Women Thru-Hiker Experiences on the Pacific Crest Trail: Gender Influences, Factors of Success, and Personal Outcomes

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Abstract

This study investigates gender influences, factors of success, and personal outcomes for women Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) thru-hikers. Female underrepresentation has been acknowledged in adventure literature for decades, yet research exploring women's thru-hike experiences remains limited and rarely focuses on PCT hikers. To expand this knowledge base, researchers conducted 23 in-depth interviews with PCT thru-hikers who identified as women. Independent coders analyzed the qualitative data and recorded emergent themes via thematic coding. Findings indicate women PCT hikers perceive gender constructs and masculine trail culture as primary constraints to thru-hiking and personal mentality as a key factor of success. Additionally, themes identify shifts in personal values, lifestyle, and career as outcomes of the thru-hike. The results reiterate that social behavior and gender constructs influence women's experiences with thru-hiking, ultimately underscoring the importance of inclusivity in outdoor settings. Implications for PCT management, the outdoor industry, and trail communities are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Pacific Crest Trail; female thru-hikers; women thru-hikers; gender influences; personal outcomes

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Female participation in long-distance hiking and outdoor recreation activities is steadily growing (Bowen, 2018; Henderson, 1992; McNeil, Harris, & Fondren, 2012; Pacific Crest Trail Association [PCTA], n.d.), yet male dominance and female underrepresentation continue to define the gender gap in most outdoor recreation and leisure settings (Little, 2002; Oftedal, 2015; Roberts, 1996). Literature exploring gender-based differences in outdoor recreation experiences widely acknowledges wilderness as a gendered space where the male perspective is presented more often than the female perspective (Cox, 2017; Filemyr, 1997; Oftedal, 2015). Furthermore, a number of studies attribute gendered perceptions of wilderness participation to limited female engagement in outdoor activities (Cox, 2017; Filemyr, 1997; Gaarder & Wesely, 2004; Henderson, 1992). This study summarizes relevant findings in the literature and examines recent testimonies of women thru-hikers, as well as examining any differences or unique findings. Due to the inherent complexities of gender and self-identification, in this study we refer to the interviewees as women thru-hikers rather than female thru-hikers to ensure maximum inclusivity within this participant group. The results of this study support the literature and suggest that elements of social conditioning (e.g., gender constructs) exist within PCT trail culture and differentiate the women thru-hiker experience.

**Literature Review**

To fully appreciate the findings of this study, it is important to gain an understanding of the female perspective in outdoor leisure activities—specifically, female perceptions of safety, inclusion, and identity on the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). The PCT is a National Scenic Trail in the western United States, spanning 2,650 miles across California, Oregon, and Washington (PCTA, n.d.). The trail is utilized by a wide range of recreationists, including day hikers, backpackers, horseback riders, and thru-hikers (PCTA, n.d.). Referred to as PCT thru-hikers, certain individuals hike the entirety of the PCT in one hiking season, an endeavor that typically takes 4 to 6 months (PCTA, n.d.). Despite growing trail popularity, few studies have explored women's experiences and accomplishments on the PCT and fewer have examined specific underlying perceptions, motivations, and outcomes of women PCT thru-hikers (Bosche, 2013; Jacobs, 2018). Several studies have been conducted on women thru-hiker experiences on the Appalachian Trail (AT), and while there may be several shared experiences among the hikers, findings suggest each trail has a unique community and culture (Berg, 2015; Bosche, 2013; Boulware, 2007; Matthews, 2009). This study represents a significant contribution to the literature, as it emphasizes relevant women's voices in PCT thru-hiking, thus improving overall understanding of women thru-hiker experiences.

According to visitor use statistics presented on the PCTA website in 2019, requests for PCT thru-hike permits increased over 300% between 2014 and 2018—a dramatic and uncharacteristic increase in the history of the trail. Increased media attention following the publication and subsequent movie adaptation of Cheryl Strayed's best-selling autobiography, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, inspired many women to thru-hike the PCT; the rapid increase in PCT popularity, especially among solo women hikers, has been referred to in the literature as the Wild-effect (Bowen, 2018). Possible implications of increased female participation in PCT thru-hiking include shifts in PCT trail culture, gender dynamics, and women's wilderness experiences. This study explores various aspects of women PCT thru-hiker experiences in the 5 years between 2014 and 2018.

Across the literature, studies suggest primary motivations for thru-hiking include a desire for transformative experiences (Goldenberg & Soule, 2014) and participation in trail culture (Crowley, 2018). The literature also indicates women may experience unique hiking outcomes due to different perceptions of risk and adventure (Cummings, Goldenberg, & Pronsolino, 2008; Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989; Haskell & Randall, 1998; Little, 2002; Overholt & Ewert, 2015). One study found that 15% more male AT thru-hikers than female AT thru-hikers attain their hiking
goals (Boulware, 2007). Furthermore, several findings show that biological conditions such as menstruation and menopause were not responsible for the observed disparity in thru-hiker success rates, but rather social conditions such as levels of support and inclusivity considerably influenced success rates (Bosche, 2013; Boulware, 2007). The growing number of women who have overcome gender-related constraints to outdoor activities often describe these extended expeditions in the wilderness as momentous, life-altering experiences that transform their feminine identities, build their confidence and resilience, and deepen their spiritual and intuitive selves (Angell, 2008; Bosche, 2013; Cox, 2017; Ewert & Shellman, 2009; Matthews, 2009; Overholt & Ewert, 2015; Pohl, Borrie, & Patterson, 2000). For women thru-hikers and other women outdoor recreationists to continue to experience these unique and transformative outcomes, social constraints must first be identified and then addressed (Angell, 2008; Jacobs, 2018; Pohl et al., 2000). An element of this study examined the constraints described by women PCT hikers.

**Intersections of Trail Culture and Male Privilege**

Crowley (2018) explored various aspects of identity, community, and ideology associated with PCT and AT thru-hikers. The study found trail culture to be more complex and layered than expected. Although perceiving trail culture to be open and welcoming, most thru-hikers also noted undercurrents of patriarchal culture, male privilege, and predatory behavior when asked direct questions about their PCT experience. While some hikers denied gender differences in social interactions on the PCT, interviews with PCT thru-hikers and trail angels indicate women hikers often experience disproportional judgment or praise for their decisions as well as occasional predatory behavior from men (e.g., groups of men following a single woman, sexist banter directed at women, and sexual harassment; Crowley, 2018). Crowley’s findings also indicate that PCT thru-hikers value and prioritize safety and group cohesion, especially in the Sierra, due to stories of fatal or near-fatal accidents involving PCT thru-hikers when they attempted stream or mountain crossings. One woman thru-hiker noted that male hikers always led her hiking group when they crossed streams due to men having “greater size and strength” (Crowley, 2018, p. 46).

Several participants noted that the outside community (non-thru-hikers) often interacted with women thru-hikers in a gendered manner along the entirety of the PCT, whereas thru-hikers quickly discarded this gendered outlook as they became accustomed to PCT trail culture (Crowley, 2018). Similarly, women PCT thru-hikers who were interviewed in Crowley’s study unanimously stated gendering was an issue only with non-thru-hikers. Finally, Crowley (2018) noted outcomes such as increased self-autonomy, new perspectives, increased patience and adaptability, and restored faith in humanity among PCT thru-hikers; a limited number of hikers stated they did not experience any changes in self or lifestyle after completing the PCT, and one woman participant expressed difficulty reintegrating into normal life activities post-hike.

A separate study found statistically significant differences between cisgender male and cisgender female thru-hiker perceptions of gender on the PCT (Jacobs, 2018). Female hikers, on average, felt more objectified than male hikers on the PCT and felt they were treated differently due to their gender; 100% of male hikers stated they were treated the same on the PCT as they were in society (Jacobs, 2018). Additionally, while male hikers felt they were treated very well by society, female hikers felt they were treated only moderately well (Jacobs, 2018). Furthermore, over 80% of female hikers identified males as the most discriminatory gender category, eliciting fear of men in some instances, whereas male hikers unanimously stated they never feared other gender groups (Jacobs, 2018). When asked to identify times when gender served as an oppressive system in their life, female hikers identified occasional instances before and after the PCT, but noted rare instances on trail, indicating a less oppressive culture on the PCT than in normal society; conversely, male hikers noted very rare or absent instances of gender oppression that happened before, during, or after the PCT (Jacobs, 2018).
Additionally, male hikers were the only gender category in Jacobs’ study to consider the PCT as a genderless place, whereas 100% of female hikers considered the PCT to present some aspects of gendering (Jacobs, 2018). Similarly, a higher percentage of male hikers than female hikers perceived thru-hiking the PCT to minimize social expectations of gender (Jacobs, 2018). Furthermore, all female hikers (100%) indicated they minimized expressions of their gender while thru-hiking the PCT, while only 40% of male hikers indicated they minimized gender expressions (Jacobs, 2018). Overall, Jacobs’ (2018) findings indicate female PCT thru-hikers experience more gender-related constraints and effects before, during, and after the PCT compared to male thru-hikers and both male and female hikers perceive trail culture as less gendered, on average, than normal culture. Jacobs’ study implies that male PCT hikers are in a position of social privilege—they do not experience gender-based fear or discrimination to the extent of female hikers and are less likely to be cognizant of gender oppression affecting other gender categories.

Several studies corroborate the notion of White male privilege in regard to thru-hiking communities and trail culture (Berg, 2015; Roberts, 1996). Berg (2015) identified White middle-class male privilege as a recurrent theme in his interviews with AT thru-hikers, later commenting on its role in AT trail culture: "It turns out that instead of overcoming the enculturation of society, 1970s thru-hikers exemplified a particular and privileged location within it" (p. 3). Similarly, Roberts (1996) acknowledged race, class, and gender as separate elements of the multifaceted concept of privilege, stating that White middle-class men have more privilege than women and that White middle-class women have more privilege than women of color. Roberts argued that for women's leadership and empowerment in the outdoors to become stronger, women's alliances must be built and must incorporate transparency, inclusivity, and respect.

Women’s Perceptions of Fear and Safety in Outdoor Settings

The outdated notion that women are neither physically nor mentally capable of participating or thriving in wilderness settings without the presence of men has pervaded American media, society, and culture for centuries (Gaarder & Wesely, 2004; Henderson, 1992; Little, 2002; McNiel et al., 2012). This holds significance considering women have been shown to be less likely to engage in outdoor activities if they feel unwelcome, unsafe, and underrepresented in wilderness settings (Cox, 2017; Haskell & Randall, 1998). A primary goal of this study was to provide women thru-hikers with a platform to voice their experiences on and perceptions of the PCT.

The literature indicates social conditioning, specifically maintenance of gender constructs, limits female engagement in wilderness activities and encourages male exclusivity and dominance in the outdoors (Cox, 2017; Filemyr, 1997; Gaarder & Wesely, 2004; Oftedal, 2015). For example, those who participate in wilderness activities must have certain skillsets and knowledge to conduct themselves safely in the outdoors (Loeffler & Warren, 2006). While most men have been taught from a young age to think independently, use outdoor equipment, increase strength and agility, and conquer fear, many women have not had the same experience (Harris, 1994). In a study exploring hiking alone, Coble, Selin, and Erickson (2003) stated, “In general, female participants were not knowledgeable about map and compass techniques and often relied on a male companion for navigational assistance” (p. 14).

Furthermore, the literature suggests that social conditioning maintains fears surrounding female solo travel; female aversion to risk; and feelings of guilt, shame, and selfishness when participating in outdoor recreation activities (Chasteen, 1994; Little, 2002; McNiel et al., 2012). A study exploring interactions between single women and their environment found that safety concerns make women perceive their experiences as more difficult than men’s (Chasteen, 1994); this finding aligns with both Jacobs’ (2018) and Crowley’s (2018) assessments. The study identified safety considerations as the primary determining factor influencing single women’s decisions about housing, transportation, and leisure. Chasteen (1994) argued that women perceive their
environment through a “socialized fear perspective” in which “dominant cultural mythologies of where a woman’s place should be” force women to limit their behaviors to “not stand out” (p. 326). In the same study, one woman claimed she would not hike alone because she had read “horror stories of what happens on trails” (Chasteen, 1994, p. 322). The women participants noted they felt more comfortable outdoors when in the presence of men, despite attributing female leisure constraints to fear of male violence (e.g., rape or assault; Chasteen, 1994; Coble et al., 2003).

Although steps have been taken to reverse notions of a masculine wilderness, remnants of this ideology have persisted, adding strength to the constraints and barriers that prevent some women from fully enjoying outdoor recreation and its derived benefits (Angell, 2008; Cox, 2017; McNiel et al., 2012). The literature consistently indicates women face significantly more constraints to leisure than men do, often identifying the presence of fear as the primary differentiating factor (Berg, 2015; Chasteen, 1994; Coble et al., 2003; Roberts, 1996). Coble et al. (2003), who explored types and intensities of solo hiker fears, identified five types of fear: violence from a male individual, accidental injury or emergency, getting lost, animal attack, and theft. Coble et al. (2003) further discovered that hiker’s perceptions of threat were influenced by four main factors: appearance, behavior, group size, and duration. Women’s fear of violence from a male while hiking was also identified by Berg (2015), Chasteen (1994), Crowley (2018), and Jacobs (2018), suggesting a nuanced relationship between female hiker interpretations of fear and safety associated with the male gender. Both Jacobs’ (2018) and Chasteen’s (1994) findings imply female thru-hikers moderate or limit their behaviors and gender expressions to reduce attention from threatening males. This study explored women thru-hiker’s perceptions and examined the factors leading to women’s success and empowerment on the PCT. The study offers additional insights to thru-hiker outcomes pertaining to the female gender and expands upon the complex nature of gender implications in wilderness settings.

**Method**

In June 2018, two researchers developed and pilot tested an IRB-approved 25-question qualitative instrument with four adult women backpackers. Once this was completed, the researchers refined the interview questions and recruited 23 participants identifying as women to address the purpose of this study. Selection criteria stipulated participants had hiked the PCT between 2014 and 2018, self-identified as women, and completed the trail in a thru-hiking manner. No additional questions were asked regarding self-identification of participants. Solo or group hiker status did not factor into the selection process, as this was not the focus of the study. Additionally, due to extreme weather conditions and fire closures along the PCT during the 5-year time frame, the researchers did not require participants to have hiked a continuous footpath. The demographics of the 23 study participants varied (Table 1), but the sample consisted predominantly of Caucasian women, women in their 20s, and women who hiked in 2017.

The researchers used purposeful and snowball sampling methods to recruit the participants over social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, as advocated by Palinkas et al. (2015) and Coble et al. (2003). While the majority of participants were enlisted through purposeful sampling \((n = 20)\), three participants were obtained through snowball sampling in hopes of procuring a more diverse participant group; these participants were individuals who identified as women of color. The researchers attempted purposeful sampling of women of color via posts on PCT hiker pages on Facebook; however, no individuals volunteered. Although the use of snowball sampling has the potential of overreport of shared experiences, the researchers felt procuring a more representative and diverse participant group was necessary to express the various experiences of women thru-hikers. Additionally, snowball sampling was successfully utilized and considered an acceptable sampling method by Coble et al. (2003). The final sample size
When theoretical saturation was reached and no new themes emerged in the data (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1995).

In-depth interviews commenced in the summer of 2018 and were conducted over Zoom, an online video communication platform that allows its users to record and download audio and video files for each correspondence. Prior to the interview, each participant signed an IRB-approved consent form to comply with study protocol. Interviews lasted between 20 and 90 min, depending on participant responses, beginning with a brief introduction of the research and followed by a series questions addressing the study purpose: (1) How does gender impact women PCT thru-hiker experiences? (2) What factors do women thru-hikers attribute to their success in completing the PCT? and (3) What outcomes did thru-hiking the PCT have on women hikers? Transcription occurred the week after each interview, which allowed time for follow-up comments or questions from the participants; this resulted in one follow-up comment being added to a participant’s transcript. Additionally, the signed consent form required participants to indicate their preference on reviewing their interview transcript or Zoom files; however, zero participants selected the option to review their transcribed interview, so no participant review process occurred. Interviews concluded in the fall of 2018.

Data were analyzed via thematic coding, as advocated by Spradley (1979), meaning the researchers assigned codes for emergent themes in the interview transcripts. The codes were defined based on the grouping of similar common responses and were not predetermined. The frequency of each code was reported. To limit researcher bias on the data, this study had three researchers independently analyze 50% of the total data and assess the consistency of thematic

### Table 1
Demographics of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of thru-hike</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Participant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity of Participant</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>82.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese-Jewish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = 23) was determined when theoretical saturation was reached and no new themes emerged in the data (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1995).
coding (intercoding). This analysis of intercoder reliability determined an average intercoder agreement of 95% \( (k = 0.95) \), where \( k > 0.90 \) indicates excellent agreement (Neuendorf, 2002). The remaining 50% of data was coded by the primary researcher with consultation from a second independent researcher.

While coding the data, researchers selected representative quotes for emergent themes. These quotes have been integrated into the Results section under each theme description. In most cases, total theme percentages exceed 100%, as multiple themes were often identified in each participant response. Tables organize the findings by theme and highlight percent emergence across all interviews, with high frequency themes listed at the top and low frequency themes at the bottom. Furthermore, to protect the identities of the study participants, the researchers did not reference real names; however, all participants consented to the use of their trail names, so quote citations include trail name and date of thru-hike.

**Results**

These findings are presented in a manner reflective of the study purpose—exploring gender influences, factors of success, and personal outcomes for women PCT thru-hikers. Throughout the study, the 23 women hikers reported various accounts of social and gender influences on their PCT experience; they identified essential support systems, motivators, and values; and they discussed personal, professional, and social outcomes from their thru-hike. While every respondent described her own unique experience on the PCT, a number of common themes emerged in the data.

**Gender Influences**

**Implications of gender on women thru-hiker experiences.** When asked “Do you believe your PCT experience differed from that of a male thru-hiker’s? And if so, how did gender affect your hiking experience before, during, and after the trail?” 100% \( (n = 23) \) of participants described at least one way in which their gender positively or negatively affected their experience. Responses ranged from mild to significant, with 73.91% \( (n = 17) \) perceiving their gender to have significantly differentiated their PCT experience from male hikers’ and 26.09% \( (n = 6) \) perceiving mild effects that only somewhat differentiated their experience from male hikers. Table 2 illustrates emergent themes from the hikers’ testimonies on gender effects.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Interactions</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misogyny, Toxic Masculinity, Bro-Culture</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitchhiking</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menstruation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear for Safety</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social interactions.** Thirteen hikers (56%) stated gender affected their social interactions during their thru-hike. A majority of these hikers described negative gender influences, such as people questioning women’s leadership and ability in the outdoors. One hiker expressed her frustration with gendered questions and assumptions that happened prior to her thru-hike: “Before the hike there was a lot of social conditioning, people asking ‘is it safe?,’ ‘is your husband going with you?’, which was very annoying to me, especially because I got him into backpacking” (Birdie, 2017). Another hiker recalled her experience in a woman-led hiking group:

http://www.ejorel.com/
I think there were times where, from the perspective of the men, that we were like “seizing control” . . . we had to work that conflict out . . . it was fascinating to me because the leader of our group, she's one of the most accomplished people I've met in my life. Just effortless in her leadership, but people were resistant to it, and I think it was because she was a woman. (Lady, 2017)

Nine hikers (39.13%) identified various prejudices against women thru-hikers in response to their gender—this is discussed further in the theme Misogyny, Toxic Masculinity, and Bro-Culture.

Several hikers noted that the gendered comments came primarily from non-thru-hikers. One hiker stated, “I had pretty positive experiences with the male thru-hikers that I came across . . . the most negative male interactions I had were with non-thru-hikers” (DK, 2017). She went on to explain one gendered experience:

A non-thru-hiker at Kennedy Meadows lectured me for a good five minutes about taking care of my feet, and that was pretty annoying because I had already done 750 miles of the PCT, I’ve thru-hiked other trails in the past, and I’ve done a lot of backpacking. I probably had a lot more trail miles than he did . . . He was an older man, and I think he saw me as a little girl who was about to walk into the Sierra, whereas I was a 30-year-old woman who was very capable outside. I have thought back to that and wondered what the interaction would have looked like if I were a man. (DK, 2017)

Conversely, several hikers described positive gender influences, such as receiving more generosity and acknowledgment from strangers. One hiker stated, “I had a great experience. At one point in Washington, I was sitting somewhere having my lunch, and these two guys walked up and said, ‘You’re my hero! You are so awesome.’ I got more of that than anything else” (Tent Talker, 2015). Similarly, another hiker said, “If I’m being totally honest, I think women are more respected on the trail . . . Maybe because there’s fewer, maybe because it’s seen as a badass thing to do . . . I’ve actually never felt more respected than I did on the trail” (VP, 2017). This same hiker also shared that she had received “loads of encouragement” from friends and family before the trail.

Misogyny, toxic masculinity, and bro-culture. Thirteen hikers (56.52%) reported that they had personal experiences with “bro-culture” (exclusive attitudes and behaviors exhibited by the male gender) or “toxic masculinity” (harmful masculine constructs or gender norms) while thru-hiking the PCT. While describing the types of misogynistic behaviors she witnessed with her predominantly male hiking group, Red Riding Hood (2016) stated, “There were fairly constant comments about women and women’s bodies, and they were just so critical about so many other women.” Red Riding Hood also recalled a time at Deep Creek hot springs in southern California when four men she was hiking with sexually harassed another woman hiker; she stated, “They turned into monsters and were really inappropriate around her.” Later, other hikers told Red Riding Hood that they had witnessed the same group of male hikers harassing another woman, asking her to take her shirt off among other inappropriate requests. Five of the hikers (21.74%) reported disturbing male interactions in the desert portion of California, potentially indicating a geographical relationship. “Pink blazing” was referenced by one hiker and described as “when a guy starts crushing on a female hiker and he kind of like follows her, stops where she stops and tries to date her on the trail” (Landslide, 2017). Landslide commented, “Those are kind of harmless things, but those remarks come off like, ‘Oh, I think he’s pink blazing.’ . . . maybe it came up more than it should have.” This term was not mentioned by the other hikers, but several hikers did report men following them on the PCT, resulting in discomfort and worry—to the point where some women asked for help or left the trail for a few days to distance themselves from the male individuals.
Experiences with excessive male competition were also coded under this theme. One hiker expressed her annoyance with the competitive and hypermasculine trail culture:

What did annoy me was how competitive it was. It was about pushing miles, and the men tended to be a bit more like that than the women. It was challenging to deal with the competitive and bro-y culture when I was not necessarily as fast as a lot of the people I was hiking with. (Speck, 2017)

Another hiker concurred with a similar assessment: “Most of the hot-headed people were men. They had the attitude of ‘I can go really fast; you can try to keep up with me if you want’” (Otter, 2017). These types of experiences sometimes resulted in hikers feeling like an outsider in the male-dominated trail community. One hiker stated, “Diving into the male community was a little intimidating. I felt like there was a little bit of judgment, judgment from men . . . They had a kind of entitlement, like they could do it better than you, like they knew everything” (Bright Eyes, 2016).

Conversely, 10 hikers (43.48%) stated that they never experienced bro-culture or toxic masculinity on trail. One 45-year-old hiker reflected that her age may have influenced her perceptions of these behaviors:

Oh, that’s a hard one. I personally did not experience it, and maybe I didn’t experience it to the level other women did, or maybe I wasn’t aware of it to the same level because I am older? Being older, I’m more of the mindset of letting things roll off my back . . .

I would just hike on. (Chardonnay, 2015)

Likewise, a 52-year-old hiker responded, “The 20-something guys were pushing each other, and somewhat competitive, but I never saw that directed towards us. I think possibly because I was older” (One Speed, 2017). Several other statements linked age and male competition; specifically, older women hikers on average reported less misogynistic or hypermasculine behavior and/or ignored it more often than younger women hikers, and five of the hikers (21.74%) identified young, male, ultralight thru-hikers as the most likely group to exhibit bro-culture and “hyper-competitiveness” on the PCT.

**Hitchhiking.** Twelve hikers (52.17%) stated their gender influenced their ability to hitch-hike to and from towns or between trail sections. Several hikers described positive gender influences, such as obtaining rides more easily than their male counterparts. One such hiker stated, “In some ways, I benefited from being a woman as far as getting hitches from the road. Women who picked me up told me they felt comfortable picking me up because I was a woman as opposed to a man” (DK, 2017). Similarly, another hiker explained, “I think people are a lot more comfortable approaching females, and that could be a good thing or a bad thing, but in the trail community that’s mostly a good thing” (Birdie, 2017). To address the potential risk of hitchhiking as a woman, one hiker stated, “As a female, having to hitchhike by yourself, you have to take certain safety precautions” (Chardonnay, 2015). She went on to say that while she had positive experiences hitchhiking on the PCT, she took precautions such as hitchhiking in groups, taking pictures of license plates before entering the cars, and keeping her backpack and personal belongings close at all times—even if that meant riding in the truck bed.

Although most accounts were positive, several hikers shared negative experiences of gender influences on hitchhiking attempts. A number of these hikers had experienced unwanted attention and inappropriate or threatening comments during a ride. Hikers who reported negative hitchhiking experiences often described drunk drivers. More often than not, these hikers asked to be dropped off at the next safe location. One hiker shared an experience involving two male drivers:
The guys that gave me a ride were drunk. One of them looked at me at one point and said, "Oh, you're cute." I said thanks and then, you know, started texting my boyfriend. And then the guy is like, "So you're like our prisoner now, right?" (Pocket Sand, 2016)

Right then, Pocket Sand decided she needed to get out of the vehicle as soon as possible. When the drivers stopped for lunch, she jumped out of the car and quickly began walking away. She further explained, “I walked a couple blocks to a coffee shop and sat down, but they walked in and sat down right next to me, and they wouldn’t leave . . . Finally, the café owner, a woman, came over and asked me, ‘Do you need help?’” (Pocket Sand, 2016). With the help of the café owner, Pocket Sand was eventually able to distance herself from the male drivers, and she later remarked on the importance of women standing up for each other.

**Menstruation.** Six hikers (26.09%) identified menstruation and feminine hygiene as an influential factor on their trail experience. One hiker explained, “The weeks when I was menstruating were a very different time than when I was not . . . you’re on the trail for around four months, so you’re going to have at least four cycles—maybe less, depending on your stress level” (Landslide, 2017). A few women took seemingly unconventional approaches to menstruating on trail: “I’m kind of a big hippie and I free-bleed. I’m a very fortunate person when it comes to periods, so it’s not really a big deal for me” (Birdie, 2017). Free-bleeding refers to a woman menstruating into her clothing, without the use of typical menstrual products.

While some hikers embraced menstruation on their thru-hike, others perceived it as a hindrance. These individuals commonly mentioned the extra weight of carrying out their used feminine hygiene products (primarily tampons and pads), unpleasant physical sensations (cramping, lethargy), and the lack of practical resources for women hikers who menstruate. One hiker described her experience of preparing for her period on the PCT:

> There were things that I didn't know and didn't know how to find out—specifically talking about menstruation and feminine hygiene on trail. There are solutions, but I didn't know the full breadth of the solutions, and when I reached out to people, I didn't even get answers there, so that's something that I think really needs to change and is something I am working on. (Giggles, 2017)

**Fear for safety.** Five hikers (21.74%) stated they experienced significant amounts of fear and worry for their personal safety as a consequence of their gender. While acknowledging that thru-hiking the PCT requires a lot of trust, one hiker affirmed, “So much of the trail is about accepting generosity from strangers, which a guy can do really easily, but I felt, as a woman, that I was constantly being ‘too risky’” (Red Riding Hood, 2016). The hikers noted factors such as “fearmongering,” oftentimes focused on dangers associated with other humans. Several hikers also referred to a singular event that occurred in 2017 when two women thru-hikers lost their lives attempting to cross a river on the PCT:

> Physically, a lot of women were at a disadvantage during creek crossings. Last year two girls passed away crossing creeks in the Sierra and they were both smaller in stature. So that aspect of not having the mass made that more daunting. (Trash Panda, 2017)

Additionally, several hikers witnessed or interacted with male hikers who “abandoned” their female hiking partner(s) prior to river crossings or hiking the Sierra to avoid the “burden and responsibility” of ensuring the group’s safety. One hiker commented on all-male hiking groups:

> “They did not want females with them. They thought that they would slow them down, that they were some sort of liability” (Lady, 2017). Another hiker identified one male hiker who exemplified this behavior:

> He said if you couldn’t go through the Sierra by yourself last year, then you didn’t deserve to be there at all . . . He talked about how he would get to a river, check to make sure no one else was there so he wouldn’t have to help them, and then get across and
sprint away . . . I think we have the idea of sticking together and not going out on our own . . . people come in different shapes and sizes, they come at different speeds, and we’re going to have to make amends with that if we’re going to do the Sierra together. (Otter, 2017)

**Follow-up themes on gender implications.** The 23 hikers then answered a series of open-ended questions that prompted supplementary discussion on female thru-hiker experiences on the PCT. Table 3 represents emergent themes in the hikers’ responses to these open-ended questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responses From Friends, Family, and Strangers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing Sexuality</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Responses from friends, family, and strangers.** About half of the hikers reported a mix of positive (excited, supportive) and negative (disapproving, doubtful, gendered) responses from friends, family, and strangers when announcing their intention to thru-hike the PCT (52.17%, n = 12). The most commonly reported responses were concerns for female safety, including topics such as self-defense, wild animals, and safety in numbers (52.17%, n = 12). Individuals who reported mostly positive responses (26.09%, n = 6) mentioned feeling respected, acknowledged, and celebrated by others. One hiker said, “I’ve actually never felt more respected than I did on the trail” (VP, 2017). Conversely, hikers who reported mostly negative responses (21.74%, n = 5) discussed that friends, family, and strangers expressed doubts in their ability or made insensitive comments toward them. For example, one hiker recalled her coworker’s response at the gym: “One of my coworkers approached me at the gym while I was training for the PCT. He told me that I needed to practice my sprints because what if someone tried to rape me in the woods” (Trash Panda, 2017). Another hiker stated, “I think women are more often told we can’t because we’re not strong enough . . . whereas men have a little bit more support from society as a system to go out and do things and not face boundaries or obstacles” (Otter, 2017).

Familial and social support—or lack thereof—was emphasized in hiker testimonies, as it often influenced women’s experiences on the PCT. Pocket Sand (2016) reflected that her family expressed disapproval and fear after she announced plans to hike the PCT: “It was difficult overcoming the cultural barriers and getting my family on board—they didn’t really get on board until Oregon, actually.” Before she had left, her parents said to her, “Why are you doing this to us? You don’t have to do this.” She also recalled her father’s many attempts to dissuade her from thru-hiking: “I got e-mails of articles of women who were murdered on trails. Not the PCT, just any trail anywhere in the world. Any murder story he could find” (Pocket Sand, 2016). Responses such as these often instilled an undercurrent of doubt, guilt, or being overwhelmed; Pocket Sand reflected on the implications of her family’s reaction: “It’s already scary because of the scale and planning and the preparation, and then you add on this other layer of ‘oh, you’re going to get murdered’ and like, it’s entirely possible.”

While several hikers perceived people’s concern as an expression of love and did not find an issue with negative responses (33.33%, n = 5), the majority of hikers did not appreciate the fear, disapproval, or gender-based assumptions that people commonly expressed. In a follow-up question, out of 15 responding hikers, 66.67% (n = 10) indicated they would have preferred different responses from the people around them. One hiker said, “I would prefer if people did not make assumptions that I am incapable or that I’m in danger as a female in the wilderness” (Birdie, 2017). Similarly, Otter expressed how she wished people would respond:
I wish people would be less afraid and more supportive. In all honesty, I wish people would be less surprised. I wish people’s first concern wouldn’t be safety. I wish their first response would be like “Dude that’s awesome!” versus “You need to bring a gun.” or “Are you going alone?” or “Are your parents okay with that?” (Otter, 2017)

**Expressing sexuality.** Eleven hikers (47.83%) reported they felt comfortable expressing their sexuality on the trail and 10 (43.48%) said either they never thought of expressing their sexuality or it was not applicable to their experience. Two women (8.70%) stated they felt uncomfortable expressing their sexuality on the trail and made conscious efforts to “not stand out.” One hiker explained,

> I was definitely not trying to be cute out there. I feel like that is a big result of the way we’re taught as women that like oh, if you get raped it’s because you were looking hot and you were drunk. So, I did not look hot, I wasn’t trying to be hot, and then I didn’t allow myself to get inebriated . . . I really had to limit myself out of fear. (Pocket Sand, 2016)

Pocket Sand described feeling uneasy about expressing her sexuality on trail, saying her unease was a “byproduct of toxic masculinity and rape culture.”

**Hiker Values and Factors of Success**

**Factors of success on the PCT.** The 23 women thru-hikers described the outdoor experience and skills they had prior to hiking the PCT. Twelve of the hikers (52.17%) had experience with recreational hiking and backpacking; nine (39.13%) had distance and endurance experiences such as thru-hikes, marathons, and multiweek bicycling trips; and two (8.70%) had zero camping or backpacking experience. The 23 hikers then answered the question “What are the primary factors you attributed to your success on the PCT?” Table 4 represents emergent themes in the hikers’ responses to factors of success on the PCT.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentality and Attitude</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>82.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Experience</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.39</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Mentality and attitude.** Nineteen hikers (82.61%) attributed their success in completing the PCT to their mentality and attitude on the trail; “I would say it’s 80% a mental game because your body is going to hurt, you’re going to be tired, you’re going to be dirty, and you’re going to walk a lot, but it’s that grit that gets people through” (DK, 2017). These hikers often emphasized the importance of a flexible and open mindset to enduring the challenges of the trail. One hiker stated, “I am very open-minded, and I think that was a super important mentality on the PCT. It made my hike a lot easier” (Bright Eyes, 2016). Almost all hikers reported changing their plans at least once, which required them to be flexible and quickly adapt to new situations.

**Social support.** Other hikers identified social support as a top factor of success on the PCT (30.43%, n = 7). Of the 23 hikers interviewed, 52.17% (n = 12) hiked the PCT with at least one partner, 43.48% (n = 10) hiked both solo and with partners, and 4.35% (n = 1) hiked completely solo. One hiker described her surprise when she discovered how social the PCT really was:

> Hiking the PCT is a very social endeavor. I thought it was going to be me by myself, in my head, in the wilderness for 6 months, working through all my shit, and it turns
out it was me and 3,000 other people on a 2.5-foot-wide, 2,650-mile-long trail where you’re constantly interacting with other people. (Coyote, 2014)

The hikers emphasized the importance of encouragement and community on the trail. While describing the positive influence of trail angels, one hiker said, “When you can’t go another foot and then someone gives you trail magic—it makes the entire experience I think” (Tripster, 2016). Another hiker reflected on trail magic: “You see more of the good in people. You’re opened up to really see what people do for strangers. It’s just a kindness that you don’t see in your hometown” (Super Feet, 2017). Other than trail angels, hikers also commented on the importance of community within their trail families (hiking groups). One hiker stated, “I don’t think I could have appreciated how important those relationships were and how important being there for each other was. Having that group comradery, that’s really what it came down to” (Soft Serve, 2016). Soft Serve went on to describe the significance of PCT trail culture: “The culture and the social support and the whole thing across the board was what made the trail so incredible.”

**Prior experience.** Despite 91.30% ($n = 21$) of participants having had previous experience with related outdoor activities, only 17.39% ($n = 4$) attributed their success on the PCT to their preparation or prior experience. Tactics mentioned by those who considered their preparation essential to completing the PCT included preventive physical therapy to reduce injuries on trail and extensive research on gear and pack weight. Other hikers stated that preparing for the PCT was almost impossible; one hiker stated, “You can’t really prepare until you’re out there, you need to do it to know” (Otter, 2017). Pack weight in relation to body size was something several hikers discussed in their responses to this prompt; Tripster (2016) shared, “When I started, my pack weighed about 35 to 40 pounds fully loaded. When I finished, it was maybe 22 pounds with food and water.” She further explained, “I learned a lot and invested in really good gear. I’m a really small person so I wanted to be as light as possible.”

**Follow-up themes for factors of success on the PCT.** The 23 hikers then answered a follow-up question about primary motivating factors that kept them on the trail during difficult times. Table 5 presents emergent themes about motivations in times of stress or doubt.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>60.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support From Others</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time to Rest and Think</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34.78</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Determination.** Fourteen hikers (60.87%) stated that determination played a pivotal role in preventing or curbing feelings of quitting the PCT. One hiker stated, “You have to want it, pure and simple. If your heart’s not in it anymore, you shouldn’t be out there” (Tripster, 2016). Another hiker said, “It really helped to stay positive and somewhat goal-oriented” (Bright Eyes, 2016). The hikers also attributed personal qualities and attitudes such as stubbornness and always following through on commitments to their ability to overcome stress and doubt on the trail; “I never wanted to quit. I had seen myself at the end of that trail before I even started, and I think you kind of have to have that mindset. There was no ‘if, and, or but,’ I was getting to the end” (Super Feet, 2017).

**Support from others.** Twelve hikers (52.17%) indicated that support from others motivated them to stay on trail during difficult times. This theme included words of encouragement from family, friends, and fellow hikers, as well as generosity from trail angels.
I was super motivated by the trail family I was with at the time. They were a huge source of strength for me, we really stuck together. When I was maybe a little negative, they were really positive, and I’d like to think I did the same for them. They really kept me going, it was awesome. (Red Riding Hood, 2016)

Time to rest and think. Eight hikers (34.78%) found that a few days off the trail helped them reconnect with their motivations to hike the PCT. Trail town resupplies, zero days (nonhiking days), and short visits with family and friends offered some women thru-hikers the time and space they needed to recharge before continuing their thru-hike.

Thru-Hike Outcomes

Personal outcomes. Thru-hiking the PCT affected hikers’ lives on both personal and lifestyle levels. Regarding personal outcomes, 100% (n = 23) of the women thru-hikers experienced specific outcomes related to their hike. Table 6 represents the emergent themes about personal outcomes for women PCT thru-hikers.

Table 6
Personal Outcomes for Women PCT Thru-Hikers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>82.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Skills</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Outlook</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Awareness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved Health</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Trail Depression</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Empowerment. Nineteen hikers (82.61%) felt more empowered after their PCT thru-hike, noting outcomes such as improved self-confidence, an independent mindset, and self-pride, as well as pride for other women. One hiker stated, “I’m not always the most confident person, but for a while there I was kind of magnificent, and that’s given me a lot of self-confidence” (Trash Panda, 2017). Similarly, another hiker said, “I feel more powerful, independent, and strong” (Karma, 2018). Hikers fell in love with the people they became on the PCT, often describing their hiking self as “the best version of myself”. Speck (2017) described how her new sense of empowerment has carried into her life: “I’m less scared of taking risks, especially associated with outdoor sports, but also in general with what I want to do with life.” Another hiker described a sense of women’s empowerment that came from hiking the PCT: “I am more prepared to defend other women, even if I don’t know them. I’m not sure if that is just me feeling more confident or if I feel like I can identify more with women, but I am more conscious of that” (Spaghetti and Meatballs, 2017).

Social skills. Nine hikers (39.13%) reported improved social skills such as improved understanding of their relationships and a sense of confidence engaging with new people. Hikers also emphasized their appreciation of the “openness” present in the PCT trail community, stating it made them want to be less judgmental toward others. Giggles (2017) described how the trail instilled in her a sense of appreciation for other people’s differences:

Everyone came from such a different place and such a different walk of life... it just really had me kind of dig down deep in myself and be like, hey, there are people who originally you would have been looking down on and right now they are your best friends and people you look up to and admire.
Red Riding Hood (2016) spoke of her female friendships on the trail: “Becoming friends with the women I passed or met briefly, really becoming friends with them, has been a huge joy in my life, and now they’re probably my main friendship group.” She went on to describe how these female friendships have reshaped her mindset on other women and potential hiking partners: “I wish I could thru-hike again knowing what I know about women who hike the trail. For most of my experience, I was the only girl in my group, but if I did it again, I would just want to hike with girls.”

**Positive outlook.** Eight hikers (34.78%) noted a more positive outlook on life, often attributing their optimism to shifts in perspective. One hiker stated, “I just don't sweat the small stuff as much as I did . . . it’s kind of like the Wizard of Oz, like the curtain has been pulled back” (Lady, 2017).

**Self-awareness.** Seven hikers (30.43%) described having increased self-awareness after the PCT. In some instances, hikers noted becoming aware of personal prejudices on the PCT: “It opened my mind to new things, like I had prejudices that I didn't really even bother thinking about” (Giggles, 2017). Other hikers claimed their thru-hike made them more aware of personal limits and boundaries, both physically and socially.

**Improved health.** Six hikers (26.09%) experienced mental and physical health improvements after the PCT. For example, many hikers practiced methods of self-care when they returned from the trail; one hiker shared, “I think one way that the PCT in a very literal sense changed me is I just have taken care of myself more . . . being healthy and treating myself right is worth more than any extra hour in front of a computer” (Lady, 2017). Regarding physical health, Rock Queen (2017) stated, “I was more fit than ever before!”

**Post-trail depression.** Six hikers (26.09%) described difficulties of reintegrating into normal life after the PCT and stated they experienced post-trail depression. One hiker said, “In a lot of ways initially I would say it kind of ruined my life . . . I was totally depressed” (Trash Panda, 2017). She acknowledged that not every thru-hiker experiences post-trail depression but that “it was a really real thing that I think is important to talk about.” Similarly, Death Wish, who had also hiked the PCT in 2017, described the difficulties of her return experience: “I went back to Paris—so like a big city—and everyone is always in a rush, and so I felt very disconnected—it was weird . . . I didn't work for three months because I felt so disconnected.”

**Lifestyle outcomes.** Regarding hikers’ reported lifestyle outcomes, 21 participants (91.30%) indicated specific outcomes from thru-hiking the PCT; two hikers (8.70%) stated their lifestyle remained unchanged because they had already “lived simply” and “traveled often” prior to the PCT. Table 7 represents the primary lifestyle outcomes that emerged in hiker testimonies.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased Outdoor Activity</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimalism</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>43.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Change</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.74</td>
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</table>

**Increased outdoor activity.** Over half of the hikers engaged in more outdoor adventure activities (hiking, camping, backpacking) and many claimed they became “addicted” to hiking after the PCT (56.52%, n = 13); Tripster (2016) stated, “I’ve always been a very outdoorsy person but now I live for hiking and backpacking . . . I’m training for an ultra-marathon because of the PCT!” Several hikers shared upcoming plans for future long-distance hikes, and Chardonnay (2015) went on to become one of the first African American women to triple crown (meaning she thru-hiked the PCT, AT, and Continental Divide Trail).
Minimalism. Ten hikers (43.48%) adopted principles of minimalism after their thru-hike; hikers noted returning from the PCT and heading straight to their closet to clean out the clothing they no longer wore. The hikers who became more minimalist often said the experience of carrying everything they needed on their back for 6 months helped inspire this mindset and desire for simple living.

Career change. Nine hikers (39.13%) changed their career after their PCT thru-hike. Eight hikers left their previous jobs to pursue a more outdoor lifestyle, while one hiker became inspired to travel less and actually pursue a career. A common theme seemed to be corporate burnout or a lack of inspiration regarding hikers’ previous jobs.

Relocation. Five hikers (21.74%) were inspired to relocate to more outdoorsy communities after the PCT. Red Riding Hood (2016) moved north to Seattle, Washington, even though she did not know anyone living there at the time, and Death Wish (2017) got a job in a French mountain town that better supported outdoor activity and connected her more closely to nature.

Conclusion of Results

Overall, the 23 women thru-hikers expressed gratefulness for the changes the PCT instilled in their lives. Lady (2017) reflected,

I am still very much on the journey of understanding everything, and honestly, I don't think I ever fully will understand every way in which the trail has impacted me . . . I love that there is still a part of me that is always walking it and figuring it out.

The complex and nuanced results presented in this section correspond with previous findings and offer constructive information for stakeholders interested in promoting the PCT.

Discussion

Despite an overall appreciation of the PCT community—the generosity, group comradery, and openness—women thru-hikers identified clear patterns of patriarchal behavior and gendering within PCT trail culture. While the results indicate gendering occurred more frequently with non-thru-hikers than with thru-hikers, data suggest thru-hikers also exhibit these behaviors—specifically in the southern desert regions. As most thru-hikers travel south to north on the PCT, the data strengthen Crowley’s (2018) assessments that thru-hikers become accustomed to the egalitarian aspects of trail culture, renouncing gender constructs the longer they are on the trail. Statements about the Sierra corroborate Crowley’s assessments of hiker perceptions—testimonies in both studies acknowledged perceptions of heightened danger in the Sierra (stream and mountain crossings)—but challenge Crowley’s findings that group cohesion and safety were high priority among thru-hikers. The results of this study show less group cohesion during the Sierra section of the PCT. Specifically, several women hikers commented on male hikers leaving mixed-gender hiking groups before or during the Sierra section of the PCT.

Descriptions of sexual harassment, pink blazing, and threatening behavior on the PCT are consistent with the literature and underscore the reality and prevalence of predatory male behavior in outdoor settings (Chasteen, 1994; Coble et al., 2003; Crowley, 2018; Jacobs, 2018). Women thru-hikers negotiated their fears using coping mechanisms similar to those described in the literature; for example, these hikers often avoided perceived threats by taking extra safety precautions such as hiking with a partner, leaving the trail for a few days, or limiting their gender expression (Coble et al., 2003). Women thru-hiker testimonies also corroborated Roberts’ (1996) findings, which suggested White women experience more privilege and less constraints than women of color. On average, Caucasian participants noted fewer constraints than participants who identified as women of color; participants who identified as women of color were the only hikers to mention cultural constraints.
Regarding social interactions, women thru-hikers reported gendered treatment and disproportional judgment and praise that happened before, during, and after the PCT. These testimonies further corroborate findings that identify the PCT community as a gendered space, even though it may offer comparatively more freedom of expression than everyday society (Crowley, 2018). Some women felt more respected on the PCT, while others felt belittled, but all hikers acknowledged at least one influence of gender on their PCT experience. The results of this study corroborate the literature that states social conditioning, gender constructs, and gender bias influence women’s perceptions, confidence, and comfort in wilderness settings (Cox, 2017; Haskell & Randall, 1998). One woman thru-hiker summarized a sentiment prevalent among most participants:

I think there’s still a level of social pressure on women doing things on their own, especially something that seems so masculine. There can be a lot of family pressure of where women should be, and a lot of times there’s a general distrust of going out into the woods. There’s an assumption that something bad will happen to you. (Lady, 2017)

Considering published literature (Angell, 2008; Bosche, 2013; Boulware, 2007; Coble et al., 2003; Cox, 2017; Little, 2002; McNiel et al., 2012; Oftedal, 2015; Overholt & Ewert, 2015) on related topics such as gendered perceptions of wilderness, fear and safety in the outdoors, and male privilege in thru-hiking communities, this statement from Lady does not go unfounded.

Although the hikers identified various constraints, such as social conditioning, fear, and male privilege, there was an optimistic overtone to the women’s responses that suggested a certain enthusiasm in overcoming gender inequalities in the outdoors; Chardonnay (2015) reflected, “Younger women are coming up; they’re stronger, they’re tougher, and I would encourage them to try to live differently.” She advised other women to stand up for themselves and follow their passions: “Live in a way that makes you happy, not that makes other people happy . . . Don’t get caught up in the hype of things. Live deeply. Do the thing that’s crazy, that everybody thinks is crazy. Go for it anyways.” A similar sentiment was shared among multiple hikers who reported a sense of empowerment and devotion to outdoor activities following their thru-hike—nearly all participants advocated for increased female engagement with the PCT, encouraging women to “just get out there!”

The outcomes listed by these thru-hikers were consistent with the literature suggesting gender-specific outcomes for women thru-hikers (Angell, 2008; Bosche, 2013; Cox, 2017; Ewert & Shellman, 2009; Matthews, 2009; Overholt & Ewert, 2015; Pohl et al., 2000). However, other outcomes such as shifted perspectives, self-autonomy, minimalism, and post-trail depression were shared outcomes across gender categories in other studies (Crowley, 2018). Surely, gendering occurs in PCT trail culture, yet there is also truth in the comparative open-mindedness of the trail community (Berg, 2015; Crowley, 2018; Jacobs, 2018); women thru-hikers noted shifts in their perspective that align with studies suggesting the PCT experience decreases hikers’ judgments of others, makes them more cognizant of their own prejudices, and makes them more appreciative of people’s differences. The results also corroborate Roberts’ (1996) assessments that women’s alliances and outdoor experiences result in the continuation of women’s empowerment and improved self-esteem. Roberts’ implications of female empowerment on women’s leadership models are also consistent with the results of this study, as several women thru-hikers adopted a feminist approach to their business endeavors and subsequent outdoor adventures.

In conclusion, women thru-hikers recognized gender as an influential factor determining their PCT experience, regardless of whether patriarchal trail culture was present. When masculine trail culture was acknowledged, a common result was feeling like an outsider or intruder; “I think women need community and need cooperation and communication, and that can be really hard if you feel like the only people around you are competing with you” (Lady, 2017). This made it even more difficult for women of color because they experienced an added cultural
limitation. It may not be reasonable to expect a nationwide shift in eliminating gender constructs overnight, but society—especially friends and family of adventurous women—should refrain from fearmongering females who express interest in wilderness recreation activities and instead should focus on supporting them. The literature agrees that women are less likely to participate in activities when they feel unsafe, unsupported, and underrepresented (Cox, 2017; Haskell & Randall, 1998), yet social support was one of the primary factors of success identified in this study. These findings underscore the significance of encouraging and positive social interactions surrounding women’s outdoor experiences and call for the bettering of society overall.

Limitations

This study had several limitations, one being diversity of participant demographics. Participants were primarily young, Caucasian women, and 2017 thru-hikers (Table 1). The researchers are uncertain why more 2017 thru-hikers responded to the social media posts, which were posted identically on six Facebook pages: PCT Class of 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018, and Women of the Pacific Crest Trail. Although thru-hiker demographics show a majority of White participants (Berg, 2015; Roberts, 1996), it was especially difficult to find women of color for this study—even after targeted sampling efforts. One hypothesis is that few women of color thru-hiked the PCT between 2014 and 2018 and therefore there were fewer volunteers for the study. Pocket Sand (2016), who identified as a woman of color, stated in her interview, “When I saw another woman of color [on the PCT] it was like seeing a Unicorn!” which suggests extremely low participation among this hiker demographic. Furthermore, no women over the age of 60 were interviewed for this study, which leaves room for more exploration on women’s thru-hiking experiences post-menopause.

Readers should also bear in mind that qualitative analysis requires the researchers to interpret and assign codes to participant responses, potentially incorporating researcher bias into the results. To control for researcher bias, this study utilized independent coders and intercoder reliability tests in the data analysis. Although the study was structured to prevent researcher bias, all researchers were women and had prior backpacking and hiking experience of their own, which makes it feasible that some of their personal experiences shaped the way they viewed and interpreted participant responses.

Managerial and Research Implications

This study explored certain aspects of women thru-hiker experiences related to the PCT and raised several managerial concerns as well as questions for future research. One concern is the potential danger women hikers face when hitchhiking along the PCT. Do women hikers experience dangerous or threatening hitchhiking situations more frequently than men hikers? Is there a need for safe commute between the PCT and trail towns for women hikers? Similarly, there were several reports of sexual harassment along the PCT, which lends to another concern regarding women hiker safety—are there adequate and accessible means for reporting concerning behavior on the trail? As hikers oftentimes engage with and rely on outside help from trail angels, it may be worthwhile to invest in an educational program, panel, or meetup for PCT angels prior to the hiking season. Outdoor retailers, such as REI, currently host panel discussions for women thru-hikers and perhaps they could sponsor similar events for trail angels.

Future research could explore contributing factors, consequences, and remedies for the lack of diversity and varying levels of inclusivity among the trail community. Special focus should be placed on spatial and demographic trends in the data, and a more robust sample size should be attained, including perspectives from male thru-hikers, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and people of color. Future studies could explore experiential differences among northbound and southbound hikers, solo and group hikers, and local and international hikers. Additionally, a more in-depth
look at barriers and constraints could help to ensure effective and practical managerial actions that improve PCT access. For example, what do marginalized groups, such as women of color, identify as constraints and barriers to entry? What do PCT hikers who leave the trail state as reasons for not completing the thru-hike? How do these findings differ based on gender, age, ability, race, economic class, or otherwise? Additional research could investigate the relative of various programs intended to increase female engagement with outdoor recreation activities and could identify the most feasible and productive strategies. Prospective studies could also explore how different approaches may be perceived by women and how they may help or hinder progress toward overall gender equality and female empowerment.

In the grander scope, although demographic information would greatly benefit PCT managers and policymakers, the outdoor industry, and tourism efforts in nearby trail towns, there is currently no official log of hiker demographics for the PCT. How can the PCT be managed effectively if hiker demographics remain unknown? How can demographic trends be analyzed over time if there is no baseline? In light of the current findings, it may benefit managers and stewards of the PCT, such as the PCTA, to conduct long-term, large-scale research on PCT demographics and annually survey for unique trends. This research would provide valuable information to guide future management efforts, marketing, and policy surrounding the long-distance trail. These topics need to be addressed for a welcoming, inclusive, and valuable wilderness experience to be maintained.

**Conclusion**

As the PCT grows in popularity, more women and girls are venturing out to experience the benefits and challenges of long-distance hiking (Bowen, 2018). The trail community is often regarded as a welcoming and open environment, one in which hikers can leave the stressors and social confines of “normal life” behind (Crowley, 2018; Henderson, 1992). However, this narrative is in part derived from a place of privilege (Berg, 2015) and does not fully acknowledge the systemic oppression that has affected women’s lives for centuries. While the present findings suggest PCT experiences may instill a sense of empowerment and positivity among some women hikers, they also suggest the PCT remains an environment where some women are operating under a veil of socialized fear and isolation (Chasteen, 1994). It is in the interest of land managers, policymakers, and the hiking community to promote and ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all hikers, irrelevant of their gender, race, age, or otherwise.

**References**


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