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Abstract

Researchers studying nicknaming practices have uncovered a variety of interesting features across a range of social groups. This paper expands this line of research by examining the norms, bases, and functions of personal “trail names” among Appalachian Trail (AT) long-distance hikers. This voluntary and relatively egalitarian leisure social world provides an ideal setting for studying nicknaming practices, as virtually all participants adopt a trail name for themselves during their journey. The research design primarily consists of interviews with 107 long-distance hikers conducted by the first author in 2025 while hiking 425 miles of the AT across six states. Findings reveal that long-distance hikers display a remarkable degree of agency in trail naming practices, reflective of the “hike your own hike” philosophy that pervades the long-distance hiking social world on the AT. Bases for trail names vary, with many names blending multiple characteristics, making them deeply meaningful for hikers. Functions of trail names include boundary maintenance, feelings of in-group acceptance, anxiety reduction, and identity transformation. The article’s discussion includes the theoretical implications of these findings and concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: nicknames, identity, Appalachian Trail, hiking, recreation, place names, socio-onomastics

General Introduction

Nicknames are a common occurrence across social groups, functioning as unofficial “additional names” that exist alongside or replace formal given names. From schoolchildren to prison inmates, individuals bestow and use nicknames within diverse social contexts. These informal naming practices are meaningful phenomena that speak to various social dynamics within groups, as researchers have found nicknames to have implications for multiple social processes beyond mere denotation, including boundary maintenance, social control, power relations, and identity formation. Despite their prevalence and social and psychological impacts, nicknames have received relatively limited attention from social scientists.

In this paper, we investigate the use of nicknames, referred to as “trail names” by their users, among Appalachian Trail (AT) long-distance hikers. These hikers exist in a distinctive social world characterized by relative egalitarianism, a strong emphasis on individual autonomy, acceptance of creative self-expression, and the rapid development of social bonds. Thus, we hope to add to the variety of social groups studied in the context of nicknaming. Moreover, examining trail names on the AT may illuminate nicknaming dynamics relevant to other contemporary contexts where individuals exercise agency in identity construction, such as within the online gamer and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Researchers studying nicknaming have mainly examined three substantive issues: (1) the norms surrounding the practice of giving and using nicknames; (2) the bases of nicknames; and (3) their functions for social groups and individuals. The literature on nicknaming practices reveals patterns across diverse social settings that might be considered norms of nicknaming. One of the most consistent findings is that individuals typically do not choose their own nicknames (Black et al. 2014; Bodenhorn 2006; De Klerk & Bosch 1996; McClure 1981). Most commonly, nicknames are given by others. A second widespread pattern is that nicknames are often pejorative (Crozier & Dimmock 1999; Skipper 1986; Gilmore 1982; Hale 1981; Morgan et al. 1979). In his description of an Andalusian farming community, Gilmore characterizes nicknaming as “a form of verbal aggression” (1982, 687). Paradoxically, the named often accept and even value negative nicknames. For example, Skipper finds that the majority of coal miners liked their nicknames despite negative connotations, with one miner explaining, “It shows you belong and others know it” (1986, 143). This seeming contradiction points to the complex social functions nicknames serve.

Researchers have also uncovered instances in which individuals receive multiple nicknames simultaneously (Rymes 1996; Morgan et al. 1979) and that nicknames can change over time (Starks et al. 2012; Bodenhorn & Vom Bruck 2006; Morgan et al. 1979). Perhaps unsurprising is that nicknames are usually context-specific and not salient across multiple social settings (Black et al. 2014; Adams 2009; Potter 2007; Rymes 1996; Skipper 1986; Morgan et al. 1979). For instance, Rymes reports that *Little Creeper* used his gang name on the streets but not at home or school.

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When it comes to the bases of nicknames, researchers have documented a wide variety, with many appearing across multiple social contexts. Physical appearance is one of the most frequent sources of nicknames (Crozier & Dimmock 1999; De Klerk & Bosch 1996; Hale 1981; Mook 1967). Behaviors (including specific incidents) and personality characteristics are also common sources (Holland 1990a; Skipper 1985; Hale 1981; Morgan et al. 1979; Cohen 1977; Mook 1967). Other documented bases for nicknames include occupation (Holland 1990a; Hale 1981), place of origin or ethnic background (Breen 1982; Holland 1990a; Hale 1981), things people say frequently (Hale 1981), possessions (Morgan et al. 1979), and nicknames passed down from family members (Cohen 1977; Hale 1981).

An important insight regarding behavior-based nicknames comes from Holland's (1990a) study of railroaders. He observes that nicknames based on personality and performance "should be viewed as a continuum [. . .] with most of them exhibiting some combination of both of those qualities" (298). This continuum framework recognizes that the distinction between behavior-based and personality-based nicknames is not absolute; rather, behaviors often resonate because they exemplify underlying personality traits. Generally speaking, nicknames appearing on the surface to fit neatly into one particular category may overlap with more than one nicknaming basis.

Researchers have found that nicknames serve multiple functions at both the group and the individual level. Most fundamentally, nicknames serve to identify and distinguish individuals, particularly in contexts where formal names overlap (e.g., see Brandes 1975). However, since Gilmore (1982) observes that nicknames are also employed in the absence of overlapping formal names, they must serve functions beyond mere identification. As Holland points out, nicknames have a "multiplex nature" (1990a, 128). For one, nicknames function to mark boundaries between insiders and outsiders, thus categorizing group members and non-members (Skipper 1986; Maurer & Futrell 1982; Cohen 1977; Brandes 1975). Nicknames have also been shown to elicit positive feelings of social acceptance (Potter 2007; Skipper 1986), promote social solidarity and intimacy among group members (McConnell-Ginet 2003; Skipper 1984; Yassin 1978; Cohen 1977; Brandes 1975), and enable the concealment of identities from outsiders (Black et al. 2014; Maurer & Futrell 1982). Given the pejorative nature of many nicknames, as already discussed, multiple scholars (Holland 1987; McDowell 1981; Harre 1980; Morgan et al. 1979; Brandes 1975; Antoun 1968; Pitt-Rivers 1961) have pointed to nicknames as mechanisms of social control and power through which social groups regulate behavior and enforce norms.

Given the inherent connection between naming and identity, researchers have also argued that being given a nickname often has consequences for an individual's self-concept. Specifically, receiving a nickname may facilitate an individual's disconnection from a previous identity, as well as the emergence of a new identity (Black et al. 2014; Emmelhainz 2012; Maurer & Futrell 1982; Tournier 1975; Jackson 1967). In his anthropological investigation of over 200 societies, Alford points out that name changes, including the adoption of nicknames, reflect "the social importance and salience of emergent characteristics, emergent identities" (1987, 83). Similarly, Heymann (2012) notes that chosen names often achieve connotative as well as denotative functions. They can be a creative expression of qualities, characteristics, or attributes as well as an individual's identifier. Emmelhainz conceptualizes phenomena of this kind as "identity elasticity", in which the adoption of a new name or nickname provides "an opportunity to explore a changing identity" (2012, 164). Emmelhainz further explains that identity elasticity is quite likely during pilgrimages and rites of passage, both apt descriptions of AT long-distance hikers' experiences.

De Pina-Cabral (1984) argues that differences between "agonistic" and "consensual" social contexts can inform specific nicknaming functions across social settings. In agonistic settings, which are highly competitive and hierarchical, such as the Spanish villages studied by Gilmore (1982), Brandes (1975), and Pitt-Rivers (1969) or the prison environments examined by Black et al. (2014) and Jackson (1967), nicknames frequently carry aggressive or controlling undertones that an individual might attempt to downplay. In contrast, in more consensual, egalitarian contexts, such as that documented by Breen (1982) in Western Ireland, nicknaming functions more along the lines of what Adams refers to as "pragmatics and politeness" structures (2009, 81). Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, Adams suggests that namers and those they name negotiate "naming contracts", with both parties observing conventions of positive and negative politeness. This framework allows for the possibility that nicknaming can occur in contexts where power is more evenly distributed and where the named retain agency in accepting, rejecting, or renegotiating their nicknames. This is consistent with Leslie and Skipper's (1990) point about the decline in nicknames in America being associated with a decrease in solidarity and common identity and an increase in individualism and impersonality.

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To date, the only ethnographic study specifically dedicated to examining trail names among AT long-distance hikers is Rubane's (2024) unpublished master's thesis, based on participant observations and interviews with 14 hikers. Rubane finds that trail names serve many functions, including the identification and categorization of individuals, the promotion of social belonging, and the emergence of new trail personae. Rubane explains that this coincides with a social world that strongly believes in individual autonomy and freedom of expression, frequently expressed on the trail by the aphorism "hike your own hike" (HYOH). In the current study, we expand upon Rubane's investigation into trail names among AT long-distance hikers by specifically examining the norms surrounding their acquisition and use, the bases upon which they are formed, and the functions they serve within this distinctive social world.

The AT long-distance hiking social world offers a valuable context for exploring several theoretical questions suggested by existing nicknaming literature. First, where does this social world fall along De Pina-Cabral's continuum from agonistic to consensual social contexts, and how does this positioning shape norms surrounding nicknaming practices? Second, how does Holland's behavior-personality continuum apply to trail names, and can this framework extend beyond those bases to others? And finally, what functions do trail names serve in the AT long-distance hiker social world? Overall, this study aims to contribute to our theoretical understanding of how nicknaming practices operate through an ethnographic examination of a previously understudied nicknaming context.

Research Design

Many researchers have advocated for the use of ethnographic methods to attain the insider knowledge necessary to fully understand how nicknames function within a particular social context. For instance, Bramwell observes that ethnographic methods allow researchers to understand naming practices "from an insider's perspective" (2016, 266). Holland also recommends "a commitment to fieldwork and a willingness to allow our understanding of nicknaming to arise from out of our interaction with those individuals and communities we 'study'" (1990b, 268). These methodological considerations guided the ethnographic approach adopted for this study.

Both authors are AT thru-hikers, previously walking the trail from end-to-end, which broadly informed the research design. The findings reported here are based on a formal analysis of 107 interviews with AT long-distance hikers, all conducted by the first author in 2025 while hiking 425 miles of the AT across 6 states. Figure 1 shows a map of the AT and denotes the sections that MacLennan hiked. He conducted interviews on the trail itself, as well as at trail shelters and hiker hostels.

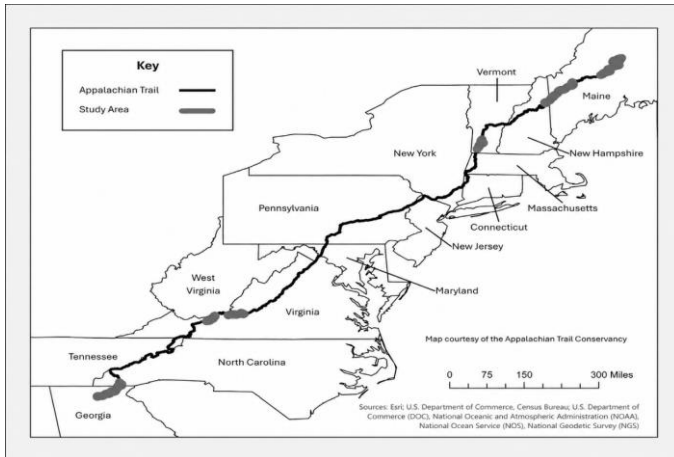


Figure 1: Map of the Appalachian Trail denoting the 425 miles in which interviews with 107 AT long-distance hikers were conducted by MacLennan in 2025.

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There, he approached potential participants and confirmed their intent to complete an end-to-end hike of the AT before he introduced himself as a researcher studying long-distance hikers and requested participation. Only two of the hikers he approached declined to participate. Interviewees included 77 male and 30 female hikers. The age distribution skewed younger, with just over 50% of participants under 30 years of age (n=54). Table 1 below lists the trail names of the 97 participants who had a trail names at the time of the interview.

Table 1: Interviewee Trail Names

1. Ace	33. Gruffalo	65. Rumbletick
2. Adventurine	34. Gummy Bear	66. Scrooge
3. Alpha Gal	35. Hangover	67. Shorts
4. Ax	36. Happy Pappy	68. Silly
5. Badass Buttercup	37. Heartbeat	69. Silverback
6. Birdsong	38. Her Dad	70. Silver Wings
7. Bluebs	39. Hound Dog	71. Skipper
8. Booty Snatcher	40. Icarus	72. Soap
9. Boulder	41. Johnny Appleseed	73. Soupy
10. Broadway	42. Kenai	74. Spoonman
11. Bullseye	43. Kilo	75. Spot
12. Channing	44. Leo	76. Sticks N Stones
13. Chef	45. Lightsaber	77. Stretch
14. Chicken Louise	46. Little Debbie	78. Sundrop
15. Close Enough	47. Mac	79. Sunshine
16. Crockett	48. Magenta	80. T-Bird
17. Curly	49. Metro	81. Thump
18. Dancing Bear	50. Mission	82. Thunder Lizard
19. Duck Tales	51. Momma's Boy	83. Thunder Thighs
20. Early Bird	52. Nobody	84. Tie-Dye
21. El Presidente	53. Not A	85. Topsy Gypsy
22. Father Time	54. Old School (2)	86. TK
23. Foggy Froggie	55. Overshoot	87. To Go
24. Foot	56. PBR	88. Truck Stop
25. Four Ply	57. Pebbles	89. Two Meals
26. Four Squares	58. Petroglyph	90. Veggie Wrap
27. Free Hands	59. Phoenix	91. Voodoo Ranger
28. Gambit	60. Pinky	92. Vortex
29. Gandalf	61. Pooh Bear	93. Whisper
30. Garbage Barbie	62. Rabid Walnut	94. White Wolf
31. Ghost Tour	63. Rainmaker	95. Wizard of Ghee
32. Giver	64. Reason	96. Woozy

Note: The moniker *Old School* was named twice by different interviewees.

Conducted on-site immediately following recruitment, interviews ranged from eight to twenty minutes in duration. The first author audio-recorded all interviews and subsequently transcribed them verbatim. While interviews covered multiple aspects of the long-distance hiking experience, the questions relevant to the present analysis were: “Do you have a trail name?” “What does it mean to you to have a trail name?” and “Do you have any thoughts about trail names in general?” These questions allowed participants to describe their trail naming experiences in their own terms. References to norms, bases, and functions therefore arose organically.

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Following transcription, the first author engaged in multiple readings of the interviews to develop familiarity with the data. He followed this with open coding, during which he identified emergent themes and patterns related to trail naming within three primary analytic domains: trail name norms, bases, and functions. He iteratively refined the coding scheme as analysis progressed (e.g., to reflect the recognition of overlapping bases of trail names), recoding earlier transcripts when existing categories required either subdivision or consolidation or when new categories emerged. The Institutional Review Board at Georgia Southwestern State University approved this research, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Use of trail names in all reporting, rather than legal names, ensured and maintained participant confidentiality.

Results

Although the precise origins of AT naming practices are unclear, available evidence suggests that trail names were not always as widespread as they are today. Memoirs written by or about some of the earliest thru-hikers (Montgomery 2014; Brill 1990; Shaffer 1983; Garvey 1971), yearly Appalachian Trail Conservancy listings of 2,000-milers, and archival shelter registers preserved by the AT Museum suggest that trail naming became common practice during the late 1970s and early 1980s in tandem with the growth of long-distance hiking. Whether the norms, bases, and functions associated with trail names have remained stable over time is less certain and would require interviews with earlier generations of hikers.

To understand trail naming practices among AT long-distance hikers, it is helpful to consider the broader social context of the trail. The AT is a 2,200-mile footpath, which roughly 3,000 hikers attempt to hike from end-to-end each year. Most hikers hike northbound from Georgia, setting out on their journeys between mid-February and mid-May. Given this temporal clustering, the hikers' separation from wider society, and the shared physical and mental challenges of the experience, a distinct social world of AT long-distance hikers is evident (MacLennan 2005).

Trail Name Norms

The HYOH philosophy, a central ethic of this social world, may best explain the norms surrounding trail names. This philosophy encompasses both individual freedom and mutual respect: hikers are free to make their own choices about different aspects of their hikes, while simultaneously refraining from judging other hikers' choices. This ethos of personal autonomy combined with non-judgment creates a normative climate in which formal rules are largely absent and individual agency is paramount.

In a social world that celebrates HYOH, there are no codified trail name rules. Any hiker can suggest a trail name for another, and it is up to the named hiker to decide whether to accept the moniker. Although participation is voluntary, most hikers eventually adopt a trail name, while only a small minority choose not to do so. That said, a preferred tradition has emerged in which a trail name is given to a hiker by another hiker (or group of hikers) after spending time together on the trail and getting to know one another. Several hikers articulated this ideal explicitly. For instance, *Duck Tales* explained, "You can't decide it yourself [...] it should be something that comes from the community". *Wizard of Ghee* simply said, "It's usually a group of people and they'll pick a characteristic and you get dubbed that".

An important dimension of the preferred tradition involves timing: specifically, a trail name should not be given too quickly or impulsively, before fellow hikers have had adequate opportunity to observe and understand the person being named. For instance, one hiker was offered the name *Toyota* soon after arriving on the trail but decided not to accept it. Explaining how he rejected the trail name he said, "I was like, 'that's not a bad one,' but it was like two hours into the hike, so I was like, 'I don't wanna take one.' I'll give it a couple more days".

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The practice of rejecting suggested names provides clear evidence of hiker agency within the naming system. Particularly thoughtful about this agency, *Heartbeat* rejected multiple names before accepting one that felt right:

There's a couple trail names that were thrown at me and they just didn't really seem to fit my hiking style or my personality. But then I was proposed with my current trail name, *Heartbeat*, and I thought on it and I walked on it, and I was like, well that kind of describes my personality and my hiking style. So yeah, I'll take that trail name.

His explanation reveals both resistance to a name that didn't capture his personality or hiking style and his eventual acceptance of one that did. From that point forward, he introduced himself to other hikers as *Heartbeat*, thus establishing it as his trail name.

However, not all hikers were aware of their ability to reject suggested trail names when they began their hikes, and some accepted names that later proved problematic. Trail partners *Chef* (so named because she cooked with butter and spices) and *Little Debbie* (so named because of the copious amount of oatmeal cream pies he ate) both received their names within the first days of their journey, but later these names no longer fit. *Little Debbie* said he no longer ate the treat he was named for, while *Chef* explained, "Yeah, now I don't even cook. We just eat candy 99% of the day". The names that seemed appropriate based on early behaviors no longer aligned with the hikers' actual trail experiences, illustrating the risk of premature naming. These cases also illustrate the practical wisdom of the preferred tradition by showing that trail names emerging from sustained interaction can be more fitting than names given too early.

Other hikers, despite being aware of the preferred tradition, chose to self-name. While an acknowledged departure from the norm, they considered their self-naming a legitimate exercise of individual autonomy and identity creation (Adedotun et al. 2025; Heymann 2012) within the flexible normative structure of the AT social world. *Dancing Bear* admitted, "Well, this is a little bit of a no, no", and then noted his father had done the same thing, when he "decided to kind of go against tradition and picked his trail name". *Kenai* explained that such departures reflect HYOH individualism and are not seriously transgressive, stating, "Initially, I wanted to be given a trail name [. . .] But I just stopped caring about what things should be. Or like, I don't need to follow any standards out here". The flexibility of trail naming also extends to the possibility of changing one's name, though this appears to be relatively uncommon. *Thunder Thighs* provided the most dramatic example, cycling through four different names over the course of his hike (from *Hell Yeah*, to *Bumble Bee*, to *Medivac*, to *Thunder Thighs*), demonstrating that trail names can evolve as hikers' most salient characteristics shift or new memorable incidents occur.

Similarly, hikers may alter or augment their trail names by adding descriptors. In some cases, these additions provide additional connotative detail. For example, *Monster* became *Monster-Button* after a female hiker told him that he was "cute as a button" in front of his hiker friends. In other cases, additions help clarify a name's denotative function by distinguishing hikers who share the same trail name. For example, *Turbo*, a resident of Maine, became *Turbo Walking Home* after learning of another *Turbo* on the trail. Consistent with the emphasis on individual autonomy and the HYOH philosophy, hikers often take it upon themselves to modify their names when clarification is desired.

Bases of Trail Names

The bases of trail names among AT long-distance hikers vary, ranging from habitual behaviors and isolated incidents to physical appearance and personality traits. Analysis of 55 trail names whose origins were explained during the interviews revealed that 78.18% (n=43) stemmed from hiker behaviors (including those based on single incidents). Trail names less frequently arose from physical appearance, personality characteristics, things hikers said, physical conditions, and identity markers. Notably, many names reflected multiple factors, and their meanings sometimes evolved to include additional bases, demonstrating the flexible nature of trail names in the long-distance hiking social world. Because individual trail names often derived from multiple characteristics simultaneously, the percentages reported below sum to more than 100%.

The most common basis of trail names was habitual behaviors, reported by approximately 50.90% (n=28) of hikers. These names captured repeated behaviors that other hikers observed over time. For instance, *Truck Stop* received his name when fellow hikers observed a recurring pattern in his hiking pace and style. Other hikers told him, "Every time we see you, bro, you're trucking and then you stop". Daily routines and habits also generated trail names: *Stretch* received his name because "every morning I do a big stretching session", and *Early Bird* was named for being an early riser.

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Isolated events formed the basis for approximately 27.27% (n=15) of trail names, with several arising from unfortunate mishaps. For example, *Overshoot* received his trail name when he accidentally hiked over a mile past his intended campsite. *Bullseye* earned his trail name when running away from a charging bull, only to stumble into a mud puddle.

Personality traits were the basis for approximately 27.27% (n=15) of trail names. For instance, *Reason* picked up his trail name when a fellow hiker observed that “you seem to be the voice of reason” and “you only seem to talk when you have a reason to talk”. *Gruffalo* became known as such for being characteristically grumpy, and *Sunshine* became identified by her outgoing and optimistic disposition.

A distinct category emerged for trail names based on behaviors involving hiking gear or other carried items, with significance laying not merely with the carried items but in how the hikers used them. Approximately 16.36% (n=9) of names reflected this combination of behaviors and possessions. For instance, *Old School* became so known for her use of paper maps instead of a navigation app, representing both a possession and a behavioral choice. *Gandalf* received his name for carrying a large wooden hiking stick reminiscent of the wizard’s staff from *The Lord of the Rings*. Pure possession-based names that were not hiking-related accounted for approximately 9.09% (n=5) of trail names. For instance, *Lightsaber* earned his name by carrying a toy plastic lightsaber, and *Adventurine* named herself after a crystal, gifted to her by her wife, that she was carrying.

Physical appearance, focused on visible characteristics such as hair, body features, or resemblance to well-known characters, served as the basis for 10.90% (n=6) of trail names. For instance, *Curly* picked up her name because of her curly hair, while *Duck Tales*, in addition to carrying a rubber ducky and telling stories, had hair that looked like “duck tails poking out”. *Pebbles* received her name because of her resemblance to the *Flintstones* character.

Things hikers repeatedly said formed the basis for approximately 5.45% (n=3) of trail names. For instance, *Close Enough* explained, “I say that a lot when somebody says something about ‘you could pull this cord and get the pitch of your tent just right.’ After a 15-mile day, it’s close enough”. These names captured linguistic habits associated with particular individuals.

Another small percentage of trail names, 5.45% (n=3), derived from physical conditions. For instance, *Alpha Gal* received his name because he has the alpha-gal syndrome transmitted by the Lone Star tick, while *Woozy* got her trail name after fainting multiple times while hiking. Only one trail name (1.81%) derived primarily from the hiker’s relationship with another hiker. In this case, *Her Dad* received his name because he was hiking with his daughter.

Functions of Trail Names

Trail names served multiple functions for AT long-distance hikers. The most frequently mentioned function involved their role in creating and maintaining connections with other hikers and the long-distance hiking social world overall. Many hikers explicitly connected having a trail name with feeling accepted by other hikers on the trail. For instance, *Broadway* noted that a trail name “gives you a sense of camaraderie with the people you meet on trail”. *Tipsy Gypsy* said, “when they started calling me *Tipsy Gypsy*, it hit a special spot”, a meaningfulness which she attributed to “that community of everybody [. . .]. They’re so caring and so kind and helpful”. Trail names also directly facilitated social interaction, acting as an icebreaker. As *Bullseye* said, trail names are “a technology that cultivates quick conversation between strangers in a way that I think benefits the trail culture, and it’s a good, quick way to get interesting stories out of people and break the ice”.

Just as trail names facilitated social interaction and bonds between hikers, they also reduced anxiety for some hikers who worried that they would not fit in. Multiple hikers expressed relief upon receiving a trail name, not because the name itself held particular significance, but because it signaled their acceptance into the trail culture. *Old School* articulated this clearly, saying, “I felt a lot better after I got the trail name. When I came out here, I was kind of wondering if I’d be able to have one, so it was a relief to get one so quickly”. *Boulder* similarly described this resolved uncertainty, saying, “At first, I was given the name and I said, ‘great, now I don’t have to worry about getting a name.’”

A frequently mentioned and practical function of trail names involved their memorability compared to given names. As *Metro* observed, “I think they’re easier to remember because names as a whole are pretty generic. John and Jeff. Which Jeff? Which John? If you say, ‘the Wizard of Ghee’ or something crazy like that, you, ‘oh, I know exactly who that guy is.’”

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In terms of personal identification, trail names functioned as vehicles for many hikers to disconnect from their off-trail identities. For instance, *Hound Dog* explained, “getting the trail name on trail was important, because it didn’t matter what I was doing before trail. All that mattered was what was happening on trail. Everything was new and there was no prior strings attached. So, I really liked that”. *Hound Dog*’s quote captures the sense of liberation from previous biographical constraints that trail names can provide.

Spoonman went further by linking his trail name not only to disconnection from pre-trail life but also to his development of a new identity, saying, “You’re not tied to the identity that comes with your [given] name. You’re really able to leave the shit from home behind and be who you want to be out here”. Similarly, *Ace* reflected on the transformative possibilities associated with trail names, saying, “You get to choose who you are on trail, and you get to choose your trail name as a representation of who you are”.

Expressions of agency and creativity often accompanied this transformative function, with trail names pointing to a hiker’s freedom and choice in who they might become on the trail. For instance, *Nobody* experienced his name as a continuous reminder of his goal of identity rediscovery, saying, “You begin to call yourself that. It becomes part of your identity. And for me, I knew that starting out I already had my goal of rediscovering myself. And so it just keeps me on goal; keeps me on target”.

Other hikers found aspirational meaning in their trail names, suggesting their function as ongoing prompts for desired ways of being. *Sunshine* appreciated how her name created positive reinforcement, saying, “it makes me want to keep being encouraging and peppy and keep the pep in my step”. Similarly, *Giver* stated, “I think [my trail name]’s a good reminder to try and be more focused on giving to other people”.

Trail names also provided anonymity, making it more difficult for strangers to access information about hikers’ off-trail lives. This protective function created distance between trail and home identities that a few hikers, particularly women, valued for safety reasons. *Broadway* articulated this safety benefit by saying, “it does feel a little bit safer as a woman. People out here don’t know my first or last name. If there was someone weird, they couldn’t find out any information about my real life, which is pretty cool”.

While most hikers attributed substantial meaning to their trail names, a few were indifferent or even actively resistant. For instance, *Reason* stated with respect to his trail name that, “It’s no big deal to me. I can leave it. It’s part of the culture of the trail, so it’s like, okay, fine. I don’t need a trail name. It doesn’t matter to me”. Even more dismissive was *Channing*, who, when asked what his trail name meant to him, said, “absolutely nothing [. . .]. I think people attach a bunch of meaning to a bunch of shit that’s not real”. *Her Dad*, whose name pragmatically signaled his relationship to his daughter, didn’t like trail names generally, saying, “I think it’s weird the trail names. I mean, why can’t you just introduce yourself? Who are you trying to hide from?” His questions challenged the premises underlying trail naming, suggesting that he viewed the practice with suspicion. This variation in perceived meaning reveals that even though trail names are nearly universal among AT long-distance hikers, experiences of this practice vary considerably.

Discussion

While the norms, bases, and functions of trail naming practices among AT long-distance hikers are not entirely unique, they differ in important ways from typical nicknaming practices documented in current literature. For one, the long-distance hiking social world on the AT exemplifies what De Pina-Cabral (1984) terms a consensual model of social organization, which is uncommon. Most nicknaming studies examine hierarchical settings such as prisons (Black et al. 2014; Jackson 1967), coal mines (Skipper 1986), or Spanish villages (Gilmore 1982; Brandes 1975), where nicknames function as instruments of social control or verbal aggression. In the present case, trail names function to increase memorability, facilitate identity exploration and construction, and reinforce belonging within a voluntary and relatively egalitarian social world.

The AT long-distance hiking social world also adheres to the HYOH philosophy, which permits hikers to accept, reject, modify, or self-select names. Although a preferred tradition exists in which hikers give other hikers their trail names after shared experience, it is a very loosely held norm. The AT case demonstrates that informal naming can flourish where power is relatively evenly distributed and where the named retain meaningful agency, including the ability to self-name, thus exemplifying Adams’s (2009) concept of “naming contracts” negotiation and Heymann’s (2012) explanation of creativity and self-authorship.

One of the most notable findings concerns the function of trail names in reducing anxiety. While some AT hikers expressed relief upon receiving a trail name, individuals in other contexts feared receiving nicknames because of their derogatory nature and the inability to deny or alter them. Of course, sometimes people like their pejorative nicknames as in the case of the coal miners mentioned previously (Skipper 1986). In addition, Harré (1980) observes that school children would rather have a negative nickname than experience

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the social invisibility of not being named. In general, it seems that in agonistic social contexts, nicknames may resolve anxiety about exclusion through potentially humiliating visibility, whereas in consensual social contexts, nicknames may resolve anxiety by signaling inclusion without degradation. This contrast underscores the link between the emotional consequences of nicknaming and social structure.

In addition, the bases of trail names validate and extend Holland's (1990a) continuum framework, in which behavior- and personality-based nicknames frequently overlap. The present findings suggest that such overlap may extend beyond those two dimensions, as some trail names, such as *Duck Tales*, combine personality traits, behaviors, physical appearance, and even possessions into a single name. Rather than falling along a simple continuum, more sophisticated trail names operate as multidimensional composites that combine several salient characteristics at once. This suggests that nickname bases may be more layered and integrative than previously thought.

Trail names also serve compelling identity-related functions. Several hikers specifically attributed the emergence of a new trail persona to their having a trail name. This demonstrates Emmelhainz's (2012) concept of "identity elasticity", particularly during liminal experiences such as a long-distance hike. Some hikers also described how trail names facilitated a corresponding disconnection from their previous identity, which is a critical, if underappreciated, precursor to identity elasticity itself.

Finally, the substantial variation in how hikers experienced trail names is significant. Even within a subculture where trail names are nearly universal, individuals interpreted and engaged with the practice quite differently. Consistent with the HYOH philosophy, some hikers embraced their trail names as transformative, while others critiqued the custom. This suggests that different perspectives on nicknaming are not a barrier to high social solidarity in consensual communities.

Conclusion

The present findings highlight the importance of the normative structure in shaping naming contracts, as well as the identity outcomes associated with nicknaming. By ethnographically examining norms, bases, and functions, we have shown how the AT context produces nicknaming dynamics that differ from patterns frequently documented in more agonistic, hierarchical settings. In voluntary, consensual settings, such as the AT, the named can express significant agency in the nicknaming process, naming can replace anxiety with belonging, and nicknames develop from multidimensional composites that are conducive to positive identity transformations. Future research should continue examining nicknaming across varied social contexts, particularly with attention to how power and agency shape naming norms, bases, and functions. Comparative studies exploring informal naming in other contemporary settings characterized by identity exploration, such as online gaming communities or LGBTQIA+ subcultures, would further clarify the relationship between naming, power, and agency.

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