

Running head: WHAT'S BEHIND THE TWEETS?

What's behind the tweets?

A look at social comparison theory, social media, and adventure tourism

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### Abstract

This study explores Twitter messages (tweets) surrounding Gauley season, a five-weekend whitewater rafting season taking place each Fall on the Gauley river in West Virginia. Social comparison orientation (SCO) is a part of social comparison theory research and one is predisposed with. The higher the level, the more likely to be concerned with portrayal of self-image and use arrogance to counteract any feelings of anxiety (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Because times of uncertainty, such as taking part in an adventure activity for the first time, can trigger characteristics of high SCO (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), this research looks at social comparison theory as framework to why individuals construct the messages they do when discussing participation in a commercial adventure activity. Results indicate social comparison theory does play a role in creating one's social identity and provides insight to those in the industry as to how successfully utilize electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

### What's behind the tweets?

A look at social comparison theory, social media, and adventure tourism

Adventure tourism is a \$263 billion industry, and grew at an average yearly increase of 65 percent from 2009-2012 (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2013). Adventure activities range from hard adventures, which contain a high level of risk and require commitment and advanced skill to soft adventures, which have lower levels of risk, require basic skills, and are usually led by experienced guides (Schott, 2007). These activities can range anywhere from hiking to snowboarding to overland trips (Weber 2001). Those who choose to take part in adventure tourism activities have traditionally been labeled sensation seekers, defined as those seeking “varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience (Zuckerman, 1994, p. 27). In the past, marketing professionals and those in the industry have ignored audiences not thought to engage in high stimulation activities (Weber). Tourism patterns are changing however, as two-income couples choose not to have children, the single adult population grows, and the expanding aging population remains active (Sung, 2004). In 2012, nearly 42 percent of travelers reported taking part in an adventure activity while traveling compared to 26 percent in 2009 (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association). Today's travelers are looking for a specialized experience they can achieve through specific activities, and it has been challenging for those in the special interest segment of adventure tourism to match the wide array of adventure products and services to this changing consumer base with diversified demands (Sung).

One of the fastest growing ways in which to communicate with consumers is through social media; the adventure tourism segment is no different. “Technology is fueling the creation of public discussion where traditional media have little to no control over the content that is spread globally” (Inglis, 2013, p. 9). Those in the adventure tourism industry can utilize these discussions to position themselves as experts or trusted sources within the field, and are just beginning to incorporate participation into overall marketing plans. According to a study by Michael Stelzner (2010), 85 percent of all marketers in the study say the number one advantage of social media marketing is generating exposure to the business, followed by increasing traffic (63%), and building new business partnerships (56%). The challenge with using social media to connect with potential consumers, specifically in the adventure tourism industry, is the inability to know what is driving consumers to post what they post, or like what they like when using it. Participants taking part in commercialized adventure activities tend to use social media to “capture and objectify their experiences...to reinforce personal identity and cultural distinction from others through...accrual of symbolic capital” (McGillivray & Frew, 2007, p.55). In order to more fully understand the messaging used by individuals taking part in social media conversations, it is important to explore what the driving force behind being part of a particular conversation is. This research explores social comparison theory as an explaining factor to why those taking part in online conversations, specifically Twitter conversations, surrounding adventure tourism activities choose the messaging they do, and how those in the industry can use this to be more successful in their marketing efforts through the use of social media. This research will contribute to an understanding of how consumers of commercial adventure activities

project the experience using Twitter, and the results will provide a framework for creating effective messaging throughout social media.

### **Literature Review**

Research pertaining to an individual's quest for knowledge and insight (Weber, 2001), restoring a displaced equilibrium (Fluker & Turner, 2000), and the perception of risk (Dickson & Dolnicar, 2004; Cater, 2006) has been done in regards to what makes adventure activities appealing for certain individuals. Someone's perception of adventure depends on a variety of past experiences including the comfort level of being in a new, strange place (Weber). Using overland trips as her focus, Weber found, "individuals' subjective experience of adventure and their self-perception may not be consistent with researchers' and practitioners' classifications" (Weber, p. 373). Further research can use this in an attempt to understand the messaging that will portray the right mix of thrill and perceived adventure.

Fluker & Turner (2000) analyzed the needs, motivations, and expectations of consumers of whitewater rafting adventures by surveying customers at a whitewater rafting company. After administering surveys before and after customers completed the trip, they found there are significant differences in needs and motivations among consumers of whitewater rafting trips (Fluker & Turner). Those with no prior rafting experience were drawn to the action of the whitewater trip itself, and were willing to take more risks to achieve the experience, while those with prior experience focused on other benefits of rafting such as being with friends or in nature (Fluker & Turner).

In an effort to further explore risk in the context of consumer behavior, Dickson & Dolnicar (2004) reviewed past literature and compared operationalizations. They found desired risk level varies with a person's perception of risk, and conclude it would be beneficial for those in the adventure tourism industry to conceptualize risk in a way that appeals to audiences with varying levels of desired risk (Dickson & Dolnicar). According to Cater (2006), handing over the element of risk to more skilled guides and outfitters automatically lowers the level of perceived risk. He found when consumers perceive controlled risk as a challenge, it enhances the overall enjoyment of the activity, therefore consumers will be drawn toward activities above their skill level to maintain the thrills they are seeking when taking part in adventure activities (Cater). Through a series of interviews with adventure tourism outfitters and customers, Cater found the most successful outfitters are those that reduce the actual risk while maintaining the thrilling feeling that surrounds it. These studies address the different desires among adventure tourists, however they fail to provide a practical way in which to harness that information to appeal to consumers, or how consumers prefer to portray these activities using social media.

Participating in two-way conversations with consumers creates a stronger relationship between the brand and consumer, and in some cases directly correlates with sales (Zhang, Jansen, & Chowdhury, 2011). Internet-based social media challenges traditional marketing ideas while creating new ways to understand and interact instantly with customers (Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2010). Companies are missing out on new opportunities to market products by sticking to outdated social media

tactics involving one-way marketing messages or “making noise” rather than participating in the conversation (Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, p. 7). Social media not only connects customers to a product, but customers with each other creating an overall brand community (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Laroche et al. define brand community as “relationships between the targeted audience and the brand, product, company, and other consumers” (p. 76). These communities are made up of “members, their relationships, and the sharing of essential resources either emotional or material” (Laroche et al., p. 77). Instead of analysis to gauge success or involvement in these communities, anecdotal monitoring is still being used by companies large and small to measure social media efforts (Harvard Business Review Analytic Services).

A 2013 Pew Research Center study found adults are using social media sites at a high rate, especially for ages 18-29 (83%), followed by 30-49 (77%), 50-64 (52%) and 65+ (32%) (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). According to the study, the amount of Twitter users doubled from November 2010 to 2012 with 16 percent of Internet users taking part (Duggan & Brenner). Thirty-nine percent of adventure travelers are likely to recommend a trip by posting updates upon their return to social media (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2013). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) creates more interest and exposure and it is more successful at creating a positive interest around a product (Zhang, Jansen, & Chowhurd, 2011). A study done by the Adventure Travel Trade Association and The George Washington University found that 54 percent of travelers overall report planning to participate in an adventure activity on their next trip, and 73 percent of adventure travelers planning to participate in an adventure activity on their next trip, with 45 percent of adventure travelers planning to

use a tour operator (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association.) This creates tremendous opportunity for those in the industry to increase their business by utilizing the reach and power of social media.

Because Twitter is still a fairly new platform, there is not an abundance of research on the topic. A majority of research focuses on public figures and the use of Twitter including sports (Campos, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2013; Smith & Smith, 2012), celebrities (Stever & Lawson, 2013), and politicians (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). There is a gap in research when it comes to the cognitive process of those purchasing commercial adventure activities when posting on Twitter, and how to utilize those conversations. Stever & Lawson used a grounded theory open coding approach as well as qualitative content analysis of celebrity tweets and their followers, and found that fans enjoy feeling like they are part of everyday information about something they enjoy. Because participation in adventure activities can also convey a type of lifestyle or personality (McGillivray & Frew, 2007), the research done by Stever & Lawson provides insight into how brands can lead an overall community rather than traditional one-way marketing.

Twitter makes up a large portion of the social media sphere, but is still one of the leading platforms marketers have questions about using effectively (Stelzner, 2010). As of December 2012, it was the fastest growing social media site growing from 408 million to 485 million users between the second and fourth quarters of 2012 (Marcello, 2013). By July 2012, the site had 517 million users, and as of December 2012, Twitter had surpassed 200 million active monthly users with an average of 175 million tweets being distributed daily in (English, 2013). Twitter provides an opportunity to be part of a



nationwide conversation simply by adding a hashtag (#topicname) to the message in order to make messages easier to search (English). The hashtags allow users to “find tweets on topics of interest, learn more about current news issues, and even find new users to follow for future updates” (English, p. 19). This study aims to provide insight into messages, shared by both consumers and businesses, regarding adventure activities on Twitter. The current study will look at whitewater rafting as an adventure activity and how consumers of commercial whitewater rafting packages use Twitter to create social identities, or align themselves with others projecting similar attitudes, personality traits, and background in order to be part of social in-groups (Pentina, Zhang, & Basmanova, 2013) using the theoretical framework of social comparison. The results of this study will answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How prevalent are the actual activities when tweeting about an adventure tourism experience?

**RQ2:** Does social comparison theory explain the messages written by consumers when tweeting about adventure activities?

**RQ3:** Does social comparison theory explain who customers mention in a tweet?

**Social comparison theory.** Long before social media, the idea of an imagined audience, has been thought to guide our actions (Litt, 2012). People rely on what they envision to be their audience and change their behavior based on what they perceive to be characteristics of the group (Litt). This is all part of creating one's social identity, which according to McGillivray & Frew (2007) includes not only actions taken by the individual, but the audience witnessing those actions. Aaker (1999) described the self as malleable, having various versions of the self activated to match different situations.

According to Aaker, our self-concept encompasses many different conceptions including good self, bad self, hoped self, feared self, not-me self, ideal self, possible self, and ought self. These are influenced by both personality and situational factors and can be activated at any time (Aaker). Consumers use certain brands or activities to express who they wish to be (desired self), strive to be (ideal self), or believe they should be (ought self) to step outside their more consistent roles such as boss or parent (Aaker). They use cues from others in similar situations to gauge salient personality traits of the strived for self and use them to manage their outward impressions and gain approval to increase self-esteem (Aaker).

It is important to know what drives someone to portray themselves a certain way throughout social media channels in order to understand the most effective way to join the conversation. Social comparison theory states “people evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison respectively with the opinions and abilities of others” (Festinger, 1954, p. 118). At one time or another everyone engages in social comparison; the act is universal (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). It is used as a cue to gauge our own achievements, gain self-esteem, or develop opinions about a certain issue (Gibbons & Buunk). When choosing to talk about a brand or engage in a community surrounding a brand, consumers are thinking of the imagined audience discussed earlier, and seek to fulfill social motives through social ties or their own image enhancement (Alexandrov, Lilly, & Babakus, 2013). Festinger’s theory of social comparison affects both positive and negative word of mouth (WOM) and allows consumers to satisfy social needs by doing things such as bragging about a product or activity to enhance self-image (Alexandrov et al.).

Social comparison theory has been expanded throughout the years since Festinger's original definition to include such cognitive processes as social projection and false consensus, in which "assumptions about the characteristics of others are made on the basis of one's own characteristics" (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, p. XXX). It is important to look at in regards to adventure tourism, as often those taking part in an adventure activity are stepping out of their comfort zone to try something new and social comparison allows them to learn how to adapt to challenging situations (Buunk & Gibbons). Fear and affiliation research is another area of research that is rooted in social comparison theory (Kulik, Mahler, & Earnest, 1994). Before the study done by Kulik et al., research suggested those who were under stress or threat choose to affiliate themselves with others in the same situation and look to them for support (Schachter, 1959). When duplicating Schachter's research, Kulik et al., found the opposite to be true. The researchers found those under stress or anxiety look to those thought to have direct experience handling the situation for advice to lower anxiety levels (Kulik et al.). The implication for this when analyzing social media conversations between companies and consumers of adventure tourism, is that consumers are not necessarily looking for companions or equals from a company, but rather someone to assert a level of experience and expertise to help lower the anxiety of participating in something new or outside of their typical self.

While everyone takes part in social comparison at one point or another in their lives, some are more susceptible (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Those with a high social comparison orientation (SCO) are characterized by three features (a) a high activation of the self meaning a heightened awareness of public and private self-image and a tendency

to focus on first person and use “I” or “me” more often (b) a strong interest in what others feel, and interdependence (c) uncertainty of self, low self-esteem or neuroticism (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). People with high SCO tend to be higher in conformity and have a self-concept that can vary in different social situations and be influenced by those around them (Gibbons & Buunk). Interestingly those with high SCO will often counter their self-doubt or low self-esteem with an outward appearance of arrogance or narcissism (Gibbons & Buunk). Characteristics of high SCO can be found in anyone during times of uncertainty whether they have an actual higher SCO or not (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Because taking part in an adventure activity for the first time often creates uncertainty thus the opportunity for characteristics of high SCO to appear, the following hypotheses were formulated for this study:

**H1a:** Individuals will use primarily first person references when tweeting about the adventure activity.

**H1b:** Companies will use primarily second person references when tweeting about the adventure activity.

**H2a:** Individuals will use a positive tone when tweeting about the adventure activity.

**H2b:** Companies will use a neutral tone when tweeting about the adventure activity.

**H3:** Individuals will not mention using a company when tweeting about taking part in an adventure activity.

This research aims to uncover whether consumers and companies are engaging in conversation and if so, are they are talking about the same things? This, combined with the knowledge of what drives consumers to create the messages used in Twitter

conversations, will provide insight into how to appeal to consumers and create a community of loyal brand followers.

### **Method**

A content analysis of all tweets mentioning Gauley or #Gauley from September 1, 2013 through October 26, 2013 was conducted for this study. Gauley season is a whitewater-rafting season that takes place on the Gauley River in West Virginia for five weekends each Fall. According to the National Park Service, 60,000 people a year raft the Gauley, purchasing guided trips from companies throughout the region. The timeframe and season were chosen due to the large number of people participating in both the activity and social media conversation in a condensed timeframe. The sample includes participants spread across the United States and 12 countries. The timeframe for this study begins 5 days before the first day of Gauley season and ends 1 week after the last. This method is an efficient way to analyze a conversation taking place among those involved in adventure tourism throughout an entire season.

All tweets containing the word Gauley were collected using the online analysis tool [www.topsy.com](http://www.topsy.com). The search timeframe was September 1, 2013 through October 26, 2013 and the two search terms included were Gauley and #Gauley. Once duplicates were removed, the search delivered 784 tweets. Duplicate tweets were the result of re-tweets and were not counted in this study due to the fact that this study focuses on the content of the tweet rather than the actual number of tweets surrounding the specific season. A re-tweet merely resends the same message a second time.

Tweets were coded using the following categorical indicators: author, point of view, mention of company, and tone. As discussed earlier, those with naturally high SCO

or those who find themselves in times of uncertainty, will counteract feelings of inadequacy with seemingly arrogant portrayals of themselves or their abilities (Gibbons & Buunk 1999). It is for this reason the categories were chosen. While Gauley season is a popular whitewater-rafting season, the intensity of the activity is thought, in this study, to bring out characteristics of high SCO when discussing it on Twitter.

The author of the tweet was reviewed and recorded as a company (a commercial whitewater rafting company), or brand (outdoor gear retailers), or an individual. When looking at whether or not SCO plays a factor, it is important to look at the author of the tweet. Companies or brands have a level of authority in regards to the activity, and thus the characteristics of high SCO should not show through in the messaging. This also allows for evaluation of conversation between company and customer.

Point of view refers to whether the author is speaking in first person, second person, or third person. Again, a high activation of self is a characteristic of high SCO and could signal uncertainty (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). This is also the reason for the mention of company category. According to Cater (2006), the use of a commercial guide automatically lessens the actual risk involved, which makes those not possessing the skills themselves able to take part in more adventurous activities. However, those taking part in the activities are drawn to the perception of risk (Cater) and enjoy conveying that public image using social media (McGillivray & Frew, 2007). Therefore, by not mentioning the company they used, customers create a more self-focused achievement, which is a characteristic of high SCO.

The tone of the tweets was measured using a positive, negative, neutral scale. In this study, positive referred to speaking positively about oneself (I conquered, I defeated),

negative referred to feelings of inadequacy in regards to the activity or self-deprecating (I'm nervous, I survived), and neutral was characterized as devoid of emotion (I'm going whitewater rafting). Categories examined within the messages of the tweets were given numerical indicators and entered into an Excel spreadsheet.

### Results

It is important to examine the prevalence of mentioning the adventure activity in tweets that were coded to provide insight into the first research question of this study.

**RQ1:** How prevalent are the actual activities when tweeting about an adventure tourism experience?

The first question is a starting point to gauge whether or not companies and individuals are talking about the same thing on Twitter. It also helps explain whether it is the actual activity consumers are interested in, or the lifestyle that surrounds it. Table 2 illustrates the data for author, total tweets and the number of times the actual activity was mentioned.

Table 2

Author	Total Tweets	Mention of Activity
Company/Brand	170	52 (31%)
Individual	743	279 (49%)
Total	911	331 (36%)

The fact that the activity itself was mentioned roughly 50 percent of the time by individuals suggests the activity itself is not always the main focus when choosing to take part in an adventure tourism experience. Other factors such as spending time with friends

and family or being in nature (Fluker & Turner, 2000), may be equally as important. The results also show that companies are only talking about the activity a third of the time.

The second research question and accompanying hypotheses involve the actual messages used by individuals when tweeting about their adventure experience.

**RQ2:** Does social comparison theory explain the messages written by individuals when tweeting about adventure activities?

The first hypothesis formulated to help answer this question was developed to determine if consumers are portraying a high activation of self with an emphasis on first person narratives (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Because companies are not affected by the lack of self-esteem present when taking part in an adventure activity for the first time, but rather trying to reach consumers, it was expected the narrative will prove different. Table 3 represents the voice used by both individuals and companies.

**H1a:** Individuals will use primarily first person references when tweeting about the adventure activity.

**H1b:** Companies will use primarily second person references when tweeting about the adventure activity.

Table 3

	1 <sup>st</sup> Person	2 <sup>nd</sup> Person	3 <sup>rd</sup> person
Individual	319 (56%)	44 (8%)	32 (6%)
Company	24 (14%)	38 (22%)	18 (11%)

The hypotheses proved true with first person being used in individual tweets 319 (56%) times, second person 44 (8%), and third person 32 (6%). The remaining tweets did not reference a person, rather a statement about the event. Company tweets resulted in first



person narrative 24 (14%) times, second person 38 (22%), and third person 18 (11%). As discussed earlier the need to project one's abilities using social media can be a way in which those feeling uneasy can boost their self-esteem about the situation (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

The second hypothesis is in regards to the portrayal of high SCO by conveying a sense of arrogance or neuroticism, even though actual self-esteem or assuredness may be low (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). In this study, a positive tone represented a positive outlook of oneself and skill level in regards to the activity (Figure 1). A negative tone refers to the difficulty of the activity and reference to intimidation or passiveness (Figure 2), and a neutral tone conveyed no emotion but rather a statement about the activity (Figure 3). Table 4 illustrates data representing the tone used by both individuals and companies.

**H2a:** Individuals will use a positive tone when tweeting about the adventure activity.

**H2b:** Companies will use a neutral tone when tweeting about the adventure activity.

Table 4

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Individuals	63 (11%)	107 (19%)	403 (70%)
Companies	8 (5%)	23 (15%)	139 (81%)

The first part of this hypothesis was not supported by the data. Individuals used a positive tone 63 (11%) times and a negative tone 107 (19%) times. While this does not fully support the idea of arrogance or neuroticism in gauging one's own skill level, describing the difficulty of the activity might still be thought to improve one's social collateral (McGillivray & Frew, 2007), by "surviving" it (Figure 4). The second part of the

hypothesis however, was supported by the data. Companies used a neutral tone 139 (81%) times, a positive tone 8 (5%), and a negative tone 23 (15%).

The third and final hypothesis involves the prevalence of the name of a company or brand used by consumers.

**H3:** Individuals will not mention the use of a commercial outfitter when tweeting about taking part in an adventure activity.

This suggests a high activation of self and the public image portrayed (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). By not mentioning the company, consumers are able to create the online persona that they have the skills necessary to achieve the goal and possess the characteristics often shared by those in the outdoor adventure community (McGillivray & Frew, 2007).

The hypothesis was supported in that consumers only mentioned a company in a tweet 61 (11%) times. If companies want to utilize the benefits of eWOM, it is important to understand how to use the online community to leverage support in spreading the company name.

### **Discussion**

Each research question and hypothesis was formulated to better understand the motivation behind the tweets sent by those taking part in an adventure activity, as well as examine the opportunity for companies to improve their social media strategies by better understanding these motives.

The first research question asked how often the activity was mentioned in the tweets, and highlights the first factor that should be examined by companies; what is getting individuals excited, the activity or the overall experience. Individuals talked about the activity of whitewater rafting almost 50 percent of the time while the companies only

talked about it around 30 percent. Social media creates an opportunity to position a brand all over the world, not just in areas where the activity is taking place. Almost half the tourists (42%) in North America and Europe reported participating in an adventure activity on their last trip (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2013). It is important for companies to remind individuals what they have to offer. It is also important when looking at fear and affiliation as a part of social comparison theory used in this study. As Kulik et al. (1994) found, those facing uncertain times will look to those with more experience to calm anxiety. This provides an opportunity for companies to position themselves as experts in a specific activity gaining the trust, and purchase of individuals.

This research also examined the theoretical framework of social comparison theory, and whether it explains individuals' tweets in regards to adventure activity experiences. The hypotheses formulated to answer this question looked at characteristics of those with a high social comparison orientation (SCO). While some people naturally possess a high SCO, and display traits such as a heightened awareness of public and private self-image, a tendency to focus on first person and use "I" or "me" more often, a strong interest in what others feel, and uncertainty of self, low self-esteem or neuroticism, anyone can and does portray these characteristics at some point in their life; usually when facing uncertain times (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). This is especially important to examine when analyzing consumers of adventure tourism activities because many of them lack skills and experience (McGillivray & Frew, 2007), and will experience a period of uncertainty, even when the perception of risk is lowered by purchasing a trip with experienced guides (Weber, 2001). The hypothesis that individuals would use a positive

tone in regards to their own abilities was not supported in this study. In fact a neutral tone was used most often (70%), followed by a negative tone (19%). A possible explanation for this finding is the amount of social collateral (McGillivray & Frew) gained through simply associated oneself with an adventure activity may be enough to fulfill the need for a carefully constructed outward image (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Further research is needed in this area.

The final research question and hypothesis examined social comparison theory and the mention of a company. Although the majority of the 60,000 tourists taking part in Gauley season each year purchase their trip use the services of local companies (National Park Service, n.d.), individuals only mentioned the name of a company 61 times (11%). Social comparison theory has strong explanatory power for these actions as well because it is understood the use of a guide lowers the perceived risk level of an activity (Weber, 2001), so there is incentive to leave that detail out when creating a social image. As discussed earlier, individuals will overcompensate for uncertainty with a projection of arrogance or narcissism. Not mentioning using a guide is not an oversight, but a calculated decision to create a desired public image (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). This is important information for companies to understand so they can create an online strategy that allows individuals to project the desired image, but utilizes the power of eWOM by giving them an incentive to mention the name of the company.

This study helps lay a foundation for looking into the actions of today's adventure tourists. In the future, studies should expand upon this using both qualitative and quantitative techniques including surveys and interviews to get feedback from the participants themselves in regards to what image they choose to project on social media

and why. It will also be beneficial to examine a longer period of time to determine if the excitement of such a short season plays a factor, or if the results are consistent throughout the year in other seasons.

Overall, social comparison theory proves to have strong explanatory power in regards to those taking part in adventure activities. Because adventure tourism is a relatively new, but rapidly growing segment of tourism (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2013), it is important to examine a unifying connection among the varying demographics of those taking part in an activity. Social comparison helps to do that not by exploring individual motives for taking part, but explaining the cognitive processes behind projecting a self-image (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), which at times proves more important than the activity itself (McGillivray & Frew, 2007).

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) creates more interest and exposure, and is more successful at creating a positive interest around a product than traditional marketing (Zhang, Jansen, & Chowhurd, 2011). The number of social media users, specifically Twitter users, is growing daily (Duggan & Brenner, 2013) so it is important for companies to understand consumer behavior on the sites, and how to best utilize it themselves. This study serves as an example for how to begin to create successful social media campaigns and attract a new worldwide consumer base.





**Willard Gordon**  
@willycg661


Follow

Conquered Class 3,4, and 5 white water rapids today on the Upper Gauley White Water Rapids in West Virginia, best weekend in a long time 🚣🌞🚣

7:46 PM - 20 Oct 2013

1 FAVORITE

Reply Retweet Favorite



**TheyStillCallMeBruce**  
@3RiversTesticle

Follow

I forgot. I totally skull fucked that Gauley River.  
[#SuckedMyBallsToo](#)

8:09 AM - 22 Sep 2013

Reply Retweet Favorite

Figure 1. Tweets representing a positive outlook on personal skills and abilities.



*Figure 2.* Tweets representing feelings of intimidation or passiveness in regards to the whitewater rafting activity.



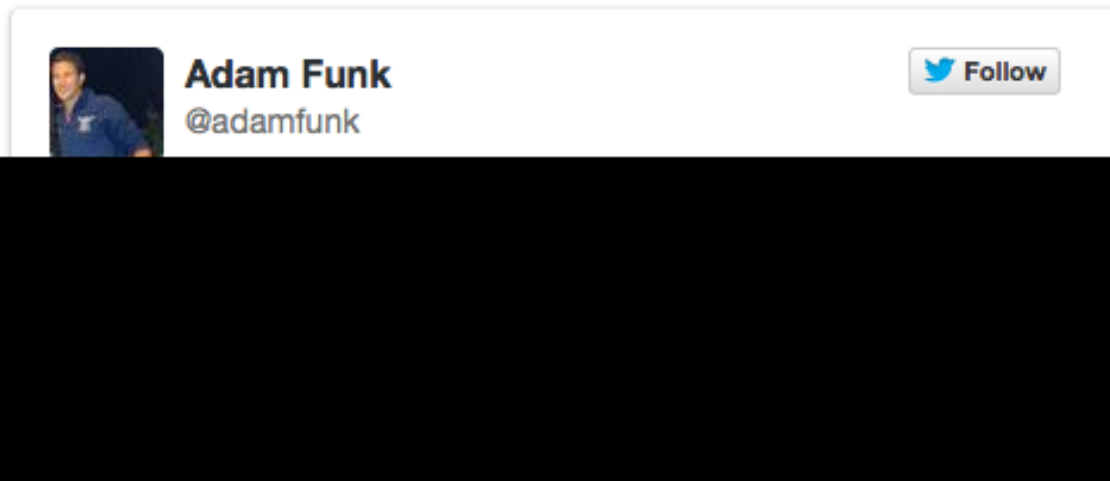


Figure 3. Tweets representing a neutral tone, neither the individual or the activity is more intimidating.



*Figure 4.* Tweets that could still be used to increase social collateral by conveying the difficulty of the activity and the fact that they were able to overcome it.

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