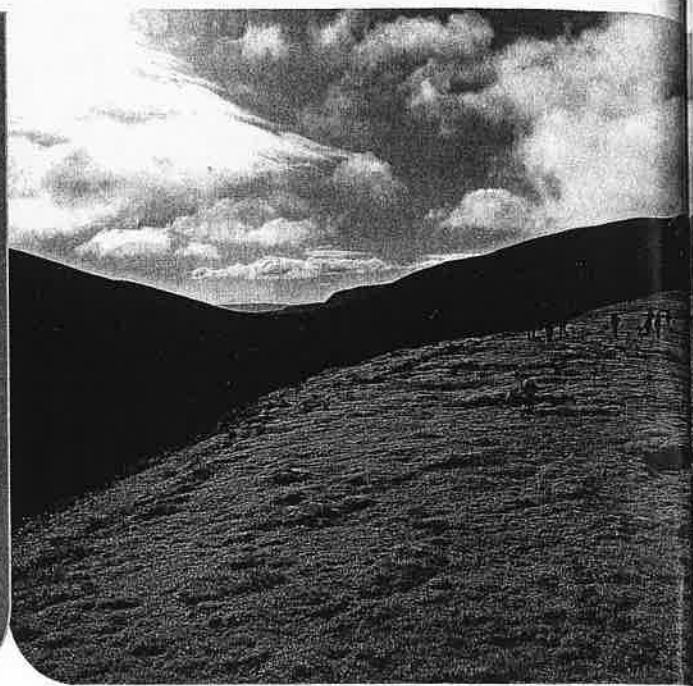


# Social media and the outdoors: Old solutions to new problems

## A new role for the outdoor education residential?



Anyone working with young people knows the powerful influence mobile technology and social media has in their lives. Within a generation, its use has become the norm and its influence global<sup>1</sup>. This has led to widespread concerns about negative effects on physical and mental health, as well as on social and personal behaviours.

For my MA dissertation, I wanted to investigate one of the most powerful and concerning issues influencing young people today: social media. I used an outdoor education residential experience to look at how outdoor education might play a role in offsetting some of the negative effects of social media use and to give young people a new perspective on their social media use. This was done through participants agreeing to be 'disconnected' whilst on the residential and investigating their experiences afterwards.

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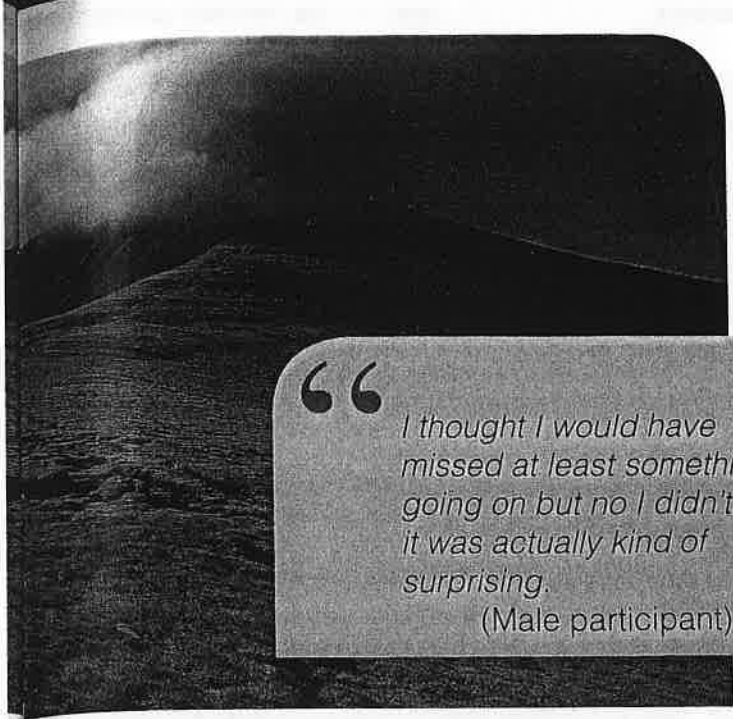
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Photos: From the authors

Some of the negative effects on physical health include mobile phones affecting quality of sleep through constant checking and hormonal changes due to blue light emissions<sup>2</sup> and increased screen time leading to activity that is more sedentary. Perhaps of even greater concern are the effects on mental health. Social media has been linked with increases in depression, anxiety, poor self-image and bullying<sup>3</sup>. There is enormous pressure to respond to messages immediately at the risk of social exclusion if this is not done. There is also the phenomenon of 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) whereby users fear switching off devices due to missing important group notifications. Constant comparison with other people's online profiles (which are often highly edited), can lead to dissatisfaction with themselves and their lives. Concerningly, these effects are more pronounced within young women, with unrealistic depictions leading to issues around body image and self-esteem<sup>4</sup>. Concerns also noted by teachers and parents are that social media is a distraction and leads to lower academic focus and productivity. Despite this it is important to remember that there are benefits to social media. It has enabled widespread, immediate sharing of information, has connected people with similar interests and allows for contact where there may otherwise be none.

One thing that struck me while designing the research was that many of the things that were cited as being negatively affected through high social media use were the same things that outdoor education could positively develop, examples of this include self-esteem, confidence, and social relationships. Another similarity was evident between outdoor education residentials and the growing industry of 'digital detox' solutions, such as, lack of access to technology, a connection with nature and a focus on the self and reflection. This led me to propose that a 'disconnected' outdoor education experience would not only enhance engagement and learning during the experience but may provide an experience of disconnection that may affect views or behaviour afterwards.



skills could be demonstrated but the trip also had the desired social element that this type of accommodation can allow. The participants worked together on navigation and journeying skills in the daytime and planning, preparation and living skills in the evenings.

### Post residential findings

On our return home, those who were 'disconnected' were interviewed immediately about their experiences on the residential and the impact of disconnection. They were then interviewed a second time six weeks later to allow for 'post residential euphoria' to wear off and to see whether the period of disconnection had influenced them in their everyday lives.

All the responses were analysed and collated into a set of findings. Notably, these were consistent in both the immediate and longer-term sets of interviews suggesting a meaningful and sustained learning experience. Those involved reported that their experience had been enhanced through not being connected to social media and the extra distractions it brought. They cited increased focus on the environment and the skills being taught and higher levels of sociability'.

### Preparations for the residential trip

The residential consisted of three days mountain walking with the aim of developing expedition skills in the Brecon Beacons with ten 17 and 18-year-old students (six male, four female). Those who were to be 'disconnected' had all volunteered (three male and one female). Most of the students had very little, or no experience of being disconnected from social media for an extended time: half the group said they had not been disconnected for longer than a week and for three of those it was for one day. It is easy for those of us outside this demographic to forget how important and central social media is to young people's lives and how difficult it is for them to step out of that, even for a short period of time. This finding was realised early on after the whole group had completed a questionnaire on social media use.

*"I didn't know whether I would be able to hold it out for a few days."*  
(Male participant)

The questionnaire also revealed that the young people also shared many of the concerns about privacy, effects on mental health and productivity. We deliberately did not exclude mobile phones from the trip as these are not just ways to access social media but are also cameras, music players and research tools. The built-in cameras on smartphones in particular were agreed to be an important elements in capturing and reflecting on the experiences.

### The digital detox residential

The residential took place in cold clear autumnal conditions with the mountains rewarding the participants' efforts with amazing panoramas. We stayed in bunkhouse accommodation but completed the walk as a circular journey to give it a self-reliant feel. This meant all food, and equipment had to be carried in and out. This meant that some expedition

*"Yes, better because I wasn't going to the top of a mountain and going 'oh let me just check Facebook to see if anyone's posted'."*  
(Female participant)

*"I was trying to take in the views and what's actually going on around me."*  
(Female participant)

*"The other people in our class that I don't normally talk to, I seemed to get a lot closer to, so I think that was part of not being on my phone all the time 'cos I feel like if I was on my phone on social media I wouldn't have connected with them as much as I did."*  
(Male participant)

The FOMO due to disconnection was a very real phenomenon before the expedition but was not borne out by the reality of being disconnected. Participants reported their surprise that so little had happened during their time away.

Related to this are the findings that this experience of going social media-free allowed for a valuable period

of reflection that not only reduced fears around not conforming but also led to future changes including reductions in use, changes to patterns of use and different attitudes towards social media. Some participants also reported that their everyday lives were affected positively in terms of increased sociability and confidence.

This small study has highlighted the potential of outdoor education to allow young people the time to experience and reflect on their social media and digital use. As well as allowing time to focus on the traditional aims of a residential trip such as learning skills, teamwork or appreciation of the natural environment. I believe a new role for outdoor education could emerge that reduces some of the harmful effects of social media use by providing a perspective from which people can exert positive control. This goes beyond a 'digital detox' short break into real changes in attitudes and behaviours that will equip young people to be confident and independent in their social media use. The humble outdoor residential may be the ideal vehicle to assist in dealing with some of the biggest issues of modern times. ■

“ *Everyone thinks you need it every day, everyone uses it a lot every day, but you don't really need it. I think as well, I had a good time and I didn't touch it for three days. Yeah (I do see it differently) people do use it too much I think.*

(Male participant)

“ *I think I've tried to limit my time on it more, than just stay on it 'til I got bored*

(Male participant)

“ *I feel like I talk a bit more, that sounds sad, but I feel like I converse a bit more.*

(Male participant)

“ *I've realised that since coming back I haven't actually used it as much as I did before we went.*

(Female participant)

## Top tips!

To those thinking of incorporating these themes into their residentials I have the following tips from my experience.

- Encourage debate around the topic beforehand to get people thinking about their use, you may be surprised that they share many of the same concerns around social media and wish to try disconnection.
- Don't try to force people into disconnecting as the aim is to encourage self-moderation in the longer term, if a person is not ready for that then forcing them will be counterproductive.
- Inform or consult parents; social media is a norm now and parents will need reasoning and reassurance about periods of disconnection.
- Remember phones are powerful and multi-functional. Banning them may be inhibiting some valuable learning tools (e.g. photographs, research).



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