Effect of Social Media and Pledge Coins on Pro-Environmental Behavior of Youth Conservation Corps Enrollees in Yellowstone National Park

Nicole Sedgeley • Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming • Summer 2016

Overview

To protect the environment and national parks from environmental threats, such as climate change, a new generation of stewards needs to be engendered to ensure the continued existence and enjoyment of our natural resources. These next stewards may come from programs like the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. The YCC enrollees are teenagers, aged 15-18, who spend one month during the summer living, working and learning in Yellowstone National Park.

Personal intellectual and emotional connections have to be made with the environment in order for stewardship programs to be successful. Therefore new approaches to environmental protection need to be created that are relevant to younger generations. Recent studies of teenagers have shown they frequently use social media.

This study evaluated the effectiveness of social media and pledge coins on encouraging pro-environmental behavior in this group. Questionnaires were given six months apart and social media platforms were observed to evaluate behavior change.

Methods

In order to answer the two research questions of the study, "Do pledges posted on social media encourage pro-environmental behavior from YCC enrollees after leaving the park?" And, "Do pledge coins encourage a chain-effect of pro-environmental behavior?", I used data collected through questionnaires, videos and journaling.

There were two sessions of the 2016 YCC program (N=60). The first session was designated the Comparison Group, and the second session was the treatment group, known as the Pledge Group.

Both groups were asked to complete two questionnaires six months apart in order to evaluate whether there were any changes in their behavior and/or attitudes toward the environment, social influence and social media. The questionnaires had Likert-scale and short answer questions.

For the treatment, the Pledge Group participants were invited to post a video to social media. This video had the participants pledge to help the environment when they returned home from their summer in Yellowstone. They would post the video to Instagram under #YELLinspired.

Additionally, the Pledge Group participants were given two wooden nickels, or pledge coins, (Figure 2) when they finished their season in Yellowstone to help remind them of their planned social media pledge videos. Once the pledge was completed, the participant would pass on one of the pledge coins to someone else, challenging them to also complete a pro-environmental activity and pledge video.



Figure 1. Screen shot of my pledge video posted to social media.



Figure 2. Image of the Pledge Coin given out to the Pledge Group

Research Questions

- Do pledges posted on social media encourage pro-environmental behavior from YCC enrollees after leaving the park?
- Do pledge coins encourage a chain-effect of pro-environmental behavior?



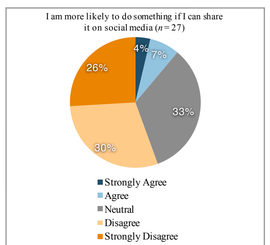
Results

The results of this study showed that after six months of social media monitoring:

- No YCC enrollee posted a pledge video to social media
- One enrollee reported passing on a pledge coin

The questionnaires confirmed the likelihood of these findings. Enrollees disagreed that social media was an influence, but instead agreed that families and social networks were an influence on their behavior. Additionally, they agreed to having interest in and caring for the environment.

Furthermore, the short-answer questions identified the already strong connection these teenagers had to the environment, with many stating that they often participate in many pro-environmental behaviors already. They went on to explain that the YCC program had increased their awareness and likelihood of doing more pro-environmental behaviors.



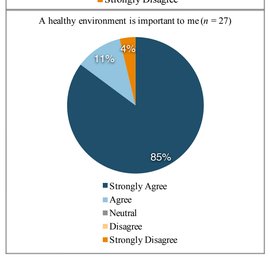


Figure 3. Percentage of value responses given for two questions on the Pledge Group questionnaire 1, (*n* = 27)

Discussion

The questionnaires indicated that the participants valued the environment. When considering that these individuals self-selected to live and work in Yellowstone, nature, the environment and conservation must have appealed to them on for them to apply for the program. Furthermore, the impact of their time in Yellowstone before meeting me may have also influenced their responses.

Additionally, the influence of family and friends and social pressure was strongly suggested in the questionnaire data. In fact, some of the participants chose to be part of the YCC because of encouragement from family.

Unlike the environmental questions and social questions, their responses to the social media questions were in disagreement. This finding was very shocking at first. So often this age group is portrayed as being addicted to technology it was assumed that their responses to the social media questions would have been positive. Considering these participants decided to join the YCC instead of staying at home for the summer, suggests that they could be less interested in technology and its influence.

Despite finding some trends and drawing some general conclusions, larger sample sizes would be needed to make stronger inferences.



Conclusions

If the ultimate goal of the YCC program is to create a new generation of conservation leaders, and, therefore, a society that is more environmentally-literate and sustainably-minded, then we need to have the most effective means of producing that behavior change. The future of our planet depends on it.

Indeed, these YCC participants are the current and future stewards of our natural world, but this study found that using social media with pledge videos and pledge coins are not likely to be an effective means to encouraging others to do the same.