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# Avoiding the ‘easy route’: Young people’s socio-spatial experience of the outdoors in the absence of digital technology

Aimee L Morse<sup>a,\*</sup>, Steven B Emery<sup>b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, Francis Close Hall, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL50 4AZ, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Centre for Rural Policy Research, University of Exeter, Lazenby House, Prince of Wales Road, Exeter, Devon EX4 4PJ, United Kingdom

<sup>c</sup> Rothamsted Research, North Wyke, Okehampton, Devon EX20 2SB, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Over-use of smartphones and under-engagement in outdoor pursuits are popularly touted as inter-dependent phenomena with various implications for the health and well-being of young people. At the same time, there has been a relative lack of social scientific scrutiny on the topic which, we contend, has been stifled by the imperative to avoid ontological distinctions between the ‘technological/virtual’ and the ‘real’, as well as deterministic renditions on the role of technology in social life. In this paper we provide evidence to reanimate this discussion by drawing into focus that, from the perspectives of young people themselves, there are and remain discernible differences in the socio-spatial relationships mediated by the presence/absence of technology in different settings. The empirical material draws on participant observation, walking- and group-interviews with young people taking part in the UK’s Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, which requires them to undertake outdoor expeditions without their smartphones. We use the metaphor of ‘avoiding the easy route’ to emphasise the differences in experience that manifest themselves for young people during co-present, and often more challenging, embodied encounters. We argue that co-present encounters with places and others are often fuller in terms of the breadth of embodied sensory experience, and often more difficult in terms of i) the kin-aesthetic experience of place and ii) the non-selectivity of social relationships. The combination and sharing of these difficulties, we further argue, has a moral and political function in ordering young people’s environmental and social values.

## 1. Introduction

This paper uses the metaphor of the ‘easy route’ in navigation to consider the moral socio-spatial affordances of young people’s co-present encounters with place and one another. It is based on young people’s (aged 14–18 years) experience of the Duke of Edinburgh (DofE) Award Scheme in the UK, which (amongst other activities) requires them to plan and undertake outdoor expeditions within teams, without the use of their mobile/smart phones. When focussing on the distinctiveness of co-present encounters it is important to clarify at the outset that we are not simply adopting the position of ‘Debunkers’ (Valentine and Holloway, 2002) in relation to the impacts of digital technologies, and nor are we upholding an ontological dualism between the ‘real’/‘material’ on the one hand and the ‘digital’/‘virtual’ on the other (e.g. Kinsley, 2014). Instead, we wish to reanimate the discussion on the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds in the lives of young

people and to draw back into focus that, from the perspectives of young people themselves, there are and remain very real differences in the socio-spatial relationships mediated by the presence/absence of technology in different settings. The discussion, theorisation and implications of such differences is our primary focus here.

Our aim, more simply, is to understand what is revealed about socio-spatial relationships, about place-making and the moral ordering of place in the absence of digital technologies. We do not argue that digital technology allows for an ‘easy route’ as a navigational aid in and of itself (but see McCullough and Collins, 2019). Instead, we use the metaphor of ‘avoiding the easy route’ to emphasise the differences in experience that manifest themselves for young people during co-present, and often more challenging, embodied encounters. We argue that co-present encounters with places and others (in the absence of smartphones) are perceived to be fuller in terms of the breadth of embodied sensory experience, and often more difficult in terms of (i) the physicality of experiencing place

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [amorse1@glos.ac.uk](mailto:amorse1@glos.ac.uk) (A.L. Morse), [s.b.emery@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:s.b.emery@exeter.ac.uk) (S.B. Emery).

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as opposed to consuming it visually on a screen and (ii) the non-selectivity of social relationships. This combination of a fuller sensory embodied engagement with place and the non-selectivity of social relations, we further argue, has a moral function in ordering young people's environmental and social values. To walk this path, we not only need to tread a fine line across the digital/real divide but must also consider the moral-political implications of doing so. Indeed, on one hand it has been pointed out that the modernised consumption of space, for instance through the medium of digital technology, detracts from the 'moral efficacy' of place (Adams, 1998) and leads to an 'emptying out' of consciousness from the landscape (Auge, 1995). On the other hand, the very act of setting virtual and real worlds apart, and of adopting technologically deterministic interpretations of social phenomena has also been cast as depoliticising, and as disembedding technology from the wider political and ideological contexts in which it is situated (Schwanen et al., 2008; Ash et al., 2018).

Auge (1995) characterises non-places as the product of super-modernity and its tendency to individualise and disembed experience. With alarming clarity and similarity to contemporary concerns about photo-sharing apps on the health and well-being of young people (Georgakopoulou, 2016; Jiang and Ngien, 2020; Faelens et al., 2021), Auge refers to the individualised anonymity afforded by non-places which may 'be felt as a liberation, by people who, for a time, have only to keep in line, go where they are told, check their appearance' (Auge, 1995: 81). This points not only to the curation of identities through such apps, nor only to norms of engagement with such platforms, but also to the consumption and experience of place. As Auge indicates, this sense of liberation may only be temporary and superficial, and this is precisely why a study of socio-spatial encounters among young people on the DofE Award is so pertinent in the contemporary moment. The scheme actively discourages children from 'staying in line' and taking the easy route. Avoiding the easy route is thus at once a metaphor for challenging the shackles of conformity but at the same time of intentionally facing up to, and dealing with, challenging and difficult circumstances; be that a particularly steep mountain, or a troublesome and argumentative peer.

In the following Section we set out the theoretical terrain that animates subsequent empirical analysis into the modalities, and moral implications, of socio-spatial experience for young people on the DofE Award. We follow Adams' interpretation of the moral functioning of place as one that provides a 'setting for seeing the consequences of one's own actions' and as a 'mechanism for "reflexive" thought' (Adams, 1998: 95; Giddens, 1984). The Award requires participants to complete an expedition ranging in length from two to four days, in which they must 'plan, organise and execute a journey' (Campbell et al., 2009: 33) in an unfamiliar outdoor environment. Completing the expedition often requires young people to step out of their comfort zone, but in doing so it is anticipated that they may develop key personal and social skills and gain a valuable sense of achievement (Bailey, 2003; Campbell et al., 2009). Interviews with participants from the English West Midlands were undertaken in 2019, allowing them to explore the experience of the expedition space and the ways in which they negotiated their relationships with their peers, in the absence of their smartphones, in more detail.

## 2. Literature review

There is a growing body of academic and grey literature setting out the benefits for young people (and humans in general) of engaging in outdoor education and/or in limiting the use of smartphone technologies (e.g. Nicol, 2014, Hordyk et al., 2015). Before exploring these positions further in Section 2.2, the following section positions the paper within debates around the 'real'/'virtual' dichotomy in digital geographies. As stated, the objective here is to justify why it is still possible, and indeed appropriate, to consider the positive and negative aspects of smartphone mediated socio-spatial encounters for young people, whilst

still recognising the need to avoid dualistic thinking on the real versus digital. To do so, the final section integrates literatures around the morality of place, sensual geographies and the engendering of socio-spatial (political) subjectivities. The concept of difficulty, and of shared difficulties, is introduced to provide the heuristic link between the moral and sensual dimension to this debate.

### 2.1. Treading carefully across the digital divide

Two debates characterise the digital/real divide in geography and cognate disciplines. The first of these relates to the positive versus negative impacts of virtual technologies and relationalities on physical/embodied socio-spatial relationships and encounters, whereas the second challenges the very ontological basis of the digital/real divide in the first place.

In relation to place, the first debate is perhaps best characterised by the distinction between the application of Scannell's (1996) conceptualisation of the 'doubling of place' to technologically augmented socio-spatial encounters on the one hand (see for instance Parisi, 2015); and the role of digital technologies in the accelerated perpetuation of Auge's (1995) 'non-places' on the other (see for instance Dryden & McCumber, 2017). Valentine and Holloway (2002) have distinguished between advocates and sceptics of the role of digital technologies on socio-spatial relations respectively as 'boosters' and 'debunkers', and maintained that both groups uphold a problematic dualism which overlooks the mutual constitution of social worlds across the digital/real divide.

The second debate follows and builds upon this line of argument. However, whereas Valentine and Holloway have argued for the incorporation of 'real' worlds into 'virtual' worlds (and vice versa) (Valentine & Holloway, 2002: 305), others have pushed further for a complete dissolution of ontological distinction between realms. Schwanen et al. (2008) conceive of an 'inter-weaving' of 'real' and digital space-times, which is informed by everyday experience. They go further, however, to warn against the technological determinism that follows naturally from dualistic thinking. By falsely concealing the wider social and political contexts in which technologically mediated socio-spatial encounters take place, they convincingly argue, it "denotes the tendency to assume the introduction or diffusion of a new technology ... [as having] ... direct and determinate casual effects on societies or socio-spatial processes" (Schwanen et al., 2008: 520). Kinsley (2014) proposes the concept of 'technics' as a means of uniting the materiality of both organic (human) and inorganic (technological) worlds by focussing on a transcendental set of ever-emergent relationships between the 'human' and the 'technological' that emanate from performance/performativity. This vision of technics, he further argues, can help human geographers deal with culture and cultural processes by exploring the ways in which the sharing of meanings, knowledge, memory and history are mediated through technology and language. Whilst he counters that story-telling and oral histories may fall outside the realms of technicity, we further contend that this theorisation fails to attend to the embodied and sensory processes involved in shared meaning-making. This is not to say that embodied or sensory meanings may not also be co-constituted through technology, but it points to a need to caution against pervasiveness being used to over-emphasise the role of technology in mediating contemporary social relations and cultural forms, and to allow for differences and divergences between forms of socio-spatial encounter to remain a valid subject of empirical enquiry.

In setting out their argument Valentine and Holloway (2002: 305) rejected "any suggestion that on-line and off-line worlds are oppositionally different or unconnected". In this paper we concur with their argument on connectivity but draw into question their argument on difference. We think it essential to maintain academic scrutiny on differences, especially as they manifest themselves in the lived experiences of young smartphone users. Such scrutiny, we further argue, is what allows a sustained moral and political engagement with the impacts of

digital technology, without *prima facie* taking a particular moral position that precedes rather than derives from empirical research.

## 2.2. Young people and digital technologies: well-being and socio-spatial relationships in outdoor activities

For the purposes of the current study, and given the proliferation of societal concerns, we explore here the intersection between young people's wellbeing, digital technology use and socio-spatial relationships. This is a complex and multi-dimensional topic and our more specific focus here is on young people's engagement with outdoor spaces and outdoor pursuits. For the reasons outlined in the previous section, we maintain that there is a need for a sustained focus on differences and distinctions in relationships that are mediated by, or in the absence of social media and smartphones. We are safe to assume that there *may* be negative implications of social media and smartphone use by young people, without assuming that this need necessarily and always be the case, nor that these implications are technologically determined rather than being embedded within wider social, political and economic contexts (Schwanen et al., 2008, e.g. see Docherty, 2020).

### 2.2.1. Social media and wellbeing

The complex relationship between wellbeing, social media use and the quality of social relationships is often expressed through recourse to the internet paradox; whereby that very tool of vastly expanded networked connectivity is also blamed for increases in social isolation and weakened social relationships in other/offline settings (Papacharissi, 2005). Though Kraftl and Mills (2014) suggest it is important to bear in mind that narratives surrounding young people's use of technology are inevitably hyperbolic and critical in nature, studies such as those by Thulin and Vilhelmson (2019; 2020) show that it is now almost inevitable that young people's daily priorities are shaped by their use of social media and their phones have become indispensable extensions of themselves. However, there is significant concern over the impact of social media use on young people's mental health. Adolescence has been discussed as an important time of change in which individuals develop their self-esteem and self-confidence. These traits may be damaged by the narcissistic cultures produced online, which see users managing their appearance for networks of weak ties, rather than model their behaviour as they would with their close, offline connections (Barak et al., 2000; Gössling and Stavrandi, 2016). When researchers for Facebook – the largest social media platform on the planet – admit to there being a correlation between passive browsing and negative mental health outcomes (Levin, 2017) we need to start taking the issue seriously in our academic endeavours.

### 2.2.2. Spatial relationships and consumption of space via social media

Smartphone-linked social media has also been argued to have a profound impact on the human experience of space. These impacts can variably be shown to consider the positive (booster) and negative (debunker) influences of smartphone technology on spatial encounters but taken together demonstrate the importance of considering the influence of technology non-deterministically; not to reject manifestly different experiences, but to consider such difference in wider context.

Hochman and Manovich (2013) argue that the ways in which we come to know the world have changed as our media practices have shifted, but such changes in the ways in which we relate to one another need not be a negative thing. For example, Instagram has changed how people interact with places; users employ the site as a tool to make sense of, and give meaning to, places from across the world (Lazzarini and Lopez-Baeza, 2016; Arts et al., 2021). The increasing use of image-based social media, it is argued, has allowed us to map our memories onto place with more ease. Through these uploads, it is possible to capture particular insights into people's experiences of a given place during a particular time period. As a result, our notion of place has now taken on a more dynamic form which can be influenced by our online networks.

Individuals can engage in the co-construction of a place, connecting 'two theres' through overlaying geographic and temporal information in the caption associated with their image, and in doing so, generate a shared emotional experience which lends itself to a feeling of co-presence (Hjorth and Hendry, 2015; Parisi, 2015).

In a different vein, however, the links between visual consumption, commodification and abstraction have been argued to have negative consequences for spatial encounters, and for the places and resident communities that are ficklely pedestalled or erased as specific representations of an ideal-type location or as conveyors of a particular form of fleeting identification. Twelve years prior to the launch of Instagram, MacNaghten and Urry (1998) highlighted the 'commodification of the countryside', suggesting that the traditional, majestic, and awe-inspiring qualities of the English countryside were readily consumed by the public whilst the significance of the vernacular and locally distinctive were downplayed. Now, through interactions of the material and virtual world, it is possible to access images of attractive locations from across the world with a simple search and consume them in the comfort of our own home (Winders, 2016). Despite Instagram's reduction of the world to a series of 'slices' (Boy and Uitermark, 2017: 616), experiences in locations which are referred to as 'Instagrammable' are becoming increasingly important to site-users and, thus, increasingly mediate their engagement with places (Siegel et al., 2019; Arts et al., 2021). The result is a superficial, curated version of a 'staged reality' in which images are manipulated to increase the number of positive responses they receive (Koskowski, 2019). This leads people to engage more with, and place more value in, the idea of obtaining a manicured image, based upon those which have been popular before, which they can present to their followers, as opposed to valuing the place and those with whom they enjoy the experience (Dryden and McCumber, 2017). In this light, we may contend that Instagram provides an archetypal example of what Auge would refer to as the 'emptying of consciousness' in relation to places within the era of supermodernity (1995: 75).

### 2.2.3. Engagement with the outdoors

The third line of enquiry relevant to the current study, goes beyond the impact of digital technologies on our conceptual engagement with place, to the impact on young people's physical engagement with place, and especially 'outdoor' pursuits and their attendant benefits.

In a quantitative study of 15–24-year-olds in Sweden Thulin and Vilhelmson (2019) found that heavy users of digital technology spent less time on exercise, leisure travel and being outdoors than light or moderate users. Whilst these authors focus on the first-order relationships rather than any positive/negative second-order consequences, the findings lend support to academics and commentators concerned about the impacts of social media on young people's exercise, engagement with nature and the outdoors, physical and mental health.

The interest in getting young people outdoors is reflected in a growing body of literature on the topic, which over the last 20 years has covered young people's experiences of residential fieldtrips (e.g. Davidson, 2001; Bailey, 2003; Gee, 2015; Hickman-Dunne, 2018); the implications of their experiences on their perception of place (e.g. Tunstall et al, 2004; Kalvaitis and Monhardt, 2012) and how they negotiate their identities during these experiences (e.g. Mycock, 2018; Kraftl, 2022). Outdoor education is promoted as helping to boost young people's self-esteem and self-awareness (Barak et al., 2000; Bailey, 2003), whilst also playing an important role in generating deeper (or different) social relationships which are characterised by more fluid social hierarchies (McCrindle, 2011; Hordyk et al., 2015). Though these authors' exact lines of enquiry are nuanced, they share a common view: these experiences have the potential to improve young 'technological natives' relations with the outdoors – with nature 'nurturing' children (Hordyk et al., 2015) and, in turn, improving their understanding of (and thus care for) the inherent value of the environments with which they interact (Nicol, 2014).

Several authors have explored the way in which technology, from the

mundane (Hickman-Dunne, 2018) to the modern (e.g. Smith and Dunkley, 2018), mediates young people's experience of the outdoors. Looking specifically at the role of technologically aided navigation among young people, McCullough and Collins (2019) found that the absence of technological aids could lead to a fuller sensory awareness and experience of place, as well as a more social experience of place. This was necessitated as the senses and social interactions played a more significant role in way-finding. McCullough and Collins make clear, however, that they do not consider digital aids as 'inherently detrimental to way-finding or to the experience of place' but they instead 'seek to encourage more critical consideration of how digital technologies might be used to encourage sensory, social and emotional engagement with place as part of way-finding' (2019: 485). They thus uphold that very real differences in engagement can result from the presence/absence of technology, without adopting a deterministic or dismissive position. We share this approach to the empirical study of difference and heed the call of McCullough and Collins for further research into how 'digital technologies mediate young people's way-finding, particularly in relation to their sensory engagements with place and forms of sociality that contribute to making it both navigable and meaningful' (2019: 481). Navigation is a central dimension to the DoE Award scheme that we describe here, but our empirical focus is as much on place and meaning-making as it is on way-finding *per se*.

### 2.3. Sensuous encounters, shared encounters, moral encounters

By combining literatures on sensory experience with moral geographies and the heuristic concept of shared difficulties/struggles we here chart a theoretical course which lays the ground for distinguishing (without reifying or fixing) the positive attributes of non-technologically mediated encounters for young people.

#### 2.3.1. Sensing place

There are two oft-cited points from Tuan (1977) that are useful from which to begin our exposition of the sensory-cum-moral nature of embodied socio-spatial encounters. The first is that place only achieves 'concrete reality' when it is experienced through 'all the senses' and with 'an active and reflective mind' (Tuan, 1977: 18). The second is that young people understand the world through more sensuous means than the adult (Tuan, 1977: 185; Mackley et al., 2015). Following Tuan (among others – e.g., Rodaway, 1994) Bartos (2013) explores the relationship between sensuous experience, emotions and place-making among children. Through overlooked senses, such as smell and taste, she argues, children ascribe special meanings to place, and embody specific forms of knowledge and agency. Taking an ethnographic and phenomenological approach to cyclists' sensuous engagement with landscape, meanwhile, Spinney (2006) focuses on the importance of kinaesthetics, and especially the muscular pain experienced during ascent. Such an approach, he argues, helps to illustrate 'how an embodied approach to interpretation can uncover alternative pre-representational meanings of place' (p. 712) and that through direct participation 'pain and the landscape take on different meanings' (p. 729) to those which are increasingly mediated by the textual and the visual. Although Bartos and Spinney are not explicitly contrasting the embodied experience of place with the fleeting and visually mediated experience afforded by social media use, their work helps draw into focus the potential differences of experience, and of place and identity, between the two. Indeed, Boy and Uitermark (2017) look at the role of Instagram in mediating socio-spatial relationships in Amsterdam. They show how the consumption of the city through this medium leads to a 'seemingly interminable series of peak moments' as 'users train their eye to spot slices of the world around them worthy of embalming' (p. 616). They argue that this not only conceals the mundane and negative elements of everyday life, but that the medium itself serves to shape practices as 'users act out aesthetic and lifestyle ideals as they craft images and strategically display aspects of their life-

worlds' (p. 622). This form of engagement, they further argue, creates both excitement and stress as users are acutely aware of the images' selectivity and the onus upon them to conform to the platform's aesthetic norms.

#### 2.3.2. Morals and Socio-spatiality

The moral dimensions to these differences are brought into sharper focus when we bring back in socio-spatiality and the interactions between places and social others, which require a process of 'negotiating the here-and-now' (Massey, 2005: 140). Whilst it is now possible to be in contact with anyone, at any time, it has been argued that the virtual networks we develop are both psychologically and socially *different* to those we maintain in face-to-face relations with our friends and peers (Gössling and Stavrandi, 2016). Whilst not keeping pace with rapidly accelerating developments in digital technologies, Adams' (1998) 'Network topologies and virtual place' remains one of the best-versed and most complete articulations of the moral implications of alternatively mediated sociospatial engagements with place. Adams' conceptual focus is on the role of digital technologies (but not in and of themselves) in the long-term sociospatial processes of globalisation, distanciation (the progressive stretching out of social relations across space), and disembedding (the loss of the social and psychological importance of physically defined places). Distanciation and disembedding, he argues, 'reduce the moral efficacy of place' with computer networks contributing to this dynamic and injecting 'ambiguity into the moral condition of modernity' (Adams, 1998: 96). This is because these processes reduce the proximity and frequency of social sanctions and shield individuals from the consequences of their own actions (see Adams, 1998 pp. 95–96 for examples).

A recent study by Thulin et al (2020) into the impact of smartphones on social relationships brings some of the moral consequences identified by Adams firmly into the 21st Century. Drawing on qualitative research with high school students in Sweden, Thulin et al focus their empirical research upon the pervasive and perpetual mediated presence of friends in relation to the foregrounding activities of everyday life. They identify three concurrent processes, which are of relevance and interest to our current study and line of argument:

- (1) Interwoven Presence: 'the harmonious interweaving of located and mediated presences and rhythms as deeply integrated in social activity' (p. 177)
- (2) Lingering Ambivalence and Intensified Congestion: whereby 'mediated presences hamper, delay, or threaten the socially competent conduct of [foregrounding] activities' (p. 178)
- (3) Colocated Absence: whereby 'extensive mediated copresences reinforce a sense of absence in the ordered pockets of everyday life because connectivity to distant places trumps corporeal proximity' (pp. 178–9)

The first of these processes can be presented in a broadly positive light, and empirically supports arguments for the dissolution of boundaries across digital and 'real' worlds. The second and third processes, however, emphasise differences and tensions between social relationships that are simultaneously mediated in online and foregrounded settings. The young people interviewed self-reported that the differing demands, norms and expectations across realms were not always harmoniously interwoven and could instead be in conflict and congested. Moreover, the sense of absence could be heightened within co-located presences, precisely because the not there-ness of smartphone users is emphasised within silent constellations of individuals who may intentionally be using their devices as 'involvement shields' to afford privacy and detachment from the trickier and otherwise unavoidable encounters that may be faced in everyday life (Thulin et al., 2020, following Park, 2013). Walmsley (2000) has argued that online forms of sociality are less constrained by the ties of social obligation and that relationships between humans are increasingly dominated by choice.

Such choices resonate clearly with the individualising condition of modernity, or in other words of neoliberal subjectivities.

It becomes clear from the above discussion that the moral function of place as described by Adams, rests in part on the propensity for difficult encounters, which require moral judgement and response. In contrast, smartphone use is one example of how socially difficult situations can be avoided, which has attendant moral and political consequences. Taking this idea of difficulty one step further, our focus in this paper is to emphasise the importance of co-located and *shared* difficulties and to further tie this to the kinaesthetic experience of difficulty in the completion of outdoor challenges (e.g. Urry, 2002; Spinney, 2006). We may also extend the moral efficacy of place beyond obligations to social others, but to the environments and more-than-human others encountered along the way. Rooney (2019), for instance, has suggested that young people's corporeal engagement with landscape and the weather may inform an ethical consideration of wider climate emergencies, whilst sharing such encounters with others can lead to the development of common perceptions of a given place or environmental issue.

### 3. Methods

The use of qualitative methods allowed for the research to be conducted *with* young people, as opposed to simply *on* them (Hickman-Dunne, 2018; Tillmann et al., 2018). Data collection required occupying several roles – researcher, group supervisor and teacher. Naturally, this work involved negotiating different balances of power. Whilst Rose (1997, p. 307) argues that ‘power [is] inherent in the production of knowledge’, recognising and responding to imbalances of power was essential in ensuring data collection was ethical and findings were valid, representative, and fair for the participants (Dowling, 2016). Addressing these power balances informed the choice of methodologies; they were chosen to give the young people multiple opportunities to talk for themselves.

By including methodologies which allowed participants to take control of elements of the research, it is possible to capture their experiences in far greater detail and consider their world views (Hickman-Dunne, 2018). Prior to data collection, the research was approved by the University of Birmingham's School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences ethics committee and informed consent was sought from the school, participants, and participants' parents. The approach used here was informed by several previous studies with young people in similar outdoor settings (e.g., Bailey, 2003; Hickman-Dunne, 2018). It comprised 27 semi-structured walking interviews, 12 group interviews, and 17 days of participant observation with DoFE participants between the ages of 14 and 18, undertaking different Award levels (see Campbell et al., 2009: 16–17), from an independent secondary school in the English West Midlands (Table 1). In the findings that follow, the names of the participants are pseudonyms.

The semi-structured walking interviews were conducted at various points along each groups' route to gain an understanding of participants' individual experiences and the elements of the expedition that were most important to them (Bailey, 2003; Dunn, 2016). Walking in a ‘go-along’ fashion prompted participants to discuss their responses to

**Table 1**  
Expedition and participant details.

Award Level [Code used in analysis]	Location	Participants, Age (in years)
Bronze [B1]	South Warwickshire	7 girls, 14/15
Bronze [B2]	South Warwickshire	7 girls, 14/15
Silver [S1]	White Peak, Peak District	1 boy, 15
Silver [S2]	White Peak, Peak District	1 boy, 15
Gold [G1]	Black Mountains, South Wales	2 girls, 7 boys, 16–18
Bronze [B3]	South Warwickshire	2 boys, 14/15

their immediate surroundings and feelings in more detail and allowed us to share some of their personal experience with them (Jones et al., 2008; Gray and Birrell, 2015; Zimmermann and Saura, 2016; Mycock, 2018). Throughout this paper we refer to the increased ‘richness’ or ‘fullness’ of experience reported by young people and consider this in terms of the senses, social interactions, reflection and relatability, awareness and understanding. It is important to stress that the *differences* we identify between smartphone mediated and unmediated encounters are based on the accounts of the young people themselves. Nevertheless, on account of the intersubjective nature of the methods employed they are also experiences that we shared with them. The semi-structured group interviews were important in understanding the ways in which each group generated a collective knowledge of the places they were visiting and gave the young people an opportunity to negotiate multiple meanings of the events which had taken place on their expeditions (Cameron, 2016). The post-expedition interviews, meanwhile, were particularly insightful as they provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences.

A digital action camera was given to each group for the duration of their expedition, and participants were asked to record moments of significance to demonstrate their way of seeing without the distraction of social media and the opportunity to share their photos. This method is sensitive of the participatory and creative culture to which the participants belong (Vartiainen and Enkenberg, 2014) and its use was informed by several papers in Children's Geographies and Outdoor Education studies which seek to address the power relations present in this type of research by making their methods more inclusive (including Tunstall et al., 2004; Bartos, 2013; Smith and Dunkley, 2018; Hickman-Dunne, 2018).

Interviews were transcribed and analysed iteratively. Significant themes from the literature and research questions guided initial coding, with further categories added to the framework with each subsequent round of coding. The photographs and videos taken by the young people were placed into categories determined by their content and analysed alongside the interview transcripts and participant observation notes to enhance understanding of the data and triangulate findings to ensure they were robust (Hemming, 2008; Kalvaitis and Monhardt, 2012).

### 4. Findings and discussion

#### 4.1. Isolation and missing the smartphone

Before exploring the differences and reported benefits of socio-spatial experience in the absence of smartphones it is important to point out that the experience was not an entirely untroubling one for the young people taking part in the DoFE. Some participants expressed an initial anxiety at missing out on engagement with their social network, or in the habitual practice of posting images to social media sites:

**Bella [B2]:** “I guess it's only because you know everyone else at home has their phone. If no one had a phone it'd be fine, but you're missing out”

**Bella [B2]:** ‘It's like you take a picture and you just can't wait to get WiFi and post it’

**Jaya [B2]:** ‘I felt really uncomfortable, it's weird, not being able to have WiFi or data, and go on social media and stuff’

Whilst such sentiments may easily be dismissed as manifestations of the FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) phenomenon, which characterises the experience of the digital native generation, it is important not to downplay the importance of relationships maintained through, or interwoven with, digital technologies. Daisy [G1], for instance, said that being without her phone could make her feel isolated from ‘the outside world’, which can have genuine implications for mental health if interwoven presences (Thulin et al., 2020) are part and parcel of young people's habituated patterns of socialising.

Others did not talk explicitly about the absence of their smartphones on the DoFE, but referred to the difficulties of being ‘stuck’ with people

they would prefer not to be:

**Jamie [G1]:** *I think it makes me hate the people I'm with... cos I just get irate very quickly, so if someone's like, not listening to you and like.. I just have a really short temper....*

**Dan [G1]:** *If everyone has the right attitude it can be really good, but if someone is being really negative it just, like it can get quite bad.*

These examples reflect the difficult inter-personal relationships encountered during the DofE expedition and the non-selectivity of social relationships. They do not reflect a distinction between online and embodied forms of engagement per se, but it can be envisaged how the inability to cope with such situations is exacerbated by young people's increasing ability (through technological interventions) to have self-interested choice over social relations and to toggle in or out of social engagements. In Section 4.4, we will explore further examples of where difficult encounters, and shared difficulties have more positive outcomes. The important point, however, is that regardless of positive or negative outcomes, the encountering of physically located difficulties (by 'avoiding the easy route') marks out and emphasises the moral function of co-located presences in physical spaces.

#### 4.2. Sensuous engagement beyond the consumptive capture

In other circumstances, being away from technology and especially photo-sharing platforms was a welcome change for the young people.

**Ria [B2]:** *'I realised this, the jokes that I remember and stuff, and like, the really deep stuff always happens on DofE because you don't have your phones to go on. You actually talk to your friends without realising it'.*

Here, Ria suggests not only that the absence of the smartphone leads to more face-to-face communication with her friends, but that the experiences involved in the DofE have deeper and more memorably lasting impacts. Grace [B1], meanwhile, expressed that the outdoor environment in the absence of the smartphone made her feel that she was less constantly being judged by people, which in turn had a positive impact on her emotional wellbeing. It is interesting, therefore, to contrast the impact of heavily curated and highly pressured shots for apps such as Instagram with the camera derived photos taken by the young people during their expeditions. Upon being made aware that the photographs and videos they recorded on the action camera would be used solely for the research, and shared no further, participants were keen to record as much of their expeditions as they could. Being given the option to record the highs and lows of their expedition, with no pressure to conform to the expectations of their online communities, generally meant photos and videos were candid reflections of each group's experience. For Alice [B1] this was a marked difference to the photographs her and her peers would usually take, which are almost 'always posed'.

Alice's comment on the 'posed' nature of the images she would usually take speaks to Boy and Uitermark's (2017) findings in their study of Amsterdam, in which 'users craft images' for display on Instagram. Alice was not alone in her reflection on Instagram's influence on her relationship with the world. On the second Bronze expedition [B2], the girls reflected further on their engagement with the world beyond the consumptive capture, which is often shaped by norms of what is 'Instagrammable' (Arts et al., 2021). As we walked through South Warwickshire, discussing the completeness of a sensory experience of a landscape, the girls explained how they felt that the desire to chase social media worthy photographs damaged their relationship with the world. They felt that the search for 'slices of the world ... worthy of embalming' (Boy and Uitermark, 2017: 616) causes a distraction rather than encouraging them to focus on what they were experiencing:

**Interviewer:** *'So do you think if you'd had your phones and you wanted to take photos and stuff you'd have paid more attention to your surroundings?'*

**All [B1]:** *'Less'*

**Interviewer:** *'Even if you were going for the perfect Insta photo?'*

**Lily [B1]:** *'Still less'*

**Grace [B1]:** *'You're not looking at it in the same way'*

**Ruby [B1]:** *You have that constant distraction in your head so you're not looking at anything properly'*

As well as a lack of distraction allowing the young people to be more attentive to their physical surroundings, the comment from Grace here (not looking at it in the same way) points to a different way of experiencing place in the absence of the smartphone, one in which they are more attentive to the mundane elements of everyday life, which Boy and Uitermark (2017) argue are not usually considered fit for consumption on Instagram. This is one that goes beyond the relatively superficial, visually consumptive and momentary experience afforded by photo-sharing apps.

Indeed, many of the young people expressed the fuller and more sensuous and affective experience of place that the DofE allowed. When asked if a photograph would capture what they were doing and how they were feeling, their responses echoed the incommunicable nature of personal experience:

**Ruby [B1]:** *'If someone took a photo and I looked back on it, I'll remember how happy and fun it was, but I don't think someone else could feel the same way. They wouldn't understand what it was like to be here'*

**Oscar [G1]:** *'When you're experiencing it it's just not the same, it doesn't feel real if it's just a photograph'*

Participants described sensory experiences which they felt would be completely absent from a photograph. For example, though touch goes largely unnoticed in our day to day lives, and is now often used as a means of scrolling on a screen, being able to get close enough to touch, or be touched by, things outdoors led to some significant moments for the young people:

**Elliot [S2]:** *'Climbing that hill and touching the trig point on the second day was a good feeling. That was the highest point of the whole expedition so reaching it made me realise I could do the rest'*

**Liam [G1]:** *'It's one thing for sitting in a classroom and looking at pictures, but then actually going means you can link the things you see to the stuff you've experienced. If it's just a picture on a screen you don't link anything to it because it's just a picture, whereas when you're there you link it to the sounds you're hearing, the noises, the smells, what you're actually experiencing'*

**Jamie [G1]:** *'When you're in the mountains and you're looking up at a slated hill and you're stood there yourself and you feel everything around you there's something kind of magical about it that you can't experience through a photo'*

This deeper, and more fully sensuous experience of place was also a specifically collective socio-spatial experience; one that allowed for different types of social interaction/relationship, simultaneously with the forging of stronger connections to the physical environment.

#### 4.3. Fuller socio-spatial experiences: shared encounters

There was clear evidence across all expeditions that not having their phones offered participants an enriched experience, both of the environment they were walking in, and the relationships they were developing with their peers.

**Harriet [B1]:** *'Not having our phones makes a difference, because we all spend like, 24 hours a day on our phones usually. Out here we can't do that which is good because it means we're actually appreciating what's around us and who we're with.'*

A commonly expressed sentiment was that spending time with one another without having others to text or call helped the young people develop deeper social bonds with their peers. This suggests that focusing on their screens (the 'easy route') is not only detrimental to their environmental awareness, but it also has a significant impact on their interactions with the people around them. Our findings thus conversely support those of Thulin et al. (2020) with benefits attributed to the reduced levels of congestion, ambivalence and co-present absence:

**Umar [S1]:** *'Well walking would've been really bad. Cos people, well first of all we wouldn't have been looking at the map. And second of all we wouldn't have talked to anyone'*

**Dan [G1]:** *'It's more about the people that you're with, you're not just walking round on your phones or whatever, you're all talking and communicating'*

Improved communication was particularly evident on the campsites in the evening, when groups sat together cooking and reflecting on their days. As Elliot noted, this was a result of being in one another's presence. His comments about being with his friends suggest that young people do still place value in face-to-face interactions with their peers, with social media serving as a medium to maintain these connections when such interactions are not possible:

**Elliot [S2]:** *'As soon as I sat down I wasn't like, I need to go on my phone. I think it's cos you're with people and friends ... On my own, I feel like I'd probably need to go on my phone, especially in the tent cos there's no one else to talk to or anything else to do.'*

The absence of their phones also gave some individuals an opportunity to relax, as the pressure of being in constant communication with their peers was removed:

**Bella [B2]:** *'We don't have any phones so we don't have to be in touch with anyone and can just appreciate the fresh air and stuff'*

We showed in the previous section how co-present encounters were perceived to be sensuously and emotionally richer than visual encounters mediated via social media. This sharing of emotional experiences with others, and in particular the shared overcoming of difficulties also has a strongly social dimension to it:

**Jess, [G1]:** *'When you finish the expedition together you have a group celebration, and you couldn't have that with anyone else because you've all worked to get to that point together. It really brings you closer together'*

**Alice, [B1]:** *'People can relate, so if someone's saying 'oh my bag's hurting' you can share it [the feeling] too'*

Participants' reactions demonstrate the 'inherently cultural and interpersonal' (Farman, 2012: 26) nature of embodied encounters with the outdoors. This highlights how our perception of a place is enmeshed in the close social relationships we develop through experiences within it and within our wider socio-cultural context.

#### 4.4. Overcoming shared difficulties and the moral function of landscape

The conversations students had, particularly in their post-expedition interviews, shed light on the co-construction of place, with participants often building on one another's comments about the places they had visited with their own, personal reflections. Their understandings of places were facilitated through their social relationships, which they curated as they walked, sharing gossip and food, singing songs and physically helping one another along on trickier sections of the walk to keep morale high:

**Dan [G1]:** *'You're trying to keep team spirits high so you're probably getting to know people a bit better, especially if they're people you don't normally spend much time with'*

Being together, and enjoying the experience, is particularly important as social relations can have a significant impact on our understandings of places (Massey, 2005; Cameron, 2016; Hickman-Dunne, 2018). Given that the young people felt positively towards their group members most of the time in turn allowed them to foster a more positive connection with their surroundings, which meant they felt they learned more throughout the walk too:

**Grace [B1]:** *'If you're with other people then the experience is different, because they're part of everything that's happening too'*

**Jamie [G1]:** *'We all have different ways of experiencing the landscape, we've all got our own definitions. So by going through it together we can sort of like, share it and it's more of a collective thing'*

The above examples variously demonstrate how specific types of

socio-spatial co-present encounters have a distinctly moral dimension to them, with specific consequences that, in turn, require specific responses. Moreover, we have emphasised that it is underlined by the co-present experience of shared difficulties (which conjoin both kin-aesthetic engagement with the physical landscape and the non-selectivity of social encounters) that are felt, sensed and corporeally embodied, which serves to render places as meaningful and moral, necessitating and delineating responses that are both socially and environmentally attentive. Be it the deeply situated sharing of feeling pain, or of joy/achievement, or even just 'talking to people' and 'appreciating the fresh air' bring moral issues more sharply into focus. We thus see efforts to empathise and to 'keep team spirits high', to better appreciate and develop shared understandings of landscape.

To contradistinguish these experiences from the visual consumption of outdoor environments through photo-sharing apps, which requires them to 'come out of a moment to enable them to capture that moment' (Dunkley and Smith, 2022: 533), the young people on the DofE experience a much deeper form of sharing; a visceral form of co-presence that is so ineffable and immediate that the 'capture' of that experience - inscribed in bodies, blisters and shared memories - is far harder to forget, ignore, or scroll-on from.

By building on our previous work into the relationship between the experiential and political approaches to landscape (Emery and Carrithers, 2016), we may take this moral dimension one step further. This requires us to consider the relationality of landscape and go beyond viewing it as a canvas (or even an active canvas) upon which the moral and political dimensions of everyday life are played out. Our last two examples point to the ability of the landscape to 'speak' to the young people about the wider social and political issues that it draws in; to deepen consciousness, awareness and critical reflection.

In the following example we see how Bella relates her experience to wider environmental concerns about a housing development elsewhere:

**Bella [B2]:** *'Yeah, it's important, because, erm, a local area near me, they want to scrap some farmland to make 500 new homes and there's been so much uproar about it because it's removing a piece of nature and you wouldn't understand what the uproar was about unless you've experienced something like this, like you can understand how important the farmed areas are and the natural landscape and beauty.'*

Bella stresses that the understanding derives from the present experience and relates this to a spatially distant issue. She also mentions farming, the traces of which were clearly present within the landscapes the students were walking through. The following examples further show how the experience of landscape may not only be related to spatially distant political issues, but to the imbricated politics of those people (farmers and rural communities) that share the immediate landscape, even though they are not co-present during the encounters themselves:

**Alisha [B2]:** *'When everyone's walking through the fields of the farmers, I know we stay single file to not ruin it but you're still walking through the farmers' livelihood, like that's how they make a living, and cos of like, the Brexit stuff and the deals and the prices, like it could be bad and then their produce is getting cheaper, no, more expensive, well anyway, we're spoiling it sometimes by walking through their fields.'*

**Liam [G1]:** *'I think some people won't get the opportunity to travel, and then they'll go to school, stay in the city, get a job and stay in the city, and they won't go out into the countryside and see it's a beautiful place. They're missing out on a lot.'*

**Daisy [G1]:** *'Yeah, people need to understand what is going on around them in the world as well, and I think that's where lots of people fall down or fall short these days, they don't have... perhaps they don't have the opportunity, but you know when they don't come here they don't see the other side of living.'*

Such engagements - via the landscape - with rural livelihoods even led some students to reflect critically on the DofE scheme itself, and to emphasise the need for a more deeply shared socio-spatial encounter to



enrich the experience:

**Liam [G1]:** *At the moment it's just walking really, there's nothing else to it, but if you add an aspect of getting hands on it's more of the sort of thing you'd do in the country' -*

**Daisy [G1]:** *All we're doing is walking, and our feet hurt. And it would be really nice to maybe stop for an hour or two and learn about lambing, or help with the animals. That'd be great.'*

Liam and Daisy suggest that a direct experience of completing a farm task would add considerable value to their overall experience. Beyond this, it also has the potential to contribute to their knowledge of a farmer's way of life, and broader issues related to agriculture in the UK. Their evident personal motivation to complete such a task would also enhance their learning experience (Bailey, 2003). The main aim of the expedition section is to encourage participants to develop initiative and work as part of a team to complete a journey; however, there is the potential for each expedition to include an element of planned activity which does improve participants' awareness of the world around them through active participation.

What we wish to argue is that this desire for the 'hands-on' – for the deeply shared socio-spatial experience - motivates, and is motivated by, moral engagement with place. We support Rooney (2019) in suggesting that young people should be offered opportunities to 'slow down', avoid the easy route, and explore their interconnections with the world around them, such that they may be afforded greater capacity for responding to future land and climate related political issues in creative and attentive ways.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper we have focussed on the *differences* in young people's socio-spatial and moral encounters afforded by the absence of their smartphones. We have shown that such encounters may be more sensuously rich, more deeply shared with others and lead to increased or different levels of awareness and understanding. The young people in our study discussed this as a more enriching overall *experience*. Put differently, and to boil this down to simple but important and highly inter-related terms used by the young people themselves, these particular *experiences* provided opportunity/space for *sensing/feeling*, for *sharing*, for *reflecting*, for *relating* and for altering *awareness* and *understanding*. We have related such changes in awareness and understanding to the moral function of place and the important role of facing or overcoming *difficulties* in unfamiliar landscapes (thus, avoiding the easy route). Such difficulties often conjoin the kinaesthetic, the affective and the social, creating specific types of encounter that would unlikely be mediated through a smartphone alone. Going one step further, we have also suggested that sensing and relating to the landscape also affords the young people space to engage with wider moral and political issues. Put differently, we might suggest that the wider issues that the landscape draws-in pose *difficult* moral and political questions that the young people may also share with one another and reflect upon.

It may be a step too far (based on our evidence here) to suggest that young people experience some political awakening through experiences such as these, but it is pertinent to draw links to the political geographic literatures that emphasise the importance of shared physical places for the formation and maintenance of emancipatory political subjectivities (e.g. Kearns, 1995; Nicholls, 2009). Links might also be drawn to critical literatures which question the likes of Castells' (1996) and Hardt and Negri's (2005) optimistic accounts of the role of digital networks in configuring new political subjectivities. Bennett and Segerberg (2011), for instance, have suggested that digital networks may facilitate more in the way of 'connected action' as opposed to 'collective action', whilst others have suggested a need for greater critical attention to the 'paranodal' (Mejias, 2010), to the wider sociological phenomena and relations which sit beyond the nodes in a network or run counter to the myth of sociality propagated by media platforms themselves (Couldry, 2015). Whilst it has been beyond our scope here, we suggest that further

work could usefully pursue an engagement with the critical phenomenology of landscapes (e.g. Hannah, 2013; Emery & Carrithers, 2016; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020) to more fully consider the role of digital technologies (both in presence and absence) in mediating the relationship between embodied experience and political subjectivity.

We have taken care to make the above points without elevating the role of technology per se in mediating young people's socio-spatial relationships or moral engagements. We must remember, of course, that there were other dimensions to these encounters that took young people out of their 'normal comfort zones' and provided space for sensing, sharing, reflecting and relating. The DofE expeditions intentionally took young people to *different* types of environment and required them to engage in *different* types of activity than would be typical in their everyday lives. The expeditions are designed to provide new experiences with attendant benefits for the formative development of young people; in examining these experiences, this paper builds on Smith et al.'s (2022) collection to provide additional insight into young people's varied engagements with different landscapes. It is also important to consider the role of the research process itself in encouraging reflection among our participants. We must acknowledge, therefore, that it is the sensing, the sharing, the relating and reflecting that are important for young people, but these can be encouraged and achieved in many different ways (including with the use of technology). Notwithstanding this, we must also consider how smartphone mediated encounters *can* often, and in the terms of young people themselves, lead to greater 'congestion' and 'ambivalence', which work against the imperatives for providing space to relate, reflect and alter awareness (Thulin et al., 2020). We therefore agree with McCullough and Collins' (2019: 485) call for further 'critical consideration of how digital technologies might be used to encourage sensory, social and emotional engagement with place'. With their specific focus on way-finding McCullough and Collins also conclude by asking whether new types of technologically mediated encounter that are sensitive to the sensory and affective can ever negate the benefits of way-finding in the absence of technology. Our focus here - beyond way-finding - also raises questions about smartphone use in other settings. As discussed, the unique and reflective experiences afforded by the DofE expeditions were only in part a consequence of the smartphones being left at home. We must take care, therefore, not to delineate specific types of space for exceptional experiences that are, in some ways, themselves carefully curated by the organisers of the scheme to have profound impacts upon the young participants. This is not to suggest that the DofE is not doing an excellent job in facilitating such experiences, nor that understandings and critical reflections prompted by the experience do not have broader and lasting impacts. It suggests, rather, that we also need to attend to the role of smartphones in mediating place-making, social relations and moral awareness in more everyday settings. Perhaps it is precisely the zones of high smartphone use (the domestic sphere, or public transport) where socio-spatial encounters are more likely to suffer from congestion, ambivalence and moral ambiguity? Encouraging a political interest in rural livelihoods and Brexit is no mean feat, but this should not detract from the importance in everyday life of young people being morally attentive to what, in the absence of their smartphone, would be under their nose.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Aimee L Morse:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Steven B Emery:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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