

# NETFLIX, MINECRAFT AND TIKTOK AT THE OUTWARD BOUND TRUST

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF THE OUTDOORS



**AUTHOR**  
**JACK REED**

Jack Reed is a Ph. D. candidate at The University of Edinburgh. His research explores mobile technologies and social media in residential outdoor education as well as contemporary formulations of society and culture as they are developed and sustained in postdigital space.

This is the third of this four-part series sharing findings from my ESRC-funded PhD at Outward Bound where I have been examining the place, use, and impact of mobile technologies and social media in adventurous residential learning environments. In my last piece, I presented data from instructor interviews around the portable comfort zone, and I now shift my attention to data generated through focus groups and observations with young people.

## What I did

In spring and summer 2022, I spent five-days at three Outward Bound centres across the UK. At each centre, I worked alongside a visiting secondary school who were attending Outward Bound as part of a pre-booked residential trip. I worked with young people aged 12-17 and spent time immersing myself in activities alongside participants in order to see how mobile technologies and social media were affecting experiences at Outward Bound. Whether it be canoeing, rock climbing, or jog and dip, I embraced my role as a participant-researcher and engaged on a daily basis with young people who, in most cases, were visiting a national park or mountainous region for the first time.

I also engaged in focus groups with young people and spent time speaking with them to get a sense of how their access (or lack of access) to technology was impacting their outdoor experiences. The young people I worked with were allowed

to bring a phone to the centre, but often did not take them on activities and could not access mobile signal after the centre Wi-Fi turned off at 10pm. In total, 50 young people took part in observations and 23 in the focus groups. The data generated was rich and complex and provided far too much for me to share here but, as a flavour, here are some of the key findings:

- 1. Not being able to speak with parents was identified as critically important. Young people often expressed frustration and anxiety when parents could not be contacted.**
- 2. Young people actively seek connectivity and will employ novel and innovative methods to find and maintain signal. For instance, in one focus group, a dorm room window was noted to have signal and the group set up a "signal rota" so everyone could gain access.**
- 3. Taking photographs was identified as a primary motivator for young people, with explicit links made to memory making and storage, as well as image sharing.**

With those other important outcomes mentioned, my attention for this piece turns to young people's sense-making baselines in the outdoors and the ways in which platforms such as Netflix, Minecraft, and TikTok framed young people's knowledge and engagement with the outdoors. The research question underpinning this piece was:

*What impact might online media, video on demand services, and gaming platforms have in shaping how young people engage with outdoor spaces and places when at Outward Bound?*

## Examples from the field

This section shares three examples from the observational component of the research. Each demonstrates the ways in which online environments were seen to interact with young people's understandings of nature and are directly taken from my extended field notes. All participant names have been pseudonymised.

### "Digging for the upside down": An expedition in Eryri National Park

This excerpt features content from the Netflix series Stranger Things. A highly popular dark drama series set in 1980s America.

We all get our water out and start to sit down. It's been a long hike to this point. Suddenly Ajeet says "wait, if I start digging here, I might make it to the Upside Down". We are in a really stunning location, and the ground is mostly soft moss, I note Sphagnum. He starts digging a hole, "is Vecna down here?" he calls out, the rest of the group gather around. I look on with a sense of uncertainty, I'm not sure whether the group are taking this seriously, or whether this is just a bit of a laugh. The rest of the group run and grab sticks, there are plenty to choose from, and return to where Ajeet has begun digging his hole. The group starts talking about what this area would look like in the Upside Down. Having watched Stranger Things myself, I know exactly what they're talking about, and much of the Netflix series is positioned within a forest just like this one. The next thing I know, the majority of the group are digging. They dig and dig and dig, generating quite a sizeable hole. One of the group is lying on their belly and leans into the hole and calls "Billy, are you down there?", referencing a character who dies at the end of series four. A couple of the group members giggle, but then there is silence, clearly there is no response. I'm still slightly perplexed at whether this is a bit of a joke or whether this is semi-serious. Given the whole group are digging quite intently and are calling into the hole to see if one of the characters could still be alive, it strikes me that this is more than a playful moment and that actually, in this beautiful forest, it is Netflix and the series Stranger Things that is framing young people's engagement with nature.

### Nature tattoos on TikTok: Rock climbing near Ullswater

This text is from a rock climbing activity near the shore of Ullswater and draws on young people's attempts at "nature tattooing", as they had seen on TikTok.

It's a little warmer today and the sun is trying to poke through, it's a lovely morning for a spot of climbing. The narrow track to the crag is slightly uphill and there's a sharp left bend to navigate before we can climb. The track has lots of ferns nearby. As the group arrive at the crag, Em calls out to the nearby members of the group "Ohh, we could do a fern tattoo like on TikTok!". There is general excitement at this, and I ask what they mean by "nature tattoos". Apparently, there's a man on TikTok who does nature tattoos, which is where you press a nature-based object, such as a fern frond, against your skin for an extended period of time 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 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" one young person shouts after also having some success. Another says "yeah, I've seen this on Insta too, there's someone on there who eats raw meat as well". 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. The takeaway from the crag centres on how young people's understandings of nature, maybe a nature baseline, are developed in networked spaces.



**Minecraft and crate stacking: A virtual gaming world brought to life in Scotland**

This is from an evening activity on-site at the centre where the young people have been tasked with a rope activity where they need to build a stack of crates as high as possible.

It's now time to have a go at crate stack. There are no phones on this activity, and the vibe appears to have completely changed. There is almost an element of childish play. The young people run, jump, and laugh with friends. It appears that phones have almost been forgotten about. However, it isn't long before the group draw the reference between the crate stack and Minecraft. Each crate looks just like one of the blocks in Minecraft that is used to build a virtual world. "The crates look just like Minecraft!" one young person calls out. When this happens, I am stood next to an instructor just the other side of the wooden fence that separates the forest from the crate stack location. He says how "this is not something new" and that "very often, Minecraft is mentioned in relation to participants undertaking the crate stacking activity". It is at this moment that two of the group really come to life. It is their turn to build the tower, they call it their "Minecraft tower", and the rest of the team are busy trying to see whether they can help in any way. It strikes me that, despite phones not actually being in hands, the young people's term of reference is still the online space; in this case the gaming environment, Minecraft.

**What does this mean for outdoor learning?**

These three short examples are indicative of the day-to-day interactions I saw at the Outward Bound centres I visited. Very often, it was spaces such as social media, gaming environments, or video on demand services that informed young people's understanding of and engagement with nature. In essence, it did not matter whether phones were on activity or not, it was these online environments that were providing a sense-making baseline as young people engaged with nature, with each other, and with instructors. I think this extends far beyond the double-edged sword described by Cuthbertson et al. (2004) in relation to whether technology is good or bad in outdoor education. The data has also questioned whether it is possible to simply "disconnect" learners in outdoor environments when, as Fawns (2022) describes, we are now so entangled with technological architectures in our day-to-day lives that the connection – disconnection characterisation oversimplifies practice.

Moving forward, a key question I have been asking myself is: Will it be necessary for instructors and policy makers to account for the "networked baselines" of young people in the outdoors irrespective of whether technology is physically present or not? The data presented here suggests an unequivocal yes, and if we are to ensure that learning can be transferred into the life worlds of our participants, then it is recommended that considerations of this are built into schemes of delivery and curricula. After all, we know the profound impact outdoor education can have, I saw it for myself during those weeks spent with young people, and I believe the sector is uniquely placed to use young people's networked baselines for learning, criticality, and fun.

**Next time**

The series so far has introduced my research and presented data generated with both instructors and young people. In my final piece I essentially ask, "what next?", and explore some of the learnings I am taking away from my PhD and how the sector might incorporate some of the study's findings in practice. I am also delighted to share that Outward Bound is going to write a piece about this research alongside my fourth piece. This is something I am sure will offer additional insight for outdoor learning professionals and policy makers who may be seeking to apply the study's findings in their own contexts.

REFERENCES

1.Cuthbertson, B., Socha, T. L., & Potter, T. G. (2004). The double-edged sword: Critical reflections on traditional and modern technology in outdoor education. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning*, 4(2), 133-144.  
2. Fawns, T. (2022). An entangled pedagogy: Looking beyond the pedagogy - technology dichotomy. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 4(3), 711-728.



# QUESTION AND ANSWER

WITH RECORD-BREAKING ROUND-THE-WORLD CYCLIST JENNY GRAHAM



definitely had different reactions to me all around the world, but most of the time they were very welcoming. Obviously that wasn't every experience! But that was the overriding experience – people wanted to look after a lone traveller.

**What motivated you to take on such a big adventure?**

**JG:** I wanted to see if I could! I was really excited to see what I might be capable of and I always thought it would be a cool way to see the world. Even though I was racing it and trying to break the record, you can only go so fast and you still need to communicate with the people around you. I found that I was very in tune with the moon and silly things like that – the whole solar cycle was the only steady thing that I had in my life! But yeah, I was just really curious to see if I could do it and to see how far I could ride.

**You've worked in the outdoors for most of your life, where did it all begin for you?**

**JG:** I think for me I didn't take to academia or school very easily, it wasn't my natural way of learning. So, for me, going to Army Cadets as a 12 year old and finding that place I could be outside and learn from the world around me was very important. And I think it was because of that experience that I ended up working in the outdoors. In the end I went on to study outdoor education, got qualified and worked with young people – specifically with young people who really struggled with societal expectations of how they should learn. I watched these young people develop, from really struggling with the classroom environment to uncovering natural talents like leadership and teamwork in the outdoors. So many young people discovered new skillsets that just weren't being drawn out in other parts of their life. So I suppose I would say my experience is quite personal with outdoor learning.

**What do you hope people take from your story?**

**JG:** The most common thing people say to me is "I go bike riding and go on adventures, but not like the ones you do". And I just think that narrative needs to be looked at – it's exactly like the things I do! From that young age of going to the army cadets, going to college when I was 24, my love of the outdoors – it was all built on these smaller overnight trips away and going off into the hills and discovering the places around me – particularly my home and the things that were in reach of me, the things I could see from my house! Climbing up them and abseiling off them or canoeing down them. It's these little building blocks that you build up, then it's your choice what you do with them. You might want to keep them safe forever or you might decide that you want to go on a massive journey like mine and by that time you'll have already had the building blocks to go and do it.

*You can pick up a copy of Jenny's book, Coffee First Then The World, now. Let us know who you think Horizons should be talking to next! Email us as horizonseditor@outdoor-learning.org.*

IMAGES

Image has been supplied by Jenny Graham. Photographers retains copyright.

*In 2018, Jenny Graham became the fastest woman to cycle round the world unaided. Horizons caught up with her just before the release of her round the world book, Coffee First Then The World, to ask her about how working in the outdoors has affected her life to date.*

**Sounds like you've been pretty busy writing up your debut book from your round the world adventures! What would you say you learned from your record breaking cycle round the planet?**

**Jenny Graham:** This is a hard one! I learned a lot about myself and about my natural flow of emotion and physical need. I learned a lot about the environment and about tuning into it and accepting whatever it threw at me - whether that was a massive storm that was coming in, or wildlife in the local area (including bears in Canada...). I also learned a lot about people and how, no matter where you go in the world, people want the same things and often think in similar ways! People