the influence of others, and the process of overcoming a challenging pursuit. As such, the results of this study have implications for various leisure

service providers in a number of leisure settings.

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to understand extreme experiences by exploring posts on a website devoted to thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. The goal was to discover what online posts suggest about the thru-hiking experience. Three research questions guide this thesis:

- 1) What is it about extreme hiking that is so compelling? Specifically, what elements of the experience do posters on a specific online website value?
- 2) What role is played by other posters in the posters' extreme hiking choices?
- 3) How does the experience change for the posters over time?

In addition, two theories and a related decision making model guide are used as sensitizing concepts. Decades ago, Icek Ajzen (1991) developed the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). He posited that human behaviour may be predicted and explained by (1) an individual's attitudes towards the behaviour, (2) subjective norms, and (3) perceived behavioural control. Each will influence an individual's intentions to perform such behaviour. If participants value the behaviour, feel that others support that behaviour, and feel they have the skills to successfully complete the behaviour then participation is more likely.

Albert Bandura (1986) added to our understanding of human behaviour by discussing the importance of the dynamic interplay between the person, the environment, and behaviour. Similar to Ajzen (1985), Bandura (1986) suggested that, for instance, leisure choices may be influenced by the person (internal beliefs) and/or the environment (other people).

In 1998, James Byrnes presented a Self-Regulation Model (SRM) which explained the process of decision making. According to the SRM, an individual proceeds through three interrelated phases (generation, evaluation, and learning phases) as they make a decision. This model suggests that decision making is very much influenced by the self and others within the environment.

Taken together, these insights suggest that participation in extreme leisure pursuits is a result of a complex dynamic between intrapersonal and interpersonal variables. The complexity and enormity of the leisure task being undertaken may influence that dynamic. This thesis explores what hikers seek from extreme experiences and how their experience changes over time. As part of that exploration, decision making processes will be considered. As the hikers go through the contemplation, planning and execution of the hike, it seems clear that other posters will have varying influences on their thinking.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Leisure seems an ideal setting through which to explore human behaviour and experience. The activity of hiking is emphasized within this thesis and is particularly noteworthy for two reasons. First, hiking is a popular leisure activity. Many of us will take part in a hike during the course of our lifetime. A hike may be best conceptualized as any long walk (Hiking, 2015). For centuries, the act of walking was crucial to survival. It was necessary to hunt for food and to find shelter. The transportation revolution of mid 1700s/early 1800s (invention of the bicycle and train system) changed society's practice of and attitudes toward walking (Wallace, 1993). Where once it had been critical for survival, people could choose to walk or take more convenient forms of transportation. With such choice, long walks slowly evolved into a potential leisure activity. The idea of hiking for pleasure emerged and the hiking evolved as a popular leisure pursuit.

Second, this notion of choice permeates hiking activities. Hiking endeavours offer a great deal of flexibility to those involved. The hiker may choose between a variety of distances, terrain, and conditions. Indeed, hikes may be modest involving little time or effort or they may be ambitious involving weeks of preparation. They may be completed in an afternoon or may take months to complete along iconic routes like the Appalachian Trail or the Te Araroa Trail (which traverses the entire country of New Zealand). They may follow a straight, flat path or meander along a hilly and circular trail. The flexibility of hiking allows individuals to choose between a number of factors to best meet their own interests and capabilities (Backlund & Stewart, 2012).

This thesis focuses on extreme hiking. An extreme hike is a loosely defined concept. A

cursory online search of extreme hiking suggests that numerous individuals have attempted to define an extreme hike by sharing their ideas and thoughts through personal blogs and online discussions. Many have focused on setting parameters. Some define an extreme hike in terms of distance travelled and elevation gained. For example, Northwest Hiker (2014) and others have identified an extreme hike to be at least 14 miles in length and have an elevation gain of at least 4,000 feet (Cody, 2015; DayHiker, 2013; Northwest Hiker, 2014). Others have identified extreme hikes based on weather and route conditions (Bureau of Land Management, 2012; Come Hike, 2011). For example, snow, rain, and/or thunderstorms are considered defining elements of extreme hiking. Further, the absence of directional signage on the trail and various route difficulties such as boulders, steep slopes and inclines, and fast and/or high water crossings have also been considered main components of an extreme hike (Bureau of Land Management, 2012).

For the purposes of this thesis, extreme hiking is broadly defined. An extreme hike herein refers to any hiking endeavour motivated by the desire to overcome an objectively dramatic obstacle (McCarville & Pilon, in press). This process is typically undertaken with an expectation to apply high levels of skill and expertise while undergoing and enduring hardship. Within this context, a thru-hike may be defined as an extreme hike. The term thru-hike typically describes a long-distance hike that traverses an entire trail from end-to-end. Thru-hikes apply to long trails such as the Appalachian Trail (AT), the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) or the Continental Divide Trail (CDT).

Increasingly, the internet seems important to hikers as they begin to plan and prepare for complex and difficult efforts like a thru-hike. The internet offers a setting in which hikers can seek advice and support as they choose and plan their next adventure. Various forms of social

media, especially blogs and social networking sites, encourage these types of interactions.

Thru-hiking offers a useful setting for the exploration of extreme leisure experiences. It demands much in terms of planning, commitment, and expertise of the participant. This chapter begins by offering insight into the levels of commitment involved in this sort of extreme leisure pursuit. Serious leisure and involvement are discussed. Next, the chapter highlights three conditions (challenge, balance, and the setting) that are important to thru-hiking experiences.

The chapter then introduces two theoretical perspectives that aid in our understanding of human behaviour. Key concepts, variables, and the interactions between them are presented here. In addition, this section also discusses the role(s) of others. Others, and in particular other participants, may influence our leisure experiences and choices through “real” and virtual interactions. Finally, the last section of this chapter describes Byrnes’ (1998) Self-Regulation Model. This model lays out how insights from the TPB and SCT might be integrated our leisure choices.

Committing to Extreme Leisure

It is difficult to imagine the level of personal resources participants are willing to devote to thru-hikes. Both the leisure and consumer behaviour literatures offer some insight into notions of commitment. An individual may devote substantial resources (time, money, etc.) into meaningful leisure pursuits. For instance, the level of commitment required to complete a thru-hike of the AT may amount to many weeks, months, and sometimes even years of dedicated activity. As a result, these pursuits are often consistent with what Stebbins (1982) called serious leisure.

Serious leisure. Serious leisure refers to continuous engagement in an activity that is so compelling and so interesting that individuals are willing to devote considerable personal resources in order to take part (Stebbins, 1982, 1992, 2007). They become committed to obtaining the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to engage in the activity. Stebbins (1982) adds: “[Serious leisure] captivates its participants with its complexity and many challenges. It is profound [and] ...requires perseverance to a greater or lesser degree” (p. 3).

The R2R2R hike of the Grand Canyon offers an excellent example of a serious leisure activity. This hike demands that the participants prepare to hike a total of 42 miles (67.6 km), with a total elevation gain of over 10,000 feet (Arnold, 2013). Such a hike may demand years of dedicated preparation. Given its difficulty, this hike has been attempted by only a few individuals. Even fewer have attempted to complete this hike in a day. There is no question that this is a difficult hike, representing a considerable challenge for those who wish to take part.

Why would individuals go to such extremes to pursue their serious leisure activities? Stebbins (1982, 1992, 2007) has identified several durable benefits that accrue from serious leisure activities. They include self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, enhanced self-image, and self-gratification (Stebbins, 1992, 2007).

Self-actualization suggests the development of skills, abilities, and knowledge (Stebbins, 1992, 2007). Indeed, when an individual spends days, weeks, and even years training for and engaging in serious leisure, they are likely to expand their skill set, abilities, and knowledge about the activity. More importantly, they may gain many additional insights about themselves.

Self-enrichment involves that act of creating something that is personally meaningful

(Stebbins, 1992, 2007). Meaning may come from a sense of accomplishment, from the expression of skills and fitness or even the successful completion of a difficult task. In these ways, we may enrich the self by engaging in extreme, challenging leisure. Perhaps, too, the meaning can be enhanced by increasing the challenge. With greater demands, may come potential for even greater enrichment.

Self-expression is exercised through our leisure choices and preferences. Such expression may affirm our identity (Kyle et al., 2007). Veblen (1899) noted the power of leisure in self-expression. While at work we are often compelled to take on tasks, while leisure involves choice. As a result, leisure pursuits are more likely to say something of the individual participant. These individuals choose to take part so the leisure choice is a reflection of personal preference and even personality.

Self-image involves an individual's beliefs about his/her self. Serious leisure has been characterized by the need to persevere (Stebbins, 1982). Struggling through and overcoming an obstacle (embarrassment, anxiety, fatigue, injury, etc.) may enhance self-image (Stebbins, 1992, 2007). For instance, the runner may overcome fatigue to succeed in their pursuit, thus boosting their self-image.

Self-gratification involves the satisfaction of oneself. The ability to overcome a variety of obstacles and find success in a pursuit can generate self-satisfaction and deep fulfillment for the individual (Stebbins, 1982, 1992, 2007). Again, complexity may be important to this process. The harder it is to overcome a challenge, the more fulfilling it is when that challenge is overcome. For all these reasons, serious leisure has been linked to a variety of measures that reflect individual commitment to an activity or pattern of behaviour. One key measure is that of

involvement.

The role of involvement. Several frameworks for involvement have their roots in consumer behaviour literature. Involvement, as a construct, was pioneered by Sherif and Cantril in 1947. They described involvement as the state of motivational arousal or interest (Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Havitz & Dimanche, 1997). Decades later, Houston and Rothschild (1978) distinguished between two forms of involvement in consumer behaviour: situational involvement and enduring involvement (also referred to as ego involvement). Situational involvement was described as the short-lived feelings of involvement that are a result of a particular situation (Houston & Rothschild, 1978). Enduring involvement, on the other hand, referred to the pre-existing relationship between the individual and the object (Houston & Rothschild, 1978).

Of particular interest to this study is the concept of enduring involvement. Borrowing from the consumer behaviour literature, leisure researchers have used the term enduring involvement and placed it in a leisure context. Most definitions of enduring leisure involvement have referred to the extent to which an activity is personally relevant to an individual (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997; Kyle et al., 2007). For instance, Havitz and Dimanche (1997) defined this type of involvement as an “unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product, evoked by a particular stimulus or situation, and which has drive properties” (p. 246). An activity may be personally relevant if an individual’s needs, goals, and values align with their knowledge of the activity (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Kyle et al., 2007). As Havitz and Dimanche (1997) suggested, we make speak of those who are “really into golf” or who “love to ski” when we describe this type of involvement. Logically, extreme leisure pursuits may be linked to enduring leisure involvement.

Conceptualizations of involvement have suggested several important dimensions (Dimanche, Havitz, & Howard, 1991; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Kyle et al., 2007; McIntyre, 1989). As research into this topic progressed, these dimensions shifted from importance, pleasure, risk probability (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985) to attraction, centrality, and self-expression (McIntyre, 1989) and later evolved to include additional dimensions (social bonding, identity expression, and identity affirmation) (Kyle et al., 2007).

In one of the most recent conceptualizations of involvement, Kyle et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of others in relation to involvement in a specific activity. Social bonding was identified as “the extent to which enduring involvement is driven by social ties” (Kyle et al., 2007, p. 403). For instance, extreme hikers may develop strong personal relationships with other hikers. According to Kyle et al. (2007), such relationships “can exert a strong influence on an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviours related to specific activities [i.e. hiking]” (p. 404). Thus, social relationships may be an essential component of an individual’s prolonged involvement in a specific leisure activity. This influence is evident within the hiking social world. In the fourth section of this literature review, I describe in detail the role of others in our leisure choices.

The various social elements of involvement suggest the importance of identity affirmation and identity expression. Kyle et al. (2007) noted that affirmation examines “the degree to which leisure provides opportunities to affirm the self to the self” (p. 405) whereas identity expression describes “the extent to which leisure provides opportunities to express the self to others” (p. 405). Hikers may engage in extreme pursuits to 1) confirm their own identity and/or 2) express themselves to others. For instance, completing a hike of the Appalachian Trail

may push an individual to their limits. This accomplishment may affirm the individual's own self-identity and, through expression, may result in social recognition, social verification, and/or appreciation from others (Bandura, 1986, 2001, 2004).

The Search for Challenge

In the first chapter I note that hiking enthusiasts may seek experiences to fulfill a desire to overcome an objectively dramatic obstacle (McCarville & Pilon, in press). This process requires the participant to use their skills to overcome the challenge that awaits. Consider the event described by Snell (2012):

My heart felt as if it was pounding out from my chest. I could feel it through five layers and waited a few seconds to see if it would subside. It did not. At 5,800m above sea level I walked the pace of an Amazonian Snail. One shuffle after the other, I pushed towards the summit... I made [it to] the summit of the highest freestanding mountain in the world and completed another life goal. I stood at the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro and the rooftop of Africa. Taking in a deep breath, I smiled to myself, you made it ... It was an incredible challenge you cannot prepare for, one you must only endure (para. 1).

Such events can be profoundly meaningful for the participant. This emotional experience relayed by Greg Snell as he successfully summited Mount Kilimanjaro serves as a basis for this discussion. The presence of challenge seems central to the quality of this experience.

The presence of challenge. Challenge can be a motivating factor to leisure participation (Iso-Ahola, 1982). As Iso-Ahola observed, "motives are aroused when individuals think of certain activities they could, should, or might do in the future, activities that are potentially

satisfaction-producing” (p. 258). Extreme leisure enthusiasts have described time again the high level of satisfaction they receive from engaging in challenging leisure. Such satisfaction may be a result of the intrinsic rewards gained from the experience such as enjoyment, mastery, and competence (Iso-Ahola, 1982). For instance, Stebbins’ (1979, 1992) serious leisure participants commented on the life satisfaction and overall well-being gained from their challenging experiences (Stebbins, 1992). These findings suggest the importance of challenge in our leisure.

Many hikers too value and appreciate the challenge that awaits. Hikers have found several ways to create challenge during their leisure with most options revolving around a variation in time, terrain, distance, and/or weather. Using these variables, hikers may create highly challenging leisure experiences. In fact, for many, the more difficult the challenge, the greater is the reward upon completion. Le Breton (2000) speaks to this profound connection between challenge and satisfaction when he states, “in a personal and often ferocious struggle the body has to be forced, knowing that the more scarred it is at the end, the more significant and more powerful will be the appreciation of the event” (p. 5).

A hill-based trail/route in Vancouver, British Columbia offers a case in point. This route, called the Grouse Grind, offers its participants the chance to race against time. Hikers attempt to complete the 3.9 km trail up the face of Grouse Mountain as fast as they can. The challenge lies in the steep, vertical ascent that the trail offers. Participants must climb a total elevation gain of 2,800 feet. However, despite the demands of the course, a number of climbers seek out greater, more extreme challenges. Nicole Yamanaka, an outdoor enthusiast and hiker, described the “die-hard, fitness fanatics” (Yamanaka, 2012, para. 10) she encountered while walking the trail. She commented: “I once had a man pass me, carrying a bike on his shoulder” (Yamanaka, 2012 para.

11).

These instances demonstrate just how crucial the presence of challenge can be to the overall extreme hiking experience. However, it is not just the presence of challenge that creates durable benefits (recall discussion of serious leisure above). As Le Breton (2000) attests, it is using one's own skill and capacity to struggle against and defeat the challenge that creates satisfaction. If the experience were just about the presence of challenge, then hikers would select impossible pursuits that result in failure after failure. The key here is to select challenging experiences that best match the hiker's skill set. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) reflected on this balancing act between challenge and skill in his discussions of flow.

Achieving balance. Flow is an immersive experience that involves deep engrossment in a pursuit. Attention is focused on the task at hand and, as a result, the participant may become unaware of the passage of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). During a flow experience, a participant may experience feelings of self-satisfaction and expression (Bandura, 1989, 2001). These feelings can become even more profound during highly challenging leisure experiences.

Achieving flow during extreme leisure may result in self-transcendence and personal fulfillment (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Such benefits are a result of such high involvement in a task with such high complexity. Le Breton (2000) gives us insight into the complexity of such experiences. "Paradoxically, the more intense the suffering, the more the achievement has a reassuring personal significance, the more fulfilling the satisfaction of having resisted the temptation to give up" (p. 1).

We may observe the flow experience in a few leisure pursuits. The climber, for instance,

“feels at one with the mountain, the clouds, the rays of sun, and the tiny bugs moving in and out of the shadow of the fingers holding to the rock” (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 33). The hiker too is ideally situated to enjoy the flow experience. The experience is intrinsically rewarding, pleasing, and reaffirms personal sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Deci & Ryan, 1991). As individuals continue to engage in meaningful leisure and to develop their skills, they may seek out greater, more extreme challenges to continue to achieve that balance. This may explain why we continually set goals for ourselves. Once a goal is accomplished, a new, more challenging goal is set and it drives us forward. “It is these systemic properties – clear constraints, goals, feedback, predictability, and graduated challenges – which make surgery and chess, rock climbing and mathematics intrinsically rewarding, by producing the experience of flow” (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1978, p. 325).

Another integral part of the hiking experience is the setting in which the experience takes place. For example, hikes tend to take place out-of-doors and in predominantly natural settings. The setting itself can become a partner in the hiking experience. Consider how Davidson (2015) describes the first time he explored the mountains. The setting itself seemed as or more important than the physical act of hiking.

I remember going off by myself ... and standing at the entrance to this valley ... and just getting this ... what I call, mountain feeling ... it's not something you cannot put into words ... it's quite emotional. You can stand at the entrance to a valley, or you can stand on a mountain and you get this wave of ... good feeling, or whatever, its quite a euphoric sort of thing. I remember that feeling (p. 126).

The following section suggests how the setting can exert a profound influence on the

hiker and the hiking experience.

The Importance of the Setting

For centuries, many influential poets, writers, and philosophers have expressed the benefits of walking in rural, natural settings. Early transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller brought attention to the importance of nature and its role in the preservation of health. For instance, in his well-known essay entitled *Walking*, Thoreau (1862) stated “I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least, - and it is commonly more than that, - sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements” (para. 6). Fuller (1851) too suggested that nature is good for the body, mind, and soul. She added “it was not meant that the soul should cultivate the earth, but that the earth should educate and maintain the soul” (p. 28).

Other pivotal figures of the 1800s extolled the benefits of walking in nature. For instance, Frederick Law Olmsted (1865), an accomplished landscape architect, expressed the importance of preserving nature. He too believed that natural scenery plays an important role in human restoration. He commented: “nature employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it; tranquilizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system” (p. 22).

A long-standing literature suggests that interaction with the natural environment inevitably influences visitor experience. A series of seminal studies by Roger Ulrich (1984, 1986, 1993) found that transcendentalists and other leading figures of the 1800s were largely correct. Ulrich (1984, 1986, 1993) found that exposure to outdoor settings could enhance positive

emotional states, create positive physiological changes (heart rate, muscle tension, blood pressure), and encourage more sustained attention levels and information intake. He found too that even exposure to photographs of natural settings could speed post-operative recovery among hospital patients (1984, 1986, 1993).

Decades of literature support the importance of natural settings on human experience. Indeed, many scholars have noted that exposure to the natural landscape elicits positive emotional states such as peacefulness and relaxation (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2008; Bricklin & Spliner, 1992; Frumkin, 2001; Hansmann et al., 2007; Kaplan, 2001; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Riediker & Koren, 2004). For instance, in the wilderness individuals may discover “a deep sense of tranquility and peace... [which is] rarely matched in other surroundings” (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983, p. 163).

Such benefits are even more pronounced when those exposed to the natural environment are engaging in an activity (like hiking). The literature suggests that, during various hiking expeditions through the wilderness, individuals may reflect, restore, and gain perspective (Atchley, Strayer & Atchley, 2012; Svarstad, 2010; Williams, 2015). For instance, David Strayer, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Utah, found that three days of wilderness backpacking resulted in several benefits. He termed this the “three-day effect” which is described as “a kind of cleaning of the mental windshield that occurs when we've been immersed in nature long enough” (Williams, 2015, para. 3). Further, in Svarstad’s (2010) study of the reasons why people hike, one individual observed “when the silence has fallen, the thoughts arrive. These are thoughts from a hectic and challenging work week. It has not been possible to reflect over these thoughts before. Now the thoughts can come, there is no disturbance” (p. 97).

Not only do we feel restored when we engage with nature, but our mental performance may also improve (Atchley, Strayer & Atchley, 2012; Williams, 2015). For example, Atchley, Strayer, and Atchley's (2012) study analyzed a group of Outward Bound participants and found that, after three days of wilderness hiking, they performed 50% better on creative problem-solving tasks. Such benefits give us insight into why the setting itself is such an integral component of the hiking experience. Nature provides the individual with a variety of benefits and such benefits are only enhanced when we engage in an activity while immersed in nature.

Nature may also play an active role in the challenge of a leisure pursuit. Recall from Chapter 1 that in some circumstances, the challenge and the setting are linked. The setting (mountains, weather, etc.) offers the challenge. Individuals seek to overcome the challenge imposed upon them by the environment. No leisure pursuit demonstrates this better than The Barkley Marathons. The Barkley Marathons is a 100-mile-long trek through the backcountry of Tennessee (Iltis & Kane, 2014). The hikers are required to complete five 20-mile loops of an unmarked trail in 60 hours or less in order to successfully complete the race. The true challenge of the race lies in the characteristics of the setting itself. First, the cumulative elevation gain during the race is over 60,000 feet – this is the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest twice from sea level (Iltis & Kane, 2014; Jamison, 2011). Second, the rugged terrain imposes its challenges. For instance, in her essay entitled “The Immortal Horizon”, Jamison (2011) describes the native flora called saw briars that “can turn a man’s legs to raw meat in meters” (para. 6).

In 2010, Jamison witnessed first hand 40 participants (including her brother) attempt to complete the race. She gives us insight into the personal struggles of the participants:

There is a gracefully frustrating tautology to this embodied testimony: Why do I do it? I

do it because it hurts so much and I'm still willing to do it. The sheer ferocity of the effort implies that the effort is somehow worth it. This is purpose by implication rather than direct articulation. Laz [creator of The Barkley Marathons] says, "No one has to ask them why they're out here; they all know" (Jamison, 2011, para. 112).

The participants seek to test the limits of human capacity. The participants push through suffering and pain knowing that they must earn their success. Enduring and overcoming such a challenge gives the individual "a feeling of jubilation, sometimes even of ecstasy, and of being in perfect harmony with the world" (Le Breton, 2000, p. 1). It is instructive to note that almost no one has ever completed the course within the time limits set by the race organizer. The only certainty associated with the race is pain and hardship. All of those who enter know they will suffer and few believe that they will finish. The setting ensures that most get lost and that everyone will hurt. The setting is both beautiful and cruel.

Understanding Human Experiences

This discussion suggests that humans often behave in complex ways in order to seek fulfillment. This complexity may take the form of hiking in profoundly moving and difficult settings. The following two subsections aid in our understanding of why this might be the case. Two theories are used as sensitizing concepts to guide this thesis. The first, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, was developed to predict and explain human behaviour, aiding in our understanding of leisure choices (Ajzen, 1991). The second theory, Social Cognitive Theory, explores how human behaviour is shaped (Bandura, 1986).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour. Proposed by Icek Ajzen in 1985, this theory

intended to predict and explain human behaviour in a variety of contexts. First introduced as the Theory of Reasoned Action, the TPB introduced a new variable, perceived behavioural control, not accounted for in the original model (Ajzen, 1991).

Central to the TPB is an individual's intentions to carry out their desired behaviours (Ajzen, 1991, 2006). Essentially, beliefs and motivational factors influence intentions to perform those behaviours. These intentions then guide eventual behaviour patterns. According to Ajzen (1991) intentions “capture the motivational factors that influence a behaviour; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behaviour” (p. 181).

Ajzen (1991) and others (Miller, 1956) suggested that an individual may possess a wide number of beliefs, but is capable only of acting on a few at a given time. Thus, the most important beliefs, or salient beliefs, are what drive an individual's intentions and actions. Three kinds of salient beliefs may explain human behaviour: behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs (Ajzen, 1991). These three types of beliefs each influence specific motivational factors. Behavioural beliefs influence individual attitudes, normative beliefs influence subjective norms, and control beliefs influence perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). Figure 1 depicts a visual representation of this theory.

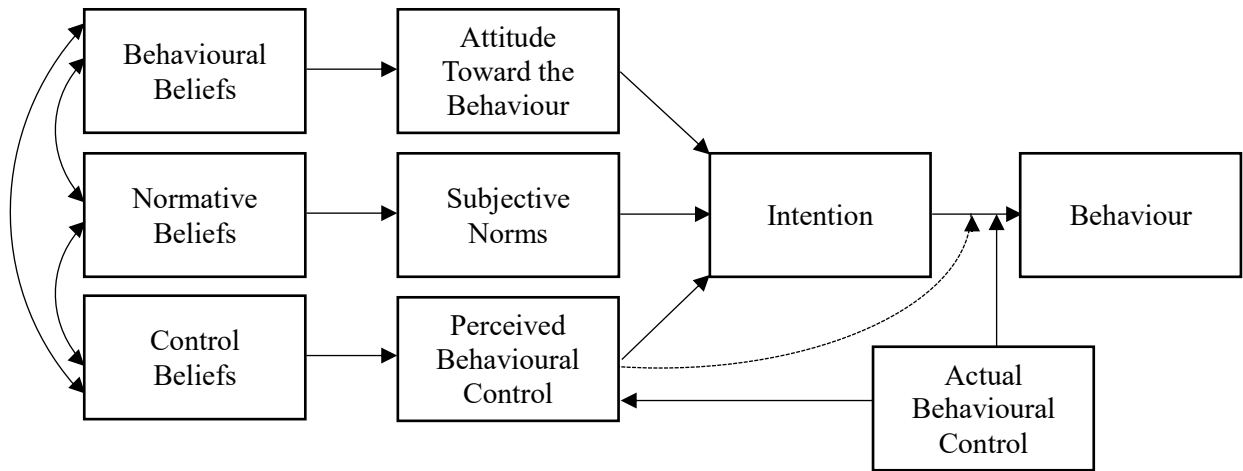


Figure 1. The Theory of Planned Behaviour. This figure illustrates each element of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Adapted from “Constructing a Theory of Planned Behaviour Questionnaire,” by I. Ajzen, 2006.

Attitude toward the behaviour. Attitudes reflect how the individual thinks, acts, and feels toward the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991, 2006). Will Hearst, an avid hiker and climber, gives us insight into his thoughts and feelings towards climbing when he stated:

Climbing convinced me I could do something dangerous, and that if I did it properly, I could be exhilarated, but also safe. It taught me to pay careful attention to details; if you don’t, you can find yourself in trouble very quickly. It taught me I could get to places I never thought I could, in the mountains, in work and in life (Schultheis, 1988, p. 3).

In this quote, Hearst expresses the various elements that drive behaviour. He addresses both cognitive and emotional variables that drive behaviour. For him, the outcomes are dramatic and sweeping. He comments on how rejuvenating and energizing the experience can be.

Subjective norms. An individual's intentions to perform a behaviour may also be influenced by subjective norms. Subjective norms refer to the perceived societal pressure to either perform or not perform a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The strength of an individual's normative beliefs influences their subjective norms (Ajzen, 1991). Normative beliefs refer to our beliefs about the views of other people who are important to us (family, friends, etc.). Our beliefs about what others think about a particular behaviour may influence our actions to perform or not perform that same behaviour.

Within a hiking context, there are many instances in which a hiker may be influenced by the hiking community in one way or another. For example, a recent issue of Backpacker magazine highlights the "ultimate hiking life" (Friedman, 2015). According to this magazine, such a life begins with a decision to "Commit to the quest. Then start with these 33 ideas that will feed your passion, reward your effort, and inspire you to explore" (Friedman, 2015, p. 11). Thereafter, the article begins to describe the 33 places to go or skills to learn to become the ultimate hiker. Such wording, detail, and coverage of these ideas emphasizes what society deems to be appropriate to consider yourself an ultimate hiker. Such efforts suggest what is noteworthy, how to do it, and why it is important.

It helps too when the source of such inspirational messages is well regarded. In this case, Backpacker magazine received the 2015 National Magazine Award for the category of Leisure Interests (Holt, Wagner, & Holmberg, 2015). Such an award recognizes Canadian print and digital publications. This award confirms that this magazine is indeed respected and admired within various recreational communities. As such, individuals are more heavily influenced to perform the behaviours suggested within this magazine than those suggested within a less

respected magazine. When Backpacker magazine suggests that we must visit these places or do these things to become the ultimate hiker, the suggestion has gravitas. This same legitimacy is present in the views of significant others like close friends or relatives. We know them, we trust them, and their views are important to us.

Perceived behavioural control. Behavioural control also influences intentions and eventual actions (Ajzen, 1991). Behaviour may be determined by non-motivational factors such as opportunities and resources (time, money, etc.). These factors may influence an individual's *actual* control over the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). However, of greater importance to this discussion is that of *perceived* behavioural control. Perceived behavioural control refers to “people's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour of interest” (Ajzen, 1991, p. 183). It is a person's perceived behavioural control not actual control that is the primary influence over both intention and behaviour.

An individual's perceptions of control can be both positive and problematic. It is positive in that hikers may attempt difficult tasks simply because they believe they can. They are not constrained by limitations. They may achieve remarkable goals as a result. However, perceived control is not sufficient, in and of itself, to overcome difficult or dangerous tasks. If hikers underestimate the degree or danger of a challenge or over estimate their own capacity to overcome that challenge, disaster can result.

Fortunately, several variables may influence notions of behavioural control. An individual's past experiences, for example, inevitably shape current perceptions of control (Ajzen, 1991). Such experience offers insight into constraints, challenges, capacity, and so on. These experiences can, in turn, influence our intent to act. The greater an individual's perceived

behavioural control, the more likely that they will persevere in their endeavours (Ajzen, 1991). For instance, the individual who is confident in their ability to hike is more likely to expend the effort necessary to succeed. Overall, the greater the perceived behaviour control, and the more positive the attitude and subjective norm, the more likely the individual will perform the behaviour in question.

These perceptions of control emerge from interactions between the self, others, and the environment. When hikers feel that they have the requisite skills, when others tell them that the challenge is worthwhile, when the setting seems to match their skill set, their choices can be profoundly noteworthy. They may seek to express their skills and interests in ways that surprise and perhaps mystify others. Such choices may put at risk their comfort and even their safety.

Social Cognitive Theory. In 1977, Bandura posited that psychosocial functioning could be explained by a triadic reciprocal causation. Specifically, he introduced Social Learning Theory (SCT), which suggested that there is a reciprocal interaction between the person, the environment, and the behaviour (Bandura, 1977). In 1986, Bandura expanded on his theory emphasizing the importance of cognition in controlling behaviour patterns. This theory, renamed Social Cognitive Theory, takes an agentic perspective. One of the most profound principles of SCT is that of personal agency. Personal agency refers to taking action. It suggests that agents “intentionally influence their own functioning and life circumstances” (Bandura, 2004, p. 76). Personal agency is influenced by a person’s perceived self-efficacy.

Perceived self-efficacy. The idea of perceived self-efficacy is consistent with the TPB’s perceived behavioural control. Recall that such control influences both intentions and actions to perform a behaviour. While the two concepts are closely related, they are not entirely

synonymous (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Terry & O'Leary, 1995). Bandura (1986, 1993) and Ajzen (1991) suggest that self-efficacy reflects internal control factors whereas perceived behaviour control is concerned with more general, external factors.

Regardless, both concepts are important to this discussion. Perceived self-efficacy, specifically, has been identified as a core feature of human agency (Bandura, 1991, 1993). Human behaviour is often purposeful and regulated by forethought towards outcomes and goals projected in the future (Bandura, 1991, 1993; Latham & Locke, 1991). Outcomes and projected goals are very much influenced by an individual's perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1991, 1993).

Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with personal “judgements of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations” (Bandura, 1982, p. 122). Self-efficacy beliefs then influence a person’s thoughts, emotional reactions, motivations, and behaviours (Bandura, 1991, 1993). Perceived self-efficacy is so influential that it may determine whether an individual engages in an activity or disregards it entirely (Bandura, 1982, 1991). As such, the importance of strong self-efficacy is emphasized. Individuals with stronger perceived self-efficacy will set more challenging goals for themselves and be more committed to fulfilling these goals (Bandura, 1993).

As stated, our beliefs about our own capabilities will ultimately influence the types of goals we set for ourselves and the outcomes that result. In leisure, participants may seek to fulfill a broad range of goals. Through the use of resources, personal skills, and effort we attempt to accomplish our goals. The self-satisfaction gained from achieving our goals serves as a motive for further action (Bandura, 1989, 2001). However, the failure to accomplish goals may also act as a motivator to engage in further action. As indicated above, individuals with high levels of

self-efficacy are more committed to goal fulfillment and thus are more likely to produce the effort needed for optimal performance and goal obtainment (Bandura, 1982). Indeed, both success and failure in the pursuit serve as motives for action.

While this thesis does not test the TPB or SCT among hikers, these two theories do offer considerable insight into the dynamics that might surround thru-hiker posts. Of greatest importance to this study is the profound willingness of hikers to post and peruse information intended to inspire then guide other hikers. Information that, in terms of these two theories, offers a compelling model for others. This information is intended to celebrate, to entertain or perhaps impress others but also serves to inspire, guide, and educate. Such information may then influence subsequent behaviour patterns in potentially dramatic ways. In the next section, I focus on the role of others and the specific ways in which others can influence our leisure choices through “real” and virtual interactions.

The Role(s) of Others

The importance of others has been highlighted in this chapter. Both the TPB and SCT acknowledge the importance of those around us in shaping our behaviours. Indeed, much human behaviour is learned through the observation of others (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1986; Rosenthal & Bandura, 1978). As noted, Bandura (1977) conceptualizes the act of observing others as social modelling. Social models serve a diverse range of functions. These include instructive, motivational, social prompting/verification, and social construction functions (Bandura, 2001, 2004). A single message may play several functions simultaneously.

Instructive. Models may assume the role of an instructor. Within this role, a model may

pass on his/her knowledge, values, behaviours, and skills to the observer (Bandura, 2004). As observations proceed individuals begin to learn “to fear that which frightened or injured models, to dislike what repulsed them, and to like what gratified them” (Bandura, 2004, p. 78). Indeed, we learn appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, desirable and undesirable actions from others.

However, observers do not exclusively adopt attributes and behaviours from a single model (Bandura, 2005). The observer “adopts advantageous elements, improves upon them, synthesizes them into new forms, and tailors them to their particular circumstances” (Bandura, 2005, p. 13-14). Indeed, observers will adopt certain features from various models to create new innovations quite different from any one source. Instructive modelling then provides a means through which personal creativity is fostered. By observing the behaviours of others, we may increase our own creativity (Harris & Evans, 1973; Gist, 1989).

Hikers too may adopt or create new leisure behaviours through instructive modelling. For instance, an avid hiker may read of other hikers who undertake greater, more extreme hiking pursuits. This new knowledge may spark a new interest and create new behaviour patterns for this hiker. New routes may be contemplated, new goals set, and new skills attempted.

Motivational. We not only observe the actions of others, but also the benefits and drawbacks of such action. According to Bandura (2004), seeing others accomplish goals and obtain desired outcomes creates outcome expectancies. Positive outcome expectancies function as positive motivators to engage in similar courses of action. Conversely, by observing undesirable outcomes, we create negative outcome expectancies. Negative outcome expectancies serve as detriments for action.

During my data analysis, I may witness a variety of modelled courses of action. Courses of action may revolve around various social priorities ranging from the search for belonging to the desire for status. Status seems particularly relevant to this thesis. Many seek to obtain social recognition and status through the successful completion of a leisure pursuit. Difficult and innovative pursuits may garner additional recognition from others and a higher social status (Bandura, 2001).

This thesis focuses on status resulting from personal struggle. The key is to endure and overcome a significant challenge. Neumann (1992) notes that endurance and struggle become markers of identity for hikers. He quotes one individual who hiked from the top of the Grand Canyon down to surface level and back up again in a single day. The 28-year-old Californian observed, “[there is] this hierarchy where we're trying to put ourselves higher up. It has to do with the level of physicality involved, the ruggedness of it, how outdoorsy you get and what you have to endure” (p. 191).

Further, the novel *Shadows on the Wasteland* recounts Mike Stroud's (1993) account of the first unassisted crossing of Antarctica. He states:

There was one less acceptable motivation – ego. How much of me wanted to go out and prove myself... to others? How much of me wanted to revel in admiration and praise? They were difficult questions and although I liked to think they were unimportant, I sometimes wondered whether I was fooling myself and just not admitting that it was the achievement in the eyes of others that mattered. After all, everything we tried was an attempt to be 'first', and if it had been done before, I doubt that we would have bothered with it (p. 27).

In these ways, the perceptions and approval of others may motivate an individual to engage in very extreme, challenging leisure. Social recognition in particular may act as a primary motive for engagement.

Social prompting/verification. The behaviour of others may act as a social prompt. Others may direct, guide, and support our behaviour. We may rely on the words or actions of others to guide our own goal setting. The guidance we receive from others in the form of encouragement may assist an individual in exerting that extra effort required for success (Pajares, 2008). In addition, we may also rely on others to evaluate our actions. This evaluation process, termed social verification, suggests that we verify our views by checking them against what others believe (Bandura, 2001). Indeed, we may look to others to show us what behaviours and actions are appropriate.

Social prompting and verification seem very much present within the hiking community. For instance, as noted earlier in this chapter, the phrase extreme hiking has emerged, been debated, refined, re-defined, and promoted by community members over the past few years. These examples suggest how participants seek to establish parameters and to, perhaps, gain agreement around those parameters. In doing so they may influence other hikers' leisure choices. A hiker who seeks to fit into the extreme hiking community may be encouraged or even convinced to participate in longer hikes characterized by increased elevations and inclement climates.

While some seek to influence how their activities are characterized (extreme vs. ordinary) others seek to extol the virtues of extreme pursuits. For example, in 2012, Jennifer Pharr Davis, an avid long-distance hiker, sought to complete the fastest hike of the Appalachian Trail. She

comments:

In a lot of people's opinion, the Appalachian Trail record is the toughest trail record in the world because it has such a long history of attempts. The idea was that my best was good enough for the overall [male or female] record on the Appalachian Trail. I wanted the ultimate challenge. I didn't want to do anything less or anything easier (Cahall, 2012, para. 6).

She characterized her achievement as the “toughest trail record in the world”. Her blog and claims regarding her achievement offer an excellent example of social prompting and verification. She sought to convince the reader of not only the importance of the activity but also the difficulty of the task. In this case, social verification drove and motivated the hiker. Verification from others may enhance the experience for the participant, suggesting that the activity is valued and significant.

It is important to note the potential impact of such blogs for the reader. The examples above help set the communal standards for the activity itself. The standards are loose, and even negotiable, but all are difficult to attain. Then blogs like those by Pharr Davis promote the importance of meeting those standards. As this process unfolds, goals are set and relevance is established then enhanced.

Social construction. Through observation and interactions with others, we begin to develop mutually constructed understandings of the world. These understandings are shared with individuals within a social world. Indeed, social worlds provide the opportunity for individuals to come together around a shared interest (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Levy 1989; Unruh, 1980). Many

scholars have noted the homogeneity among the individuals involved in social worlds (Fischer, 1982; Kelly & Godbey, 1992). Such homogeneity creates a profound sense of belonging among members (Kelly & Godbey, 1992).

This concept of social worlds has been debated for decades. During the 1950s, Shibutani (1955) thought of a social world as “an organized outlook, built up by people in their interaction with one another; hence, each communication channel gives rise to a separate world... ..the boundaries of which are set neither by territory nor by formal group membership but by the limits of effective communication” (p. 566). He provided examples of various social worlds, “...there are the loosely connected universes of special interest – the world of sports, of the stamp collector, of the daytime serial” (p. 566), and suggested that social worlds are ever changing. The shared perspectives of those involved are continually being re-established. “Worlds come into existence with the establishment of communication channels; when life conditions change, social relationships may also change, and these worlds may disappear” (Shibutani, 1955, p. 567).

In essence, social worlds are characterized by informal interactions and communication among many individuals (Unruh, 1980). Such informality allows social worlds to exist locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally. Since individuals within the same social world may be scattered across the globe, social worlds are no longer characterized by face-to-face interactions. Rather, communication is conveyed through newsletters, posted notes, telephone messages, radio and television announcements, and internet communications (Unruh, 1980).

Constant communications between members of a social world typically results in growing similarities between individual members’ ethos. The “spirit” of the community is manifested in the socially constructed attitudes, values, beliefs, goals, practices, etc. The social

world of the participants is where these attitudes, beliefs, values, etc. are developed and expressed. Leisure social worlds may develop practices that are not familiar to others outside of that particular community. For instance, the selection of a trail name seems to be a unique practice of the hiking community. The individual does not select their own trail name, it is the other hikers on the trail that select their name for them.

Examples such as this suggest that as we communicate with others, our beliefs, values and actions may be influenced by such interactions. For centuries, these interactions have taken place in the immediate physical environment. Indeed, when Bandura (1986) first introduced Social Cognitive Theory, he referred primarily to these face-to-face interactions within his works. However, recent advances in the technology of communication have allowed newer forms of social observation to emerge that transcend the physical environment (Bandura, 2001). In 2001, Bandura referred to these newer forms of communication as symbolic modelling.

Symbolic modelling is a powerful and influential resource that has transformed the way that we communicate to each other. A symbolic model may display his/her behaviours through various means such as books, video, television programs, electronic media, etc. Of greatest importance to this thesis is the influence of social media via the internet. The internet can “transmit information of virtually limitless variety to vast populations simultaneously in widely dispersed locales” (Bandura, 2005, p. 14). This instantaneous dispersion of information (ideas, values, and beliefs) fosters a global consciousness that is “a powerful vehicle for transcultural and sociopolitical change” (Bandura, 2005, p. 15). We may learn much about the nature, scope, and speed of human influence by studying online, virtual interactions.

Social Media

Social media can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 [platform in which all users are participatory and collaborative], and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content [the various forms of media content available to the public]” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media outlets provide a place which encourages online interactions to take place. Such outlets have attracted the masses. Social media has been so popular, in fact, that according to Pew Research Center, 74% of internet consumers used social media in 2015. Further, during the same year, 90% of young adults (ages 18 to 20) used social media (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Social media and online interactions differ from physical, face-to-face interactions in at least four basic ways. First, in online settings, the communicator has the option to reveal as little or as much about their identity as they wish. Indeed, during such communications, the individuals may hide or manipulate their identity (Kollock & Smith, 1999; Lee, 2014). They have the option to either display their physical appearance through the use of photographs, avatars, etc. or hide their appearance. Social media provides an avenue in which people are judged solely on the merit of their ideas and are not judged based on a variety of other factors such as gender, class, nationality, culture, etc. (Wellman & Hampton, 1999). For some, such anonymity may be a source of inspiration (Kollock & Smith, 1999). People who may not be comfortable sharing their stories face-to-face may be inspired to share anonymously with others online.

Second, the internet provides a space wherein new forms of communication may take

place (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For instance, microblogging services such as Twitter require users to publish posts that are 50 characters or less in length. Such services have evolved the way we communicate with one another. Third is the idea of reach. Many types of posts (discussion forums, blogs, messages, etc.) are publicized and can be read by anyone on the internet. The potential number of individuals who read and then comment on these posts may have an effect on the poster. Fourth, the nature of social media allows for the exploration of social processes overtime. “These qualities of practicality and capacity shed light on social processes across space and time, together with their insight into everyday life, combine to make these types of social media a valid addition to qualitative research” (Hookway, 2008, p. 93). Parenthetically, this is exactly what I hope to do in this thesis.

As suggested above, we may rely on others to instruct us, motivate us, prompt us, verify our views, and help construct our social world. The virtual environment seems to be the ideal setting to guide and influence human behaviour. It is through online communications that we may begin to explore the dynamics of the self, others, and the environment.

The popularity of social media has encouraged the creation of many different forms of social media. It is no surprise then, that a variety of categories of social media have been established. In their influential article, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) identified six different types of social media to include collaborative projects, blogs, social networking sites, content communities, virtual social worlds, and virtual game worlds. Two of these, blogs and social networking sites, are prominent forms of social media in which hikers have selected to share their stories. As such, these two types of social media are described in detail below.

Blogs. Blogs represent the earliest form of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). A

blog is most commonly referred to as a diary/journal entry, displayed in reverse chronological order, that an individual has published on the world wide web (Quiggin, 2006; Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; Hookway, 2008). A blog may be composed of the author(s) thoughts, opinions and observations, information from the traditional media, and/or other insider knowledge about the topic of interest (Quiggin, 2006; Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; Hookway, 2008). Hookway (2008) identifies blogs as “a revolutionary form of bottom-up news production and a new way of constructing self and doing community in late-modern times” (p. 91).

Blogs generate a substantial amount of information for the reader. In fact, many blogs communicate in greater detail and depth than both traditional media channels and online news sites. Indeed, blogs may be very revealing (Banyai, 2016). As a result, individuals and providers have begun to turn to blogs for information. Individuals may seek advice, assistance, and/or support from a blog while leisure and tourism providers can use blog content to understand individual experiences (Banyai & Havitz, 2013; Banyai & Potwarka, 2012). Indeed, blogs can represent a valued and trusted source of information (Hewitt, 2005; Jones & Alony, 2008). Further, blogs may provide the general public with access to insider knowledge within a particular social world. Websites and various news and event pages associated with a certain social world may be accessed through blogs.

Social networking sites. Social networking sites (SNSs) have been defined by boyd and Ellison (2008) as an online service that allows individuals to “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). Popular social networking sites include Facebook, Twitter, Bebo, YouTube, and

Flickr, to name a few.

The foundation of social networking sites lies within each user profile. User profiles typically include personal information about the individual, a list of friends, and a profile photo. In these ways, users can find and create community by browsing the profiles of other users. Most SNSs offer their users the choice to leave messages on their Friends' profiles (i.e. Facebook), share photos (i.e. Flickr, Instagram), share videos (i.e. YouTube), post blogs, post to discussion forums, and so on.

As suggested, social media provides an outlet for identity expression and affirmation (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2006). Those who post their leisure experiences online are showcasing their activities to others within their social world. Individuals are able to retell their most meaningful and inspiring tales to others. This act can lead to feelings of recognition and value for the user (Jones & Alony, 2008). Further, through the construction and development of life stories, we reaffirm our notions of self (Leppanen, Kytola, Jousmaki, Peuronen & Westinen, 2014; Kyle et al., 2007; Scheibe, 1986). As Leppanen et al. (2014) suggest, identities are “constructed in active processes of identification and self-understanding, seeking or eschewing commonality, connectedness and groupness” (p. 112).

Researchers have explored blogs and social networking sites to discover the ways in which others have been successful in their leisure pursuits. Hikers look to others for support; advice on what clothing to wear, what equipment to use, what weather conditions are preferred, and for words of encouragement. In these ways, the online hiking social world may guide, direct, and motivate its members as they strive to find success in their pursuits. It seems worthwhile to explore the online environment to discover how it might guide and direct hikers' behaviours.

This chapter has provided an overview of the many influences that can alter, direct, and change behaviour patterns. It has reviewed the means through which leisure participants might be exposed to those influences. Online blogs and social networking sites were highlighted in this regard. The next section outlines how these many factors might become part of decision making. While many decision making models are available, this section focuses on Byrnes' (1998) Self-Regulation Model. This model is generally consistent with models available in the consumer behaviour literature (Assael, 1984) and is used as a sensitizing model within this thesis. It lays out how insights from the TPB and SCT might be integrated into decision making.

The Self-Regulation Model

In 1998, Byrnes proposed a decision making model that aids in our understanding of “what people do (in their minds and actions) when they make decisions” (Byrnes, 1998, p. 8). This model, the Self-Regulation Model (SRM), helps us understand leisure choices. Factors such as the self and others influence the individual's decision.

Byrnes' (1998) Self-Regulation Model builds on previous scholars' work on decision making. Building upon the work of decision theorists in the 1980's and 1990's (Furby & Beyth-Marom, 1992; von Winterfeldt & Edwards, 1986), Byrnes (1998) proposed three subsequent phases of decision making (see Figure 2). In addition, Byrnes (1998) includes a fourth component, which highlights the various moderating factors that may influence the decision making process (Byrnes, 1998).

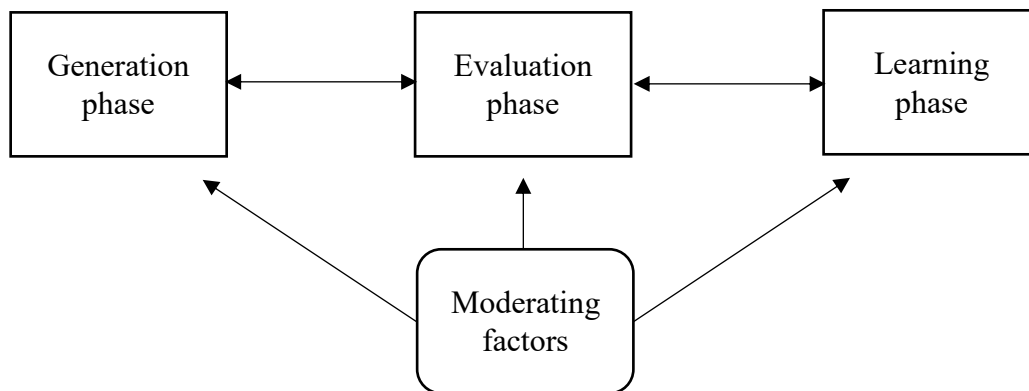


Figure 2. The Self-Regulation Model. This figure illustrates each element of the Self-Regulation Model. Adapted from *The Nature and Development of Decision making: A Self-Regulation Model* (p. 31) by J. P. Byrnes, 1998, New York, NY: Routledge.

The three phases of decision making include the generation phase, the evaluation phase, and the learning phase (Byrnes, 1998). These phases may be seen as three subsequent periods in time (i.e. before the decision is made, during the decision making, and after the decision is made).

Generation phase. The generation phase is the first phase of the SRM. If an individual is uncertain about how to accomplish a task, goal, etc. or a solution is not yet apparent, an individual will enter this phase to generate options as to how they might respond (Byrnes, 1998). However, if options are already present to the individual, they may skip over the generation phase and may proceed directly to the evaluation phase.

There are three components of the generation phase: cue interpretation, goal setting, and strategy construction (Byrnes, 1998). The first of three is cue interpretation. An individual must recognize and interpret personal cues (i.e. feelings or thoughts) or cues within the outside environment before they are able to respond to it (Byrnes, 1998). Reading blogs about extreme

hiking may peak the reader's interest, thus acting as a cue.

The second phase is goal setting. Once cues are acknowledged and understood, the individual decides whether or not to respond to the cue. An assumption of the SRM is that as soon as an individual ponders this decision, they leave the generation phase and begin the evaluation phase (Byrnes, 1998). If the individual ignores the cue, he/she returns to the beginning of the generation phase. However, if the individual chooses to respond to the cue, they need to decide *how* to respond. According to SRM (1998), there are four ways to determine how to respond to a cue: “(1) retrieve a response from memory, (2) construct a response using analogical reasoning, (3) construct a response using causal reasoning and (4) seek advice regarding how to proceed” (p. 38). Byrnes (1998) defines these methods as construction strategies for fulfilling individual goals.

Construction strategies may involve a single action or a number of actions that will result in goal achievement. The first strategy, memory retrieval, is used when the same cue recurs in the same context (Byrnes, 1998). As such, a more experienced individual may use this strategy more often. A hiker may use this strategy if they desire to hike a trail that they have already completed in the past.

Analogical reasoning suggests that there is partial overlap between the current context and the previous context (Byrnes, 1998). In other words, the past experience is similar but not identical. Many hikers may use this method if they are pursuing a hike in a new and unfamiliar setting. According to Scholnick and Friedman (1993), it is more efficient to alter past techniques and practices to fit the current setting rather than creating new practices altogether. We may learn from previous mistakes and build on past successes.

Casual reasoning is the third method for establishing strategies. The SRM assumes that “actions are connected to outcomes in a casual way” (Byrnes, 1998, p. 40). Therefore, through casual reasoning, we may plan out current actions so that they may produce the outcome that we desire. For instance, we may use casual reasoning to plan out various actions that will lead to a successful hike. Such actions may involve planning out the how much and what equipment needed, how much food is needed, how far the hiker is required to travel each day, where the hiker is staying each night, etc. It is likely that casual reasoning is used quite frequently before a hike (i.e. planning out the necessary actions) and throughout the hike (i.e. altering actions to ensure the desired outcome).

The final method for constructing strategies is to seek advice. Individuals may seek advice from others within the physical environment or online. Memory retrieval, analogical reasoning, and casual reasoning are strategies that are individually constructed whereas seeking advice involves support from others. Individuals may learn from others in the physical environment through observation and imitation or during face-to-face interactions. Online, individuals may learn from others as they interact through various forms of social media (i.e. blogs, social networking sites, etc.). Both approaches allow for the creation and exchange of ideas that may offer an individual assistance and guidance as they make their decision.

Evaluation phase. Through the use of construction strategies, an individual will generate a number of options as to how to proceed with the decision making process. It is at this moment, when options are presented to the individual, that he/she then enters the evaluation phase. During this phase, the individual will consider the pros and cons of each option. Information found in any number of sources (blog posts are just one example) may be used in making these

assessments.

The individual will consider various issues such as causality, resource issues, and/or social/moral convention issues as they begin to make their lists of pros and cons (Byrnes, 1998). Causality refers to an individual's judgements about the link between actions and outcomes and beliefs about the factors that may affect the desired outcomes. In essence, decision makers will not construct strategies that they do not believe will work (Byrnes, 1998). Resource issues refer to the individual's judgements about the efficiency of strategies (i.e. the level of effort, expenses, and other assets that are required to carry out the strategy). Social or moral convention issues refer to the individual's judgments about the societal appropriateness of the strategy (Byrnes, 1998).

Learning phase. Once these issues are considered, the individual will rate each option, categorizing each option into a rank order list. The optimal option is accepted. Once the best option is established, the learning phase begins. In this phase, individuals observe and then determine if their goals have been met. Within the SRM, it is assumed that learning refers to the "knowledge of linkages between actions and outcomes" (Byrnes, 1998, p. 110). As such, an individual's knowledge is updated based on the outcome of the decision. Individuals make note of and store both successful and unsuccessful decisions in memory for future reference.

Moderating factors. The final component of this model outlines the various moderating factors that may affect each of the three phases of the model. These moderating factors may be defined as limitations, beliefs, and/or biases (Byrnes, 1998). For example, inadequate knowledge of the topic at hand may cause an individual to choose an option that does not result in the desired outcome. Despite the individual's best effort, their lack of knowledge resulted in selecting an

option that did not end in success. Additionally, an individual may be influenced by another before they finalize their decision (i.e. they may gain additional knowledge/advice from another, etc.). As a result of the new-found knowledge, the individual may be better equipped to make a decision. The individual may indeed confirm that their decision is correct or change their decision in an attempt to achieve the outcome they desire.

This chapter provided an overview of the many concepts that help us understand extreme experiences. Pulling from the existing leisure and consumer behaviour literatures, I provided brief outlines of serious leisure and involvement. I too noted the importance of challenge, balance, and the setting in the overall extreme leisure experience. I outlined two sensitizing concepts (the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Cognitive Theory) that aided in my understanding of extreme experiences. I noted the profound role of others in the overall experience, emphasizing the prevalence and benefits of online interactions. Finally, I provided an overview of one decision making model (the Self Regulation Model) which offered insights into decision making processes. The next section provides an overview of my methodology and methods.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

This thesis sought to understand extreme experiences by exploring posts on a website devoted to thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. Specifically, I hoped to discover 1) what elements of the experience thru-hikers value, 2) the role of other posters in the hikers' extreme hiking choices, and 3) how the hikers' experiences change over time. In doing so, I used a realist, inductive approach to analyzing the data. This realist approach relies upon and "reports experiences, meanings, and the reality of the participants" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9). Themes were sought from within the data and insights gathered through the literature review were used as sensitising concepts as those themes emerged. For example, Social Cognitive Theory suggested the potential importance of others when planning under uncertainty. We tend to look to others for direction when faced with uncertainty. The theory suggests too that these "others" can take on a variety of roles in assisting the decision maker. Knowing this, I looked to see if a) people sought out the advice of others, b) under what conditions they did so, and c) what sorts of roles these others played. The theory offered a way to think about the data and potential issues that might emerge. The data then provided the insights that are reported within my findings. My procedure as to how I analyzed and represented the data is discussed further in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Study Site

This study relied on hikers' reports of their thru-hiking experiences. Recall that thru-hiking is a long-distance hike from one end of a trail to the other. Thru-hiking is most commonly associated with three well-known trails within the United States: the Appalachian Trail (AT), the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), and the Continental Divide Trail (CDT). The data that I analyzed

concerned thru-hikes of the AT.

Whiteblaze.net is a popular hiking website and was selected to gather data.

Whiteblaze.net focuses on discussions surrounding the Appalachian Trail. The AT covers 3,525km (2,190 miles) and typically requires five to eight months of hiking for completion. The dedication required to undertake thru-hikes on the AT is noteworthy. Those who seek out information on this website are interested in the demands of such a hike. Their participation on this site suggests an abiding interest in difficult hiking challenges.

The Whiteblaze network. Created in 2002, Whiteblaze.net describes itself as “a community of Appalachian Trail enthusiasts” (Attroll, 2002). Specifically, Whiteblaze.net is the main online hub for any and all information pertaining to the AT. Whiteblaze.net may be best classified as a social networking site. A social networking site, as previously discussed, is a website in which individuals may build their own profile and interact with others (boyd & Ellison, 2008). A user of Whiteblaze.net is given the option to create their own profile. Further, the site provides the user with a variety of formats that encourage interactions among users. In fact, according to the Whiteblaze user agreement, the overall goal of Whiteblaze is “to allow the open discussion of topics that a person interested in hiking may need to know” (Attroll, 2002, para. 2). Indeed, this site was created for its members. There are no facilitators, organizers, or administrators of the site.

The main method of information sharing on this site is through discussion forums. An individual may either view information on or post their thoughts and opinions to a discussion forum. A discussion forum may be best described as an online bulletin board which shares information through various media (text, audio, video, etc.). On WhiteBlaze.net, an abundance of

information is shared through such forums and several sub-forums. For instance, within the forum “Thru-Hiker Classes” are several sub-forums pertaining to these classes organized by year (i.e. Class of 2012, Class of 2013, etc.). Within each, the posters discussed a variety of more detailed topics such as hiking services, campsites, thru-hiking preparations (gear, route, start date), and so on.

One might speculate as to why the site is organized in such a way. It may be for simplicity. Indeed, the site is easy to navigate as discussion forums revolve around specific experiences and interests (i.e. Thru-Hiker Classes, Class of 2015). This facilitated data collection in this thesis. Yet other explanations are also possible. For instance, the title of each thru-hiker class sub-forum read, “Class of ____ (This is a private forum only for ____ thru-hikers, please)”. Such a title suggests that status group dynamics may also be at work. Patrick West (1977) studied the dynamics between those who possessed status and those who emulated them. Several distinct stages emerged. The elite participate - participation is inherently tied to status.

Those organizing this website (the members) may fear status-based diffusion wherein emulators begin to move in and a status base diffusion results (West, 1977). This then may be an example of status group defence in which the members are protecting the “purity” of the site. Only those who have committed to this arduous task are welcome to post.

At the time of this study, WhiteBlaze.net had 56,614 members, 96,041 discussion threads and 1,696,867 total posts (Appalachian Trail Statistics, 2016). Due to the sheer amount of data found within the Whiteblaze.net network, the study sample consisted of posts within a specific forum. I analyzed posts within the forum “Thru-Hiker Classes - Class of 2015”. In addition, there were several links to personal blogs found within this forum. Thirteen of these personal blogs

were also analyzed.

Analyses and Representation

I used a realist, inductive approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a process wherein the researcher seeks to find patterns of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorff, 1989). This process begins by focusing on the replication of the text (a word, phrase, or segment of data) (Krippendorff, 1989). The researcher seeks the manifest content or the “visible, obvious components” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 106) of the text (Bryman et al., 2012). For instance, a researcher may want to identify how many times the word “travel” appears within a text document. The researcher begins to code the data to identify the number of occurrences. Several words/phrases are analyzed and corresponding themes start to emerge within the data.

To assist me in my qualitative coding, the software program CATPAC II was used. CATPAC II is a software program that analyzes content and provides a series of outputs (a word frequency list, a dendogram, and a perceptual map). The three outputs assisted me in identifying themes that emerged from the data. CATPAC II is a reliable program and has been used by many leisure and tourism scholars to explore similar issues (Banyai, 2016; Banyai & Potwarka, 2012; Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Zhang & Mao, 2012).

I used a semantic approach involving “a progression from description, where the data have simply been organized to show patterns in semantic content, and summarized, to interpretation, where there is an attempt to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). Accordingly, then, I sought

patterns within the text (words, phrases, etc.) and then interpreted these patterns to develop a set of themes.

As suggested, my analyses focused on not only quantifying the text, but also interpreting the broader meanings of the text to develop themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Banyai & Havitz, 2013). The themes that emerged were based on my subjective interpretations (i.e. my own understandings of the text and the context (blogs, discussion forms) in which the text is written).

Prepare the data. Guided by my research questions and methods, I engaged in four interrelated steps as I analyzed and interpreted my data (Creswell, 2014). The first step was to prepare the data for my analyses. I compiled the data into one .txt file so that it could be imported into CATPAC II to be analyzed. According to Woefel (1998) (the developer of the CATPAC software), to produce the most optimal results possible, I needed to eliminate “meaningless units” found within the text. Meaningless units are those that show up frequently in the text but are not content-bearing and should not be included in the analyses (Woefel, 1998). Words such as “is”, “the”, “and”, etc. were excluded from the analyses. Please see Appendix A for a full list of the units excluded from my analyses. Multiple runs of CATPAC II were conducted to ensure all meaningless units were eliminated. Other leisure researchers who have used CATPAC II also performed these operations to achieve optimal results within their analyses (Banyai & Potwarka, 2012; Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Potwarka & Banyai, 2016; Zhang & Mao, 2012).

Code the data. The second step was to code the data. I used CATPAC II to assist me in coding the data. In other words, I used CATPAC II to find common words within the data which

helped me to determine themes that emerged from within the data. The data was imported into CATPAC II and a word frequency list, a dendogram, and a visual perceptual map were created.

Word frequency list. Word frequency lists are based on a number of network options to include the total number of unique words, window size, slide size, cycles, threshold, decay rate and learning rate (Woefel, 1998). For all except one of the network options, I used the default values recommended by Woefel (1998): window size = 7, slide size = 1, cycles = 1, threshold = 0.00, decay rate = 0.9, and learning rate = 0.01. The default value of 25 unique words was not used. Woefel (1998) recommended increasing this number to 40 unique words when analyzing larger text files to result in easier interpretation of the dendogram and visual perceptual map. I analyzed a large text file and as a result, I set the number of unique words to 40 within my analyses.

Dendogram and visual perceptual map. Using the statistics provided in the word frequency list, CATPAC II created a dendogram to show the relationships between the most commonly occurring words within the data. This dendogram was created using one of seven different clustering techniques (each with its' own advantages and disadvantages). This study used Ward's clustering method to identify these relationships. Ward's clustering method represents clusters (words that are related to one another) by their central point and displays them in a figure (Woefel, 1998). A visual perceptual map provides an additional illustration of the output in three-dimensional space. The words are displayed on an axis and are clustered together based on the height of each "tower" in the dendogram.

Develop themes and narrative passage. The word frequency list, dendogram, and visual perceptual map assisted me in determining central words within the text and what words tended

to be expressed together. I then sought phrases in which those words appeared within the data. This offered context to establish how those words were being discussed. For example, when searching for one of the more popular words (“miles”) I found that it was consistently used as a way of measuring progress, suffering, goals, and so on. This suggested the ongoing importance and relevance of challenge to those using the term so challenge emerged as a theme. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) define a theme as “a thread of an underlying meaning through, condensed meaning units, codes or categories, on an interpretative level” (p. 107). Themes can be abstract (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 780) but are used to make sense of diverse and copious data. Using this technique, I was able to identify patterns that seemed to explain posters’ motives, concerns, and priorities. In sort, it helped understand their experience. While these themes are not comprehensive, they do reflect many of the issues identified by these posters.

Once these themes were established, I created a narrative passage used to express the findings. A narrative passage may express research findings in a number of ways (Creswell, 2014). Within this thesis, I used a narrative passage to describe the various themes that emerged from within the data. I used a number of quotes from the text to enhance this passage and support each theme.

Interpret my findings. The final step involved interpreting my findings. My interpretation of the findings (found in Chapter 5: Discussion) identified the significance of the themes that emerged from within the text and discussed the larger meanings and implications for research and leisure providers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In doing so, my interpretation of my findings included:

- 1) my personal interpretation (drawing from personal experiences, my cultural background,

etc.),

- 2) a comparison of the research findings with information found within the various literature and the existing theories described within my literature review
- 3) any new insights that I did not anticipate to arise during my analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

A fundamental issue of Internet research is determining whether or not information found online is public or private, and if participant consent is necessary (Elm, 2009; McKee & Porter, 2009; Sharf, 1999). There are a number of ways in which a user may share information online and the issue of public vs. private information varies between each. As a result, the issue of informed consent must be determined on a case by case basis (McKee & Porter, 2009). McKee and Porter (2009) present a heuristic that can be used to determine whether or not participant consent is necessary.

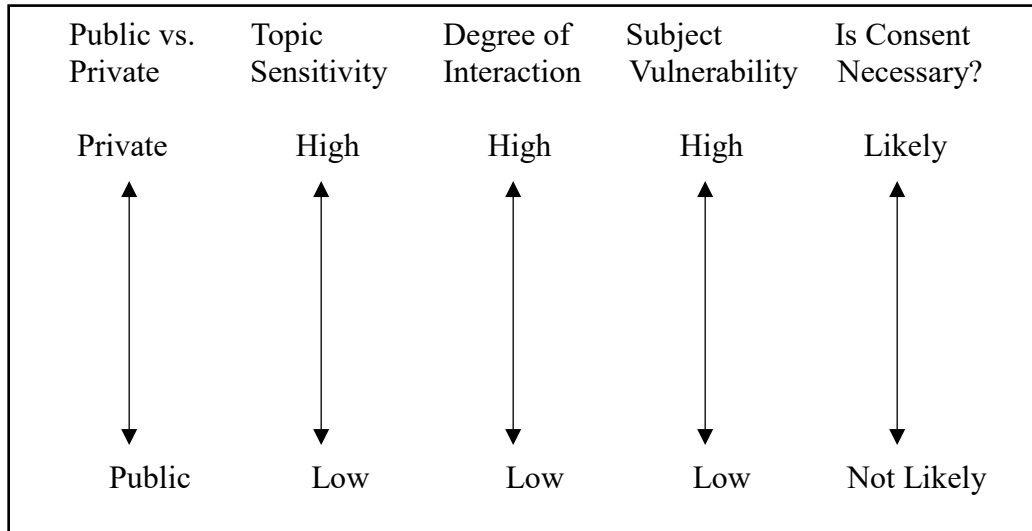


Figure 3. Issues with informed consent. This figure illustrates the research variables affecting the question of whether informed consent is necessary. Adapted from *The Ethics of Internet Research* (p. 88) by H. A. McKee & J. E. Porter, 2009, New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Informed consent is typically used to protect the individual’s thoughts, ideas, and opinions that are being discussed. Procedures are put in place to ensure that things they consider private are not shared. For example, McKee and Porter (2009) suggest that researchers must consider three main factors before it can be determined if participant consent is required. The researcher must consider topic sensitivity, the degree of interaction with participants, and the level of subject vulnerability (McKee & Porter, 2009). Topic sensitivity refers to the topics that are particularly sensitive to individuals. This thesis collects only those statements that have been posted publicly by posters/bloggers with the intent of sharing their posts/experience with others. Consequently, issues of privacy and sensitivity seem less relevant than in traditional studies where the private thoughts of participants are collected. There is an explicit assumption that those who post are hoping that others will see the posts. As such, confidentiality seems less an

issue.

To return to the McKee and Porter (2009) guidelines, there will be no interaction with the participants. I have not interacted in any way with the users of Whiteblaze.net. Finally, subject vulnerability within this study was low. Discussions of hiking equipment, trails (i.e. terrain, weather, etc.), and other hikers are inconsistent with notions of vulnerability. Further, hikers, in general, are not typically considered a particularly vulnerable population. In addition, many hikers post under a pseudonym. As a result, many of the posts are anonymous. Based on these reflections, I did not seek informed consent from the hiking participants.

Ensuring Validity

Validity is a very important component of qualitative research and is essential to producing an accurate data analyses and a credible final thesis report (Creswell, 2014). The importance of and methods to produce valid results are thoroughly discussed throughout the literature (Bryman et al., 2012; Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2014). Various terms have been used to address validity such as trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility. Creswell (2014) suggests actively incorporating validity strategies into my data analyses to ensure accuracy. I have employed five strategies throughout my analyses.

First, I was as transparent as possible when presenting all steps of my research process. Within my analyses and findings, I presented representative examples from the data content as well as my interpretation of these examples to help the reader connect my analytical claims to the specific content (text) presented (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2000). Readers have been given an abundance of information so that they too are able to evaluate every step of the research process

(Jorgensen & Phillips, 2000).

Second, I sought to find rich descriptions within the data to help describe and support my findings. For instance, when I presented a theme, I offered many different perspectives from the data that support this theme. Such a strategy adds validity to my findings.

Third, I met with my thesis supervisor on a regular basis to ask questions and review my progress. My supervisor provided feedback, guidance, and encouragement as I engaged in this process. We were able to address any issues that arose which helped to produce a more reliable and credible final thesis report.

The fourth and final strategy revolved around the concept of transferability. This idea refers to “the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings or groups” (Polit & Hungler, 1999, p. 717). High validity corresponds to high transferability. This is not a thesis about hiking per se but rather a thesis in which explores decision making, the influence of others, and the process of overcoming a challenging pursuit. As such, the results of this study are not specific to hiking pursuits and therefore may have implications for a variety of other leisure service providers as well.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study explored posts on a website devoted to thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. In reviewing those posts, I sought to understand the experiences of these hikers. Three research questions guided this thesis:

- 1) What is it about extreme hiking that is so compelling? Specifically, what elements of the experience do posters on a specific online website value?
- 2) What role is played by other posters in the posters' extreme hiking choices?
- 3) How does the experience change for the posters over time?

This chapter is broken into four sections. The first highlights the words and themes that emerged from my data analysis. Within this section, I provide the three outputs (word frequency list, dendrogram, and visual perceptual map) from CATPAC II. Subsequent sections address each of my research questions in turn. First, I discuss the various elements of the hiking experience that were particularly important to posters (Research Question 1). Second, I discuss the role of others in the participants' hiking choices (Research Question 2). And third, I discuss how the experience changed over time for the posters (Research Question 3).

Words and Themes

Using thematic analysis, I compiled content from one discussion forum on Whiteblaze.net and 13 personal online blogs. The sub-forum, entitled "Class of 2015", was found within the forum entitled "Thru-Hiker Classes". I also analyzed content within 13 individual blogs. Web links to the 13 personal blogs were found within the "Class of 2015" sub-forum. Each blog provided complete or partial day to day accounts of the hikers' journeys.

CATPAC II results. I compiled content from the discussion forum and blogs into one .txt file. This content was then inputted into CATPAC II. The software produced a word frequency list, a dendogram, and a visual perceptual map based on the inputted content (see Table 1, Figure 4, and Figure 5 below).

TOTAL WORDS	58744	THRESHOLD	0.000
TOTAL UNIQUE WORDS	40	RESTORING FORCE	0.100
TOTAL EPISODES	58738	CYCLES	1
TOTAL LINES	190251	FUNCTION	Sigmoid (-1 - +1)
		CLAMPING	Yes

DESCENDING FREQUENCY LIST					ALPHABETICALLY SORTED LIST				
WORD	FREQ	PCNT	CASE FREQ	CASE PCNT	WORD	FREQ	PCNT	CASE FREQ	CASE PCNT
TRAIL	6685	11.4	29233	49.8	APRIL	1076	1.8	5947	10.1
HIKE	3386	5.8	17151	29.2	BAG	974	1.7	4598	7.8
MILES	3118	5.3	15703	26.7	COLD	825	1.4	4874	8.3
TIME	2853	4.9	16296	27.7	EARLY	821	1.4	5082	8.7
GOOD	2481	4.2	14161	24.1	FOOD	1071	1.8	6015	10.2
HIKING	2386	4.1	13535	23.0	GAP	746	1.3	4031	6.9
VIEW	2079	3.5	12242	20.8	GEAR	1349	2.3	6979	11.9
SHELTER	1932	3.3	9569	16.3	GOOD	2481	4.2	14161	24.1
PEOPLE	1905	3.2	10396	17.7	GREAT	1367	2.3	8222	14.0
HIKER	1888	3.2	10115	17.2	HIKE	3386	5.8	17151	29.2
HIKERS	1752	3.0	9101	15.5	HIKER	1888	3.2	10115	17.2
LONG	1407	2.4	8727	14.9	HIKERS	1752	3.0	9101	15.5
GREAT	1367	2.3	8222	14.0	HIKING	2386	4.1	13535	23.0
NIGHT	1355	2.3	7858	13.4	HOME	748	1.3	4603	7.8
GEAR	1349	2.3	6979	11.9	LIFE	849	1.4	4716	8.0
PACK	1335	2.3	7035	12.0	LONG	1407	2.4	8727	14.9
WATER	1168	2.0	5949	10.1	LOVE	735	1.3	4541	7.7
RAIN	1145	1.9	5828	9.9	MILE	834	1.4	5259	9.0
MOUNTAIN	1109	1.9	6092	10.4	MILES	3118	5.3	15703	26.7
APRIL	1076	1.8	5947	10.1	MORNING	836	1.4	5208	8.9
FOOD	1071	1.8	6015	10.2	MOUNTAIN	1109	1.9	6092	10.4
BAG	974	1.7	4598	7.8	NICE	874	1.5	5529	9.4
NOBO	948	1.6	4833	8.2	NIGHT	1355	2.3	7858	13.4
TRIP	889	1.5	5647	9.6	NOBO	948	1.6	4833	8.2
PRETTY	880	1.5	5662	9.6	NORTH	759	1.3	4496	7.7
NICE	874	1.5	5529	9.4	PACK	1335	2.3	7035	12.0
TENT	863	1.5	4416	7.5	PEOPLE	1905	3.2	10396	17.7
WEIGHT	860	1.5	4579	7.8	PRETTY	880	1.5	5662	9.6
WEATHER	855	1.5	5003	8.5	RAIN	1145	1.9	5828	9.9
LIFE	849	1.4	4716	8.0	SHELTER	1932	3.3	9569	16.3
MORNING	836	1.4	5208	8.9	TENT	863	1.5	4416	7.5
MILE	834	1.4	5259	9.0	THANKS	779	1.3	4781	8.1
COLD	825	1.4	4874	8.3	TIME	2853	4.9	16296	27.7
TOWN	822	1.4	4627	7.9	TOWN	822	1.4	4627	7.9
EARLY	821	1.4	5082	8.7	TRAIL	6685	11.4	29233	49.8
THANKS	779	1.3	4781	8.1	TRIP	889	1.5	5647	9.6
NORTH	759	1.3	4496	7.7	VIEW	2079	3.5	12242	20.8
HOME	748	1.3	4603	7.8	WATER	1168	2.0	5949	10.1
GAP	746	1.3	4031	6.9	WEATHER	855	1.5	5003	8.5
LOVE	735	1.3	4541	7.7	WEIGHT	860	1.5	4579	7.8

Table 1. Word frequency list of AT thru-hiker content. This table lists the top 40 words found within AT thru-hiker posts.

WARDS METHOD

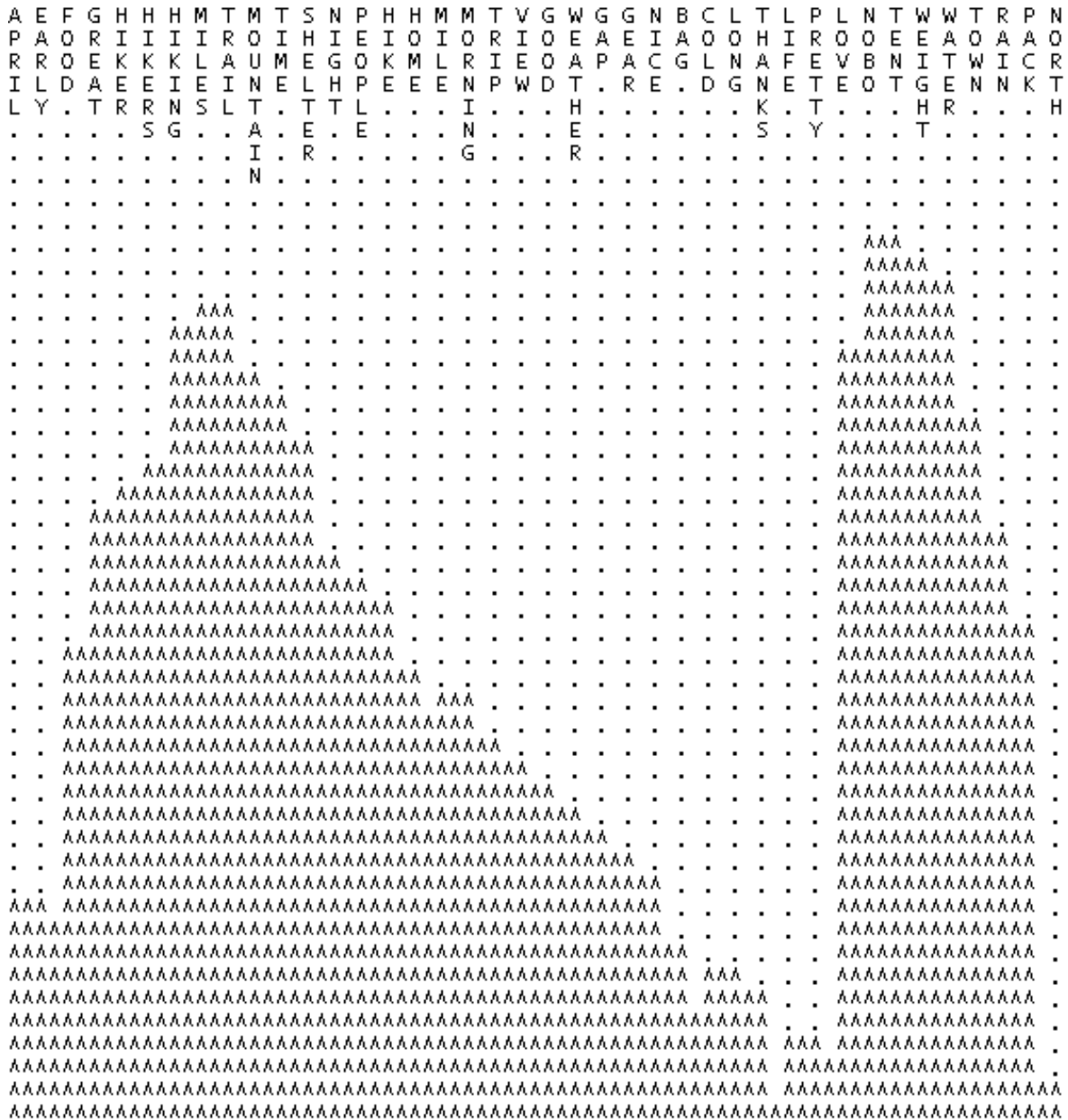


Figure 4. Wards' clustering method on AT thru-hiker content. This dendrogram presents the relationships between the top 40 words within the AT thru-hiker posts, illustrating the size and strength of each cluster.

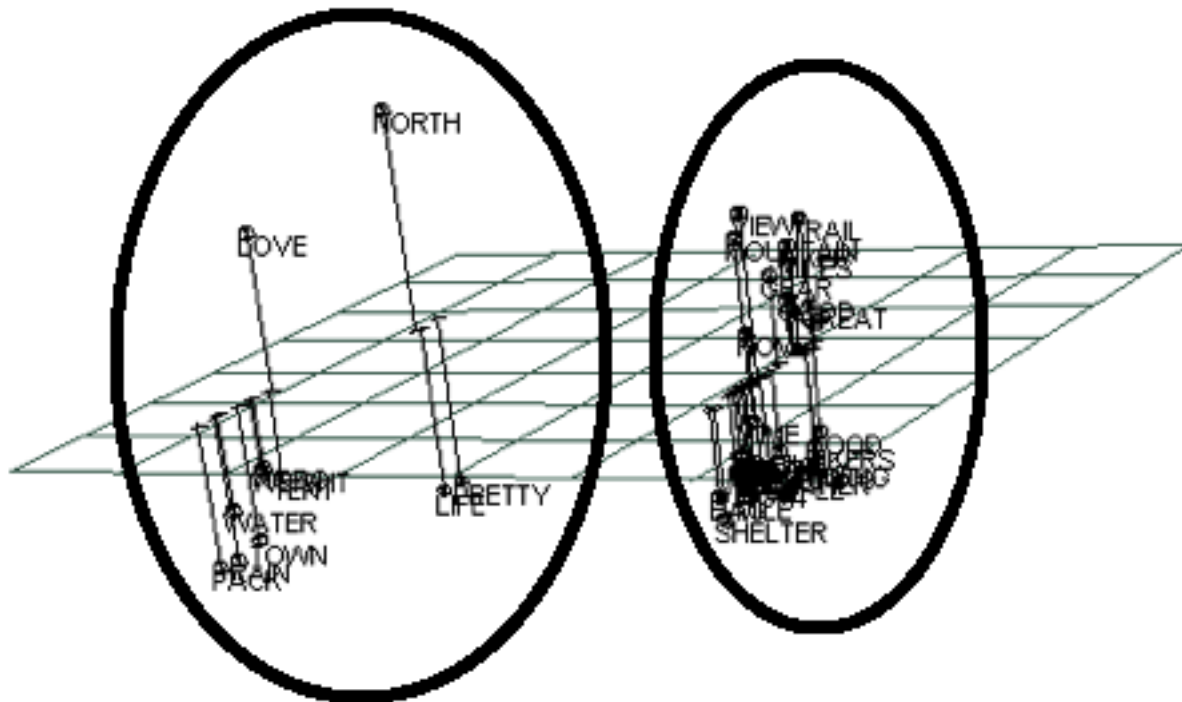


Figure 5. 3D visual perceptual map of AT thru-hiker content. This figure illustrates the top 40 words found within AT thru-hiker posts (See Appendix A for an expanded version of cluster 2 above the axis and Appendix B for an expanded version of cluster 2 below the axis).

This visual perceptual map provides a three-dimensional map of the dendrogram. This map illustrates the two different clusters of words displayed in the dendrogram. The left “tower” displayed in the dendrogram corresponds with the cluster on the left and the right “tower” displayed in the dendrogram corresponds with the cluster on the right of the perceptual map.

Themes. Three themes emerged within the data. While they are considered in greater detail as the research questions are explored, they are introduced here to aid in overall clarity. The first and perhaps the most prevalent theme focused on the supportive nature of the AT hiking community. Indeed, AT thru-hiker interactions were characterized as being overwhelmingly

supportive. Community members were willing and even eager to support the successes of others. This support presented itself in many different forms. Support was demonstrated physically through occurrences of trail magic (acts of kindness) and virtually through posts of encouragement and advice. This support played a positive role in the overall thru-hiker experience.

The second theme that emerged from within the data focused on the setting. AT hikes were very much influenced by the setting in which the hike took place. Hikers' valued various characteristics of the setting and commented on the reflective and restorative qualities of a walk through nature. Finally, the third theme revolved around the notion of challenge. Challenge was expressed as an important component of the overall hiking experience. Indeed, part of the appeal of thru-hiking was both enduring and overcoming the challenge of the pursuit. Participants faced a variety of challenges imposed upon them by the trail itself (terrain, elevation, and distance) and the weather that surrounded the trail.

It is important to note that within the hikers' posts, there seemed to be a lot of overlap between these themes. For instance, the setting provided challenge and offered spectacular views. Indeed, the setting both played a role in the challenge of the pursuit and provided the opportunity for reflection and restoration. Further, support seemed to emerge throughout the entire experience. Participants both offered advice to overcome various challenges and supported one another as they struggled through such challenges. There seemed to be a dynamic interplay between these three components. This interplay is discussed in further detail below.

Research Question 1

Posters valued three elements of the hiking experience (the setting, challenge, and support). The participants valued the restorative and reflective elements of the setting. Participants commented on the spectacular views and wildlife inherent to the natural setting which encouraged repose and at times resulted in profound insights. Yet this was not all participants valued about the setting. Participants both valued and faced several setting-related challenges on their thru-hike. This difficulty emerged from three characteristics of the setting (the terrain/elevation, weather, and distance). These characteristics are explored in the second section which focuses on the challenge of the pursuit.

The third valued element of the experience focused on the support hikers received from others. This support presented itself in two forms. The first described the physical support hikers received through trail magic (acts of kindness) while on the trail. The second described the virtual support hikers received through posts of encouragement and advice. Below, I describe these three valued elements in detail providing several examples from within the data.

The setting. The traditional hiking literature often extols the restorative capacity of natural settings. This insight was not lost on these hikers. Amid the misery and the challenge, there also existed time for restoration and reflection.

Restoration and reflection. Hikers frequently commented their restored state as a result of the setting. The quote below provides a great example of how the setting and the weather provided the opportunity for restoration among hikers. aussielegs posted, “A quick peek outside revealed what we had been hoping for, for days – the sun was shining! With renewed energy, we

got everything sorted and stepped out in to a new world (oh how we've missed the sun!).

The setting also provided comfort which encouraged restoration. DRL commented, "The Shenadoahs are a magical place. There is something incredibly serene and comforting about hiking through its gorgeous mountains, like you're waking through them with an old friend by your side."

Participant also commented on the reflective qualities of the setting. The very act of walking seems to enable and encourage self-discovery and the development of insight. This quality seemed exacerbated on long walks like the AT thru-hike. For example, Boomer began to reflect on his role as a parent and what this time on the trail was costing him in terms of parental responsibility.

Boomer

Just Another Statistic...

April 20, 2015

... I realized what is most important to me while I was out there. It wasn't finishing the trail, although that was up there. It was becoming a better father and husband. I've spent the majority of my adult life being pretty selfish. The trail, although I had spousal support, was another example. It was MY dream. It wasn't my daughter's dream; it wasn't my wife's dream. It was mine.

I still plan to hike the trail. However, it looks as though it'll have to wait until retirement. My daughter isn't getting any younger and she needs me at home more than I need to be on the trail...

... They say people hike the trail to find themselves. I feel I've done the same thing, albeit in a different manner. I'm not entirely thrilled about giving up this opportunity to hike the trail; however, I'm glad to finally be with my family. I'm excited about our future together. I'm excited to finally be a part of my daughter's life. I'm excited to finally feel like I'm genuinely trying to be a better husband and father.

For Boomer, the repetitive nature of the hike seemed to encourage profound insights. For DRL, however, it was the difficulty of the setting that seemed to enhance the insight. This notion is explored in the next section but is introduced here. Dirty Rotten Liar commented:

Dirty Rotten Liar

Days 42-43

Monday, July 13, 2015

I am reminded that growth happens at our limits. I am reminded that on each of our own great treks through life, we will see amazing views at the tops of so many mountains, but there will be times when we are indeed down in those valleys, wondering what the heck we're doing in this situation, and why we're even here in the first place. I am reminded that we must remember that those valleys, those hardships, are what make the tops of those mountains so worth it. Our struggles and our hardships exist to make our successes so much sweeter.

I knew it was going to be difficult. Everything worth it in the end is indeed difficult. It can be a relationship, or a job promotion, or a goal you're trying to accomplish-- everything worth it in the end will take time, energy, dedication-- and perseverance when times get tough. There WILL be challenges that pop up that will try to stop you from

accomplishing these dreams. These challenges exist to weed out the ones who don't want it badly enough. But if you work hard enough, and you grit your teeth and give it absolutely everything you got, you will overcome these challenges, and all of your dreams and desires will come true. You will find yourself in the relationship you are meant to be in. You will get the job promotion. You will get into medical school. You will hike the Appalachian Trail.

This hike will be difficult at times, but I know that I can accomplish it, and in the end, I know that the journey will be one of the greatest experiences of my life.

Challenge accepted. Let's do this.

Indeed, the challenge of the setting seemed to establish and develop new understandings for the hikers. They too commented on their philosophical reflections resulting from the surroundings. Within these posts, the participants reflected on both the immediate and distant surroundings. For instance, DRL reported:

Dirty Rotten Liar

Day 65

Thursday, August 6, 2015

I camped out... underneath the most beautifully clear night sky I have ever seen. There were stars upon stars upon stars. Heat lightning was flashing in the far distance, illuminating the sky periodically. As I gazed upward in amazement, a shooting star flashed across the entire sky. Of course I made a wish, but obviously can't tell you what it was or it won't come true. But it was a beautiful wish on a beautiful night, and an

amazing reminder of just how tiny we are in this vast and overwhelming universe.

In some instances, it was not the beauty of the surroundings but rather the wildlife that caused hikers to reflect. Specifically, the hikers' encounters with larger animals (bears, etc.) caused reflection. This may be due to the fear and possibly the hopelessness that the hiker experienced during these confrontations. During his encounter with a bear, Dirty Rotten Liar, "Standing just off the trail [are]... two of the biggest, widest damn animals I have ever seen. It was hard to comprehend something so large-- like two giant, furry boulders with hungry eyes and claws that can swat you like a fly... They turned and slowly lumbered away... What a crazy, glorious, and possibly once-in-a-lifetime experience." Through encounters such as this, it seemed that the hikers developed an appreciation for the power of other living organisms which offered perspective and encouraged reflection.

Overall the setting proved to be extremely powerful; it allowed the hikers to reflect and discover themselves. Such reflections were at times overwhelming but also encouraged development. Recall DRL's quote in which it was the difficulty of the hike that encouraged reflection. Indeed, many setting based elements like terrain and elevation, weather, and distance could creep into every aspect of the hike. The following section explored these setting based challenges.

Challenge. Challenge was identified as a core component of the thru-hiking experience. A participant's decision to hike the AT suggested that hikers sought out difficulty and even suffering in their pursuits. Further exploration revealed that it was the ability to overcome these sorts of obstacles that created a deep sense of personal meaning for the hiker. Hikers' valued their ability to overcome pain, suffering, and difficulty.

It was found that the natural setting played an active role in the challenge of the leisure pursuit. In many cases, it was the setting (terrain and elevation, weather, distance) that offered the challenge. Individuals sought to overcome the challenge that was imposed upon them by the environment. Hikers commented on the tough terrain, changes in elevation, total distance of the trail, and harsh weather conditions as enhancing the overall challenge of the hike.

Hikers too noted that the challenge seemed more manageable if there was an worthwhile outcome associated with the effort. The participants put in effort with the hope and sometimes the expectation of receiving benefits. For instance, for some it was the view or a clear sense of progress that made the challenge worthwhile. Hikers valued this exchange between work and benefit.

Below, I discuss the challenges of the hike as highlighted by the participants. Following this I comment on the hiker's ability to negotiate the balance and overcome various challenges of the hike. Within this section, I discuss various benefits of the hike (beautiful views, achievement of goals/milestones, etc.) and how these benefits became a source of motivation for hikers.

Challenge emerging from terrain and elevation. Participants predominantly spoke about the physical challenge of steep inclines and/or declines created by difficult terrain. They noted both the physical and mental challenges of climbing and descending such heights. The physical challenge of continual ascents and descents was demanding. Hikers commented on the grueling challenge; the exhaustion, the "huffing and puffing", and the aching joints and muscles, all due to the ascents and descents that are so much a part of the trail. At times, participants seemed to either underestimate the degree of challenge of the pursuit or overestimate their own capacity to overcome the challenge. In this instance, the hiker's perceptions of (1) the challenge or (2) their

own ability resulted in several injuries. Hikers spoke about “blowing out their knees on the long descents”.

Participants also spoke of the psychological challenge of the changes in elevation. joshuasdad commented on the fear he felt as he descended Wildcat Mountain. He stated, “My second to last mile on the Appalachian Trail involved descending of Wildcat SOBO, after dark with a storm approaching, down a trail I still characterize as horrifying owing to its steepness.” Others too commented on the mental challenge of the elevation changes. PUDs (pointless ups and downs), were particularly frustrating. Hikers were required to exert extra effort to hike up steep inclines and descend back down again for no reason other than to follow the trail. PUDs were known to offer no benefit; no spectacular view at the top and no landmark to show progress. Dirty Rotten Liar (DRL) and aussielegs commented on their frustration of these elevation changes:

Dirty Rotten Liar

Days 128-130

Saturday, October 24, 2015

Oh God, the PUD. The Pointless Up and Down. When the Trail makes you climb thousands of feet for absolutely no reason at all. No view at the top, no outstanding historically significant marker, no secret McDonald's nestled away amongst the trees, nothing. And then you descend thousands of feet back down to the same elevation you had originally started at.

aussielegs

Day 53: 'The Captains' to Laurel Creek Shelter – 17.3 miles.

May 13th, 2015

...we took off to attack a 2.5 mile uphill... This 'hill' was truly the definition of a PUD (pointless up and down). By the two mile mark we had slowed down to an old lady shuffle, with Lindsey gasping that the view would make it worth it at the end. One lack of view later and we had started the descent to our destination for the night... Why do they do that?!

It was evident that the terrain and elevation of the trail itself could be a challenge for hikers both physically and mentally. Next, I describe how the weather too can play a role in the overall challenge of the hike.

Challenge emerging from weather conditions. For these hikers, harsh weather conditions enhanced the challenge of the hike. Rocky routes became wet, muddy, rocky routes, steep inclines became freezing, slippery, steep inclines. Participants needed to be prepared for any and all weather conditions during their hike. Such conditions included extremely hot or cold temperatures, clouds/fog, wind, rain, sleet, and thunderstorms.

There were hundreds of posts that commented on the challenge that emerged from the weather. The posts could be literally and figuratively chilling. Consider this post from DRL:

Dirty Rotten Liar

Days 158-160

Tuesday, November 24, 2015

After the snow, the temperature plummeted to 16 degrees [Fahrenheit] that night. When I woke up in the morning, everything was frozen. My water bottle was frozen solid. My contact lenses were frozen in their case. Even my socks and shoes had frozen solid.

In the pursuit of your dreams, when the going gets tough, as it inevitably will, you will have to ask yourself "How far am I willing to go in order to succeed?" "What sacrifices am I willing to make?"

I had to do the hardest thing I've ever had to do on the Trail this morning. In 20-degree weather, I had to take off my warm, dry socks, slide on my freezing wet socks-- and then shove them into the cubes of ice that were my shoes. There was simply no other way around it. I had to hike, and I couldn't hike in flip flops, and I didn't have the time to build a fire or wait for the sun to come out in order to thaw everything out. Sure, I could have simply worn my dry pair of socks, but at the end of the day, that would have left me with two pairs of wet socks and nothing dry to put on my feet that night-- and that would have turned a very difficult moment into a very dangerous one.

The pursuit of your dreams isn't going to be easy. There will be many times when you want to give up. When those difficult times happen, you have to grit your teeth, bite the bullet, and just keep going, through the hard times, toward the light at the end of the tunnel, one step at a time.

Sometimes you have to make sacrifices. Knowing fully the possibility of frostbite from the wet socks and the likelihood of blisters caused by the rock solid, frozen shoes, I slid them on my feet and began hiking anyway. The first ten minutes were terrible, but

thankfully the shoes began to thaw out after that, and my body heat began to dry the socks, and things were fine again.

The sub-freezing temperatures. The frozen socks and shoes and contact lenses and water bottles. The ever-present, ever-penetrating cold. I asked myself this morning: if it came down to it, am I willing to do this every single morning until I finish? Even when the end still feels so far away?

And the answer is yes. I've come too far to give up now. Call it stubbornness, call it stupidity, call it sheer determination of will-- this Trail will be completed.

Every struggle makes you stronger. As Thomas Paine said, "The greater the conflict, the more glorious the triumph." Behind every difficult moment lies a lesson to be learned. I now know how to avoid having my items freeze at night-- wrap them up and shove them in the sleeping bag. But if it came down to it, and everything froze again, I know now that I can handle it.

Eventually you realize that, in a weird way, there is beauty to be found in the difficult moments as well.

Just keep going.

Dirty Rotten Liar commented on his will to endure the challenge. In this moment, he fought the struggles inside himself and kept pushing. This seemed to be a profound moment for the hiker. Others too commented on not just the pain but also the danger that the weather could create:

AJ

The Hostel Life

May 22nd, 2015

I walked up the mountain into a cloud, and right as I stepped into the clearing of the first bald [mountain summit with little vegetation] the rain started. At first it wasn't too bad, but the temperature quickly dropped as I gained elevation and the wind picked up. I was soaked through within ten minutes, despite my rain jacket, and the rain was literally going sideways. I'm not sure if the rain turned to freezing rain, or if it was just moving so fast due to the wind, but it felt like needles stabbing me wherever it hit unprotected skin. Of course this was a 9-mile section of the trail without any sort of shelter, so I was stuck moving on through the storm on top of a mountain completely devoid of trees. There were a few gusts of wind that actually pushed me off the trail, and visibility was down to about 10 feet... It took about an hour to make it up and over the balds and into the cover of the trees, and that was the longest hour of my life.

AJ (and others too) were engaging in potentially dangerous leisure. They put their comfort and safety at risk in an attempt to overcome the challenge and move forward on their journey.

At times, the challenge was only enhanced by the unforgiving weather conditions. The weather and the trail combined created an adversary that demanded much of the hikers. For instance, Grayson Cobb, a very fit and experienced hiker, spoke about the extreme challenges he encountered on his hike. He focused on the misery that weather and the trail could create. Such misery lead to physical and mental exhaustion for the hiker.

Grayson Cobb

Speck Pond Lean-To: Day 8, 31.9 Miles

July 9, 2015

...By the time I made it to the lean-to after navigating my way through some more blowdowns, I was in a drizzling cloud. I threw my stuff in the shelter, undid my sopping shoes, and laid down. Consciously I knew I needed to keep going, but physically and emotionally I was exhausted. I was so sick of being wet, so tired of hiking in the damp clouds, and couldn't be more fed up with the uncleared trails. I closed my eyes without thinking about the many more miles I needed to cover.

It is evident that the weather can create or add to the challenge of the hike. The final challenge expressed by the participants emerged from the sheer distance of the trail.

Challenge emerging from distance. The Appalachian Trail is 2,190 miles (3, 525 km) in length. It is difficult to comprehend the distance of the trail yet it helps to state that the hiker passes through 14 states from the start to the finish. It may come of no surprise then that the total distance of the trail posed a challenge for hikers. The wear and tear on the body and the mental exhaustion felt as a result of hiking for hours on end, months at a time became increasingly difficult for hikers.

Valued trail elements (which are discussed below) could boost the hikers mental state. Below, AJ commented on the absence of milestones and views during one section of his hike. He too noted that this section lasted for hundreds of miles. It was in these instances that the sheer distance of the trail proved to be very difficult for the hiker. AJ commented on the mental

difficulty of the hike:

AJ

Beating the Virginia Blues

June 22nd, 2015

I've been in Virginia for around 250 miles now, and I've still got around 300 to go until I leave the state. Something I had heard about before even starting my hike was the Virginia Blues. Before Virginia there are big accomplishments every hundred miles or so, which makes it easier to get up in the morning and hike towards your next goal. Now that I'm in the heart of Virginia I can understand just how mentally difficult hiking this trail can be.

Many people describe the AT as a green tunnel, and that is a very accurate description for the Virginia section. Most days consist of walking for 20 miles up and down ridgelines and not having even a single view of anything interesting. It almost feels like walking on a treadmill, my feet are moving but it doesn't look like I'm going anywhere.

As evidenced above, the length of the trail was a major challenge for hikers. Some questioned themselves, others lost their sense of purpose, and some even declared defeat. The length of the trail constantly created strong physical and mental challenges. Overall, it was evident that the terrain/elevation, weather, and distance of the trail posed challenges for hikers. In an attempt to overcome these challenges, participants worked to negotiate a balance between the challenge and their own skill set.

Finding the balance - Negotiating and overcoming challenge. Posters often focused on

ways to overcome the immense challenge offered by terrain and elevation, weather and distance. Some focused on finding enjoyment from the very challenge that seemed so difficult. DRL commented on how he embraced the challenge, maneuvering around the “car-sized rocks” he encountered, posting that he had to “scramble up and slide down the mountains”. He found the process to be captivating, noting that he was constantly entertained as he made his way through the rocks.

Others focused on how they were forced to alter behaviour patterns in order to succeed. John Chris realized he would have to slow down to overcome the challenge. He posted about the extremely rocky terrain and found himself “rock hopping through most of it.” He was relieved when the rocks subsided and the trail descended towards the road. John Chris slowed down in an attempt to negotiate the balance and decrease the challenge (risk, danger, etc.) inherent to the trail.

Others used various equipment to assist them. On descents, joshuasdad learned how to use poles to reduce the pounding on his legs. In addition, during unforgiving weather, participants reported using umbrella hats, waterproof clothing, durable shoes (gore-tex, etc.) to attempt to negotiate the balance.

Some hikers used their community of fellow thru-hikers to assist them in overcoming the challenge. Hikers received support through physical and virtual interactions. One notable act was described by Dirty Rotten Liar in one of his daily posts. He recalled the support he received from another thru-hiker on the trail. He posted:

Dirty Rotten Liar

Day 40-41

Sunday, July 12, 2016

But the thoughts didn't go away-- they had escalated.... I wasn't going to complete this entire trail. I wasn't even sure if I was going to make it to Katahdin. I needed to find the nearest hotel and take a zero day immediately. I looked at my map-- the nearest hotel was four miles away. Even those four miles seemed impossible. I finally got cell service and in a moment of panic, I called a close friend of mine, Goon Chump...

And thankfully, Goon Chump was able to calm me down in my moment of greatest need...

GC, you slapped some tape on me when I was beginning to break apart. And I know you're smirking right now as you're reading this, but I wanted to say, truly, thank you.

I felt a hell of a lot better after the pep talk from Goon Chump. I decided to postpone my zero until the next day, where I can take a zero with other hikers and be around company instead of holed up in a hotel room by myself.

Posts such as the one above offer noteworthy insights. Not only did the hikers describe the support they received but they also commented on the gratitude they felt because of the support. Indeed, the support of others motivated the hikers to overcome various challenges which likely help them to succeed in the pursuit (this support is discussed in further detail below).

Despite their efforts, however, participants were sometimes unable to negotiate the balance between challenge and skill. In this case the term skill is used in its broadest context. It

refers to capacity including both physical and emotional resources. Their posts focused on their inability or unwillingness to continue. Many posters noted that the challenge had proven too great and they left the trail. Such failures did not diminish the value of the experience for these posters, rather, the failure seemed to enhance the worthwhile nature of the hike. T-Square and Grayson Cobb's posts illustrate this point:

T-Square

Re-Boot in 2020

Friday, July 31, 2015

Since I've been home, reviewing everything. And really dealing with missing the trail all I can think of doing is doing it over, and getting it right. With myself.

It's eating me up that I didn't finish. I learned a lot. And I learned also that I could have done quite a few things better. But I had to learn it.

So,

I'm re-setting and doing it over with the knowledge I gained. I'm sure I'm not the first person to have done that, and I don't mind.

So 2020 is my re-do.

Grayson Cobb

Home off the Appalachian Trail

Saturday, July 4, 2015

In the end I made it Bull's Bridge Road in Kent, Connecticut, some 720 miles or so, in little over three weeks. It did happen. And I may be home, but it's certainly not over. If anything, I learned that [the Appalachian Trail Record Attempt is] possible.

It was evident that challenge was a valued component of the experience regardless of the outcome (completed or uncompleted hike). Indeed, successful and unsuccessful hikers both noted their ability to overcome several challenges which resulted in deep personal meaning for those hikers. For some, the experience was very emotional. We get a glimpse into some of these experiences in the quotes above. Fatigue, pain, doubt, determination, suffering... It was during these moments that participants tested their physical and psychological boundaries.

Participants seemed more motivated to overcome such challenges when they were able to work towards an outcome. Posters often focused on the positive elements that diminished the misery the trail could offer. In particular, they spoke almost with reverence about spectacular views and the satisfaction that emerged from achieving important goals.

Valued trail elements - Views. Participants were motivated by scenic views. To many, the view was considered a "reward" earned as a result of the effort they put into their hike. Boomer and Grayson Cobb discussed the importance of these views.

Boomer

Day 7

March 19, 2015

A little further down the trail, we came into Tesnatee Gap. I'm pretty sure that Tesnatee means "get ready to die" in Cherokee. The guide book didn't really mention what was

about to happen to us. We climbed for what seemed like two hours and finally got above it. As has become normal, we were again treated to another amazing view. I'm honestly not sure how we made it through the first four days of nothing but rain and fog. The views at the tops of the mountains really do make the climbs worth it. I think the lack of any type of reward for all the hard work is probably why we were so depressed at the beginning.

Grayson Cobb also commented on this exchange. He noted the challenge of the “constant undulation on the high alpine mountains” in South Maine. Despite these challenges, however, he stated that most miles passed by with ease because of the “terrific beauty of the area”.

Both of these quotes highlight the power of the view. The hikers specifically spoke about the exchange between work and benefit. The hike was difficult and exhausting (work) but the views (benefit) made the struggle worthwhile. This exchange made the hike “worth it” for both Boomer and Grayson Cobb.

Valued trail elements - Achieving goals/milestones. In preparation for the hike, many participants established a variety of goals/milestones that they sought to achieve. These goals/milestones acted as sources of motivation for hikers – a special indicator to hike towards. The type of goal/milestone varied; some focused primarily on landmarks (i.e. reaching a new state or town, etc.), others on distance (i.e. celebrating every 100 miles), and others on exceeding performance measures. Some were unplanned yet still provided personal meaning for the hiker.

Landmarks. A variety of landmarks were selected as milestones. Some participants selected towns, others selected various national parks, while others selected a variety of states.

For AJ, the Shenandoah National Forest was identified as a milestone. He commented:

AJ

Beating the Virginia Blues

Monday, June 22nd, 2015

I'm currently in Daleville, which is at mile 727. My next big goal is to get to the Shenandoah National Forest, at mile 860. After that I'll almost be done with Virginia and be at the halfway city of Harpers Ferry, WV.

This has been an amazing adventure so far, and I can't wait to see where the trail leads next.

For Grayson Cobb, closing in on a new state was motivating. He posted, "Before long I was... on my way toward the Maine-New Hampshire state line. I couldn't be more thrilled about getting through the most rugged state on the entire trail and on my way to warmer temperatures and easier hiking." Indeed, landmarks of any sort seemed to motivate the hikers.

Distance. Hikers frequently used miles as a marker of progress. Many hikers established 100-mile goals. Each time they added 100 miles onto their hike, they celebrated their success. These milestones indicated progress and thus motivated hikers to continue their journey. On a tough day, DRL was able to celebrate his success of hiking 400 miles.

Dirty Rotten Liar

Day 36

Wednesday, July 8th, 2015

Today was a tough day for me, physically. It seems my legs don't want to work in the way that I want them to. Even slight uphill have become a struggle for me in the last couple of days...

On a lighter note, I have officially hiked 400 miles! Yowza. I can't believe it. One day at a time. I am officially 765 miles from Mount Katahdin, the official northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, and the hardest mountain to climb on the entire trail.

aussielegs also celebrated 100-mile goals. For instance, at the 600 mile mark aussielegs commented:

aussielegs

Marion to Pearisburg

May 11, 2015

*** A new distance record was set today!! *** We also crossed the 600 mile mark – yay!!

Today was hard work but it was wonderful!!

Other hikers set daily goals for themselves. These hikers outlined their expected miles per day, start/end location, etc. Once planned, hikers then set out to achieve their expected performance and accomplish their goals. Jared's blog post exemplifies this perfectly. Within his blog post he also included a chart of his daily goals. A section of this chart is provided below (Table 3).

Jared

Pre Hike: The First Two Weeks

March 15, 2015

Without further ado, this is how I plan to navigate my way north for the first two weeks.

There are a few resupplies and, probably to the benefit of everyone else around me, a few showers mixed in. If all goes well I should arrive at Fontana Dam, just before the Smokies, at the end of those two weeks. After this I'll start cranking my miles up to closer to 20 every day.

Start Location	Start mileage	End Mileage	Miles Per Day	End Location	Days of Food
Approach Trail	-8.8	2.8	11.6	Stover Creek Shelter (Resupply)	3
Stover Creek Shelter (Resupply)	2.8	15.8	13	Gooch Mountain Shelter	
Gooch Mountain Shelter	15.8	31.7	15.9	Neel Gap (Resupply)	3
Neel Gap (Resupply)	31.7	43.2	11.5	Low Gap Shelter	
Low Gap Shelter	43.2	58.6	15.4	Tray Mountain Shelter	
Tray Mountain Shelter	58.6	69.6	11	Top of Georgia Hostel (Dick's Creek Gap, Resupply)	3

Table 2. Jared's expected performance. This table lists start location, start mileage, end mileage, miles per day, end location and days of food for the individual hiker.

Such detailed planning set forth goals that could both motivate and guide individuals in achieving their expected performance. Hikers had a goal in mind and were constantly working

towards achieving that goal.

Performance. Hikers found a variety of performance related elements to be rewarding. Boomer spoke about making it past the point where 30% of hikers drop off the trail. He stated, “Might seem like ho-hum to you, it’s a glimmer of hope to me”. Milestones of any form were very motivating for hikers.

Unplanned milestones. Some hikers were motivated by “unplanned” milestones. Participants noted the presence of footbridge or a sign. Each symbolized a sense of progress for the hikers and thus motivated them. Boomer described the happiness and motivation he felt when stumbling upon a footbridge after a few repetitive days of similar climbs and descents with no change in scenery. He too commented on an unexpected sign indicating the borderline between North Carolina and Georgia. He stated:

Boomer

Day 12

March 26, 2015

Trudging along, we finally made it to the most anticlimactic (read: truly amazing) sign I’ve ever seen. It really isn’t much, and in the grand scheme of things, we’ve done less than 5% of the trail. However, in the driving rain, fog, and cold weather, this truly was an awesome sight. [Picture of sign read: N.C. / G. A.]

Nailed to a tree, the wooden sign indicated the North Carolina / Georgia border. Here it seemed to be a combination of the presence of the sign and crossing into a new state that boosted his spirits. The sign was assurance that he was making progress in his journey. It is interesting to

note how virtually any marker that was associated with progress could be motivational for hikers. Thru-hikers sought out any sort of sign that would assist them in their pursuit.

Overall, this section commented on the value of challenge. Within the posts, it was evident that the setting played an important role in the challenge of the experience. The setting also was valued by hikers for the benefits (like scenic vistas) it offered. The setting provided hikers with so many opportunities to reflect and restore. Another valued component of the hike was the support the hikers received from others. This support is discussed below.

Support. Within this section I discuss the support hikers received through physical and virtual interactions. I comment on physical acts of kindness (trail magic) and virtual posts of encouragement.

Physical support - Trail magic. Posted frequently commented on the support they received from others on the trail. This physical support was shown through acts of kindness (identified as trail magic). Trail magic seemed to be an important component of the AT thru-hiking culture. Often the donors (trail angels) of these acts were past hikers themselves. For these hikers, providing trail magic was a way to show gratitude (or pay it forward) to present hikers. For current hikers, trail magic both inspired and motivated the hikers to pursue their journey. Trail magic came in many different forms. Hikers identified four forms of trail magic (free rides, free food and drink, shared company and conversations, and mail drops). These four forms of trail magic are discussed in further detail below.

Free rides. Free rides were one form of trail magic. Posters noted that trail angels would sit on the edge of the trail at the end of the day waiting for thru-hikers to arrive. The trail angels

would then offer them a free ride into town to resupply food, find a hotel, etc. Posters too described the great appreciation they had for such acts of kindness.

As suggested, trail angels were commonly past thru-hikers themselves. However, in some cases, the trail angels were relatives of a thru-hiker or not related to the hiker or the hike in any way. Dirty Rotten Liar commented on his appreciation for a ride that he received from a relative of a past thru-hiker. He posted, “I headed back to the trail and caught a ride with John. John’s daughter, Scatters, had thru-hiked a few years ago, and so John helps out hikers whenever he sees them around town. Thanks for the ride, John!”.

Boomer posted about a man named Bill that he met on one of his resupply runs in town. In this case, this particular trail angel was not associated with the hike in any way yet still offered Boomer a free ride back to the trail. Boomer commented on the ride and his appreciation:

Boomer

Day 10

March 22, 2015

That was one of the best rides I’ve ever had... Bill was one of the coolest people I’ve ever spoken to. We just talked about fishing the entire way. If you get around to reading this, Bill, I genuinely appreciate the ride and the conversation. I hope your fishing trip this summer is amazing.

It seemed as though AT thru-hikers and relatives of these hikers were willing to offer their assistance because of their positive past experiences. The support offered by complete strangers, however, seems a bit perplexing. I explore this topic of discussion in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Free food and drink. Hikers frequently commented on the free food and drink they received while hiking on the trail. The act was as simple as leaving a cooler full of drinks on the trail to as extravagant as setting up an entire BBQ for the hikers. In any case, the hikers were greatly appreciative of the support. Boomer and Dirty Rotten Liar both appreciated and praised the trail magic offered by others:

Boomer

Day 4

Saturday, March 14th, 2015

...if any of you are reading this from the group who did trail magic today, we really appreciate it. Everyone in the hostel has been talking about how great it was to see you guys through the fog.

Dirty Rotten Liar

Day 21

Sunday, June 21, 2015

So I'm hiking along, water is low, hoping to come across a stream, and-- what is this?

TRAIL MAGIC!

I received some AWESOME trail magic today, from a mysterious individual named Starman.

He must have just refilled everything-- there was almost everything a hiker could need: jugs of water, pop tarts, fresh fruit, medical supplies, donuts, granola bars, toilet paper, everything.

What a saint.

Both the tangible items of trail magic (food, drink, etc.) and the unexpected occurrence of the act were motivating for the hiker. The fuel (food) provided energy and the occurrence of the trail magic acted as an “unplanned” milestone (recall discussion above) that signified a positive change in the rhythm of the hike. With renewed spirits, the hikers were motivated to continue their pursuit. It seemed as though both the tangible item and the occurrence contributed to the hiker’s successful thru-hike.

Shared company and conversations. Posters valued shared company and conversations. Whether this company be other hikers on the trail or strangers in a local pub, hikers found value in the ability to converse with others. DRL’s insightful post helped to explain why these conversations are so easy yet at the same time very profound and meaningful.

Dirty Rotten Liar

What the Trail Can Teach

January 23, 2015

The kindness of others, often complete strangers, is a theme that comes up again and again... The AT community is a living organism fueled by kindness and generosity.

The trail brings together people from all around the globe and from all walks of life. Young and old. Sick and healthy. Wealthy and poor. The incredible diversity combined with the fact that everyone, no matter their background, is going through the same experience helps to learn to get along better with everyone. It also helps to form some incredible bonds with people you may never have spoken with off the trail, which can

lead to more openness and acceptance after the trail.

DRL commented on how the social aspect of the experience can positively change the individual. Indeed, the task itself and other hikers are both noted to be important to the experience. Others too have noted the benefits of conversing with others and desired that within their own thru-hike. For instance, 2015 Lady Thru-Hiker commented, “I so look forward to... creat[ing] memories and forg[ing] friendships with those of you I meet along the way”.

The posts above emphasize the trail as a special place for these posters. Indeed, the instant and profound connections between the hikers seem to be a unique characteristic of the hikers’ life “on the trail”. The notion of liminal space may help to explain this unique space. Liminal spaces may be characterized as space in which every day obligations are suspended and participants are freed from social and cultural constraints (Preston-Whyte, 2004; Ryan & Martin, 2001). Indeed, liminal space is evident in this community of hikers. DRL’s post below gives us further insight into the notion of liminal space. He specifically comments on how the experience seems to be free of social constraints.

Dirty Rotten Liar

Day 31

Thursday, July 2, 2015

That's the crazy thing about the Trail-- these kind of things happen all the time. Random people meet, have crazy adventures together, and then won't see each other again for weeks, if ever again. The Trail takes away any of that social awkwardness that comes along when you typically first meet somebody-- probably because when you have fake

names, you're both grungy, dirty, disgusting, and both haven't showered or worn deodorant for weeks, perceptions and first impressions really don't matter, so it's like you're best friends immediately.

Above Dirty Rotten Liar explained how he became “best friends immediately” with his fellow thru-hikers. This immediate willingness to accept and trust other hikers may be explained by the notion of liminal space.

Mail drops. Mail drops were another form of tangible trail magic present on the AT. Mail drops were identified as packages that were sent to a specific location along the trail. The thru-hiker would then pick up the package once they reached that location. These packages contained several items (preserved and/or dehydrated foods, clothes, hygiene items, etc.) that assisted the hiker during their travel. The post below gives us insight into the extent of such assistance from others. It too demonstrates the level of appreciation the posters had for those who supported them.

aussielegs

Walnutport to Delaware Water Gap (Pennsylvania done!)

June 22, 2015

We headed straight to the outfitters to pick up our TRAIL MAGIC PACKAGE!! Back at the start of the trail we met a lovely hiker named Sookie. We hiked with her for a while but she had to drop out due to an ankle injury. She follows my blog (and is awesome), so she offered to send us a resupply box. Well, this wonderful trail angel thought of everything!! We have so many amazing meals (all dehydrated ones) which are so

different from what we normally eat, plus she put in gas canisters, insect repellent, and so many delicious extras (including candy made in her home town). On top of all that, she slipped in \$50 for us to treat ourselves. We had a lovely dinner at the grill in town with the money – thank you times a million Sookie!!!

Here, the hikers again note their appreciation for the tangible support they received. It seemed as though the support assisted the hikers both physically (nutrition, clothing, etc.) and mentally (boosted their spirits).

Overall, it is evident that trail magic was a core component of the experience. Trail magic positively impacted the experience for these hikers through increasing motivation, offering perspective, and encouraging positive change. The change was so profound in fact that hikers noted their restored faith in humanity as a result. DRL posted:

Dirty Rotten Liar

Day 6-7

Monday, June 8th, 2015

...absolutely everyone I have met so far have been so incredibly nice-- everyone in towns, every fellow hiker, the people who pick us up when hitchhiking, everyone. You see on the news all the shit that takes place across America, the crazy riots and violence taking place, people hurting people, everything, and you eventually begin to lose faith in society. Out here, on the ground, moving at a snail's pace, in the backcountry of America and quite far away from the rest of the world, hearing people's stories, seeing how they live their lives, seeing the kindness of strangers, I feel like I'm rediscovering my faith in

humanity one individual person at a time.

The impact of trail magic and the notion of change seemed to be notable findings within this study.

Virtual support - Posts of encouragement. Virtual support was illustrated through online posts of encouragement. These posts were very common and usually written in response to a post regarding the hikers' progress or their uncertainty before or during their pursuit. For instance, in response to one of aussielegs blog posts indicating their progress, Michelle stated, "You guys are doing a fantastic job. Stay strong, stay positive, be happy and have fun. You got this!". Others too offer their support: "Proud of you!", "Well done!", "You are awesome!", "Congratulations!". Overall, the commented were very positive and encouraging.

Included below is a notably high number of quotes from within the text. These quotes are used to show the extent to which posters both supported and were inspired by the hikers. It is evident that it was not just the hiker that received a benefit from these posts of support. Other posters also received benefits from their involvement in the experience. Many showed great admiration for the hikers and were inspired by their stories. The responses to aussielegs final blog post give us insight into both the prevalence of this support and the admiration the posters had for the thru-hiker(s). In total, 65 comments were written in response to their final post. Some of these responses are provided below.

Charlotte

Thursday, August 30, 2015

Well, ladies.... I just can't believe it. You've done it! I had tears in my eyes and a lump in

my throat as I read your account of the last day and summit of “Big K.” It sounds strange as we only spent a couple of days together, but you all have touched my heart. Reading your journey this summer has been such a joy and only works to rev me up for our hike in a little under 2 years... I must admit that I’m pretty impressed that you all made it all 2180 miles without injury inflicted by each other. I love that you did, though, and that you each obviously have fantastic, adventurous, loving, supporting, strong spirits. I wish you each an enjoyable time wandering the US for a few days. All my love and prayers for a safe trip home, wonderful, long-awaited reunions with family and friends, and memories which will last a lifetime. Please keep in touch whenever you can! XOXO–Sari

llowline

Thursday, August 30, 2015

Bloody brilliant. Congratulations to all three of you on a mammoth adventure. I have enjoyed the blogs and photos and will miss my weekly routine of a coffee and a read. Whoa that last mountain was a doozie! Enjoy the rest of your time in the states. Hope to catch up with you in Perth some time. x Teena

Sonja

Thursday, August 30, 2015

So amazing guys! Well done on your fantastic trek and enjoy the rest of your time in the US before coming home. You should be so proud of yourselves:-)

Bob

Thursday, August 30, 2015

Fantastic guys! Have been following your posts since Pinkham Notch. Great to have you at our lake party and thanks for the summit pic with your MMVSP shirts on. Hope to see you back in Oz some time Bob

Godspeed

Thursday, September 3, 2015

I am both overjoyed and saddened at the same time. So excited for your accomplishment and will so dearly miss sharing this adventure with you. I treasured every update and remembered almost every picture spot. For it was 10 years ago this month that I summited Katahdin. Thinking now about thru hike number 2. It is so good for your soul.

Thanks for the great adventure.

Godspeed & Mountain Momma

A variety of individuals posted a response to this blog post. Some were fellow hikers, others were family and friends, and others were complete strangers. Regardless of the strength of their connection, the individuals seemed to bond in the common cause. Charlotte commented on how she was brought to tears reading the post despite having only spent a couple of days together with the hikers. Llowline and Bob were interested in getting together with the hikers once back in their hometown of Australia. Individuals who followed the journey were moved and inspired by the hikers' stories. Some even desired to get together with the individual(s) to share stories and stay connected.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 focused on the role of other posters in the posters' extreme hiking choices. While it was originally anticipated that the posts would include discussions of "if they would hike", they were exclusively devoted to discussions of "how they would hike". Upon reviewing the data, the posts are for those who have committed to the idea of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail but have yet to complete it. Therefore, I did not analyze the role of other posters in the poster's decision to hike the AT. Instead, I analyzed the role played by other posters in the posters' hiking choices; issues that still need to be resolved such as gear selection, start dates and route options, etc. It was these posters who sought advice from other posters as they made their hiking choices.

Other posters played an essential role in the hikers' choices. They were extremely willing to offer their support to individuals who were preparing for their hike. This virtual support was very common within the hiking community. Since 2002, AT hikers have used Whiteblaze.net as a primary hub for online interactions (Attroll, 2002). Over a decade of daily posts suggests that the environment is rich with information provided by supportive and informed members. These posts offered valuable advice, guidance, and support for the hikers.

This section of the report has four components. First, I provide a brief outline of the four components of the Self-Regulation Model (Byrnes, 1998). Second, I discuss the various topics that were considered by posters as they prepared for their hike. Topics of concern dealt with hiking gear, food options, start date and route options, physical training strategies, mental training strategies, and trail budget. Third, I discuss the presence of other posters (physical or virtual) in the hiker's choices. Finally, fourth I discuss the moderating factors associated with

these elements of the hike. I comment on the role played by such factors and the influence they have on the hikers' choices.

Self-Regulation Model. Recall from Chapter 2 the three subsequent phases of decision making inherent to this model: (1) generation phase, (2) evaluation phase, and (3) learning phase (Byrnes, 1998). Moderating factors, the fourth component of the model, are also discussed and describe other variables that may influence decision making (Byrnes, 1998).

The generation phase is the first phase of the decision making process (Byrnes, 1998). The participant enters this phase of decision making when they are uncertain about how to accomplish a goal or task. During this phase the participant begins to construct strategies which are then used to determine how they might accomplish their goal. The Self-Regulation Model suggests that there are four ways to construct strategies (1) memory retrieval, (2) analogical reasoning, (3) casual reasoning, and (4) to seek advice (Byrnes, 1998). First time thru-hikers frequently sought advice from other posters. I note the presence of analogical and casual reasoning in some of the hikers' posts, however, the focus of this study is on the fourth construction strategy: to seek advice. Once advice is given, the individual generates a number of options to be used to accomplish their goal.

The second phase of the decision making process is the evaluation phase. It is in this phase that the individual reviews the pros and cons of each option before deciding on the optimal strategy. Finally, during the third phase, the individual observes and then determines if his/her goals have been met. While all three phases of this model are important to the thru-hiker experience, I have only focused on the evaluation phase within this study. This study focused on the choices made by posters who have decided to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail but have yet to

complete their thru-hike. The online posts provide insight into the hikers' contemplations and evaluations during their decision making, not before or after the decision is made. The posts revolve around the evaluations that hikers assign to a variety of topics. Therefore, it seems appropriate to focus on the evaluation phase within this study.

Hiking gear. Hiking gear was one of the most popular topics of discussion for these thru-hikers. Recall Table 1: Word frequency list of AT thru-hiker content from the first section of my results. This table illustrated the top 40 words within the data. Many of these words within this table revolved around the topic of gear (i.e. gear, weight, bag, tent, pack, etc.). This suggests the prevalence and importance of such a topic to the hiking community. Indeed, new thru-hikers post several comments asking for feedback from others. Specifically, they asked questions about hiking equipment (tent, sleeping bag, etc.), clothing, shoes, hygiene products, and other miscellaneous items. New thru-hikers sought advice, support, and/or verification from other posters.

Several hikers posted their gear list for their thru-hike. While it was referred to as a "gear list" by hikers, it is not just limited to gear but rather a complete list of what the hiker planned to bring on their hike (equipment, clothing, shoes, hygiene products, etc.). Typically, when they posted their gear list, they too asked for advice on what was missing, what not to bring, the weight of their pack, etc. For instance, showtime_ provided a list of his gear in one of his posts. At the end of his post, he asked for advice on the weight of his pack and his gear selection. Fourteen posters responded. Such a high response rate suggested that others were willing and some perhaps even actively sought to support others in their thru-hiking decisions.

The responses to his post varied. MamaBear suggested that he bring an emergency kit of

some kind (ibuprofen or Tylenol and some band aids), Poedog recommended that reduce his weight by getting rid of a towel and bringing a bandana, and mountain squid offered several detailed insights. His complete response is added below. He commented:

Some observations:

3 [pairs] of shorts? – 2 should be enough; one for hiking, one for sleep/town (when doing laundry)

extra [pair] of socks for camp use only and always dry

camp shoes

knife needs only to be big enough to slice bagels and spread [peanut butter] – military guys have a tendency to bring a Rambo knife?!?

small swiss army knife [with] tweezers and scissors would suffice

hand sanitizer

needle for draining blisters

lighter

duct tape

ear plugs

pencil

small notebook

insect repellent

head net

Companion/AT Guide – guidebook with town info... ...Good Luck and Have Fun!

See you on the trail,

mt squid

The posts from MamaBear and Poedog seemed to be more suggestive, guiding the hiker in their choices whereas the post from mountain squid seemed to be instructive. This poster specifically noted the items the hiker would require and the items the hiker could leave behind. There is no sense of uncertainty in this post. Regardless of the instructive nature of the post, showtime_'s response to these posts indicated that each post assisted and influenced his final gear selection. He first showed his appreciation for the posts by thanking the posters for their input. Next, he noted that he would change his gear as a result of their responses. Specifically, he commented on including ibuprofen in his pack, swapping the towel for a bandana, reducing his pack to two pair of shorts, and adding a lighter to his pack. He did not however agree with all of mountain squid's suggestions. He posted that he would not be bringing a needle, insect repellent, or a head net.

When several posters offered advice (and at times conflicting advice), the hiker would have to navigate these posts and select the best option based on their own values and beliefs. Values and beliefs are identified in the Self-Regulation Model as moderating factors. These factors are described in more detail at the end of this section.

Not only did other hikers reply to posts, but they also made an effort to be the first to engage in conversation. Other posters reached out to hikers offering their advice and support. q-tip, a frequent poster from Richmond, Virginia, commented, "I have a number of gear list spreadsheets that got me from 40 lbs to 13-15 lbs. If interested send me a [personal message] with your email (large files). Good luck...." Again, this demonstrates the willingness of experienced hikers to post helpful information for other hikers attempting the same journey. It

was evident that these posters were eager to act as social prompters and instructors (Bandura, 2001, 2004), guiding and directing the hiker's behaviour.

Food options. Posters also discussed thru-hiking food options. Hikers made decisions regarding the type of food they would be eating and how they would obtain food while on the trail. Two types of food were noted: (1) dry food and/or (2) hot food. While hikers noted that they would frequently hike to a nearby town to resupply, they also commented on the importance of setting up other food sources. Before their hike, many hikers prepared mail drops and bounce boxes. This method of preparation is discussed in further detail below.

Dry food. Posters commented on the benefits of dry food. In many cases, dry food diets were more efficient (no cooking required) and resulted in a light pack (no cooking appliances required). Thus, many participants selected a dry food, no-cook diet before beginning their thru-hike. The level of complexity and detail of such preparations varied between hikers. For instance, Grayson Cobb provided explicit details of his diet. He conducted an in-depth analysis of many different foods. He searched for the highest calorie dense foods but also took into consideration macronutrient numbers, personal preferences, energy balance, fiber content and other contents (See Table 3 below).

Food	Kcal/g	Protein (g/g)	Fat (g/g)	Carbs (g/g)	Sodium (mg/g)
Fritos chili cheese	5.71	0.07	0.36	0.54	9.65
Fritos	5.70	0.07	0.36	0.57	6.10
Keebler Pecan shortbread	5.50	0.06	0.32	0.58	3.50
Nature valley roasted nut crunch almond crunch	5.43	0.17	0.37	0.37	5.40
Nature valley roasted nut crunch peanut crunch	5.43	0.17	0.37	0.37	5.40
Nutella	5.40	0.05	0.32	0.57	0.40
Walker shortbread	5.40	0.04	0.29	0.63	3.30
Fritos honey bbq flavor twists	5.36	0.07	0.32	0.57	6.40
Reeses chips ahoy cookies	5.33	0.07	0.30	0.60	2.80
Chips ahoy candy blast	5.29	0.06	0.29	0.65	3.50

Table 3. Grayson Cobb’s thru-hike diet. This table lists a variety of food items and the associated calories, protein, fat, carbs, and sodium of each.cvm

Here, the poster offered detailed information. In response to the post, some agreed with his methods and used the information to assist themselves in their own food preparation. Others, however, disagreed and even disapproved of his methods (too much sugar, etc.). This post demonstrates the high level of thought, detail, and complexity that some thru-hikers’ invested in their preparations. Such detail guided others in their own preparations.

However, this was not the case for all hikers. Others put little thought into their food choices. For instance, when noting his food options, Busfoot commented, “Planning is good so far. I have a rough itinerary that I probably won’t follow”. There is a stark contrast between the preparation involved for Grayson Cobb and for Busfoot. Such preparations may be simple or complex, unplanned or planned. The level of complexity varies greatly depending on the hiker.

Hot food. Some posters commented on hot, cooked food and the value they associated with it. This was evident by their willingness to both cook the food and carrying cooking appliances. Hikers commented on the comfort they found in hot food after a cold day. In many cases, posters asked others for advice on what to cook. For example, Thundermuffin commented:

Greetings prospective thru hikers!

I would like to get advice from y'all on dinner options while on the trail. I realize I could easily fork out money and buy mountain house dinners for the entire duration of the hike but it would be expensive plus they don't pack very well.

I'm looking for some dinner ideas that I can put into a Ziploc and do a "boil-in-the-bag" method. I recently tried a pre-made "Knolls" brand just add hot water meals and they were absolutely disgusting.

Does anyone have any great meal plans that can be arranged for resupply that are simple, cheap, and tasty?

She received several responses from experienced thru-hikers. A 62-year-old hiker from Tallahassee, Florida posted his response based on his past thru-hiking experience. He stated:

Lipton/Knorr Sides with pouched meats. A very high number of possible combinations, more than you'd need for a different dinner every night. Instant mashed potatoes and pouched meats, and the number of variations just keep climbing. And, of course, mac and cheese. With cheese.

In response, Thundermuffin posted her appreciation for each post and indicated that she would make use of a variety of these options. Again, it was evident that others played a role in the hikers' choices. In fact, the idea that this advice was based on the posters' past experiences seemed to add value to the post and in turn, was more likely to influence the hikers' choices.

Mail drops and bounce boxes. Regardless of the hiker's diet (dry food, hot food, etc.),

posters were required to resupply. One way to do so involved mail drops and bounce boxes.

Recall from the previous section the definition of mail drops; support packages including several items (preserved and/or dehydrated foods, clothes, hygiene items, etc.). Bounce boxes were filled with similar items. The difference between the two was in the use. Mail drops were packages sent to a specific location on the trail for one time use whereas bounce boxes were packed for several uses. Bounce boxes were intentionally packed with items that the hiker would require occasionally, but not all the time. The hiker would use some of the items in the box at one location and then send it off to the next location.

Posters contemplated these methods, asking others for assistance. Posters asked others which methods to use (if any), what to pack, and where to address the packages. For instance, wrtenda asked:

How far along is everyone with the logistics of their resupplies?

I keep going back and forth about how to do my resupply... I go from wanting to do mail drops to certain locations, bounce one box along the way, buying resupplies along the way or some combination. I've looked at the resupply article on here and it gives great, specific information but everyone's hike is different.

The resupply article wrtenda referred to here was provided a detailed list of a variety of items that hikers might consider including in their packages. Other posters commented on this post. Some described the limited food options that hikers would have during certain sections of the hike. These limitations proved difficult for some hikers and they suggested the use of maildrops or bounceboxes.

Others noted that mail drops and bounce boxes were unnecessary, indicating that the logistics of setting up these packages was not worth the reward. In addition, posters also asked where to address such packages. For example, brancher commented, “Does anybody have info as to names/addresses/etc. of possible mail drops between Harper’s Ferry and Maine? I am in the process of making a plan for bounces...”. Other posters provided information and web links to assist the hiker in their preparations. The thru-hiker was not the only poster to plan these packages. In many cases, members of the hikers’ online support group (friends and family) offered to prepare and send these packages. Their interest and role is in assisting not in taking part per se. The hikers noted their great appreciation for such packages.

Start date and route options. Hikers frequently discussed start dates and route options for their hike. Start dates varied depending on the route the hiker selected (NOBO, SOBO, or Flip-flop). North Bound (NOBO) hikers commonly started in March or April, South Bound (SOBO) hikers typically started in June or July, and Flip-flop hikes started during the same time as NOBO hikes (March or April). A Flip-flop hike involves two subsequent trips to the middle of the trail with one hike travelling Northbound and the other Southbound. Several sub-forums on Whiteblaze discussed start date and route options. The posters discussions focused on two elements of the hike that influenced their start date and route. These elements included (1) temperature and weather conditions and (2) the number of current hikers on the trail (hiker bubble).

Temperatures and weather conditions. Experienced posters highlighted the various temperatures and weather conditions participants would encounter on the trail. Unpleasant conditions such as snow and very cold temperatures could be avoided (to a certain extent)

depending on the hikers' start date. However, other harsh conditions (rain, wind, hail, etc.) were considered unavoidable characteristics of the trail. Venchka and QiWiz commented on unavoidable cold temperatures and rain hikers would encounter.

Venchka

February, 20th, 2013

The weather is whatever the weather chooses to be. Outfit for low 20, hope for low of 40, be happy if the low stays at or above 30.

The mountains that form the TN-NC border make their own weather. Case in point: NW NC, Boone NC, elev. 3,200'-3,500' Since Tuesday of this week it has been Cloudy, Raining, Wet, Cool. Temps from mid 40s to mid 60s. It is so soggy that shoes that were used in the creek on Tuesday are still soggy today... Your rain gear needs rain gear. Have fun.

QiWiz

December 28th, 2014

The earlier you leave, the more you may encounter cold and snowy or freezing rain conditions. No problem if you are prepared for it, but be prepared. This is also true if you leave in early April, BTW. Don't underestimate the potential for weather challenges, especially in the Smokies.

Posters also discussed snowy, cold conditions. Many hikers felt that these conditions were an unnecessary element of the hike and they asked advice from others as how to avoid the

snow and cold. For instance, Wandering Deer commented, “Seriously considering a NOBO thru-hike but not quite sure as to when I should start. I’d prefer to avoid snow (mass accumulations).” Elder, a 64-year-old experienced thru-hiker from Oakwood, Georgia, responded with her advice. She posted, “April 1st..... It is the #1 target date, Hike North with the Spring, etc. You should be clear of major snow events, except for the Smoky's.”

Others also commented, adding insights from their own experiences. CarlZ993 reflected on his Northbound thru-hike when he stated:

I started my hike on 3/21/13. I wished I had started later. Snow & icy conditions at times. Some very cold nights. Tested my 15 deg [degree] bag's limits. Saw some people get hurt in the Smokies (bobsled run coming down from Clingman's Dome on 4/6/13). I met a hiker that started 9-10 days after me. He missed all that bad stuff that I hit.

It is evident that the experiences of other hikers might offer considerable insights for thru-hikers contemplating their own journey. These posts guided hikers in selecting their start date and route.

Hiker bubble. The hiker bubble refers to the increase in hikers at one point on the Appalachian Trail. Posters discussed peak start dates for Northbound, Southbound, and Flip-Flop hikers. The Northbound route was by far the most popular thru-hiker route (many posters desired to finish at the sign a top of Mount Katahdin), followed by Southbound and Flip-flop hikes. map man commented on the peak start dates for Northbound hikers:

- 1) The window for big crowds of NOBOs starting at Springer runs from the last 3 or 4 days of February through the first week of April.

- 2) ...more people start on weekends than weekdays and this year March 1 is a Sunday.
- 3) Every year an inordinate number of NOBO thruers are attracted to March 1, March 15 and April 1 as start dates.

Posters also commented on peak start dates for Southbound and Flip-flop hikes. Southbound hikers usually started between the beginning of June and the first week of July to avoid the colder weather in Maine. Posters who planned a Flip-flop hike frequently started during the same window as NOBO hikers (end of February to first week of April).

The hiker bubble was a factor in determining start date and route. For many hikers, they either desired to (1) hike in solitude or (2) engage in environmentally friendly hiking. Changing their start date and/or route with the intent of dispersing the hiker bubble would increase alone time on the trail and decrease the impact of hikers on the trail. These two factors are discussed below.

Posters emphasized the importance of solitude while hiking. Solitude allowed for time for reflection and restoration (recall my discussion of the reflective and restorative benefits of hiking in the section above). Some hikers desired to hike in solitude as much as possible. These posters asked others for their advice on when to start and what route to select to fulfill this desire. Experienced hikers posted their responses. RED-DOG commented, "If you want solitude go SOBO if you want to party go NOBO". ATAdam supported this post, commenting on his own experience: "Did a SOBO in 09 - and it's very true. Alone the whole way, night hiked maybe 60% of the trail. Camped on all the mountains off trail and alone in the woods to draw and read."

These sorts of posts seem to have a direct influence on the hiker's choices. For instance,

on September 22nd, 2014, Frank_the_cat stated that she would be hiking the trail Northbound. After several discussions with other posters, she altered her decision. On December 27th, 2014, she commented, "The idea of crowds is actually what caused me to change from NOBO to SOBO." I do not know for certain but posts of advice such as those above may have had a direct influence on Frank_the_cat's decision making here. This too may suggest that posters greatly value the information provided by other posters.

For some hikers, it was important to engage in sustainable, eco-friendly hiking. The hiker bubble, or a high number of hikers on the trail at once, has resulted in degradation of the trail. Hikers have used Whiteblaze.net and their own personal blogs to bring attention to the issue. Posters noted that the number of hikers on the trail had exceeded the trail's carrying capacity. They highlighted issues such as improper disposal of waste, trash on the trail, etc. For instance, BirdBrain commented:

I've lived within a two hour drive of Springer for nearly 40 years now and have regularly hiked that part of the trail (though not in the spring) and watched the steady degradation of the trail environment as each year the spring hoard gets bigger and bigger and destroys a little more of the vegetation around shelters and campsites along the first 100 miles of the trail. Not just my perception - ask any of the regular, long-time trail maintainers from either the GATC or the NHC - they can no longer keep up with the vegetation damage or the litter or the ever burgeoning piles ofummmmm human waste. Things have exceeded carrying capacity... as [the number of AT hikers] go up so does the impact (no matter how much dispersed camping occurs) not to mention the aesthetic qualities of turning a trail that was once described as "remote for detachment" into a pedestrian

freeway.

It was evident that hikers valued and supported eco-friendly hiking. One thread, called “Changing Thru Plans to Save the AT” received 76 responses. Many of these responses suggested that the hikers were willing to change their plans to engage in sustainable hiking. A change in start date or a change in route helped to disperse the hiker bubble. Boot and Backpacks commented on changing his start date, “I’m starting 12/30, that should help”, and others too commented on changing their route. In particular, many noted the sustainability of a Flip-flop hike. It seemed as though much effort was put into promoting Flip-flop hikes to create awareness. For instance, posters commented on a Flip-flop Kick Off Event intended promote and celebrate flip-flopping as a form of sustainable hiking.

The goal of this event was to promote flip-flop thru-hikes (that begin anywhere other than Georgia in March and the first half of April), provide information about the benefits of flip-flopping, and support those who choose to start out in Harpers Ferry May 2. The purpose is to disperse thru-hikers along the A.T. in time and space so that the Trail will be less crowded and negatively impacted, and, at the same time, allow more people to experience a thru-hike among uncrowded conditions.

Again, we see the direct influence of others in the hikers’ choices. Others created awareness and highlighted the importance of eco-friendly hiking and some hikers changed their route or start date as a result.

Physical training strategies. Multiple threads discussed physical training strategies. Often times, new hikers asked for advice from more experienced posters. Their responses were

usually a reflection of their past experiences. Some completed minimal training before the hike, noting that the first section of the trail would act as training. Specifically, they commented on how they developed their “trail legs” during the first few weeks of their hike. Others however, completed extensive daily training and suggested such training to future thru-hikers. They suggested day hikes, overnight hikes, walking, running, hiking, hiking with a pack, and snowshoeing to name a few. These posters may have recommended these sorts of vigorous training strategies to emphasize the difficulty of the pursuit and perhaps too to seek recognition from others.

These posts were not limited to advice. Posters also supported others in their own training strategies. For instance, lordwilliam invited others to train with him. He reported:

New to long hiking but have been walking for the past year. Total about 2,850,000 steps so far. I use a fitbit for tracking. Anyone who wants to come hike in Colorado to train for the big one is welcome to contact me. Good altitude training where I live. My house is at 7500'. We could do some Colorado Trail or Continental Divide segments for training.

Further, others also offered their support in the form of online encouragement for hikers who doubted their ability to complete the trail (injuries and lack of fitness were primarily noted here). For example, Boomer asked:

Boomer

Can it be done?

Friday, February 20th, 2015

I got laid off yesterday, considering a NOBO thru-hike leaving within a month. I have

gear and wife's blessing. I've always wanted to do it and I honestly don't think I'll ever be in a better position to do it. Haven't really trained for it, necessarily, but I know what's involved and have been backpacking my entire life.

Boomer doubted his ability to complete the trail because of his lack of fitness. Others responded with support, encouragement, and advice. For instance, soumodeler responded, "Go for it! Just start off slow and don't push too hard the first couple of weeks." Kaptain Kangaroo also posted a response. "Yeah, go for it! You don't need any planning, just turn up at Springer with your winter gear & 3 days of food and start walking North. Don't get too ambitious with your mileage & get in shape as you hike." Boomer responded to these posts:

Boomer

Monday, February 23rd, 2015

Just [finished] talking to the wife one more time. It's happening. Just planned out the next few years of our life, starting with my 2015 NOBO thru-hike!!!

Again, it is evident that others were willing to offer their support to new hikers. In this sense, they may take on the role of a motivator. For Boomer, this encouragement might have played a role in his decision to commit to this hike. Overall, the variance in training strategies that is noted above seemed to be tied to the great flexibility that is offered by the trail.

Mental training strategies. Many posters noted the several mental challenges they faced while out on the trail. They too commented on the importance of being mentally tough. For instance, q-tip posted:

Without a doubt it was the mental challenge and enduring the daily rigors of hiking that became the greatest challenge. I committed to Springer to Harpers Ferry after being dead on an OR table in 2008, the last 200 miles were all mental. Stopping was just not an option...

Jake2c supported his post. He commented, "I agree. Over my career and traveling the world I had to overcome some very stiff challenges. Without a doubt the deciding factor was my attitude. I have seen it over and over."

Posters also offered advice and support for new hikers struggling to prepare for their thru-hike. One such hiker, soumodeler, commented on her doubts.

It is amazing how one bad trip can make you question yourself. I hiked Amicalola Falls to Unicoi Gap Sept 1-5 and it was probably the worst hike I have ever been on. It started out as a 13 day, Amicalola to Fontana section trip, but was quickly cut short due to the humidity. That is the only reason I can come up with for the trail to have whipped me so badly.

... Thinking back on it now, I am questioning my idea to thru hike next year. If I can't handle Georgia without quitting when it gets rough, what makes me think I can handle the entire AT? It is kind of depressing.

Anyone else having pre-hike blues/second thoughts?

Many posters responded with advice and support. BuckeyeBill, an experienced hiker, commented, "I would suggest you get and read Appalachian Trials by Zach Davis. In it he

discusses the "SUCK" and how to handle it with a smile on your face. Good luck on your thru attempt next year.”

Others also offer their advice and support. jjozgrunt posted:

I think everyone has a bad day or two occasionally, where everything seems wrong and you start to question yourself. It's small part physical and a big part mental thing, it's easy to quit when you have an option, harder to keep going when there is no requirement to...

I live in a hot humid area and most of the spring and summer walks are in 30 - 40C (84 - 104F) temperatures and you have to adapt your walking to the conditions. Sit and think about what went wrong and then improve it. Hot humid weather, you need more water and electrolytes especially if you sweat heavily, you also don't usually feel like eating much during the day so you are not getting the fuel your body needs, try glucose tablets for a bit of an energy hit or other easy to eat high energy foods and then more water.

Have a siesta in the middle of the day 11 am - 2pm and eat after you have rested. Eat big meals in the early morning or after dark when you cool down. Take a water bottle to bed and if you wake during the night more water. Shorten the distances traveled or do some night walking.

From what I have read in others journals by the time you hit the hot and humid weather on the AT your body should have had a chance to slowly adjust to those rising temperatures and humidity and it won't be such a big problem.

Damn Yankee commented on his similar experience.

During my High Sierra hike a couple weeks ago, I had more elevation gain than I have ever hiked. Very steep, very long and unforgiving, not to mention the altitude and carrying more weight than I have done since the military in 09. I hated life a hundred times for each ascent. I was huffing and puffing, my knees hurt, thirsty etc. By the 3rd day I was feeling and doing much better. My point is, don't be so quick to give up, your body then your mind will adjust quickly.

Again, it appeared that posters took on a motivational role here. Posters offered support which then acted to motivate and inspire new thru-hikers.

Trail budget. Many new posters sought advice from experienced posters. These posters sought advice regarding their total trail budget as well as how to allocate their money. One particular thread, “On Trail Budget” had within it a notable number of posts. New hikers asked about trail budgets and experienced hikers offered their advice.

sympathetic joy

Monday, August 11th, 2014

I think the rule of thumb is \$1000 a month. Its nearly impossible to give an example because each person does things differently. Some might spend 2 or 3 nights a week in some sort of motel or hostel. Others might spend 1 night a month.

RED-DOG

Wednesday, August 13th, 2014

Plan you overall budget being around \$5,000-\$6,000 that's for gear and transportation

and anything else you have to pay for before you start the trail.

Your actual on "trail budget/expenses" should be around \$3,000. This is what my 2012 GA-ME budget looked like and I spent an overall of \$5,700 this was for everything, before, on, after the trail. I resupplied myself by buying 100% on trail.

But prices of stuff have gone up since then, every hiker I have met this year is saying a safe comfortable thru-hike budget is \$1,000 a month.

A lot people say budget \$10,000 that's it. other people say you can thru-hike on \$2,500. But really I say budget however much you can afford to, don't bankrupt your self on a thru-hike, remember you got to live after the trail.

Some hikers have even posted detailed budget accounts of their hike with the hope of assisting others with their thru-hike expenses. For example, Texaco provides an excel document with his expenses during each month of his thru-hike (See Appendix B for a section of this document). There is no strict evidence that indicates whether this budget assisted others but it seems likely. Others put value in these posts and often used such posts to guide their preparations.

Virtual interactions emerging as physical interactions. Above we see examples of how virtual interactions may emerge as physical interactions on the trail. These physical interactions may emerge after only a few interactions online. These connections happen very quick yet they are very profound. For instance, Taylor posted asking for a hiking partner. namaste7 responds once and a connection is formed instantly. Taylor stated:

Hi All,

I am planning on beginning in July... most likely mid month. I do not feel confident/ comfortable enough to begin my SOBO hike solo through the 100 miles due to all I've read warning how difficult it is to start in the North. I'd either like to hike with someone through most of the Maine portion, or am alternatively thinking of starting in northern VA and hiking north and then flip-flopping to finish. Any advice or recommendations are welcome! Thanks and good luck to all!

namaste7 replied:

Taylor,

I'm hiking Katahdin on 16 July and starting the 100 mile wilderness on the 17th. I am also apprehensive about the 100 mile wilderness. If you are leaving approx. the same time, I would be happy to hike the 100 miles with you.

Taylor responded:

Hi Namaste,

I like the idea of Floridians sticking together! I was hoping to start a little earlier around the 10th or so but am open to talking about it more! I am still in the research phase and trying to buy all of my equipment. While I consider myself physically fit and have some long-distance hiking experience, I'll admit I don't know the first thing about tying my food up in a tree...

I'd love to talk further about your plans, equipment and packing list etc. I can PM you my number. I'm not sure how much you've already acquired but I am going to plan a day trip to the REI store in Jacksonville either next week or late in June when I get back from a

trip.

Thanks and hope to talk soon!

Others too established their interactions online with the intent of meeting up with other hikers on the trail. Indeed, several threads and posts were directed towards finding a hiking partner. The thread, “SOBO Thru-Hike 2015 Partner” included a notable number of posts. For instance, Hucklebarry posted, “Just seeing how many people plan on doing a SOBO Thru-hike 2015. Could use a Partner for some of the trip.” Others also commented. maggie019 posted, “Headed SOBO around June 20th with my boyfriend. Looking for group to get into! Let me know!”, jillatvt posted, “I’m headed SOBO, don’t have an exact date yet but probably around June 10. Mom would love it if I had a partner”, and wloyalgrace posted, “Heading SOBO sometime after graduation (early June). I’m starting off with a friend and we wouldn’t mind anyone tagging along.”

These posts give us insight into the dynamics of this community. There seemed to be a willingness to instantly accept and trust others within the hiking community. This gives us insight into the role of others. Partnering up is beneficial for both parties. Together, these individuals may guide each other in their pursuits.

Moderating factors. Various moderating factors may affect the hikers’ decision making (Byrnes, 1998). Such factors may be defined as limitations, beliefs, and/or biases. Posters were limited by inadequate knowledge of the topic at hand (hiking gear, etc.) as well as resources (cost, time, etc.). Posters made a great effort to obtain the knowledge they needed to make informed choices yet due to the complexity of the pursuit, inadequate knowledge of the hike undoubtedly was a limiting factor in their decisions.

Posters were also limited by the cost and time of the pursuit. The cost of hiking gear, food, training, etc. influenced the hikers' decisions. For instance, when considering different gear options, Jared suggested that for him, the final product was based on "a balance of cost, weight, and comfort." Time also influenced the hiker's choices. Indeed, many hikers commented on the time constraints of their hike. For instance, FrozenMac commented, "Sadly, I can't change my plans, because I have 6 months specifically off from work to do the hike."

Values and personal beliefs also impacted the hikers' decisions. In some cases, the support received from the posters would vary (i.e. posters would offer conflicting advice). The reader would have to navigate these posts and find a fit between their own values and those that are inherent to the posts. In this sense, the advice offered by other posters was moderated by the hikers' personal values and beliefs. For instance, regarding the topic of hiking gear, there was a stark contrast in the values and beliefs of the posters. Many posters commented on the weight of the hiking pack versus the hiker's comfort. Some preferred a lighter pack, making the days easier but the nights less comfortable. Others preferred to carry additional weight in exchange for further comfort at night (sturdier equipment, additional warmth, chairs vs. no chairs, etc.). There was considerable tension between the posts. This tension is demonstrated in the exchanges between Rock Doc, mankind117, and colorado_rob. Rock Doc posted:

You can pack for hiking (light) or pack for camping (heavier, with chairs, etc.).

Do what you want to do. I think that packing extremely light for 10-12 hrs of hiking/day leads to a nice physical challenge, but often not a lot of enjoyment (start in the dark/finish in the dark).

So pack for camping and enjoy your time at camp, while perhaps moving a bit slower on

the trail. It's not a race (at least it shouldn't be IMO [in my opinion]).

mankind117 replied:

I wouldn't worry about it too much. Your hike isn't going to succeed or fail whether you base weight is 22 pounds or 15 pounds. There is no acceptable or unacceptable weight. If you can and are willing to carry it then it is fine, HYOH don't let the ultralight evangelists tell you otherwise. Lots of people have done long hikes with more weight than that . . .

colorado_rob, an experienced poster with nearly 3,000 posts, responded:

PLEASE, don't let the heavyweights on here try to talk you out of reducing your weight. Sure, lots of folks have been "successful" with heavy packs, but your odds improve with a lighter, but still fully-equipped pack, and what's much more important, the lighter the pack the happier you are on the trail, er, hiking. Wanna have fun? Reduce your pack weight. Lots of grumpy-gus's out there who wind up being "successful" but are not particularly happy when hiking.

The fit between the poster and the hiker was influenced by these values and beliefs.

Despite these conflicting views, however, the sheer volume of posts to this forum suggested that the hikers likely found something useful within the posts.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 focused on how the experience changed for the posters over time. Posts regarding the experience dealt with experience-related elements before, during and after the hike. The following sections have reflected the sequential nature of the posted discussion

topics. The first section focused on posts created by future AT thru-hikers. These posters identified themselves as future 2015 thru-hikers and their concerns were typically relating to questions of “how”. For them, the experience was still largely aspirational and their focus was on data collection. These posts/questions were often addressed by hikers who had already completed the hike. Their responses to such posts were primarily instructional and supportive in nature. For both the prospective and the accomplished hikers, the nature and extent of the experience often emerged in their posts. Their discussions were exhaustive, suggesting the importance of the experience.

The second section highlights the experiences of present AT thru-hikers. Their posts focused on the hikers’ day to day experiences. These posts tended to be immediate and very much in the moment. For them, the experience was part of their daily lives. Their reflections and ruminations provided insight into how the experience was playing out in their minds and on their bodies. In this case, the audience changes. Whereas earlier discussions primarily involved future and past hikers, these posts focused on current hikers and their family, friends, and other leisure enthusiasts showing support for the hiker. These posters were, at least partially, outside the hiking community. Their entries were less about how and more focused on emotional support.

The final section explored the experience of past AT thru-hikers. As I monitored their posts, I found that their discussions were very much a blend of the other two groups noted above. They were very much present in the discussions of “how”. Indeed, they were typically the individuals helping the prospective hikers discover how best to prepare for and complete the trip. Moreover, like the current hikers, this group was also likely to reflect on the thru-hiking experience. They were unique, though, in their reflections on life after the trail. Posts by this

group sometimes dealt with the emotional cost of leaving the trail. The experience was so profound that they experience a sense of loss upon leaving the trail life. Taken together, it was evident that the overall experience was very profound and deeply personal for the hikers. In all cases, the posts represented an effort to be connected to the hiking community and this is reflected in my discussions below.

Future AT thru-hikers. Many future thru-hikers introduced themselves to the online community by publishing a post identifying their intent to thru-hike the AT. Within this post, the hiker would identify himself/herself as a future 2015 AT thru-hiker. The thread “2015 Thru-Hike Registry”, pinned to the top of the “Class of 2015” discussion forum made it quick and easy for hikers to introduce themselves as future AT thru-hikers. Three hundred and ninety future hikers posted on this thread. The high number of responses as well as length of the posts within this forum suggested the importance of this introductory post for future AT thru-hikers.

In general, hikers posted their trail name, route direction, estimated start date, reason for thru-hiking, and hiking experience within these posts. Trail name was an interesting topic of such posts. Selecting a trail name seemed to be an integral part of the AT culture. For instance, posters commented on the inability to select a trail name for themselves. Other hikers or *the trail* picked their trail name for them. Many hikers posted that they did not have a trail name yet or that they had not earned it yet while others explicitly stated that they are leaving their trail name for others or the trail to decide. For instance, Jacob Byrne commented, “No trail name yet, haven’t earned it”, Hillbilly Mac posted, “Trail Name – Ain’t got one yet... that’s up to you folks”, and Glimmer posted, “Trail name: Letting the trail pick that. 😊.”

These posts suggest that AT traditions and values are deeply rooted into the hiking

community and this is reflected in the hikers' experiences. Not only that, but a trail name may represent something much more than just a name. The name may symbolize a fresh start or a new life on the trail.

The thru-hikers' reasoning for hiking as well as their previous fitness experience also provided insight into hiker's overall thru-hiking experience. Many noted that they believed this journey would provide them with adventure, freedom, the opportunity to meet new people, to accomplish a challenging task, and the opportunity for transition from one period of their life to the next. For instance, GH posted about his passion for adventure and freedom: "I love the outdoors and the freedom of being there. I have had many adventures and can't wait to get started on this new one. I may be crazy but crazy is fun."

Farren noted his desire for the extreme challenge and complexity of the hike. He posted, "I'm doing this for myself so I can prove to myself that I can accomplish something few people ever think to try." Others noted specific goals they sought to accomplish. Josh D posted, "completed a NoBo thru in 2011. Going out with different objectives this time. Going to see how fast I can cover the distance." pattiwp noted this experienced as a transitioning period. She posted, "I'll be travelling with my partner... We are both in our 50's and hiking for Life Transitions, looking forward to being part of the Trail Community."

Yet others noted their decision to sacrifice relationships or things in their personal life for a chance to hike the trail. Hikers commented on selling their house, sacrificing their marriage, etc. For instance, Gunner1776 commented, "Look[ing] forward to this hike... Basically giving up everything for it (marriage, home, etc....) because sometimes you just have to chase your dreams." In some cases, the reasons that prevented the hiker from hiking in the past were not

relevant anymore. These hikers noted that they finally had the time to pursue such a journey, whether it be in between completing school (high school, college, or university) and looking for a job or retiring from work.

Many future hikers also provided their hiking experience in these posts. Some expressed their inexperience while others showcased their experience to the rest. It was important for some to express their past experiences. It seemed as though these hikers felt it was necessary to prove to others that they were capable of completing an AT thru-hike.

Some used previous hikes to indicate their experience. For instance, ryleyb commented, “I’ve hiked the [Pacific Crest Trail] in 2007 and the [Continental Divide Trail] in 2011. I’m looking forward to seeing everything the East Coast has to offer! Most people I met on the CDT and PCT had previously hiked the AT, and it was universally recommended.” Others used alternative pursuits to showcase their experience. Pursuits such as Ironman triathlons and other endurance events were noted. For instance, Nonfiction posted, “The Wife & I will be hiking it together. I am an Ironman Triathlete & cyclist & she is a Runner. We have been avid backpackers for years & have a deep love for the mountains.”

Posters would frequently respond to these introductory posts welcoming the hikers to the community, however, this was usually the extent of these discussions. This was the only thread I found in which the discussion between the posters did not continue past the first or second posts. Within all other discussions sub-forums, several exchanges were made. These posts primarily focused on topics of preparation for their upcoming thru-hike.

Discussions of “how” - Asking questions. Future AT thru-hikers commonly posted

questions relating to “how” they might accomplish their thru-hike. Some were open-ended questions, others asked for assistance pertaining to a specific topic, and others asked for confirmation regarding their choices. In all cases, the posters sought advice from past hikers. This advice focused on a number of topics including hiking gear, food options, start date and route options, physical and mental training strategies, and trail budget.

The previous section provided several examples that provided insight into the nature and extent of the posters’ experiences before the hike. It was evident that the responses future thru-hikers received to these posts were detailed and informative. It seemed likely that future thru-hikers were able to plan and prepare for their thru-hike based solely on the responses they received. Indeed, posters indicated the changes and improvements they made based on the responses they received from other posters. For instance, when discussing her gear with past thru-hikers, Sprout78 posted, “Thank you everyone! I think I’ve got some great improvements! I’ll give you all an update at the end of the week with the new gear choices/weight of my backpack.” It is also evident that as the hiker progresses through these discussions, their questions may differ. In this example, Sprout78 may have started this discussion with an open-ended question asking what sort of gear was required for their hike. Then once she gained advice from other posters, she went back to the community for confirmation regarding her choices (as she indicated above).

Others too commented on the importance of these posts in preparing for and planning their thru-hike. War Eagle noted that he had started reading through discussions on Whiteblaze.net two years before his hike. He had no prior hiking experience when he first started reading through these discussions. He posted that these discussions were “invaluable in helping

[him] to gain helpful information.” Indeed, many future thru-hikers discussed how essential their online interactions were in their preparing them for their hike. Overall, the importance of others in the experiences pre-hike was noted time and time again.

Present AT thru-hikers. Present AT thru-hikers provided details accounts of their day to day experiences on the trail. While the hikers did mention many aspects of their hike (other hikers, spectacular views, their successes, their failures, etc.), an overwhelming number of posts seemed to focus on the pain and suffering that they experienced. The posters gave explicit details of the misery they felt. Their followers (family, friends and other leisure enthusiasts) offered emotional support and advice to assist them on their journey. In this section I discuss these posts of suffering along with the assistance the posters received from others.

Posts of suffering. In their day to day accounts of their hike, posters often emphasized the difficulty of the pursuit and the pain that resulted. I provided some great examples of the pain and suffering endured throughout the hike in my discussion of challenge above (see RQ 1). Two more example are provided below to emphasize this point. For instance, Grayson Cobb noted the suffering he endured when he stated:

Earlier in the day I started to realize that I never would catch a break on this trip. I had been constantly hoping for it to get easier, thinking there was no way I could continue through the unrelenting rain and suffering. But each day I kept getting up and kept hiking. When the rain would stop, the mosquitoes would come. When the mud dried, the trail switched to a rocky mess.

Boomer focused on the painful aspects of the hike. He posted:

Boomer

Day 23

Friday, April 3, 2015

This footbridge was 2.4 miles from today's destination. It was all downhill from there. Sounds great, right? Wrong. Prior to coming on this trip, I assumed the downhills would be super easy and break up the monotony and pain of all the climbing. It turns out the downhills are almost equally as painful... The combination of ups and downs proves to thoroughly destroy the legs of the budding thru-hiker.

These posts noted the difficulty of the hike and the suffering and pain that was endured. Next, I describe the emotional support provided by others to assist these hikers in their pursuit.

Emotional support from others. Other posters were an important component of the overall hiking experience. These posters quickly developed into a support system for the hikers. In times of greatest need, the posters offered support and advice to these hikers. This notion of support is explained in great detail in some of the above sections. Recall the sections on physical and virtual support where I discuss trail magic and virtual posts of encouragement (see RQ 1). I would like to add one additional post here to further demonstrate the emotional support hikers received from others. During his thru-hike, DRL contemplated getting off the trail permanently. His followers offered support to assist him in his struggle. Anonymous said:

Sorry to here about your difficult days, but your honesty is beautiful... This is your time, and I can bet that the experiences you are having will help define everything you do from this day forward. Take each day as an opportunity to learn more about yourself and

experience the wonders around you (which are evident in all of your photos). You are right where you are supposed to be.

Posters not only appreciated this support but were both motivated and inspired by such posts. These posts no doubt contributed to the hikers' overall success.

Past AT thru-hikers. Even though past hikers had already completed their thru-hike, they were still very much involved in discussions surrounding the experience. Past AT thru-hiker posts revolved around three topics: (1) discussions of "how", (2) reflections of their thru-hike experience, and (3) post trail depression.

Discussions of "how" - Providing answers. Past AT thru-hikers were present in the hikers' discussions of "how". Future AT thru-hikers sought advice on how to plan and prepare for their trip and past AT thru-hikers directed and guided these discussions. They provided knowledgeable and informed advice, which both guided and directed the discussions. Overall, these posts suggested that the hiking community was very supportive of its new members. The previous section provides several quotes that exemplify the willingness of this group of thru-hikers to offer advice (see RQ 2). As a result, I have no new insights to add here.

Reflecting on their experience. While current AT thru-hikers very much focused on the pain and suffering of their hike, past AT thru-hikers looked back on their hike with fond memories. The pain seemed to fade and what remained seemed to be something much more positive. For instance, DRL commented on the fond memories he cherished from his time on the trail.

Dirty Rotten Liar

Days 188-189 (The Final Post)

Thursday, December 24, 2015

There are many things about the Appalachian Trail that I will miss. I will miss the innumerable beautiful sunsets and jaw-dropping views that I had been blessed to have the opportunity to witness.

I will miss hitchhiking into and out of towns and meeting the most incredibly interesting, strange, kind, and unique characters.

I will miss the genuine peace and serenity that only nature can provide.

I will miss the amazing and selfless kindness shown toward me by strangers who quickly became close friends. Extra special shout out to the Dresser family, who went far out of their way to take care of me and treat me like a member of their own family. I will always cherish that amazing dinner we had together.

I will miss my fellow hikers, with whom I've shared my blood, sweat, and tears with, and who shared their blood, sweat and tears with me for the last 2,189.2 miles.

All of these people, all of these experiences, helped turn this Trail into more than just a dirt path through the woods, but into the absolute adventure of a lifetime. And I'm sure that as I begin to transition back to the real world, there will be so many more things that I will miss about my six-month little jaunt through the woods.

Grayson Cobb's reflections of his hike were also very positive. He commented, "...after some time to reflect I think I mark those moments [moments of struggle and adventure] as some

of the absolute highlights of my trip”. These positive reflections attest to the meaning of the hike for these posters. Thru-hikers identified strongly with this leisure pursuit. It may be of no surprise then that once off the trail, posters experienced a mixture of emotions. At times, these emotions lead to post trail depression.

Post trial depression. A thru-hike of the AT is a complex and perhaps overwhelming experience. In the hikers’ reflections, they commented on feelings of joy, excitement, and pride having accomplished their pursuit yet at the same time they discussed feelings of confusion, sense of loss, and no sense of purpose as they re-entered into society. Overall, many thru-hikers had a difficult time adjusting to life off the trail. For many, in the weeks that followed their hike, their feelings of confusion, anguish, sense of loss, and no sense of purpose only strengthened. Such feelings may be identified as post trail depression.

Post trail depression concerned both hikers who selected to step off the trail (incomplete thru-hikes) and those who completed their hike. The only difference between these two groups was in their feelings of regret. Hikers who did not finish the trail felt regret whereas those who finished did not. T-Square commented on his uncompleted thru-hike attempt. Notice how his comments get worse post hike. It seemed as though the more he thought about the failed attempt, the more he regretted getting off the trail.

T-Square

I fought the Trail, and the Trail won.

Monday, July 20, 2015

My 2015 undertaking is over.

A little over 1,433 miles and 9 states. I ran out of motivation and injuries kept piling up. I enjoyed the entire trip, challenges and have such great respect and admiration for all of the fellow hikers I came in contact with, got to know, and shared time with.

While I still have over 800 miles to complete, I know I will in the course of a few section hikes. Several times I read, and was told, it's the JOURNEY, NOT the DESTINATION. So, I continue to hope that is true. But it doesn't remove the feeling of failing.

My decision to stop was the correct decision and I know the trail is not going anywhere.

Thank you, ALL, for the comments and encouragement.

T-Square

My Heart hurts

Friday, July 24, 2015

Having stopped, and getting off trail was a harsh decision.

I miss the people I got to know, came to respect, and admire.

The journey, adventure, whatever you want to call it, is a very personal thing.

We all start out with visions of completions. I did. I'm sure we all did. Some will, some won't. I didn't.

That is something I now have to deal with. And correct, at a more appropriate point in time, which I will.

To all of those still moving forward, I give my best regards and well wishes.

T-Square

Post Hike Blues worse than I anticipated

Tuesday, July 28, 2015

I'm home. I'm off trail. And I feel horrible.

My injuries are healing, but my soul SCREAMS to be back on the TRAIL.

I'm miserable being at home knowing I didn't go another 800 miles.

He commented on his “failed” attempt and how he must “correct” it (complete his thru-hike). For T-Square, his regret and misery seemed to be all-encompassing. This suggests not only the profound impact of the experience on the hiker but also the inability to recreate such a pursuit.

Other hikers not only commented on their regret but also felt the need to apologize to their followers for their uncompleted hike. For instance, dangerdave and Boomer both commented on their “failed” thru-hikes and apologized to their followers:

It's great to see you all still pushing. I'm your biggest fan! At times, my envy is overwhelming. I replay my failed thru hike in my mind every day. It seems to indicate that my downfall was overconfidence, which is not new to me. I really thought I could make it, and that nothing could stop me. I was a fool. The whole time I was setting myself up for failure. I thought I could "walk it off". And now I'm paying the price. After a month at home, I'm still dealing with daily pain, and the huge dish of crow I have to choke down.

I'm sorry, my friends. I failed you, too.

Boomer

Just Another Statistic...

Monday, April 20, 2015

I've enjoyed keeping this blog going and have delayed disclosure of this information as long as possible because I honestly feel like I'm letting you guys down. I sincerely apologize to those who have been following along; but, this is the right choice for my family and I at this time.

We see here the complexity of the role of others in the participants' thru-hiking experiences. The hike is not just an individual pursuit but a social pursuit shared with a number of other hikers. Yet again, others played a supportive role. Tejas posted her support and words of encouragement for those who did not complete their hike.

Tejas

Monday, July 20, 2015

To my fellow Flip-Floppers who had to get off trail, I know the disappointment that comes with it. I also know that we can all be proud of what we have accomplished. Many only dream of what we have done. My slow hiking style put me in the rear of the FF [Flip-Flopper] pack. But, I had a chance to meet many of you during overlaps at shelters and trail breaks. I believe that this group is indeed special. You all demonstrated a bond of like-minded, thoughtful, and caring hikers. I always had a thrill to come upon register entries from Tree, Faith, Scout, Time, Buck, Fuzz, Brad, Baby Girl, Carbo, and Danger.

Those hikers who completed their hike also dealt with post trail depression. Several of these hikers noted their struggles with re-entering society post-hike. aussielegs and Cyndi Loppers commented on a lack of purpose and meaning in their everyday lives. They commented:

aussielegs

Mileage, \$ spent, number of times we fell...

Tuesday, September 22, 2015

The weirdness of it all is not really having a purpose for the day. For months we've got up each morning with a clear and intended goal for the day – eat, hike, eat, hike, set up camp, eat, sleep. It was pure and simple. Katahdin was our destination and walking was our way to get there. I took great joy in my map planning and was always amazed as the miles slipped by. Our short term goals were where we would be resupplying next, where we would be getting water for the day, where we would lay our heads to rest that night. Waking up with a list to achieve which includes “book a dentist appointment, go to the bank and shave my legs” seems to border on meaningless.

Cyndi Loppers

Everything Will Be Okay

Saturday, November 21, 2015

Post trail depression is real. I did my research. I read journals. I read Appalachian Trials. I knew it was coming. There isn't anything I can say about it that somebody hasn't said already. It's been just over five weeks since I came home and I am still adjusting.

The thru-hiker experience was very profound and deeply personal for the hiker. Yet at the

same time others were heavily involved in the experience. Other hikers, family, friends and leisure enthusiasts all played a role in the overall thru-hiker experience.

Note that these posts offer several insights that help us understand the profound sense of purpose and accomplishment that comes from the intense and demanding journey offered by the trail. The posts reported here originate from both beginners and seasoned veterans. They are inquisitive, helpful, thoughtful, and heartfelt. Like the journey itself, they represent the best and the worst of conditions. Chapter 5 offers and discusses insights found within these posts. The goal is to suggest insights for both research and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

My exploration of Whiteblaze.net and 13 blogging sites offers considerable insight into extreme hiking. Specifically, my results suggest the role of other thru-hikers in hike related decision making and help us understand the many facets of the thru-hiking experience. As suggested, online posts and blogs were analyzed. Thus, it seems important to provide a brief discussion of online communications upfront. Within this section, I provide context by commenting on various facets of hyper-space-biased-communication (Jansson, 2006) and symbolic modelling (Bandura, 2004, 2005). I then address each research question in turn, discussing the significance of my results and the implications of such results for research and leisure service providers. Finally, I offer a few limitations of this study and some additional suggestions for future research.

The Online Hiking Community

Whiteblaze.net provides a powerful and influential resource which seemed to facilitate and even encourage communications among thru-hikers. Indeed, every day several thousands of users actively post to Whiteblaze.net (Attrol, 2002). The hikers' desire to post may have to do with the similarities between these hikers. It was evident that hikers bonded as a result of their common interests. Their shared values, beliefs, preferences, and interests created a powerful, united community of thru-hikers. With each post, it seemed that hikers were establishing, expressing, or affirming their identity within this hiking community.

This common trail and hiking focused identity represented a marvelous form of short hand. As Dirty Rotten Liar commented, "The trail takes away any of the social awkwardness that

comes along when you typically first meet somebody.” Common interest in the trail created an ongoing sense of community. In this way, the trail represented a liminal space in which new rules and roles emerge and social interactions seemed easy. It was evident that the liminal nature of the trail extended to this online community. Profound connections between members seemed to emerge with great ease online as well as on the trail itself.

Members were quick to accept and trust other posters. This seemed very much a part of the hiking experience in that they expected to rely on fellow hikers. In this way, fellow posters enhanced the experience for each hiker. Jansson (2006) suggested that leisure pursuits may be much enhanced by this type of sharing. We may share our experiences with others through a variety of online media methods (textual posts, photos, audio recordings, videos, etc.). Such sharing helps develop and nurture a sense of community.

It is noteworthy that Jansson (2006) also expressed concern that online communication may diminish the liminal capacity offered within this hiking community. After all, virtual contact seems a poor substitute for face-to-face communication. However, the nature of this virtual hiking community seemed largely positive. This online community seemed to very much enhance the AT thru-hike for posters and readers alike.

Whiteblaze.net and personal blogging sites have allowed for the transcendence of boundaries. Hikers from around the world have shared their personal stories with one another. They too have shared these stories with others interested in the activity. Through hyper-space-biased communication, hikers have gained a number of benefits. As these data suggest, future hikers were able to ask questions and gain knowledge that assisted them in planning and preparing for their hikes. Present and past hikers were able to reflect and gain support from their

audience. Overall, the experience was overwhelmingly positive for the participants. This positivity seemed to emerge as an overall image that individuals associated with the AT thru-hike and with fellow hikers. Even those hikers unable to complete their hike described their experience as tremendously positive. The positive image associated with the experience may be part of its appeal.

Furthermore, in this case, this image is not created by marketing communications but rather is created and developed by the community of hikers and their past experiences. When an image of a destination is expressed by the participants themselves, it may help to represent an authentic image of the activity. As suggested by Banyai (2010), by examining content within blogs, the researcher is able to reflect on the authenticity of the event as noted by the participants themselves.

This insight is of considerable importance to providers. It takes a great many resources to create and control websites of this nature. Indeed, it would be impossible for a single provider to create the thousands of posts that populate this site. The community members themselves represent a tremendous resource in promoting the site, informing preparations, monitoring issues and even congratulating participants. This potential of the resource provided by community members can be explored and leveraged for years to come.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, “What is it about extreme hiking that is so compelling? Specifically, what elements of the experience do posters on [this] website value?” Recall from Chapter 4 that posters valued three elements (the setting, challenge, and support) of the hiking

experience. As discussed in my findings, the first and second elements are closely related. Indeed, the setting was key to both the reflective capacity and the challenge of the hike. First, I provide insights and discuss implications as they relate to the reflective and restorative components of the setting. Next, I focus on the second element, challenge, and discuss the presence of pain in the pursuit, the hikers' capacity to overcome that pain, and their perceptions surrounding such topics.

The third element focused on support. Although two forms of support were common (emotional support and utilitarian support), the former seemed very much tied to the compelling nature of this activity. Hikers commonly received positive comments from others. In terms of the TPB this social support was very much tied to the appeal of this sort of hiking. Support was expressed through one of two ways: (1) physical support or (2) virtual support. Physical support was identified as trail magic and online support focused on posts of encouragement. These two forms of support are discussed and implications are provided.

The setting. The setting both tortures and delights. Within this section, I focused on the reflective and restorative elements of the setting. The participants spoke about the spectacular views and opportunities for reflection and restoration. These reflective acts are no doubt a function of the hiker's continuous engagement with the setting and the highly repetitive needs created by the setting. Thru-hiking is inherently repetitive wherein the hiker walks a certain number of miles day after day for months on end. Indeed, this is a setting unlike many others wherein the hikers have been freed from their structured daily lives and social obligations (Preston-Whyte, 2004). These types of spaces have been identified as liminal spaces (Jansson, 2006; Preston-Whyte, 2004; Ryan & Martin, 2001).

The concept of liminal space helps explain why a space like “the trail” may encourage reflection and repose where as other settings do not. Lauriep provided insight into why this place is so special and so meaningful for hikers. She stated, “Is there any other place in the world where people have such freedom to go and just spend their time in nature, [and] roam the mountains and countryside...? Is there any place more free and more welcoming?” Here we see “the trail” as a special space in nature that encourages reflection and allows for self-discovery, serenity, and comfort.

The setting - Implications for research. Above, I noted that the setting was an integral component of the challenge of the hike as well as key to encouraging reflection and restoration. There is an opportunity for future research to monitor participant response patterns within different setting parameters. Do those who complete the hike in wet or particularly challenging seasons find more reward as a result of the additional suffering they endured? Further, future research could experience the difference in experience for first-timers versus experienced hikers. Is this liminal space valued the same by first-time thru-hikers and experienced thru-hikers? Or for example, are experienced hikers less likely to comment on the scenery because they have seen it before? Is this hike less noteworthy as a result? Future research could explore these issues.

The setting - Implications for leisure providers. This thesis emphasizes the importance of the setting in the overall pursuit. The setting helps creates the challenge and provides the beauty. Not only that, but it is also a crucial component that adds to the overall uniqueness of the experience (liminal space). Participants embark on a journey and venture into the “unknown”. The unknown in this case is nature, the forest, and the trail. It was evident that participants

valued this component of the experience. As such, providers might consider providing events and programs that take place in the outdoors or in wild/special places.

Challenge as enduring pain. One of the unique attributes of the AT hiking culture was its acceptance and expectation of pain. Hikers' reported that their journey was often characterized by difficulty, pain, and suffering. Many of the posts offered considerable detail regarding the discomfort brought on by the physical and emotional demands of the trail. In this sense this thru-hiking community might be characterized as, what Atkinson (2008) called a "pain community". Members both accepted and expected pain and suffering during the pursuit.

On several occasions, present and past AT hikers noted the pain and suffering inherent to the hike yet participants continued to engage in the pursuit regardless. They valued very much the capacity to endure. For first-time thru-hikers, part of the excitement of the pursuit was the uncertainty of the pain. They expected pain but the amount of pain was unknown. Further, they wondered about their own capacity to endure that pain. Each hiker sought to test their physical and psychological boundaries.

In his discussions of serious leisure pursuits, Stebbins (1992) provided insight into why hikers sought to endure pain in their leisure. Stebbins (1992) noted, "the positive feelings about the activity [hiking] come, to some extent, from sticking with it through thick and thin, from conquering adversity" (p. 6). Indeed, the hikers too noted the importance of enduring. As DRL commented, "Our struggles and our hardships exist to make our successes so much sweeter."

The acceptance and expectation of pain is present in a limited number of communities. Young (2004) suggested that this acceptance is present in athlete/sport cultures. Indeed,

Atkinson's (2008) study of triathletes provided insight into this acceptance and expectation of pain. Such a concept is described as the participants' willingness to endure despite the mix of emotions felt – fatigue, determination, suffering, etc.

Atkinson (2008) suggested that many may feel compelled to tell their story to help garner their distinction within their own community of suffering. He suggested that through telling their story, participants may feel both recognized and valued. This was also the case in this study. Hikers sought verification and recognition from others within their community. In many instances, these hikers responded with posts that verified the current hikers' actions. However, most responses came after the final post. This suggests that the hiker has to see the pursuit out until the end to receive full recognition and value.

The acceptance and expectation of pain not just present in sport cultures. As demonstrated within this study, leisure cultures too share this condition. However, what seems to be unique about the hiking community is the flexibility involved. Participants in sport for example must train before their games, events, etc. Thru-hikers however have the ability to train before or during the event. Some described their vigorous training plan to be completed months before their hike. Others however noted that they would develop their "trail legs" during the first few weeks of their hike. In all cases, the hikers were trying to accommodate the challenge and pain to be endured through this activity.

Enduring pain - Implications for research. This study adds to our understanding of pain communities. As noted above, scholars have used the term pain communities to describe certain athlete/sport cultures that embrace pain (Atkinson, 2008; Young 2004). However, this study reveals that the AT thru-hiking community, a leisure community, may also be identified as a pain

community. Indeed, AT thru-hikers both accepted and expected pain and suffering in the pursuit.

Recall that pain communities (Atkinson, 2008) often focus on performance. While hiking the AT is not a sport per se, this performance issue seemed paramount in many AT thru-hiker discussions. The performance model may extend far beyond sport where winners and losers are part of the activity. Perhaps completion of the task is a “win” and failure to do so is a “loss”. Can insights from sport literatures help us better understand this form of hiking and other related activities? More research is needed but this study may begin to shift how we define sport, performance, or pain related communities.

Enduring pain - Implications for leisure providers. The insight that pain, or at least discomfort, can be part of leisure is an important insight for providers. Indeed, for this group, they actually wanted the experience to be difficult and even painful. Challenging conditions may be used to promote leisure activities. In fact, the more challenging and grueling the site, the more appeal it may have to these sorts of individuals.

Recently, sites have been promoted for the hostile conditions they offer. Providers in the private sector now leverage this desire with events like Tough Mudder which promise and deliver discomfort. One such event, called Dead End Race, requires participants to run several kilometers and struggle through various obstacles that test their endurance and strength. Several of these events are held year around. The winter races promote the sub-zero temperatures that contestants must endure. This element increases the challenge inherent to the pursuit which adds value to this particular race. These challenging conditions have been used to promote the leisure activities.

Within this study, the participants embraced the rocky trails, freezing rain, and steep elevations. They often rejoiced in the suffering and pain as a result of the pursuit. These characteristics are not typical of leisure sites and seem less than ideal to promote yet they are valued here. This seems to be an important insight for leisure providers.

Overcoming obstacles/achieving balance. The challenge these hikers dealt with was more than pain and discomfort however. They talked a great deal about how to overcome obstacles. To return to the importance of balance noted in the literature review, these hikers were very much concerned with finding ways to overcome the challenge offered by the trail. They sought balance. They actively sought a delicate balance between the challenge provided by the trail and the hiker's skill set. Recall from Chapter 2 the experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow is important to the thru-hiking experience. Hikers sought to test their limits by engaging in challenges that were attainable. As their skills developed, the hikers set new more challenging goals to match their skill set (attempted to hike more miles in a day, etc.). These new goals kept the hikers motivated. Indeed, discussions of flow tend to focus on goals as primary sources of motivation (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1978).

Hiker's sought to test their limits by engaging in challenges that were difficult but were, with skill and dedication, attainable. Even those who were not able to complete the full thru-hike seemed to revel in the challenge they had undertaken. Both uncompleted and complete thru-hikes resulted in considerable personal meaning for the hiker. Yet for some who completed their hike, this meaning seemed to be enhanced due to the inability of others to complete the trail. These participants found meaning in the fact that they were able to overcome the challenge of the hike and find success where many others could not.

Overcoming obstacles/achieving balance - Implications for research. In their pursuits, the hikers sought a balance between challenge and skill. This balance is important, and at times necessary, but it may not be sufficient in and of itself. Many may achieve high levels of skills and partake in challenging leisure but the act itself may not be engaging for them. The individual may be participating in the pursuit for all the wrong reasons. This suggests that the participants' level of engagement might play a crucial role here. There is an opportunity for researchers to explore the level of engagement in these sorts of pursuits. Can an individual's experience be constrained by their level of engagement? How does the experience differ for these participants (high vs. low levels of engagement)?

Overcoming obstacles/achieving balance - Implications for leisure providers. In Chapter 2 I commented on the flexibility of hiking and the benefits of such flexibility. Indeed, thru-hikers were able to select challenges which matched their own skill set. As their skills developed, they set new more challenging goals. Providers within many leisure settings may be able to "mimic" this sort of flexibility in their own activities and programs. Providers can create flexibility by offering a variety of choices for a single participant or the whole family. For instance, providers may organize a marathon event but also provide 2km, 5km, 10km and half marathon distances. The participant selects the distance that best matches their goals and skill level. Moreover, providers may also offer instruction (instructional programs, etc.) which assists the participant in developing their own skills. Both choices and instruction may encourage participation.

Capacity to overcome challenge. In my results, I commented on instances where the participants seemed to underestimate the degree of challenge or overestimate their own capacity

to overcome such challenge. This idea has been identified by both Ajzen (1991) and Bandura (1982, 1991, 1993) in their respective theories (the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Cognitive Theory). Ajzen (1991) defined this idea as perceived behavioural control where as Bandura defined it as perceived self-efficacy. In any case, the two concepts are closely related and are important to this discussion. For simplicity, I will refer to this notion as perceived behavioural control.

In Chapter 2 I noted that perception can be both positive and problematic. Indeed, hikers within this study pushed themselves above and beyond what they once thought were their limits. In many cases, the hikers accomplished remarkable feats as a result. However, as evidenced in Chapter 4, in some cases, the hiker either underestimated the degree of challenge of the pursuit or overestimated their own capacity to overcome the challenge. For instance, Dirty Rotten Liar commented on the mismatch between his perceived skills and actual skills. He posted advice for others:

Step more confidently and you will go faster. Step too confidently, however, and you may slip. I learned this the hard way when going over a bunch of rocks-- confidence is a great thing to have, but too much confidence can be costly. A great lesson to apply to life.

As illustrated, great danger can exist when the hikers underestimate the challenge and overestimate their own capacity. Fortunately, several variables influence notions of behavioural control. Past experiences, for example, shape behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). However, for many new thru-hikers, their own past experiences (or lack there of) may be insufficient in accurately determining their own perceptions of control. Others too influence notions of control. The importance and prevalence of others in shaping our perceptions is noted in this study.

Indeed, the community seemed to emerge to assist hikers in obtaining the skills necessary to complete this task.

Capacity to overcome challenge - Implications for research. Extreme hiking is an inherently complex pursuit. Participants did their best to prepare themselves for the task yet they frequently miscalculated the challenge of the hike or their own skill. They required help. Other posters were a constant source of assistance for these hikers. This community of hikers seemed to emerge as a community of support. There is an opportunity for future research to study why this community was so connected. Why is this community so closely knit? Perhaps they are so connected because they need to be. They need the support of others to attempt such a complicated and demanding pursuit.

Further, it would be interesting to study other hiking (i.e. PCT and CDT) and leisure communities to find out if the same culture exists there as well. How do these communities interact? Is the level of support as tangible as on Whiteblaze.net? What characteristics do these communities possess? How are they the same or different from this community or from each other? Will this sort of close knit community emerge to support any leisure community or does the difficulty (and the other influences discussed here) enhance the cooperative components of the pursuit?

Capacity to overcome challenge - Implications for leisure providers. There is an excellent opportunity for providers to reduce the discrepancy between challenge and perceived control. Leisure providers might provide instruction to assist in the safe completion of such activities. Providers may point out the nature of the challenge, the level of the challenge, and the danger associated with the challenge. Further, they may also provide instruction and guidance on

how to develop participants' skills in order to accomplish the task (recall my discussion in the previous section). What I do not note above, however, is that this instruction may be provided through online means (in addition to physical means). For instance, posts concerning "Tips and Tricks", "How to", and "What to Watch for" topics might encourage others to participate. These posts may be published on their own website, social media accounts, or online communities.

Finally, one of the great advantages of this site is its organic and immediate nature. Posters respond in real time to questions from individuals with responses that can be either specific or general. While this is a great strength of this format it lacks overall organization. There seems an opportunity to both coordinate and collate this information into coherent narratives to enhance their instructional capacity. They might organize the posts according to, for example, the stages of the decision making process.

Physical support - Trail magic. Families, friends, others hikers, and sometimes even complete strangers showed overwhelming support and kindness to the thru-hikers. Such acts of kindness have been identified as trail magic. Trail magic comes in many different forms. Recall from Chapter 4 the various types of trail magic: free rides, free food and drink, shared company and conversations, and mail drops. Both tangible (free rides, free food and drink, mail drops) and intangible (shared company and conversations) acts of support were present on the trail.

Trail magic was a core component of the unique social environment (liminal space) that encompassed a hike of the Appalachian Trail. Indeed, the recipients both valued and praised trail magic. They commented on how it not only enriched their experience but assisted them in times of struggle. Trail magic was a source of motivation to "keep pushing" and undoubtedly contributed to the successful completion of many thru-hikes. For instance, Boomer noted his

appreciation for trail magic. In this case, trail magic consisted of free food and drink. He posted, "...if any of you are reading this from the group who did trail magic today, we really appreciate it. Everyone in the hostel has been talking about how great it was to see you guys through the fog."

AT thru-hikers were willing to engage in their own acts of kindness because of their positive past experiences. As they reflected on their experience, they began to appreciate and develop a sense of gratitude toward the donors of the trail magic. Research on gratitude suggests that it has motivational value which "prompts grateful people to behave prosocially themselves" (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001, p. 254). The concept has been identified as moral motive within the literature (Fredrickson, 2004; Bono & McCullough, 2006; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Indeed, trail magic appeared to have a motivational effect on posters in this study.

Intriguingly, some hikers seemed less interested in giving back and more interested in "paying it forward". In other words, acts of kindness based on principles of reciprocity or social exchange were not seen here. Rather, when the hiker (recipient) completed their hike, they took on the role of the donor "paying it forward" to the next generation of hikers. Hikers commented on their willingness to pay it forward as a result of their positive past experiences. Further, this notion of paying it forward became a self-sustaining process. Every year, a new generation of past AT thru-hikers paid their deeds forward to current AT hikers.

In many cases, the donor and the recipient were strangers. What is perplexing here is the willingness of people to offer their support to complete strangers. Research shows that "factors associated with valuation of another's welfare are those that designate likely kin – others with

whom one shares (genetic) components of the self” (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce & Neuberg, 1997, p. 492). In other words, individuals are more willing to give to their friends, family, or others that they share close relationships with. This type of kindness has been identified as normative kindness (fits within social norms). However, what we see above is an act of non-normative kindness, which goes against social norms. Specifically, non-normative kindness is “performed by a stranger or a rival... [or] if [the act] seems unwarranted based on principles of reciprocity or social exchange – if the recipient did nothing to earn the kindness, for example” (Exline, Lisan & Lisan, 2012, p. 46).

These notions of kindness and exchange are linked to gratitude. Gratitude can induce social change in our relationships with others. Those who experience gratitude can become more open and accepting of others and their well-being is enhanced as a result (McCullough et al., 2001). Hikers noted their restored faith in humanity as a result of trail magic. For instance, DRL posted:

Out here, on the ground, moving at a snail's pace, in the backcountry of America and quite far away from the rest of the world, hearing people's stories, seeing how they live their lives, seeing the kindness of strangers, I feel like I'm rediscovering my faith in humanity one individual person at a time.

Posts such as this suggest that through their experience, hikers may become accepting of strangers and thus open to showing gratitude towards strangers.

Physical support - Implications for research. Within this study, the kindness of others emerged as an ongoing theme. Indeed, the whole site seemed to be driven by that sentiment. The

kindness of others was inherent to the AT thru-hiker culture. Many referred to acts of kindness they themselves had experienced while on the trail. They had all benefited from the kindness of strangers both on and around the trail and responded in kind. Although, the “in kind” reference poses an interesting question. While some hikers intended to “pay it forward” to hikers on the trail, others offered their gratitude by responding to hikers’ posts online.

In the latter example, the hikers were offering virtual kindness. Is this form of kindness as meaningful given that it lacks the physical components of the acts they observed on the trail? Can advice on the types of food, gear, etc. compete with a free meal offered to a starving hiker on the trail? Both have dramatic impact but one fills the senses and the other offers useful insight (additional insights on virtual support are discussed in the following section).

Second, phrase “trail magic” suggests that something mystical happens on the trail. By using the word magic, the hikers acknowledge the special nature of the trail and its part in their journey. They too seem to want to recreate this notion of the “unknown” (recall discussion above) into something more positive. This mystical part of this experience can be explored in future research.

Third, the hikers were very intentional when committing to acts of kindness. For instance, it was reported that some donors (past hikers) would wait on the trail on the outskirts of town to offer a hiker a ride or they would purchase food with the intent of cooking it on the trail for the hikers. Why do hikers go back to the trail and provide this gratitude? This seems to be an interesting topic that requires further research.

Finally, additional research on kindness in an environment where it is not such an

established part of the culture would add to our understanding of the relationship between kindness and gratitude on the Appalachian Trail. Would a culture of kindness emerge in a more competitive environment? Ironman athletes have been known to stop in the middle of a race to help a fellow competitor for example. Such an act would slow their times and render the competitor less competitive. In that case, there is a very real cost to helping out. What conditions would lead to such actions?

Physical support - Implications for leisure providers. Trail magic was not only a powerful component of the experience but it was also completely organic in that it emerged from community itself. There was no organized provider behind these actions. Given the profound nature of these acts on hikes, could these efforts be coordinated or enhanced? Or perhaps it is their spontaneous nature that renders them so profound. There seems a very real possibility to enhance the current efforts but they would have to be enhanced with due regard to the organic nature of the existing magic.

Virtual support - Posts of encouragement. Not all the support the hikers posted about took place on the trail. It was also evident that posters supported the hikers by offering online advice and words of encouragement. Posters played a major role in preparing the hikers for their thru-hike. From gear selection to trail budgets, posters were able and willing to offer their advice to future hikers. These preparation choices are described in detail as they pertain to Research Question 2. Here, I discuss the support received from posters through words of encouragement.

A number of people (family members, friends, other hikers, strangers) offered posts of encouragement for hikers on the trail. Some individuals, primarily family members and friends followed the hiker along from the very beginning of their journey. Their intent was to stay

connected to the thru-hiker's experience by reading the hikers' posts. They also intended to support the thru-hiker by posting words of encouragement.

Other individuals (acquaintances and strangers) may have stumbled across the hiker's post or blog as they read through discussion posts on Whiteblaze.net. These individuals may desire to remain part of the experience because they are inspired by the hiker's story. In many cases, they have replied to the hiker's posts expressing their appreciation and/or providing their encouragement. For instance, Godspeed and Mountain Momma commented on aussielegs final blog entry. They were both "overjoyed and saddened at the same time. So excited for [their] accomplishment [but] will so dearly miss sharing the adventure with [them]."

Indeed, it was common to see such online interactions (exchanges between the hiker and others) and they often seemed to develop into a friendly relationship between the poster and the hiker. More than that, the interpersonal bonds seemed to build over time. As in face to face communities, regardless of the strength of their connection before the thru-hike, members of the community often related to and bonded over the experience. Such a sense of community may be a function of the hiking culture or perhaps the culture that has emerged around this trail and this site in particular. This may help explain why hikers valued the support they received from others. They may value too the outcome (relationships) initiated by the posts of support.

Virtual support - Implications for research. These forms of virtual support seemed full of emotional potential. Posters would often, for example, offer encouragement to those struggling on the trail. Sometimes they would offer paragraphs of encouragement telling the struggling hiker for instance, that this activity, this place was where they belonged. This type of support seems very different from recommendations regarding diet or pack size. More research is

needed to investigate these varying types of support and the impact each have on the hiker.

In addition, the virtual nature of such emotional comments may even enhance the power of the comment. First, the comments may be posted and left for others to respond at their convenience. Second, the posts extend to others all over the world. At no other time in history could individuals write their thoughts and feelings and have them reach out with such immediacy to others everywhere. Third, the posts are in a way permanent. For instance, those struggling on the trail could return to the posts over and over for the positive feelings they offer. Indeed, in one way these posts are limited (no physical contact) yet in another way they are unlimited. The power of such interactions seems worthy of further investigation.

Virtual support - Implications for leisure providers. The prevalence of online communications offers the provider a chance to support the experience. Leisure providers might want to consider assisting their participants through various forms of online support such as posts or emails of encouragement.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked, “What role is played by other posters in the posters’ extreme hiking choices?” Recall from Chapter 4 that I focused on (1) posts written by those who have committed to a thru-hike but have yet to complete it and (2) posts written in response to these posts (primarily posts of advice). Initially, it was anticipated that I would guide the reader through the three phases of the Self-Regulation Model, commenting on how it pertained to my study. However, due to the nature of the posts, I only used the second phase of the Self-Regulation Model to guide my results.

First, I describe the types of posts new thru-hikers published online. This discussion gives us insight into the roles played by other posters in response to such posts. For instance, those who had little to no experience relied heavily on advice from the posters while those who had in-depth knowledge relied on confirmation from the posters. In both cases, the hikers were often influenced by the post.

Second, I discuss the roles assumed by others. Bandura (2004, 2005) suggested that social models may serve a variety of functions. Within this study, I found that posters functioned within three of these roles when they responded to posts regarding various hiking choices (instructive, social prompters/verifiers, and social constructors). These roles are discussed in detail below. Third, I discuss one topic of research to help us understand the influence of others on the posters' hiking choices. Research on electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communications and the implications of such research are discussed.

Type of post. Regardless of the topic of the post, there seemed to be a continuum of post types made by the new thru-hikers. Such a continuum was based on the hiker's past experiences and knowledge of the hike. On one side were new hikers with limited to no hiking experience or knowledge (or new thru-hikers with no thru-hiking experience or knowledge). These hikers asked open ended statements such as "What should I do?" or "Any advice/help would be appreciated". In the middle were new hikers who had completed some research. These hikers would frequently post stating, "Here is my ____ (gear list, food options, etc.), do you have any advice?". And finally, on the other side of the continuum were new thru-hikers with in-depth knowledge of the pursuit. These hikers already selected what they thought was the optimal option and want confirmation from other posters. However, it should be noted though that their

choices were not always concrete. If these hikers did not receive approval from other posters they may have adjusted their decision or altered it completely. This suggests the strong influence of others, the great value associated with their posts, and the high level of credibility that the hikers place in these posts.

Type of post - Implications for research. Above, I noted that the variation in past experience and current knowledge of future thru-hikers was suggestive of their type of post. What I did not explore was how such experience and knowledge translated to performance during the thru-hike. Are first time thru-hikers with more knowledge and experience more likely to complete a thru-hike? They certainly have an edge over beginners in those ways. Or is completion more reliant on the sheer determination of will and the endurance of the participant? Possibly, it's combination of both. There is an opportunity for future research to explore this.

Type of post - Implications for leisure providers. This discussion emphasizes the point I made earlier where I highlight the opportunity for providers to contribute to online discussions within the hiking community. Again I suggest that the provider gets in on the experience by providing informed and knowledgeable information for future thru-hikers. This might encourage participation in the activity.

The role of others. Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory acknowledges the importance of those around us in shaping our behaviours. Indeed, behaviour may be shaped by social models within our environment. Bandura (2004, 2005) noted that social models may take on the role of an instructor, motivator, social prompter, or social constructor. In this particular study, models describe other posters. Others posters assumed three of the four roles (instructor, social prompter/verifier, and social constructor) as they responded to posts regarding thru-hiker

choices. These roles are described below.

Posters assumed the role of an instructor as they passed on their knowledge, values, and skills to the recipients (Bandura, 2004). Instructors have been noted by Bandura (2004, 2005) and others within the consumer behaviour literature (Kiecker & Cowles, 2002) to influence the individual as a result of their involvement, expertise, and experience with a product or service (Kiecker & Cowles, 2002). And this was certainly the case within this study. On several occasions, posts published by instructors seemed to have an influence on thru-hiker choices.

Recall the influence of these posters on Frank_the_cat's behaviour. In her first few posts, she noted her plan to hike the trail Northbound but also noted her desire to hike in solitude. Other posters responded to her posts, relying on their own involvement and experience to offer advice. After several discussions with other posters, others recommended a Southbound hike to get away from the crowds of other hikers. She altered her decision and changed her route from NOBO to SOBO. It seemed as though other posters had a direct influence on her decision making here. This provides a great example of how posters may assume the role of an instructor by providing the hiker with valuable knowledge.

Social models also acted as a social prompt to guide, direct and support another's behaviour (Bandura, 2004, 2005). Indeed, on several occasions, experienced thru-hikers guided first-time thru-hikers' in their planning and preparation. For instance, q-tip posted, "I have a number of gear list spreadsheets that got me from 40 lbs to 13-15 lbs. If interested send me a [personal message] with your email (large files). Good luck...." He quite literally offered a guide for others to use as they selected their hiking gear. This guide likely influenced the planning and preparation of many thru-hikers.

Further, guidance may also take the form of encouragement which may act to motivate and assist the individual (Pajares, 2008). This was also evident in the hiking community. Many posts were very informational yet at the same time very encouraging. For instance, Boomer published a post asking others if he would be able to get ready for a thru-hike in a month. Others offered posts of encouragement and advice. soumodeler responded, “Go for it! Just start off slow and don’t push too hard the first couple of weeks.” Again, we see here that other posters have assumed the role of a social prompter, thus guiding the hikers’ choices.

Models may also verify our actions. Social verification suggests that we often seek to verify our views by checking them against what others believe (Bandura, 2001). This type of modelling was present within this thru-hiking community. In many cases, new thru-hikers not only sought advice but also sought verification from more experienced posters. For future thru-hikers, their ultimate goal was to complete an AT thru-hike. The hikers sought verification from others regarding their own preparation choices (gear, training strategies, start date, route options, etc.) to increase their own success rate. Other posters assumed this role and verified or disapproved of the hikers’ choices.

Social construction suggests that an individuals’ beliefs and understandings are developed socially, through their interactions with others (Bandura, 2004). The concept of social worlds provides additional insights for this discussion. Recall from Chapter 2 that social worlds are characterized by informal interactions and communication among many individuals (Unruh, 1980). Constant communications between members of a social world typically results in growing similarities between individual members’ ethos. Unique ethos describes the “spirit” of the community or the socially constructed attitudes, values, beliefs, goals, etc. of the social world.

Other posters within this study acted as social constructors. Through writing and posting each response, others emphasized the beliefs and understandings of the hiking community. For instance, the ability to revel in an experience that induces suffering was a value inherent to this hiking community. This value was identified by a number of these posters as they responded to thru-hiker posts regarding their choices. This is exemplified by Venchka's response commenting on the challenge imposed by the weather. She stated, "The weather is whatever the weather chooses to be. Outfit for low 20 [-6 degrees Celsius], hope for low of 40 [4 degrees Celsius], be happy if the low stays at or above 30 [-1 degrees Celsius]". She also noted, "it is so soggy that... your rain gear needs rain gear. Have fun". Here she gives advice yet at the same time she not only notes the challenge but implies that the recipient of such advice should embrace the challenge.

The role of others - Implications for research. Other posters may influence the hikers' choices in different ways by assuming a number of different roles. The need for these roles may again be tied to the complexity of this particular pursuit. It would be interesting to explore other extreme pursuits to see if these sorts of roles have emerged within these communities as well. Do all extreme activities require these roles or is there something about the AT experience and community that requires or encourages these roles to emerge?

The role of others - Implications for leisure providers. There is the opportunity for providers to assume such roles and facilitate these sorts of discussions to encourage growth within the community. Above, I suggest that providers should offer instruction and guidance to their participants. Here I also emphasize the importance for providers to instruct, guide, and verify the participants' actions to encourage participation in the activity.

Providers also have the opportunity to facilitate these sorts of discussions through a variety of means. Providers may offer physical seminars/workshops where members of the community have the opportunity to discuss topics regarding preparation, etc. Online, providers might provide open discussion forums, online chats, etc. to be used by participants of these sorts of activities.

Electronic word of mouth communications. Research on electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communications also helps us understand the influence of other posters on the posters' hiking choices. Researchers have found that relational properties such as level of homophily, tie strength, and source credibility influence choices and behaviour (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). These three relational properties are discussed below as they pertain to this topic of discussion.

Online homophily describes the similarities in psychological attributes (values, beliefs, etc.) of the individual posters (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Recall that this site was intended for only thru hikers. As a result, within this hiking community, posters shared a high level of online homophily. This may be explained by the hikers' shared interest in thru-hiking. They have the same interests, they have similar values and beliefs and, as a result, they trusted in and acted on the advice of others.

Online tie strength may be identified as "the level of intensity of the social relationship between individuals" (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Existing WOM research suggests that individuals in strong tie relationships are likely to know more about one another than individuals in weak tie relationships (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). In line with this research then, the more the individuals know about one another, the more likely they are able to satisfy the needs of one

another. Therefore, information passed between the contributor and the recipient (within a strong tie relationship) is likely to be more influential in the recipient's choices (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Rogers, 1983; Steffes & Burgee, 2008). It may be that even though the posters have very little direct contact with each other, the shared interests and values they express may create strong ties between them. The nature and extent of these ties could be studied further.

Source credibility is the extent to which the poster "(1) sees the source as having relevant knowledge, skill, or experience and (2) trusts the source to give unbiased, objective information" (Kiecker & Cowles, 2002, p. 76). Expertise is noted again as a determinant in the influence of posts. Kiecker and Cowles (2002) suggest that characteristics such as knowledge, experience and/or social status contribute to the overall expertise of the posters. They suggest that "a source with expertise is more persuasive than one with less expertise" (Kiecker & Cowles, 2002, p. 76). This is particularly relevant when neophytes are asking experienced hikers for advice. The hikers are seeking help and expect the responses of other posters to be both expert and accomplished. In this way, it seems likely that those asking for advice could be very much influenced by whatever insights they receive. In this case, credibility was likely much enhanced by posters' extensive experience on the trail. All had completed the hike. Such completion suggests both an expertise and an engagement that was consistent with that of those who posted the questions.

eWOM - Implications for research. This study gives us insight into the dynamics of this online community. The dynamics here are very organic. There are no facilitators, no referees, no organizers, and no administrators. The Whiteblaze community is self-sustaining, organized by and for its members. This is not always the case for these sorts of online discussions. Indeed, many forums are tightly controlled by paid staff whose role is that of control and continuity.

What is it about this community that renders it so independent?

Two types of posts seemed to emerge within the data. The first describes the posts of advice. Within these posts, there was inherent efficiency and effectiveness. I found very little evidence of posturing, of ill-temper, of accusation, or negative emotion. The comments were invariably helpful and concise. Interactions seemed to cut right to the point yet at the same time responses were knowledgeable and informative.

The pattern was straight forward. Questions would be posed (typically by someone hoping to undertake a thru-hike) and experienced hikers would respond. The tone was helpful and the information useful. It was both a spare form of communication but also dense with information. There were few social niceties expressed. The emphasis was on information gathering and distribution. This may be one of the advantages of online vehicles. There was no perceived need to engage in chit chat. The focus was on problem solving and information dissemination. It would be interesting to conduct content analyses to determine the balance of social versus task content.

There was also a separate type of post where the entire point of the post was social. These were posts of encouragement often directed to posters who were expressing doubt or were struggling with some aspect of the hike/post hike experience. These posts were not about information, but dealt entirely with emotional support. Future research might explore how those who received posts interpreted and responded to their content. For example, did the doubts subside or did they feel additional pressure about disappointing those who were showing so much faith in them?

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked, “How does the experience change for the posters over time?” As noted throughout my results, how the experienced played out evolved through three distinct phases (before, during, or after the hike). Regardless of the phase, involvement was key in preparing for, producing, and reliving the experience. Thus, I provide an overview of the concept as it relates to my study. Following this overview, I comment on the three phases of the experience. I provide insights that pertain to future, present and past AT thru-hiker experiences. Finally, I provide implications for research and practice.

Involvement. Recall from Chapter 2 the concept of enduring leisure involvement. Enduring involvement can be defined as great interest in an activity that is personally relevant to the individual (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997). Understandably, thru-hikes may be linked to enduring leisure involvement. There are several dimensions of involvement which have been debated over several decades (Dimanche, Havitz, & Howard, 1991; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; McIntyre, 1989). In their recent work, Kyle et al. (2007) found that involvement consisted of five components: attraction, centrality, social bonding, identity affirmation, and identity expression. These dimensions seemed salient in this discussion.

For example, thru-hikers would often comment on their enjoyment (attraction). Recall dangerdave’s comment, “The exertion of hiking balanced out the cool air nicely... and I was enjoying myself immensely.” Hikers too commented on the centrality of the activity in their lives. Most thru-hikers spent years training for their long-distance hike. Moreover, once they began their journey, they were completely immersed in the pursuit for half a year.

Participants also commented on the strong social bonds they created with other hikers on the trail and online. Recall how the trail became a place free of social obligations and awkwardness, a place where Dirty Rotten Liar became “best friends immediately” with his fellow thru-hikers. Indeed, the trail and its online counterpart encouraged interactions among fellow hikers.

Through their involvement, participants were often able to affirm their own identity and express their identity to others. Hikers noted their ability to affirm their identity through enduring and overcoming the challenge inherent to the pursuit. Identity expression was also present within the hikers’ experiences. They described their ability to express themselves through their leisure. Veblen (1899) noted the power of leisure in self-expression. Leisure involves choice and these choices say something about the participant. The hiker’s leisure choice is a reflection of personal preference and even personality. The hikers accepted, embraced, and overcame the challenge because it suggested to others their preference and personality. It suggested that they are committed, hard working, and driven. It may too have suggested that they are physically and socially “special”. Indeed, posts from experienced hikers with notable accomplishments such as an AT thru-hike were recognized and valued by other posters.

Future AT Thru-hikers. Future thru-hikers’ introductions to the online hiking community were an integral component of experience before the hike. These introductions made their thru-hike public and “official”. By posting they were “declaring” their commitment to the enterprise. This was an essential first step in committing to the journey.

Within these introductory posts, new thru-hikers often described what they gave up in order to hike. Such posts exemplified the importance of an AT thru-hike for many individuals.

Their desire to hike at all costs may stem from their interactions with others. Indeed, in 2004, Bandura noted the motivational role that others assume. Current and past hikers both noted that they hoped to inspire others while some did not mention and may not have realized the impact of their posts. Yet in both cases many future hikers noted that the posts motivated them to pursue their own hike. Others too may have been motivated but did not indicate this within their posts.

Another step valued by the community was the creation of a trail name. Trail names were important to the AT community. However, it was well-known within this community that hikers did not select their own trail name. If asked for their name, new hikers would often comment on their inability to select a trail name for themselves. They noted that other hikers/the trail would pick their trail name for them. For the individual, a trail name may be a meaningless. But for the hiker, a trail name is highly valued and represents more than just a name. The name symbolizes a fresh start or a new life on the trail. Individuals leave their burdens and past struggles behind. In this regard, this discussion again turns to the notion of liminal space. Indeed, new life on the trail suggests that individuals are freed from their previous obligations and burdens.

These new hikers often offered information that established their capacity to succeed at the task they were accepting. It was as if these future thru-hikers thought it was necessary to prove to others that they were capable of completing a thru-hike. Some used previous hikes to showcase their experience while others noted other challenging pursuits. Pursuits that involved suffering such as Ironman events or other endurance events were noted. It seemed as though hikers were looking for acceptance and verification from others within these posts.

Generally, though, the posts were an effort to collect information. The new hikers sought to answer personally meaningful questions and to seek aid in the upcoming hike. These posts

were exhaustive and my discussion surrounding the posters' hiking choices (Research Question 2) focused on these posts. As a result, I do not comment on these posts here.

Future thru-hikers - Implications for research. These introductory posts were unique in that once posters identified themselves as AT thru-hikers (Class of 2015) they seemed to be accepted immediately into the community. Again, I note the profound acceptance and trust of others within this community and suggest that future research addresses this.

The symbolic nature of trail names seems to provide several new insights for research. A trail name provides more than just a name but also a new identity. This concept draws parallels with other leisure activities such as video games and online chat forums where the participant may take on a new identity. The difference here is that the participant does not inhabit a virtual body but rather assumes a new identity within their physical body. More than that, the name is assigned by fellow hikers. The role and importance of these names seem important. Also, how do they differ from names we assign ourselves in other online environments? Researchers might address these issues further.

Present AT thru-hikers. This section focuses on present AT thru-hikers. Current hikers provided detailed accounts of their day to day life on the trail using blogs. Overall, their posts focused on the challenge (daily pain and suffering), the setting (spectacular views), and other hikers (relationships). Responses to their posts primarily focused on emotional support and appreciation. Taken together, these posts exemplify the many elements of a thru-hike. Indeed, the experience is very complex and no posts demonstrate this better than current posters daily accounts of their life on the trail (and the subsequent responses to these posts).

An interesting combination of emotions seemed to be present in their experience. They commented on the pain, suffering, and exhaustion they experienced yet they too commented on the feelings of pleasure and awe. These feelings did not emerge in isolation of one another. This may be a result of the complexity of the pursuit.

Moreover, while they enjoyed the beauty, they talked of the suffering they needed to experience in order to enjoy that beauty. Dirty Rotten Liar's post gives us insight into their experience. He posted, "...we must remember that those valleys, those hardships, are what make the tops of those mountains so worth it. Our struggles and our hardships exist to make our successes so much sweeter."

In these discussions, it seemed as though hikers sought social verification from others online. Indeed, in their posts, hikers frequently described the difficulty and suffering they encountered during their day to day life on the trail. Present thru-hikers sought to convince the reader, and perhaps themselves, of the importance of the activity. They also sought to verify the difficulty of the task they set out for themselves. Together, this creates meaning and significance for the activity. Indeed, social verification not only confirms that our thoughts and actions are appropriate, but drives and motivates us to complete such daunting tasks.

Present thru-hikers - Implications for research. The interplay of challenge and performance seemed important to the day to day experience of these hikers. Did that importance change over time? Do experienced hikers learn that they can indeed achieve remarkable performance levels so that the experience becomes ordinary? Does contentment grow or subside as experience grows?

Present thru-hikers - Implications for leisure providers. This study provides a great example of a complex leisure pursuit. Not only was the complexity present, but it was desired by hikers. Such complexity made success in the pursuit all the more worthwhile. There is value in complex pursuits and this seems to be an important insight for leisure providers. Clearly, there are many motives being pursued by those engaging in leisure. Offering activities and opportunities that help fulfill a wide variety of motives seems appropriate.

Past AT Thru-hikers. “The trail” was identified as a special place, a space that did not exist in their every day lives (recall discussion of liminal space). Scholars comment on the benefits of liminal spaces for past AT thru-hikers. Turner and Turner (1982) noted that liminal spaces change us. Once we remove ourselves from these spaces, we re-enter into society viewing the world from a new, more knowledgeable perspective (Turner & Turner, 1982). Indeed, several AT hikers not only posted their intent to seek life-altering experiences but also suggested that they were changed by the experience after the fact.

Others have also noted such change. In his discussion of serious leisure, Stebbins (1982, 1992, 2007) suggested that such an act may result in recreation or renewal of the self. Thru-hikers commented on how they felt renewed/changed by their experience. This may have to do with several components of the hike; the hike physically pushed the participants to their limits, the hike allowed for time to reflect and restore, and the hike created a space where openness and acceptance was encouraged.

Once off the trail, posters experienced a mixture of emotions. At completion, and in the hours after, the participants experienced feelings of joy, excitement, fulfillment, and pride in having accomplished their pursuit. In the weeks that followed their hike, many posters

commented on feelings of confusion, anguish, sense of loss, no sense of purpose, and regret (for those who did not finish) as they re-entered society. Past thru-hikers had a difficult time adjusting to life off the trail. Such difficulty may be due to the change they experienced as a result of engaging in the task.

Post trail depression. Post trail depression concerned both hikers who selected to step off the trail (incomplete thru-hikers) and those who completed their hike. Overall, there were many posts that dealt with the topic of post trail depression. It was evident that this was a concern and a reality for many hikers.

The fact that post trail depression was common suggests that the experience was unique, profound, and fulfilling. It was unique in that it could not be replicated in the everyday lives of these hikers. For instance, many posters commented on the characteristics of the experience that they would miss. Recall Dirty Rotten Liar's final post. He listed a number of things that he would miss about the trail: beautiful sunsets, peace, interesting people, fellow thru-hikers, and kindness, to name a few.

It was profound in that it could provide great personal insight for the individual. Indeed, a walk through nature provided a space for reflection, restoration, and insight. Recall Boomer's insightful post. He realized that his daughter needed him at home and his hike would have to be postponed.

It was fulfilling in that the ability to struggle through and overcome challenge resulted in satisfaction for the hiker. Dirty Rotten Liar referenced a quote by Thomas Paine in one of his blog posts. His quote exemplifies this point perfectly. As Thomas Paine noted, "The greater the

conflict, the more glorious the triumph.” This notion supports Stebbins (1982, 1992, 2007) insights on serious leisure.

Why post - Desire to stay connected to the community. Past thru-hikers may have posted online because of their desire to stay connected to the hiking community. This desire may result from their lack of current involvement in the activity. To alleviate feelings of loss and depression, some hikers sought to stay connected through online means. Past AT hikers actively read and posted on discussion forums to recreate those benefits they longed for. Such benefits have been noted as social bonding, identity affirmation and expression (Kyle et al, 2007). Other scholars have also noted the benefits gained through continued affiliation with the online community. They noted self-affirmation and social integration (participation and belonging) as benefits (McWilliam, 2000; Oliver, 1999).

Why post - Desire to pay it forward. Past AT thru-hikers may have also posted as an act of gratitude. The notion of “paying it forward” is again relevant to this discussion. Two concepts (gratitude as a moral motive and gratitude as a moral reinforcer) are identified here. In a previous discussion, I commented on the concept of gratitude as a moral value (Fredrickson, 2004; Bono & McCullough, 2006; McCullough et al., 2001). In that circumstance, gratitude lead to action in the form of trail magic. In this case, the gratitude leads to action in the form of posts. Past hikers may have been motivated to “pay it forward” to future hikers because of their past experiences of gratitude. For instance, War Eagle posted, “To those of you who post here, thank you. In an attempt to pay it forward, if anyone who might be thinking about a similar journey has any questions, please feel free to ask me. I am not an expert, but I’d be more than happy to relate my experiences.”

Gratitude may also serve to reinforce moral behaviour (McCoullough et al., 2001). Individuals who expressed gratitude may not be motivated by prosocial behaviour and may instead be motivated by the responses to their posts. These responses of social approval may be highly reinforcing for the individual (see Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991). Individuals within this study may have posted to experience social approval from others.

This overall desire to help others in their decisions is closely related to the concept of altruism (or prosocial behaviour) discussed in the philosophical literature (e.g. Paul, Miller, & Paul, 1993). The desire to help others in their decisions (i.e. purchasing decisions) is also discussed in the marketing literature (e.g. Carman, 1992; Price, Feick, & Guskey, 1995).

Why post - Desire to achieve social recognition. A thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail is well-known for its challenge. It was found that difficult and innovative pursuits garnered additional recognition from others and a higher social status (Bandura, 2001). This thesis included literature suggesting that recognition could result from one's undergoing personal struggle. The hikers' desired to become a part of the elite group of thru-hikers. For instance, some posts from past AT thru-hikers offered advice based on their own past accomplishments. Perhaps the underlying purpose of these posts was not to offer advice but rather to showcase their accomplishments in hopes of achieving social status, prestige, and distinction in addition to achieving social approval (as noted above) from others.

Past thru-hikers - Implications for research. When immersed in a consuming activity where the challenge, purpose, and setting are all noteworthy, abrupt withdrawal may be confusing, stress inducing, and frustrating. This study only briefly examined the thru-hikers' experiences post-hike however post trail depressions seemed to be a profound component of the

overall experience. There is an opportunity to complete further research to study hikers affected by post trail depression. The departure from this liminal space is characterized by new insight but also by distress. This seems worthy of additional study.

While this was the case for those who completed the thru-hike, some of those who failed to complete the challenge seemed most distressed. This combination of challenge and failure seemed significant. There is the opportunity to study the experience of those who “failed”. How did they deal with their experience post trail? Did they return to the trail to complete it? Was this experience more profound because of their failure the first time around?

Past thru-hikers - Implications for leisure providers. Hikers posted about the presence of post trail depression in their lives but many did not comment on how to manage it. As most thru-hikers only complete one thru-hike in their lifetime, this was likely their first experience with post trail depression. This may suggest that hikers did not know how to deal with post trail depression. As the number of thru-hikers increase every year, so does the growing concern for how the individual may manage post trail depression and adjust to their life off the trail. Providers might consider how to best prepare the hikers for this change.

Limitations of the Study

This thesis does have some limitations. First and foremost, thematic analysis relied on subjective interpretations of the researcher. There was no interaction between myself and the participants. This may be noted as a limitation as I did not have the option to clarify any content that was analyzed. Researcher participant interactions might have added a level of depth to my analysis.

In addition, I used thematic analysis to analyze various discussion posts surrounding the thru-hiking experience. To answer Research Question 2 (which focused on decision making), I had originally anticipated that the data would revolved around discussions of “if they would hike” however this was not the case. The discussions were devoted “how they would hike”, (i.e. discussions surrounding hiking gear, food preparation, start dates, and so on). Initially, I had expected to take the reader through the Self-Regulation Model within my results and discussion. However, these discussions did not apply to all components of the Self-Regulation Model. As a result, I only focused on the evaluation phase within this study. This could be also be considered a limitation of my study.

Finally, this study used thematic analysis to analyze words within discussion posts and blogs. I did not analyze photo and video posts. This could be a limitation as these sorts of posts could have added a level of depth to my analysis. This is both a limitation to my study and an opportunity for future research.

Additional Opportunities for Future Research

As discussed above, future research could focus on photo and video posts published on Whiteblaze.net and related sites. Such posts could add insight into the thru-hiking experience. For instance, a video of a thru-hiker’s final day of hiking, summiting Mount Katadin and touching the sign to complete their hike is likely very emotional. Videos and photos can catch the emotions of the hiker in the present moment whereas a textual blog post after the fact cannot. Posters may have selected to leave out parts of their experience or forgot to include them. An analysis of visual media such as videos and photos could provide great insight into the hikers’ experience.

In addition, a study using methods in which the researcher could interact with the hiker may also provide additional insights. Within this study, I was unable to clarify posts or ask the hiker any additional questions I may have had. Unstructured or semi-structured interviews might be useful in the study the thru-hiking community and the thru-hiker experience.

Further, throughout my findings, I noted the high level of detail provided in the posts. Posters describe their likes and dislikes about particular products and experiences. The posts reveal much about the hiker's personal preferences and interests. This may provide a great opportunity for not only leisure providers but also tourism providers to both understand and contribute to the experience. In their article evaluating research methods, Banyai and Glover (2012) emphasized the importance of travel blogs in revealing rich descriptions of the travel experience. They commented on the uniqueness of travel blogs in that they can offer "DMOs (destination marketing organizations) the competitive advantage needed to differentiate themselves from other destinations. What differentiates one travel experience from another, and the meanings tourists assign to their experiences, are revealed in online travel stories" (p. 276). Indeed, online posts offer the provider an opportunity to discover the preferences and interests of their participants so that they may better understand the consumer and his/her needs.

I now turn to the Self-Regulation Model. While this study focused on the decisions of individuals who had yet to complete a hike, it was clear that the generation and learning phases were prominent among experienced thru-hikers who posted. Future studies might explore these phases. Within the first phase, the generation phase, the individual must decide to pursue their goal or give up on it entirely. What influences are at play in the individual's decision to pursue or disregard their goal (i.e. their decision to pursue a thru-hike of the AT)? This study provided little

insight into this decision. Some posts gave insight into why posters decided to hike but more insight is needed. A complete comprehensive study focusing on this question would provide additional insights into the thru-hiker experience and decision making.

During the learning phase individuals observe and then determine if their goals have been met. This study provided little understanding into thru-hiker experiences post-decision. This study commented on a few posts regarding the thru-hikers' experiences post-hike (i.e. post trail depression) but more insight is needed. Future research may explore this third and final phase of decision making.

Conclusion

This thru-hiking community emerged organically to aid in the completion of a single task, a thru-hike of the AT. There is a certain inevitability to this community given the complexity of this task. The demands placed on these hikers encouraged and may have even required the emergence of such a community. United together, participants found delight in the challenge, scenery, and social support inherent to this thru hike. The individual's capacity to endure pain and overcome challenge, to reflect and appreciate; the trail's capacity to challenge, delight and restore; fellow posters' willingness to offer support were all part of the story. Each of these components painted a picture of this community that was both beautiful and unique.

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Appendix A
CATPAC II Exclude Files

USE	THEY'D
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ANY	HER
CAN	HIM
THIS	YET
THAT	GET
AND	KEPT
HAVE	GIVE
FOR	THUS
ARE	VERILY
HAS	GOES
THEM	GONE
THESE	ECT
OUR	GOT
YOUR	MID
YOURS	OWN
OURS	VERY
THEIRS	EVERY
THEIR	EACH
WAS	SOME
HAD	MUCH
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ALSO	GAVE
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WHILE	HIS
THEN	HERS
NOW	BEEN
HERE	USING
THERE	HER'S
CAME	WENT
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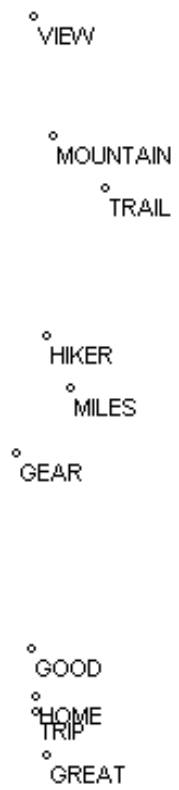
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REALLY
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NEVER
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MIGHT
RIGHT
DANGERDAVE
LOOKING
SURE
LITTLE
TWO
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DOING
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HEAD
ALWAYS
ALREADY
REPLY

QUOTE
JOIN
POSTS
LOCATION
DEFAULT
OFFLINE
MESSAGE
REGISTERED
IMAGES
JOURNAL
ENTRIES
DATE
AGE

Appendix B
2D Visual Perceptual Map of AT Thru-Hiker Content (Words Found Above the Axis)



Appendix C
2D Visual Perceptual Map of AT Thru-Hiker Content (Words Found Below the Axis)



Appendix D
 Texaco's Financial Insight for a Thru-Hike

Total A.T. Thru-Hike Expense: \$2,101.10

Restaurants: \$615.51

Resupplies: \$864.80

Post Office: \$45.96

Gear: \$199.92

Movies: \$31.50

Lodging: \$203.85

APRIL	Gear	Atlanta	GA	\$32.81
	Resupply	Hiawassee	GA	\$53.05
	Restaurant	NOC	NC	\$22.21
	Resupply	NOC	NC	\$7.84
	Restaurant	NOC	NC	\$19.51
	Lodging	NOC	NC	\$19.38
	Gear	NOC	NC	\$47.98
	Resupply	Fontana Dam	NC	\$25.05
	Resupply	Clingman's Dome	NC	\$7.73
	Cash	Hot Springs	NC	\$42.00
	Restaurant	Hot Springs	NC	\$12.18
	Resupply	Hot Springs	NC	\$41.32
	Resupply	Hot Springs	NC	\$14.18
	Resupply	Erwin	TN	\$22.56
			TOTAL:	\$367.80

MAY	Restaurant	Damascus	VA	\$8.75
	Movies	Damascus	VA	\$8.50
	Resupply	Hampton	TN	\$27.21
	Post Office	Damascus	VA	\$14.31
	Resupply	Damascus	VA	\$6.39
	Resupply	Damascus	VA	\$24.86
	Resupply	Atkins	VA	\$22.50
	Restaurant	Atkins	VA	\$15.54
	Resupply	Pearisburg	VA	\$59.45
	Post Office	Daleville	VA	\$13.50
	Gear	Daleville	VA	\$42.12
	Resupply	Daleville	VA	\$36.94
	Resupply	Daleville	VA	\$5.85
	Resupply	Bland	VA	\$20.66
	Lodging	Wood's Hole	VA	\$51.45
	Restaurant	Waynesboro	VA	\$8.36
	Resupply	Waynesboro	VA	\$33.97
	Restaurant	Shenandoah	VA	\$17.10
	Restaurant	Shenandoah	VA	\$7.72
	Restaurant	Shenandoah	VA	\$8.83
	Restaurant	Shenandoah	VA	\$7.55
	Lodging	Bear's Den	VA	\$30.00
	Restaurant	Harper's Ferry	WV	\$20.55
	Restaurant	Fayetteville	PA	\$23.55
	Resupply	Fayetteville	PA	\$27.99
	Lodging	Fayetteville	PA	\$37.62
			TOTAL:	\$581.27

JUNE	Restaurant	Boiling Springs	PA	\$23.45
	Restaurant	Duncannon	PA	\$20.14
	Gear	Hamburg	PA	\$17.27
	Restaurant	Hamburg	PA	\$8.80
	Resupply	Hamburg	PA	\$11.91
	Restaurant	Layton	NJ	\$5.53
	Resupply	Boonton	NJ	\$63.28
	Cash	Tuxedo	NY	\$21.75
	Gear	Poughkeepsie	NY	\$19.57
	Movies	Poughkeepsie	NY	\$23.00
	Restaurant	Poughkeepsie	NY	\$50.00
	Resupply	Bear Mountain	NY	\$7.80
	Restaurant	Garrison	NY	\$12.89
	Restaurant	Kent	CT	\$19.66
	Resupply	Kent	CT	\$9.56
	Resupply	Kent	CT	\$8.59
	Post Office	Dalton	MA	\$5.80
	Restaurant	Dalton	MA	\$20.00
	Resupply	Lanesborough	MA	\$18.95
	Restaurant	North Adams	MA	\$36.23
	Resupply	Cheshire	MA	\$6.22
	Restaurant	Cheshire	MA	\$4.44
	Restaurant	Bennington	VT	\$3.25
	Resupply	Bennington	VT	\$8.22
	Resupply	Bennington	VT	\$30.04
	Post Office	Killington	VT	\$12.35
	Resupply	Killington	VT	\$53.20
			TOTAL:	\$521.90

JULY	Resupply	Lebanon	VT	\$8.98
	Restaurant	Woodstock	VT	\$9.50
	Restaurant	Hanover	NH	\$82.99
	Restaurant	Lincoln	NH	\$27.17
	Resupply	Lincoln	NH	\$33.76
	Restaurant	Lincoln	NH	\$5.45
	Gear	Lincoln	NH	\$72.98
	Resupply	Gorham	NH	\$58.85
	Cash	Gorham	NH	\$20.00
	Restaurant	Gorham	NH	\$16.98
	Lodging	Gorham	NH	\$65.40
	Resupply	Gorham	NH	\$15.46
	Restaurant	Gorham	NH	\$21.22
	Resupply	Andover	ME	\$19.48
	Restaurant	Andover	ME	\$21.04
	Cash	Stratton	ME	\$23.00
	Resupply	Stratton	ME	\$19.06
	Resupply	Stratton	ME	\$45.71
	Restaurant	Stratton	ME	\$20.00
	Resupply	Monson	ME	\$8.18
	Restaurant	Monson	ME	\$14.26
	Restaurant	Abol	ME	\$20.66
			TOTAL:	\$630.13

Adapted from <http://whiteblaze.net/forum/showthread.php/107832-Financial-Insight-for-a-Thru-Hike>