

Girlhood in the Great Outdoors

By

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ABSTRACT. Women have historically been socialized to interact with the environment as caretakers or consumers, which has contrasted with men's role as an environmental conqueror. These roles have had an enduring effect on how girls have interacted with their identities and the available avenues for environmental activism. This paper investigates how those roles have manifested in two case studies: the Girl Scouts and VSCO girls. The Girl Scouts have historically focused on environmental service projects and teaching girls outdoors skills, and it uses cookie sales to fund these endeavors. VSCO girls embody an outdoorsy and sustainability-inspired aesthetic and purport to "save the turtles," and VSCO girls must purchase environmentally sustainable products to enact their aesthetic both stylistically and environmentally. As gender roles have evolved, this research investigates the ways in which girlhood informs, enables, and limits these activists' environmental impact. By looking at the similarities and differences between an organization such as the Girl Scouts, which has enabled girls' environmental activism for over a century, and a modern community such as the VSCO girls, whose activism is intrinsically tied to the technology and society of today, this case study comparison seeks to understand how social constructions of girlhood have shaped and continue to shape girls' means of environmental activism.

BACKGROUND

Constructions of femininity and masculinity affect how people view the dichotomy of wilderness and civilization, and in turn, impact the ways men and women interact with the natural environment. Unexplored areas of land have historically been referenced as virginal lands and their lack of exposure to human influence is compared to the purity of feminine virginity (Casey and Neville-Shepard 2020). In this metaphor, the human explorer then embodies a masculine force which deflowers the land. American narratives of wilderness and discourse surrounding the environment have been heavily influenced by frontier mythology and Manifest Destiny (Bessetti-Reyes 2014). The frontier describes a conceptual boundary between settled and unsettled land and is generally accompanied by a mandate for someone to cross it. This mandate is encapsulated in the concept of Manifest Destiny which describes the American cultural belief that white settlers had an almost moral obligation to explore and "civilize" the West (Hofstadter and Lipset 1968). Manifest Destiny is both a cause and effect of 19th-century masculinity; it was a product of paternalistic attitudes and it reemphasized many "mountain man" aspects of masculinity, including physical domination of

surrounding people and places (Bessetti-Reyes 2014; Casey and Neville-Shepard 2020; Vance 1997).

This contrasts with the idea that wild places can be refuges from social constraints, including those imposed by gender norms (Meyer and Borrie 2013). Wilderness is by definition free from the constraints of civilization and since gender performances are dictated by and for the benefit of society, gender in a space free of society, such as wilderness, has the potential to transcend binary constructions of femininity and masculinity. Both Girl Scouts and VSCO girls nominally promote expansions of feminine gender roles, but in reality, still situate their actions and attitudes within traditionally accepted femininity. The Girl Scouts began as a way for girls to gain environmental experience in a structured and supervised way that ensured their safety and that they would be interacting with the outdoors in ways suited to their youth and femininity. It was well established that outdoor activities were a healthy part of boyhood but there was a growing realization that in order to raise boys in the outdoor arena, their mothers would need basic knowledge of some essential outdoors skills (Unger 2012). The Girl Scouts stepped up to meet this need, training young women in basic outdoor skills that they would be able to then teach their sons. The Girl Scouts organization has evolved since then and in the past several years girls in the United States who are interested in environmental activities and involvement have been able to also turn to the VSCO girl community. Contrary to the Girl Scouts' established organization, the VSCO community has arisen out of a shared aesthetic that informs girls' clothing choices, product purchases, and outdoor activities. While this aesthetic is embodied in their day-to-day lives, it is also performed via posts on Instagram, and VSCO girls engage not only with their fellow VSCO friends from their school or neighborhoods, but follow and connect with VSCO girls from all over the country on social media.

METHODS

This paper employs case studies of both the Girl Scouts and VSCO girls to understand how the nature of girlhood influences the ways in which members of these groups interact with the environment. The case studies are formed by researching both what these groups say about themselves and what other published texts describe them as. To do so, it used the official website of the Girl Scouts of the United States, the organization's published studies on its own successes, records of Girl scout badges' introductions, discontinuations, and descriptions, as well as several different Scouting Handbooks used over the years. This yields information about what activities are emphasized and in what ways the Girl Scouts encourage environmental activities. VSCO girls do not have a concrete organizational structure, nor do they have any official leadership which can produce definitive material on how the group views themselves. However, all VSCO members share usage of Instagram and this case study used the account [vscogirls.account](#) which was created by and for VSCO girls to help inspire other VSCO girls' content. I used this to emulate the kind of authoritative material produced by the Girl Scout organization, but for the VSCO girls. Additionally, the account provides elements of the digital VSCO girl aesthetic, such as wallpaper pictures that the account's viewers can screenshot and use for themselves. In doing so,

accounts such as these can be seen as both reflections of VSCO girls' preferences and as sources of authority on what is and is not included in the VSCO aesthetic, lifestyle, and digital presence. This paper also used digital ethnography research techniques on Instagram to investigate VSCO girls' interests and involvement in environmental activism. To get a broad range of data from the different sources VSCO girls interact with on Instagram, I included the aforementioned VSCO inspiration account, as well as the hashtag #savetheturtles which has become a VSCO slogan and rallying cry, and a brand's account, Pura Vida bracelets, which were a staple accessory seen in the posts of girls on the VSCO inspo account. The sample of posts used were from posts under these two accounts and the hashtag, between the months of January and March. This time frame allowed for the data to be recent while not including posts from April, which is Earth month and thus may include a disproportionate amount of content related to the environment and environmental activism. To understand how non-group members viewed the identities and efforts of each, I also included research on published studies as well as media portrayals of each organization and the people involved.

FINDINGS

Modern Girl Scouts learn a variety of skills intended to increase their capabilities, community, and self-confidence (Hughes 2001) and no longer are explicitly taught to be mothers of men. However, gendered interactions with the wilderness continue to manifest in other ways. In particular, women have not been allowed to be "conquerors" of the wilderness and instead are relegated to consumers of wilderness. The masculine values inherent in the role of conqueror harken back to the glorification of Manifest Destiny and paternalistic domination and civilization of wild lands and peoples (Casey and Neville-Shepard 2020; Vance 1997). As such, the role of the conqueror is inaccessible to performances of femininity. In its place, women are often seen as consumers. A study of women-targeted advertisements in prominent outdoor magazines found that women were shown enjoying the aesthetic and material trappings of outdoor experience but were rarely pictured accomplishing physical feats with any daring or independence. Advertisements picturing women were often for new products such as backpacks or outdoor clothing, or for picturesque vacation destinations (McNiel, Harris, and Kristi 2012).

The consumer role manifests in how the Girl Scouts are most widely known for their cookie sales, which earn the funds that enable their environmental explorations, yet all too often subsumes those activities and is seen as the principal purpose of Girl Scouts. Outside observers of Girl Scouts are especially apt to think primarily of Girl Scouts' cookie-selling role in part because it puts Girl Scouts into contact with the outside community, and also because the image of the darling gap-toothed Girl Scout, with her hair in pigtail braids and her wheelbarrow of cookies, is an especially socially-acceptable image of these young girls. Similarly, as will be discussed later, the popular image of a VSCO girl is characterized by her distinctive and expensive accessories. As such, both the Girl Scouts and VSCO girls require their members to participate in a consumerist relationship with the environment.

Membership requirements also include more explicit actions: though the Girl Scouts have codified membership, membership within the VSCO girl community is more nebulous. However, VSCO girls still display unifying characteristics that signal group belonging and which are expressed with both commercial accoutrements and specific actions. The official leadership structure and institutional nature of the Girl Scout organization's group membership ensures that its members all recite a common pledge and work towards leadership-sanctioned badges (Meyer and Rowan 1977). VSCO girls label themselves as VSCO girls with little chance of being sanctioned if they incorrectly perform the VSCO aesthetic. However, they do risk negative responses through social media, most commonly through negative Instagram comments or low numbers of likes. Additionally, though they do not have a formal pledge, they share common phrases including "save the turtles," and also have shared slang, such as "and I oop" and "sksksksksk" that unite the members (Gaudet and Clément 2008). While Girl Scouts have their official sashes, VSCO girls have a similarly strict dress code consisting of oversized t-shirts that conceal the shorts worn underneath, Birkenstocks on their feet, and Hydro flasks or metal-strawed reusable water bottles in hands with wrists stacked with scrunchies and Pura Vida bracelets (Dickson 2019; Singer 2019; Thompson 2019). They keep their chapstick in Fjällräven Kånken backpacks and might tuck a Penny skateboard under one arm (Cyr and Matusheski 2020). Most of their clothes are in muted pastels and are often tie-dyed, and the tame color palette contributes to the delicate femininity conveyed by how swamped they appear in their oversized shirts. These colors also complement their natural make-up and emphasize their image of youthful innocence. Despite how curated the elements of the VSCO girl look are, even down to the specific brands central to some of the most identifiable aspects, the effect is ruined if her aesthetic appears at all contrived (Dickson 2019).

The VSCO girls' accessories are also means of conveying VSCO girls' environmental consciousness. While VSCO girls are identifiable by their material products, group membership is contingent on a shared environmental consciousness that is often manifested in the saying: "save the turtles" (Cyr and Matusheski 2020; Dickson 2019). The Hydro Flasks, metal straws, and Pura Vida bracelets are all associated with efforts to live more sustainably and this environmental focus is the only action-oriented goal associated with their aesthetic and lifestyle. By using reusable water bottles and purchasing from environmentally-conscious brands they are presumably reducing plastic waste that would be contaminating oceans and, as the oft-repeated slogan references, harming the turtles (Cyr and Matusheski 2020).

The trappings of the VSCO aesthetic are instrumental to the performance of a VSCO identity, and that performance takes place both in person and on social media. The term "VSCO" references the VSCO photo editing app, which gained popularity in the 2010s and gave photos an atmospheric and understated appeal and its users a platform on which to share galleries of VSCO edited photos with other users (Dickson 2019; Perlman 2019). Through VSCO and Instagram, future VSCO girls edited, posted, and interacted with their own and others' applications of this developing aesthetic. Already adept at the use of social media and accustomed to its role as a reinforcing reflection of their own self-images, pre-teen and teenage girls translated the VSCO aesthetic from a

photo filter to an identity. The lifestyle that accompanies this identity, which includes the materialist accessories discussed previously, has essentially become a lived filter which, when applied to a girl or young woman, transforms her into a VSCO girl.

Historical interactions of femininity and wilderness preservation inform how the VSCO girls' aesthetic situates their environmental activism today. Studies of environmental activism have noted the positive correlation between belonging to an environmental organization and rates of activism (Mcfarlane and Boxall 2003; Perkins 2012). The Girl Scouts can serve as one such organization, and while not institutionalized, girls who identify as VSCO girls also face calls to partake in certain environmentally-motivated behaviors as part of accomplishing their aesthetic. However, women are traditionally relegated to grassroots levels of activism movements, including in environmental campaigns, and they are restricted from positions of authority within the larger movements (Buckingham and Kulcur 2009). Additionally, Girl Scouts' and VSCO girls' efforts are impacted by the coupling of their gender and age. Girl Scouts are primarily promoted in popular culture as cute cookie sales girls as opposed to the environmental explorers and protectors that they also can be. Similarly, VSCO girls' efforts to live eco-consciously, though flawed, are perhaps unfairly denigrated not because of the hypocrisy embedded in elements of their identities but because of their identities as girls. The classed consumerism required of VSCO girls may be problematic, but it does not negate the effect of their eco-conscious efforts. The intersection of their youth and femininity makes these activists especially dismissable, not because of their actions but on the basis of their intersectional identity.

CONCLUSION

As the importance of environmental consciousness and actions on both individual and macro levels increases, it is imperative to understand how young girls, as future stewards of the environment, are encountering and interacting with the natural world. The Girl Scouts provide a glimpse into how girls' roles in the environment have both evolved and endured. By comparing this with the most recent manifestation of a specific coupling of girls and environmental interactions, the VSCO girls, we can expand our understanding of how modern girlhood constrains and empowers various avenues of environmental impact and girls' future investment in environmental action.

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