# Promoting Ecotourism to Millennials Through Social Media

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how coastal ecotourism marketers can utilize social media to effectively market to millennials. Coastal Tourism is one of four types of ecotourism identified by Honey and Krantz (2007) in their study Global Trends in Coastal Tourism sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund. An online survey of university students from the millennial generation was utilized. Findings indicate that millennials are interested in ecotourism and gather information about it from friends and social media. They check their accounts several times a day and usually from their smartphones. They would choose an ecotourism destination if money were not an issue. They believe it is a good cause and plan to visit an ecotourism destination within the next year. Millennials who are involved in ecotourism decisions and use social media to gather information also intend to visit an ecotourism destination. There is a need to build the literature base as few studies about social media and ecotourism exist. This study is exploratory but does provide a foundation for further research. Coastal ecotourism marketers should utilize a multi-platform approach; put out positive reviews via social media; consider budget-friendly options; and focus on the natural environment and animal conservation efforts. This study extends the literature by bringing together social media marketing, millennials, and ecotourism.

**Keywords:** ecotourism, social media, marketing, millennial

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the world accounting for 10% of the world's GDP, 7% of global trade, and 1 in 10 jobs (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2017). Unfortunately, tourism can have a negative impact on the physical environment (Bagri, Babu & Nayal, 2008; Lee & Jan, 2017; Postica & Cardoso, 2014) such as

increased carbon emissions, pollution, crime, etc. (Lee & Jan, 2017). In considering the impact of ecotourism, Harold Goodwin, the founding Director of the International Centre for Responsible Tourism, notes that ecotourism will need to evolve into responsible tourism, where premium pricing will contribute to sustainability (2015). Ecotourism and responsible tourism are similar topics. Responsible tourism, specifically, asks travelers to make choices which lessen negative impacts. For this study ecotourism in general will be the focus. On the positive side of impact, Castellanos-Verdugo et al., (2016, p.226) claim that "Ecotourism, a powerful market force, is a low-impact nature tourism, which contributes directly and indirectly to the maintenance of species and habitats. It is based on environmentally responsible behavior, environmentally friendly destination management, and sustainable development of local human populations." This type of tourism can mitigate the negative impacts related to tourism (Lee & Jan, 2017).

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as, "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (The International Ecotourism Society, 2016). It permits tourists to explore nature and also allows emphasizing sustainability, responsibility, awareness, ethics (Oviedo-García, et al., 2017). It is a type of travel that is mutually beneficial for the traveler and the destination. This mutual benefit is recognized by the United Nations in their Sustainable Development Goals where they state that "there's a growing sense of urgency and growing recognition of tourism as a potential path to economic opportunity and environmental protection" (Twining-Ward, 2015). This partnership of economic opportunity and environmental protection really defines ecotourism because, ultimately, ecotourism is about "uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel" (The International Ecotourism Society, 2016).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how ecotourism marketers can utilize social media to effectively market to millennials. This exploratory study is designed to better understand the factors considered by millennial tourists as they search for information and make decisions about ecotourism travel destinations. The recommendations will be based on the millennials' perspectives about how they gather information, what matters most to them when considering possible destinations, and their interests and intentions about ecotourism. Although ecotourism has been studied in the tourism literature, the combination of it and social media is a new addition to the marketing literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### International vs. Domestic Ecotourism

Internationally, the U.S. is regarded highly in terms of ecotourism by authors outside the country (Simoni, 2011). Nationally we have 367 protected areas, many of which are in coastal regions, and include 58 national parks. Although all visitors to national parks are not considered

ecotourists, many of them would fit our definition. In addition to the National Park Service, associations exist in individual states that are oriented toward sustainability and ecotourism including: the Alaska Wilderness Recreation & Tourism Association, La Ruta Sonora Ecotourism Association in Arizona, the Hawaii Ecotourism Association, Sustainable West Virginia, the Virginia Eco Tourism Association, and the South Carolina Nature Based Tourism Association. Although much of the ecotourism research involves exotic locations such as Moldova (Postica & Cardoso, 2014) and North Western Himalaya, India (Bagri, Babu & Nayal, 2008), some research has concentrated on U.S. destinations. Yellowstone National Park, as pointed out by Simoni (2013), is the oldest such natural area in the world. In a way, ecotourism began in the U.S. and is still strong and growing as a preferred ecotourism destination. However, strong seasonal and economic factors affect the number of park visitors per month. To address these issues, park management implemented some marketing tactics including winter programs; programs for children; ceremonies such as weddings; online webcams of geysers; and social media pages on Facebook, YouTube, Flicker, and Twitter. In conclusion, ecotourism is a type of travel that can be enjoyed along the coast, throughout the United States and around the world.

## The Millennial Generation

In the United States the Millennial Generation (also called Generation Y), those born between 1980 and 2000, has now surpassed the baby boomers to become the largest in size, numbering over 75 million (Fry, 2018). That is three times the size of Generation X and roughly one-fourth of the entire U.S. population (Antonow, 2017). Due to the large number of people in this generation, they are influential in sociocultural and economic ways (Antonow, 2017). This is also the case with their travel expenditures. Their travel preferences majorly impact the tourism industry both currently and for the foreseeable future. "Traveling with a purpose is the phrase du-jour, as more millennials are opting for charitable travel and eco-tourism is on the rise" (Talty, 2015). They are more highly educated than other generations and therefore employ smarter shopping habits and increased brand expectations while considering the quality and ethics of manufacturers and service providers (Antanow, 2017). Some say that they are the "best hope of an eco-conscious and non-materially focused future" (Postconsumers Staff, 2016). This generation wants to make a difference and have their travel be a part of the larger solution (Cogswell, 2014). They want to have local experiences and are interested in sustainability and personalization when it comes to their travel choices (Fromm, 2018). Millennials are leading the way in sustainable tourism and ecotourism (GlobalData Staff, 2017).

Beyond just being large in number, this generation is also a major driver of the economy with millennial spending well over 200 billion dollars annually in the U.S. alone (Schroeder, 2017). The environment that millennials have grown up into is very different than previous generations due to the digitalization of society. Some have called members of Generation Y digital natives (Prensky, 2001). Generation Y was born into an online environment where other generations, even Generation X, have had to migrate into this online world after living in an offline environment. These generations' can be considered digital immigrants (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010, Prensky,

2001). It is not surprising that compared to other generations, millennials might behave differently, are heavily influenced by their peers, and have different values than other generations (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003; Chen & Choi, 2008; Nusair, Bilgihan & Okumus, 2013). These factors could be due to the fact that they have always had a world of information and people's opinions readily accessible. They tend to be less persuaded by traditional advertising and more interested in authenticity of both message and sender.

Lim, Lim, and Heinrichs (2014, p.125) suggest that "although there has been significant development in the social media marketing field recently, it is not well understood how millennial users evaluate and use various types of social media. In developing a targeted social media marketing strategy, it is important to understand user differences in social media evaluation and usage." Therefore, this study attempts to provide ecotourism companies with a better understanding of what social media outlets millennials are more likely to utilize when evaluating ecotourism both pre and post consumption.

## Trends in Social Media Marketing

The dynamic between customers and brands has shifted dramatically in recent years due to social media. "Social media has become an important new cultural and social phenomenon, changing the way millions of people and businesses connect and communicate" (VanMeter, Grisafe & Chonko, 2015, p.70). This powerful tool provides marketers with new ways of engaging customers through two-way communication that is timely and relevant. Essentially social media is "the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers. It is the shift from a broadcast mechanism, one-to-many, to a many-to-many model, rooted in conversations between authors, people, and peers" (Solis, 2011, p.21). By definition, social network sites are online services that allow people to create a profile, come up with a list of users with whom they will share information, and view connections made by themselves and others in the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). They support "both the maintenance of existing social ties and the formation of new connections" (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007, p. 1144).

The underlying behaviors of social media are established in community and socialization. It is basic human nature for people to connect with others about common interests. A theoretical understanding of why people use social media can be found in the uses and gratifications approach. Examples of uses and gratifications of social media are social interaction, information seeking, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Although each social media user might not be searching for all of the aforementioned uses and gratifications with each visit to a social media site, he/she might be searching for several of them or possibly different ones depending on the site. Additionally, travelers' social media usage and information sharing is impacted by their ability to find reliable and accurate information from knowledgeable sources on social media sites (Hur et al., 2017, p.171). Based on the uses and gratifications approach, Mkono and Tribe (2017) discovered additional roles that social media users specifically can play such as the troll, the activist, the socialite, the social critic, and the

information seeker. This theory and related studies underlie the current research by providing a framework to ask respondents about how they use social media to gain information about ecotourism destinations as well as what they gain from such interactions.

Social media communications are essentially an electronic and visible form of word-of-mouth marketing. Marketers are very familiar with this concept and rely on it to build customer loyalty. As a response to consumer preferences, marketers are well served by establishing a strong brand presence on multiple social media sites and focusing on the sites where their target market already communicates. It is generally more successful to meet the audience where they are instead of trying to bring them to a new site. In addition to establishing a presence on multiple sites, marketers are also interested in reaching influential consumers. They know that influencers often are surrounded by followers that may be influenced. Reaching out to the friends of fans can lead to positive benefits for a brand such as increased reach and possibly exposure to a new section of the target market (Lipsman et al., 2012).

Young adults (ages 18 to 29) are the most likely to use social media – fully 88% (Smith and Anderson, 2018). That share falls to 78% among those ages 30 to 49, to 64% among those ages 50 to 64 and to 37% among Americans 65 and older (Smith and Anderson, 2018). Furthermore, those with at least some college level experience are more likely than those with a high school degree or less to use social media (Perrin, 2015). Another differential in social media usage is household income: 78% of those living in the highest-income households use social media, compared with 56% of those in the lowest-income households (Perrin, 2015). Additionally, most millennials connect with brands through social networks and believe that social media is one of the most effective channels for reaching brands (Antonow, 2017). These factors provide support the idea that individuals in the millennial generation who can afford to travel are an appropriate choice for ecotourism marketers to target.

"Online Social Networks (OSNs) are creating collective knowledge and becoming major information gathering sources among tourists when making travel decisions and purchasing travel-related products and services" (Bilgihan et al., 2016, p.287). Few academic articles have been published on social media and ecotourism. The existing studies are about maintaining connections with tourists after a visit (Wheaton et al., 2016) and promoting eco-friendly hotel experiences (Narayanan, 2015). There have also been some relevant studies about millennial tourists in general and online social networks. Specifically, Nusair, Bilgihan, and Okumus (2013) found that online social network marketers should consider specific marketing strategies to build social interaction with millennials; namely, encouraging them to contribute more content and treat them as opinion leaders; encourage users to post more information to their sites; and acknowledge their contributions by sending them thank you notes for positive comments and reviews. The study also found that the more benefits that millennial users receive from online social networks, the more engaged they will become with members of that travel community (Nusair, Bilgilhan & Okumus, 2013). Increasing the ease of use and perception of site integrity influences tourist knowledge

sharing behaviors (Bilgihan et al., 2016). Current trends in social media and ecotourism combined with the sheer number of millennials provide a fruitful opportunity for motivated marketers.

## METHOD

**Research Overview**

As noted earlier, the purpose of this study is to explore how ecotourism marketers can utilize social media to effectively market to millennials. This is an exploratory study designed to better understand the factors considered by millennial tourists as they search for information and make decisions about ecotourism travel destinations. Specifically, the researchers are interested in the following research questions:

1. Do millennials look to social media platforms for information about ecotourism destinations?
2. Which social media site(s) are most useful?
3. What are they looking for in ecotourism content via social media?
4. Is There a Relationship Between Social Media Use, Involvement in Ecotourism Information Gathering and Intention to Visit an Ecotourism Destination?

Any recommendations will be based on the millennials' perspectives about how they gather information, what matters most to them when considering possible destinations, as well as, their interests and intentions about ecotourism.

Although ecotourism has been studied in the tourism literature, the combination of it and social media is a new addition to the marketing literature. This topic is of particular interest to millennials which is why university students were chosen as the sample. The survey design is a commonly employed method to collect a large amount of data from a sample of the population at any given time due to its efficiency. Surveys distributed online have proven to be extremely efficient in terms of best utilizing resources including cost and time. Online surveys are also designed to limit human error in data transcription and coding. Therefore, the researchers decided to gather data on consumers' views of social media sites to promote ecotourism via an online survey of university students. Established measures as well as original measures were used to capture the data, and the appropriate statistical analysis tools were chosen given the format of the data.

*Sample and data collection.* University students were chosen as the sample for this study because they are primarily identified within the millennial generation at the time of data collection and represent a demographic that frequently uses social media sites. The students were enrolled at a mid-sized university in the Mid-Atlantic United States located near the coast. These respondents live and attend a university in a coastal region with numerous ecotourism activities available to them. Some ecotourism activities include paddle board and kayak tours in area waterways, state parks, nature trails, animal conservancies, rice plantations as well as others. The online survey was

created using Qualtrics and distributed to students in several marketing and tourism courses. The convenience method of sampling was chosen due to the student population being in the millennial generation which is the subject of the study. A total of 220 completed surveys were received, however 16 respondents were outside the millennial age requirements and two were unusable. This left 202 useable surveys. Students were asked to complete the survey in class as well as through email communications. Student participants were also encouraged to find other university students to complete the survey in a snowball sampling approach, a common tool in various disciplines. This system involves teaching students the proper way to collect data, then asking them to recruit others to fill out the survey.

*Measures.* The online survey consisted of established scales and a few items created specifically for the current research purposes (see Appendix A). The first question simply asked if the respondent had any previous experience with ecotourism. To measure ecotourism beliefs (survey question 2) a previously tested and replicated scale (Baral, Stern & Hammett, 2012; Baral, 2014) was utilized. For this study a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 was found showing the ecotourism scale has high internal consistency and remains consistent over multiple studies. The mean scale score was 5.65 and variance of .02.

To measure purchase decision involvement levels for both tourism and ecotourism (survey questions 3 and 4 respectively), the 3-item, 7-point scale presented by Mittal (1989) was utilized. Wording of the items was slightly modified to adapt to the specific topics of tourism and ecotourism. Respondents were asked to answer 3 scale items related to general tourism and then later in the survey asked the same 3 items related specifically to ecotourism. Purchase decision involvement for general tourism was found to have a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, with a mean of 5.72 and variance of 0.02. The items when specifically relating to ecotourism were found to have an alpha of 0.92, a mean of 5.23 and variance of 0.01. Both versions of the scale show a very high level of internal consistency, well above the accepted cut off of 0.70.

The personal thoughts items (survey question 5, 8-items) were created for this survey. These questions asked about the respondents' interest or lack thereof of ecotourism and similar topics. To measure respondents' willingness to gather and share ecotourism information and experiences (survey question 6), a 10-item scale was created specifically for this survey. This scale showed high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90, a mean of 4.71, and variance of 0.09.

Consumers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence with respect to ecotourism (survey question 7, 8-items) was measured with a modified version of the Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) scale. Eight of the original twelve items fit with the concept of ecotourism and were included in the survey. These 8 scale items had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, mean score of 4.40 and a variance of 0.11. This scale also shows a high degree of internal consistency.

Survey questions 8-12 were created for this survey and measured respondents' monetary considerations, feelings about participation, preference of aspects, importance of aspects, and

intentions to visit as they applied to ecotourism decisions. The social media usage items (survey question 13) were adapted from a subset of the Media and Technology Usage and Attitudes Scale established by Rosen et al. (2013). The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90, mean score of 6.56 and a variance of 1.53. This scale also shows a high degree of internal consistency.

Social media and tourism questions (survey question 14, 2-items) were created for this survey. The top 10 ecotourism destinations list (survey question 15) was from Rayner (2016). Social media information gathering (survey question 16) was created for this survey. The items measuring attitude toward ecotourism and influences and intentions about ecotourism (survey questions 17-21) were adapted from Ajzen and Driver (1992). This scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, mean score of 5.02 and a variance of 0.18. This shows that the scale is internally consistent. The demographic questions were standard (survey questions 22-25) about gender, age, classification, and home zipcode. The complete questionnaire appears in the Appendix.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The sample's profile appears in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Sample Profile**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Sample size** | |
| *Total* | 220 |
| *Useable surveys within age range* | 202 |
| | |
| **Gender** | |
| *Female* | 56% |
| *Male* | 44% |
| | |
| **Education** | |
| *Graduate Student* | 1% |
| *Senior* | 41% |
| *Junior* | 34% |
| *Sophomore* | 23% |
| *Freshman* | 1% |
| | |
| **Ecotourism experience** | |
| *Had previous experience with ecotourism* | 19% |
| *Had no prior experience with ecotourism* | 81% |
| | |
| **Ecotourism plans** | |
| *Plan to visit within one year* | 58% |

**Social media activity**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Check accounts on smartphone all the time* | 33% |
| *Check accounts on smartphone several times a day* | 24% |
| *Check accounts several times a day* | 24% |
| *Check all the time* | 24% |

**Social media sites they check for ecotourism information**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Facebook* | 29% |
| *Instagram* | 22% |
| *Google+* | 21% |
| *TripAdvisor* | 1% |

**Most preferred ecotourism type**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Animal preservation* | 35% |
| *Natural environment* | 33% |
| *Local people/culture* | 28% |
| *Conservation of resources* | 5% |

**Important information source characteristics**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Cost* | 54% |
| *Trustworthiness* | 43% |
| *Currently used social media sites* | 25% |

**Exploratory Analysis Approach**

The focus of the analysis was to explore the topic of marketing ecotourism destinations to millennial tourists via social media and to answer the research questions about these topics proposed at the beginning of the Method section in the Research Overview. To begin the analysis and to better understand the sample, descriptive statistics were assessed and the data was analyzed using crosstabs and correlations.

The main variables included in the analysis are below:

- Q4      Involvement with Ecotourism Decisions
- Q10      Plan to Visit Destinations Within a Year
- Q11      Number of Reasons to Choose a Destination
- Q12      Intention to Visit an Ecotourism Within a Year
- Q14-2      Social Media Use to Gather Information
- Q22      Gender

To provide context for the analysis, the data from questions about previous experience with and the definition of ecotourism, as well as purchase decision involvement were examined. Almost one fifth (19%) of the respondents reported previous experience with ecotourism while 81% reported no experience. The respondents reported means of 5.40-5.82 on a 7-point Likert scale about their agreement with the definitional aspects of ecotourism. Given the closeness of the scales in both content and wording, it was of interest to measure the correlation between the scales. Results indicated that the respondents' scores on the scales had a correlation of .45, significant at the 0.00 level in a paired sample test.

When asked about their personal thoughts about ecotourism, the respondents responded positively. The highlights of means based on 7-point Likert scales are listed below:

- The highest means were on the items about being very interested in ecotourism (4.29) and picking a destination based on activities available there (5.34).
- In terms of gathering and sharing information, the respondents are most likely to pay attention to destination and attraction reviews (5.17) and reviews posted on social media (5.12).
- When it comes to interacting with others about ecotourism decisions, the respondents are most likely to ask their friends (4.86).
- Monetary considerations do impact their plans as they report that given their current financial situation, they are more interested in just having fun than about ecotourism (5.01). However, they do feel that money spent at ecotourism destinations is going toward a good cause (5.02). And, if cost wasn't a factor, then they would choose ecotourism destinations over non-ecotourism destinations (4.71).
- Most respondents plan to visit an ecotourism destination within the next year (58%).

### Research Question 1: Do Millennials Look to Social Media Platforms for Information about Ecotourism Destinations?

Participants were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement about Social Media Use for Travel to Ecotourism Destinations. The mean for Travel to Ecotourism Destinations was 4.35. This mean is slightly higher than neutral indicating that respondents look to social media platforms for information about ecotourism destinations.

In terms of social media activity, the respondents are most likely to check their accounts either several times a day (24%) or all the time (24%). Similarly, they are likely to check their accounts on their smartphones either several times a day (24%) or all the time (33%).

### Research Question 2: Which social media site(s) are most useful?

When asked which social media sites they would utilize to find information about ecotourism destinations, they responded with Facebook (29%) and Instagram (22%). One student also wrote in TripAdvisor as an option.

### Research Question 3: What Do Millennials Seek in Ecotourism Social Media Content?

This research question is related to the sections of the survey that cover:
- What ecotourism destinations they are drawn to? (Q10)
- How important are ease of use, cost, trustworthiness, and familiarity with the source of information in the information gathering process? (Q11)

### Q10 - What Types of Ecotourism Destinations Have a Draw for Millennials?

Survey participants were asked to indicate which single destination type they were more drawn to for ecotourism. The destination types were:

- The Natural Environment (32%)
- Animal Preservation (35%)
- Local People/Cultures (28%)
- Conservation of Resources (5%)
- Other Specify (0%)

Overall, the respondents preferred animal preservation (35%) and natural environment (32%) most with local people/cultures (28%), conservation of resources (5%), and other considerations (1%) less when choosing an ecotourism destination. When asked specifically which ecotourism destinations they were interested in visiting (Q15), the respondents indicated their top choices were Costa Rica (43%), New Zealand (22%), and Maldives (10%).

### Q11 - How important are ease of use, cost, trustworthiness, and familiarity with the source of information in the information gathering process?

Millennials Survey participants were asked to indicate which of the following characteristics of information sources on ecotourism destinations are important to them:

- Ease of Use/Access
- Cost
- Trustworthy Information Sources
- Social Media Sites I Already Use
- Other Specify

Overall, the respondents rated the characteristics in the following order: cost (54%), ease of use/access (48%), trustworthy information source (43%), and social media sites already used (25%).

### Research Question 4: Is There a Relationship Between Social Media Use, Involvement in Ecotourism Information Gathering and Intention to Visit an Ecotourism Destination?

A linear regression analysis was conducted among those who intend to visit an ecotourism destination

within 1 year.  In this analysis, Intention to Visit an ecotourism destination was the first variable (Q12).  Those 42 respondents indicating 'Other' in answer to Q12, or who had missing data, were excluded from the analysis leaving 160 useable cases.  Social Media Use information gathering about ecotourism destinations (Q14-2) was the second variable.  Purchase Decision Involvement was the third variable and was composed of an average of the three involvement items. All means are based on a 7-point Likert scale.

The relevant descriptive statistics are as follows:
- Purchase Decision Involvement mean = 5.22 out of 7 maximum with a standard deviation of 3.53.
- Social Media Use mean = 4.52 out of 7 maximum with a standard deviation of 1.41.
- Intention to Visit an ecotourism destination in one month = 9%.
- Intention to Visit an ecotourism destination in six months = 21%.
- Intention to Visit an ecotourism destination in one year = 71%.
- Increased Social Media Use is positively correlated with Involvement in Choosing Ecotourism Destinations (r = .201, p = .01).

Intention to Visit is positively related to Number of Reasons students have for gathering ecotourism destination information (r = .193, p = .01).


### *Gender Differences in Desired Ecotourism Destinations and Social Media Use*
There were some gender-specific differences to consider regarding possible ecotourism destinations.  The results of the analysis are in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Gender by Destination Crosstabs**

| Destination | Male | Female | Row Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Natural Environments | 44% | 24% | 33% |
| Animal Preserves | 28% | 41% | 35% |
| Local People/Cultures | 24% | 30% | 28% |
| Conservation | 5% | 5% | 5% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Specifically, there was a significant difference between Males and Females on Social Media Use for gathering information about possible Ecotourism Travel Destinations (Chi Square with 3 df, = 8.96, p = .03).  Table 2 shows Males prefer Natural Environments and Females prefer Animal Preserves.  Neither Males nor Females prefer Conservation destinations.  There was moderate preference by both Males and Females for Local People/Cultures destinations.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Marketers have an opportunity to assist in the increasing popularity of ecotourism travel. Ecotourism organizations have an opportunity to encourage ecotourism through marketing tactics including: better and more interactive designs for web sites that also provide more relevant and current information to potential visitors; creating off-season events and contests that are communicated through on-line guides; and utilizing various social media sites for building networks of ecotourism enthusiasts and associations to connect with each other.

Ecotourism marketers can utilize social media to communicate with millennial tourists. Specifically, these findings indicate that millennials are interested in ecotourism and would be likely to gather information about it from friends as well as through various social media sites; specifically, Facebook and Instagram. They check their social media accounts at minimum several times a day, usually from their smartphones. Although they reported not have much experience with ecotourism they indicated they would choose an ecotourism destination over a non-ecotourism destination if money were not an issue. They believe in a good cause and many plan to visit an ecotourism destination within the next year. They are most interested in animal conservation and/or natural environments in terms of what attracts them to ecotourism destinations.

Most interestingly, millennials who are involved in ecotourism decisions and use social media to gather information are likely to also have an intention to visit an ecotourism destination soon. This finding is promising for ecotourism marketers targeting millennials. Respondents that have intentions to visit an ecotourism destination in the near future should be easier to persuade to book a visit. Marketers can better the chances of attracting this target market by utilizing social media sites to communicate with involved, millennial decision makers.

### Potential Theoretical and Practice Implications

These results are positive for ecotourism marketers.  Highly involved decision makers will likely take a longer time to plan their ecotourism trips, but they are still intending to travel to such destinations utilizing social media. This analysis provides support for the ideas that millennials who use social media to gather information are more likely to have intentions to travel to ecotourism destinations and are more involved in their purchase decisions.

The practical implications can help ecotourism marketers to better reach millennials with relevant communications. This research provides practical suggestions for how to reach millennials with ecotourism content. Specifically, ecotourism marketers should utilize a multi-platform approach including Instagram and Facebook. These sites excel in visual storytelling, so they are an appropriate choice for this environment. Ecotourism marketers should also put out positive reviews on their social media sites as this type of content is especially appealing to the target market. Marketers should consider budget-friendly travel options for millennials that are currently in university as they have limited funds for travel. Marketers could potentially partner

with universities to provide service learning opportunities, marketing internships, and other opportunities for students that could be included in the cost of their education. There is so much possibility with the future of ecotourism marketing to millennials that this research is just the beginning of the conversation. Finally, ecotourism destinations should focus on both the natural environment and animal conservation efforts at their properties to appeal to millennials. Marketers must also take the long view since millennials are likely to take up to a year to select and plan a trip to a specific destination.

The theoretical implications are important due to the lack of research in this particular marketing area. There is a need to build the literature base as few studies about social media and ecotourism are found. This study is primarily exploratory in nature, not a conclusive type of research, but it does provide a foundation for further research. It is a contribution to the marketing literature as it brings marketing ecotourism to the study of the Millennial Generation. It also contributes to the tourism literature as it brings in the timely and relevant topic of social media marketing. Tying this research into the previously studied uses and gratifications theory allows researchers to understand its foundation.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As with any study, limitations exist. Very few students (only 19%) reported visiting an ecotourism destination. Therefore, marketers should concentrate on attracting first time visitors. The online study was conducted with a convenience sample at one university and could be enhanced by replicating it at other universities across the United States and the world. The students surveyed were primarily in the lower end of the age bracket for millennials at the time of data collection. Surveying people in the upper end of the age bracket could potentially give different results especially since they are probably working full time and earning a higher income than their younger cohorts.

Future research should build upon this study with a more empirical investigation of the constructs. Adding older members of the millennial generation, GenZ members, and surveying more respondents with prior ecotourism experience could be a promising path for this topic. Adding in review sites such as TripAdvisor would be an interesting addition to this study and should be considered by future researchers.

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**APPENDIX**

**Ecotourism Survey**

Q1 Ecotourism is defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment, sustain the well-being of the local people, and involve interpretation and education. Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel.  Have you been to an ecotourism destination? If so, then please indicate the location(s).

- Yes _____
- No

Q2 Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about ecotourism.
(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)

- An ecotourism destination should minimize negative impacts to the environment and to local people.
- An ecotourism destination should increase the awareness of the area's natural and cultural systems.
- An ecotourism destination should contribute to the conservation and management of legally protected area.
- An ecotourism destination should direct economic and other benefits to local people.
- An ecotourism destination should promote participation and empowerment of local people.
- An ecotourism destination should provide adequate information to visitors before and during visits.
- An ecotourism destination should satisfy visitors' expectations toward a successful ecotourism project.

Q3 Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about your tourism decisions.
(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)

- I choose my tourism destinations/attractions very carefully.
- Which attraction/destination I choose matters to me a lot.
- Choosing a tourism destination/attraction is an important decision for me.

Q4 Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about your ecotourism decisions.
(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)

- I choose my ecotourism destinations/attractions very carefully.
- Which ecotourism attraction/destination I choose matters to me a lot.
- Choosing an ecotourism destination/attraction is an important decision for me.

Q5 This section refers to your personal thoughts about ecotourism and how you make choices. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)
- Ecotourism is a main focus for me when picking a destination.
- I am very interested in ecotourism.
- I am not very interested in ecotourism.
- Ecotourism is not the main focus when picking a destination, but it is a nice thing to have available.
- I participate in ecotourism in my local area when I get the chance.
- I pick a travel destination based on ecotourism opportunities available.
- I pick a travel destination based on activities available at that destination.
- Only after I arrive at my destination do I look for activities to do.

Q6 This section is about how you gather and share information. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)
- I enjoy reading about other people's experiences at ecotourism destinations I want to visit.
- After visiting an ecotourism destination myself I want to read about other people's experiences at the same destination/attraction.
- I check multiple social media sites when I am interested in a particular ecotourism destination/attraction.
- When I have participated in an ecotourism activity I like to share my thoughts, pictures, reviews etc. with my friends via social media.
- It is important to me to have an outlet (such as Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor, etc.) to share my ecotourism experiences with others.
- Recognition (such as a certificate or memento) of participating in an ecotourism attraction is important to me.
- I want others to know that I participate in ecotourism.
- Once I experienced an ecotourism destination/attraction I wanted to try others.
- Destination and attraction reviews are an important source of information when I am deciding on a vacation spot.
- When I see reviews on social media sites I check other sites to see if they say the same thing.

Q7 This section is about how you interact with others regarding your decisions about ecotourism. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)
- I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from ecotourism destinations/attractions.
- If I want to be like someone, I often try to go to the same ecotourism destinations/attractions as they do.

- It is important that others like the ecotourism destination/attractions that I go to.
- To make sure that I choose the right ecotourism destinations/attractions, I often observe where others are going and doing.
- I often identify with other people by going to ecotourism destinations/attractions that they do.
- If I have little experience or knowledge with ecotourism destinations/attractions, I often ask my friends about their experiences.
- I frequently gather information from friends or family about ecotourism destinations/attractions before I decide.
- I achieve a sense of belonging by going to ecotourism destinations/attractions that others go to.

Q8 This section is about monetary considerations of ecotourism travel intentions. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)

- I am willing to pay more for ecotourism activities than for non-ecotourism activities.
- I would participate more in ecotourism if the cost was less.
- I am more likely to buy merchandise at an ecotourism destination/attraction than I would at other attractions.
- I feel the money I spend at an ecotourism destination/attraction is going to a good cause.
- Given my current financial situation I am more interested in just having fun at my destination than I am worried about whether it is an ecotourism attraction or not.
- If cost wasn't a factor I would choose an ecotourism destination over non-ecotourism destinations.

Q9 Choose the answer that best describes how participating in ecotourism makes you feel.

- Good
- Proud
- Hopeful
- Satisfied
- Part of Something Bigger
- Like I Am Giving Something Back
- Other _____

Q10 Choose the answer that best describes your thoughts on the following sentence: When looking at ecotourism activities I am drawn more towards ones that focus on ...
- The Natural Environment
- Animal Preservation
- Local People/Cultures
- Conservation of Resources
- Other _____

Q11 Choose all answers that describe your thoughts on the following sentence:When gathering information on an attraction/destination the following are important to me is ...
- Ease of Use/Access
- Cost
- Trustworthy Information Sources
- Social Media Sites I Already Use
- Other _____

Q12 I intend to visit an ecotourism destination in the next:
- Month
- 6 Months
- Year
- Other _____

Q13 This section is about general social media usage. For these purposes, social media refers to the utilization of social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Google+, YouTube, Snapchat, etc.) to network, communicate, and gather information. How often do you do each of the following activities on social networking sites?
(10-point scale; never – all the time)
- Check your account(s).
- Check your account(s) from your smartphone.
- Check your account(s) at work or school.
- Post status updates.
- Post photos.
- Browse profiles and photos.
- Read postings.
- Comment on postings, status updates, photos, etc.
- Click "Like" to a posting, photo, etc.

Q14 Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about social media and tourism:

(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)
- I use social media to gather information about possible travel destinations.
- I use social media to gather information about possible ecotourism destinations.

Q15 According to escapehere.com, the top 10 ecotourism destinations for 2016 are: New Zealand, Kenya, Seychelles, Maldives, Botswana, Norway, Greenland, Cambodia, Laos, and Costa Rica. Choose the one that you have heard the most about or would consider visiting and answer the rest of the survey questions based on that location. Choose one answer. You may also write in another location.
- New Zealand
- Kenya
- Seychelles
- Maldives
- Botswana
- Norway
- Greenland
- Cambodia
- Laos
- Costa Rica
- Other _____

Q16 If you were gathering information about your chosen location (from the previous question), which social media site would be your primary choice? Choose one answer.
- Instagram
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Pinterest
- Google+
- YouTube
- Snapchat
- LinkedIn
- Other _____

Q17 This statement is about your attitude toward ecotourism. Please respond with how you feel about the statement.
(7-point Likert scale; very bad – very good)
- For me, participating in ecotourism when traveling is

Q18 This statement is about your attitude toward ecotourism. Please respond with how you feel about the statement.
(7-point Likert scale; very foolish – very wise)
- For me, participating in ecotourism when traveling is

Q19 This statement is about your attitude toward ecotourism. Please respond with how you feel about the statement.
(7-point Likert scale; very unpleasant – very pleasant)
- For me, participating in ecotourism when traveling is

Q20 This statement is about your attitude toward ecotourism. Please respond with how you feel about the statement.
(7-point Likert scale; very harmful – very beneficial)
- For me, participating in ecotourism when traveling is

Q21 This section is about influences and intentions with ecotourism. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.
(7-point Likert scale; strongly disagree – strongly agree)
- Most people who are important to me think I should participate in ecotourism when traveling.
- Most people who are important to me would want me to participate in ecotourism when traveling.
- People whose opinions I value would prefer that I participate in ecotourism when traveling.
- Whether or not I participate in ecotourism when traveling is completely up to me.
- I am confident that if I want, I can participate in ecotourism when traveling.
- I have resources, time, and opportunities to participate in ecotourism when traveling.
- I am willing to participate in ecotourism when traveling in the future.
- I plan to participate in ecotourism instead of conventional tourism when traveling in the future.
- I will expend effort on participating in ecotourism instead of conventional tourism when traveling in the future.

Q22 Please indicate your gender.
- Male
- Female

Q23 Please indicate your age range.
- Younger than 18
- 18 - 24
- 25 - 34
- Older than 34

Q24 Please indicate your classification.
- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate Student
- Other _____

Q25 What is the zip code where you grew up?

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**