YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES AND NETWORKED SPACES IN UK RESIDENTIAL OUTDOOR EDUCATION

Research Report

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Dr Jack Reed is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Exeter. His research has focussed on how young people's online cultures in the United Kingdom inform and shape interactions with the natural world. Jack's PhD research worked in collaboration with The Outward Bound Trust to assess how mobile technologies and networked spaces such as TikTok, Netflix and Minecraft informed young people's residential outdoor education experiences.

THE OUTWARD BOUND TRUST

Outward Bound was founded in 1941 and is dedicated to providing transformative outdoor experiences for individuals of all ages and backgrounds in the United Kingdom. With six residential centres across England, Scotland and Wales, Outward Bound provides young people with challenging residential outdoor programmes aimed at fostering leadership skills, resilience, self-confidence and nature connection. Over 25,000 young people visit an Outward Bound centre annually.

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PHOTOGRAPHY

Photographs have been provided by The Outward Bound Trust with all necessary permissions. None of the participants pictured featured in the research. Quotes are not attributable to those pictured.

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SECTION ONE

Overview

Young people's day-to-day interactions and experiences are increasingly characterised by their mobile technologies and uses of social media. It has been suggested that young people's leisure and play are entangled with their in-person interactions. With outdoor learning featuring across curricula in England, Scotland and Wales, this investigation into young people's mobile technologies and networked spaces (e.g. gaming, social media, streaming services) in residential outdoor adventurous education settings holds particular relevance. This is especially so given the pervasiveness of mobile technologies and online platforms in young people's lives, and the potential implications they bear on the educational experiences of young people. The primary aim of this research was, therefore, to explore the role and impact of young people's technological entanglements on their experiences of residential outdoor adventurous education at Outward Bound centres in England, Scotland and Wales.

Historically, the approach toward technology in outdoor education has been to remove young people's mobile technologies in favour of technology-free interactions with others and the outdoors. Such a perspective is often linked to a romantic assessment of human experiences in nature and that a pre-digital life provides an escape from the fast-paced and always-on nature of our online spaces. To explore whether these traditional perspectives featured in contemporary practice, a series of interviews were conducted with Outward Bound instructors. Findings demonstrated a distinct "technology free" culture in practice, with instructors often preferring that young people do not bring their phones with them to the residential environment. The interview findings are presented in section two and focus on narratives of not having a phone policy at Outward Bound, young people's online engagements as "fake", Outward Bound as a technological detox and phones providing young people with a form of portable comfort zone.

The researcher then spent 15 days across three of Outward Bound's residential centres. These were Loch Eil in the Scottish Highlands, Ullswater in the English Lake District National Park and Aberdovey in the Welsh Eryri National Park. Across the centres, young people participated in focus groups and observations, as well as in a full five-day Outward Bound programme that included activities such as canoeing, rock climbing and expeditions. The ways in which mobile technologies and social media intersected with young people's Outward Bound experiences were twofold:

1. When phones were removed, young people expressed worry about not being able to contact home. At times, this resulted in distraction from the Outward Bound learning environment.
2. When interacting with nature, young people often related to the environment through the lens of what they had seen and engaged with in online spaces. These spaces included TikTok, Minecraft and Netflix.

In relation to the worry young people expressed at not being able to contact home, this was an unexpected finding given empirical data have demonstrated that young people often use social media platforms to escape the gaze of adults. This study's findings demonstrate that young people's experiences of residential outdoor adventurous education settings were negatively affected by not being able to contact home, which also affected participation and immersion in the natural environment. This generates an important tension in outdoor education practice, as the relations between young people contacting home and the development and effectiveness of learning outcomes are yet to be sufficiently understood.

When interacting with nature at Outward Bound, young people often related their in-person experiences back to their online environments. This meant that sometimes young people's interpretation of nature was that "this is just like Netflix". Such a finding draws to attention how young people construct understandings of what nature "is" and the mediating role online spaces can have in framing residential outdoor adventurous education. Given nature connection is often an important part of an Outward Bound week, alternative approaches could be required to ensure that young people's experiences in these settings enable them to reflect on how their online engagements relate to their in-person interactions. Doing so may enhance the transfer of learning from residential environments to young people's day-to-day lives once back home.

This report ends with a series of recommendations for policy makers, instructors and other relevant stakeholders. These recommendations aim to further enhance the purpose and scope of residential outdoor adventurous education so that young people's experiences in these environments can continue to have a significant and lasting impact in our increasingly digital world ▲

SECTION TWO

The perspectives of instructors

20 Outward Bound instructors were interviewed across the Loch Eil, Ullswater and Aberdovey centres. These interviews explored how and/or whether instructors used technologies in their practice, as well as their perspectives on young people having access to their mobile technologies whilst at Outward Bound. Findings were clustered around the following themes:

1. No policies on young people's mobile phone use were in place. Young people's engagements with social media are considered "fake".
2. Outward Bound programmes provide a technological detox for young people.
3. Phones provide young people with a form of comfort zone at Outward Bound that can distract from learning outcomes and presence.

This section briefly describes each of the findings and draws on instructor quotes to provide examples of instructor perspectives[1].

NO POLICIES ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOBILE PHONE USE WERE IN PLACE

Instructors often described a degree of ambiguity in decision making around whether mobile technologies should or should not be present in practice, with 19 of the 20 instructors citing a lack of phone policy at Outward Bound to be a primary issue. For instance, Alan described how "the decision about whether to let them take phones rests with the school, it rests with the visiting members of staff". This was echoed across the cases with Anne suggesting "there's no firm policy at Outward Bound to take phones off or not take phones off". For Euan, he explained that "there's a bit of relief when schools blanket say 'no phones!' because it's out of my hands. I don't have to worry about the decision making". Instructors often placed onus on individual schools to make the decision on what to do with phones during an Outward Bound residential.

With a lack of Outward Bound led policy on what to do with phones, and this often placed within the remit of schools, instructors expressed relief at having this decision taken away from them,

especially when schools decided there would be no phones. For instance, Holly suggested that when schools "have decided they're not going to have their phones during the day, during activity time they get locked away and that, for me, it makes it a lot easier". Helen also discussed phone management at Outward Bound as "very much a teacher's job, like, 'I'm not getting your phone out, that's not my job, I'm not here to give you your phone'". In essence, not needing to manage phone use by young people was positioned as important and allows an instructor to focus on delivering their programme.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENTS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA ARE CONSIDERED "FAKE"

Whilst instructors often hoped visiting schools would take the lead on what was going to happen with young people's phones, they also shared insight into their perspectives on young people's phone and social media use. Throughout the interviews, instructors often positioned young people's engagements with online environments as fake, and that Outward Bound programmes reconnect them to "real life". For instance, Oliver suggested that person-to-person communication on social media "takes away that connection, that proper connection between a human being and a human being, you know, you're doing it through a piece of technology". Charles acknowledged this, suggesting that "maybe it is their real world, but it's not, you know, it's only a real world when it's between you and the screen" and Lauren suggested "it [social media] is not true, and it is not real, it is digital … it is a false connection".

> *Person-to-person communication on social media "takes away that connection, that proper connection between a human being and a human being, you know, you're doing it through a piece of technology"*

With young people's social media engagement described as "false" or "unreal", instructors described the power of an Outward Bound programme to be dependent on physical proximity and engagement with others. For Lauren, phone-free Outward Bound "means they [young people] can build a connection with the actual people on the course". Meanwhile, Liam described Outward Bound courses as something "you can't explain" and that, whilst "you can see one or two sentences from the phone … actually being there, you get so much more". In essence, screen-based engagement was considered to restrict the strength of connection to the Outward Bound environment. Anne summarised this by describing in-person, phone-free, Outward Bound as "more impactful, because you're showing them that they can exist without their phones".

OUTWARD BOUND PROGRAMMES PROVIDE A TECHNOLOGICAL DETOX FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Alongside positioning Outward Bound as uniquely placed to return young people to a "real" world, instructors often described courses as offering a detox for young people away from their phones. This was often foregrounded by discussions surrounding young people's addiction to mobile technologies and excessive screen time. For instance, Helen described Outward Bound courses as "almost like a bit of rehab away from your phone" and that "I just think, it's [Outward Bound courses] just a detox,

get rid of it". This was reflected by Charles who described removing phones from young people at Outward Bound as being "almost like a heroin addict with that withdrawal from it". For Louise, she thought that young people enjoy withdrawing from always-on online environments during their Outward Bound course and that "most of them really quite appreciate, you know, that sort of detox, I suppose". Most instructors considered young people's detoxing from their phones at Outward Bound to be a positive experience and a form of informal learning outcome.

PHONES PROVIDE YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A FORM OF COMFORT ZONE AT OUTWARD BOUND THAT CAN DISTRACT FROM LEARNING OUTCOMES AND PRESENCE

Instructors often recognised the presence of young people's phones during an Outward Bound course to provide them with a form of comfort zone. These forms of comfort zone were recognised to restrict the development of learning outcomes and, through contact with the outside world (e.g. parents), distract from immersion in the Outward Bound process. For Immy, she noted how young people's mobile technologies restrict learning as "they still get that sort of comfort from just even having it in their hand and holding it. Some of them have had it in their hands and they have not used it to do anything, but they're just using it for comfort, like having a blanket with you". As Callum described in relation to encouraging young people to exercise resilience at Outward Bound, "my immediate thought is that your phone would give you a way out of that". It was through narratives of resilience and confidence that instructors often criticised the ways in which a phone at Outward Bound could give young people "an easy way out" of challenging situations.

Greg picked up on this, suggesting phones are "just that umbilical cord of support. Without it being cut, you just feel that 'I can just call them [parents], I can just be taken back to my nice safe place, I don't have

> *maybe it is their real world, but it's not, you know, it's only a real world when it's between you and the screen*

to fully engage'". Interestingly, instructor perspectives often overlooked the possibility that mobile technologies could help young people feel less anxious. Instead, the presence of a phone on an Outward Bound programme was thought to potentially restrict a young person's ability to immerse themselves in the residential experience by offering access to a comfortable space. That said, a couple of instructors did recognise the possible benefits of a portable comfort zone, with Charles suggesting that "some people are so full up on their comfort cup just by being here, that just putting on a new pair of boots might be enough to tip them over the edge. So, when you say 'you can't have your phone anymore,' that might just be the bit that makes them go, 'well, I'm out of here'".

SUMMARY

The absence of clear policies regarding young people's mobile phone usage at Outward Bound was a significant concern among instructors, who often deferred the decision-making responsibility to visiting schools. Many instructors expressed relief when schools enforced a no-phone policy during an Outward Bound programme, as it simplified their role and placed responsibility in the hands of visiting staff members (e.g. teachers). Instructors commonly viewed young people's engagement with social media as artificial, emphasising the importance of reconnecting them with real-life interactions during a programme. Instructors therefore recognised Outward Bound programmes as having a series of informal affects that extend beyond formalised learning outcomes. These affects centred on reconnecting young people to a pre-digital life devoid of distraction.

In this sense, Outward Bound courses were also portrayed as providing a detox from technology for young people, with instructors positioning their work as positively affecting young people's addictions to their phones. The presence of phones during courses were therefore recognised as a comfort zone for participants, potentially hindering their engagement and immersion in the experience. If a young person sought reassurance or security from people (e.g. parents) through using a phone when at Outward Bound, instructors adopted a critical stance, suggesting that this form of contact compromised Outward Bound's learning outcomes. That said, some instructors acknowledged the benefits of phones as a source of comfort, highlighting the potential for phone use during a programme to provide levels of comfort that may enhance participation ▲

SECTION THREE

Young people, networked spaces and residential outdoor education

50 young people participated in observations and focus groups across the three Outward Bound centres. These young people were from metropolitan areas in London, North-Eastern England and Edinburgh, with their schools being in areas of multiple deprivation. Young people visited their respective Outward Bound centre for five days, where the researcher actively participated alongside them as they engaged in activities such as canoeing, rock climbing and expeditions. For all schools, their phone-management protocol at Outward Bound was that young people could have their phones at the centre, but that they were not to come on activity. Young people were told that bringing phones on activity risked breakage and that their phones were not insured in these environments. Findings centre on two key areas, they are:

1. When phones were removed, young people expressed worry about not being able to contact home. Young people had high-level connectivity expectations in these rural Outward Bound environments.

2. When interacting with nature, young people often related to the environment through the lens of what they had seen and engaged with in online spaces. These technologically-mediated nature engagements often shaped young people's Outward Bound experiences.
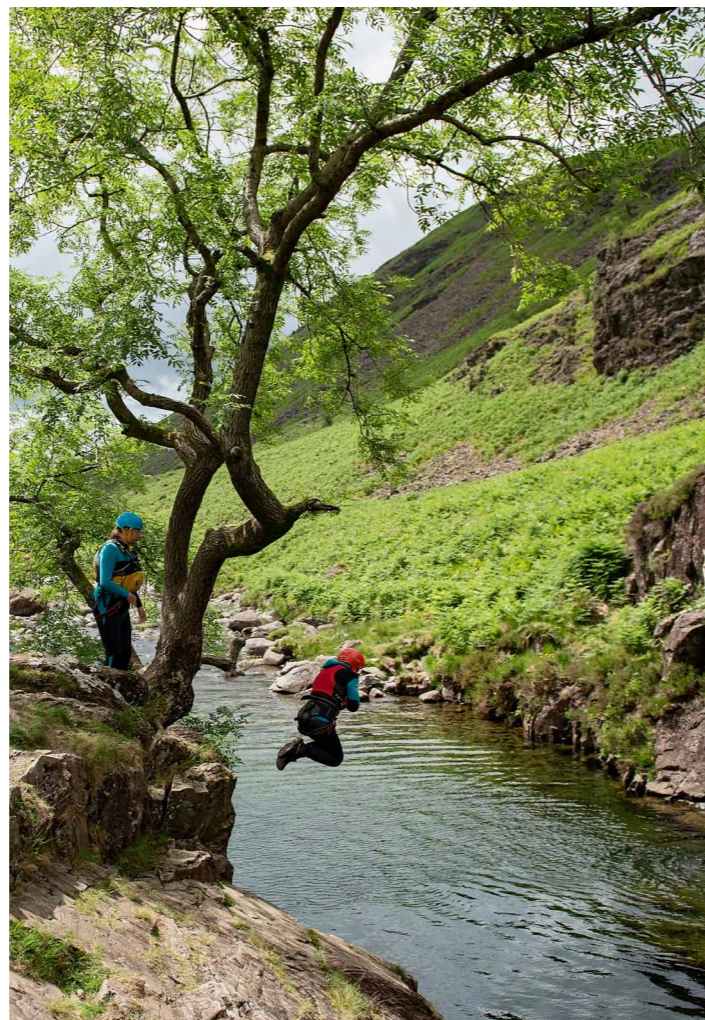
These themes provide somewhat of a challenge to the instructor interview findings. Collectively, the study's outcomes provide outdoor education instructors, managers and policy makers with initial evidence on the relationships between networked environments, contemporary youth cultures and residential outdoor learning spaces.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S NORMALISED CONNECTIVITY EXPECTATIONS AT OUTWARD BOUND

It was clear that engagement with phones for the purposes of remaining connected beyond Outward Bound was expected by young people throughout their visit. From the very moment they arrived at each centre, study participants very often had their phones in their hands and attempted to find signal within the centre grounds. Young people took searching for signal seriously, something I followed up on in the focus groups. As one group told me:

> " *"The perfect signal is for whoever is closest to the window. Umm, one of the windows, when you're there, the signal is amazing, the other windows are just rubbish, or anywhere else in the dorm"* (Izzy)

> *"We've had to share!"* (Katherine)

> *"Well, for me, it was on and off. Sometimes you could get signal near the windows or outside. It was better to use it there because you've got more signal outside than inside"* (Kayleigh) "

The quest for signal and to always be connected was also discussed by Charlene who explained how she had used her phone "everywhere! I even took it in the shower, no joke".

Whilst young people readily searched for signal at each centre, young people also broke rules imposed by each school in relation to not taking their phones out on activities. This became evident on the first day I spent with one of the groups when climbing a local hill (the following extracts are re-storied narratives from fieldwork):

I have a chat with Jordan on the climb up the hill. "Are you hoping to use your phone this week, then?" I ask. "Yeah! I've already downloaded some mods, but it took ages on the Wi-Fi". Jordan then pulls out his phone, he's had it in his pocket the whole time. He presses the "on" button, "oh, I have full signal" he tells me with a hint of excitement, and proceeds to download more mods with his "great 4G". The instructor sees this moment and calls Jordan over, "why are you looking down at that and not up at this?", indicating to the expansive views all around us. Jordan responds casually "oh, this is just much more fun". Jordan continues playing on his phone most of the way up the hill. For Jordan, it seemed that the landscape and place we are in is not important, the most important aspect of this experience is the prevalence of 4G.

Throughout the findings, the covert practices young people engaged in to keep their phones on their person when told to hand them in or leave them in their rooms was evident. In one example, this occurred during an evening campfire activity where young people were told to leave their phones in their room:

We collect wood from the nearby forest in preparation for our campfire activity. I notice that two phones have been hidden behind a bench leg, they've certainly been placed in a manner that obscures them from view. Once the fire is lit, the group relax and, before I know it, participants produce their phones and start using Snapchat and Instagram; the group are busy updating their visual-based social media with images of the fire. One of the instructors walks around the back of the benches and says, "can we not look down there and look up here?". This isn't met with young people putting their phones down, and

the instructor remains quiet. The other instructor now chimes in, "ok everyone, next activity, we are all going to throw our phones on the fire!". Some of the group appear to take this literally, "I'm not throwing mine on the fire!", one young person responds in a slightly panicked tone.

It became clear across the centres that young people were bringing the typical ways they use their phones in the home environment to Outward Bound. When phone use was purposefully restricted by adults, young people would often hide their phones and seek to use them in a hidden manner.

SPEAKING WITH HOME: STRESS AND WORRY WHEN PARENTS CANNOT BE CONTACTED

Across each week of data generation, young people often attempted to speak with home, and the adverse reactions that developed when they were unable to do so became a central finding for the study. Young people placed significant emphasis on being able to speak with a parent whilst at Outward Bound. For example, Rachel described the importance of being able to speak with her parents, suggesting "I'd feel lost without them, if I didn't have contact I wouldn't be as confident as I was". Beth also described parental contact as a factor that provided comfort, explaining that "I've never been away from my Mum and Dad, I've never been away for this long. I wouldn't have stayed if I couldn't speak to them". Beth expanded on her point and said how without parental contact "I wouldn't survive … I can't live without my phone. I just have to have it there".

The above examples indicate the importance young people placed on speaking with home. However, young people's ability to make contact was not always possible if signal was poor, the Wi-Fi was switched off or phones were removed by an adult. In his focus group, Ryan spoke about his lack of signal and how he found being unable to speak with home "terrible, that's all I have to say [sad tone]. When we

first got here, I was really miserable the whole day". In a different focus group, Ellie explained in relation to the lack of connectivity that "it's just anger, I get really angry. You can get good signal, but then if you move only slightly it'll just go off and you'll be in the middle of a conversation". Blake echoed this anger, saying that "I'm pretty mad, because I can't talk to any of my mates or any of my family".

One young person who was particularly upset when unable to contact his parents was Olly. Over dinner on day three, the researcher chatted with Ryan and Olly about whether they had made contact with home, the following excerpt documents the conversation:

"I haven't got any signal. I think I'll just have to wait until Friday now. I've searched everywhere, but I just can't get enough," Ryan explains. Olly joins in, he appears very anxious about not being able to call home. "I tried ringing my Dad, but I couldn't get through. I spoke to him for five seconds, but the line went dead. I rang five or six times, and he rang me too, but each time I couldn't hear him". "And how did that make you feel?" the researcher asks. "I was really angry, I couldn't believe it, I punched my bed!". "Yeah, he did!" Ryan says and appears very concerned. Olly continues, "I just want to be able to speak to my Dad, it just makes me feel so much better. I can't wait to go home just so that I can speak with him". The group continue eating and the conversation changes to focus on what the evening activity will be.

Meanwhile, in another focus group, Alaina said in hushed tones that "I miss them [parents] because I won't get my pocket money, and I also wanted to speak to my parents because I was crying the other day … I'm really looking forward to speaking to my Mum and Dad".

Whilst young people wanted to keep in touch with parents, and expressed anger and upset when unable to do so, it was also clear that parents were

placing pressure on young people to make contact with them. As Daisha explained in one of the focus groups, "when I was leaving to come here, they [parents] told me 'ok, you have to go on your phone to message us'". The pressure felt by young people to maintain contact also materialised at the end of the expeditionary component at one of the centres. The young people were challenged to not take their phones on expedition as part of the "living in the wild" experience. However, following a later than expected arrival back at the centre, young people's sense of pressure and desire to speak with parents emerged:

After a short while, Tim approaches the visiting staff member, we have been back at the centre for around five minutes. "Can I have my phone back now?" Tim asks very politely, but there's certainly a little bit of nervousness coming through in his voice. "We'll talk about phones in a bit", the visiting staff member responds. The visiting staff member then announces to the group, "we've had lots of parents emailing the school and emailing me saying that they haven't had any contact from you for over 24 hours, when you get your phones can you please ring your parents and tell them you are in the land of the living?". A short while later, the group are still unpacking, and Natalie approaches the instructor. "Can I have my phone back now?". Again, there is a real sense of nervousness here. "How about we give you them back at 5:00pm?", 5:00pm is 35 minutes from now. Natalie looks quite deflated and returns to her bag.

At 5pm the group head back to the main house at the centre and wait to retrieve their phones:

The group have been waiting to get their phones at the front of the main house for 10 minutes now, there is a growing sense of frustration. They decide to go into the centre and, just as they are going in, one of the other visiting staff members comes around the corner. In their arms is a big box, this is the "phone box". The young people who have already gone through the front door turn around and, with great speed, sprint across the driveway to the visiting staff member. Ajeet, who has been getting increasingly agitated over the last few minutes, shouts quite loudly as he is running across the driveway "OMG, my mum is going to kill me! She's going to be so worried". During this time of intensity, Ikaj grabs his phone with force and immediately rings home, he is emotional and requires the support of others who walk him down the driveway with their arms around him.
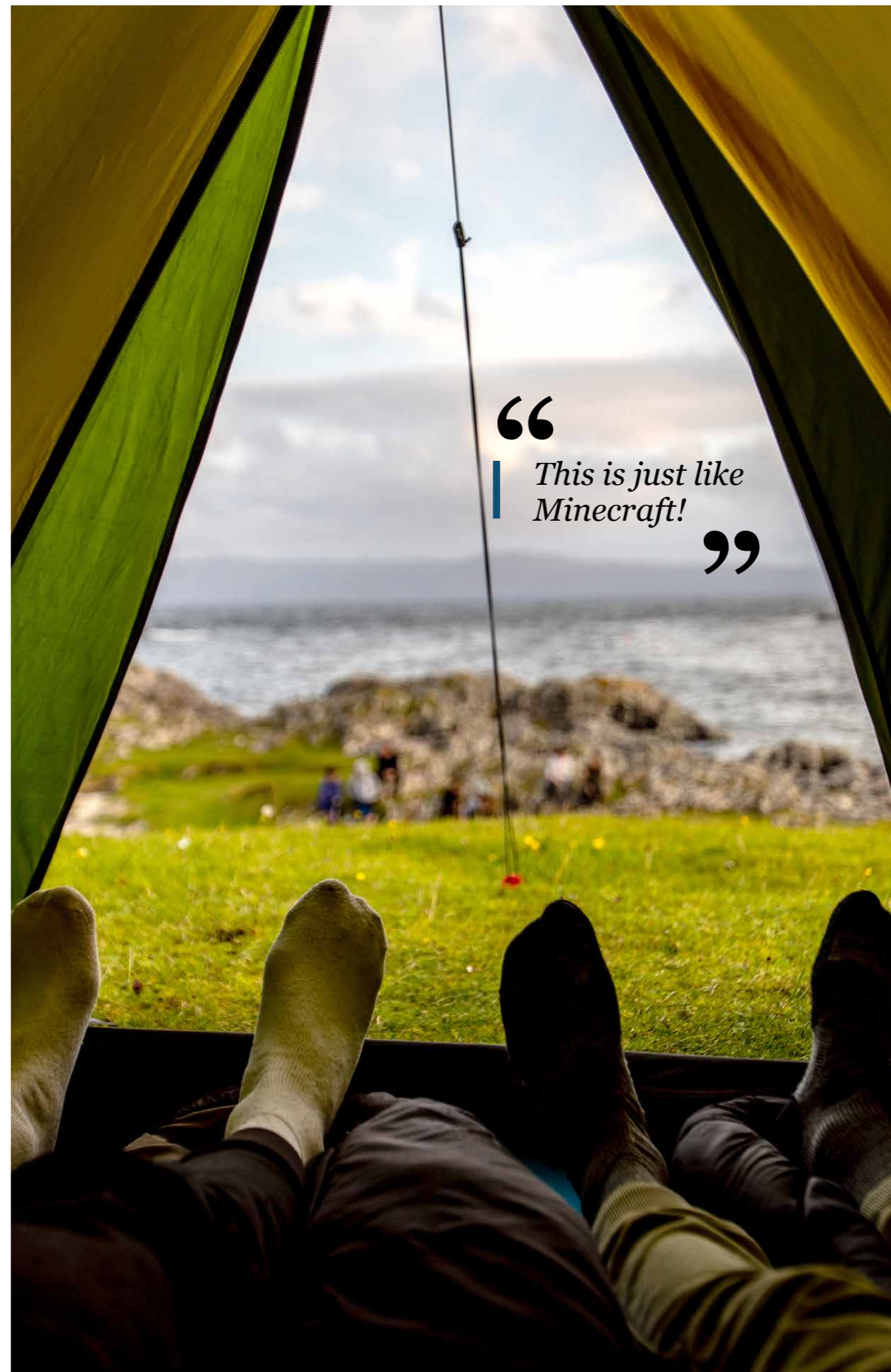
" *This is just like Minecraft!* "

This example demonstrates one of the ways in which phone-free time can provide a significant level of disruption if the unexpected happens such as arriving back at the centre later than anticipated. These findings also provide a counter-narrative to the instructor findings, where contact with home was often described as one of the worst aspects that comes from young people having access to their mobile devices. What became clear is that contact with parents was significantly important for young people, and that a lack of connectivity sometimes detrimentally affected their Outward Bound experiences and wellbeing. Conversations with young people around this topic elicited deep-rooted emotional responses that centred on worry and anger.

ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS FOREGROUNDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S INTERACTIONS WITH NATURE AND THE BROADER OUTWARD BOUND ENVIRONMENT

Throughout each week of data generation, the ways in which virtual environments such as Minecraft and TikTok framed how young people engaged with nature was identified as a recurring and prevalent theme. These moments, where young people's interpretations or engagements with nature were filtered through online spaces, occurred regardless of whether mobile technologies were present or not. One space where this was prevalent across all centres was during campfire activities, a staple of any given Outward Bound week where young people often pause to reflect on their learning journey. For instance, at one centre, young people related their fire-starting experience back to Minecraft:

The group walk up into the forest and head for a parachute that is suspended in the trees. Below the parachute is a fire pit and the sun shines through the trees in such a way that the forest floor is bathed in light and shadow. The group are given a flint fire starter, some cotton wool and a small jug in which to try and start their own fire and the group are really engaged with this activity. "This is just like Minecraft! OMG this is way harder!".

This comes from Emma, who is trying her best to light a successful fire. "I'm good at this on Minecraft, if I only had some Netherrack, that's what I need". "Yeah, I can't get mine to work at all" James replies. The group begin discussing techniques, wondering how a Minecraft Fire Charge might aid their fire-starting endeavours. "Do you all like Minecraft, then?", the instructor chimes in. Marcus responds, "yeah! It's educational. You can light fires, I know all about Oak and Birch trees, and I've spent so much time exploring caves and cliffs. This fire is way harder to light though".

This type of example could be traced throughout the findings. Alongside fire-based activities, young people also related the flora and fauna they were seeing and engaging with at Outward Bound back to their previous uses of Minecraft. Young people had a significant "networked baseline" that informed how they understood, interpreted and engaged with Outward Bound activities.

Meanwhile, the impact of TikTok videos in framing young people's networked baselines featured significantly. Each week, certain aspects of a given activity would be mediated by content that had been engaged with on this social media platform, and offered an alternative lens through which to understand the Outward Bound space. One such example came from a rock climbing activity:

The group hurriedly get their harnesses on and checked. It's a little warmer today and the sun is trying to poke through, it's a lovely morning for a climb. The narrow track to the crag is slightly uphill and there's a sharp left bend to navigate before the group can climb. The track has lots of ferns nearby. As the group arrive at the crag, Emma calls out to others, "ohh, we could do a fern tattoo like on TikTok!". There is general excitement at this, and the researcher asks what they mean by "nature tattoos". The group describe a man on TikTok who does nature tattoos, which is where you press a nature-based object, such as a fern, against your skin for an extended period and it leaves a semi-permanent imprint. The instructor decides to break off a small bit of fern and Naomi gives it a go and has a little bit of success. She presses the fern hard against the back of her hand and the outline of a fern is present when she removes it. This serves as further encouragement for the group. "Look at that! I'm going to try and do this back home" Oliver calls out after also having some success. The instructor is rapidly becoming quite unimpressed with this, the group are not engaged in rock climbing at all, and it is TikTok-based nature tattooing that appears to have become the dominant activity so far.

Alongside virtual spaces such as Minecraft and TikTok providing a form of networked lens through which young people viewed and understood their
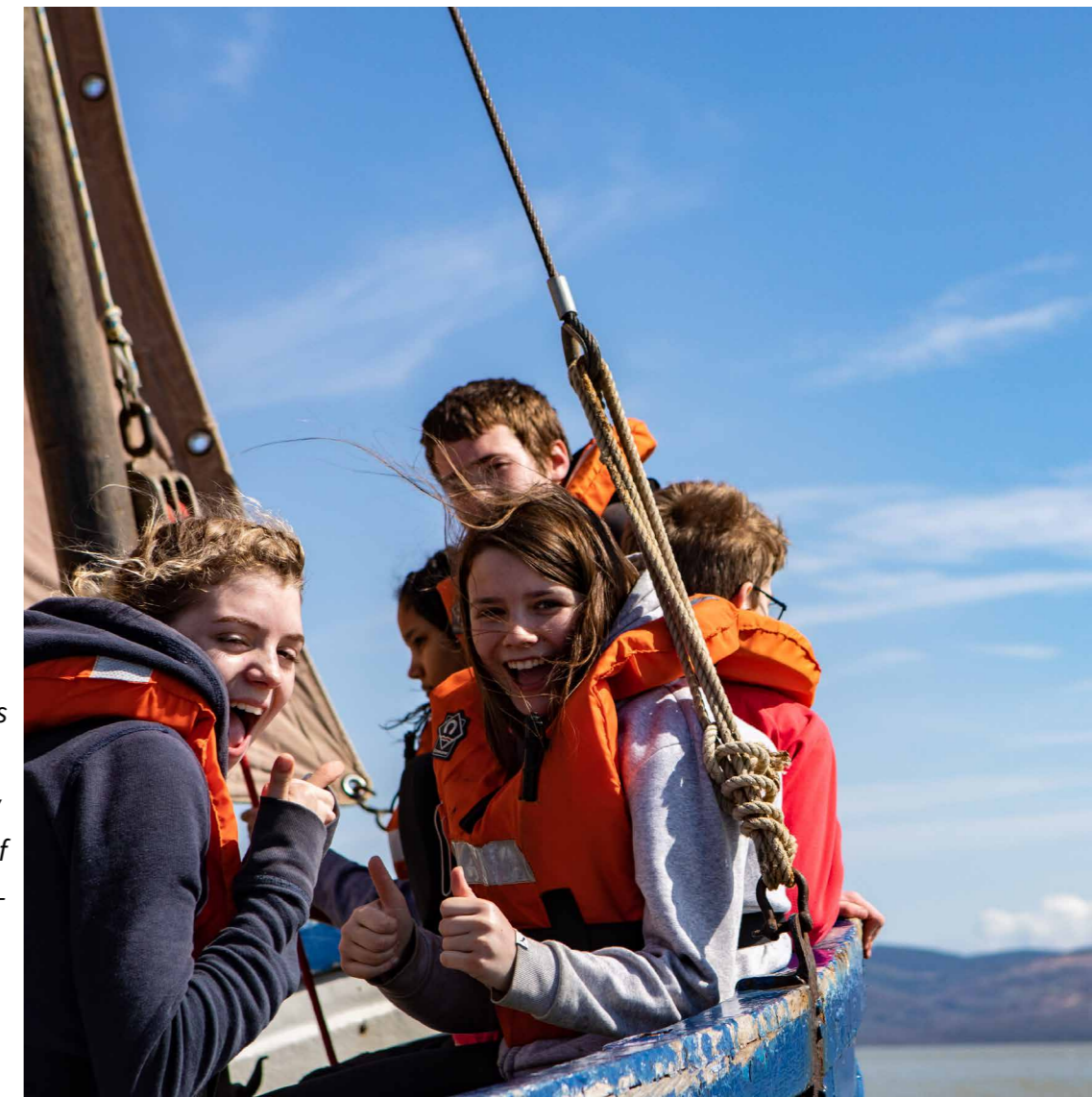

Outward Bound experience, Video-On-Demand services also featured within this theme, especially during one of the expeditions. The group were out on a one-night trip with the intention to camp just below the summit of a nearby mountain and to finish the climb the following day to catch the sunrise:

The group decide to take a short break in the shade, it is a really hot day and they have been taking regular breaks. They all get their water out and start to sit down when, suddenly, Ajeet says "wait, if I start digging here, I might make it to the Upside Down". He slowly walks away, his eyes glued to the floor, and finds a suitable place to start digging a hole, "is Vecna down here?" he calls out. The rest of the group now gather round and agree that they must dig deeper. They run and grab sticks, there are plenty to choose from, and return to where Ajeet continues to dig. The group start talking about what this area would look like in the Upside Down. They are referring to parts of the Stranger Things series on Netflix, which is positioned in a forest just like this one. Before too long, most of the group are digging - they dig and dig and dig - generating quite a sizeable hole. Tim, who is lying on his belly at this point, leans into the hole and calls "Billy, are you down there?". A couple of the group members giggle, but then there is silence, clearly there is no response.

The group return to their water bottles and prepare to continue our hike to camp.

It is noted that there is a degree of playful and imaginative engagement with place here, but young people's interactions were also serious, they dug their hole with purpose. It is also important to state that these forms of interaction are not necessarily "new" to the Outward Bound space. In reality, young people will have engaged in playful moments such as these long before the arrival of Netflix (e.g. significant cultural artefacts such as the Beano or the Famous Five). However, we may come to think of these moments as being "newly different". By this, what is meant is that the content engaged with by young people in online environments is always-on and always-available. Much more so than previous analogue versions of culture, where young people

had to be in the right place at the right time to engage. It is the pervasive, easily accessible and always-available nature of a platform like Netflix that appears to foreground young people's contemporary Outward Bound experiences.

The young people who participated in the study arrived at their various centres with a degree of networked knowledge about the places engaged with during a typical Outward Bound course. This is especially interesting in the context of this research given most of the young people had never been to a National Park or to a remote area like the Scottish Highlands. In essence, online environments appeared to blur the lines between prior participation in online spaces and situated in-person and in-place engagement. Such a finding raises important factors for Outward Bound instructors and the broader sector. It may be that the removal of young people's technologies for the purposes of immersion in an outdoor education programme overlooks the networked knowledge young people bring into these spaces. The consequences of this for the development and transference of learning outcomes is yet to be explored ▲

> " *The group start talking about what this area would look like in the Upside Down. They are referring to parts of the Stranger Things series on Netflix, which is positioned in a forest just like this one. Before too long, most of the group are digging - they dig and dig and dig - generating quite a sizeable hole. Tim, who is lying on his belly at this point, leans into the hole and calls "Billy, are you down there?".* "

SECTION FOUR

Summary and ways forward

SUMMARY

This study explored and assessed the ways in which mobile technologies and networked spaces affect the facilitation and experience of Outward Bound programmes across three centres in the UK. Through interviews with instructors and observations and focus groups with young people, the findings have demonstrated a tense relationship between instructor preferences and the situated experiences of young people. The interviews with instructors often positioned Outward Bound as a form of connectivity counter-narrative, and as a space that directly challenges the centrality of the digital in the lives of young people. This often focussed on Outward Bound as a form of technology detox, and that the presence of young people's mobile technologies stand in the way of instructors achieving Outward Bound's desired learning outcomes.

However, the young people in the study arrived at their respective Outward Bound centres anticipating that their mobilised digital connectivity would be sustained during their residential trip. Across all centres this was not the case. Throughout the findings, young people's perspectives on disrupted connectivity centred on worry and anger, which affected young people's immersion in the Outward Bound space. It was not uncommon for young people to hide their phones during activity time or to search the centre grounds to find mobile reception.

Alongside hiding phones, regardless of whether young people had their mobile technologies with them or not, the young people related their Outward Bound experiences back to their previous engagements in online spaces. Factors such as nature tattooing from TikTok and understandings

of flora and fauna from Minecraft informed young people's sense-making baselines in the natural world. This is a significant finding that could extend far beyond the Outward Bound context, especially given Natural England's Nature Connection Index does not account for the role of online, networked, spaces in young people's constructions and interpretations of nature.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings presented here raise important considerations for Outward Bound, outdoor education more broadly and those at the forefront of policy and curriculum development. Key recommendations from the study are listed below.

Outdoor education providers and instructors

1. Outdoor education providers may choose to develop guidelines on what to do with young people's mobile technologies. Part of this may be to include information to both parents and young people before a residential trip around what to expect in relation to phone signal, broader connectivity and the risk of breakage in wild and remote environments.
2. In liaison with young people, specific "phone time" could be factored into each day during a residential trip. This phone time could be treated as an opportunity for young people to "check-in" with home, to switch off from a challenging day or to reconnect with peers and participate in important online cultures. Creating this time in collaboration with a group of young people may help alleviate the worry and anger expressed by the participants in this study.
3. A suite of instructor training programmes could be built for use during continuous professional development. Focus could be placed on understanding how young people connect to nature in online environments, as well as raising awareness of the importance young people place on having access to their mobile technologies for the purpose of contacting home.

Policy makers and outdoor education leaders

1. There have been significant policy developments in the banning of phones in schools across the UK. Throughout England, Scotland and Wales, schools regularly ban young people's access to their phones, with English schools recently receiving guidance that phones should be banned throughout the school day. The ways in which this guidance transfers when schools visit residential outdoor education centres requires further scrutiny. It may be that outdoor education centres provide advice to schools before they travel, so that on arrival all parties are aware of the approach to be taken and how to communicate this to young people and parents.
2. Given the ways in which young people related their Outward Bound experiences back to the content they had previously engaged with in online environments, outdoor education curricula within individual outdoor education providers may need to be updated. These updates could seek to explore innovative strategies for integrating digital and media literacy components into outdoor education practices. Such an approach could help young people critically evaluate and contextualise their online experiences in relation to their outdoor interactions. Doing so could also enhance outdoor education learning outcomes and help transfer learning from the residential environment back home.
3. With increasing interest in nature connection, and the development of Natural England's Nature Connection Index, it has been noted that current approaches tend not to take into account the role that networked environments such as TikTok and Minecraft could have in developing a connection to nature. The findings presented in this study encourages policy makers and outdoor education leaders to consider this in their development and implementation strategies. Doing so could further enhance the impact of outdoor education, bringing to life and enhancing young people's networked connections to the natural world ▲

Further reading
There are a number of academic publications linked to this study. For more information, please see the following references:

Reed, J. (2024). Instructor perspectives on mobile technologies and social media in practice: Findings from the United Kingdom's Outward Bound Trust. Journal of Experiential Education, 47(1), 53-71. https://doi.org/10.1177/10538259231186774

Reed, J. (2022). Postdigital outdoor and environmental education. Postdigital Science and Education, 6(2), 416-424. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-022-00323-2

Reed, J., & Dunn, C. (2024). Postdigital young people's rights: A critical perspective on the UK Government's guidance to ban phones in England's schools. Postdigital Science and Education, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-024-00464-6