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Apartheid in the digital outdoors? An analysis of the Instagram content of outdoor brands in the US, UK and Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT
The outdoors offers widely understood health and wellbeing benefits and provides an unparalleled resource for the realization and projection of identity, from the personal to the national. Yet access to the outdoors in the countries of the global North is manifestly unequal, with BIPOC communities typically much less likely than their white counterparts to participate in outdoor leisure activities such as hiking, trail running, cycling, climbing, etc. This study revisits the hypothesis that outdoors media plays a central role in perpetuating what Martin (2004) terms "apartheid in the Great Outdoors" by performing a content analysis of the Instagram posts of the top 10 outdoor brands in the US, Scandinavia and UK between the spring and summer seasons of 2020 – a period when the global pandemic restricted access to the outdoors at the same time as the Black Lives Matter movement raised awareness of systemic racial inequalities. The analysis reveals that whilst there is a purposeful response to calls to diversify the outdoors in the representational strategies of US outdoor brands, this is not the case in the UK and Scandinavia. In these locations the digital outdoors and its associated leisure identities remain overwhelmingly white, young, straight, and able-bodied.

KEYWORDS
Outdoor brands; Instagram; diversity; pandemic

Introduction

The outdoors offers widely understood health and wellbeing benefits and provides an unparalleled resource for the realization and projection of identity, from the personal to the national (Holland et al., 2018). Yet participation in the outdoors in the countries of the global north is manifestly unequal, with Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities typically much less likely than white counterparts to have access to urban greenspaces or to engage in outdoor leisure activities such as hiking, trail running, cycling, climbing, etc. (Outdoor Industries Association, 2015, Outdoors Foundation, 2021). Previous research on this topic finds that promotional media construe the outdoors as an exclusively "white" space in the social imagination (Finney, 2014; Martin, 2004), and that outdoors media reproduce an outdoor leisure identity that is "necessarily White, able-bodied, straight, and male" (Stanley, 2020). In light of

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the global developments wrought by both the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the coronavirus pandemic since 2020, this study revisits the hypothesis that outdoor media perpetuates what Martin (2004) termed "apartheid in the Great Outdoors" by performing a content analysis of the Instagram posts of the top 10 outdoor brands in the US, Scandinavia and UK between the spring and summer seasons of 2020. The project addresses the following questions:

1. To what extent have outdoor brands across the global North continued to perpetuate "apartheid in the outdoors" in their Instagram content?
2. What changes in terms of diversity of representation took place following the advent of the pandemic and the BLM protests and related calls to diversify the outdoors (see Melanin Base Camp, "Diversify Outdoors", 2023), in 2020?

This article focuses on the Instagram content posted by the top 10 outdoor brands (by follower count) within three regions, the US, UK and Scandinavia, between 1 April and 30 September 2020, for a total of 3708 posts (US n = 1300, UK n = 1283, Scandinavia n = 1125). We use visual content analysis (Rose, 2022; Bainotti et al., 2021) to code the material for representations of different forms of visible diversity, including race and ethnicity, gender, body type, disability and age. In the following sections, we present the rationale behind the study and how this relates to previous studies.

Outdoor leisure identities across the anglophone global North

The "outdoors" is typically associated with adventure, discovery and leisure and is widely understood as a space that affords positive health and wellbeing benefits while also providing an unparalleled resource for the expression and realization of both individual and communal identities (Baker et al., 2021; Dashper & King, 2022; Finney, 2014). It is a key driver for industries ranging from tourism and real estate to recreation and retail, and so of major socio-economic significance to countries and regions. The US outdoor industry has been estimated to generate $887 billion of consumer spending - greater than the pharmaceutical and automotive industries - and employ 7.6 million people - more than Computer Technology and Construction (Outdoor Foundation, 2017). Yet participation in the outdoors - not just in the US, but also in the UK and Scandinavia - is manifestly unequal, with black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities typically much less likely than white counterparts to visit national parks, wilderness spaces, and urban greenspaces, or to participate in associated outdoor leisure activities (Outdoor Foundation, 2021; Rishbeth et al., 2022, Arora-Jonsson, & Ågren, 2019; Winter et al., 2019).

Whilst there have been a number of studies that have sought to evolve and interrogate Martin's (2004) arguments in relation to the role play by mediatized representations in informing outdoor leisure identities (Flores & Kuhn, 2018; Frazer & Anderson, 2018; Low et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2023; McNiel et al., 2012), there are fewer that speak to the same issues in relation to Scandinavia and the UK (Godtman Kling et al., 2020; Stanley, 2020) – similarly affluent countries of the Anglophone global North for which the "outdoors" occupies a central space in the social imagination and leisure economy – and none that seek to do so comparatively. Moreover, Stanley's (2020)

work aside, these studies typically focus on single vectors of diversity such as race or gender, rather than the broader spectrum of diversity that one might find articulated, for example, in the #diversifyoutdoors campaign coordinated by the US-based activist community Melanin Base Camp or enshrined in the "protected characteristics" of the UK's Equality Act of 2010, which include age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation (UK government, 2023). These studies tend also either to focus on place- or nation-specific media (such as websites and social media for national parks, or users located in particular places) or to overlook the significance of digital and especially social media content being putatively global in its audience reach. The present study addresses these gaps and makes a novel contribution to scholarship in this area by offering a comparison of commercial media content produced within but accessible across three geographically distinct yet culturally similar regions of the global North.

Whilst broadly speaking the "outdoors" conveys similar meanings in these three spaces – traditionally referring geographically to "natural" environments away from human habitation such as forests, mountains, and lakes, but more recently also to human-made outside "green" spaces such as municipal parks and even private gardens (Rishbeth et al., 2022) - it is imbricated within complex histories where ideas about nature and outdoor recreation, but also race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality have been shaped by ideologically freighted narratives of exploration and appropriation (DeLuca & Teresa Demo 2001, Finney, 2014, Merchant, 2003). When Martin (2004) refers to the "Great Outdoors" he is speaking specifically to the US context wherein the outdoors is socially constructed through promotional media as a "type of place characterized by a sense of isolation and remoteness found in areas that are typically far removed from the urban environment". Here, outdoor recreation is understood as leisure activities specific to "wildland and wilderness" spaces such as hiking, camping and rafting and the corresponding "outdoor leisure identity" is a "stereotyped composite of who visits wildland space, and by extension, who belongs there" (pp. 516–517). For Martin, the reproduction of this racialized identity in media plays a significant role in the massive disparity in participation in the "Great Outdoors" between ethnic groups. Comprising two basic archetypes - "the environmental conservationist and the rugged frontier individualist" – this identity is alluring to white Americans for the cultural capital it confers, yet is alienating and inaccessible to other ethnicities precisely because this identity is racialized as white (Finney, 2014).

In the UK and Scandinavia, the meaning of the outdoors has also been shaped by romanticized, masculinist, nationalistic and racialized ideas about personal development and belonging. As in the US, the development of outdoor leisure activities and associated identities is inflected with particular aspects of their respective modernities. For example, where "wildland" forms of recreation are foundational to US conceptions of the outdoors, in the UK a broader conception is at play. Professional outdoor sports that are now globally practiced – such as cricket, golf, horse racing, soccer, rugby, tennis and athletics - originated in the UK and their development was closely linked with "industrialisation, urbanisation, imperialism and the building of national identities" (Humberstone & Pedersen 2001, p. 25). That it was primarily men – first from the upper classes in the 18th century followed by the middle and working classes into the 19th and 20th centuries – who enjoyed the leisure time which made these pursuits

possible was instrumental in framing both outdoor recreation and education as pre-eminently masculine endeavors. The paternalistic development and promotion of outdoor education as "character building" by the British upper classes – eg. the Boy Scouts and Outward Bound movements - had a significant influence on the outdoors movements that developed in both the US and Scandinavia. Most prominently we see this emerge in both formal and informal "codes of conduct" designed to foster and normalize citizenship. Combined with the legal restrictions that have long limited public access to land in the UK, "access to and inclusion in the countryside is heavily regulated, making outdoor leisure inaccessible to many" (Dashper & King, 2022, p.436). A 2015 report by the Outdoor Industries Association acknowledges that a stereotyped outdoors leisure identity - "white, middle class, car-owning individuals/families doing traditional 'out-doors' activities" (cited in Dashper & King, 2022, p.438) - is operative in the UK. However, while it implicitly acknowledges that the outdoors is racialized in a similar manner to the US, it construes the racialized stereotype as a symptom rather than an underlying cause of unequal access and participation.

In a Scandinavian context, participation in the outdoors – *friluftsliv*, meaning "outdoor life" – is an intrinsic part of national identity (Gurholt & Haukeland, 2020). As such, in recent years outdoor spaces have become the focus of initiatives for the integration of minority communities (Bjerkli et al., 2017; Figari et al., 2009). As Anderson and Setten (2023) note, this politicization "has produced a friluftsliv culture that is not merely based on taking pleasure from the outdoors, but a duty" that is infused with "normativities" (p.4). For example, where immigrant women in Norway have been found to access outdoor spaces for recreation less than their white counterparts, Lorentzen and Vike (2022) put this down to the lack of knowledge, skills and competencies involved in participating in the outdoors, not least in terms of accessing hiking groups that could help them. That such social and cultural barriers deny these groups the many benefits of engaging with the outdoors is acknowledged by public health authorities who since 2015 have "indicated that promotion of outdoor recreation among immigrants is a priority" (p.39). But to a greater degree even than the UK there has been a reluctance to acknowledge – from the academy as well as the authorities – that in spite of its universal premise, when promoted in visual media "frilufstliv" is typically racialized in similar ways to the "Great Outdoors" in the US and the "countryside" in the UK (Arora-Jonsson & Ågren, 2019; Skille et al., 2023).

Instagram: Scripting and modeling outdoor leisure identity

From the orientalist landscapes of colonialist travel literature to the touristic gazing of globetrotting travel influencers, the promotional imagery of outdoors media has played a central role in conjuring the idea of the outdoors as the archetypal space of "freedom, relaxation and enjoyment" but also, as a rapidly growing body of recent research attests, a "site of exclusion, hierarchy and domination" (Dasper & King, 2022, p.435). This is because it draws on such deep reservoirs of normative ideas around who belongs in this space, contributing to what Martin (2004), in his seminal study of some 4000 print advertisements from three US magazines between 1984 and 2000, identifies as the reproduction of a "racialized outdoor leisure identity" (p. 514) in visual media. Subsequent research has built on this insight by focusing on a broader

range of media and introducing intersectional perspectives. In her summary of this work, Stanley (2020) considers how outdoor leisure identities are subject to the affordances and constraints of a number of "powerful normativities" that inform a particular "social script" in outdoors media representations:

> Just as the outdoors itself is not "natural", there is nothing "natural" about the ways in which outdoor magazines, advertising, and other media portray legitimate outdoorspeople in very specific ways: White, male, straight, muscular, and able bodied. In contrast, BIPOC, female, queer, fat, disabled, and other deviant bodies are rarely represented at all. (p. 244)

In Sweden, the marketing of tourist-oriented locations and heritage sites are particularly laden with patriarchal narratives to the exclusion of female and other non-normative identities and stories (Funk & Pashkevich, 2020). As Stanley (2020) attests and campaigners to diversify the outdoors, such as Latino Outdoors, Unlikely Hikers and Melanin Base Camp in the US and Black Trail Runners, Muslim Hikers and We Go Outside Too in the UK have come to stress, representation matters. No more so is this the case than in the digitally mediated outdoors which undergirds the multibillion dollar outdoor industries of the anglophone global North (cf. Finney, 2014; Whitson, 2021; Young, 2020).

The rise of social media since the 2000s has transformed the way we experience and think about the outdoors. What once might have been faraway and exotic landscapes which could be experienced only by those privileged enough either to be able to visit in person or through the leisurely perusal of "travel literature", can now be experienced instantly via our smartphones. These digitally networked devices have encouraged people to engage in new ways with green and blue spaces closer to home (Arts et al., 2021). In concert with these technologies, the democratization of travel and leisure as such has enabled more - and more diverse - communities to become active producers as well as consumers of digitally mediated outdoor leisure identities (Leather, 2024). For example, the studies by Gray et al. (2018), Weatherby and Vidon (2018) and Low et al. (2022), which focus on the self–representation of "outdoorsy" women on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, note how these subjects are able to present themselves as active and often empowered participants in the outdoors. Where historically the visual representations of the outdoors have been dominated by "hypermasculine representations and identities" (Baker et al., 2021 p.309), these findings are in line with broader academic discussions concerning the ambivalent manner in which agency is often articulated in social media self-representations by women and other hitherto marginalized groups (Banet-Weiser, 2021). As such they offer a notable contrast to earlier studies by Martin (2004), McNiel et al. (2012), and Frazer and Anderson (2018), which focus on representations of diversity in the outdoors - or rather its lack - within analogue media (primarily magazines) and unanimously support Martin's hypothesis concerning how outdoors media reproduce a highly stereotyped leisure identity. What these studies do not consider is the scale of these emergent identities and their impact on the content produced by outdoor brands – this being one of the gaps the present study looks to address.

Of the various photosharing platforms to have emerged in this period, Instagram plays a central role in the evolution of this medium. Used by roughly 1.318 billion users globally in 2023 (DataReportal, 2023), Instagram was the first and for many

remains the quintessential photosharing app (Leaver et al., 2020). Its popularity among who we might call "ordinary users" (Caliandro & Graham, 2020, p. 4) has always revolved around its founding promise to allow them to "capture and share the world's moments" (Buchanan, 2013, np). However, in contrast to the immediacy and intimacy of this original promise, in response to the demands of an "attention economy" it has evolved supplementary features designed to keep users within the app for as long as possible, scrolling through what essentially becomes an endless feed of personalized content (Zulli, 2018). This is to maximize advertising revenue and the data harvesting that enables ever more refined personalization (for the user) and targeting (for the advertiser). The platform introduced video features in 2013, followed by its Snapchat-rivalling ephemeral content feature Stories in 2016, and then its algorithmically hyper-attuned short form video feature Reels, alongside integrated shopping functionality, in 2019 (Carah et al., 2022; Leaver et al., 2020).

By dint of their focus on leisure activities that take place "in" the outdoors - clothing and equipment that keep the user safe and comfortable in adverse weather are staple products - the advertising of outdoor brands is predicated on what has become known as the "tourist gaze" (Urry & Larsen, 2011). In order to market their products successfully outdoor brands must use promotional media to create an immersive experience of the outdoors that can be experienced vicariously, in advance of, or potentially even without actually visiting the outdoors as such. To borrow from Stanley (2020), their advertising has to *script* outdoor recreation and *model* outdoor leisure identities. Of all the social media platforms available to advertisers in the 2010s into the 2020s, Instagram is most attuned to the imperative for these brands to enact for their audiences the "mediatised travel performances they no longer read about in books but scroll through with their thumbs" (Smith, 2018, p. 173).

Context: 2020 - Black lives matter and the COVID-19 pandemic

Whilst it has long been established that BIPOC communities do not access national parks and related outdoor spaces in anything like the same proportion as their white counterparts across the US, UK and Scandinavia (Arora-Jonsson & Ågren, 2019, Dashper & King, 2022, Davis, 2019), a series of racist incidents in the US in the first half of 2020 made it clear that the reasons for this in that context were not just the socio-economic circumstances, cultural preferences and socio-cultural barriers that had previously been identified (Martin, 2004), but also the very real threat of racist violence (Tarin et al., 2021).

Racial inequality is not a one-space condition, but rampant across all areas of society and all societies as such. With the increased importance of digital platforms, social media has become a space where "historically disenfranchised populations" are able to "advance counternarratives and advocate for social change" (Jackson et al., 2020, p.38). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement emerged in response to the murders and violence visited on Black people at the hands of the law in the US. Growing awareness of these issues from the late 2010s led to the formation of a number of activist groups concerned with racial injustice in the outdoors. Prominent among these is Melanin Base Camp. Formed in 2016 with the aim of increasing participation in the outdoors among ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ communities, Melanin Base Camp

initiated the hashtag campaign #diversifyoutdoors and in 2018 formalized a coalition of "digital influencers, affinity groups and allies promoting diversity in outdoor recreation and conservation" (Diversify Outdoors, 2023).

The BLM movement was formalized in Sweden in June 2020 with protests taking place in the Swedish cities of Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg (Solander & Svahn, 2020). In addition to widespread BLM protests, public debates were sparked over the legacy of Carl Linnaeus, the physician and botanist most known for his taxonomy of humans, often referred to as the origin of scientific racism. This racialized memory war played out in both on- and offline settings during 2020 in Sweden (Hübinette et al., 2022). In Denmark the BLM movement has been active since 2016 and in 2020 protests took place in Copenhagen, Aarhus, Odense and Aalborg. Likewise, in Norway, protests were also ongoing throughout 2020, with the most northerly protest globally known taking place in Tromsø, 350 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle (The Nordic Page, 2020). In the same period in the UK, BLM protests took place in several cities such as London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, and Newcastle, whilst organizations such as Black Trail Runners and We Go Outside Too formed and already established groups such as Black Girls Hike began getting mainstream media coverage (Parveen, 2020).

Alongside the murders and other racist incidents, the containment measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 revealed the intersectional impact of structural inequalities on BIPOC communities across the anglophone global North. At the time of the BLM protests in 2020, the majority of countries globally were either enforcing or had enforced some form of social distancing and stay-at-home restrictions. These measures came into force from mid-March onwards, meaning that the northern hemisphere Spring of 2020 marked a historically unprecedented situation whereby almost everyone on the planet faced some form of government-mandated restriction to the outdoors. Scandinavian authorities justified and endorsed these prolonged measures by appealing to the principle of solidarity. This involved urging citizens to actively contribute and fulfill their roles, emphasizing the collective welfare and improvement of community conditions (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021). Whilst the longer-term impacts of this experience are still only beginning to be fully understood, being denied access to - *but also being made aware of the benefits of* - the outdoors unquestionably recalibrated attitudes and participation across populations (Beall et al., 2022; Beery et al., 2021).

Of the US studies that have examined changing behaviors and attitudes in relation to outdoor participation during the pandemic, none directly addresses diversity variables such as ethnicity, gender or sexuality. Nonetheless there is a clear pattern whereby urban and lower socio-economic groups populations were significantly less able and likely to participate in outdoor recreation than those living in rural contexts or from higher socio-economic groupings (Burnett et al., 2022; Rice et al., 2020). A strong correlation between these groupings and minority ethnic communities is beginning to emerge. For example, in a survey which purports to national generalizability Taff et al., (2021) found that a significant majority of Americans who had started participating frequently in outdoor recreation during the pandemic were white and relatively affluent, whilst the majority of those in the group identified as previously frequent participants who had stopped because of the pandemic, were more ethnically diverse, urban and of lower socio-economic means. Similar findings in the UK are also evidenced in

research by Natural England (2021), a governmental body that monitors engagement with nature. In a 2022 review the body reported that "nature spaces in rural and urban environments are not accessed equally by all and that factors including age, ethnicity and socio-economic status seem to play a role in this picture" (Rishbeth et al., 2022, p. 2). Here they lived experience of racism in green spaces is more directly foregrounded as a contributing factor, alongside the complex interplay of culture, religion and geography among a diverse array of minority communities (Edwards et al., 2022).

In contrast to the US, UK and other parts of Scandinavia, where the COVID-19 containment measures taken in early 2020 curtailed access to the outdoors for all, the situation in Sweden offers a fascinating counterpoint. One of the few nations globally that chose not to mandate stringent containment measures, such as stay at home orders, Sweden is described as a "special case" (Hansen et al., 2023, Hedenborg et al., 2024) whereby participation in the outdoors significantly increased during the pandemic as individuals sought the social as well as wellbeing benefits of *friluftsliv*. However, while Hansen et al. (2023) find the most notable increases in participation among younger generations and women, there is no reference to ethnicity and only limited discussion of other diversity variables. There remains a significant question mark around the extent to which the 2010 government policy decree "Nature is accessible to all" was realized as part of the overall increase in participation.

Outdoor brands taking a stand

During the period where the upsurge in BLM protests coincided with the "stay at home" measures, brands across all regions shared messages of racial equality as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) via social media (Yang et al., 2021). Sometimes, these initiatives were met with strong pushback from online communities. For example, in early June 2020, social media users were encouraged to share black squares during what was called Black Out Tuesday, together with the hashtag #blackouttuesday, in an initiative to appeal to music industry businesses to refrain from releasing new music during this day in solidarity with the movement. However, as social media users shared black squares, they tended to include hashtags such as #blacklivesmatter or #blm, resulting in a blockage of information and content concerning the actual movement. Brands contributing to the Black Out Tuesday initiative were also critiqued for these reasons, showing that brand activism can be problematic when aligning with social movements as opposed to causes (Thomas & Chintagunta, 2022). According to Francis (2021), the marketing academy has for too long neglected racial inequality, stating that it "has failed to either recognize or address its own role in societal foundations built on colonization" (p.133). Because of this, as Sobande et al. (2022) and Einstein (2023) forcefully note, the strategic motives of brands that "take a stand" by aligning with social movements such as BLM or related campaigns such as #diversifyoutdoors need to be critically examined.

In the context of outdoor brands, where global markets are dominated by key players for whom activism on a range of social and environmental issues has long been central to their positioning and appeal (e.g. The North Face, Patagonia), Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) provide a typology of brand activism provides a useful frame for understanding

the strategic decision-making behind the inclusion of more diverse representations or other forms of overtly activist messaging. Where one might expect a brand such as Patagonia, "whose value-driven messaging is in sync with progressing social change" (p. 450), to increase the frequency of representations of BIPOC figures in its social media content through the late spring and summer of 2020, for those brands that have little or no history of this - which is largely the case in UK and Scandinavia - to do the same risks being perceived as inauthentic and even cynical; in short, as engaging in "wokewashing". In spite of this risk, Vredenburg et al. (2020) argue that there is a zone of "optimal incongruence", in terms of the distance between a brand's established positioning on pro-social issues and the extent to which they "take a stand" in their messaging, by which they might "maximise" their outcomes (p. 455).

Method

To answer our research questions we employed visual content analysis (Rose, 2022; Bainotti et al., 2021) within a netnographic framework, whereby the traditional ethnographic approach of analyzing a social space provides a means of finding and collecting data (Kozinets 2015). Following this approach, we spent 2020 immersing ourselves in the Instagram content of outdoor brands. Using Crowdtangle, a social media and brand analytics tool owned by Meta, we identified the top 10 outdoor brands by follower count from each region and then downloaded the metadata and URLS for every post between 1st April and 30th September 2020 (US n = 1300, UK n = 1283, Scandinavia n = 1125 - see Table 1).

Data collection: Sampling and ethical considerations

Whilst we acknowledge that the marketing bias of Crowdtangle means that it does not offer comprehensive access to the Instagram API and so can be problematic for accessing and analyzing data on a number of levels, brand accounts such as the ones

Table 1. The brands included in the data collection, their follower counts, and the number of posts collected within the chosen timeframe.

US			Scandinavia			UK		
Brand	Followers	Posts	Brand	Followers	Posts	Brand	Followers	Posts
The North Face	5.3m	121	Fjällräven	673k	44	Rab	194k	196
Patagonia	5.2m	121	Helly Hansen	268k	97	Finisterre	173k	184
REI	2.3m	165	Norrøna	216k	130	Inov-8	128k	351
Black Diamond Equipment	959k	115	66°North	191k	189	Berghaus	93.5k	23
Backcountry	885k	235	Peak Performance	165k	112	Montane	84.6k	141
Mountain Hardwear	704k	113	Haglöfs	96.6k	65	Lowe Alpine	84.2k	95
Columbia Sportswear	565k	92	Didriksons	92.3k	130	Mountain Equipment	76k	37
Outdoor Research	485k	94	Bergans	88.9k	161	Regatta	74.7k	178
Marmot	484k	150	Sweet Protection	89.5k	113	Alpkit	51.8k	104
L.L.Bean	469k	92	Hestra Gloves	79.9k	83	Mountain Warehouse	50.9k	43

we have looked at were all fully accessible and so we experienced no such issues. Furthermore, as the content is necessarily public, there were no ethical problems with regard to consent in using the data for our study.

We chose the date range of April to September 2020 in order to sample data that would enable us to determine the extent to which outdoor brands were or were not representing visible diversity "before, during and after" the crucial month of June, where the conjunction of BLM protests and a newfound awareness of the benefits of the outdoors in the pandemic context reached its apogee. Ideally, we would have performed the analysis over a longer time period to provide a fuller picture of any changes taking place, however, through our netnography, we encountered a limiting factor to the visual analysis of outdoor leisure identities via social media. During the northern hemisphere winter months (broadly, October to March) the clothing and equipment typically used by outdoors people – often quite baggy and featuring large hoods, helmets and face coverings - means that it can be difficult and often impossible to accurately identify features of visible diversity, such as ethnicity, gender, age, disability or body type. Hence our focus on the Spring and Summer seasons.

Our data collection raised questions of privilege, positionality, and reliability in relation to our identification and analysis of different forms of visible diversity in Instagram content. As white, middle-class individuals with tenured positions at northern European universities, we occupy positions that are symptomatic of imperial legacies as well as contemporary global asymmetries of power. Further, as individuals who have accessed and enjoyed the outdoors from an early age, our life experiences have been conditioned by – and in some ways are still expressive of – the normative socio-cultural contexts and outdoor leisure identities identified in the preceding sections. We therefore approached the research guided by critical discussions concerning whiteness and allyship in the field of leisure studies (Anderson et al., 2021; Arai & Kivel, 2009). Consequently, we acknowledged the potential for unconscious bias in our coding as well as the highly problematic ways in which qualitative data have been used to train social media algorithms to date (Noble, 2018). To mitigate these risks, we chose to code manually without recourse to AI or any other form of automation. We reflected on these issues throughout the data collection and performed robust intercoder reliability testing ahead of the content analysis.

Coding and visual content analysis

In constructing our coding categories and variables we drew from the key signifiers of the lived experience of diversity as identified and given definition by the coalition of activists behind the #DiversifyOutdoors campaign (2023). This gave us the following categories: ethnicity, gender, body type, age, and religion. To decenter the norms operative in this domain – "white, Able-bodied, straight and male" (Stanley, 2020, p. 241) – we chose those variables that this community typically use to positively identify non-normative differences, e.g., gender: no people depicted, includes women, excludes women; ethnicity: BIPOC, mix (denoting both white and BIPOC individuals present), white, none, etc. We reflected at length on the social construction of these categories, for example "BIPOC" and "white" and the highly problematic nature of our attempt to collate diverse ethnic identities under each term; and of the challenges

in categorizing identities based primarily on visual markers of difference, for example by identifying transgender or non-binary men or women under the category of "gender". Whilst we believe that the categories we used enabled us to code and analyze the data in a robust and meaningful manner given the limitations of the medium and our method, we acknowledge that these categories are (and should) be open to contest and that further research is required in this area.

Using these categories and variables the named authors and a research assistant analyzed posts from across the datasets. We conducted an intercoder reliability test using Krippendorf's (2019) alpha to refine the coding scheme in order to make sure our different interpretations of the variables were sufficiently consistent for the purpose of our study. Working with a range of 0.70 to 0.80 as being acceptable (Lacy et al., 2015), the alpha for the variables we have used for this analysis range from *age ("older")* = 0.77 to *non-normative body type ("fat")* = 0.92). This form of content analysis is "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 24). We then performed the visual content analysis of the post and corresponding captions with the overarching trends visualized and discussed below.

Results

US outdoor brands: A strategic response

Between May and June 2020 there is a very notable drop off in the percentage of posts containing *only* white figures in the US outdoor brands covered in this study. Correspondingly there is a spike in the number of posts containing solely BIPOC figures, as well as an up-tick in posts containing a mix of visible ethnicities – a trend which more or less continues throughout the rest of the summer (from less than 10% of posts depicting solely BIPOC figures in April to more than 20% by September), as can be seen in Figure 1. The drop off as well as the spike occurring in the sampled data clearly corresponds to this general societal upheaval in the US at this time. However, this drop off in white representation was followed by a general "recovery" to its pre-BLM protest levels, where posts containing solely white individuals accounted for just over 50 per cent of the total for the month of July – followed again by a general drop off later in the summer. Correspondingly, these subsequent trends were consistent with a general increase in both mixed (where both white and BIPOC figures are represented) and BIPOC representation in posts.

Interestingly, the most significant spike over this period was not in terms of ethnic representation but rather the number of posts which do not contain figurative representation at all (with an increase of around 20% between May and June). While there is some correlation here with posts containing statements of support for the BLM movement and associated calls to diversify the outdoors, for the most part it is figurative representation *per se* being removed from posts - with such content largely consisting of either products, images of wilderness/nature, or some form of graphic design. This suggests that while this highly charged political moment was seen by some outdoor brands as an opportunity to express solidarity with the BLM movement and associated calls to diversify the outdoors by reducing white and introducing more

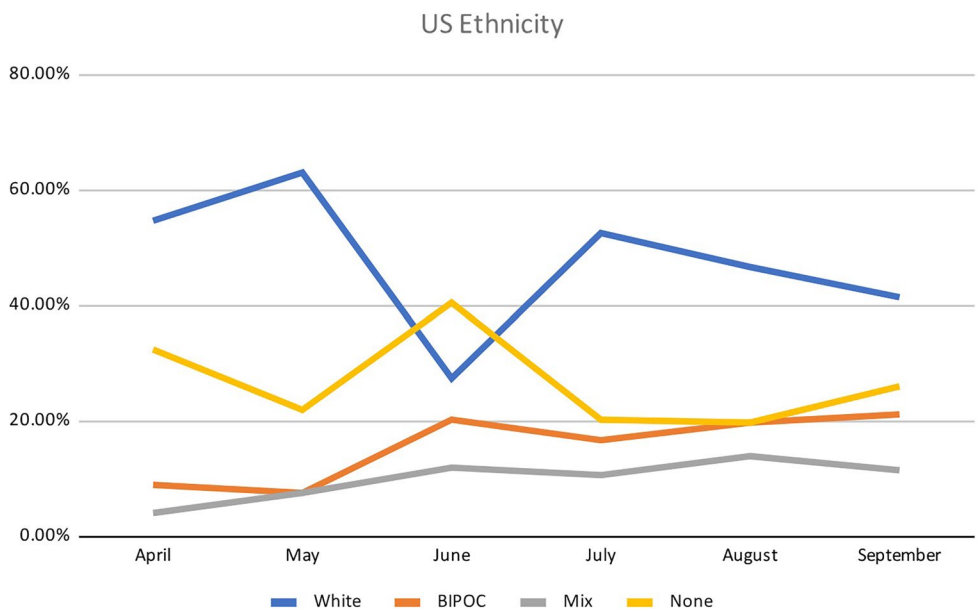

Figure 1. US brands - proportion of posts by ethnicity.

BIPOC representation in their promotional content, for others the response was more circumspect: acknowledging the issue, but not taking a stand as such by including content that is inclusive of BIPOC ethnicities.

The progressive response we see from May onwards with regard to representations of race and ethnicity is also reflected in representations of gender, presented here in Figure 2. In April 2020 only 31% of posts featured women. This jumps to 51% in May, drops back in June – though notably here we see the impact of the BLM statement spike, with 37% of posts not featuring figures at all - but then from July to September settles at between 45-50%. This points to a modest increase with regard to the inclusion of women in the content of US outdoor brands in this period.

UK outdoor brands: A negligible response

Similar to what we see in the US, in the UK there was a slight drop off in the number of posts featuring solely white figures during the early summer of 2020. However, in contrast to the US, there is a marked *decrease* in the number of posts that do not depict figures, and while there is a gradual increase in posts featuring mixed or only BIPOC figures between May and September (from 2% of total to 12%) by the autumn of 2020 there was also, remarkably, a recovery to *higher than* pre-June percentages of posts featuring only white figures (from 62% in June to 71% in September), as can be seen in Figure 3. This shows that whilst there was a response on the part of some brands, the overall impact was negligible, in contrast to the more purposeful response we see in the US in the summer of 2020. The overarching picture here is that the outdoors is projected as an almost exclusively white space at this time.

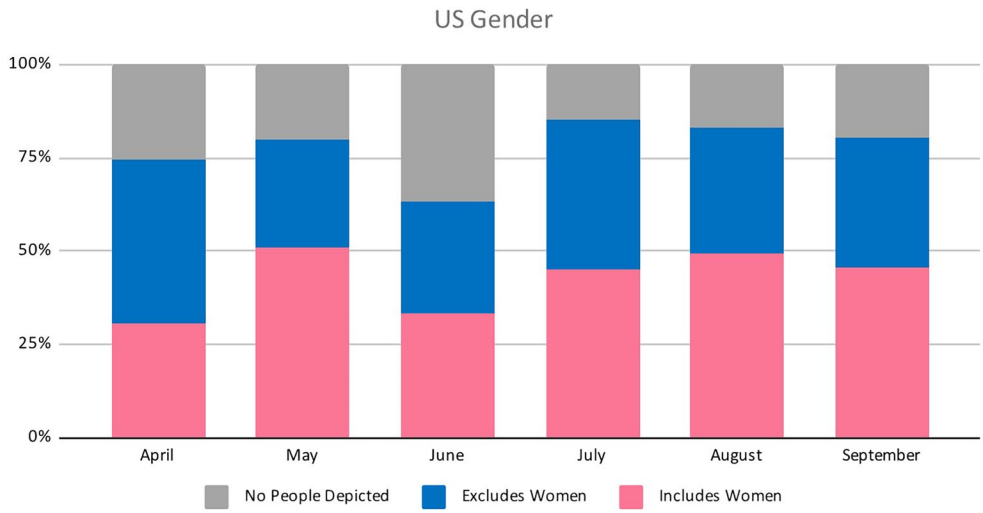

Figure 2. US brands - proportion of posts by gender.

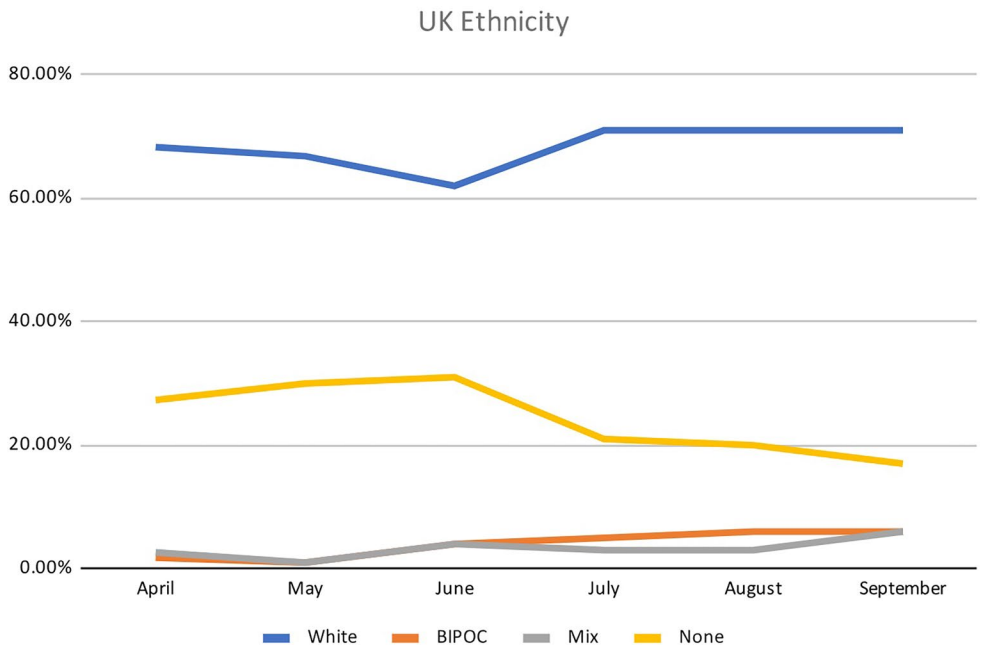

Figure 3. UK brands - proportion of posts by ethnicity.

In contrast to the US, where more often than not one could expect to see a woman represented in posts, the percentage in the UK hovers a few points below this benchmark throughout the period, as can be seen in Figure 4. This said, the proportional relationship between April (43% include women as opposed to 38% which do not) and September (48%/38%) is remarkably consistent, suggesting some level of strategic intent when it comes to the purposeful inclusion of women in the Instagram content among UK brands.

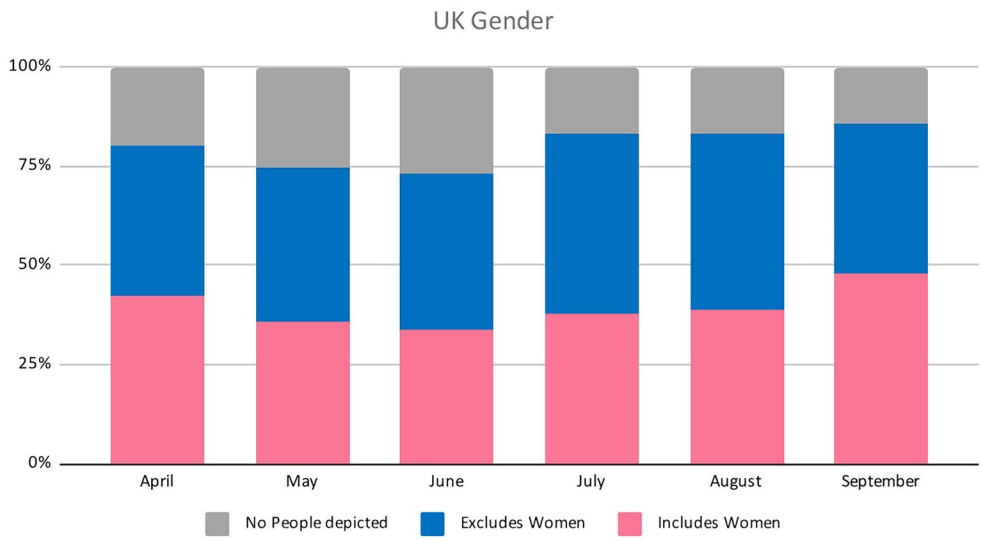

Figure 4. UK brands - proportion of posts by gender.

Scandinavian outdoor brands: A negligible response

While BLM protests were ongoing in the summer months of 2020 in Scandinavia, patterns of change in the content of Scandinavian outdoor brands were consistent with their overall trends in BIPOC representation: i.e. we see a negligible response, as can be found in Figure 5. While the percentage of posts featuring solely white figures did drop by 10 points during the months of June and July, we do not see the same kind of corresponding spiking of content based around nonfigurative content or representations of mixed or BIPOC figures as we do in the US, or even to a lesser degree in the UK. This lack of movement around minority representation in this region might indicate that the Black Lives Matter movement and associated calls to diversify the outdoors were not very prominent – but this was not the case, as discussed in the context section of this paper.

The non-responsiveness of the Scandinavian brands, in light of these events and what could be seen to be happening with US brands - many of whom being global leaders also operating in Scandinavian markets – is telling. In line with Francis's (2021) broader discussion of how marketers have responded to BLM, outdoor brands in both the Scandinavian and UK contexts would seem to have chosen purposefully *not* to address the issue of racial inequality and related identity politics in their social media content strategy. Relatedly, and returning us to Martin's (2004) hypothesis concerning the multiple factors which lead to "apartheid in the Great Outdoors", the negligible responses of Scandinavian-based brands may correspond with the underrepresentation of BIPOC and minority communities in outdoor spaces as a whole (Lorentzen & Viken, 2022; Turistföreningen, 2017). This Scandinavian exceptionalism in relation to the racialization of outdoor activities, which is deeply connected to nationalist rhetorics, may well inform the normative whiteness as represented in the Instagram content of outdoor brands, no matter the presence of anti-racist activism and ongoing political movements in these countries. While political affiliations with the BLM movement

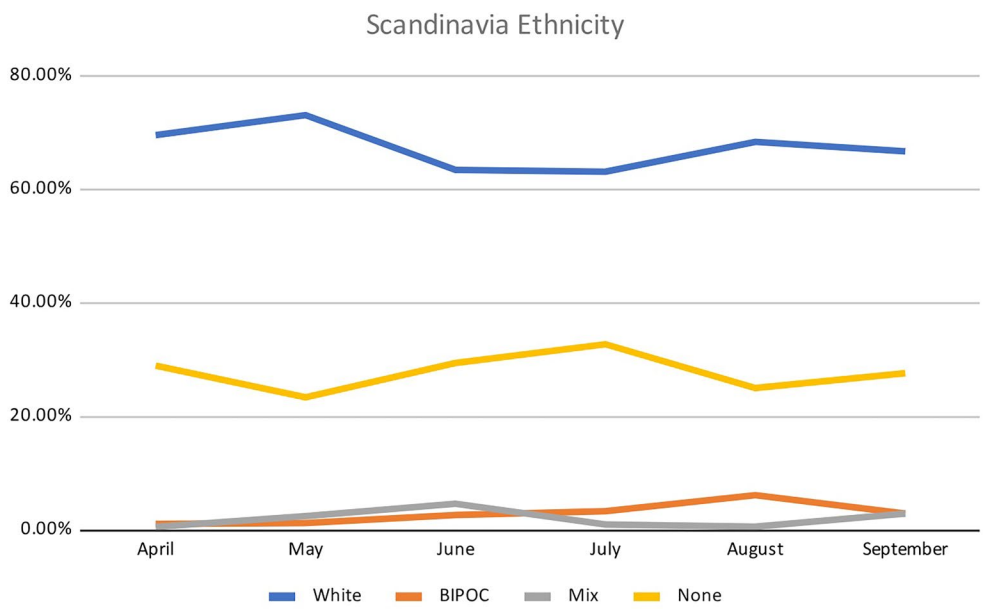

Figure 5. Scandinavia - proportion of posts by ethnicity.

can prove complicated for brands, as exemplified by the Black Out Tuesday initiative (Thomas & Chintagunta, 2022), the non-responsiveness of Scandinavian brands can only construed as a calculated decision *not* to "take stand" on this issue by introducing BIPOC figures into their Instagram content in this period.

When it comes to gender, much like the UK, the picture with the Scandinavian outdoor brands is quite different, with a very consistent proportion of posts representing women across the period – just above 40% on average, but more or less at parity with the amount of posts excluding women when one takes into account the proportion which features no figures at all, as can be seen in Figure 6. In other words, outside of the US, we see no substantive change in the representation of women across this period.

Other diversities: Body type, disability, age, LGBTQ+, religion

In line with Stanley's (2020) qualitative research, representation of a broader spectrum of diversities in the Instagram content of outdoor brands from across all three regions is minimal to point of being, effectively, non-existent. For example, the number of posts featuring people with visible disabilities accounts for significantly less than 1% of total in all three regions; those featuring non-normative body types ("fat") ranging from less than 1% (Scandinavia) to just more than 2% (US); less than 1% in all regions featuring visible LGBTQ+ identities; between 2 and 3% of posts in all regions featuring "older" people; between 6% (US, Scandinavia) and 9% (UK) featuring children; and less than 1% in all regions featuring visible displays of religion. With these numbers being so low, it is evident that there was no substantive change in the representation of this broader range of diversities in this period.

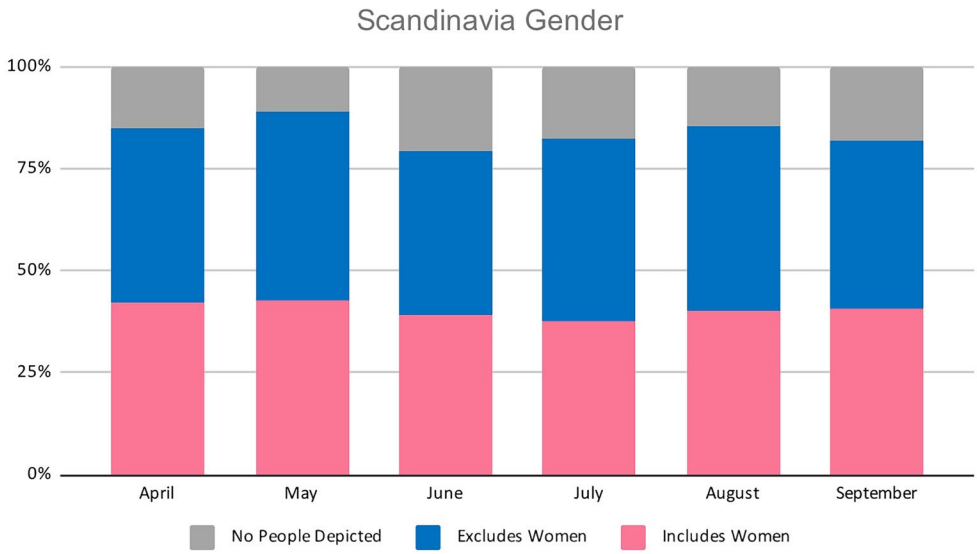

Figure 6. Scandinavia - proportion of posts by gender.

Discussion: The response of outdoor brands to calls to diversify the outdoors in 2020: Purposeful activism or expedient strategy?

Whilst the scope of the present paper does not allow for the inclusion of more granular quantitative and qualitative analysis of specific brands, the broad patterns identified in the preceding analysis clearly indicate that in all regions the combined impact of the BLM protests and related calls to diversify the outdoors in this period, alongside the exceptional circumstances imposed by the pandemic, impacted the representational strategies of outdoor brands across all three territories - but to quite different degrees. In the US the initial impact was quite dramatic but was then followed by more incremental change. It was if the US outdoor brands signaled that they were, so to say, "cancelling" the idea that the outdoors is an exclusively white space – but only for a short time, what in a related context has been described as "performative allyship" (Wellman, 2022). Following Vredenburg et al. (2020), this can be interpreted through a strategic lens, whereby outdoor brands who (unlike for example global market leaders The North Face and Patagonia) had no history of positioning themselves around prosocial issues decided to respond in a way that mitigated the risk of alienating a broader customer base, before making more gradual changes to their content strategy later in the year when BLM was less prominent on the news agenda. In the UK the initial response was followed by a very modest increase in the proportion of posts featuring BIPOC figures and mixed groups. However, by the year's end this is outweighed by a similar increase in the representation of solely white figures, whilst in Scandinavia there is similarly very little change across the period.

Whilst by September 2020 US outdoor brands were responding in a more or less concerted manner to calls to diversify the outdoors with respect to ethnicity, in the UK and Scandinavia this was not the case: the "apartheid in the outdoors" that Martin (2004) identified in the outdoors media of the early 2000s is still very much in

evidence in these digital spaces in 2020. Furthermore, the claim made by Stanley (2020) that the outdoor media reproduces not merely a racialized leisure identity but one that is necessarily white, able-bodied, and straight (p. 241) is supported by the evidence of this analysis across all three data sets. With respect to Stanley's argument, one area where outdoor brands of the global North do appear to have made is in relation to (normative/binary) gender equity. However, this needs to be qualified by acknowledging the limitations of our content analysis method, which only enabled us to code for *visible* signs of diversity, thereby potentially occluding "hidden" forms of diversity such as disability and with respect to gender, non-binary, queer or transgender identities where these were not otherwise made explicit in textual elements of the post. Further research is therefore required to determine if this development has subsequently translated into similar progress with regard to any of the other forms of diversity our study is concerned with, whilst different qualitative approaches are needed to better understand the non-normative identities and narratives that are emerging in the self-representations of outdoorspeople on not only Instagram but also across other widely used social media platforms (see for example Beames & Adams, 2024)

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