

Social media impacting backcountry decisions

By Paddy O'Connell, Adventure Journal

“Hold my beer and watch this.” The famous last words of a redneck, as the joke goes. But, could “take my picture and post this” be the last words of millennial backcountry skiers and snowboarders? It would seem very possible.

The latest human factor in avalanche terrain decision-making is the pressure of social media and the influence of an omnipresent digital group dynamic.

At the International Snow Science Workshop at Breckenridge, Colo., earlier this month, State University of New York at Plattsburg Associate Professor Jerry Isaak presented his paper “Social Media and Decision Making in Avalanche Terrain.” Isaak explained that decision-making and risk-taking in backcountry terrain is highly influenced by heuristic issues. Our human desire to be accepted by those we respect or seeking the acceptance of those we want to notice us will many times silence that cautious internal dialogue. We convince ourselves to engage in dangerous activities due to social influence. In the digital age, Kodak Courage has morphed into Facebook Fame and Instagram Celebrity. And that social influence is omnipresent. We carry it in the smartphone in our pocket.

In his paper, Isaak describes acceptance and social facilitation as the major heuristic influencers of backcountry “digital natives,” millennial off-piste practitioners who are experts in the creation and consumption of social media content.

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