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Smartphone-Free Summer Camp: A Context for Adolescent Development of Offline

Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract

In today's society, nearly all adolescents have access to a smartphone with internet and social media connectivity, and almost half report "almost constant" online use. Studies on smartphone usage have observed associations with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. In recent years, adolescents shifted from spending leisure time with peers in-person to online interactions and communication, which has been linked with feelings of loneliness. As young people now spend much of their leisure time online, there is increasing importance placed on experiences in which they are able to interact face-to-face with peers and develop social awareness, relationship skills, and interpersonal relationships offline. One such leisure context is summer camp, where technology is often not permitted. The purpose of this study was to explore adolescent perspectives of a smartphone-free residential camp experience. Results indicated that youth felt positively about the smartphone-free camp experience, they were presented with opportunities to interact socially and form deeper connections with peers offline. Findings from this study have implications for recreation and leisure practitioners, parents, and adolescents themselves.

Keywords: adolescents, smartphone, social media, smartphone-free, offline, summer camp, interpersonal relationships, social emotional learning (SEL), relationship skills, social awareness

Introduction

Adolescent Technology Use

In recent years, the use of mobile smartphones has become more prominent for all members of society, including adolescents. This new phenomena has radically shifted the types of social interactions in which young people engage. As Skierkowski and Wood described (2012), “it would appear that mobile phones have permeated almost every facet of interpersonal interaction” (p. 744). In fact, the Pew Research Center (2018) examined American teens’ (ages 13-17) internet and social media use and found that 95% of teens had access to a smartphone and 42% self-reported “almost constant” online use. While some educational settings enforce restrictions on smartphones, others use technology to enhance learning and teaching through different modalities, catering to myriad learning styles (Buck, McInnis, & Randolph, 2013). Some parents place restrictions on their children’s smartphone use, whereas others do not (Hwang & Jeong, 2015). As a result of teacher and parent restrictions, adolescents have varying amounts of time they are able to use their smartphone; however, it seems clear that adolescents are accessing their smartphones nearly every chance they get. This “almost constant” online use may have important impacts for adolescents and their interpersonal skills and relationships, particularly during leisure time.

Twenge and colleagues (2019) investigated adolescent in-person interactions and social activities and how this has shifted over the years. As compared with previous generations, iGen adolescents, those born in 1995 and beyond (Twenge, 2017), reported spending less time interacting with peers in various contexts including spending time with friends, going to parties,

and dating. These declines in social interactions occurred as adolescent use of digital media increased dramatically (Twenge, Cooper, Joiner, Duffy, & Binau, 2018), which suggests that adolescents shifted from in-person interactions to online interactions with peers (Twenge, Spitzberg, & Campbell, 2019). Increased time and interactions online may hinder young people's development of important skills.

The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Framework

The SEL concept arose from theories of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and became a focus for many educators who emphasized the importance of non-cognitive skills that are essential for life success (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2007). A widely accepted model was proposed by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; 2012) and is composed of five competencies: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision-making (Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2016; Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett, & Weissberg, 2000). While adolescents may have opportunities to develop these components in various contexts, social awareness and relationship skills in particular, may be best developed in the presence of others. With findings that many adolescents are “almost constantly” on their mobile phones (Pew Research Center, 2018) and that digital media use is replacing face-to-face interactions with peers (Twenge et al., 2018; Twenge et al., 2019), it is expected that young people are faced with fewer in-person opportunities to develop social awareness and relationship skills. This lack of development in these areas may be problematic for future life success. Not only does increased smartphone use hinder this potential development, but some adolescents are also experiencing various adverse effects from technology use.

Negative Outcomes of Adolescent Technology Use

Negative outcomes found to be associated with adolescent smartphone use include anxiety (Skierkowski & Wood, 2012), reduced quality of sleep (Espinoza & Juvonen, 2011; Woods & Scott, 2016), a constant pressure to be available online (Thomee, Dellve, Harenstam & Hagberg, 2010), depression (Pantic et al., 2012), and stress (Farahani, Kazemi, Aghamohamadi, Bakhtiarvand, & Ansari, 2011). Again, as detailed above, many adolescents spend time using technology instead of interacting with others (Twenge et al., 2019). In person social interaction has been identified as a buffer against loneliness (Pea et al., 2012; Steptoe, Shankar, Demakakos, & Wardle, 2013). Furthermore, Twenge and colleagues (2019) found that adolescents who have low levels of in-person interactions with others and high levels of social media use reported greater loneliness. Underscoring all of this are reports that time adolescents previously spent interacting with others in face-to-face social contexts has been replaced with online interactions (Twenge, 2017). This shift in leisure behavior may lead to a lack of social awareness and relationship skills, which are key components of CASEL's model of SEL (2012). Findings such as these highlight the importance of examining in-person leisure contexts during which youth may be restricted from technology use and social interactions are promoted. One such context is residential summer camp.

The Summer Camp Experience

The American Camp Association (ACA, 2013) reported that over 14 million individuals attend camp each year in the USA. While camps can vary dramatically, most share goals of providing youth with a positive experience in a safe and supportive environment (Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011). Outcomes of the experience have been widely studied and include gains in

self-concept and self-esteem (Whittington, Garst, Gagnon, & Baughman, 2017), confidence (Jones, Dunn, Holt, Sullivan, & Bloom, 2011; Whittington et al., 2017; Sorenson, 2018), and independence (Whittington et al., 2017; Sorenson, 2018). Much research in this field finds the development of social relationships to be a key inherent quality and mechanism of the camp experience, and relationship skills a highly salient outcome for participants (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007; Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007; Jones et al., 2011; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013; Uhls et al., 2014). Research continually explores the contextual factors and mechanisms that promote such development at camp (Garst et al., 2011, Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2018; Wilson, Akiva, Sibthorp, & Browne, 2019; Sibthorp, Wilson, Povilaitis, & Browne, manuscript in preparation); however, it is thought that a technology free space may play an important role. Changes in culture and adolescent behavior, including time spent online and lack of in-person interactions, may be important to consider when exploring youth leisure contexts, including summer camp.

Camp and technology

Current research of the camp context without smartphones is relatively limited; however, one publication by Uhls and colleagues (2014) investigated the outcomes of a residential camp experience for youth in regard to social skills. They found that youth who did not have access to their devices for a five-day period during an overnight outdoor education camp displayed increases in understanding social cues (Uhls et al., 2014). This study provides evidence for the potential positive impact a technology-free leisure experience may have for participants and SEL development. As young people are now spending much of their leisure time online, experiences in which they are able to interact face-to-face with peers and develop interpersonal relationships

offline are becoming increasingly important. It is evident that additional exploratory research into the overall adolescent smartphone-free experience at residential camp is needed. In addition, there is a need and importance to gaining insight into the adolescents' own voices about their smartphone use. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore adolescent perspectives of a smartphone-free residential camp experience.

Methods

Participants for this study were purposefully recruited from a residential camp that serves youth and adolescents 8-17 years of age, primarily from families of middle to high socioeconomic status (SES). Two programs were offered: the general sporting program (ages 8-16), and the senior camper program (ages 15-17). It is important to note that the researcher has been a long-time staff member at the camp and has been involved with the camp and its culture for nearly a decade. As such, she has known some participants in both programs for many years and has a friendly relationship with them, which may have influenced campers' willingness to participate.

For sampling purposes participants were recruited from only the senior camper program. This was thought to be an important age to sample as according to the Pew Research Center (2018), 95% of teens have personal smartphones. The camp serves mostly individuals from high SES families. It is likely that many campers had smartphones from a young age and spent much of their leisure time online. Participants were sampled if they were attending the camp for a minimum period of two consecutive weeks during the summer of 2018 as to provide a clear and distinct separation from their smartphones during the camp experience.

All participants were under the legal age of consent, and thus information letters were sent to their legal guardians/parents detailing the study, requirements, and the primary

investigator's contact information. An opt-out consent procedure was used, wherein parents who did not want their child to participate were instructed to notify the researcher prior to their child's arrival at camp. None opted their child out. Due to the inclusion criteria (i.e., 15-17 years old, attending the camp for a minimum of two weeks, and owning a personal smartphone), a total of 46 individuals were eligible to participate. While these adolescents came from different geographical areas and personal backgrounds, they all had access to a smartphone in their home lives and were unable to have their smartphone with them while at camp. This shared experience is explored in this study.

On their arrival day, each participant was given an informational letter regarding the study and an opportunity to review this letter and ask the researcher questions. Participants were informed that by choosing to complete the initial (pre-test) questionnaire they were consenting to participate in the research, but were able to withdrawal at any time. They were also notified that during their last days of camp they would be asked to complete a brief 10 to 15-minute interview with the researcher. Both participants and their parents were encouraged to email or call the researcher at any time if questions or concerns arose during or after the study.

A total of 46 participants completed the initial questionnaire and 45 participants completed both the questionnaire and final interview (one camper left due to medical issues).

Demographics of the final sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Sample Demographics*

Demographics	Frequency (n)	Percentage
<u>Gender</u>		
Female	22	48.9
Male	23	51.1
Gender Nonconforming	0	0
<u>Age</u>		
15	19	42.2

16	13	28.9
17	13	28.9
Mean = 15.86 years		
<u>Years at camp</u>		
1	5	11.1
2	6	13.3
3	2	4.4
4	13	28.9
5	2	4.4
6	4	8.9
7	8	17.8
8	1	2.2
9	2	4.4
10	2	4.4
Mean = 4.69 years		

During the initial questionnaire, campers reported information such as time spent on their smartphones daily and the social media profiles they had. Descriptive data were analyzed using SPSS.

Within the final days at the residential camp, participants were interviewed. The interviews occurred during free-choice periods and transition times (i.e., while waiting for meals or the next activity). All participants volunteered a time to meet with the interviewer and chose their location for the interview. Most interviews occurred in a semi-secluded area of the camp property and all were outside. Interviews were semi-structured and all included three broad questions, (1) tell me about your experience at camp while apart from your smartphone, (2) how have you felt without your smartphone? and (3) do you think camp would be different if smartphones were allowed? Prompting questions were asked if needed and as interviews evolved throughout the study process. Interviews ranged from 4 minutes and 39 seconds to 28 minutes and 10 seconds ($M = 11$ minutes and 18 seconds) and were audio recorded and transcribed by the primary investigator. Shorter interviews were with newer campers (first and second year) and

those who did not have a prior relationship with the primary investigator, while the longest interview was with a 10-year camper, who had known the researcher for eight years.

While there were three original guiding questions described above, the participants and researcher both contributed to the direction of the interview, in an attempt to co-construct meaning and understanding (Creswell, 1998) of the smartphone-free experience at camp. Participants were able to freely discuss their beliefs about smartphones broadly and in the context of camp, and the researcher prompted further reflection with questions. This type of interview practice is aligned with a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this view, the researcher subscribes to a subjectivist or transactional epistemological perspective; this means the phenomenon studied is not independent of inquirers, but rather the understanding of it is co-constructed by researchers and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Trustworthiness is an essential feature in qualitative research, and as described by Creswell (1998), there are eight evaluative criteria that may establish trustworthiness. In this study, three were especially relevant: prolonged engagement, triangulation, and reflexivity (Creswell, 1998). As previously mentioned, the researcher has been engaged with the camp industry for multiple years and has been privy to trends and the emergence of new phenomena in this culture to include the separation from smartphones while at camp. She has known and interacted with some participants for many years and developed rapport and trust in these relationships. This facilitated co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 1998). Further, method triangulation (Polit & Beck, 2012) using quantitative and qualitative data, was employed to provide a more comprehensive and rich understanding of this phenomenon (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). Finally, reflexive practices were employed, in which

the researcher openly addressed her approach to research and previously held beliefs of how knowledge is constructed.

Interview transcripts were thematically analyzed using a six-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Broad themes were inductively identified upon initial readings of the transcripts and subthemes emerged during a more detailed analysis. The transcripts were analyzed again, and deductively coded according to an established set of codes, which will be presented in the results section. For the purposes of this paper, descriptive data from the questionnaire will be provided, however the results section will focus on data from the interviews. As there was no software used for qualitative analysis, results are not presented according to frequency, but rather potency, relevance to the research question, and strength of discussion among participants.

Results

In this section, self-reported phone use data will be presented, followed by qualitative findings from interviews. It will be structured with comments about smartphones in today's society, how participants believe the experience would be like if they were able to have their smartphones while at residential camp, and perspectives about camp without a smartphone.

Phone Use Data

On the first day of their arrival at camp, participants were asked to complete an initial survey which asked about their smartphone use prior to attending camp (i.e. "how much time do you spend using your smartphone each day?"), and the social media platforms they used. Details are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Self-reported smartphone use*

Activity	Frequency (n)	Percentage
<u>Daily phone usage (hours)</u>		
1 or less	2	4.4
2	7	15.6

3	7	15.6
4	9	20.
5	9	20.
6	7	15.6
7	2	4.4
8	0	0.
9	1	2.2
10 or more	1	2.2
<u>*Activity on phone (y/n)?</u>		
Text messaging	43	100.
Audio-calling	34	79.1
Video-calling	34	79.1
Listening to music	41	95.3
Playing games	30	69.8
Using social media	42	97.7
Searching for information	34	79.1
School work	26	60.5
Watching videos	39	90.7
<u>Social media platform (y/n)?</u>		
Facebook	21	46.7
Instagram	43	95.6
Twitter	23	51.1
Snapchat	44	97.8
YouTube	28	62.2
*Note: data was missing for two participants		

Smartphones Today

During interviews, participants discussed their feelings regarding smartphones and technology in general society, and in relation to attending camp. Results indicated that teens felt smartphone use was just the way of the world now, that campers looked forward to attending camp without their smartphone, and returning campers knew what to expect without devices.

Way of the World. Some adolescents described technology and smartphone use as rampant in today's society. A few even showed disdain for teens' frequent social media use and hesitation in participating in a tech-based society, saying "I kinda wish I wasn't so dependent on my phone

but since like, everyone's on social media and everything's on the internet, you kind of have to be." Some acknowledged that it is part of being an adolescent: "I just don't like social media, I use it because I'm a teenager but I'm not really the biggest fan" and "I don't know why I do it. It's like our generation is so like, we need to do this... I wish it wasn't like that." Sentiments such as these indicate that some adolescents may welcome a break from technology that residential camp provides, and a few described anticipation of the break.

Look Forward to it. While not mentioned in interviews with new campers, participants who had previously attended camp expressed their eagerness to return and experience the isolation from technology. One camper explained, "I always look forward to the two weeks where I have no excuses to go on my phone," continuing to say, "I 100% look forward to it... probably a week before school ends... I'm so excited to just be away from all – like school and my phone and everything and just literally be isolated for these weeks."

Know What to Expect. While not all campers explicitly described looking forward to the experience, many returners explained that the process was easier because they knew what to expect: "I've been doing this for six years... I knew exactly what I was doing coming here." They understood the challenge it posed for first time campers "if you're not used to camp and this is your first time, it would definitely be difficult, because I found it difficult my first time."

The Camp Stay

Participants expressed how camp would be different if smartphones were allowed, as well as what the camp experience was like without access to a smartphone.

Camp with Smartphones. When participants were asked what camp would be like with smartphones, there was a strong negative appraisal and participants felt that less social interactions would occur, as phone would act as barriers.

Negative appraisal. Overall, there was a strong negative appraisal of the camp experience with smartphones. This is similar to report findings (Screen Education, JCC Association of North America, & Stark Statistical Consulting, 2019) which indicated that 72% of survey respondents (age 11-16) felt the camp experience would be “worse” if they were able to have their smartphone with them at camp. In fact, in the current study, 44 of 45 participants indicated that camp is ‘better’ without smartphones or that ‘the best part of camp’ was that there were no smartphones. When asked how the experience would be different if smartphones were allowed, while there were some strong negative general responses (“I can’t describe how phones would actually ruin camp”), participants commonly expressed how smartphones would function as a barrier to social interaction.

Barrier to social interaction. As previously discussed, a key inherent characteristic of the camp experience is meeting people and developing relationships (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007; Henderson, et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2011). Findings from this study position smartphones as a potential barrier to campers meeting and interacting with peers. Campers in the current study readily acknowledged this and expressed how having access to a smartphone would hold people back from social interactions. One participant said,

Having the phone is very limiting to like, what you can and can’t do. And it kind of holds you back in a way from like... I could be sitting in my cabin on my phone right now if I had it. I probably wouldn’t be out here... talking to people.

Others explained how adolescents would “just be staring at their phone non-stop” and “people wouldn’t talk to each other as much.” For some, this would fundamentally change the camp experience:

I feel like if I had access to my device all these years, this wouldn’t be my favorite place. I wouldn’t have met the people that I’ve met and had the same relationships... I feel like it would be nowhere near the same if we had our phones here.

Camp Without Smartphones. Participants described what the camp experience was like without having access to their smartphones. Primary themes were the ability to meet people face-to-face and without being able to find out who they are online and vice versa, forming closer connections with people, a break from social media and technology, and being prompted to live in the moment. These findings reinforce similar themes discussed in a recently published report (Screen Education et al., 2019).

Meeting people offline. A common sentiment about camp without a smartphone was that “you’re forced to talk to people,” which, although quite simple, is clearly something teens do less face-to-face, than they used to (Twenge et al. 2018; Twenge et al. 2019). A few campers described how, after the camp experience:

I feel like I’ve become better talking to people face-to-face actually. Because I’m used to like, I can text something, but then I can take it away and do it again. I rewrite it and proofread it, but when I’m speaking, it’s just flowing.

Similarly, one camper explained that “at home, like everyone, we just talk through our phones, we don’t talk face-to-face anymore. It’s just different. And here you get to actually meet people face-to-face.”

Meeting others in person, or offline, means that you understand who they are in different ways, and thus form a different kind of relationship. In today’s society many adolescents have multiple personas including in person and on social media profiles. Some of the female participants spoke of how camp allowed them to meet and get to know people completely separate from other’s images on social media.

There’s no way we would have all talked to each other without judgments if we had our phones, cause like you could look someone up on Instagram and see their life and what they’re actually – like, not what they’re actually like, but what they want to portray themselves as. But at camp you see someone like, for who they really are.

In addition, this feeling was reciprocal as another camper mentioned how she could be herself, without others viewing her social media, saying “you’re just yourself and people get to know you for who you are alone, which I really like. And they don’t have to look at how many followers you have or how many friends you have on Instagram.” The experience of being oneself at camp and navigating various relationships contributes to the development of social awareness, a key component of SEL (CASEL, 2012).

Closer connections. Again, similar to the Screen Education et al. report (2019), a strong theme was that without a smartphone, adolescents are able to develop closer connections and deeper bonds with peers. This held true for new campers as well as returners. One multiple year camper explained her relationship with a good friend saying,

I live in the same town as her and like, we connect so much more here without our phones than we do at home. We text more at home, but here we actually have one on one conversations with each other. We like, just sit and have deep conversations, and lying in bed without our phones, we don’t get distracted, it’s just us in the dark talking to each other and it’s amazing.

Break from social media. Another common theme was the idea that without a smartphone, there is a clear and distinct break from the obligations of social media and technology, which, in another study, 93% of respondents were “relieved to escape” (Screen Education et al., 2019). In the current research participants discussed similar sentiments. Campers were, often happily, not able to like photos on Instagram, maintain Snapchat streaks, or respond to text messages. It was seen as a nice break for many:

Summer camp is a good place for teens to get away from social media because like, I find myself caught up in it way too often, and here it’s great to just come and relax and kind of get away from all that.

In addition, this meant that they did not have to deal with any “drama” through texting and social media while at camp. A camper explained:

Problems start much easier because of the phone, because everyone's a different person behind a screen. Like, things you say over the phone are things you would never say to somebody's face... because through text you don't have to deal with the response. If you don't want to answer after, you don't have to. If you're saying it to their face you have to deal with the consequences of your words.

Living in the moment. This concept is a central feature of the summer camp experience (Wilson et al., 2019) and a lack of smartphones may contribute to it. For some campers, being without their smartphone made them stop and appreciate the overall experience of being away from home, interacting with others, and trying new things. Multiple campers discussed the enjoyment they experienced being offline, not thinking about what was happening online, or in the world outside of the camp bubble.

Not having your phone here really makes you focus on what you have in front of you and cherish the moments and like, take advantage of things that you didn't think you were going to be able to do, or didn't think you could do. Because there's nothing holding you back because you don't have your phone.

Discussion

The findings from this study yield implications for camp practitioners and campers. While similar reports have been published examining smartphones and summer camp (Screen Education et al., 2019), it is important to consider biases that may be present in different materials. The current study was unfunded yet had similar findings. An overwhelming majority of participants in the study (all but one) felt that being separated from their smartphone at residential camp was a positive experience. As adolescents are now spending much of their leisure time online and replacing face-to-face interactions with peers (Twenge et al., 2019), it is essential that they have other opportunities to interact with similarly aged adolescents. This type of interaction may help stave off loneliness (Pea et al., 2012; Steptoe et al., 2013) and potentially develop important interpersonal skills (Bialeschki, et al., 2007; Henderson, et al., 2007; Jones, et al., 2011; Thurber et al., 2007; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013; Uhls et al., 2014), such as

social awareness and relationship skills (CASEL, 2012). Camp professionals may consider marketing camp as primarily a social experience or an opportunity for campers to form relationships in real life. Being in the “camp bubble” offers many benefits, such as the opportunity to be one’s true self and interact with peers without the influence of social media and the manufactured images of individuals that are promoted online. The lack of smartphones in this context allows campers to spend time with peers, develop and practice social skills (Uhls et al., 2014) used while meeting and forming close relationships with others that, while may not be as common in today’s adolescent culture (Twenge et al., 2018; Twenge et al., 2019), are important for developmental relationships and future and successful transitions into adulthood (CASEL, 2012; Search Institute, 2018).

In addition, these findings have implications for adolescent mental health. Many participants expressed that during the residential camp stay, they experienced a break from anxiety associated with smartphone use, such as responding to text messages, maintaining Snapchat streaks, and online drama. This experience also offered respite from the daily stressors of adolescent life, which included living up to expectations, living at home with parents and siblings, and applying for college. A residential camp stay may be a welcome experience before transitioning into emerging adulthood and all it encompasses.

A Proposed Model of Adolescent Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Leisure Contexts

With these findings, a model that contributes to SEL (CASEL, 2012) is proposed (Figure 1). The original SEL model includes five components: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2012). As various leisure experiences demand different skills and competencies, many experiences, including camp, have the potential to promote adolescent development in all five areas. However, the

results of this study provide adolescent voice to identify which competencies were most relevant to them during the camp experience: social awareness and relationship skills. Perhaps, as adolescents are now increasingly limited in their opportunities to be offline, this smartphone-free leisure context provides an important opportunity for many. Therefore, this proposed model will focus specifically on social awareness and relationship skills and incorporate the previously outlined themes in relation to these two SEL components, as reported from the participants' own perceptions.

In an imagined camp context where smartphones are allowed, campers expressed negative appraisals, as they felt that smartphones would be a barrier to social interaction. This barrier would therefore decrease opportunities for the development of social awareness and relationship skills, potentially leading to a decrease or no change in SEL overall.

Conversely, participants described positive appraisals of the camp experience without smartphones as they felt an important factor in their positive experiences was this separation. This smartphone-free leisure opportunity allowed them to develop a deeper understanding of who others are offline, form closer connections with peers, take a break from social media, and live in the moment. These themes contribute to social awareness and relationship skills as when adolescents are present in the current moment, they are not focused on their social media presence, and instead are able to interact with others face-to-face. Through this opportunity, they practice and refine relationship skills and an understanding of themselves and how they relate to others socially. Again, as adolescents are "almost constantly" online, this smartphone-free experience is a unique and important leisure context that may increase opportunities to develop social awareness and relationship skills, two essential components of SEL.

[INSERT MODEL HERE]

Figure 1. Proposed model of adolescent perceptions of social emotional learning (SEL)

Limitations

This exploratory study had limitations that should be addressed in future research. Although it was a strict rule of the program that campers could not have any Wi-Fi enabled devices, some campers may have broken this rule and had their smartphones at camp. Further, some participants disclosed that campers (who may or may not have been study participants) had their phones in the cabin, potentially impacting the results.

In addition, due to sampling only the senior camper program, many campers not only attended camp previously, but owned a smartphone for years and had thus already had the smartphone-free camp experience. Therefore, many participants knew what to expect, which likely contributed to their depictions of the experience.

Participant response and social desirability biases are important to consider in any research that involves self-report measures, including qualitative interviews. In this case, most participants had been attending the camp for multiple summers. As the researcher had been a

staff member at the camp for 8 summers, many of the campers knew her. This emic perspective (Patton, 1999) may have allowed for more honest discussions, but may also have negatively impacted the truthfulness of participant responses, as participants may have wanted to positively impact their relationship with the researcher. Also, as smartphones are a popular topic and it is known that screen time is associated with negative consequences, participants may have provided the “right” response and described camp as better without smartphones.

Future Research

Campers in this study averaged 4.69 years of camp experience, with 5 of the 45 campers attending for their first year. The first experience of being separated from one’s smartphone at camp is vastly different from those individuals who have repeatedly experienced the separation. Future studies should thus explore the first-time experience (i.e. first-time campers and repeat campers who had recently gained access to a personal smartphone) in more detail, including previously developed explicit measures of SEL (specifically social awareness and relationship skills). These campers may describe the experience differently as compared with those who have previously had the experience.

Additional investigations at a variety of camps and with larger numbers of participants may be beneficial. For example, youth who attend single gender camps, full-length summer camps, day camps, or specialty camps (e.g. those for individuals with disabilities, arts-based, or faith-based) may have different experiences. Also, a researcher with limited experience in the camp industry may be able to explore unique aspects of the experience or see viewpoints that were inaccessible to the primary investigator due to her prolonged exposure in the industry. It is possible that a new perspective may see benefits of allowing youth to access their devices during their camp stay.

While the current study advocates for a smartphone-free camp experience, a study that explores different options for smartphone use at camp (i.e., during limited time periods or using specific apps only) may show outcomes of a regulated approach to adolescent smartphone use while at camp. It may be that an all or nothing approach is not the only option for camp practitioners. This may yield new questions surrounding the implications for both campers and practitioners (i.e., how might this type of use be regulated or what are potential outcomes for campers?).

Finally, as a model was proposed from the findings of this study and others, additional research that explores the context of leisure spaces in which adolescents are unable to rely on online interactions and relationships with others is encouraged. Summer camps that impose regulations on smartphone use are ideal contexts, however investigations in various recreation and leisure environments with similar restrictions may yield useful and interesting contributions to the literature. The adolescent perspective is essential as it allows for programmers to understand what youth need and desire in leisure experiences.

Conclusion

Findings indicated that overall, youth, themselves, believed that camp without smartphones, was a positive experience. While it is commonly believed that youth are addicted to their smartphones and prefer to interact primarily online, the adolescents in this study advocated for a smartphone-free leisure experience and expressed that with this type of an experience comes many positive outcomes. In order to protect mental health, practice relationship skills and social awareness, and have an enjoyable time, residential camps should continue to be a protected technology-free space for youth. Based on these findings, a conceptual model including components of SEL was proposed. Future research may further explore the

adolescent perspective of this experience for first-time campers, individuals who have only recently gained access to a smartphone, and with camps that are trialing different approaches to smartphone use and restrictions with campers. Exploration and refinement of the conceptual model in many leisure contexts in which adolescents' smartphone use is limited or restricted is encouraged. This type of scholarship may have implications for mental health professionals, the recreation and leisure industry, and parents and adolescents.

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