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# No connectivity, better connections: teenagers' experiences of a phone-free summer camp in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

Phones have become pervasive in many teenagers' lives, and outdoor educators are increasingly faced with making decisions regarding technology. This case study sheds light on the complex relationship between teenagers, phones and residential outdoor environmental education by exploring the experiences of participants at a phone-free summer camp in the US. It was conducted over six weeks and gathered evidence from individual interviews, focus group interviews and unstructured conversations. The three main findings were: (1) participants expressed overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards the experience, especially regarding social interactions. (2) This positive experience was perceived to only be possible at CIFIC, where an engaging programme and a strong community supported participants in their phone-free experience. (3) As a result of (2), teenagers expressed concerns about applying their experience outside of camp. These findings have important implications for practitioners and contribute to pedagogical discussions regarding phones on outdoor environmental education programmes.

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## Introduction

In my first year working at camp in 2014, most campers added me on Facebook; the year after, half did, and the year after that, Facebook was considered a platform for 'older' people. In the meantime, Vine had come, gone and been replaced by TikTok. When I tell the campers I do not have an Instagram or, worst, a SnapChat account, they give me a look of utter concern. – author.

The ways in which phones have evolved increasingly shape and reshape society. This is especially so within contemporary youth culture, with 89% of 16-year-olds Americans owning a smartphone and using them for a daily average of 7:22 hours. These numbers are on the rise and younger teenagers are closely following these trends, as 69% of 12-year-olds own a phone (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Smartphones have become ubiquitous in many teenagers' lives and up-to-date evidence is required to better understand the effects that these changes may have on young people (Reinecke & Oliver, 2016).

Discussions regarding the impact of phone-use are relevant to all ages, but working in outdoor environmental education (OEE) with adolescents, I have noticed how fast the trends are evolving, as highlighted by the opening anecdote. Despite being a 'millennial,' I have started to feel disconnected from my students due to the differences in our phone-use. I have also noticed more parents expressing concerns about phones causing arguments at home, or about their teenagers' digital gaming addiction. Those issues are reflected in a study that showed how 59% of 1200 US parents

believed their teen was addicted to their phone, and half of the teenagers agreed (Common Sense Media, 2016).

Working in residential OEE, I strive to provide students with experiences where they can (re) connect with the natural world, themselves and others. My immediate instinct is that phones have the potential to get in the way of such goals by acting as a physical, social and emotional barrier, something which is often echoed in the literature (see examples in van Kraalingen, 2021). I undertook this research to challenge my assumptions, by striving to understand how adolescents engage with their phones, and how that understanding can influence pedagogical decisions about phones in the field of residential OEE.

This paper presents the findings of a study conducted over six weeks at Canoe Island French Camp in the US, which delved into participants' experiences at a phone-free summer camp. I begin by contextualising this study within the existing literature, exploring the relationship between teenagers and their phones, and approaches in education and OEE.

### Phones and teenagers: a conflicting report

There is no denying that cellphones have quickly changed the way teenagers live their lives and, in many cases, provided more efficient ways to live it. Educational literature also suggests many positive ways in which cellphones can contribute to learning. Researchers have argued that mobile technology in the classroom can improve learners' motivation, using a tool that permeates their lives, and providing alternative learning opportunities to cater to learners' needs (see examples in Kumar & Chand, 2019). In OEE, other benefits have made the use of portable technology almost indispensable and which 'supplement the physical environment' (Bolliger & Shepherd, 2017, p. 183). Using phones for emergencies or digital maps for instance are practices widely spread among educators. For learners, mobile technology can sometimes provide engaging ways to interact with their environment, such as using QR codes (Lai et al., 2013) which can lead to increased environmental awareness (Uzunboylu et al., 2009). It is evident that phones provide opportunities to facilitate everyday life and to engage learners both indoors and outdoors. On the other hand, a body of literature suggests that concerns associated with the way teenagers use their phones may outweigh those benefits.

One of the growing concerns related to excessive phone-use is the negative impacts on physical and mental health. With the exception of some applications which are designed to encourage users to be active, excessive phone-use is associated with a sedentary lifestyle and its negative impact on the body (e.g. Chiasson et al., 2016; Dumuid et al., 2017; Poitras et al., 2017). Wadhwa and Palvia (2019) also condemned our failure to recognise how 'a form of techno-quicksand sucks us in and [...] invades our most intimate moments to weave an unhealthy web of compulsion and dependency' (p.154). The constant social pressure to instantly reply to messages has made phones ubiquitous in our social lives (Hefner & Vorderer, 2016). Such pressure can lead to what is now known as *technostress* or *digital stress* (Ajris et al., 2018; Hefner & Vorderer, 2016), which has been linked with teenagehood depression (Jun, 2016). A study by Twenge and Campbell (2018) echoed these findings by studying a large ( $n = 40\,337$ ) random sample of US children and teenagers and found clear associations between screen time and low mental health. Interestingly, another large-scale study which looked at Irish ( $n = 4573$ ) and US ( $n = 790$ ) children and teenagers found little evidence of such associations (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). The question of how two similar studies came to opposing conclusions is worth posing and highlights the complex relationship between phones, teenagers and mental health. Both meta studies concluded that focusing solely on screen-time as an indicator could be constricting, and that researching *how* digital media is used may be more relevant.

Neuroscientists are also increasingly studying the possible impacts of cellphones on teenagers' brains. Puberty is a transitional stage where teenagers begin to question adults' authority and to place higher value on peers' opinions, which could explain why many may be 'hypersensitive to social exclusion' (Blakemore, 2018, p. 38). Eleuteri et al. (2017) argued

that social media's 'carefully molded profiles that project perfected images' of others can dramatically influence young people's identity, self-esteem and decision-making, precisely because of their malleable and developing brain (p.356). Another consequence of phone-use on the brain is its impact on sleep, which is essential for memory construction and other brain functions (Blakemore, 2018). Screen time has been found to seriously infringe on precious sleep time, negatively affecting academic performance, social life and mental and physical health (Steinberg, 2015; Cabré-Riera et al., 2019; Robb, 2019; Scott et al., 2019).

Finally, some studies have shown that phones can have a negative impact on learning. Felisoni and Godoi (2018) and Kuznekoff et al. (2015) researched the repercussions on academic performance specifically. The authors found a clear association between higher screen time and lower academic performance, especially when phones were used in class. Meanwhile, Siebert's (2019) literature review on the topic of the impact of phones and education shows that most studies were done on university students and not middle or high school students, which highlights the need for more diverse study groups.

On the one hand, phones have provided ways to live life more efficiently, improved connectivity and created exciting opportunities for education. On the other hand, the dangers associated with excessive or risky phone-use raise valid concerns for the future. This duality was discussed by Weinstein (2018) who conducted a study called the Social Media *See-saw* in which teenagers reported social media to have both highly positive and highly negative impacts on their lives. In OEE, Cuthbertson et al. (2004) and Beames (2017) used the expression the '*double-edged sword*' to illustrate this conflicting aspect of technology, which was also evidenced in van Kraalingen's (2021) recent literature review. Assuming that there is a balance to be found to deal with the 'double edged sword' and 'see-saw' nature of technology, the question of how to find it seems to be of utmost importance.

### **Approaches in education and OEE**

One way in which individuals respond to the challenges associated with a media-saturated lifestyle is through 'digital detox,' which may decrease stress symptoms (Ajris et al., 2018). For teenagers who are concerned with their phone-use, a growing number of digital detox companies aim to provide youngsters with a phone-free experience and teach them to reconnect with the off-line world (Walker, 2017). Assuming that digital detox does provide opportunities to rethink phone-use and lower the risks associated with phones, it heavily relies on the individual's personal motivation. For many modern-day teenagers, making this decision might be close to impossible.

Relying on a third party to mediate adolescents' interaction with their phones is often the preferred option. In 2019, 68% of 500 US parents said they had rules about their teenagers' phones at home (Robb, 2019). Although it can help teenagers reduce their phone-use at critical times, restrictive mediation can also back-fire. Teenagers may see it as their parents' attempt to impede their freedom and lead to a boomerang effect, where teens defy the rules and engage more in restricted content (Rasmusen & Densley, 2017). In France, the government recently adopted a law that bans mobile phones from all public primary and middle schools (Herard, 2018). Trust (2018) responded to schools' decision to ban phones by highlighting the dangers of demonising technology. Trust (2018) claimed that rather than banning screens, educators should strive to empower students to critically reflect on their technology use and to explore how it can positively impact learning. Nonetheless, Reinecke and Oliver (2016) indicated that very few studies were done to show whether digital education did indeed better equip youth to deal with the negative effects of technology.

In OEE, Hills and Thomas (2019) argued that making decisions related to technology and outdoor education programmes requires criticality. The authors developed an analytical framework to support educators in making such decisions, emphasising that technology in OEE should only be used to enhance learning. Beyond that, the nature of OEE also creates rare opportunities for some people to

experience life without their phone. A few studies have delved into the experiences of participants who attended OEE programmes where phones were completely or partially removed.

C. A. Smith et al. (2018) interviewed university students after they went on a phone-free study abroad eco-tourism programme. The data was gathered post-experience, therefore losing some contextual authenticity, but overall, the study highlighted the participants' feelings that not having their phone enabled stronger peer bonding, personal growth and connection with their surroundings. The students admitted that the nature of the class enabled them to disconnect from their phones and reconnect with each other, themselves and the environment.

Godley (2018) also suggested that OEE had the potential to allow young people to reflect on their use of social media by experiencing a disconnected life. The study focused on a short three-day hiking and camping expedition in Wales, where six teenage participants voluntarily agreed to be disconnected from social media, while keeping their phones for photos and safety. The participants showed a high degree of reflectiveness regarding their phone-use and led the author to express his hopes for residential OEE to become 'the ideal vehicle to assist in dealing with some of the biggest issues of modern times' (p.26).

Similarly, Mutz et al. (2019) conducted a study which focused on the impact of a tech-free residential outdoor adventure programme on teenagers' mental health. The authors found that students whose screen time was the highest before entering the programme seemed to benefit the most from the experience. They argued that the novelty aspect of outdoor adventurous activities provided the needed catalyst to enable change in young people.

Finally, Uhls et al. (2014) studied the impact of a phone-free OEE camp in the US on a very specific skill: adolescents' nonverbal communication. They conducted an experiment and compared students who attended camp for a week with those who stayed at school. The findings showed that students who were away from screens, with many opportunities for social interactions, substantially improved their understanding of others' facial emotions.

These studies constitute a small but optimistic body of evidence for the potential of OEE in moderating phone-use. Yet, they focused either on short OEE programmes or on adult participants, which highlights the need for studying a more diverse range of programmes. As the literature has shown, phones' pervasiveness in adolescents' lives and their conflicting impacts call for further exploring the 'consequences of intentionally removing digital technology' in longer residential OEE programmes (Hills & Thomas, 2019, p. 12).

## The inquiry

The objective of this study was to delve into the complex relationship between teenagers, phones and OEE, which required exploring the topic from various angles. As a staff member at the camp, I used a 'local-knowledge case study' approach to obtain rich and diverse data from two three-week long residential outdoor programmes in the US (Thomas, 2013). After obtaining parental consent, I presented the research project to participants and staff who joined on a voluntary basis. Campers aged twelve to seventeen ( $n = 21$ ) and instruction staff ( $n = 5$ ) participated in a total of four focus-group interviews, while parents ( $n = 3$ ) and other staff ( $n = 2$ ) participated in semi-structured individual interviews, each lasting around one hour. Campers were organised in focus-groups by age and seniority to allow for potential comparison across these characteristics.

I had worked at CIFC as a camp counselor in 2016 and as a programme coordinator in 2017 and 2018. This means I was familiar with the camp's culture and knew many staff members and campers. It allowed me to become both 'complete participant' and 'participant as observer' which led to rich data, while avoiding participants' behaviour changes and ensuring ethical cooperation (Robson, 2011, pp. 320–322). My time at camp could have also helped me in acquiring parental consent and participants' trust (Thomas, 2013). On the other hand, it is also possible that some participants and staff members struggled to disclose certain information due to my previous roles at camp.

I addressed this possibility by attempting to create a relaxed atmosphere and disclaiming my objectives for the study before interviews.

The interviews were then transcribed and analysed using the constant comparative method. I coded the qualitative data, representing categories which were then organised into themes. These were based on 'carefully considered judgements about what was really significant,' and often recurrent, in the data (Dye et al., 2000). Themes were continuously refined throughout the analysis to capture the patterns and essence of the data (Thomas, 2013). Finally, 'thick descriptions,' in the form of quotes, were used to illustrate those themes and provide a rich account of the participant's experiences (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 7). All participants were given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity, followed by the letter T for teenagers, S for staff and P for parents.

While it is important to note that the findings of this research are not generalisable and are specific to the context (the camp, the participants, the time frame...), my goal was to spark discussions amongst practitioners. Case studies should be designed to 'provide a window into the case' for others to find 'resonance' (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 62). By providing a rich, detailed description of the research setting, I aimed to encourage readers to immerse themselves in the place and to draw connections between this study and their own experiences.

### **The setting: Canoe Island French Camp (CIFC)**

CIFC is located on a small island in the San Juans (WA), on the border between the US and Canada. The camp is steeped in the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Pacific NorthWest. It opened in 1969 and offers various experiences, from learning French language through cooking classes to paddling a traditional voyageur canoe. CIFC runs summer programmes of two or three weeks. In the shoulder season, the island is used for a variety of shorter programmes including French or Science residential school weeks, family camps or yoga weekends.

The camp employs ten seasonal, French speaking counselors from the US and abroad as well as two camp directors, three programme coordinators, three chefs, a volunteer nurse and a facility assistant. CIFC also relies on assistants, a group of past campers who volunteer for the summer holidays, helping with the programme, maintenance or catering. Each summer session welcomes around fifty campers, aged nine to seventeen who primarily come from the US or Canada. It is important to mention that most young people are from affluent backgrounds, but the camp also offers scholarships to support local or underprivileged children.

CIFC has a strict no-phone policy for campers and the camp director collects phones and other digital media (apart from cameras) on the first day of camp and returns them on the last day. According to the directors, the policy was established to encourage campers to be fully present and engaged without the distractions of phones. It is also meant to support the development of essential social interactions skills. Finally, it aims at giving teenagers a break from the constant flow of information and demands of social media. Recently, the camp directors have started sending an email to parents to inform them of the reasoning behind the policy, and to encourage them to support CIFC in their endeavour to provide a positive phone-free experience.

### **Findings and discussion**

#### ***An overwhelmingly positive, yet radical, change***

For many teenagers, the experience represented a sudden change from their digital-infused life, to one with no access to phones. Some older participants shared an interesting point about dealing with this transition. 'At the beginning of camp, I kept thinking that I was missing something in my pocket' [Claude. T]. 'I had my disposable camera in my pocket before, and I felt it. . .buzz almost! It's kind of like your brain tricks you into thinking you're getting notifications' [Laura. T]. This feeling was shared by a high number of teenagers in that focus group. While interviewing a parent, she

mentioned how her child's phone was 'an extension of her body' [Greta. P] which led me to call the feeling mentioned above the *ghost phone* phenomenon. This shows how drastic the lifestyle change can be for some of the teenagers interviewed.

Yet, the data indicated that most participants regarded the phone-free experience very highly, with positive impacts on: social interactions, the ability to enjoy the moment and skills development. Overall, the experience was overwhelmingly positive, but teenagers also discussed some of the challenges they faced, including the lack of certain digital allowances, particularly music and instant news.

### **Social interactions**

One of the most prevalent themes concerned the strength of the relationships at camp. In all the interviews conducted, participants mentioned how close they became to each other. 'Everyone was living so much more strongly. I was able to make connections so much better than I've ever made connections in my life.' [Emily. T]. Participants contrasted life at camp with home, discussing the number of new friends they made, but also the intensity of the bonds they created.

Most importantly, participants drew connections between the strength of those bonds and the absence of phones at camp. 'It makes it easier to make new friends because usually, on your phone, you're talking to your friends, so it's like you already have friends with you.' [John. T]. 'I'm lucky that no one in my tipi snuck in their phone, so you can have really deep conversations [and] actually get to know each other' [Laura. T]. 'I feel like [. . .] you make such good connections here without your phone. Other things help too, but phones don't get in the way' [Natalie. T].

This was also expressed by the staff, although they referred to the social *skills* that teenagers developed at camp such as 'not relying on a third party, the phone, to aid in their social interactions' [Valerie. S] or being 'comfortable in silence, and just [learning] to be with other people without, as soon as there's a lull, instantly pulling out phones' [Victor. S]. It is worth mentioning that these quotes represent staff's *perception* of the teens' experiences, but these perceptions concur with Uhls's et al. (2014) findings about how a five-day phone-free camp helped improve campers' non-verbal communication skills.

Only one participant, a first-year camper, mentioned missing everyone back home and not being able to talk to them instantly. She also expressed that she eventually developed friendships with other campers and how it was 'fun to actually hang out with people and not be interrupted, or not be the person focusing on their phone' [Rozie. T]. Her perspective is interesting, as most returning campers already have friends at camp, but first timers must go through a period of adaptation.

Another viewpoint is that of Louise who kept her phone, although it was eventually found by a counselor. She expressed how, as a returning camper, she already had many strong social connections, which meant keeping her phone did not affect her ability to socialise. Interestingly though, she and everyone else in the focus group agreed that phones should not be allowed at CIFC, as that would 'change the community' [Emily. T].

The fact that peer relationships was one of the dominant themes in the data was unsurprising, as psychology has highlighted the 'hypersensitivity to social exclusion' many teenagers experience through puberty (Blakemore, 2018, p. 38). What was surprising was to hear so many participants recognise that the absence of phones played a crucial role in developing these relationships. C. A. Smith et al. (2018) also showed participants displaying such awareness, but their study focused on university students. What this section shows is that teenagers were also capable of showing remarkable reflexivity concerning the potential harmfulness of phones on their social life.

### **Enjoying the moment and release of pressure**

Many participants mentioned how being without their phones allowed them to live in the moment, without having to worry about the constant demands of phones.

"Not having my phone helped me take in a lot more things. If I was on my phone and saw a seal, I wouldn't care, but because I don't have it, I'm more focused on one thing at once. It's also good to get some alone time; with my phone, I never get any because there are always texts or YouTube videos." [Jeremy. T]

In this quote, Jeremy expressed how the distractions provided by phones might take away from an experience. He also alluded to how phones encourage users to be constantly connected and how that led to a feeling of incessant connectivity. Other teenagers also discussed the phone-related pressures they were under at home. 'It stresses me out when I have so many notifications' [Emily. T]. 'I feel like there's so much pressure that if you don't text people back, you're mean or ghosting them' [Lea. T].

The teenagers then discussed how not having a phone at camp allowed them to feel relief from those social expectations. 'All that pressure dissolves here, it's almost like you have an excuse' [Natalie. T]. 'When you're [here] without your phone and you're looking at waves and boats, it's very soothing and relaxing. You're much more at peace with yourself and mind' [Jeremy. T].

Staff members' interviews also addressed the pressures associated with phones, but they focused on the social media culture of photo and video posting, instead of instant messaging.

"It's really valuable for campers to learn to be conscious of their surroundings, to not be snapping pictures of everything and to be able to appreciate a sunset without being like 'how am I going to post this to get some followers'" [Victor. S].

Additionally, one of the teenagers referred to the pressures of social media but focused on the unrealistic expectations of heavily edited posts. 'Also, I'm not comparing myself to other people on the internet as much. On Instagram, you see these amazing talented people who are beautiful and I'm like "I can't do that." But at camp, everyone is just themselves' [Rozie. T].

Although the stress associated with constant comparison on social media was often mentioned in the literature (e.g.: Eleuteri et al., 2017; Weinstein, 2018), it only appeared once in the teenagers' interviews. This may be due to participants not willing to discuss such a sensitive topic with me or in a group setting and would require further research. It is also worth noting that campers could bring cameras and that programme assistants took pictures and posted them on social media for parents. This could explain why only very few teenagers and staff said they missed taking and posting photos and videos.

Overall, teenagers felt relief from the pressures of instant messaging, which supports Hefner and Vorderer (2016) argument that phones' constant social requirements can sometimes lead to severe *technostress*. The campers also expressed a feeling of freedom from their phones and deeper enjoyment of their daily experiences at camp, which corroborates Smith, Parks, Parrish and Swirski's (2018) findings with university students. Phones can remove users from 'the direct experiences of life' (Wadhwa & Palvia, 2019, p. 152) and from their ability to find 'beauty in the simple things' (Montag & Walla, 2016, p.2). This section showed that CIFIC's phone-free experience allowed teenagers to slow down and appreciate their surroundings, without worrying about the pervasive social demands of phones.

### **Skills development**

At CIFIC, campers were busy all day with morning, afternoon and evening activities, but they also enjoyed essential down time. This time is when the staff believed campers would miss their phones the most. Yet, the data showed that teenagers made the most of the experience by 'learning to be bored' [Helen.T], widening their horizons and learning new skills.

"The other day we were in the library and I was like 'omg there are so many books I haven't read'... and we got so excited, I can't even explain how excited we were. It was a moment of realisation that we'd lost something because we've had our phones for so long. Here, I got so much better at friendship bracelets; I've picked up so many new books. It's helped me bridge out so much more" [Emily.T]



When talking to one of the parents, they mentioned their child used to spend time doing crafts, but phones' constant flow of entertainment had 'killed [their] creativity' [Greta. P]. Blakemore (2018) stated that there were many reasons why teenagers may lose interest in an activity, including natural psychological changes, peer pressure or trends. It is also true that using technology requires learning many skills and may lead to improved multi-tasking (Hofmann et al., 2016). However, losing interest in regular activities is also a symptom of internet addictions, as recognised by the American Psychiatry Association (Reinecke & Oliver, 2016). The young people's enthusiasm shown in the quotes above suggests that teenagers may indeed benefit from time away from their phones to diversify their interests and skill set.

The relevance of free time in residential OEE was rarely discussed in the literature. The focus was either on organised activities (Mutz et al., 2019) or on the benefits of overall phone-free experiences (Godley, 2018; Uhls et al., 2014), but rarely on the specific impact of 'phone-free-time.' T. N. Smith (2019) conducted a study that showed participants often recalled memories of their residential OEE programmes that took place during non-activity time, which highlights its importance. This section showed that teenagers at CIFIC appreciated the ability to (re)learn how to be bored, which led to increased interest in self-led activities and skills development.

Although most of the data showed teenagers' positive attitudes towards the phone-free experience, it also highlighted two specific constituents that campers missed: music and the news.

### **Missing music**

One of the elements of the data which I found most surprising was the amount of time participants mentioned missing their own music. 'I don't think music is that bad and I'd love to have it here, even if it drowns out the sounds of the birds!' [Lea. T]. When asked why one of the campers kept her phone, she said she missed 'the little bubble of listening to music' [Ophelia. T]. Camp life is very busy and participants are almost always with people, so it is understandable that some campers would seek ways to enjoy time alone. Interestingly, one camper also expressed the possible impact of individual music on music as a shared activity. 'There's a lot of singing at camp and groups listening to music so I feel like, if everyone had their individual music, it would kind of ruin that experience' [John. T].

It is worth noting that music was played regularly at camp during activities or around campfires, but many campers expressed missing the music of their choice. I believe that music is often an important part of many teenagers' lives and identity, which was echoed by this study's participants. It was therefore surprising that this topic was absent in the literature I reviewed. This may be due to my research method, as I later found sources in the field of psychology and education related to the importance of music in teenagers' development (e.g.: Boer et al., 2013; McFerran et al., 2019).

### **Feeling 'out of the loop'**

Although many campers expressed feeling a release of pressure related to instant messaging and social media, the older teenagers conveyed a different kind of stress: feeling out of the loop.

"We live in a world where we have to be like 'how many mass shootings have there been in the past week?.' So I feel guilty for not being informed and taking a break for my own sake. I think a lot of kids want to know" [Eleonore. T]

Many older participants agreed with those statements but some also expressed feeling unsure about the issue. 'I would like to know, but at the same time I do come here to get away from it all. I'm very conflicted' [Emily. T].

This led to participants suggesting that CIFIC should offer an optional news bulletin for campers who wished to stay informed. It is important to mention that the interview took place after a mass shooting in the US and campers had heard about it from a staff member, which may have influenced

their discussion. CIFIC's no-phone policy was in part designed to give campers a break from the constant 'onslaught of information' [Margaret. S]. Hefner and Vorderer (2016) and Wadhwa and Palvia (2019) also warned against the *always-on* mentality which may cause stress from an overload of information. This study's participants seemed to be aware of those risks, but also expressed their desire to choose to stay informed, especially the older ones who were 'going to vote next year' [Louise.T].

In summary, the data has shown that the participants' experience had predominantly positive impacts, especially on their social interactions and ability to enjoy the moment, but also on their skills development. The study also highlighted ways in which teenagers struggled to cope without their phones, such as missing music and feeling disconnected from the news. Despite these issues, all campers, staff and parents interviewed agreed that phones should not be allowed at CIFIC. Some of the younger campers contemplated what camp would be like with phones and concluded that it would be 'sad,' 'a ghost town' and 'counter-intuitive to the ambiance of the camp' [Lea and Thomas. T]. This last quote hints to the next section which discusses the role that the *ambiance of the camp* plays in the campers' experiences.

## 2-CIFIC as a "special place:" the importance of the external environment

Another key element that transpired from the data was the notion that such a positive phone-free experience could only happen in a 'very specific environment' [Victor. S], like Canoe Island. In this section, I focus on what aspects of CIFIC make the no-phone experience so positive and aim to shed light on why so many participants felt it could only happen there.

### Camper's perception of the policy

Many teenagers acknowledged that the policy itself created an environment where it was easier to give up their phones, by putting everyone on an equal playing field. 'Since the majority of camp doesn't have their phone, I feel like I'm not missing out on anything' [Helen, T]. As one camper noted, CIFIC welcomes children aged nine to sixteen from a variety of backgrounds, so not allowing phones also prevents unfair situations where some campers bring phones, and some do not. Sometimes, campers tried to keep their phones despite the policy, but the participants interviewed still agreed that phones should not be allowed on Canoe. When analysing the data, I noticed that participants frequently used the word *forced*. 'When you're in a community and no one has their phone, you're kind of forced to talk to people' [Julia. T]. 'People aren't distracted and they're **forced** to interact. [. . .] It **forces** everyone to become better friends with people who are here' [Silvia. T]. 'At school no student can resist going on their phone so it's good that we're **forced** to not do that here' [Rozie. T].

The word *forced* is usually associated with negative situations, but in these quotes, participants used the word in positive sentences, which showed their belief that the rigidity of the policy was an important factor in campers' experience. It was also a testament to the addictive nature of phones, as teenagers seemed to suggest that being forced to give up their phones was sometimes necessary.

Trust (2018) warned against demonising technology by banning phones in schools instead of encouraging reflections on positive uses. In residential OEE, Godley (2019) also argued that educators should not force students to disconnect, but rather promote self-moderation. Yet, this study showed that teenagers may appreciate a stricter policy, in a specific context, and if everyone followed the same rule. This is interesting as France has received much criticism regarding their decision to ban phones in schools. Similarly, one of the staff members explained how she described CIFIC to other teenagers who were appalled at the idea of giving up their phones, even just for three weeks. This study's findings therefore suggest that teenagers may need to live through the experience to appreciate its possible positive impacts.

### *The 'ambiance' of the camp*

Participants displayed positive attitudes towards the policy, but they also emphasised that it was successful within the particular context of CIFIC. In this section, I focus on the aspects of camp that made the policy possible; mainly the busy nature of camp life, the safety provided and, most importantly, CIFIC's community.

Some participants expressed how a typical day at camp was full of engaging activities which helped them live without their phones. 'Here you just forget about it, because there are so many activities' [Ophelia. T]. This was unsurprising as many teenagers use their phones as a form of entertainment to combat boredom, with almost half of phone-time dedicated to watching videos online (Robb, 2019). It showed the importance of developing busy and engaging programmes to distract campers from the desire to use their phones.

A few campers and staff also speculated on the sense of safety that phones can provide daily and related it to life at camp. 'I think some kids might keep their phones because they don't feel safe without it. But here, there's no safety reason to keep your phones' [Meredith. T]. 'Camp is maybe able to provide that sense of protection and maybe that's why campers don't ask about their phones' [Oliver, S]. In other words, CIFIC might have provided a sense of security which in turn prevented the need to use phones as a safety tool.

One of the reasons the director chose to send emails to parents to clarify the no-phone policy was because some were complicit and helped their children 'smuggle' phones. I was therefore expecting more participants to mention those 'over-involved, helicopter parents' whose concerns can sometimes "ruin camp" (Kamenetz, 2017, para 10). Instead, participants suggested that the feeling of safety that CIFIC provided may contribute to parents' and campers' ability to disconnect. This may be due to the fact that most participants were teenagers and returning campers. In my experience, parents tend to show greater concern with younger children who attend camp for the first time, which might explain the scarcity of data on this topic.

Although an engaging programme and feeling of security were occasionally mentioned, the factor contributing to a positive phone free experience that was discussed the most was CIFIC's *community*. In the interviews, participants related the notion of community with their phone-free experience: 'Knowing that it changes the community, I never wanted to keep my phone. It just helps me live so much better, it's one of the key parts of Canoe that I think makes it so special here' [Emily. T]. 'I feel like (the policy) just creates a whole different thing that you really can't get anywhere else. You have to just live in the community and put everything into it' [Julia. T].

As mentioned earlier, socialising was the main theme that participants said improved greatly at camp thanks to the no-phone policy. Here, campers were partly referring to social interactions but also used the word 'community' to encompass the overall camp atmosphere which includes the people, the place and the shared experiences, to name a few. This sense of community was often mentioned during camp-led reflection activities as the reason for campers returning to CIFIC year after year, and it appears that not having phones played an essential role in that feeling.

This last point raises an interesting question which one of the staff members accurately articulated. 'I wonder about the direction of causality: no phones create strong community, or strong community makes no phone easier?' [Victor. S]. In other words, would having phones at camp somehow negatively impact the community? And would banning phones in a weaker community be more challenging?

Mutz et al. (2019) argued that the *novelty* of adventurous activities was the main factor contributing to a positive phone-free experience in OEE programmes. Although this was sometimes reflected in the data when campers mentioned exciting camp activities, this study suggested otherwise. CIFIC's strong community seemed to be the determining factor in the participants' positive phone-free experience.

Overall, the data suggested that the campers' positive no-phone experience heavily depended on both the policy and the camp's atmosphere. C. A. Smith et al. (2018) also found that the students they interviewed believed 'the nature of the class [...] helped them overcome their conditioned

inclinations' (p.11). Both their study and this project highlighted the importance of the external environment in helping regulate phone-use in residential OEE.

If CIFIC is indeed a very special place, where campers can have a positive phone-free experience, it raises questions regarding the impact of this experience on their 'real life,' a term frequently used to describe life after camp.

### **3-Concerns about applying the experience to 'real life'**

The policy was designed to give campers a break from 'experiencing the world through their screen' [Margaret. S] to improve their experience at camp; something which most participants recognised. However, the data also showed teenagers' concerns about the difficulty of applying the experience to their life at home. 'I try to use my phone less but it's so hard when it's right there. And when I'm not using it, I'm still thinking about it' [Natalie. T]. 'At home, I tell myself a lot that I should stop going on my phone and go one day without it, but it's so hard because that's the way I communicate with everyone' [Helen. T].

These quotes illustrated two of the many reasons that make it difficult to moderate one's phone-use. The first one referred to the pervasive and addictive nature of phones. For instance, applications such as SnapChat have developed 'streaks' which prompt users to check their phones constantly and can contribute to stress (Hefner & Vorderer, 2016). The second quote alluded to how phones permeate social lives, especially amongst teenagers. One of the parents I interviewed expressed how taking her daughter's phone away at home would 'break her social group' [Greta. P]. As many teenagers' lives revolve around their peers, exercising self-control through, for example, a digital detox may be extremely challenging (Hofmann et al., 2016).

On the last day of camp when phones were returned, many campers ran down the hill to retrieve their phones and were immediately absorbed in the 'overwhelming amount of things that have built up over the last three weeks' [Emma. T]. This observation may offer a window into their life after camp and suggest that some campers could struggle to apply their experience.

While some campers expressed worries about their ability to moderate their phone-use after camp, others also conveyed their desire to apply their experience at home. 'Coming back from camp, I'm gonna try to read more books and get better at the ukulele, there is so much outside of social media and your phones that I think gets lost' [Julia. T]. 'I'm gonna make my mum take away my phone at night, I don't want to spend all night on Youtube. This camp made me a changed person! (laughs)' [Rozie. T]. Here, the participants commented on how their experience at camp could influence them to modify their habits at home. The two quotes referred to two different ways to mediate phone-use: self-mediation and restrictive mediation. The latter has been criticised as it sometimes encourages teenagers to challenge parental control (Rasmusen & Densley, 2017), so it was surprising to hear a camper mention it.

This section has shown that campers' phone free experience may impact the lifestyle of some teenagers after camp. It is interesting that those concerns were expressed so frequently by campers and I believe that the issue was an integral part of their experience. Experiencing a phone-free camp might have allowed participants to reflect on their lifestyle at home but also raised their awareness of the difficulties of moderating one's phone-use. It is of course very difficult to know whether the policy has impacted the teenagers' life after camp, or whether the experience was so insular that it was only relevant on the island.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Smartphones, like other 'disruptive innovations' (Weinstein, 2018, p. 3620), continue to be the subject of admiration and criticism. There is no denying that phones have permeated the lives of adults, teenagers, and even children, and trends show that they will continue to do so. Despite the many advantages of phones, research has also shown that the consequences of poor phone-use can

be dramatic, and highlighted the growing need to raise awareness of digital addiction. The evolving nature and ubiquity of technology has rendered discussions regarding phones in OEE programmes increasingly topical, and challenging.

This study represents a step towards better understanding the complex relationship between adolescents and their phones and the role of residential OEE in that relationship. It supports the small body of literature on the topic in their claims that OEE has the potential to provide phone-free experiences and spark reflections on digital use. This study further expands on the issue by exploring the much-needed perspectives of teenagers on a long residential OEE programme.

### **Implication for practice**

The findings show that having a no-phone policy on OEE programmes can have a highly positive impact on teenagers' experiences. However, practitioners need to intentionally reflect and discuss how to facilitate the experience. Some considerations include creating a strong and supportive community, the fairness and rigidity of the policy, communication with parents, access to music and the news and developing a busy and engaging programme. Offering opportunities for teenagers to meaningfully discuss the phone-free experience could also lead to further awareness on the issues surrounding phone-use at home.

There is no denying that digital media can be used in exciting ways to enhance OEE (e.g.: Beames, 2017) and not utilising it might result in missed opportunities. I strongly believe there is room for residential OEE programmes to make use of those affordances, while encouraging reflection on poor phone-use by experiencing digital disconnection.

### **Future research**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the world's interconnectedness and the speed at which the relationship between teenagers and technology evolves. It is now more than ever crucial to keep up with these changes, and conduct similar research projects to further educators' understanding and reflections on phone uses. As Povilaitis (2019) stated, a one-size fits all may not be the right approach to dealing with phones in OEE. Finally, recent papers by Reed (2022) and van Kraalingen (2022), which were published after this study took place and after the COVID-19 pandemic, explored the issue of technology and OEE beyond the double-edge sword view. They offer the perspective that "distinguishing between 'digital' and 'non-digital' spaces in OEE no longer adequately describes the nature of students' postdigital realities" (Reed, 2022). Researching novel approaches to technology in OEE, and their impact post-programme would further shed light on the issue.

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### **Notes on contributor**

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