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Citation: Parker, E. (2025). An Examination of the Social, Experiential and Physical Impact of Digital Technologies on the Pre-Trip, Onsite and Post-Trip Phases of the Camping Experience. (Unpublished Doctoral thesis, City St George's, University of London)

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**An Examination of the Social, Experiential and Physical Impact
of Digital Technologies on the Pre-Trip, Onsite and Post-Trip
Phases of the Camping Experience**

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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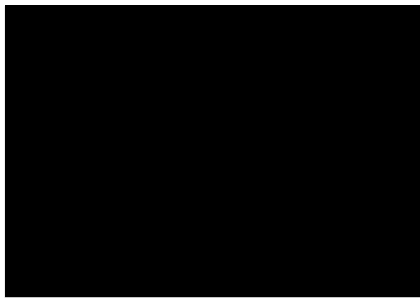
December 2025

Declaration of Authorship

I, Eryn Parker, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

An Examination of the Social, Experiential and Physical Impact of Digital Technologies on the Pre-Trip, Onsite and Post-Trip Phases of the Camping Experience

Signed: Eryn Parker



Date: 1 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to examine the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies across three phases of the camping experience: from the pre-trip planning phase, the onsite phase, and finally the post-trip experience. Digital technologies are increasingly pervasive during camping. It is, therefore, important to understand how they facilitate and mediate this popular form of recreation. Camping within the United States, and more broadly the natural environment, has particular antimodern and escapist meanings associated with it that are often in opposition to technological culture, thus introducing tensions into the experience when digital technologies are used. These tensions revolve around uncertainty, safety, and presence, which are the concepts that inform the conceptual and theoretical framework.

My thesis is driven by the following questions. What digital strategies do campers employ to navigate the pre-trip planning experience? How does the use of digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the camping trip? How does digital connectivity affect how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards? These questions are addressed using a qualitative methodology that involves a variety of campers, including those that use traditional public campsites and peer-to-peer accommodation platforms, being interviewed about how they use digital technologies before, during, and after the onsite phase of a camping trip.

The findings of this research indicate that campers use a variety of digital strategies to manage expectations and minimize risk in the pre-trip phase, but this paradoxically can increase the uncertainty that is experienced. This study also finds that the way that technology is used to mitigate risks during the experience depends on how digitally connected the environment is, as well as whether or not it is within a digitally mediated hospitality context. This study also illuminates that digital technologies are being used, or not, in the onsite and post-trip phases in order to enhance social and sensory presence and preserve a sense of liminality. As little

empirical research has been conducted that examines how the use of digital technologies may alter the experience of camping, and in turn, our understanding of both our relationship to the practice as well as the digital technologies that are employed throughout, my research advances an understanding of this important area of study.

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List of Abbreviations

UGC	User Generated Content
P2P Accommodation Platforms	Peer-to-peer Accommodation Platforms
GPS	Global Positioning System
AI	Artificial Intelligence
km²	Kilometers squared
E-WOM	Electronic Word-of-mouth

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was made possible through the steady support and kindness of several people, who are all deserving of my deepest gratitude.

I owe my greatest thanks to my supervisors, Dr. Michael Saker and Professor Dan Mercea. Their patience, guidance, expertise and good humor made this journey extremely rewarding and their support helped me navigate the challenges that inevitably arose from pursuing such a project. I am forever grateful to them and will look back at this experience fondly.

I am tremendously grateful to my parents, brother and sister for their unwavering support and for continually teaching me the importance of family. Throughout my life, they have exemplified the powerful combination of determination, a strong work ethic, an open mind, and a kind heart. I would particularly like to thank my amazing parents. Thank you for encouraging my curiosity from a young age, supporting every path I have pursued, and for taking care of Aiden and Oliver when work on this project needed to be completed. Without you, I wouldn't be here.

To Aiden and Oliver, I hope that this one day inspires you to find delight in learning, to follow your dreams wherever they may take you, and to stay resolute in that journey. Being your mom is the greatest joy I have ever known and I love you both with all my heart.

Finally, I would like to thank my incredible husband, Riley. As my biggest champion, his steadfast love and support have sustained me through every stage of this journey. He has been a constant source of encouragement, patience, and clarity, always making me laugh even in the most trying moments. Without him, this project would not have been possible. I love him deeply and am profoundly grateful to have him as my partner.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

My research concerns the use of digital technologies and the camping experience. Its main aim is to understand the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies across three phases of the camping experience: the pre-trip planning phase, the onsite phase, and finally the post-trip experience. Three primary questions arise from this aim. First, what digital strategies are employed to navigate the pre-trip planning experience? Second, how does the use of digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the camping trip? Third, how does digital connectivity affect how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards?

Digital technologies are increasingly used in camping (Dickinson, et al., 2016; Martin, 2017; Shultis, 2012). Therefore, it is important to understand how they facilitate and mediate the experience. Studies have indicated that social interaction, nature appreciation, and the feeling of escape are primary factors in visitors' motives for going camping (Garst, et al., 2009; Rantala and Varley, 2019). With the use of digital technologies, the social experience and meanings ascribed to camping have the potential to change and, in turn, these changes may have measurable impacts on this popular form of leisure. Put differently, the use of digital technologies throughout the camping experience may induce people to engage with the outdoors and with each other in new ways thus assigning new meaning to camping while also revealing something about our relationship to digital technology (Borrie, 2000; Mesenhöller, 2025; Wiley, 2005). These potential shifts in the camping experience and its participants are what my research is interested in understanding.

Camping, and its context within the natural environment, has particular antimodern meanings associated with it that are often in opposition to technological culture, thus introducing tensions in the experience when digital technologies are used (Douglas and Borrie, 2016; Wiley, 2005). To illuminate the ways that the social, experiential, and physical experience of camping may be altered, I will consider these tensions in greater detail. I will begin by examining different aspects of camping, starting with its characterization as a recreational activity that is multi-phasic and dynamic (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001). I will then move into a description of the American conceptions of wilderness that have informed the

meaning and value that is given to camping. A way of understanding camping as a social practice is through social practice theory. In turn, I will then detail social practice theory, as it will throw light on the way that camping might change through the use of digital technologies. I will then examine the tensions that have arisen between digital technology and wilderness (Wiley, 2005), which is significant as it informs much of this research. This will help me underline why exploring the impact of digital technology on the way we approach our environments, each other, and ourselves throughout the camping experience is important. Next, I will provide a more detailed list of research questions, identify existing gaps in literature that my study will address, as well as note the contributions of my research. Lastly, I will outline the subsequent chapters of my thesis.

1.2 Camping, Conceptions of Wilderness, and Digital Technology

Camping can be described as “the activity of living in a tent for a short period of time” or other forms of temporary shelter “whether in a campground or wilderness setting” (Brooker and Joppe, 2014: 1). Over the past fifty years, camping in the United States has become a popular way for millions of Americans to step outside of their urban lives and experience nature (Garst, et al., 2009; Young, 2017). More than one quarter of Americans camp every year with almost eighty million active camper households in 2019 alone (Garst, et al., 2009; Brooker and Joppe, 2014; KOA, 2019; CHM Government Services, 2020). Indeed, according to 2020’s *Outdoor Participation Report*, recreational camping is the fifth most popular activity in the United States. Like any recreational experience, and notably outdoor recreation experiences, camping can be described as multi-phasic and dynamic (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001; Hammitt, 1980; Harmon and Dunlap, 2017). Clawson and Knetsch (1966) first identified the various temporal aspects of leisure, noting that these five ‘stages’ are characterized by the evolving states of mind of the participant. First is the anticipation phase in which participants envision and plan the trip. The second phase is when participants travel to the recreational site, while the third is the actual onsite experience. The fourth phase is when participants travel back home. In contrast, the fifth phase revolves around recollection, or when participants recall their memories of the experience (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966). Importantly, Clawson and Knetsch (1966) argue that outdoor recreationists gain satisfaction or

dissatisfaction from each stage of the experience and that the total experience is the sum of the stages as opposed to just the onsite phase.

Other scholars tend to consolidate these phases into pre-visit, during, and post-visit outdoor recreation experiences, which is the format I adopt within this research (Harmon and Dunlap, 2017; Nautiyal, et al., 2023). The pre-trip phase involves searching, comparing and planning the visit using various sources of information that create different perceptions of the trip in the visitor's mind (Bertella, 2016; Nautiyal, et al., 2023). When using digital technology during this phase, "the pre-visit stage becomes the first interaction of nature-based destination(s) and humans via mobile technology" (Nautiyal, et al, 2023:3) Additionally, the information gathered in the pre-trip phase can affect experiences during the onsite experience (Neuhofer, et al., 2014). The second stage of the trip is the onsite phase which is characterized by the actual experience of place, people, culture, and environment (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966; Hammitt, 1980). This phase plays a central role in the overall satisfaction of the experience, as well as post-visit experiences (Nautiyal, et al., 2023). The last phase is the post-visit stage in which involves the recollection and sharing of the experience (Ballantyne and Packer, 2011; Hughes, et al., 2011). Notably, an evolving state of mind characterizes each stage of the experience so that new considerations must be taken into account with each phase (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001; Hammitt, 1980). What is significant, then, is that a camping experience is multi-faceted as the environment in which it takes place, the social interactions that occur, and the meanings associated with it may depend on the stage of the experience.

While an important aspect of the experience of camping is that it is multi-phasic and dynamic, another aspect is its situatedness in the natural environment and the corresponding conceptions of American wilderness. The natural environment, or wilderness, is a key component of camping trips as people choose to dwell in the outdoors, exposing themselves to the unpredictable elements of nature. Yet, the very notion of wilderness is contested and a lively debate exists between the 'wilderness idea' and wilderness 'out there' (Chappell, 1997: 47). In other words, there is disagreement regarding how wilderness should be conceived and whether it is socially constructed or objective. Many widely accepted definitions of wilderness focus primarily on wilderness as an objectively real place unaffected by

man (Henderson, 1992), or as “an area lacking human habitation, cultivation, or significant use” (Rogers, Castree & Kitchin, 2013). This conception views wilderness as a landscape that ‘contains beauty and power that is irreducibly nonhuman, something profoundly Other than yourself’ (Cronon, 1995). Significantly, these definitions posit a dualism that juxtaposes “wilderness and civilization, nature and human”, as opposites (Lewis, 2007: 9). Accordingly, this understanding has informed legal designations of wilderness that indicate an area protected by public authorities (Vannini and Vannini, 2016). In America, the Wilderness Act of 1964 states that:

a wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain (US Wilderness Act, 1964, Sec. 2C).

This definition proceeds to include broad characteristics of wilderness that emphasizes both the inhuman aspects and size of the land as well as the value the landscape can bring to people. While this legal definition has led to the protection of 443,000 km² of land in the United States, proponents of the ‘wilderness idea’ posit that the land which is deemed ‘wilderness’ and worthy of protection is informed by American cultural values (Cronon, 1996; Nash, 2014).

This research holds the position that, rather than dismissing the role of humans, the centrality of humans in the creation of wilderness must be considered (Cronon, 1995; Nash, 2014). Wilderness has been conceptualized as an idea, “a state of mind” (Nash, 2014: 5), a “congeries of feelings about man and nature” (Lowenthal, 1964: 35), and a “myth of the urbane, mostly urban mind” (Chappell, 1997: 47). Further, those who adhere to the ‘wilderness idea’ contend that wilderness is a social construct that has been created as a consequence of a civilization that is detached from nature due to technological society (Cronon, 1995; Graber, 1995; Rothenberg, 1992; Vidon, Rickly & Knudsen, 2018). Graber (1995: 123-4) explains that wilderness is a “landscape that is *managed* to reveal as few traces of the passage of other humans as possible.” While Graber’s argument applies to modern wilderness management strategies, it also extends to the notion of

wilderness as uninhabited land. The wilderness idea has been constructed through the coerced removal of native people in these spaces, which in turn has influenced the western conceptualization of wilderness. (Cronon, 1995). Accordingly, it is difficult to represent wilderness 'out there' without acknowledging the social constructedness of wilderness. The elusiveness of a singular definition of wilderness is largely a result of its highly contextual and subjective nature; the meaning of wilderness is variable over place and time (Henderson, 1992; McDonald, 2001).

Because of the "conditionality of wilderness" (McDonald, 2001), then, an American conception of wilderness is specific to its political, social and cultural mythologies and characteristics. The American conception of wilderness is important to understand, as exploring specific conceptions of wilderness can reveal how the concept can shift across cultures and contexts, thus influencing individuals and their relationship to the natural environment. Indeed, Marx (2008:10) highlights the hybridity of an American conception of nature, which was "conceived in Europe and inflected by New World experience." In addition, policies that reflect an American conception of wilderness, like 'mainstreaming nature' and recognizing nature as a subject with rights, have been adopted by other countries, thus highlighting the cross-cultural influence of these conceptions (Kauffman, et al., 2018; Tallis, et al., 2024).

William Cronon's (1996) seminal essay, 'The trouble with wilderness or, getting back to the wrong nature,' traces America's unique relationship with wilderness. Early American settlers were heavily influenced by biblical representations of wilderness as places of despair and temptation (ibid). Here, wilderness was negatively conceived as a fearful place outside of civilization where individuals would only venture against their will (ibid). The American understanding of wilderness began to change before the end of the 19th century as the effects of modernity, through capitalism, industrialism, and rationalism began to transform existing, relatively traditional societies into "modern" ones (Delanty, 2007, p. 3068). Coinciding with this development was the espousal of the Romantic concept of the sublime which influenced the representation of wilderness as something sacred (Cronon, 1996). Wilderness became a secular place to bear witness to a religious experience of God's creation (ibid) Coinciding with this transformation was the frontier cultural

movement which was a direct reaction to the rapid industrialization and modernization occurring in America.

More precisely, the frontier movement asserted that “the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living” and appealed to a nostalgic American past (Cronon, 1996: 13). Inherent to this movement was the idea that frontier wilderness promoted individualism, freedom, and authenticity, all of which were being threatened by industrialization and urbanity (Cronon, 1996). Cronon argues that the American view of wilderness today is the direct result of these two movements and has contributed to the emphasis and urgency assigned to the preservation of wilderness areas. Moreover, “wilderness is a vital component of the social fabric that displays the character of American citizens and culture” (Schuster, Tarrant & Watson, 2003: 359). To Americans, then, wilderness is represented as a place of religious redemption and national renewal, which in turn, exemplifies the very characteristics Americans hope to embody. As such, wilderness has transformed from a place to fear into a place for Americans to experience reverence and awe as tourists escaping from modern society. The idea of wilderness as an escape from modern society is not unique to the United States. Indeed, in their review of outdoor recreation and nature tourism from a UK and European perspective, Bell (et al., 2007) note the trend towards nature being conceptualized as a way to reconnect to the natural world from which they feel disconnected by modern lifestyles. This is indicative, then, of the way that wilderness can be positioned as a salve for the alienation that is felt in modern life and across different cultures.

Moving forward, then, contemporary understandings of American wilderness as a place to escape from normal life and foster self-identity have led to the representation of wilderness as a sanctuary, a refuge from society, and “inviting another rhythm of being” (Borrie, Meyer & Foster, 2012; Schuster, Tarrant & Watson, 2003; Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier, 2021). In this vein, wilderness is presented as a place that is not answerable to society, where the individual may go to experience solitude and privacy that is characterized by freedom of movement and freedom from societal constraint (Hollenhurst and Jones, 2001). In wilderness, the demands and encumbrances of society are distant and less intrusive, thus allowing individuals to achieve a “true” sense of self (Borrie, Meyer & Foster, 2012; Hollenhurst and Jones,

2001). For example, Pohl, Borrie and Patterson (2000) find that wilderness is a place where women may rebel against what they have been socialized to be. Essentially, then, authentic wilderness leads to an authentic self, as “the true wilderness experience is one, not of escaping, but of finding one’s self” (Zahniser, 1992: 66). It is important to note that critiques of authenticity contend that authenticity is a fantasy; those seeking authenticity through natural environments engage bodily and psychologically in this fantasy because they yearn for spaces apart from everyday existence (Knudsen et al., 2016; MacCannell, 1976; Oakes, 2006; Vidon, 2019). Indeed, this notion of authenticity is challenged by Vidon, Rickly and Knudsen’s (2018) concept of ‘hypernatural wilderness’ in which feelings of authenticity exist in wilderness despite an absence of any true or real wilderness. As they note, “while styled, staged, and sold as the quintessential ‘real thing’, pristine, sacred wilderness so embraced by many a contemporary American nature tourist, has no antecedent, no original from which it has emerged” (Vidon, Rickly & Knudsen, 2018: 66). Yet, the illusion of authenticity is deemed vital to humans’ successful functioning as social subjects as it allows us to connect with what we perceive as genuine aspects of humanity and to combat the alienation that can be felt in modern society (Knudsen et al., 2016; Oakes, 2006; Vidon, 2019).

Camping, then, is a recreational activity whose context within the natural environment is significant. Indeed, its emergence and its contemporary meanings echo those that imbue American wilderness. Young (2022) notes three historical trends that shaped American camping. First, that campers lived in a world that was undergoing modernization and that urban residents embraced camping as a temporary retreat into imagined ‘natural’ places, thus allowing an escape from the stresses and alienation felt in modern life. Second, camping was a form of pilgrimage that restored and refreshed because ‘pilgrims’ exited their everyday world into a place that allowed them to ‘rough it’ and feel transformed. Third, camping was an antimodern reaction to a modernizing world even as it was subject to modernization itself, creating comfort, ease, and predictability through advancements in gear and more domestic campgrounds. What is important here is the emphasis on camping as an antimodern activity that emerged as an escape from daily modern life. The meanings associated with contemporary camping thus derive from its emergence as an antimodern activity, with restoration, social interaction, special places, and

experiencing nature being central for campers (Garst, et al., 2009). Yet, as digital technologies have become more commonly used to engage in leisure activities in the natural environment, scholars contend that technology generally changes both the meaning and experience of wilderness, which is the context in which camping takes place (Borrie, 2000; Freimund and Borrie, 1998; Martin and Pope, 2012; Shultis, 2012).

Using social practice theory to conceptualize camping as a practice is helpful here, as it provides a framework for understanding how the experience of camping has the potential to change with digital technologies. Social practice theory suggests that “in the flow of activities we carry out in our everyday lives, we can identify sets of repertoires that are performed together as a coordinated entity, recognizable across time and space” (Heidenstrøm, 2022: 238; Röpke, 2009). A practice can be conceived of as “forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” that are interconnected to one another (Reckwitz, 2002: 249-250). For Shove and Pantzar (2005), materials are highlighted as an integral element of practices and distills a practice into three connected elements: material, meaning, and competence. These elements thus help conceptualize camping as a practice with its own social, cultural, and material underpinnings. For example, materials may include essential equipment like tents, sleeping bags, and stoves, as well as the natural environment in which it takes place. Competences may include survival skills like how to build a fire or navigate with a map, as well as social skills like following camp etiquette. Lastly, meanings can include a connection with nature, escape from daily life, strengthening relationships, and personal growth, as were referenced above (Garst, et al., 2009).

Importantly, social practice theory provides a framework for understanding how practices shift over time, allowing researchers to investigate “how new practices emerge, how existing practices are maintained, and how they transform to various pressures, such as technological advancements or policy interventions” (Mesenhöller, 2025: 3). Technological innovations, in particular, play an integral role in practice change, as “technologies do not exist in isolation but are embedded in social, cultural, and material arrangements” (Mesenhöller, 2025: 1). More specifically, the affordances of technologies, or “how objects are perceived with regard to their

possibilities for use” are shaped by social conventions and shared understanding of practice and these affordances can influence the practice itself (Costa, 2018; Harwood and Hafezieh, 2017: 2). As an example, a mobile phone has availability affordances because of its objective functionality of texting and calling and these affordances have the potential to impact how we experience the onsite phase of camping which has been deemed as an escape from modern life (Katz and Aakhus, 2002; Schrock, 2015; Young, 2022). Social practice theory also highlights the mutual relation between technology and individuals, “emphasizing the role of technology in shaping and being shaped by everyday practices to understand technological adoption and change” (Mesenhöller, 2025). Essentially, technology has the potential to change everyday practices for individuals while individuals have the ability to change the technologies themselves through continued and changing use. These are important points to highlight, as it forms a theoretical foundation for my research in that practices are subject to change when a new element, like digital technology, is integrated by the practitioners into the performance of the practice. Specific to my research, then, is the theoretical assumption that the camping practice may change from the use of digital technology before, during, and after the camping trip, which is a gap that I have identified and will be addressing in this study.

The possibility for digital technologies to change the camping experience is driven by the ubiquity of digital technologies and digital media that has become a part of everyday life for many people. While camping has often been conceptualized as an escape from everyday life in large part because it often takes place in locations that have had limited or no internet technology access, improved infrastructure at campsites and satellite technologies has resulted in the ability to stay digitally connected while camping (Helms, et al, 2019; Pearce and Gretzel, 2012). Research has indicated that outdoor recreationists use digital technologies for a variety of reasons. One particular use is to gain information about campsites, conditions, and the surrounding environment (Fredman and Margaryan, 2021; Neuhofer et al., 2014). Another use is for navigational purposes, with outdoor recreationists using GPS and other location-based technologies to prevent getting lost (Martin, 2017). Entertainment and comfort are also facilitated through technology, with outdoor recreationists using mobile devices for music, social media, videos and even smart sleeping gear (Conti and Farsari, 2021; Garst, et al., 2009).

Digital technologies are also used in emergencies, as personal locator beacons, satellite phones, portable banks, solar chargers, and wifi hotspots are all common for outdoor recreationists to maintain a sense of safety (Pope and Martin, 2011). Lastly, digital technologies help facilitate the camping experience by allowing campers to reserve campsites online, whether through government websites like [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) or through peer-to-peer accommodation platforms. For example, Hipcamp specializes in connecting private landowners to outdoor enthusiasts who pay to camp on their property through a website that streamlines the campground search, evaluation and booking process (Bengston, Zimmerman, Callaway, 2019). Accordingly, the question arises of how Hipcamp and the digital technologies used at the campsite are affecting the experience of camping. This is a specific gap that I will be addressing in this research, as very little empirical research has examined the ways that camping, as a practice, is impacted by these digital technologies. As Young (2022: 25) argues, “camping arose as a response to the unsettling aspects of modern urban life, so an increasingly modernized camping undermines its original value.”

Indeed, scholars acknowledge that the presence of these technologies is “altering our relationship to natural environments, our experience of being in the wilderness, and, in some cases, the wilderness landscape itself” (Dickinson, et al., 2016; Helms, et al., 2019; Martin, 2017; Shultis, 2012; Wiley, 2005: 5). Technologies, like new lightweight fabrics and metals used for equipment such as clothing, tents and stoves, have been widely used in wilderness (Shultis, 2015). That said, the shift to digital information and communication technologies and their increased prevalence throughout the camping experience represents a significant change as “satellite phones, cell phones, global positioning systems (GPS), and personal locator beacons (PLBs) has extended technological networks to the point that no wilderness spaces remain outside our technological grasp” (Wiley, 2005: 4). Understanding the malleability of wilderness, Wiley (2005) argues that “what we want to do is changed by what we can do - technology never simply does what we tell it to, but modifies our notions of what is possible and desirable” (Rothenberg, 1993: xiv). If wilderness is “the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (Cronon, 1996: 7), then the experience and representation of wilderness may be reconstructed when facilitated through

emergent digital technology. Wiley (2005) addresses the ubiquity of digital technologies in wilderness in his essay on mobile communication technologies and the transformation of wild space. He identifies four “integrated tensions” that exist between wilderness and technology: risk versus security, solitude versus connectivity, mediation versus direct experience, and knowledge versus the unknown. First, mobile technologies alter the risks, as well as the perceptions of risks of entering wilderness areas because they provide a degree of security. Second, the connectivity that mobile communication devices make possible affects the experience of solitude that has been a motivation for outdoor enthusiasts. Third, one’s experience of the natural environment may be altered because of various forms of technological mediation. Finally, mobile technologies bring mapping and other forms of scientific knowledge to wilderness, “potentially eliminating a key wilderness experience: the human encounter with the mystery of the unknown” (Wiley, 2005: 11). Significantly, it is these four tensions, and their implications for the social practice of camping, that guide the questions that my research will examine.

While Wiley’s (2005) tensions guide the research, they are limited in that they focus on wilderness as opposed to camping as a specific practice with its own sets of materials, competencies, and meanings. In addition, there are not enough empirical studies within the context of the United States that take into account the developments in digital technology that have occurred in the last twenty years, like the rise of smartphones, 3G, social media, peer-to-peer accommodation platforms, and the various apps and technologies that are part of our daily lives (Carlson, et al., 2016). These technologies have arguably made us more connected (Björklind, 2018; Katz and Aakhus, 2002), more knowledgeable (Hafidz Al Fajar and Erlangga, 2025; Hanchard, 2020), and have influenced our perceptions of safety (Cumiskey and Brewster, 2012; Hardley and Richardson, 2021; Saker, et al., 2023), yet the effects these they have had on the camping experience are not understood. Further, Wiley highlights the way that tensions may arise from the use of digital technology *during* recreation experiences rather than before and after, which are equally important to the camping experience. These omissions point to the scholarly gap that is explicitly addressed through this research. As such, an understanding of the specifics of the impact of digital technology on the camping experience not only as a practice but one that entails different stages and evolving mindsets will be better understood.

Examining these tensions is important as it will update understandings of the social, experiential, and physical impacts that digital technologies have on the camping experience.

In sum, then, I have provided a detailed description of the context and meanings associated with camping, outlined a framework for understanding the ways that digital technologies can change the social, experiential, and physical aspects of the camping experience, and explored tensions that may arise from using digital technologies in wilderness. As an outdoor recreational experience that has gained popularity in the United States, camping can be characterized as multi-phasic and dynamic, meaning that there are pre-trip, onsite, and post-trip phases to camping that each involve different mindsets and attributes. Accordingly, each of these phases needs to be examined to provide a more complete understanding of the camping experience as a whole. Following this, I detailed American conceptions of wilderness and camping, as camping's context within the natural environment is critical to the antimodern and escapist meanings associated with it. I then highlighted that scholars have contended that digital technologies have the potential to change the meaning and experience of wilderness. Social practice theory was subsequently explored as a framework for conceptualizing camping as a practice that is constituted of materials, meanings, and competences. Importantly, practices are subject to change when a new element, like digital technology, is integrated into the practice, which is what this research addresses. I then noted the technologies that are currently being used in outdoor recreation and the tensions that have been theorized between these digital technologies and wilderness. As I have established that camping is a meaningful way that many Americans can feel restored through interaction with nature and each other, it is important to understand how digital technologies are being used throughout the entirety of the camping experience, which in turn has implications for the social, experiential, and physical experience of the practice. What follows, then, is a more detailed description of my research questions and the existing gap in knowledge thus making clear the expected contribution to knowledge that this research will provide.

1.3 Research Questions and Expected Contribution to Knowledge

Ultimately, the use of digital technologies may alter the experience of camping, and in turn, our understanding of both our relationship to the practice as well as the digital technologies that are employed throughout. There is currently very little empirical research that explores this topic. My research intends to provide an overdue and needed update to the way that new and current iterations of digital technologies are impacting the American camping experience, thus deepening an understanding of their effects on the social, experiential, and physical aspects of the practice. In addition, extant research has focused primarily on the onsite phase of camping but has neglected to examine each phase as they relate to the tensions that exist between wilderness recreation and digital technology. As such, an investigation of the effect of digital technologies on conceptions of camping and the experience of the recreationists who participate in the practice is warranted. Accordingly, I will reiterate my research interests. As established in the beginning of this chapter, my research is driven by three research questions that are related to the social, experiential, and physical impacts that digital technologies have on the camping experience. First, what digital strategies are employed in the pre-trip planning phase of a camping experience? Questions that follow include: what digital technologies are campers using to gain more information about campsites? As camping has become more popular, what specific strategies are used in the pre-trip phase for reserving campsites? What effect do these technologies have on the experience? Second, how does the use of digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the camping trip? Questions that follow include: How do digital technologies change how we approach different camping environments? How does the use of peer-to-peer accommodation platforms like Hlpcamp impact feelings of risk or safety and why? Third, how does digital connectivity affect how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards? Questions that follow include: How is digital disconnection experienced at the campsite and are campers able to achieve a sense of escape, which is one of the primary reasons for going camping? What is the experience of regaining connection after a digitally disconnected camping trip? What are the effects of digital technologies on the sensory experience of camping?

Each of these research questions are guided by gaps in the literature regarding camping and digital technologies. Accordingly, my research will make contributions in a number of ways. First, empirical work is needed to understand how digital technologies are impacting each phase of the camping experience. Much of the empirical research related to camping examines the onsite phase of the camping experience (Garst, et al., 2009; Hassell, et al., 2025; Huang, et al.), but each stage of outdoor recreation has its own characteristics and each is characterized by the evolving states of mind of the participant (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966; Hammitt, 1980). In other words, a more complete picture of each stage is missing. My research aims to fill this gap, which is important, as it will provide a more holistic and complete understanding of the impact of digital technologies on the camping experience, how we interact, and the meanings we make of it. Second, I am offering a new perspective on research into the tensions between wilderness and digital technology by applying them to the specific context of camping within the United States, which has its own associated meanings, routines, and materials. While these tensions have been examined independently of each other within outdoor recreation contexts throughout the world (Barkley, et al., 2021, Martin and Blackwell, 2016; Martin and Pope, 2012; Shultis, 2015), camping, and specifically camping in the United States, has not been a specific focus. As an increasingly common recreational activity for many Americans, this omission will be rectified through my empirical research. The focus on camping, as a specific social phenomena, leads me to my third contribution. Not enough empirical research conceives of camping as a social practice, with routineized and shared activities, meanings, and competences, that can be changed by introducing new tools like digital technologies (Magaudda, 2011; Shove, et al., 2012). This study will thus fill this gap by casting light on how social practice theory can be applied within the very specific context of camping. Crucially, this research will provide updated understandings and theories regarding the social, experiential, and physical aspects of camping that ultimately reflect the pervasiveness of technology in society and our relationship to it.

1.4 Chapter-by-chapter Outline

Moving forward, the theoretical underpinnings of this research are outlined in chapter two. Chapter two reviews existing research that corresponds to each stage of the

camping experience and does so by tying each phase to Wiley's (2005) tensions between digital technology and wilderness. First, the tension between knowledge and the unknown in the pre-trip phase is examined through the concepts of uncertainty and comfort. Second, the onsite phase of the camping experience is examined through the tension between risk and security, developing an understanding of the concepts of risk and safety. Third, and lastly, the tensions between mediation and direct experience, as well as solitude and connectivity, are discussed as they relate to the onsite and post-trip phases and the concepts of social presence and digital disconnection are examined. By reviewing the literature in this way, I am able to ask the kinds of questions detailed above as digital technologies could impact each stage of the camping experience. Chapter three moves on to outline the methodological approach to my research. Following a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, a qualitative case study is formulated in which semi-structured interviews are conducted to learn about the effect of digital technologies on the social, experiential, and physical aspects of the camping experience. Guided by the themes of uncertainty, comfort, risk, safety, social presence, and digital disconnection which were established in the theoretical framework, data is subjected to reflexive thematic analysis in order to extract key findings from the research. Chapter four proceeds to analyze the data produced by participants with a focus on the pre-trip stage of the camping experience, detailing how uncertainty is experienced through the digital work that campers must undergo in order to plan for the trip. Chapter five analyzes the data produced by participants with a focus on the onsite phase of the camping experience, detailing how risk and safety are experienced by campers when using digital technologies in different types of camping environments. Chapter six analyzes the data produced by participants, focusing on the onsite and post-trip phase of the camping experience, detailing the ways in which a connection, or disconnection, to digital technologies can impact the social and sensory experience of camping while also having implications for its liminal qualities. Lastly, chapter seven explains the key findings from this research, which details the impact that digital technologies are having on the social, experiential, and physical aspects of the various phases of the camping experience. The limitations of this research are then identified and suggestions for future research are provided.

In the next chapter, I will review the existing literature related to the research questions outlined above.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to advance an understanding of the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies across three phases of the camping experience: the pre-trip planning phase, the onsite phase, and finally the post-trip experience. More specifically, I am interested in exploring how knowledge is gained, safety is perceived, and connectivity is experienced through the use of digital technologies and their impact on camping. As explained in my introductory chapter, three primary questions guide this research. First, what digital strategies are employed to navigate the pre-trip planning experience? Second, how does the use of digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the camping trip? Third, how does digital connectivity affect how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards? By examining the theoretical understandings of these themes, as well as related concepts, I will be able to establish a theoretical footing for my research.

Accordingly, the chapter is structured in a way that ties each phase of the camping experience to Wiley's (2005) tensions between digital technology and wilderness as each stage of a leisure experience has its own characteristics and each is characterized by the evolving states of mind of the participant (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966; Hammitt, 1980). The chapter begins by examining the tension between knowledge and the unknown in the pre-trip phase. To do this, the chapter details how uncertainty has been conceptualized (Knight, 1921; Rowe, 1994; Zinn, 2008) and applied to the camping experience (Borrie, 2000). The desire for certainty through knowledge attainment is connected to feelings of comfort, which is then conceptualized (Kolcaba, 2003; Pineau, 1982; Price, et al., 2021; Shove, 2003) and explored in the context of camping (Brooker and Joppe, 2013; Garst, et al, 2009; Varley, et al, 2018). The chapter proceeds to examine the onsite phase of the camping trip and the tension between risk and security. An understanding of risk and safety are developed, highlighting how they are both objective and socially constructed (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002; Zinn, 2008) and recent literature regarding digital technologies and safety is detailed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the tensions between mediation and direct experience, as well as solitude and

connectivity, in the onsite and post-trip phases. The concepts of social presence and digital disconnection are particularly important here in helping understand how digital technologies might impact the camping practice. This is a salient area of study due to the potential for digital technologies to change the way that people engage with the outdoors and with each other, therefore assigning meanings to camping and relationships with the digital technology that are used throughout the camping experience.

2.2 Knowledge vs. the Unknown and the Pre-trip Phase

Uncertainty

The pre-trip phase of any recreation experience is characterized by the need to plan and prepare as this preparation may shape what happens during the onsite phase (Jung and Cho, 2015; Nawjin, et al., 2013; Pabel and Prideaux, 2015). This often involves information-gathering to limit uncertainties and risks (Joseph, et al., 2022; Souza and Machado, 2017). In outdoor recreation, in particular, people prepare by researching the environment and the conditions they expect to encounter, gathering gear, and gathering information to help ensure a safe and satisfactory trip (Anderson and Absolon, 2011; McKown, 2005; Townsend, 2011). That is to say, preparing for a camping trip involves gathering knowledge to reduce varying degrees of uncertainty related to the natural world. Uncertainty is closely tied to the concept of risk as risks “have to do with *expectations*, which can be more or less (un-)certain” (Luhmann, 1995; Zinn, 2008). For economist Frank Knight, a distinction between risk and uncertainty exist in that:

“risk applies to situations where we do not know the outcome of a given situation but can accurately measure the odds, whereas uncertainty applies to situations where we cannot know all the information we need in order to set accurate odds in the first place” (Dizikes, 2010; Knight, 1921).

While this distinction is often used in economics assessments of risk, O'Malley (2004: 174) suggests that “rather than concerning ourselves about a possibly futile exercise in measuring whether risk is ‘spreading’, we should recognize that risk and uncertainty are both being valorized in new ways and forms.” It has been posited that

risk is actually a component of the more general concept of uncertainty “which gives access to a differentiated way to analyze the strategies which, apart from risk, are still and necessarily there to cope with uncertainty and ignorance” (Zinn, 2008: 280). Uncertainty can be conceptualized as subjective and contextual and “should no longer be redefined as a problem of how to produce order and certainty” because unique optimal solutions do not exist and instead, proposed solutions can create new uncertainties (Zinn, 2008: 277; Bonß, 2013). As such, attempts to conceptualize any uncertainty as predictable and cumulatively controllable risk are often futile.

Another aspect of uncertainty is its relationship to knowledge and information attainment, as “there is more information we don’t know than we do know for making most critical decisions involving risks” (Rowe, 1994:743). In other words, uncertainty is essentially a lack of knowledge and information. Rowe (1994) identifies four dimensions of uncertainty. The first dimension is temporal where there is uncertainty in future states or in past states. The second dimension is structural where there is uncertainty due to complexity. The third dimension is metrical which is uncertainty in measurement. Lastly, the fourth dimension is translational when there is uncertainty in explaining uncertain results. Rowe (1994) also notes that all four classes are subject to variability due to the inherent randomness of nature, inconsistent human behavior, and nonlinear dynamic systems behavior. Variability thus contributes to uncertainty. Because uncertainty is “written into the script of life” (Nowotny, 2015: 1), so too is the management of uncertainty and the strategies that evolve to deal with future outcomes that are not known.

The management of uncertainty is often conceptualized dichotomously between objective knowledge as a rational strategy for managing risk and belief and ideology as a non-rational strategy for its management (Wynne, 1982, 1989; Zinn, 2008). In large part, this has informed the way that experts have been viewed as having “access to superior scientific knowledge while lay people relied on ‘folk wisdom’, everyday myths, beliefs, and ideologies” (Zinn, 2008: 440). Following this argument, the rational knowledge that experts possess is of a higher quality and thus should take precedence over irrational knowledge when managing uncertainty. While rational knowledge is indeed important when managing uncertainty, non-rational strategies have benefits in that they allow individuals to act when the odds of a positive outcome are minimal, allowing people to embrace risk and manage

uncertainty (Lupton and Tullock, 2002; Lyng, 2005, Zinn, 2008). Further, in-between strategies, or “strategies that are neither fully rational nor non-rational” and use emotion, trust and intuition to make decisions are often employed in everyday approaches to uncertainty, especially when knowledge or time is limited and complexity is overwhelming (Zinn, 2008: 442, Zinn, 2016). Zinn explains these strategies further, stating, “They might have some of the features of rational strategies, e.g. may rely on the use of knowledge albeit not scientific knowledge, and some of the features of non-rational strategies, i.e. are influenced by personal context, feelings, or beliefs” (Zinn, 2008: 442). Significant here is the emphasis that is placed on prior knowledge and experience in strategies to manage uncertainty, as it suggests that individuals make risk-based decisions that are not always based on institutional or traditionally authoritative sources. Indeed, “in-between strategies are more important when expert knowledge is fundamental but contested in dealing with future challenges” (Zinn, 2016: 349). Instead, personal experience, skills honed over time, the knowledge of lay people *and* experts, and sociocultural influences blend together to form uncertainty-management strategies that guide actions in everyday life that are meant to “facilitate more effective control over the future” (Zinn, 2008: 439; Zinn, 2016).

Uncertainty and the Camping Experience

Digital technologies can both serve as solutions and introduce new risks, thus potentially increasing the complexity of how campers manage uncertainty throughout the camping experience (Hui Kyong Chun, 2011; Sundberg, 2023). For example, in the preparation phase of any recreational trip, user-generated content (UGC) plays a significant role in providing inspiration and information that forms travelers’ initial perceptions of destinations (Hafidz Al Fajar and Erlangga, 2025). This has secondary effects in that information provided by fellow users is trusted more than the information provided by professional or traditional institutions (Moodley and Machela, 2022). Indeed, research has found that “UGC exerts a strong influence on destination image and tourist preferences because it is perceived as more credible, relevant, and contextual than information provided by tourism service providers” (Hafidz Al Fajar and Erlangga, 2025: 93; Kfoury, 2024). Yet, the distribution of the quality of information found in UGC has high variance, leading to doubts about its

authenticity, or a “quality control problem” (Kim and Ahmad, 2013: 438). Accordingly, the information provided by digital technology can lead to an ambivalent decision environment where decision-makers are put “in undesired situations of untrustworthy or contradictory information on facts and agency” (Gimpel and Schmied, 2019: 8). Put another way, digital technology use can lead to the consumption of misinformation, leading to an eroded sense of trust in what information is being consumed and increased levels of uncertainty. Accurate information is especially important when camping as the natural environment has real and objective hazards, like forest fires, wildlife activity, or blocked trails, that can make it difficult if not dangerous to sleep and recreate outside (US Forest Service, 2025). Certainly, “technology creates manufactured risks of which history provides little guidance of how to manage” (Giddens, 1999; Sundberg, 2023). What is of interest to my research is how campers use digital technologies to manage uncertainty within the pre-trip phase of the camping experience and what implications this has for the experience as a whole. This is important, as information gathered in the pre-trip phase can impact onsite experiences as well as recollection of the experience in the post-trip phase, thus shaping our understanding of camping as a practice (Kim et al., 2015; Arts, et al., 2021). As scholarly focus has primarily centered on the onsite phase of camping experiences (Garst, et al., 2009; Hassell, et al., 2025; Huang, et al.,) or the pre-trip planning phase within other contexts (Hafidz Al Fajar and Erlangga, 2025: 93; Kfoury, 2024), this is an area of research on camping that I would suggest is lacking and will be addressed with my research.

Using digital technology as a means for handling uncertainty in the pre-trip stage may also have implications for the camping experience because of the tension it introduces between knowledge and the unknown in wilderness. Wiley (2005) contends that a tension arises “between the increasing availability of information about wilderness areas and the human need to confront and experience the mystery of the unknown - that is, nature in itself” (20). He notes that the internet provides a wealth of information that can reduce the uncertainties that are inherent to camping, as “before visiting a wilderness area, one can acquire satellite images and topographic maps of the area, data on the wildlife present, photographs of prominent natural and cultural features, current weather conditions, and more” (Wiley, 2005: 20). Borrie (2000:87) highlights this point, stating:

Database and memory technology, combined with greater levels of public access, have taken away much of the sense of wilderness as a blank space on the map. It will not be long before characteristics of a wilderness campsite such as predominant wind direction, amount of bare ground, and numbers of fish become available for every campsite in wilderness. Although aiding trip-planning, selection and reservation of designated campsites, this comes at the cost of a loss of the unknown. The sense of discovery and mystery, that can be so much a part of wilderness, is lost. Instead of developing local knowledge from direct interaction with the wilderness environment, more decisions and expectations are being based on a mediated or controlled image of wilderness.

While Borrie laments the loss of the uncertainty inherent to wilderness that results from digital technology use, it is important to note that knowledge and information gathering in the pre-trip phase can also be perceived positively. After all, there is a reason why recreationists seek this information out. The desire for certainty is connected to feelings of comfort, which is precisely what the following section will examine.

Conceptions of Comfort

Comfort relates to the notion of well-being and has been conceptualized in different contexts, mostly between physical/embodied and mental/spiritual comfort (Varley, et al., 2018). Scholars have noted how it applies to a variety of experiences in everyday life related to bodies and environment, difference and encounters, materiality and textures, and health and well being (Price, et al., 2021). For example, it has been described as a corporeal sensibility (Bissell, 2008), where being comfortable is “to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (Johnson, 2017: 280). Other definitions have included “soothing of distress or sorrow, relief or assistance in distress, a human or thing that brings comfort, a tranquil and quiet state of mind, easiness in life, or the minimization of grief through cheering, calming, and inspiration of hope” (Samonte and Vallente,

2023). Maldonado (1991: 35) contends that comfort is “the services that a particular ambient reality can provide in terms of convenience, ease, or habitability.”

Comfort theory, first developed within the context of nursing and health and having expanded to other disciplines, explicitly connects the notion that comfort pertains to both one’s body and mind (Kolcaba, 2003). In comfort theory, comfort is conceptualized as existing in three forms: relief, ease, and transcendence (Kolcaba, 2003). Relief refers to acts that relieve physical discomforts, ease refers to comfort felt when anxiety is tackled, and transcendence refers to the comfort in being able to rise above the individual’s challenges (Kolcaba, 2003; Samonte and Vallente, 2023). Similar to Kolcaba’s (2003) emphasis on action’s relation to comfort, Shove (2003) highlights how comfort is an achievement which requires an action to reach. She proposes that “some comfort elements, such as physical comfort, which, once satisfied, are likely to diminish in importance and leave individuals striving for the next comfort level” which may explain why individuals are constantly striving for comfort (Nagy and Carr, 2018: 225; Shove, 2003). Further, comfort is relationally contingent to discomfort and exists on a spectrum on which comfort and discomfort oscillate (Price, et al., 2021; Stewart, 2007). For example, one must be cold (discomfort) in order to appreciate the comfort of a fire. In addition, “comfort can flow into a negation of comfort” where new hardships result from the desire for comfort (Maldonado, 1991: 36). Air conditioning, for example, provides comfort in hot environments but actually drives up temperatures, thus impacting livelihoods and economies (UNEP, 2023).

Pineau (1982) explores the various aspects of comfort as it relates to dwelling. He notes that, for some scholars, comfort concerns “everything that contributes to the well-being and convenience of the material aspects of life; thus it constitutes an improvement of living conditions in inhabited space” (Pineau, 1982: 271). When objects provide comfort, their function is to make daily life easier. Comfort can also refer to the general quality of a dwelling (Pineau, 1982). Quality can range anywhere from utilities like running water, heating, and electricity to spaciousness or even subjective aspects of a dwelling like its decor. Yet comfort cannot be evaluated through purely material criteria, and instead, its psychological or subjective aspects must be addressed. Pineau (1982) identifies four broad themes that have a role in determining the comfort of a dwelling: personalization, freedom of

choice, space and warmth. When a dwelling is personalized, the dwelling becomes familiar. An inhabitant can recognize himself in his environment and thus feel a familiarity that lends itself to feeling comfortable. Unlike standardized hotel rooms, a personalized dwelling provides a sense of security from the familiarity it evokes. Varley et al., (2018) agree, arguing that objects not only have a functional use but also a symbolic value because they conjure up feelings and emotions. Freedom of choice is also important in determining the level of perceived comfort in a dwelling. In Pineau's study, this translated to the freedom to choose to get away from other people and to establish a sense of privacy or distance between oneself and others, whether it be housemates, neighbors, or the surrounding environment. The third theme, space, is linked to freedom of choice in that a spacious dwelling allows for privacy or choosing not to interact with other people. The last theme Pineau identifies is warmth, which has both physical and psychological factors. Interestingly, the warmth of an open fire provides a sense of comfort due to its nature as "visual entertainment" (279) and provides a cozy ambiance, while central heating, although lacking in visual appeal, is still quite important. Within the context of outdoor accommodation, research has also suggested that campfires are an important part of the social experience of camping (Hendee and Campbell, 1969).

The concept of dwelling, or 'making oneself at home' is also integral to discussions around tourism and hospitality, as the "sense of homeliness, belonging and comfort are the core qualities" in hospitality contexts (Varley, et al., 2018: 143). Hospitality is the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers, with liberality and goodwill (OED, 2022). Put simply, hospitality can be defined as the relationship between hosts and guests where the experience of the guest is the highest priority (Varley, et al., 2018). At the highest level, being a good host means providing the basic necessities of shelter or food. Yet it also entails triggering feelings of mental well-being, fostered by "a desire to make guests happy, compassion to please their needs and entertain them" (Varley et al., 2018: 140, 148), sharing one's 'home-space', and emphasizing "simplicity, togetherness, intimate spaces, atmosphere and stories that are told in small social circles and casual environments" (Edberg, 2016; Kearney and Semonovitch, 2011). Varley et al. (2018) perhaps summarize it best, stating "hospitality experiences involve temporary sharing of space, time and often food while attempting to create intimacy, fellowship and

comfort, nudging towards that elusive (and compromised) sense of belonging often associated with the home (p. 141). Hospitality, then, is an extension of comfort in which hosts provide guests with both embodied and psychological comfort.

Significantly, comfort is not a universal concept and is instead dependent on differing frames of reference for individuals. Comfort, and by extension discomfort, is evidently expansive and multidimensional in its meanings. As the nature of comfort is ever-changing, comfort can thus be conceived as socially constructed or a “social phenomenon that is bodily sensed on an individual level as well as shared as social conventions that are interpreted in everyday life” (Madsen and Gram-Hanssen, 2017:88; Rybczynski, 1987; Scitovsky, 1976). Indeed, throughout different points in history, notions of comfort have emphasized privacy, being at ease, and convenience (Rybczynski, 1987). Scitovsky (1976) highlights the social constructedness of comfort, contending that, as the standard of living rises and we get used to doing or experiencing things a certain way, a sense of comfort develops and doing without them would be uncomfortable. The nature of comfort is, therefore, dynamic. In line with existing scholarship, this research adopts the position that comfort is socially constructed and has physical, physiological and psychological attributes that impact everyday life, which is what this research is interested in exploring. The examination of comfort is important because it structures daily life, ritualizes conduct, and influences our way of being in the world (Maldonado, 1991)—“comfort is a highly complex sensibility and one that requires sustained attention to the nuances therein” (Bissell, 2008: 1697). In particular, these nuances have not been explored in depth as they relate to the use of digital technology in each stage of the camping experience which is a gap my research intends to address.

Comfort and Camping

Varley and Semple (2015) consider comfort a key element of ‘slow adventure’, or the “basic and simple activity of just being, or dwelling, in nature for extended periods of time, which allows for the generation of rich experiences, deep appreciation of and spiritual immersion in the natural environment and engagement in simple outdoor activities” (Varley, Farkic, Carnicelli, 2018: 138). They contend that comfort “implies being at ease with the unusual challenges throughout the journey, and might include reconnection with the place, and even with ourselves and with others” (Varley et al.,

2018: 139). Camping, as an example of slow adventure, has undergone a transformation in which comfort is seen as a key component of the experience which is reflected in how and where people camp (Brooker and Joppe, 2013). Two components of comfort stand out for campers: comfort provided by materials and environment and the comfort of hospitality (Garst, et al., 2009; Varley, et al., 2018). As noted, when objects provide comfort, their function is to bring convenience to daily life. For example, a portable stove makes it much easier and faster to cook dinner than it is for a camper who has to build a fire to cook. Synthetic materials that can provide warmth and withstand adverse weather conditions have replaced natural fabrics in clothing, tents, and sleeping bags (Tilin and Grudowski, 1997). Additionally, advancements in equipment such as self-inflating pads, collapsible water bladders, and solar-heated showers have made camping more comfortable (Cordell, et al., 1999). Comfort can also refer to the general quality of a dwelling (Pineau, 1982). Garst et al. (2009) found that the trend among public-managed campgrounds seems to be moving away from rustic campgrounds that provide only a tent pad and a fire ring to camping facilities that provide a range of amenities such as full hook-ups with water, sewer, and electricity, thus reflecting a general shift in expectations of campground facilities.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the desire for comfort in the camping experience is “glamping”. Described as “modern and accessible” (Craig and Karabas, 2021), glamping is a portmanteau of ‘glamorous’ and ‘camping’ and is defined as a “form of camping that involves accommodation, facilities and services that are more luxurious than those traditionally associated with camping (OED, 2022). With glamping, a sense of privacy, and thus comfort, is achieved much more readily due to the physical structures that cordon off interactions between other glamping guests (Adamovich, et al., 2021; Filipe, Santos, Barbosa, 2018; Lopes, et al., 2020). Traditional campsites have historically been standardized, included few features like a fireplace, camp table and a place to set up one’s tent (Young 2017). In fact, the architect of traditional campsites in the United States, E.P. Meinecke, emphasized the need for the bare minimum at campsites to foster a decidedly antimodern space that does not resemble the camper’s life at home (cited in Young, 2017: 159). Meinecke states that the camper “seeks release from the restrictions of town and city life...the task is much like furnishing a home overcrowded with all kinds

of furniture. It consists in the wise elimination of the encumbering surplus” (Young, 2017: 156-158). Traditional campsites were constructed to reflect an antimodern sensibility that maintained the illusion of wilderness. Essentially, because many traditional campsites are standardized, they are predictable. Yet, a desire for a hybrid form of outdoor accommodation that blends the comfort and conveniences of home, the luxury of a hotel, and proximity to nature have become important to outdoor recreationists, leading to greater variety of experiences. What is notable here is that glamping “combines wishing to stay in the outdoors and wanting all the comforts of home” (Milohnic et al, 2019: 457). While there may be a variety of experiences, glamping is comfortable because of the provisions that are usually more comfortable, but also because there is a sense of certainty, and thus comfort, in knowing that a campsite will resemble the comfort and convenience of home.

The aforementioned motivations have consequently fostered this relatively new tourism industry that provides quasi-outdoor lodging for those that desire comfort, privacy and unique experiences in a natural environment (Adamovich, 2021; Brochado and Pereira, 2017; Craig and Karabas, 2021). Hipcamp, of course, is one such example. Many of Hipcamp’s campsites may be considered a form of glamping due to both the company’s recommendation that landowners build permanent camping structures and the amenities provided by many campsites (Hipcamp, 2019), as this is a competitive strategy that draws visitors to their sites (Carter, 2011). Additionally, and similar to other peer-to-peer accommodation platforms, Hipcamp provides photos, descriptions, and reviews of the campsite, which is all information that is important to the pre-trip planning process and creates a sense of certainty in the future experience (Hyun, et al., 2009). Further, Hipcamp provides a dedicated ‘host’ that is responsible for ensuring a good and comfortable camping experience by providing information about expectations for the trip. Hipcamp, as an example of commercial hospitality, provides services to make guests welcome and comfortable but with the added aim of extracting monetary value for the service provider (Ashness and Lashley, 1995). Part of this comfort comes from the assurance of safety and the reduction of risk that the host provides, especially within the context of the outdoors. Essentially, the host is paid to be hospitable and to provide guests with the feeling and comfort of being at home (Duncan et al., 2013). In fact, Hipcamp’s website lists a set of host standards that describe how to be a respectful host.

Specific standards include being responsive, communicating with Hipcampers, accepting booking requests, maintaining positive ratings, maintaining an accurate listing, being inclusive, only canceling bookings when necessary, and leaving the Hipcamp community better (Hipcamp, 2022). The psychological comfort and certainty that a host can provide, however, is tempered by the fact that the host is essentially a stranger and can increase perceived uncertainties, especially with regard to physical insecurity, as is shown through other peer-to-peer accommodation platforms like Airbnb (Moon and Song, 2026).

Regardless of how information is gathered while planning a camping trip, the pre-trip phase can be characterized by the tension between the knowledge and the unknown, or the desire for comfort in the face of uncertainty. Indeed, while comfort has been acknowledged as an important part of modern day camping experiences during the onsite phase, the manner in which this is experienced in the pre-trip planning phase and how digital technologies may provide comfort during a phase that is marked by uncertainty is unclear. One of the primary questions guiding this research then, is what digital strategies are employed to manage uncertainty during the pre-trip phase of the camping experience. As noted, the importance of this question is highlighted in the way that the pre-trip planning phase can influence both the onsite and post-trip phase (Kim et al., 2015; Arts et al., 2021), thus shaping our understanding of a camping practice. In addition, the use of digital technology in this phase may change how we approach camping precisely because of the way that certain digital technologies, like UGC or Hipcamp, can introduce uncertainties. Accordingly, my research aims to fill this gap in knowledge.

As Clawson and Knetsch (1966) note, the next phase of any leisure experience is getting to the recreational site and experiencing the actual activity and environment. Additionally, the onsite phase is characterized by an evolving state of mind which may lead to new considerations for campers. An important distinction, as we move forward to the onsite stage of the camping experience, is that the pre-trip phase is characterized by supposing what may happen during the camping trip as opposed to what is actually experienced. In other words, the unknowns that are navigated in the anticipatory pre-trip stage may become more known as the trip progresses. For campers, real and perceived risks within the natural environment must be managed. An examination of the tension between risk and security while at

the campsite is, therefore, important to understanding the lived experience of campers.

2.3 Risk vs. Security and the Onsite Phase

Conceptions of Risk

The tension between risk and security is an integral part of the onsite phase because of the “risk - or in the perceived risk - of leaving civilization and entering the wild” (Wiley, 2005:11). Accordingly, an understanding of how to conceptualize risk is necessary. Risk is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define precisely because it is a multi-disciplinary concept (Althaus, 2005; McNeill, 2013; Gstaettner, et al., 2018). While risk has historically been dichotomously conceived in its relation to the potential for positive or negative outcomes, “modern definitions refer to resistance against fate, uncertainty, and negative outcomes” (Gstaettner, et al., 2018; McNeill, 2013: 2). Ulrich Beck’s (1986) seminal work, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, reflects a more nuanced approach to risk. In it he argues that we are moving into a ‘world risk society’, in which risk is “defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself (Beck, 1992: 21). That is to say, risk is created by modern society rather than being entirely objective, where individuals are “forced to confront the systematically produced unintended social and environmental consequences and side-effects of industrialism (Scott, 2014: 650). Rather than the contemporary world being riskier than the world of pre-modernity, it is the nature of the risks that are changing. For Beck, the development of science and technology are creating new risks that are inherently different to the natural dangers or hazards of pre-modern times because “we cannot control or eliminate the uncertainties surrounding the probable outcomes of various risks” (Dillon, 2020: 458; Giddens and Sutton, 2017). In essence, these risks are manufactured as opposed to natural, as they are consequences of the use of technology with few aspects of the physical world untouched by human intervention (Giddens, 1999). For example, a natural hazard like a wildfire is a risk that existed in pre-modern times. Industrialization has resulted in climate change and the encroachment of human development on undeveloped wildland, thus creating a warming planet that heightens the risk of wildfires threatening livelihoods, settlements and infrastructure in an unpredictable way (Mansoor, et al., 2022).

People are constantly made aware of these risks, reflect upon the negative consequences of modernization, and attempt to manage them by acquiring knowledge to avoid them, perpetuating a reflexive modernity in which progress is viewed through the lens of managing its own negative consequences (Brey, 2003; Sundberg, 2023). Through this process, individuals experience anxiety and fear due to the association of risk with dangers, hazards and uncertainty (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). As a result, “people will spend more effort and use more resources dealing with risks than ever before” (Giddens and Sutton, 2017: 451). Beck characterizes these risks as universal in scope, transcending economic class lines because both rich and poor are affected (Beck, 1986). Further, a characteristic of “risk society” is that negative consequences derive from the attempt to manage these socially produced risks. As a result, risk society is all encompassing in the way that it frames our perspectives and guides our actions, and perpetuates through our attempts to manage the risks that society creates.

While establishing the notion of risk as ubiquitous in modern society precisely because risk is produced by social actors is foundational to the sociology of risk, other scholars have critiqued Beck’s conceptualization of risk as too narrow as it does not take into account the subjective experiences and contexts of risk (Lash, 2000; Lupton, 1999; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Zinn, 2006). Sociocultural factors that may influence risk, like ethnicity, gender, and economic status, are flattened in Beck’s argument in favor of risk being conceived as global in scale. While global risks certainly exist, individuals within a society and within specific cultures may perceive or experience risk differently. A cultural perspective highlights this omission and defines risk as a “culturally given way to respond to threats of the boundaries of a group, organization or society and its definitions of reality and ways to maintain social order” (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Zinn, 2006: 277). Functionalist in nature, the cultural studies approach to risk analyzes the link between social organization and the individual’s response to risk, or self and other (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982). Important here is the idea that risk perceptions form certain patterns that are shaped by social and cultural norms (Tulloch and Lupton, 2002). Moving beyond the functionalist perspective of cultural studies and turning to a focus on the experience of risk in everyday life, the socio-cultural approach to risk, developed by Tulloch and Lupton (2003), asserts that risk is “historical and local, as

constantly contested and as a subject to disputes and debates over their nature, their control and who is to blame for their creation”, thus creating “thick descriptions of risk-taking and responses to risk” (Zinn, 2006: 278). That is to say, the negative connotations associated with risk that are emphasized in other sociological approaches are contested in the everyday experiences of individuals. Indeed, while risk is often defined negatively as an unacceptable threat to physical, financial or psychological well-being, individuals may find enjoyment in voluntary risk-taking as opposed to being fearful of it (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). In their empirical research Lupton and Tulloch (2002) define voluntary-risk taking as “the activity in which individuals engage is perceived by them to be in some sense risk, but is undertaken deliberately and from choice” (115). They then identify three dominant discourses in voluntary risk-taking: self-improvement, emotional engagement and control. In each discourse, power-relations, cultural boundaries, embodied sensation, and identity are evident in the way that people experience risk (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). Accordingly, from a socio-cultural perspective, risk is context dependent and managed in complex and unpredictable ways.

As my research is interested in the lived experience of campers, a socio-cultural perspective is significant due to its focus on the complex and dynamic processes of risk issues in everyday life and the notion that risk epistemologies are socially constructed (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002; Zinn, 2006). Important to this research, too, is the idea that risks are a combination of objective and subjective factors because they involve physical realities regardless of whether people are aware of it or how they feel about it. For example, the conditions of the natural world might result in a boulder falling onto a hiking trail. This objective risk was not created by society; a falling boulder has the very real possible consequence of physical harm. Yet, it is how the hiker responds to the objective risk and the knowledge that this could occur that reveals the subjectivity of risk. In other words, there is a world “out there” and how we respond to and manage risks is highly subjective (Beck, 1999, Latour, 1993, Zinn, 2006). Risk perception, then, is a “function of hazard plus exposure” (Leiss and Chociolko, 1994: 28) in which one has to perceive a hazard as a risk before assessing how it will impact action moving forward. Espiner (2001) suggests that “it is the values associated with the expected outcome that determines whether a risk is viewed positively or negatively” (Gstaettner, et al., 2018: 1785).

Usually, the chance of loss will impact a decision because individuals focus on what worries them most about a particular outcome (O’Gorman, et al., 2003). Further, people underestimate familiar risks and overestimate unfamiliar risks (O’Gorman, et al., 2003).

Following this, the framework for my research is built on a critical realist perspective with the understanding that hazards can be objective or socially produced, but how we perceive and manage them is highly subjective and dependent on cultural, social, and individual understandings. This is significant, as “the distinction between true and subjectively-distorted knowledge or between real and perceived risks seems to be one of the basic distinctions every society relies upon (Krohn and Krücken, 1993: 12). In other words, the management of risk is characteristic of everyday life. As such, recreational experiences, like camping, involve the management of real and perceived risks. Part of this management, too, is the ability to be safe from real and perceived risks. Thus, an understanding of safety is needed to fully examine the tension between risk and security.

Conceptions of Safety

A single definition of safety does not exist, as different perspectives and approaches to the concept are abundant. As Raheemy, et al. (2025: 1) detail, “at one end of the spectrum, safety is explained as the absence of risk or incidents, while on the other, it is viewed as the presence of capacity or capabilities.” With regard to safety’s relationship to risk, safety has been defined as “the antonym of risk” (SRA, 2018: 7), “freedom from unacceptable risk” (ISSO/IEC, 2014: 2), and “a state of low risk: the lower the risk, the higher the safety” (Möller et al., 2006: 421). On the other hand, Balderson (2016: 68) highlights its relationship to control over hazards, defining safety as “the application of hazard control through the workplace, person and system by integrating into the organization sustained actions, accountability and reducing risk to as low as reasonably practicable to mitigate potential injury”. Maurice et al. 's (2001: 328) definition of safety echoes the importance of controls, stating that safety is “a state in which hazards and conditions leading to physical, psychological, or material harm are controlled in order to preserve the health and well-being of individuals and the community”. Raheemy, et al (2025) note the temporal aspects of definitions of safety, finding that understandings of safety vary according to whether

it is being looked at from a future-oriented, present-oriented, or retrospective perspective. From a future-oriented perspective, safety is about proactive actions aimed at preventing injuries and is focused on the measures that are taken to ensure that upcoming environments will be safe (Raheemy, et al., 2005). That is to say, the focus is on preventive actions. From a present-oriented perspective, safety is about “ensuring that individuals are protected from harm at any given moment” (Raheemy, et al., 2005: 8). The focus here is on current conditions and real-time attention and control. Lastly, from a retrospective perspective, safety is understood as an outcome where value is placed on learning from historical performance to inform future safety practices. Evidently, safety is a multi-faceted concept.

Important to this research, though, is Simpson’s (1996: 550) assertion that perceptions of safety and danger are “intersubjective — products of social construction, collective agreement, and socialization.” Simpson (1996:550) recognizes that objective danger exists but also argues that “the objective environment provides only inconsistent and ambiguous clues about danger, leaving wide latitude for inference and interpretation.” In other words, objective danger can have both observable or unobservable symptoms (e.g. the atom bomb and radiation). Given this assertion, we are never truly aware if we are unequivocally safe and thus, perceiving anything as safe requires ignoring all the potential ways in which danger exists, both seen and unseen. As Simpson (1996: 551) contends, “in safety there is always the possibility that danger lurks unseen...perceiving safety necessarily involves rationalization.” To explain the subjectivity of safety, she provides the example of the distinction between snakes as dangerous animals and turtles as safe, which rests on where we identify the source of danger. She states,

“Snakes can cause illness and death by transmitting venom. Turtles can cause illness and death by transmitting the bacteria that cause salmonella. In each case, the process is the same: physical contact with fluid from an animal causes illness and possibly death. But despite the similar process, we treat snakes as agents of danger while turtles are merely benign carriers of a dangerous disease” (Simpson, 1996: 552).

That is to say, despite the same objective danger, society designates one animal as safer than the other. This can also explain why perceptions of safety may differ on an individual level for campers, where an experienced camper might view remote campsites as safe while a more inexperienced camper might perceive them as dangerous. To conceptualize the way we perceive danger and safety, Simpson (1996) details three cognitive frameworks that make a different default assumption about the world and whether it is safe, dangerous, or neutral. She posits that we perceive safety and danger according to this default assumption and that we 'mark' entities that defy the framework's default assumption. The Cautious framework "assumes a dangerous background and marks certain items as specifically safe", the Confident framework "assumes a safe background and marks certain items as dangerous" and the Neutral framework "assumes a neutral background and marks items as either safe or dangerous" (550). It is the neutral framework that dominates everyday life. The appropriate framework for a specific situation is thus determined by collective agreement, highlighting the social constructedness of safety.

The notion of the stranger, in particular, highlights the subjectivity of safety. Jackson, et al. (2017) note that there have been many discussions about 'the stranger' that have developed over time, including debates around who, or what, is strange. Indeed, notions of the stranger are context-specific, "reflecting social constructions and concerns regarding daily life and an attempt to categorise the outside" (Jackson, et al., 2017: 5). Simmel (1908) first identified a stranger as a newcomer approaching an established group, as someone who does not belong. The stranger is characterized by otherness and not sharing a common identity or heritage of the established group (Schutz, 1944/1971). Because a stranger is someone outside of one's circle, a stranger may be perceived as unpredictable (Lofland, 1973; Lupton, 1999). To Jackson, et al. (2017), this, and by extension the fear of the unknown, is where fear in the stranger is situated. In other words, the stranger is "a constant threat to the order of the world, poisoning the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos" (Bauman, 1991: 56). Yet, while a stranger can be perceived as dangerous and thus unsafe, they can also be seen as enticing in their otherness (Sandercock, 2000). Strangers, then, can be deemed both unsafe and safe.

In commercial hospitality settings, hosts and guests are strangers to each other - they are outside of each other's normal social circles - yet a level of trust is

involved in the exchange due to beliefs about hospitality and obligations to others that are “located in views and visions about the nature of society, and the natural order of things” (Lashley, 2015: 4; Selwyn, 2000). Indeed, “the duty to provide hospitality, to act with generosity as a host, and to protect visitors is more than a matter left to the preferences of individuals” (Lashley, 2015: 4). The provision of food, drink, and accommodation represents an act of friendship (Lashley, 2015; Telfer, 2000). Here, the stranger becomes trusted and is thus deemed safe precisely because of the cultural and social context. As evidenced in the popularity of peer-to-peer accommodation platforms like Airbnb and Hipcamp, the hospitality offered by strangers is now being facilitated digitally and within both urban and rural environments. Trust in a host is necessary for a guest to stay in an Airbnb or Hipcamp, and digital features like photos and reviews can increase the level of trust, and by extension, feelings of safety, in staying in a stranger’s home or on their land (Tussyadiah and Park, 2018; Mao, et al., 2020; Ye, et al, 2019). Yet, new safety concerns can arise precisely because of the unreliability of non-professional hosts, as the accommodation service is highly dependent upon the host’s competence in hospitality (Huurne, Ronteltap, Corten, and Buskens, 2017; Zhang, Yan and Zhang, 2018).

As it relates to the camping experience, campground managers are essentially strangers who provide customer service and perform duties related to the maintenance and operation of the campground (Ziprecruiter.com, 2022). Importantly, campground managers are part of traditional institutions like the United States National Park Service, thus instilling in campers a sense of institution-based trust, or “the belief that appropriate impersonal structures and common standards are in place with which to anticipate a successful transaction” (Mao, et al., 2020: 69). Some duties of campground managers include ensuring guests pay for their stay, reporting illegal activity and general upkeep of the campground. Other duties are based more on being an expert on the location and entail giving directions to hiking trails and providing information related to the surrounding area, its history, and campground amenities. Acting as guides, campground managers “encapsulate the essence of place, act as mediators between nature and its consumers, and construct or make sense of their experience” (Jennings and Weiler, 2006; Pond, 1993; Varley, Farkic, Carnicelli, 2018: 141). Holyfield, Jonas and Zajicek (2005) argue that outdoor guides

ensure that the adventures they facilitate remain “somewhere between the poles of boredom and anxiety” and that the goal is to offer guests a fun and memorable experience while managing the actual risks inherent to nature (176). That is to say, campground managers are strangers that can actually offer a sense of safety due to their knowledge of risks, their role within the context of a hospitality setting, and their connection to an institution. Another way that campers manage the tension between risk and safety during their camping experience is through the use of digital technologies, which is detailed in the following section.

Risk, Safety and the Camping Experience

The risks associated with camping revolve around the unpredictability of natural hazards, the presence of dangers like wildlife and extreme weather conditions, as well as the lack of infrastructure and emergency services. While not an exhaustive list, possible environmental and weather-related dangers can include exposure to extreme heat, cold, or precipitation, lightning, wildfires, landslides, and water hazards (Herrera, 2023; US Forest Service, 2025). Health and safety dangers can include injuries, disease-carrying insects and poisonous plants, food and water poisoning, campfire mismanagement, misuse of equipment, and altitude sickness (Herrera, 2023; US Forest Service, 2025). Wildlife related dangers can be a concern as well, including animal encounters and attacks (Herrera, 2023; US Forest Service, 2025). Further, equipment malfunction can place a camper in a hazardous situation depending on the remoteness of the campsite and an unfamiliarity with terrain can lead to campers getting lost. Because of the lack of infrastructure, camping requires a level of self-sufficiency, knowledge, and skills for navigating these risks (Mullins, 2014). Indeed, executing a task or activity requires the skills or experience necessary to operate within a given environment (Mullins, 2014). Direct experiences within an environment allows recreationists to gradually gain the skills necessary to recreate in the wilderness (Shultis, 2012). For example, the ability to read a map is important to ensure proper navigation while recreating outdoors. Yet, many are more familiar with digital maps than analog maps which could pose problems for wayfinding when there is a lack of cellular service when camping. Empirical evidence supports this, as Hergan and Umek (2017) conducted a study in which the participants were more independent and made fewer mistakes when using a mobile

navigator than when using a paper map. Accordingly, digital technology can impact the knowledge and skills required for maintaining safety in the outdoors.

Gimpel and Schmied (2019) identify a variety of risks associated with technology use. One risk they identify is undesirable behavioral adaptation, or a change of traditional competencies and behaviors in a socially undesirable manner (Gimpel and Schmied, 2019). This can include technology-reliance along with increasing incompetence and distraction from a principal activity in which there is “harmful loss of focus on a principal activity due to the simultaneous use of digital technology and media” (Gimpel and Schmied, 2019: 8). While digital devices may provide instantaneous results, they don’t require skill, practice, and the incorporation of environmental knowledge in the same way that other camping equipment does (Pohl, 2006; Pope and Martin, 2011). Accordingly, “visitors may come to rely on these devices in the wilderness instead of developing appropriate knowledge, abilities, experience, and skills” (Pope and Martin, 2011: 20). Technology-reliance may lead to the loss of survival skills in the outdoors (Hyatt, et al., 2020) or can lead to distraction from the natural environment, which may have harmful effects on both physical and psychological health (Dustin, et al., 2019). The result of the reliance on digital technology may lead to riskier behaviors or a false sense of security, as “technology may serve to insulate visitors from the consequences of their actions to the point where they fail to recognize the severity of a situation” (Borrie, 2000; Pope and Martin, 2011: 21). Indeed, in their study of visitor perceptions of technology, risk, and rescue in wilderness, Pope and Martin (2011) found that those with personal experience of a serious wilderness accident were more likely to believe that technology creates a false sense of safety for wilderness users. Research in other contexts supports this notion. In their study on the embodied experience of smartphone users in urban darkness, Hardley and Richardson (2021) and Saker et al. (2023) note how smartphones can provide a sense of safety and security, finding that the communicative and geo-locational affordances of smartphones change the way that women perceive the riskiness of urban environments. This last point is important as it highlights how digital technologies, and in particular, mobile phones, can shape how environments are experienced (Evans and Saker, 2017). Yet, Hardley and Richardson (2021: 74) also point out the paradox of safety in that “the connectivity afforded by network functionality provides comforting and familiar

feelings of ambient presence or copresence, even while we are concurrently aware of the inadequacies of online communicative reach in situations of bodily risk.” In other words, the information and connection that digital technology provides may prove to be a “double-edged sword” (Cuthbertson, Socha and Potter, 2004: 1), providing a false sense of security in the face of objective danger.

While this may be true, many wilderness visitors stress their ability to avoid over-reliance on technology due to the experience and knowledge already gained (Shultis, 2015). In Pope and Martin’s (2011) study, they also found that many participants felt strongly that technology cannot substitute for skill, experience, and knowledge and were very unlikely to take chances that could increase risk just because they had technology with them. Additionally, mobile technologies like cell phones and GPS devices offer the obvious benefits of being able to be located and call for help in case of emergency as well as the ability to maintain contact with family and friends. Satellite communicators like Garmin inReach, allow users to send SOS signals via satellite when cell service is unavailable while also enabling messaging with emergency contacts. GPS navigation provides precise location data which can be critical for ensuring one does not get lost. When having cellular connection, the ability to gather information immediately can allow campers to avoid dangerous situations. Further, artificial intelligence (AI) is “transforming outdoor safety from reactive to proactive” (Parekh, 2025) in myriad ways, including smarter weather forecasting, route optimization, wildlife tracking, health monitoring, and risk prediction from AI, crowdsourced data, and environmental sensors that can assign risk scores to outdoor trips. In studies regarding outdoor recreation and technology, Martin and Blackwell (2016) and Shultis (2015) both found that technology increased feelings of safety and security, “allowing them to expand their limits and provide new challenges” (Shultis, 2015: 200). Indeed, Martin and Blackwell (2016:29) found that personal locator beacons (PLB) allowed participants to enjoy wilderness more because “it cut down on uneasiness, worry, and the guilt of making family members worry.” Evidently, balancing the risks of camping with the security that digital devices can bring is a key component of the camping experience. Applied to this research, it is unknown how the affordances of smartphones and other digital technologies might impact the way that risk and safety are experienced during the camping trip. Further, the implications for the way users approach the variety of environments, both social

and physical, in which camping takes place have not been examined in extant literature. For example, it is unknown how risk and security are experienced during the onsite phase of a Hipcamp camping trip, as the introduction of a non-professional host may have effects on the social experience as well as how campers relate to the natural environment. This is a gap that my research will address.

Beyond the management of risk and safety, the ability to fully experience the natural environment and social interactions are both integral components of the onsite phase of a camping experience (Garst, et al., 2009). The onsite phase is characterized by the actual experience of place, people, culture, and environment which has implications for the recollections of the experience in the post-trip phase (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966; Hammitt, 1980). Yet, Wiley (2005) notes that digital technologies can mediate and reduce the direct experience of wilderness while also creating a tension between the connectivity that digital technologies allow and the solitude that many wilderness recreationists seek. Accordingly, these tensions are explored further in the last section through the concepts of presence and digital disconnection.

2.4 Onsite and Post-Trip: Mediation vs. Direct Experience and Solitude vs. Connectivity

Social Presence and Embodiment

To reiterate, one of the many motivations for camping is the ability to spend time with one's friends and family, as social interaction is a primary factor in visitors' motives for going camping (Garst, et al., 2009; Varley, Farkic, Carnicelli, 2018). Individuals often elect to go camping as they feel as if it allows them to focus on members of their families and friends in a way that is difficult to do at home or during other leisure endeavors because of the responsibilities and distractions of daily life (Garst, et al., 2009). What is important here is the emphasis on focused interpersonal communication while camping. Thus, it is worth examining how individuals are able to focus, or put another way, to perceive themselves and others as present during the camping experience, which can be theorized using social presence theory. Originating from symbolic interactionism, which argues that society is constructed through interaction and negotiation between social agents (Edgar, 2008), social presence theory was originally defined by Short, Williams and Christie (1976: 65) as

“the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships.” Social presence has also been conceptualized as the ‘realness’ of other persons in the interaction and a sense of being in the environment (Kreijns, et al., 2021), as well as whether there is a positive interpersonal and emotional connection between communicators (Lowenthal, 2010). Although social presence theory is most often discussed in the context of mediated communication, the concepts in which it originated are based in non-mediated interactions (Cui, et al., 2013). For the purposes of this research, social presence is understood to be a concept that is related to both digitally mediated and non-mediated interactions.

Social presence is arguably the “most important perception that occurs in social context and it is fundamental to person-to-person communication” (Cui, et al., 2013: 663; Short, et al., 1976). Two concepts that are important to social presence are Wiener and Mehrabian’s (1968) concept of immediacy and Argyle and Dean’s (1965) notion of intimacy (Cui, et al., 2013; Kreijns, et al., 2021; Short, et al., 1976). Immediacy, as Wiener and Mehrabian (1968) conceive of it, is “a measure of psychological distance that a communicator puts between himself and the object of his communication” (Cobb, 2009: 242). In other words, it is the sense of being close to another individual or individuals that can lead to more intense and immediate interactions. Behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, that communicate warmth, availability, and interest can enhance psychological and physical closeness (Kreijns, et al., 2021). Accordingly, immediacy can enhance social presence (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997). Intimacy, as a closely related concept, is a joint function of physical proximity, eye contact, smiling, and personal topics of conversation (Argyle and Dean, 1965; Cui, et al., 2013). In sum, social presence is about the feeling of “being there” with another person. It is facilitated by both verbal and non-verbal behaviors that communicate immediacy and intimacy. It is a significant aspect of social interactions in both mediated and non-mediated environments.

As demonstrated, digital technologies both facilitate connection and can have implications for the degree of social presence between individuals in digitally mediated communication. Research has indicated that the mere presence of a cell phone and what it might represent can be distracting and have negative consequences for social interaction (Thornton, 2014). Digital technologies among

others can give off the impression of being psychologically elsewhere when physically present (Björklind, 2019; Gergen, 2002; Saker, et al., 2023). Björklind (2019) contends that this 'absence-in-presence' is qualitatively different because of digital technologies that facilitate active engagement with other people's virtual presence. Empirical studies have examined how the perception of 'absent presence' (Gergen, 2002) can impact interpersonal communication, with findings suggesting that impaired social interaction can include delayed responses, mechanical intonation, a motionless body, and a lack of eye contact (Aagaard, 2015) and can be interpreted by others as disrespectful (Kleinman, 2007). In another study, better conversations and higher levels of empathy were reported when devices were absent compared to when they were present (Misra, et al., 2014). Accordingly, absent presence has implications for immediacy and intimacy, which are the components of social presence.

Absent presence also implies that engagement with technology impacts the *user's* perception of their own physical and social world. Accordingly, presence in its physical manifestation in which actual objects are experienced sensorially is important to examine (Lee, 2004). Mobile devices can cause distractions for the user, perceived by others as absent presence, which can have implications for the sensory experience of both their social and physical environment. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) emphasis on our corporeal and perceptual engagement with the environment can provide insight into how embodied sensory experience and digital technologies are entwined. For Merleau-Ponty (1962), the experience of one's corporeal schema is not fixed and is instead tied to our perception of the world as opposed to being purely objective and material. Thus, our sense of the body's ability to act in a particular situation "may encompass a range of potential body-aspects and body-images in the form of material and technological mediations, and cultural and historical contexts" (Richardson, 2007: 206). Richardson (2007) illustrates the way that technological materials and mediations influence our corporeal schema, describing how driving a car involves adjusting our physical relationship with the world as a result of a car's material shape and capacities. She posits that "the car becomes an aspect of our embodiment, part of our repertoire of proprioceptive skills; we have appropriated the body of the car as a temporary body or quasi-body, a supplemental being-in-the-world (Richardson, 2007: 206). Significant to this

research, then, is the observation that bodily sensations, perceptions, and physical interactions shape our understanding and perception of the world and that mobile devices have the ability to allow us to engage in the physical world differently and in ways that may impact the embodied sensory experience. For example, it is widely accepted that mobile devices can be distracting in the different environments and engagements of everyday life, such as walking (Barkley and Lepp, 2016; Dustin, et al., 2019; Stavrinou, et al., 2011), learning (David, et al., 2015; Shelton, et al., 2009), and driving (Charlton, 2009; Qi, et al., 2020; Strayer and Drews, 2007). Strayer and Drews (2007), in their research on distracted driving, call the reduced focused attention a form of “inattention blindness.” Accordingly, smartphones have the capacity to “distract our attention from the immediacy of our surroundings to the smartphone itself, and we miss much of what is going on around us while ensconced in our smartphone technology” (Dustin, et al., 2019). Essentially, the distracting affordances of mobile devices and other digital technologies have the ability to make us ‘lose sight’ of the physical world; the virtual world that is mediated by the mobile device assumes priority over the embodied sensory world. Important here is the point that digital technologies can mediate people’s relations with their world in an embodied way, when technologies “are included in experience and change bodily perception either in the direction of *enhancement* or, conversely, *reduction*” (Sokolova, 2019: 124; Verbeek, 2005).

In addition to the interpersonal strain and the distraction from sensory and social experience that can arise from absent presence, the communicative affordances of digital technology allow for “anywhere, anytime” availability and connectivity which provides more opportunities to be absorbed by a technologically mediated world while physically present. For Björklund (2019: 75), “situations of absence, where we used to be forced to be without each other, are now almost always equipped with a window for possible connectedness.” Calling this ‘presence-in-absence’, Björklund (2019) provides the example of parents dropping their children off at a location and then tracking them through GPS, thus creating an omnipresent virtual connectedness. Another way of understanding this is through the concept of ‘perpetual contact’ (Katz and Aakhus, 2002) in which the ability to always be contacted informs how we approach and make meaning of our mobile devices and guides action in different social contexts. For example, and relevant to the

perception of risk and safety which was explored in the previous section, studies have indicated that being virtually connected via mobile devices can make urban environments feel safer and is implemented as a risk reduction strategy (Cumiskey and Brewster, 2012; Pain, et al, 2005). What is important is that “perpetual here is not contact itself but the possibility of making it” (Schegloff, 2002: 285). That is to say, it is the idea, not necessarily the actuality, of connection that can guide social interactions and experiences. Ribak’s empirical study of parents’ and children’s relationships with the communicative affordances of mobile devices highlights the distinction between the potential for communication as opposed to actual communication, as “its significance lies in its availability rather than its actual use” for the participants (Ribak, 2009: 188). Yet, the negotiation of availability is more subtle and strategies of disconnection or partial connection have been observed in daily life (Licoppe, 2004; Light and Cassidy, 2014, Schrock, 2015). Accordingly, this has implications for the way that people experience digital connection or disconnection while camping, which is what the next section examines.

Digital Disconnection

The ubiquity of digital technologies and digital media has become a part of everyday life for many people. Accordingly, the sheer prevalence of digital technologies and the expectation to be connected, and thus available, at all times in order to fully participate in society has made the ability to disconnect from the online world increasingly difficult. Indeed, “our societies are increasingly saturated by digital media and their infrastructures, which have become constitutive for the social worlds in which we live” (Hepp, 2020: 1411). As a complement to the ever-present role that digital technologies play in our lives, digital disconnection, also known as “digital detox” (Elmahdy, Haukeland, Fredman, 2017) and “digital switch-off” (Gretzel, 2014) has become an important topic of discussion as the emotional and psychological consequences of constant connection become more evident (Alter, 2017).

Consequently, a desire to digitally disconnect can be a strategy for combatting hyperconnectivity. Gimpel and Schmied (2019) note that digital technologies have the potential to impair health, both physically and psychologically, with digital technology addiction named as a specific risk of digital technology use. With digital technology addiction, use of digital technologies is “persistent, compulsive, and

excessive at an intensity that leads to individually harmful cognitive or behavioral adaptation” (Gimpel and Schmied, 2019: 8). Switching off from the online world has become an imperative for many people who are seeking to escape, even if temporarily, from “coerced digital participation” (Barassi, 2019).

Because of the ‘mainstreaming’ of digital disconnection, defined as “disconnection from social or online media, or strategies to reduce digital media involvement (Syvertsen and Elin, 2020: 1269), much scholarly attention has been directed towards the concept. Disconnection is often framed dichotomously between involuntary disconnection and voluntary disconnection. Involuntary disconnection describes the non-use of technology as a result of the inability to access or use digital technology and is often viewed as a detrimental consequence of social inequalities (Bucher, 2020; Hesselberth, 2018; Selwyn, 2003). For those that are involuntarily disconnected from digital technology, the possibility of fully participating in society is hindered and should thus be rectified. Voluntary forms of disconnection, on the other hand, are viewed as an active choice or experience of empowerment (Bucher, 2020). As Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier (2021: 1634) posit, “being in a position to voluntarily disconnect becomes indicative of autonomous disposal over your time and the privilege of choice”.

Beyond these two broad conceptualizations of disconnection, empirical research has sought to understand the people who disconnect, their motives, how they disconnect, and more generally, whether or not complete disconnection is possible. For example, some scholars point to digital disconnection as a form of political activism or engagement (Casemajor et al., 2015; Tréré et al., 2020; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), others have focused on how issues of disconnection and connection vary radically dependent on location and cultures like those found in the Global South (Pype, 2021), while others argue that digital disengagement, or the ability to opt out, is impossible due to digital technologies encompassing all interactions (Bucher, 2020; Hesselberth, 2018; Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019). Accordingly, opting out strategies should not be viewed as a fixed dichotomy, but as a continuum of practices (Moe and Madsen, 2021).

The motivations for disconnecting are also viewed as wide-ranging and varied. The pressures, expectations, and norms associated with everyday life are encountered in both offline and online experiences. As a result, many have found the

urge to temporarily disconnect from digital devices as a way to assert autonomy over one's time and to improve health and well-being (Baym et al., 2020; Kaun and Schwarzenegger, 2014; Schwarzenegger and Menke, 2020; Smith and Puczkó, 2015; Sutton, 2017). Syvertsen (2020) argues that three tropes of digital disconnection exist. First, digital disconnection is motivated by individual resistance against the temporal overload of hyperconnectivity. Second, individuals feel a loss of a sense of space, physical proximity and closeness as a result of constant connectivity and believe that disconnection will help remedy this feeling. Third, individuals also feel a loss of an authentic self and body which coincides with the temporal hyperconnectivity and lost sense of space. As a result, individuals feel the need to disconnect in order to regain these foundational aspects of individuality. The use of digital media is often considered too time-intensive or a waste of time, with the time spent disconnected from digital technologies considered more real and meaningful, especially as it relates to maintaining social relationships with friends and family (Allcot et al., 2020; Gomez et al., 2015; Schwarzenegger and Menke, 2020).

While disconnection has implications for well-being and feelings of authenticity, both individual and social, it is also subject to commodification in a variety of ways. For Kaun and Treré (2020), connection is viewed as a natural state whereas disconnection is an escape from the norm, thus transforming disconnection into a lifestyle option and a way to distinguish oneself from everyone else. Thus, disconnection becomes a symbol of autonomy, control, and a luxury that is not available and affordable to everyone. Disconnection is not only a symbol of exclusivity, but being offline is also being marketed as a luxury through a variety of products and accessories, most notably in the form of exclusive touristic experiences, technological solutions and apps (Jorge, 2019; Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier, 2021). The notion of disconnection from the pressures of technology is used to advertise tourist attractions that allow tourists to experience a form of reconnection to a more authentic state of nature (Natale and Treré, 2020; Sutton, 2017). In addition, a powerful motivation for digital disconnection is nostalgia. Syvertsen and Enli (2020) suggest that the wish to disconnect can be triggered by a longing for the past, “when people allegedly had more time on their hands, a more defined space, and a less stressful lifestyle” (Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier, 2021:

1636). To address this desire, people may seek disconnection in tourist sites that reinforce nostalgia. Notably, rural and wilderness settings fulfill the aspiration for temporarily returning to a more traditional and basic way of living as they lie in contrast to urbanism and modernity (Christou et al., 2018; Creighton, 1997). Indeed, for “it is in tourism, where the commodification of nostalgia for the old days, for pure nature and pristine lifestyles intertwines with imaginaries regarding mindfulness, health and wellness, and digital disconnection as a condition to achieve either” (Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier, 2021: 1637).

The motivation to escape has informed traditional conceptions of vacation which hold that “tourists cross a threshold which disconnects them from their home world and plunges them into an often rewarding, sometimes transformative and occasionally challenging space” (Pearce and Gretzel, 2012: 2-3). In this traditional conceptualization, vacations are liminoid experiences where a touristic “reversal of habits” (Graburn, 2001:44) occurs “that enables individuals to leave the stress of everyday life while obtaining experiences unavailable at home” (Ayazlar and Ayazlar, 2024: 209). The reversal of everyday life can lead to individuals becoming “free from the responsibilities brought by gender, fame, status, role, social class and other structures” and allow them to suspend norms from their daily lives while thinking about their own lives and societies from a different perspective (Kim: 2010; Turner, 1982: 48). For those on vacation, a suspension of daily routines and comfort of going against the rules is thus possible (Plat, 2014). Travel experiences have also been conceptualized as creating “flashbulb memories” wherein individuals retrieve their experiences vividly because they are significantly different from people’s ordinary lives, thus having implications for post-trip recollection (Kim, 2010). Indeed, the feeling of being refreshed from the sense of escape that travel can generate can lead to stronger memories during the post-trip stage (Kim, 2010). The separation between home and vacation may still be realized in ‘dead zones’ where digital connection is not possible due to a lack of infrastructure. Yet, issues may arise in these dead zones, as Pearce and Gretzel (2012) found in their study of tourism in technology dead zones in which they identified four technology-induced tensions. These include “a concern with maintaining social communication while being frustrated by its demands; the issue of staying in touch with work requirements while seeking to escape them; the value of being free and unplugged contrasted with the

absence of a safety or security net for troubling events; and the enjoyment of mere presence and a focus on the now while challenged by the skills of participating in the moment” (Pearce and Gretzel, 2012: 10).

Yet, digital technology is mediating vacations more than ever before, as “mobile technology has considerable utility in the tourism domain since tourists are on the move in unfamiliar environments and seek information to resolve practical travel problems and to enrich the tourist experience” (Dickinson, et al., 2016). Mobile phone usage also allows the demands from everyday life to penetrate time that is set aside for an escape from ‘ordinary’ life (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009; White and White, 2007; Pearce and Gretzel, 2012). Indeed, conceptions of tourists’ connections to their home base have changed over time because of digital elasticity, or “tourists remaining electronically linked to their home worlds as they explore their identity and the worlds of others (Pearce, 2011: 41). Digital elasticity thus challenges the traditional conception of vacation as it highlights the ongoing digital connections that provide connections to normal daily life while on vacation (Pearce and Gretzel, 2012: 3). In other words, the distinction between the ‘everyday’ and ‘away’ is harder to achieve in tourism because of mobile connectivity, which allows tourists to stretch between multiple spaces and contexts. Because of this, it is often hard for tourists to control their technology use as social obligations or addictions to technology bleed into the vacation experience (Turel, et al., 2011). Consequently, the escape that is sought may no longer be attainable because of the digitally elastic character of modern vacations. This is especially important to camping, as research has indicated that camping has liminoid qualities in that it provides the opportunity for individuals to feel detached from daily routines, demands, interruptions and expectations, thus promoting the contemporary idealistic notion of wilderness as an escape (Ayazlar and Ayazlar, 2024; Kaplan and Talbot, 1983; Hollenhurst and Jones, 2001; Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001; Vidon, Rickly & Knudsen, 2018). Yet, it remains unclear how the experience of digital elasticity may impact the liminoid qualities of a camping trip, which is a gap that my research will address. This is an important question to ask, as it may reveal ways in which digital technologies impact the meanings and behaviors associated with camping while also exposing the underlying tension between freedom and control that these technologies generate. Moving forward, then, an examination of digital disconnection and camping is warranted.

Digital Disconnection and Camping

In order to understand the ways that digital disconnection may impact the camping experience, it is important to examine the meanings that campers give to this leisure activity. Garst (et al., 2009), in their study regarding camping experiences and meanings, found that nature, social interaction, and comfort and convenience are key elements of the camping experience. Notably, the meanings associated with these elements include: restoration, special places, family functioning, experiencing nature, self-identity, social interaction, and children's learning. They also found that some of these meanings held importance in the greater context of participants' lives rather than just during the camping trip, including restoration, family memories and traditions, novelty, and appreciating nature. Restoration is a key theme for campers, suggesting that camping allows "a reduction in stress, arousal, or anxiety that results from being removed from one's home environment and being placed in a natural setting" (Garst et al., 2009: 95). In addition, the natural environment is a salient aspect of camping and also extends to being significant in meaning, which is symbolized in nature's aesthetic beauty and in nature being somehow different from home (Garst et al., 2009). For campers, the outdoor setting is a "novel quiet context for personal restoration and social interaction" (Garst et al., 2009: 98). The appreciation for the natural environment is also embodied, where feeling the environment and being consciously aware of its natural elements is part of the experience (Morrow, et al., 2017). Notably, having immediate and direct access to nature-based setting features, like rivers, mountains or wildlife, is enough to make campers feel as if they are in wilderness, even if a campsite is more developed (Garst, et al., 2009). Further, camping has been associated with self-sufficient leisure and hard work, as "arriving at the campsite and making ourselves at home in the emptiness that we find (or invent) there engenders a kind of creative making do, a making out of nothing" (Kearns et al., 2017; Molz, 2014: 19). A 'back to basics' mentality is key to camping, as it is seen as a transformative activity that allows one to 'rough it' and be renewed as an antimodern reaction to a modernizing world (Young, 2022). Nonetheless, camping is subject to modernization and the presence of smartphones and other digital devices is part of the experience (Dickinson, et al., 2016; Garst, et al., 2009).

Evidently, camping represents an activity in which people outwardly choose to engage with a simpler time, reminiscent of a past that is devoid of technological devices (Dickinson et al., 2016). Digital disconnection “is becoming increasingly contiguous to nature-based tourism by building symbolic connections between disconnection from mobiles, remoteness, rurality, wilderness, ‘taking a break’, ‘reconnecting’, mindfulness, wellness and authenticity” (Conti and Farsari, 2024: 528). Wiley’s tension between solitude and connectivity is especially applicable with regard to digital disconnection, as it may be considered a strategy for retaining an aspect of wilderness in which the experience of “being far from the everyday demands, relationships, technologies, and practices associated with civilization, of becoming engulfed in a completely natural environment, without connections or interruptions” is valued (Wiley, 2005: 14-15). The dominant motives for digital detox or restriction echo the motivations for nature-based tourism, where escaping the stresses of everyday life by “unplugging from technology and returning to nature are presented as an antidote to information overload” (Gomez et al., 2015). For many campers, disconnection is viewed positively. As technology can distract from relationships, disconnection while camping permits social bonding and unmediated contact with the natural environment, leading to a heightened awareness of both (Garst et al., 2009; Hassell et al., 2015). In their empirical study of disconnection among campers, Dickinson et al., (2016:196) note that mobile technology hinders the camping tourism experience, with participants focusing on conflicts related to: “intrusion from work; desire to escape day-to-day activities; a desire to be immersed in the natural environment often aligned with a bucolic image of rurality; conflict within the camping group due to the impact of mobiles on family and social interaction; and a desire for children to disengage from technology.” These intrusions may have implications for the post-trip camping experience as well, as research indicates that the higher the level of involvement in a travel experience, the more likely a memory is to be formed (Kim, 2010). In other words, if a camper is not engaged or involved during the onsite experience due to distractions from connectivity, their ability to recollect and retrieve past travel experiences is lessened. Echoing Syvertsen’s three tropes of disconnection, Gretzel (2010) is critical of connection, arguing that tourists’ use of mobile devices can cause disengagement that lead to disembodied experiences, a loss of a sense of place, and a lack of

interaction with those that are physically present. Studies have revealed that disconnection in nature leads tourists to enjoy better social relationships and engagement with the natural environment (Pearce and Gretzel, 2012), avoid the intrusions and expectations of one's home life (Li, Pearce, and Low, 2018), and experience the simplicity that is associated with camping (Elmahdy, et al., 2017; Tribe and Mkono, 2017). In Holden's (2004) study, participants who were not aware of the presence of a satellite phone reported a greater connection to nature, feeling of simplicity, and timelessness than those that were aware of the phone's presence. Some scholars believe that "the hegemony of hyper-connectivity will change nature-based adventure tourism by shaping it, culturally and experientially, into a choice between leaving connectivity items at home or bringing them into the tourism experience" (Conti and Farsari, 2024: 528; Gretzel, 2010; Voase, 2018).

On the other hand, being disconnected can be perceived negatively as the absence of something critical for safety, relaxation and enjoyment is enforced and stressful (Dickinson, et al., 2016; Tan, 2017). Consequently, connectivity can provide the comfort and convenience that is not traditionally associated with camping (MacKay and Vogt, 2012). Garst et al. (2009) observe that people may claim to seek an escape from modern life but their desire for connectivity means they are never fully relieving themselves of the modern comforts of home. For example, peer-to-peer accommodation platforms like Hipcamp recognize this desire and advertise the ability to stay connected by offering a filter for WiFi while searching for campsites. Connection can also democratize access to wilderness spaces, where "bringing a cell phone into the wilderness may change the intensity of your experience, but enable you to go on a trip that you otherwise wouldn't be able to experience at all" (Freimund and Borrie, 1997: 22). Both Dickinson, et al., (2016) and Conti and Farsari (2024) found that campers valued being connected with informational, logistical and relational purposes. Indeed, different meanings are given to different apps and devices which may render some less connected than others. For example, some campers enjoyed maintaining contact with family members at home, found it useful to look up information pertinent to issues at the campsite, or appreciated the orientation and guidance coming from GPS apps. Campers also appreciated feeling connected in case of emergencies. Further, Conti and Farsari's (2024) study revealed that campers will have essentially 'connected' experiences

while still perceiving their experience as disconnected due to the unplugging strategies (Tanti and Buhalis, 2017) that are undertaken. Their data suggests that escapism does “not depend on the essential absence or presence of generalizable, essentialist technological objects but on the meaning placed on them and how they could be negotiated through embodiments and translations of disconnection” (Conti and Farsari, 2024: 537). Accordingly, the perceptions of digital disconnection are integral to the camping experience and reveal the meanings ascribed both to our digital technologies and the places and activities in which we use them.

Besides Conti and Farsari (2024) and Dickinson’s et al. (2016) studies, not enough empirical research has been undertaken that directly addresses digital disconnection within the context of camping. Most empirical research has focused on digital-free tourism in other contexts. While these studies have undoubtedly provided valuable insights, there are clear gaps in understanding the ways that digital disconnection might impact the camping experience, namely with regard to how social presence and embodied presence are negotiated with the connective affordances of digital technologies. Examining this is important, as it might reveal more about the interplay between the meanings we ascribe to camping and our relationship with technology, as well as how these impact our social worlds. In addition, very little research examines the implications of digital disconnection for the post-trip experience when campers return home and recall their trip. Further, the post-trip experience of regaining digital connection after a digitally disconnected camping trip has not been explored in detail in academic literature. Again, these are important questions to ask as it means that the evolving states of mind throughout the stages of the camping experience (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966; Hammitt, 1980) have not been fully considered in its relation to digital disconnection and camping. My research intends to fill these gaps and will thus contribute to a better understanding of how digital connection or disconnection is impacting both the onsite and post-trip experiences of campers.

2.5 Conclusion

As this literature review has detailed, the use of digital technology throughout each phase of the camping experience raises important questions about the social, experiential, and physical impact it might have for campers and the routines and

meanings associated with camping. Various themes related to each phase of the camping trip were examined according to Wiley's (2005) tensions between wilderness and digital technology, as each stage of a leisure experience has its own characteristics and are characterized by the evolving states of mind of the participant (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966; Hammitt, 1980). My intent in doing so was to develop the theoretical and conceptual foundation for my research, thus allowing me to ask the questions I am interested in asking. The first tension explored, then, was between knowledge and the unknown in the pre-trip phase, with uncertainty being established as a lack of knowledge that is both subjective and contextual, closely tied to understandings of risk, and managed in ways that are both rational and nonrational (Zinn, 2008: 277; Bonß, 2013: 10). It was then suggested that knowledge attainment provides comfort and conceptions of comfort were explored. I could then take the position that comfort is socially constructed and thus its relationship to camping can be altered, as was then highlighted in a discussion of comfort and camping. This exploration allowed me to ask my first research question, which is: what digital strategies are employed to navigate the pre-trip planning experience?

The chapter then proceeded to examine the onsite phase through the tension between risk and security, determining that a critical realist perspective is appropriate as it recognizes that hazards can be objective or socially produced, but how we perceive and manage them is subjective. Conceptions of safety were then explored as the other component of the tension between risk and security, similarly finding that perceptions of safety are products of social construction. The concept of the stranger was then explored in order to illuminate the subjectivity of safety, especially as it relates to the idea of the strangers and hospitality settings. Existing research regarding risk and safety and digital technology as they pertain to camping were then discussed, specifically focusing on the ways in which digital technology can foster a sense of safety due to its communicative affordances while also inhibiting the development of outdoor skills. Yet not enough research addresses the implications of digital technologies on the way that users approach the variety of environments, both physical and social, in which camping takes place. For example, it is unknown how risk and security are experienced when using Hipcamp. This is a gap that my research will address by asking my second research question, which is: how does the use of digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the camping trip?

Lastly, the onsite and post-trip phases were investigated through the tension between mediation and direct experience and the tension between solitude and connectivity. An understanding of these two tensions were developed through conceptualizations of social presence and embodiment, as digital devices have the potential to both mediate and distract from the social and physical world because of their communicative affordances, thus having implications for the camping experience. Digital disconnection was next explored as a strategy for combatting hyperconnectivity and regaining a sense of self in the social and physical world. In modern tourist settings that have been traditionally conceived of as liminoid, digital elasticity (Pearce, 2011), or the intrusion of home worlds through the use of digital technology, was seen as a challenge to the escape motive for tourists. Camping and digital disconnection was then examined through the symbolic meanings associated with camping, including social interaction, nature appreciation, and hard work, and then concluding with a summary of existing scholarly research. This exploration thus allowed me to set the foundation for asking my third research question: how does digital connectivity affect how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards?

Understanding the ways in which these tensions are experienced throughout the camping experience is a chief aim of this research and the review of the pertinent literature has not only provided the conceptual and theoretical underpinning for exploring the questions established in chapter one, but has highlighted the research that is missing from the field. I would suggest that what is missing in this field is empirical research that takes a holistic view of the camping experience by highlighting each phase of the camping trip and how knowledge attainment, safety, and connectivity affordances of digital technology are affecting how campers engage in the routines and meanings associated with camping. My research intends to compensate for this dearth by advancing an understanding of the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies on each phase of the camping experience. In the following chapter, I will outline the methodological approach that will enable me to answer my research questions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I established that there is a notable dearth of empirical research on the impact of digital technology on the social, experiential, and physical aspects of each phase of the camping experience—from the pre-trip planning phase, to the onsite phase, and ending with the post-trip experience. Empirical research is necessary as it will provide insight into the implications of the use of digital technologies and how it may change the experience of camping and the meanings that are ascribed to the practice. My research is driven by three questions. First, what digital strategies are employed to navigate the pre-trip planning experience? Second, how does the use of digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the camping trip? Third, how does digital connectivity affect how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards? These questions are important to ask as this research intends to provide updated understandings and theories regarding the social, experiential, and physical aspects of camping when it is facilitated through digital technology. Context is important here, as camping practice, and its locatedness in the natural environment, has meanings and routines that are specific to it. Additionally, the knowledge attainment, safety, and connectivity affordances of digital technology have been studied most often from individual stages of the camping trip rather than connected to form a holistic experience. As such, the collection of my own data is imperative to address this gap in the literature. As epistemological and ontological considerations serve as the foundation for all methodological decisions, this chapter begins by establishing the philosophy, approach and strategy for this research project. I then outline the methods used, including the sampling and recruitment strategies employed, the forms of data collection appropriate for this research, and the analytical framework that is used to examine the collected data. I then conclude with a discussion of ethical considerations for this research project.

3.2 Research Philosophy, Approach and Design

The goals of a research project are influenced by the philosophical worldview and assumptions that researchers bring to a study (Cresswell, 2018). Ontology, or the

branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of being and social reality (Fabri, 2021; Gorski, 2013), forms the basis for defining “which elements really matter” when it comes to explaining the phenomenon that social scientists aim to elucidate (Fabri, 2021: 195). Although many other ontological positions exist in social research, there are two primary modes of thought: realism and constructivism (Fabri, 2021). Scientific realism “assumes that social phenomena have an objective existence, independent of the subject” (Fabri, 2021: 195) and that “the facts of the world are essentially *there* for study...they exist independently of us as observers, and if we are rational we will come to know the facts as they are” (Gergen, 1991: 91). Constructivism, on the other hand, “claims that social phenomena have no objective existence and are a construction of the human mind” (Fabri, 2021: 195) and that “what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective” (Schwandt, 1998: 236). Constructivists argue that interpretation of meaning construction and clarification of what and how meanings are “embodied in the language and actions of social actors” is paramount to understanding the social world (Schwandt, 1998: 222). Further, constructivism posits that “the world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors” (Schwandt, 1998: 118). For constructivists, social reality is “lived, felt, and undergone by social actors” and that a natural science framework should not be applied to the social (Schwandt, 1998: 236). This view is further extended by taking an anti-essentialist approach in which objects that are assumed to be self-evident aspects of reality are actually the product of discursive practices, with reality being pluralistic and plastic due to its constant reconstitution through social actors (Schwandt, 1998).

Linked to ontological orientations are epistemological questions concerned with the nature of knowledge and justified belief (Pellegrino, 2021). In social scientific research, epistemology is used in the context of deciding which methods produce reliable scientific knowledge (Blaikie, 2004). One of the dominant epistemological paradigms is positivism in which knowledge is “thought to grow out of careful observation and experimentation” (Peile and McCouat, 1997: 344). In contrast to positivism is interpretivism, which is “not concerned with objective facts but, rather, with the subjective meanings people have about their situation, within the context of which they are a part” (Peile and McCouat, 1997: 345). Interpretivism is descriptive

and explanatory rather than focused on prediction (Fay, 1975). An interpretivist approach aims to understand or uncover the meanings of individuals' or groups' actions through an interpretation of their discourses (Imbeau, Tomkinson, Malki, 2021). Given these differing positions, this research follows a constructivist ontological orientation and an interpretivist epistemological position as I am interested in exploring how campers experience, create meaning, and socially interact while using digital technology throughout the stages of the camping trip. Not only does the foundation of this research rest upon the belief that reality is constructed by social actors, but the kind of knowledge that this research is interested in interpreting is subjective, contextual, and meaningful to the people I am studying.

The design of a research project and the methodological decisions that are made are strongly influenced by the researcher's conception of reality and how knowledge is gathered. Consequently, these are distilled in the form of research goals and the specific information that the researcher is interested in obtaining. Two primary strategies, or methods, exist in social research: quantitative and qualitative (Blackstone, 2012). Qualitative and quantitative strategies correspond to specific ontologies and epistemologies. Quantitative research entails "the collection of numerical data, as exhibiting a view of the relationship between theory and research as deductive and a predilection for a natural science approach (Bryman, 2012: 160). In other words, quantitative research ascribes to a realist conception of social reality in that it focuses on numerical data to explain the relationship between theory and empirical research as a way to learn more about the social world. Qualitative research, on the other hand, originates from a constructivist position and "tends to be concerned with words rather than numbers," and has "an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research, whereby the former is generated out of the latter" (Bryman, 2012: 380). While quantitative and qualitative techniques are often employed separately according to the goals of the research project, they can be used together in what is known as a mixed method research strategy. When the goals for the research project are to both collect numerical data and to interpret the meanings that people bring to their lives, a mixed methods approach to the research using both a qualitative and quantitative design is warranted.

Regarding my study, a qualitative approach is appropriate as the aim of my research is to understand the meanings ascribed to the experiences of campers through their own perspectives. Qualitative research, as outlined above, affords this opportunity as my research is predicated on a comprehension of reality that is socially constructed (Cresswell, 2008; Flick 2007). This approach permits the study of “things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 2). In contrast, a quantitative approach that focuses on objective, numerical data instead of subjective, text-based research, would likely not produce a deep understanding of campers’ social world (Flick, 2011: 2). Without this perspective, the data collected would be lacking the rich detail about the lived experience that I am interested in understanding, which is a vital component to answering the questions this research asks.

Moving forward, qualitative research will be conducted in the form of a case study of camping. This is defined as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme, or system in a ‘real life’ context” (Simon, 2009: 20-21), a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon” (Yin, 2003: 23). Indeed, the use of digital technology throughout the camping experience is a contemporary phenomenon that warrants further investigation. Further, context is important to case studies in that “the phenomenon is not isolated from its context...but is of interest precisely because the aim is to understand how behavior and/or processes are influenced by, and influence context” (Hartley, 2004: 323). This research strategy was chosen because of the importance of the natural environment to camping, where the meanings associated with this context are significant (Garst, et al, 2009). If we were to remove the context from camping, as in laboratory research, it would not be possible to answer the questions this research is asking. Further, a case study allows me to explore my research questions “in depth and from many angles” because of the rich data that is collected in context, as “context is deliberately part of the design” (Hartley, 2004: 323-324; Thomas, 2011:4). While the impact of digital technologies has been studied within the context of outdoor recreation, little empirical research exists that examines camping specifically and “case studies can be useful in capturing the emergent and changing properties of life” (Hartley, 2004:

325). As the use of digital technology throughout the camping experience is an under researched area there is a need for a deeper understanding of the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies on the camping experience.

Case studies are ideally suited to this because they are based on examples of real-life situations that can provide context dependent knowledge which, in turn, can be used to understand everyday practices and their meanings to those involved (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Hartley, 2004). Case studies explore issues in depth and in context using detailed evidence, thus allowing theory development to occur in which theories are generated or replicated, which is another aim of this research (Hartley, 2004). Yin (1994) highlights the inductive characteristic of much case study research, noting that researchers are like detectives who must sift evidence to build inferences about “what has happened, why and in what circumstances,” which is exactly what this research is interested in addressing (Hartley, 2004: 324). Additionally, this case study is interpretive and not intended to make broad generalizations about camping, nor is it meant to assume that every user’s experience of using digital technologies throughout the camping experience is representative of the larger population (Lijphart, 1971). Accordingly, this study is exploratory and opens up an opportunity for further discussion and additional research questions that result from the exploration of an under-researched area (Biggam, 2015; Simons, 2009). By focusing on camping and the individual’s experience of using digital technologies throughout the experience, I can research a specific case that contributes to general knowledge of the topic. As I have elucidated the specific philosophy and approach that undergirds this research, as well as the research strategies that will be employed, I will now address the sampling and recruitment strategies that this project utilized.

3.3 Sampling and Recruitment Strategy

Sampling Strategy

The goals of qualitative and quantitative research differ and thus require different strategies for collecting data. For example, and pertinent to the goals of this project, qualitative researchers aim to attain an “in-depth, idiographic understanding rather than more general, nomothetic understanding” (Blackstone, 2012: 80). While gaining knowledge about a specific group, or population, may be of interest to the researcher, the lack of time, resources, or willingness to collect data on the entire

population of interest is often challenging. To address these limitations, the researcher collects data from a subset of the population that is the chief focus of the project. This subset is called a sample and is defined as “any subset of units collected from a population” in which units may also be referred to as ‘elements’ or ‘individuals’ (Johnson and Reynolds, 2012: 224). The process through which this subset is selected is called sampling, defined as “the process of selecting observations that will be analyzed for research purposes” (Blackstone, 2012: 79).

Two types of sampling exist: probability sampling and non-probability sampling and are related to the type of knowledge the researcher values (Blackstone, 2012). Probability sampling is most often utilized for quantitative research, as the goal of quantitative research is generalizability, or the ability to “generalize the results of the study from the sample to the population from which it is drawn” (Merriam, 2009: 77; Blackstone, 2012). To achieve generalizability, the sampling of participants must be random, and all elements in the researcher’s target population must have an equal chance of being selected for inclusion in the study. Put another way, the probability of selecting each unit of analysis is known, which allows the researcher to “calculate how accurately the sample reflects the population and to infer or generalize the results to the population with a known margin of error” (van Haute, 2021: 248). While quantitative social research employs probability sampling as a strategy for statistical generalization, this research is instead qualitative and thus interested in an in-depth understanding of “the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bryman, 2012: 380). Accordingly, probability sampling is not the appropriate strategy for collecting data for this research project.

Non-probability sampling is most often used in qualitative research. Non-probability samples are “samples in which each element in the population has an unknown probability of being included in the sample” (van Haute, 2021: 249). In other words, research participants are not sampled on a random basis and because the likelihood of selection is unknown, it is unknown if the sample represents a larger population or not. Yet this is not an issue with qualitative research, as the goal of this type of research, and this project in particular, is to understand the lived experience of participants rather than generalizing the population as a whole. A form of non-probability sampling, purposive sampling, was used in the beginning of this

research project in an exploratory manner, as academic literature indicates that there can be resistance to the use of digital technology in outdoor recreation (Carlson, et al., 2016; Shultis, 2012; Wiley, 2005), and thus the reception to becoming a participant in a research project aimed at understanding digital technology use while camping was unknown. With a purposive sampling method, “the researcher determines the characteristics of the target population and identifies units that match these characteristics to include in the sample” (van Haute, 2021: 249). With non-probability sampling, the researcher purposefully selects participants with a broad range of perspectives that he or she wishes to examine which, in turn, contributes to answering the research questions (Blackstone, 2012; Cresswell, 2018). This method was employed for the selection of participants due to the need for a selection of participants who have been camping and can describe their experiences. In other words, purposive sampling ensures that those sampled are relevant to the research question. Importantly, purposive sampling “does not allow the researcher to generalize to a population” (Bryman, 2012: 418). In turn, the aim of my research is not to provide broad generalizations of a population but to focus on how particular social interactions and contexts affect our understanding of how individuals experience camping when using digital technologies. Focusing on specific information-rich cases rather than broad statistical generalizations will allow me to contribute to general knowledge with in-depth empirical data about the changing experience of camping and to produce further research questions, hypotheses and theoretical insights (Bryman, 2012: 418).

As a form of non-probability sampling, convenience sampling was also used for much of this research project. The convenience sampling method “includes members of the population who are available to the researcher” and is typically applied when “it is difficult to access subjects with the target characteristics” (Naderifar, et al., 2017: 2). Difficulty in accessing subjects can be common in research that involves ‘hard-to-reach’ or ‘hidden’ populations (Shaghaghi, et al., 2011). People who are sometimes categorized as hard-to-reach or hidden are those being under social pressure of the broader community, those who have no interest to be found or contacted, those who fear confrontation with legal authorities, migrants, and over-researched people, among others (Shaghaghi, et al., 2011). Populations that may be hard to reach for research purposes are varied but may include social or

political status or closed social groups (Cohen, et al., 2011). Additionally, difficulty in accessing subjects can be common in research that utilizes social media platforms for recruitment, as online distrust is prevalent (Ankenbauer and Brewer, 2025). Indeed, “distrust is both reasonable and informative as it reflects concerns not only about the research and researcher, but also broader concerns felt on and about the given platform and the wider context of online distrust” (Ankenbauer and Brewer, 2025: 1). Indeed, as the recruitment of participants progressed through the research project, it became challenging to find sufficient individuals willing to participate vis-a-vis data saturation through purposive sampling. When trying to engage with campers in the online spaces in which they talk about the practice, for example Facebook groups dedicated to camping, campers fell into the category of a ‘hard-to-reach’ population because they had little interest in being contacted about this research, often expressing their displeasure with the research topic. Negative perceptions of digital technology use within outdoor recreation are common, which may explain the resistance to being recruited (Borrie, 1998; Dickinson, et al., 2016; Martin and Pope, 2012). In addition, there may have been skepticism about being recruited online in groups that are not often exposed to requests for research, as there can be situations in which “legitimate research participants question whether or not the researcher is a bad actor posing as a legitimate researcher (Ankenbauer and Brewer, 2025:5). That is to say, purposive sampling using social media may have been unsuccessful both because individuals were antagonistic towards the research project and distrustful of being recruited online.

To overcome this obstacle, a convenience sampling method, snowball sampling, was used. Here, “the existing study subjects recruit future subjects among their acquaintances” until data saturation is reached (Naderifar, et al., 2017: 2). Essentially, the characteristics of networking and referral are central to this method, as researchers use their social networks to establish initial links who then provide referrals to additional potential participants (Parker, et al., 2019). Atkinson and Flint (2001) note that snowball sampling can be especially useful if the aim of the study is explorative, qualitative or descriptive. As is the case with purposive sampling, snowball sampling does not allow the researcher to generalize to a population because of selection bias (Sharma, 2017). Yet, this is not the aim of my research, as this study is exploratory and I am interested in “information-rich cases for study in

depth” (Patton, 2002) as to better understand the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies on the camping experience. While statistical generalizations are not the aim of this study, it is necessary to select a sample that is relevant to the research topic (Bryman, 2012; Flick, 2002). As Cresswell (2018: 185) writes, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question.” In other words, there must still be a logic or criteria, in the selection of participants in order to be relevant to the research questions that this study is asking. Accordingly, specific criteria must be met in order to participate in this research.

Regarding participant criteria, a diversity of perspectives is important to this research and thus participants were recruited from a wide range of backgrounds. Indeed, I am interested in the way that digital technologies may be shaping the camping practice for all campers as opposed to a narrow subset. As such, factors like age, sex, occupation, and ethnicity were purposely varied. The potential for differences among those recruited justify this choice, as variety can lead to a better and more nuanced examination of the research question. For example, campers that recreate in remote campsites may have a different experience of safety than those that camp at frontcountry campsites, or women may have a different experience of safety while camping than men. Gathering data from a broader group of participants can thus lead to a richer and more textured understanding of the modern camping experience. Horrocks and Kings (2010: 29) highlight the importance of a diversity of participants, stating that researchers should “seek to recruit participants who represent a variety of positions in relation to the research topic, of a kind that might be expected to throw light on meaningful differences in experience.’

Given the emphasis on variety, participants were selected using the following criteria: both male and female, all over 18, a variety of different occupations, a variety of ethnicities, having camped within the past five years, and living within the United States. In addition, RV (recreational vehicle) campers were excluded, as RV camping is a unique category of camping (Brooker and Joppe, 2014). It is important to note that participants from the United States were chosen because an American conception of wilderness, and by extension camping, is specific to its political, social and cultural mythologies and characteristics (Cronon, 1996). In addition, those who have camped within the past five years will have a better understanding of the latest

technologies used during the camping experience, as we are in a “fast changing digital era” (Coccoli, et al., 2014: 1003).

In the initial piloting of this research, one of the selection criteria was that a participant had used Hipcamp. Pilot studies are smaller-sized studies that assist in planning and modification of the main study to improve the quality and efficiency of the main study (In, 2017). The focus on Hipcamp campers was justified by the fact that Hipcamp represents a new demographic of campers whose experience is facilitated by digital technology, which is what this research is interested in understanding. Indeed, Hipcamp campers are an under researched group as there is limited to no empirical research on this demographic. As peer-to-peer accommodation platforms have an effect on the way that travel and leisure is experienced (Bucher, et al., 2020; Liu and Mattila, 2017; Roelofsen and Minca, 2018), this was an important perspective to include. Through piloting this research, I discovered that having such a narrow focus on a specific demographic limited the sample size needed for data saturation as the recruitment of Hipcamp campers proved difficult. In addition, the pilot study found that most Hipcamp campers had primarily camped at public campsites and spoke more broadly about the camping experience as opposed to just Hipcamp camping. Accordingly, the Hipcamp campers were important to include, but a richer and more detailed collection of data could be gained from including all campers. As such, both campers who have used Hipcamp and those who have not were included in the primary study.

Recruitment of Participants

This study used two methods for participant recruitment. The initial participant recruitment strategy involved the use of social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Reddit. The justification for using these sites is that using social media for recruitment offers numerous benefits, including a broad audience, targeted recruitment, rapid recruitment, engagement, and reduced cost (Oudat and Bakas, 2023). As I was looking to recruit participants from across the United States, as opposed to one location, to increase the diversity of perspectives, utilizing social media allowed me to engage with potential participants that were not based in my location. The cost of flying to various campgrounds throughout the United States to recruit participants would have been cost-prohibitive. While algorithmic bias exists

when recruiting through social media (Benedict, et al., 2019), this research is not seeking to generalize to the population as a whole. The second method for participant recruitment was through convenience sampling, in which discussions with my own social network led to acquaintances putting me in contact with friends that met the criteria for this research project. Convenience sampling is a way of selecting participants from the target population based on ease of access (Golzar, et al., 2022), and this sampling method was justified by the need for data saturation after purposive sampling using social media proved difficult. A more detailed description of how participants were approached and recruited follows.

Facebook:

Facebook was utilized initially as the primary social media platform for participant recruitment for the reasons outlined above. Further, through the Facebook Groups functionality, Facebook allows for the ability to exclude or include different parameters and groups, thus increasing the likelihood that those targeted are applicable to the study (Oudat and Bakas, 2023). During the initial piloting of the research, I joined or requested to join groups that were found using the search term “Hipcamp. For example, groups I joined included “HIPCAMP Community Creative” and “Hipcamp Professional Hosts.” When joining the group was successful, I then posted the following message:

Hi all! I am a PhD researcher at City, University of London and I am conducting a piece of research on Hipcamp campsites and the use of technology while camping. I'd love to interview campers who have used Hipcamp!

If you are interested in participating, please feel free to reply to this post or DM me so I can provide more information about the study and set up some time to chat. I'd be massively grateful for any help. Thank you!! :)

As the project evolved past the piloting stage and broadened to include all campers, I joined or requested to join groups that were found using the search term “camping” in the groups section of the website. For example, groups I joined included “Camping

Tips and Hacks”, “Everything Camping”, “Camping, Adventure & Outdoors Community”, and “We Love Camping.” My request to join camping Facebook groups were not always successful, including “National Forest Campgrounds”, “Ohio State Parks Camping Group”, “Camping Tips - Camping Lovers Group”, and “Indiana State Park Camping.” When joining a group was successful, I then posted the following message:

Hi all! Thanks for the add! As an avid camper and a PhD student, I have decided to focus my PhD dissertation on the experience of using digital technology while camping at campgrounds. Would anybody be interested in being interviewed about this topic?

Please feel free to reply to this post so I can provide more information about the study and set up some time to chat. I'd be massively grateful for any help. Thank you!! :)

Many of the groups proceeded to remove the post and gave a warning, including “US National Park Travel,” and “Tent Camping.” Accordingly, no participants were recruited from this recruitment strategy.

I then proceeded to search “camping” and “Hipcamp” across all of Facebook and specific users that had recently posted about camping or Hipcamp were shown in the results. I then directly messaged them asking if they would be interested in participating in this research.

Hi [NAME]! My name is Eryn and I'm a PhD researcher at City, University of London. I'm conducting a piece of research on campsites and the use of technology while camping. I came across your profile while searching for campers. Would you be open to being interviewed by me in the next week or two about this topic? The interview would last about an hour and would take place via Zoom. If you're interested, I can provide more information about the study and we can work on scheduling a time to chat! Thanks, and I look forward to hearing from you :)

Of the twenty-three individuals contacted, two responded and, after confirming that they met the selection criteria, were thus included as participants in this study.

Further, I utilized my own network by posting the following on my personal profile:

Hi everyone! If you've gone camping in the US within the past few years, I'd love to interview you for my PhD dissertation. It would be a HUGE help.

Just comment on this post or DM me and I'll reach out with more info. Thank you so much!!

Have you or anyone you know camped using Hipcamp? If so, I'd love to interview you for my PhD research project. Let me know and I'll DM you with more info. Thanks all!

Two acquaintances responded and after confirming that they met the selection criteria, were included as participants in this study. In total, only four participants were successfully recruited from Facebook.

Instagram:

Instagram was also used as a social media platform for participant recruitment due to its potential for reaching a broad range of camping communities. In addition, the use of Instagram was further justified by its common use in the outdoor recreation community (Arts, et al., 2021; Ferreira, et al., 2025; Low, et al., 2022). I took a similar approach to the one used for Facebook in finding potential participants by using Instagram's search functionality and using the keywords "camping" and "Hipcamp." I then directly messaged seventeen individuals from the results that likely fit the criteria for selection that has been previously outlined:

Hi [NAME]! My name is Eryn and I'm a PhD researcher at City, University of London. I'm conducting a piece of research on campsites and the use of technology while camping. I came across your profile

while searching for campers. Would you be open to being interviewed by me in the next week or two about this topic? The interview would last about an hour and would take place via Zoom. If you're interested, I can provide more information about the study and we can work on scheduling a time to chat! Thanks, and I look forward to hearing from you :)

Hi [NAME]! My name is Eryn and I'm a PhD researcher at City, University of London. I'm conducting a piece of research on Hipcamp campsites and the use of technology while camping. I came across your profile while searching for Hipcamp campers. Would you be open to being interviewed by me in the next week or two about this topic? The interview would last about an hour and would take place via Zoom. If you're interested, I can provide more information about the study and we can work on scheduling a time to chat! Thanks, and I look forward to hearing from you :)

Of the seventeen potential participants that I reached out to, none responded.

Similar to my recruitment strategy using Facebook, I then utilized my own network by posting the following on my personal profile:

Have you gone camping in the US recently? If so, I'd love to interview you for my PhD research project! Comment or DM me for details. It would be a huge help!

Six acquaintances responded and after confirming that they met the selection criteria, were included as participants in this study. In total, only six participants were successfully recruited from Instagram.

Reddit:

Another social media site that was used for recruitment was Reddit, as it allows “free and rapid data collection from large samples” (Shatz, 2016). The website is

composed of an interlinked community of subforums known as ‘subreddits’ which can provide access to special interest groups and specific demographics (Shatz, 2016). Because I was trying to reach a specific interest group, the use of Reddit was seen as a potentially valuable platform for recruitment. As such, I posted in the ‘camping’ subreddit:

Hi all! Would anybody be interested in being interviewed (virtually) about their experience with digital technology while camping at campgrounds?

As an avid camper and a PhD student, I have decided to focus my dissertation on this topic.

Please feel free to reply to this post or DM me so I can provide more information about the study and set up some time to chat. You must be 18+ and based in the United States. I'd be massively grateful for any help. Thank you!! :)

Unfortunately, the post was removed by the moderators because “surveys and market research are not allowed as they are requested too frequently and are never popular.” Thus, using Reddit for recruitment of participants was unsuccessful.

Researcher's Social Network:

By far, the most effective recruitment method was providing friends details of my study and asking for recommendations for potential participants. Nineteen participants were recruited in this way. Accordingly, a convenience sample and then snowball sampling proved to be the most effective recruitment strategy.

In total, twenty-nine participants were recruited. The number of participants, or sample size, was deemed adequate for analysis due to the need for in-depth discussion of experience while also negotiating a short time frame for analysis (Bryman, 2012: 425). Lastly, to ensure ethical research was conducted, informed consent was required for all participants, ensuring participant anonymity, confidentiality, and securely stored data. As recruitment has been detailed, I will now explain how data was collected.

3.4 Data Collection

Pilot Study: Media Go-Along

Before the primary phase of data collection was conducted for this research, a pilot study was administered. A pilot study is “a small feasibility study designed to test various aspects of the methods planned for a larger, more rigorous, or confirmatory investigation” (Lowe, 2019). This was the purpose of the pilot study in this research, as I was interested in understanding the feasibility of using a relatively recent approach to data collection called the “media go-along” (Jørgensen, 2016). This data collection method was used as part of a pilot study when the initial focus of this research was on Hipcamp users. The media go-along method combines interviews and participant observations of a digital service in which “research participants give verbal and visual tours, framed by the researcher’s discursively constituted invitations for orientation” (Jørgensen, 2016: 32). In other words, the participant acts as a guide of the virtual space within which he or she operates as the researcher asks questions related to the information being provided. By gathering data using this method, the researcher can “explore the context with the participant in real time, with the participant in the role of expert guide explaining the meaning of the environment” (Garcia, et al., 2012: 1395).

Go-along interviews can add a layer of depth and data richness when a specific media is being used (Garcia, et al., 2012; Jørgensen, 2016; Trell and Van Hoven, 2010). In media go-along interviews, different types of questioning are used as starting points for the open orientation of the media environment being discussed. Open touring invitations “invite the informant to narrate a pathway through the app that is mostly of their choosing” while thematic touring invitations “are invitations to move to certain places (the favorites function, the user profile, the messages area) and/or to expand on certain themes” (Jørgensen, 2016: 40). For example, asking a participant to show the researcher how they use the specific listing page on Hipcamp is a thematic touring invitation that was used. An open touring invitation that was used was to ask how participants communicated with Hipcamp hosts through the booking experience and giving them the option of showing that communication or not. Limitations do exist with this method in that the participants control the media device and thus can deny the researcher visible access to part of the digital media

(Møller and Robards, 2019). Gaining visual and narrative access through encounters with personal social media has ethical implications. As such, the researcher “should be ready to pay special attention to how the encounter has unfolded to arrive at an ethically fraught moment and to consider...what should be undertaken next to de-escalate it” (Møller and Robards, 2019: 104).

The use of the media-go along method was justified in the initial piloting of this research in that it allowed for an additional layer of information about a new digital experience for campers. Using Hipcamp’s website to book a camping trip is arguably a qualitatively different experience from traditional camping reservation sites precisely because it is a peer-to-peer accommodation platform that specializes in connecting private landowners to outdoor enthusiasts who pay to camp on their property. Its user-friendly website streamlines the campground search, evaluation and booking process where campers and landowners can also review each other, the campsite and the experience itself. Through the display of campground images, descriptions, and reviews on its site, Hipcamp can provide prospective campers with detailed information about the camping experience. Users are also given the ability to filter their search based on the activities or experiences provided by the landowner, like yoga classes, foraging, nature walks, and wine tasting.

When conducting interviews with those participants that had been identified as Hipcamp users, an interview guide was used that asked questions regarding the various pages of the Hipcamp site, including the search and booking process, digital communication and reviews, and the guest profile and host profile, as well as how the planning process with Hipcamp differed or resembled the process for booking public campsites. Participants shared their screen and walked through the Hipcamp platform and their use of it. After the media go-along was complete, the participant would stop sharing his or her screen and the interview would proceed in the same manner as interviews with those participants who had not used Hipcamp, albeit with some interview questions that referenced Hipcamp. Before the interview, participation sheets and consent forms that included information about the media go-along method were provided for all participants that agreed to this method of data collection. In total, three media go-along interviews were conducted. While the data provided was useful, I very quickly found that participant observation, which is one of the key aspects of the media go-along, was difficult when conducting the media

go-along with video conferencing software. As users shared their screen, I was unable to observe the haptic elements of the go-along and the "physical manipulations of media artefacts (such as finger to touchscreen)" (Møller and Robards, 2019). In addition, the interviews of the participants led me to the decision to broaden the criteria for participant selection to include all campers as opposed to just Hipcamp campers, in which the media go-along would not be relevant. Accordingly, I was able to test this method and determine its feasibility, which is the purpose of a pilot study.

Interviews

Moving beyond the piloting of this research, interviews were the primary source of data collection (Hopf, 2004). Interviews are one of the main methods of social inquiry and are used extensively as a means of investigation for empirical research (Matrakova, 2021). Some researchers have even argued that interviewing has become the primary resource for social sciences to investigate societal issues (Brinkmann, 2013; Rapley, 2001). At its highest level, "interviews are a method of data collection that involves two or more people exchanging information through a series of questions and answers" (Blackstone, 2012: 108). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 3) note that an interview is "a conversation with a structure" and that the purpose of interviews is to "obtain thoroughly tested knowledge." Because interviews are used when trying to understand the interviewees' "own behavior or that of others; attitudes; norms; beliefs; and values (Bryman, 2012: 209), they are most appropriate when desiring "rich, detailed answers" that allow for "insights into how research participants view the world" (Bryman, 2012: 470-471). Approaches to interviewing are influenced by the purpose behind the research and assumptions about the nature of social science (Arksey and Knight, 1999). As this research is chiefly interested in understanding how participants experience, create meaning, and socially interact when digital technologies are used throughout the camping experience, qualitative interviews are the most suitable method of data collection. Specifically, qualitative interviews "examine the context of thought, feeling and action and can be a way of exploring relationships between different aspects of a situation. Interviewing is a powerful way of helping people to make explicit things that have hitherto been implicit – to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and

understandings” (Arksey and Knight, 1999: 32). In contrast to other data collection methods, like survey interviews and questionnaires, which check the accuracy of the interviewer’s account and generally leave the researcher unable to ask follow-up questions due to their closed-ended nature, qualitative interviews allow for deeper and more detailed exploration of a participant’s answers to the researcher’s questions (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Blackstone, 2012). They are especially useful when the questions asked are more complex or require greater explanation because qualitative interviews “allow both parties to explore the meaning of the questions and the answers involved, which is not so central, and not so often present, in other research procedures” (Brenner et al., 1985: 3). Qualitative interviews emphasize the importance of subjective experience and accordingly mirror the qualitative, and thus constructivist, nature of this study; my aim is to understand the camper’s experiences and the meanings ascribed to them in depth, consequently getting to the root of issues being addressed (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Biggam, 2015: 192).

A key aspect of qualitative interviews is the fact that qualitative interviews are essentially conversations—“our everyday lives are thus conversational to their core...we should see language, culture, and human self-understanding as emergent properties of conversations rather than the other way around” (Brinkmann, 2013; 3). Further, knowledge is constituted through conversation and social practice (Rorty, 1979). In other words, knowledge is not just conveyed in conversation, it is brought into being through conversation and thus constitutes ourselves and our worlds (Horrocks and King, 2010; Shotter, 1993). To have a meaningful conversation, one must establish a bond, or a sense of intimacy, with whom they are having a conversation. One of the best ways to develop and build the intimacy of a conversation in social research is through a type of interview known as in-depth interviewing, which carries with it a certain style of social and interpersonal interaction (Johnson, 2001). In-depth interviewing seeks ‘deep’ information, which can mean four things. First, deep understandings are held by the participants in some everyday activity, event or place, and the interviewer seeks the same deep level of knowledge as the participants (Johnson, 2001). Second, deep understandings begin “with commonsense perceptions, explanations, and understandings of some lived cultural experience...and aims to explore the contextual boundaries of that experience or perception, to uncover what is usually

hidden from ordinary view or reflection or to penetrate to more reflective understandings about the nature of that experience” (Johnson, 2001: 105). Third, “deep understandings can reveal how our commonsense assumptions, practices, and ways of talking partly constitute our interests and how we understand them (Johnson, 2001: 105). Fourth, deep understandings allow researchers to “grasp and articulate the multiple views of, perspectives on, and meanings of some activity, event, place, or cultural object” (Johnson, 2001: 105). These descriptions of deep understanding are consistent with the aims of this research project.

To achieve the level of deep understanding that this project requires, a semi-structured interview is most appropriate. As opposed to structured interviews, which are regularly employed in quantitative research and involve the interviewees being given the same set of questions that are asked within the same order, semi-structured interviews offer a more flexible approach (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews are mainly used in qualitative research so that the interviewee’s point of view can be explored in detail without the restrictions imposed by a structured interview. In a semi-structured interview, researchers have a list of open-ended questions, but the ordering of questions “can be modified based upon the interviewer’s perception of what seems most appropriate (Robson, 2002: 270). The interviewee has a greater degree of leeway to reply through the open-ended nature of the questions, allowing “more fluid interaction between the researcher and the respondent” as respondents can “elaborate on their statements and connect them with other matters of relevance” (Marvasti, 2004: 22). In other words, the researcher can have a conversation, build rapport, and establish a level of intimacy through the casual back and forth that semi-structured interviews facilitate while also keeping the conversation relevant to the research questions being asked. By creating structure through a list of questions, the researcher can ask the same questions to all of the participants while allowing for flexibility in the content of the conversation (Biggam, 2015: 192). Additionally, the semi-structured nature of these interviews provides a framework for replicability and the ability to emphasize relevant topics while also allowing for answers to be expanded or followed up on and new themes to emerge that can provide greater insight into the individual’s lived experience.

While the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews is certainly a popular form of data collection, it does not come without certain limitations or disadvantages. First, interviews are time consuming “as the researcher needs to go through a long process, starting from establishing access to making contact with participants, conducting the interview, followed by transcribing the data and making use of it” (Alsaawi, 2014: 154; Arksey and Knight, 1999). I intend to counteract this limitation by keeping a manageable sample size instead of including a large swathe of the population. A smaller sample size, due to the intensive nature of the process, may impact the generalization of results that those with an objectivist or realist orientation value (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Yet this research does not intend to make broad generalizations and is instead focused on a deep understanding of the individual's experience, thus necessitating a smaller sample size. Analysis can be quite complex due to the subjective nature of the responses given in semi-structured in depth interviews, therefore making it hard to achieve ‘reliable’ analysis of open-ended responses (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Klenke, 2008). The validity and reliability of the interview may also be disputed due to the influence that the researcher's identity has on the data obtained, as the researcher carries unseen biases to the interview which may alter the way data is interpreted and analyzed (Gunasekara, 2007; Scheurich, 1997). That said, recognition of this limitation will allow me to actively hold back from asking leading questions or inserting my own opinions as the researcher. More broadly, an understanding of the limitations of in-depth, semi-structured interviews is helpful in ensuring that the decisions made during the research process are well thought out and justified, leading to contributions to knowledge that are of high quality. As these limitations have been addressed, I will now proceed to outline the specifics of how data was collected through interviews.

For this research, in-depth semi-structured interviews took place online. While onsite interviews are the more traditional approach taken by researchers (Mann and Stewart, 2001), I chose to interview campers across the United States instead of one particular location. As mentioned with regard to the purposive sampling and snowball sampling approaches I am utilizing, this allowed for a varied array of participants, experiences, and landscapes that can help inform meaningful differences and similarities of experience. Accordingly, I conducted interviews online using Zoom as the video conferencing application, as this eliminates constraints that would have

otherwise made face-to-face research impractical and offers the possibility for “extending the range of participants beyond those who are available for face-to-face interviewing” (Mann and Stewart, 2001: 603). Iacono, Symonds and Brown (2016: 1) agree with this approach, stating that using video conferencing applications “opens up new possibilities by allowing us to contact participants worldwide in a time efficient and financially affordable manner, thus increasing the variety of our samples”.

That said, establishing rapport and trust can be more difficult without meeting in person (Iacono, et al., 2016; Mann and Stewart, 2001). I addressed this concern by sharing information about myself and displaying openness about the purposes and processes of the research (Mann and Stewart, 2001). Richard Cutler (1995) suggests that “the more an individual discloses personal information on-line, the more others are likely to reciprocate, and the more individuals know about each other, the more likely it is that trust, satisfaction, and a sense of being in a safe communication environment will ensue” (Mann and Stewart, 2001: 614). To help foster this sense of trust, I informed the interviewee that the interview will be recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate analysis of the interviewee’s answers and confidentiality of digital data will be ensured by downloading the recordings onto a password-protected computer and data will be destroyed after the completion of the project.

After recruitment and before the interview, all participants were sent a participant information sheet that explained the purpose of the study and informed participants about what was involved. In addition, all participants were digitally sent a consent form that was signed by the participants before any interview took place. As noted, participant anonymity and confidentiality was important, and pseudonyms were used in lieu of the participant’s real names. Further, digital data was securely stored to prevent data from being shared with unauthorized individuals. Each interview lasted around an hour, with some extending to an hour and a half, because it struck a balance between permitting in-depth answers and being mindful of the participant’s time (Robson, 2002: 273). An interview guide that listed all of the questions to be asked was used so that I could ensure that the structure provided replicability and relevance, while the open-ended nature of the questions allowed me to have a more conversational and casual tone with the interviewee, as well as the

ability to probe deeper into information or themes that are interesting or had not been considered. The questions were broken out into the three phases of camping. For the pre-trip phase, questions revolved around motivations for camping and trip planning. For the onsite phase, questions involved the themes of one's personal relationship with technology and one's social relationship with technology, with questions asked about digital connection, safety, and the experience of the natural and social environment. Finally, the post-trip phase questions revolved around the post-trip social experience and how technology was used after the trip. Additionally, all interviews took place on Zoom using both audio and video.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Consistent with the qualitative data collection methods outlined above, certain analytical frameworks are best suited for qualitative research. Morin, Olsson and Atikcan (2021: 283) note that qualitative researchers collect words as data and “treat and analyze word-based data as words, rather than transforming them into numbers for statistical analysis”. Thematic analysis, as one of these qualitative analytical frameworks, is used pervasively within the research community to analyze interviews and other text-based data which may be somewhat unclear (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Cresswell, 2008; Morin, et al, 2021; Roberts, Dowel, Nie, 2019). The qualitative paradigm is significant here, as thematic analysis is mapped to the belief that “reality consists of people’s subjective experiences or interpretations of the world. Therefore, there is no singular correct pathway to knowledge...there is no objective knowledge that is independent of thinking” (Roberts, et al., 2019: 4). As outlined, this research follows a constructivist ontological and an interpretivist epistemological perspective as it is principally interested in how guests and hosts use, understand, and make meaning from the social interactions that are facilitated by Hipcamp. In turn, the use of thematic analysis is justified. Defined as “the process of analyzing data according to commonalities, relationships and differences across a data set” (Brown and Gibson, 2009: 127), thematic analysis is a useful framework for extracting key themes, or patterns or meaning, from a large and rich data set. Morin, et al., (2021: 286) contend that thematic analysis produces a “rich interpretative

account of patterned meanings across a dataset, and the implications of those.” Despite there not being a widely accepted definition of ‘theme,’ Bryman (2012: 580) identifies four factors: “a category identified by the analyst through his/her data; that relates to his/her research focus...; that builds on codes identified in transcripts...; and that provides the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of his or her data that can make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the research focus.” Braun and Clarke (2006: 79) specify a theme as a patterned response or meaning within the data. This study adopted these two interpretations of themes. Another important aspect of thematic analysis to note is that themes can be developed at different points in the analytical process. For example, themes can be identified prior to data collection as in a form of thematic analysis called ‘coding reliability’, after data collection as in a form of thematic analysis called ‘reflexive TA’, or both before and after data collection as in a form of thematic analysis called ‘codebook TA’.

As this research assumes a constructionist and interpretivist approach, I employed the form of thematic analysis called ‘reflexive thematic analysis’ which is a fully qualitative approach with an emphasis on reflexivity, subjectivity and situated meaning (Kidder and Fine, 1987). Reflexive thematic analysis “acknowledges that research is inevitably and inescapably shaped by the processes and practices of knowledge production” which include the researcher being an active and valuable resource in the analytic process and coding being an organic and evolving process (Morin, et al., 2021: 285). Coding is a “technique for systematically identifying small segments of the dataset that (might) meaningfully contribute to the broader patterns of meanings that are themes” (Morin, et al., 2021: 285). Significantly, coding is a key component of thematic analysis and the purpose and practice of coding can vary according to particular ontological and epistemological assumptions (Morin et al., 2021). As such, coding in reflexive thematic analysis is always a situated and subjective interpretation of the data rather than involving agreement between multiple coders. Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun (2017: 20) advocate that “coding ‘gets better’ through immersion in, or repeated engagement with the data.”

For this research, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2013) six-phase process for reflexive thematic analysis. First, I familiarized myself with the data by reading each interview transcript in detail and “becoming intimately familiar with the contents”

(Morin et al., 2021: 286). I then proceeded to start the coding process by tagging excerpts of data with labels and writing memos, or notes that “serve as reminders about what is meant by the terms being used and provide the building blocks for a certain amount of reflection” (Bryman, 2012: 573). Many of the codes were related to Wiley’s (2005) tensions between wilderness and technology, as referenced in Chapter Two. Examples of codes included: meanings, uncertainty, comfort, risk, safety, social presence, physical experience, and digital connectivity. Through this coding process, I started interpreting the data as it related to the research questions as well as began reducing the number of words being analyzed, making the analysis more manageable. Theme development was the next step in this process, in which I organized the codes into clusters that formed broader patterns of meaning and then proceeded to revise, refine, and interpret the initial clusters “in light of the dataset, research questions, theoretical positioning, and wider scholarly (and real-world) contexts” (Morin et al., 2021: 287). The overarching themes extracted from the data were as follows: uncertainty, safety, and presence. I limited the number of themes, as researchers “normally try to restrict the number of overarching themes as far as the data will allow - between two and five is probably the norm” (Horrocks and King, 2010: 158). Finally, each theme was summarized and its wider implications discussed as they related to my research questions.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

As with any qualitative research, ethical questions must be considered when trying to “comprehend some meanings of life” as “one must get close to that life” (Stake and Jegatheesan, 2008: 1). To ensure this project addressed these ethical questions, I sought and received ethics approval for my research from the ethics committee Ethics Committee of the Sociology and Criminology department. Ryen (2011) notes that the most frequent ethical concerns consist of three interrelated themes: codes and consent, confidentiality, and trust. Codes and consent refer to informed consent and the right to know that participants are being researched, what the nature of the research entails, and the right to withdraw at any time (Ryen, 2011). To address this concern, I sought and obtained informed consent from all research participants by providing them with a participation information sheet and consent form. Doing this fully informed them of the purpose of the research. Additionally, all participants were

over eighteen years of age and interview questions and media go-along prompts focused primarily on the experience of camping, which is not anticipated as a sensitive topic. If participants were uncomfortable, I allowed them to refuse to answer, challenge, or withdraw from any interviews and observation, although this was never necessary. Second, confidentiality means that “we are obliged to protect each participant’s identity, places and the location of the research (Ryen, 2011: 33). Accordingly, I ensured anonymity through the allocation of a pseudonym to the participant and the participant was not identified through other information provided by the research (for example: age, gender, etc.). Confidentiality and the safekeeping of data was ensured through the use of a password protected laptop. Additionally, research data will be erased and destroyed after the completion of the research project.

Third, trust refers to the relationship between the researcher and the participant as well as the presentation of the work and findings as trustworthy (Fine, 1993; Ryen, 2011). While there is a low risk of harm being caused to participants with this research, participants could potentially be uncomfortable providing answers about their camping experience while interviewing as it could become more personal. The issue of privacy is relevant here, as it concerns the notion that “each and all individuals should have the right to decide for themselves what and how much others get to know about them. It is only the information that they choose to reveal that should be known to others” (Elm, 2008: 69). In order to establish trust, I first built rapport with the participant by sharing information about myself and displaying openness about the purposes and processes of the research (Mann and Stewart, 2001). Stake and Jegatheesan (2008:8) note the importance of knowing ethical boundaries, stating that “through empathy, intuition, experience, something, we need to rely on ourselves to back off.” As a way to give the participant a sense of privacy while still participating in the research process, the option of turning their video off while interviewing was offered to ease any discomfort associated with online interviewing. Lastly, because I interviewed individuals and analyzed their answers, there is the risk that my interpretation of the data is subjective and could therefore misrepresent the participants. I addressed this ethical consideration by asking clarifying questions and allowing the participants the time to articulate their thoughts and experiences in more detail so as to get to the root of what they were

trying to convey. As Silverman (2005: 211) contends, researchers must convince their readers that “their ‘findings’ are genuinely based on critical investigation of all their data”. Ultimately, this is what my research aimed to accomplish so as to understand the implications of digital technology on the experiences and meanings ascribed to camping by its users.

3.7 Summary

The primary aim of this research is to advance an understanding of the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies on each phase of the camping experience for my participants, from the pre-trip planning phase to the onsite phase, and finally the post-trip experience. Because my research implies an interpretivist epistemological and constructivist ontological position, a qualitative research design was devised and a case study of camping was implemented as a research strategy. These were justified by the need for rich, detailed information within its context and from the participant’s perspective, as these decisions will allow me to examine how digital technologies are being used throughout the camping experience as well as their impact on campers. Both purposive sampling and snowball sampling were employed to ensure a large enough sample size to reach data saturation and recruitment of participants was conducted through social media and the researcher’s social network. To better understand an underresearched population, a pilot study of Hipcamp users was devised in which the ‘media go-along’ method of data collection was employed. This pilot study allowed me to then determine that a broader and more diverse sample was needed to reach data saturation and to better investigate the questions I am interested in asking, both in terms of the content and collection of data. Following the pilot study, both campers and Hipcamp users were included in the sample, with a focus on a diverse sample to provide a richer set of data through varied perspectives. A total of twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with interviews focusing on the pre-trip, onsite, and post-trip experiences and themes that were guided by Wiley’s (2005) tensions between wilderness and technology. As themes were an important way to structure the interview, thematic analysis was deemed the appropriate framework from which I extracted key themes and findings.

Moving forwards, chapter four examines the pre-trip planning phase of the camping experience by exploring the digital technologies used to plan camping trips and the effects they may have on campers. Utilizing user generated content (UGC) as a digital strategy is examined and its impact on the experience of uncertainty, comfort, and trust for campers is discussed. Lastly, the strategies employed and the skills required for booking campsites are examined and their implications for accessibility are considered. Chapter five then addresses the onsite phase of the camping experience by exploring the way that digital technologies impact feelings of safety and risk for campers. Following this, the way that digital technology is used in different camping environments is examined in terms of its connection to how safe participants feel in that environment. Chapter six then addresses both the onsite and post-trip phases of the camping experience by examining the way that campers perceive connection and disconnection from digital technology during and after the camping trip, with a focus on the effects of digital technologies on physical and social presence. These findings chapters will thus help provide a better understanding of the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies on each phase of the camping experience for my participants, from the pre-trip planning phase to the onsite phase, and finally the post-trip experience. In turn, it may also reveal something about our relationship to digital technologies. As the methodology and subsequent chapters have been detailed, let me now address the impact of digital technologies on the pre-trip phase of the camping experience.

Chapter 4: Pre-Trip: Digital Planning Strategies and Uncertainty

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine how the preparation phase of the camping practice is changed through the use of digital technology. Specifically, I am interested in the digital strategies that are employed in service of preparation for a camping trip and the effects it has on modern day campers. The chapter begins by examining the meanings attached to the planning phase of the camping trip, establishing that much of the preparation work of camping has moved to the digital sphere. Following this, the chapter examines the various ways that user generated content (UGC) is utilized as a digital strategy to reduce the amount of uncertainty that is experienced when planning for a camping trip. More precisely, this section explores how campsite conditions and ambience are made familiar through UGC, providing a sense of comfort to campers. Next, the chapter considers how varying levels of trust and distrust are assigned to information provided by government-run websites and UGC and its impact on the planning process. Lastly, the strategies employed as well as the skills required for booking campsites are examined, and its implications for accessibility to both private and public land are discussed. Accordingly, the chapter develops an updated understanding of the preparation phase of modern camping, recognizing that the digital strategies employed by campers ultimately help them navigate the tensions between risk versus security and knowledge versus the unknown, which are two of Wiley's (1995) integrated tensions that exist between wilderness and technology.

4.2 Camping and Preparation

Recreation experiences are multi-phasic and include pre-departure, traveling, and post-traveling phases (Pabel and Prideaux, 2016). The planning phase is an important and rewarding part of the experience for many tourists (Hammit, 1980). While in the pre-trip stage, anticipation about travel can lead to feelings of happiness and excitement (Jung & Cho, 2015). This sentiment is echoed by participants, with Jessa stating:

It's like a huge, huge undertaking that has to unfold and come together over time. I love, love the planning portion of it. It makes me feel super cool.

Rhett explains why it is so special:

The planning of the trip is part of the enjoyment for me. I mean while you're out on a trip, there's that sense of exploration and discovery, and you get a little bit of that while you're planning, too. And that to me is like, super enjoyable. Looking at all the possibilities and then narrowing it down to what are we gonna do with this short window that we have away from work and responsibilities. (Rhett, Male, 35, Washington, D.C.)

Yet, pre-trip preparation can also lead to stress due to the burden that is involved in planning and preparation (Nawijn, et al., 2013). In other words, the amount of work required to prepare for a trip can be onerous. Camping is unique in that it involves considerable preparation in order to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip (Marion, 2014). This includes researching the campground, gathering equipment and food, and being aware of potential environmental issues, as the infrastructure, amenities and comforts of more urban environments are not readily available (Anderson and Absolon, 2011; Hodgson, 2000; Randall, 2013; Townsend, 2011). Hodgson (2003:3) notes that "there is a constant fight to protect ourselves from the elements and soften the edges of wilderness". Indeed, the amount of preparatory work involved in a camping trip is an experience many participants discussed, especially as it compares to other forms of vacation. The following extracts support this point:

It's funny because it's like it's a lot more prep work and work at times. You don't have the luxury of a hotel room where you just set up and things are there. You do have to be much more organized and sort of planned out and thought out before. You can't just be like, there's a store down the street. It's like, no, you gotta bring your food. So it's sort

of nice just knowing like once you're all planned and set up that you have everything that you basically need. (Corinne, Female, 35, CA)

There's certainly a lot more needing to be prepared to feed yourself, to set up your own kind of domicile and prepare your own food. And so there's a lot more kind of dependence on yourself. Whereas, you know, another vacation you might rent a home and you've got the roof over your home and they probably have restaurants nearby and stuff like that. (Miles, Male, 39, CA)

Jessa expresses a similar point when comparing camping trips to beach vacations:

We just sit on our butts all day long, and just drink and eat and drink and eat, requires absolutely no planning. The trips that I plan are multifaceted like multiple campgrounds, like hiking plans, having to come up with meals, bringing equipment. It is far more work. (Jessa, Female, 35, CA)

In each of these excerpts, participants touch on the amount of work that is required to have a successful camping trip precisely because of the lack of basic necessities that is inherent to a camping trip. Eva also describes the preparation involved, but points to the inclusion of digital tools to streamline the process:

There's a Google Doc that me and my husband and I will create to have centralized information as well as meal prep sign up and then there's always a group Slack channel that will happen or a Facebook group. We'll try to coordinate who's driving, when is everyone arriving. You can't just show up. There is some prep work involved. (Eva, Female, 37, CA).

What Eva describes above is a digital strategy employed to ensure the proper preparation for a group camping trip. Eva's experience is representative of a broader trend identified by my research. Today, much of the preparation for camping has

moved into the digital sphere, requiring different strategies at each stage of the pre-trip planning process, from discovery and information gathering to booking campsites. Germann Molz (2014: 19) suggests that, “camping confounds the imaginaries of indulgence and comfort...instead of pampered luxury, however, *camping* embraces discomfort and lack - not so much as pleasures in and of themselves but as reminders that less is often more.” However, to achieve the ‘less is more’ approach while at the campsite, the digital technologies that campers use to assist in the preparation of the trip often lead to a ‘more and more’ approach as the amount of preparation increases. Social practice theory can thus help explain how the camping practice is altered through the use of these digital technologies in this phase of the trip. A practice can be changed by introducing new elements that result in new sets of materials, competences and meanings that are drawn upon to perform the practice (Shove et al., 2012). Accordingly, the pre-trip stage of camping is experienced differently because of the digital planning in which participants engage in and the affordances of the digital technologies used. Let me now examine what types of digital technologies are being used by campers and their effects on the pre-trip experience.

4.3 Utilizing UGC to Manage Uncertainty

Digital technologies have become the primary method of facilitating recreation experience in the pre-trip phase as they provide a wealth of information about destinations and platforms for booking accommodations (Haegeli and Probstl-Haider, 2016). In particular, User-Generated Content (UGC) plays a significant role in the early stages of trip planning for tourists, especially in the information search phase (Kennel and Rushton, 2015; Yilmaz, 2017). For campers, platforms or websites that include photos and reviews uploaded by fellow campers, like Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Google Reviews, Hipcamp, and The Dyrty, are deemed most useful in the planning phase. Utilizing UGC is a digital strategy for gaining more granular insight into a potential camping trip to manage risk. Understandably, travelers are often sensitive to safety when choosing destinations (Lee and Hyun, 2015). Using UGC as a digital strategy can provide critical information about the campsites and its conditions. This point is supported by Grant in the following extract:

I look up this information for comfort and the ideal experience. If there are some of the downsides that I can eliminate from the experience. Google will have reviews from people who camped there recently. One time I saw one where a bunch of people had gotten norovirus because it was sort of like in the groundwater, like somebody had dumped untreated water there. And I just sort of made the decision to not go there just in case. (Grant, Male, 26, WA)

Grant's decision-making process is directly influenced by reports on the condition of the campsite and the risks associated with camping there. Although implicit, he looks beyond the basic information provided by the government-run website or traditional guidebooks in order to understand the real-time conditions, which is consistent with research that states that online review and ratings play a significant role in shaping travelers' perceptions of destinations, accommodations and attractions, influencing their purchase decisions and travel plans (Gretzel, 2018; Oliviera et al, 2021). While this is useful to ensure a safe camping experience, it ultimately creates more work for him in the process, as he spends additional time in the information gathering phase rather than moving forward with his booking. In a similar vein, Jasper looks at reviews to understand the current conditions for camping related activities like hiking:

It depends on if there's a part of a trail that might be a bit riskier or something like there's some exposure or something like that. Then I'd like to read a bit more about that for safety reasons, because obviously I don't wanna put myself in danger or in a situation that would add a layer of risk that I'm not comfortable with. (Jasper, Male, 33, CA)

Rogers and Leung (2023) contend that navigating uncertainty and facing unforeseen challenges are inherent components of wilderness recreation. For both Grant and Jasper, then, safety is a key concern and UGC acts as a tool that mitigates the risks associated with camping. Accordingly, the integrated tensions that exist between wilderness and technology (Wiley, 1995), as identified by Wiley (1995), namely the tension between risk versus security and the tension between knowledge versus the unknown (Shultis, 2012: 112), apply here. Scholars have criticised the use of technology in wilderness, arguing that the availability of electronic information

transforms wilderness from an 'unknown' place imbued with mystery and the risk that often accompanies adventure into a place that is 'known' and thus more predictable (Borrie, et. al, 2012). Yet, as Jasper and Grant's use of UGC indicates, this predictability is precisely what participants are seeking when they use UGC in the planning phases of the trip as it ensures a level of comfort that may not be possible otherwise. These participants interpret the recency of information, which is an affordance of UGC, as providing a sense of security through the knowledge it provides. While an argument could be made that using UGC for the most up-to-date information before the trip creates the "illusion of safety" (Ewert and Hollenhorst, 1997:21) because the natural environment contains its own risks and the conditions are ever-changing, it is certainly significant to the decision-making processes involved in pre-trip planning. For campers, the additional digital work of searching for more concrete information online about conditions is balanced by the sense of comfort that this digital work provides.

The attempt to reduce uncertainty by campers was also observed in the use of UGC to ascertain the ambience and aesthetics of a campground, ensuring that it matches what a camper desires. The planning phase includes locating campgrounds and campsites that provide an opportunity to receive a nature-based experience, which is one of the key dimensions of camping (Garst, et al., 2009). Historically, public campgrounds within the United States have been designed in a relatively homogenous fashion to reflect suburban space through camping loops, or curvilinear roads within the campground, with each campsite lining the road demarcated by boundaries (Young, 2021). However, the quality of individual campsites within each campground with regard to aesthetics and conditions is varied, and campers use the digital information available to them in order to find what is most ideal. This point is supported by Dorian who notes the variety and difference in perceived quality of campsites within a campground:

If you've been to a public campground, you know that not all sites are equal. If we have the luxury of choosing which site, then I'll try to do a little bit more research. I saw a Tripadvisor Review once, where they mentioned oh, like A58, is not great but A47 has elevation that really separates you from the neighboring campsite. (Dorian, Male, 38, NY)

Vernon describes a similar experience using UGC to determine the quality of a campsite:

I like The Dyrty because it has pictures and reviews of the different campsites and even specific camp campgrounds. But even specific campsites, when it has a lot of reviews, someone will post a picture of campsite eight and be like this is trash, don't stay in this one. Or like Campsite eight's the best. (Vernon, Male, 32, CA)

Both Dorian and Vernon's digital planning extends to TripAdvisor and The Dyrty, where other campers have posted details deemed valuable for attaining the experience that Dorian and Vernon seeks. Dorian and Vernon undertake additional research to tailor their camping experience to what is deemed optimal. This process asserts more control and customization over the camping experience. The granularity of detail in a UGC review helps make the atmosphere of the campground better understood before the experience, thus allowing Dorian and Vernon to combat the risk of a negative aesthetic or social experience. Photos also function to allow participants to feel like they know these spaces better than they otherwise would, thus giving the illusion of "knowing" the campground ahead of time, as photographs both reflect and inform destination images (Urry, 1990). In particular, photos uploaded by other campers were found to play a particularly important role in a camper's pre-trip planning phase, as they provide visual references for discovering ideal natural landscapes and locations. The following two extracts support this point:

Pictures are nice. There are some campgrounds that are right on a highway, and then there's some that are like literally lakeside, so that makes a big difference, too. (Luna, Female, 26, WA)

I think photos are often really helpful because photos will show me what the campsite actually looks like as well as what environment I'm going to be in. There's campsites that are in the redwoods, but they're

actually not around the redwoods. You have to walk to them, right?
(Vernon, Male, 32, CA)

Much like Dorian, Luna and Vernon note the variety that can be found within standardized campgrounds, indicating that there are some campsites that are in more ideal locations than others which can, in turn, impact their overall experience. Variety causes uncertainty as to what campsite is going to best meet a camper's needs, whereas the photos provide a visual reference with which to extinguish the uncertainty and control a future experience. Stellan also uses pictures to better understand whether or not a specific campsite will meet his aesthetic desires:

Since we like being near rivers, it's how close to the river are you? Can you hear it from your campsite? Can you walk down to it? Those are the best spots if you can get them. So by trying to see that in the photos, you can tell quite a bit from that. (Stellan, Male, 35, WA)

Hyun et al. (2009) assert that tourists search for information that allows them to get a taste of what it is like to be at the destination, including vivid descriptions and the option to virtually experience the destination. UGC, then, facilitates this virtual experience because it provides a destination image that is both cognitive in that it provides knowledge of the destination that is related to its attributes (e.g. safety, attraction, etc.) and affective, leading to emotions or feelings that campers hold about the campsite (San Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008). For Stellan, looking at photos seems to provide a sensory experience that extends beyond the virtual visual reference; it's almost as if he can hear the river from the photo. In essence, looking at these photos gives a sense of how a campground can 'feel', with the natural environment being the primary component that campers try to optimize for. One participant, Lina, describes this as ascertaining the "vibe" of a campground and indicates that it influences her pre-camping trip decision-making process. She provided more information about this process in the following extract:

The vibe is so important to me and I can really tell from photos. Is it really nature? Is it, you know, full of trailers? When I went to Toronto

and I was planning my trip I was looking at like, where's the best food? I didn't care about the photos of the restaurants or anything like that. If it's a great hotel, maybe I want to know the vibe of the hotel, but I'm not gonna plan out my whole trip based on photos. I think with camping, the land, the scenery. The vibe of it is the number one thing I care about. I've seen some booking websites that didn't have photos, and I was like no way. So I would then separately try to do research to find people's photos of it. (Lina, 40, Female, OR)

Interestingly, the virtual ambience that is projected from pictures of the campsite is so important to Lina that, in their absence, she will either reject the campsite completely or engage in more digital research in the attempt to find photos. In essence, this is an exercise in managing expectations and making the campsite more known to avoid the risk of having a negative experience. This point is supported by Stellan as he describes how the expectations set by using UGC as an information source make him feel more capable of handling the negative aspects of camping:

It mentally prepares me for oh, this is a crowded beach, or there are no bathrooms, so we should plan for that, or the water is extremely cold. You learn the things that annoyed people, and if those things are fine with you, then you're prepared for it, and you usually mind it even less since you knew it was coming (Stellan, Male, 35, WA)

Nico describes a similar thought process when explaining why he puts in the effort to achieve a more granular level of detail about the campsite:

I wanna have things set out. I wanna kinda know what to expect. And so certainly that provides us a comfort level, having done a ton of research beforehand and knowing pretty much how it's gonna go. (Nico, Male, 35, TN)

What UGC can provide in the pre-trip planning phase, then, is a sense of psychological comfort for campers because it provides the illusion that they have already experienced the campsite, which reduces anxiety. In other words, risks are reduced because the potential experience is perceived as being more known. The desire for camping experiences that are tailored to a camper's personal preferences parallels the growing demand in nature-based tourism for comfort, which has led to sub-sectors like glamping and RV camping in which the comforts and conveniences of home are readily available during nature-based recreation (Brochado and Periera, 2017). While the type of camping that these participants describe is still without many of the modern amenities or infrastructure that is found in urban environments, there is still a desire for comfort that is immaterial. It can be argued that this is an extension of a trend that I call "comfortable camping", with comfort being facilitated less by amenities and more by the promise, provided by digital technologies like UGC, that the experience will meet the personal preferences and degree of risk a camper is willing to accept. Comfort relates to the notion of well-being (Varley, et al., 2018) and the state of mind that accompanies the feeling of safety (Arnould and Price, 1993). Accordingly, UGC, including photos and reviews, become "comfort-generating objects" (Pineau, 1982: 273) that make the camping process easier by removing or alleviating the risk of the unknown. A key component of comfort is the notion of personalization. With UGC, the virtual representation of the campsite, or the dwelling, becomes personalized through the ability to choose a site based on one's personal preferences. While these virtual objects provide a level of psychological comfort that is indeed part of the modern camping practice, this comfort is complicated by the fact that campers must be able to trust the information that they are consuming, which is analyzed and discussed in the following section.

4.4 Government-run Sites, UGC, and Trust

Looking at UGC and making pre-trip decisions based on the information provided requires a level of trust in what is being presented online to minimize the risk involved in camping. Participants found UGC to be useful in the information-gathering phase, even providing comfort due to its ability to provide up-to-date information, recommendations, and visual references, and would spend additional time and effort to seek this content outside of more traditional information

channels. For some campers, the informational quality on government-run websites, which have traditionally been authoritative sources of information, led to the use of UGC. Trust in an online source can be eroded if the information provided is deemed insufficient or of low quality (Gao, et. al, 2012; Kim and Ahmad, 2013). Nico's experience in the following extract supports this point:

So we flip back over to Google reviews, and where people had posted images because it was very hard in the images on the State parks website to understand all right, where do you put your car like, do you? Can you pull your car up on this platform? How's that gonna work? And so, flipping through reviews on Google was super helpful to realize how that was actually gonna work. (Nico, Male, 35, TN)

Nico indicates that the State parks website lacks the logistical information that is necessary for him to effectively plan a trip, so he must do additional research and extend beyond these traditional authoritative sources to find the information he needs. This confirms the argument that the quality of information that the tourism industry provides to tourists is essential because tourism relies mostly on information and value given to the customer (Wang, et al., 2009). If the role of information is to reduce risks, the lack of up-to-date online information on government-run websites ends up creating another risk that many campers are unwilling to take. This is expressed explicitly in the idea of the camping community providing digital content that is more trustworthy or authentic than government-run websites regarding conditions around the campsite. Jessa expresses this sentiment in the following extract:

Even on recreation.gov the photo can be so misleading when it comes to what the campsite actually looks like (Jessa, Female, 35, CA)

Romy similarly employs UGC as a digital strategy intended to combat the sense of distrust in government-run public sites:

Wildfires are very prevalent on the West Coast. Has the campsite been affected and is it actually even open? Sometimes it will show it's closed, and it's not closed or the opposite. And so, really knowing if this is real, is this a reliable source of information? Were water sources damaged in the fire? If it's bear country, are they closing the campsite because of bear activity? And is it reliable? Is it safe to stay? Because you're not in a building. You're in the elements. Which is why I rely a lot on some of the Facebook groups because you can get very updated information, because a lot of times the public site is not up to date.
(Romy, Female, 50, CA)

Romy perceives that the stakes are higher while camping because of the inherent dangers of spending time in a natural environment. Because the website provided by the government does not fulfill Romy's desire to minimize risk through making the conditions of the campsite more knowable before the trip, she places her trust in the virtual camping community. Thus, the virtual camping community becomes the more authoritative source for managing expectations for her trip. Luna details a similar experience while explicitly mentioning the camping community:

On AllTrails or Facebook Marketplace, people will leave reviews on things that are harder for the trail itself like if it's rocky, or if it's muddy. That's something that's constantly going to be changing, so you can't necessarily have one article about it. So I feel like that community is helpful. (Luna, Female, 26, WA)

For Logan, the camping community provides a level of honesty that is hard to find elsewhere:

I actually care about the campsite reviews, just what other people have said about it. I think it's the most transparent way to get a perspective on it. (Logan, Male, 35, CA)

The ability for camping to foster community has been noted (Slater, 1984; Jirasek, et al., 2016) and this sense of community is also found online. Indeed, for Romy, Luna and Logan, the virtual camping community serves as a trusted resource for attaining information that reduces the risk of the unknown. E-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) has been shown to have higher levels of credibility than other sources of information (Fotis, Buhalis, and Rossides, 2012; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008), which is supported by these participant's experiences. Nonetheless, Luna points out the need to have multiple sources of information to truly understand the conditions around the campground when she states, "you can't necessarily have one article about it." Kim and Ahmad (2013: 438) note that UGC has a "quality control problem", in that the distribution of quality has high variance. Yet, the quality of information provided by government-run websites is deemed worse and leads to active distrust. Significantly, this contests the idea that the highest level of trust is afforded to information on State government tourism websites (Burgess et. al, 2009). This may be symptomatic of a general erosion of trust in the government, as studies have shown that higher levels of trust in government correlate with satisfaction of e-government services (Carter and Belanger, 2005; Horsburgh et. al, 2011).

While the virtual camping community may be regarded as an authoritative source for pre-trip planning for many participants, there was still a sense of distrust in the information provided by UGC. The subjectivity of reviews, in particular, was discussed as a potential pitfall of using UGC, as the following extracts demonstrate:

I think there are definitely examples where people have described a trip as easier, and it being harder than I expected, and vice versa. So that could be a problem. You know, every person is different. (Jasper, Male, 30, CA)

Sometimes it can be overwhelming because you don't know what is actually the truth. Sometimes you're like, well, these three different sites said three different things. And if you're going by someone's review you have to think about how everyone has this different way to gauge an experience so kind of playing that against what my

experience and expectations are versus somebody else's. (Corinne, Female, 35, CA)

Jasper and Corinne both recognize that “every person is different” and that the reviews being used to gather information and certainty about a camping experience may be unreliable precisely because reviews, and the people reading them, are subjective. In essence, they are describing the notion that “when each individual looks at an object, the perceived value of the same object may appear different because the viewpoints of each person are different from each other” (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992; Ham, et al., 2019: 1439; Leonard et al., 1999; Robey and Taggart, 1982). Accordingly, an unbridgeable gap exists between the experience of a reviewer and the camper attempting to manage expectations, imbuing the pre-trip planning phase with a sense of uncertainty that is directly related to the core of UGC’s functionality. There is also an undercurrent of suspicion around photos of campgrounds. For Kendall and Corinne, this suspicion is rooted in the sense that a photo has been doctored in some way to make it more appealing.

You can kind of tell when something feels a little too good to be true or just like not quite real. You can kind of tell when someone's photos are like incredibly saturated (Kendall, Female, 30, NV)

Sometimes you see, a picture like that is the most breathtaking thing in the world, and then it's really just like the angle that it's taken from, and photoshop and things like that. (Corinne, Female, 35, CA)

Jessa, a photographer, also expresses a distrust of UGC photos, but links this to having been in situations in which a photo has led to expectations that did not match with the reality of the campsite. As she explains:

As I've gotten more experienced in booking campsites and showing up to campsites, I have just kind of lowered my expectations and been like, okay, this is what the photo looks like. I know that it's probably not as great as this. I know that two feet that way is probably another

campsite, and I need to be accepting of that fact (Jessa, Female, 35, CA)

Because of a similar disappointing experience, Vernon explains why he is not fully trusting of UGC posts:

I've learned to take everything I read and see with a grain of salt. There was one post and it was beautiful. It was green and lush. They're like, it's not busy. It's a hidden gem. I was like, this is gonna be great! And I went there and it was barren, there was no green anything. And I realized that that picture must have been taken in early spring where I had gone in August or September and there was nothing, it was just dry and brown the whole time. That was very disappointing. (Vernon, Male, 32, CA)

In each case, my research demonstrates that using UGC as a digital strategy in the pre-trip planning phase of a camping trip has become a balancing act between trust and distrust. Digital technology imbues the camping practice with a level of uncertainty that campers are paradoxically attempting to diminish by using UGC in the first place. In the search for accurate and detailed information, campers extend their search beyond government-run websites and guidebooks, which have previously been perceived as the primary source of information for campers. The use of UGC provided by the virtual camping community is a digital strategy employed by campers precisely because of its ability to provide up-to-date and more varied information. While this strategy can diminish much of the uncertainty surrounding what one should expect at the campground (Rogers and Leung, 2023), campers do not view this negatively. In fact, UGC provides a level of certainty that government-run websites can't always provide. The virtual camping community, then, becomes the authoritative source for pre-trip planning. At the same time, crowdsourced photos and reviews of UGC sites, while often viewed as more granular in detail, are also perceived as biased or inauthentic. The affordances of UGC create a wealth of information for campers to review, yet campers don't necessarily know what information sources to trust. In the attempt to control the

experience and its associated risks, campers must now put more effort and time into the digital planning phase to reach an acceptable level of certainty. In other words, digital uncertainty adds an additional layer of work to the already intensive preparatory work of planning, becoming a “process of managing unpreventable uncertainties” (Zinn, 2006: 277).

4.5 Gaining Access to Campsites: Online Booking Strategies

As my research has demonstrated, the pre-trip phase of a camping trip requires much digital planning that is labor intensive precisely because of the difficulty in ascertaining what information is an accurate representation of the campground and its conditions. In the effort to mitigate the risk of an unsafe or unsatisfactory experience, campers choose to employ the digital strategy of using UGC to gain more information, even at the expense of its affordances imbuing the process with uncertainty. While the challenge faced by campers in the information gathering stage lies in the tension between knowledge versus the unknown, and to an extent, the tension between risk versus security, my research indicates that the booking stage of pre-trip preparation requires different digital strategies for gaining access to campsites. The popularity of camping has soared recently, with nearly 85 million Americans going camping in 2023 (Statista Research Department, 2025). As such, many participants described the difficulty in booking campsites due to limited availability coinciding with high demand. Lorelai details this in the following extract:

Ever since Covid, it's been nearly impossible. I'm going to Steep Ravine next month and I had to book on a Tuesday night. There was literally nothing for months. I'm trying to book Kirby Cove and I'm like, oh okay, cool. I can go in March for one night. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

Lorelai expresses frustration with the booking process, whereas Luna, a frequent camper, notes the competitive nature of booking campsites due to low supply in the following extract:

I feel like the National Park ones are booking up so fast like, it's crazy. You gotta put your elbows out. (Luna, Female, 26, WA)

Jessa similarly spends a large amount of time planning her camping trips and is a frequent camper. In the following extract, she explains the need to be proactive and competitive about getting campsites:

I think if I was just a general camper and wasn't on top of getting a reservation, there's no way I could have ever gotten a reservation at Lake Louise campground. I think for normal people who just think about going camping and don't realize how competitive it is, that definitely would block access to it. (Jessa, Female, 35, CA)

By positioning herself as different from "normal" people, she alludes to the fact that, as an experienced camper, she has knowledge of how to get campsites that less experienced campers might not have, thus preventing them from going camping. For those that don't have this knowledge, the lack of clarity about how to get a reservation at specific campsites can create more effort in the planning process, as Nico's experience in the following extract suggests:

Getting a campsite reservation is just not super clear with how it's supposed to work, or when the best time to apply is. Do you need to do it right when it becomes available? Or can you wait a little bit? What are the strategies to get a good reservation? A lot of Googling, maybe this is a case where you find a blogger like a travel blogger who has a whole bunch of experience with this and kind of shares how they approached it. So just kind of trying to find information from wherever you can. (Nico, Male, 25, TN)

Because Nico doesn't have specific information about the booking process, he is unable to move forward from the information gathering stage into booking and still needs to rely on the experience and knowledge of others to reserve a campsite. Effectively, he must go back to employing the digital strategy of using UGC in the

information gathering phase to get to the booking process. As camping is increasingly popular and booking campsites has become a competitive endeavor, having to look up this information could mean missing out on the opportunity to camp. Following a similar vein, campers that don't know to book online in advance miss out on camping experiences, as Kiera describes in the following extract:

We were going between a bunch of national parks, obviously National Forests. We planned on doing as much camping as possible. We only ended up camping two of the nights because we didn't book any in advance, and we got to some places early enough to get one [campsite]. Other ones, we just did one pass around and nothing. We're going to a motel. (Kiera, Female, 37, AZ)

Other campers know that planning in advance is a key component to being able to camp in publicly managed campgrounds, as is evidenced in the following extracts:

We usually book way in advance, because we expect it to be harder to book if we wait too long. Probably about 3 months, I think 2 to 3 months in advance. (Serena, Female, 30, CA).

It's like, I know that it's like 2 or 3 months out of the time that I actually want to be there. If it's this weekend, I won't even look. I know that it's not gonna be available. (Sachin, Male, 31, NV)

Jessa, Serena and Saraubh are all frequent campers. This knowledge, then, is acquired through experience, as executing a task or activity requires the experience necessary to operate within a given environment (Mullins, 2014). My research shows that, while campers may gradually gain wilderness skills through direct experiences of camping (Shultis, 2012), the same rule can apply to the digital sphere. In essence, campers are gaining what I call "digital wilderness access skills", in which campers may gradually gain the digital skills necessary to gain access to public campgrounds through the direct experience of booking online. Put another way, digital planning, which includes knowing when and how to book public campsites online, is a new skill

set that is necessary to facilitate the camping experience. One of the digital strategies that is often employed by campers is to use digital calendar invites, setting up email alerts, and using alarms to notify when to go to the booking websites, as many campgrounds open up reservations six months in advance. Each of these strategies is detailed in the following extracts:

And now every year, about six months ahead of time, in the winter, I get an email reminder from Lost Lake, saying, 'Don't forget to book for this summer.' And every time I click the link and book it so that we plan six months in advance, because those sell out. (Lina, Female, 40, OR)

I know my mom and I were booking a trip to the North Cascades and it took us four days of logging on at 7 AM, just trying to get a single day. (Luna, Female, 26, WA).

I have Google calendar invites for the backcountry lotteries for all the local national parks, for like six months in advance. I will wake up at the right time to get the reservation because they go by so quickly. I didn't get my pick of the sites that I wanted because it was so fast, and you had to win the lottery in order to get in to even choose the sites. (Grant, Male, 26, WA)

These participants must go through a fair amount of effort to get access to campsites. They use digital skills, like setting up calendar invites, combined with diligence and knowledge of the competitive nature of the booking process. Even then, there is a sense of resignation with what they are able to achieve with all of this work. For Luna, this effort results in a single day of camping. For Grant, the effort results in access to the campground but not getting to choose the specific campsite. Jessa also puts a lot of time and effort into gaining access to these campsites, which is described in the following extract:

I'm like that girl that sets alarms too. Camping in Arches National Park at Devil's Campground, probably one of the hardest camping

reservations to get. We are on our phones. We're on our computers. I'll tell my friend's husband, too. I am very well informed on when the reservation period starts, and I am on the website in one second. I mean it can be super frustrating, because at that point I've usually already planned. I like to manifest that I will get the campsite that I want. So it's super frustrating when I can't. It's kind of stressful. (Jessa, Female, 35, CA)

For these campers, the onus is on them to put in the digital labor to go camping on public land. Yet, the digital strategies employed are often not enough to either gain access to specific campgrounds or campsites within those campgrounds. As a result, the competitive nature of the booking process becomes one of frustration and stress, with a sense of resignation that even the skills and experience necessary for access may result in a diminished experience. The experiences of these participants indicate that booking a campsite has become a leisure constraint (Jackson and Scott, 1999), in which people's participation in camping, use of a public campground's services, and people's enjoyment of camping activities is limited. This is important, as access to nature in America has historically been conceived as a civil right for the public (US Wilderness Act, 1964, Sec. 2C). All citizens are viewed as stakeholders of public lands rather than customers. Yet, this civil right becomes less effective due to the introduction of this new leisure constraint that inhibits those without the time, knowledge or digital skills to experience camping on public land. As such, camping has the potential to become an exclusionary activity due to the existence of digital barriers.

Though this might be the case, some campers have found ways to lower these digital barriers. While many campers take it upon themselves to engage in the digital labor required for access, other campers who have experienced this frustration have discovered new strategies that extend beyond using government-run booking websites to gain access to these campgrounds, effectively straying off the beaten path. When Grant is unable to get a reservation at a campsite due to limited availability, he relies on social media as another digital method of gaining access:

I'm in a Facebook group for people who are swapping camping reservations. And what they'll do is they will put out a post saying 'I have this reservation for this campsite at this particular set of dates, and I'm willing to either swap with you, or you will Venmo me some amount of money, and I'll transfer it to you.' So there are ways to find them from other people. There's almost like an aftermarket for reservations. (Grant, Male, 26, WA).

Similarly, Stuart describes using the Meetup app, which is a social networking application that facilitates connecting with others based on shared interests and hobbies, to have other climbers book campsites for him. Significantly, this indicates a social experience that would not have existed without the digital barriers to camping on public lands. He explains in greater detail in the following extract:

So there's a Meetup group that is reserved for climbers. So let's say in Yosemite there's like three campsites in the valley, but sometimes we want campsites in Tuolumne Meadows and we request it on the Meetup. And then this guy does all the legwork. I don't know what he does, he trades them with others. Last minute he would be able to find someone to switch us to the other campsite. It's so easy. It's like oh, let's go climbing next Saturday, and there's already a campsite booked for us. (Stuart, Male, 48, CA)

Essentially, Stuart is using a digital technology to connect with others that will do some of the work for him in booking highly sought after campsites. This isn't to say that either Stuart or Grant completely relinquish control of the process to others, as they still must actively seek out campsites and engage with others to do so, but the intensity and frequency of booking public campsites eases through the use of these technologies. Other campers completely remove the human element of booking public campsites. Lorelai explains further in the following excerpt:

There's all these bots now. And there's this other website where you pay a subscription, and then their bots get in and book it for you once

it. It's all messed up now. It's like buying concert tickets, you know. It just makes me annoyed. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

By likening the experience of booking public campsites to purchasing concert tickets, Lorelai makes an astute observation that access to public land is becoming scarce not only due to demand but because of software that helps book public campsites faster and in larger volumes than humans. Accordingly, this land is being denied to people who are either unwilling, can't afford, or don't know how to employ these digital strategies to gain access to public land. The digital strategies employed by these participants indicate that one of the tensions between wilderness and technology, the tension between risk and security (Wiley, 1995), takes on a new dimension in the pre-trip planning phase. Instead of focusing on the impact of technology on risk perception while *in* wilderness (Shultis, 2012), perhaps focus should also be placed on how the perceived and real risk of being unable to have a camping experience has led to the creation of digital strategies to gain access to wilderness.

One particular digital strategy that has emerged out of the high demand for the limited supply of public campsites is using peer-to-peer accommodation platforms to camp on private land. Because Hipcamp opens up private land to campers, the amount of time and effort it takes to get a reservation to go camping is reduced, as Lara notes in the following extract:

I think the part that stood out to me was you weren't having to wait years in advance for a campsite in a specific National Park or you weren't having to go in person and go make your reservation. It made it pretty easy. So, you know if there was a last-minute campaign trip that popped up I would always be like, oh maybe we just booked a campsite there. (Lara, Female, 32, CA)

Kiera describes a similar experience in using Hipcamp to find a campsite that accommodated a large group without much prior planning:

We only decided to do it about three weeks in advance, so I don't even think Brandon bothered to try and find something that could accommodate us through the normal channels. From past experience, specifically California, the national and state parks are much harder to get campsites and a campsite for five is near impossible. (Kiera, Female, 37, AZ)

Adele also uses Hipcamp to accommodate her specific constraints around group size and availability:

Anyone who camps in the Bay Area knows that the biggest problem is availability. You have to plan six months in advance. When I come to use Hipcamp it's because either I didn't have a booking for the weekend I wanted, or recently I was trying to coordinate a larger trip. (Adele, Female, 34, CA)

Using a camping accommodation platform like Hipcamp has implications for the tension between knowledge and the unknown that digital technology introduces in the pre-planning phase. As the previous extracts indicate, campers that use Hipcamp are often looking for the certainty that Hipcamp can provide as it relates to the availability of campsites, among other constraints that booking a public campsite might entail. The booking experience was also described as being easier and more streamlined than booking via government-run websites. When describing one of the reasons he uses Hipcamp, Logan states:

You're just on reserve.gov, you're just in this loop. It's like book a campsite, pick a date, book. It just sends you on this recursive loop. You can't actually get to the booking page or the information you need. (Logan, Male, 35, CA)

Romy similarly describes the difficulty of using government-run booking sites in the following extract:

God bless our government. But they need to update their technology. Recreation.gov or any of these things are very clunky. They're hard to use. Sometimes they're down. Whereas with Hipcamp you're gonna go on, you're gonna find your thing. There could be an instant booking. Hipcamp is a technology company, right? It's an app. They're motivated to keep it working, whereas the government has other things to worry about. (Romy, Female, 50, CA)

Miles echoes this sentiment when describing why he uses Hipcamp:

The alternative before that was looking up campsites on generally like a government or state run site. It was neat to see a business entity focusing on making the experience of discovery and booking good because if you have a monopoly on all the campsites in the state, you don't necessarily have that incentive. (Miles, Male, 40, CA)

In each of these excerpts, participants speak of government-run booking sites as difficult to use, with Romy and Miles attributing the difficulty to a lack of incentive to improve user experience. This is contrasted to Hipcamp's streamlined and efficient booking process, which is ascribed to their position as a for-profit technology company. These participants echo the belief that "government agencies and public enterprises are generally thought to perform poorly because their managers and workers lack the high-powered incentives that are believed to prevail in private firms" (Dixit, 1997: 378). Yet this profit motive can also fuel feelings of distrust among campers. For Logan, the idea of being sold a product is the reason he feels a sense of distrust, as he explains:

I think my cynical default is that the hosts are sort of like marketing and it's more commercial. I don't like that. (Logan, Male, 35, CA)

For Dorian, the pictures of the Hipcamp campsites indicate a level of professionalism that feels inauthentic and commercial:

They're usually doing their hardest to try and sell you on the property. A lot of places will be very slick. You just sort of try to have to be like, okay, you've got the professional photographs, everything is at sunrise or sunset when they know it's most aesthetically pleasing. (Dorian, Male, 38, NY)

Because Hipcamp uses UGC as a way to validate the information presented on each listing page, it is still hampered by the feeling of distrust that is also found in the information gathering stage of pre-trip planning. In particular, participants describe the sense of distrust because there is less known about each individual site and its hosts. Lara's experience supports this point:

Like a lot of them do have the amenities but you never know what you're really gonna get until you show up. (Lara, Female, 32, CA)

Kiera similarly expresses a disconnect between what is viewed online in the pre-trip planning phase and the reality of the on-site experience, which is evidenced in the following extract:

We almost always actually try to call the person and see how responsive they are. That's a little hack we've decided after driving two and a half hours once, and then there not being a campsite. We tried to contact them for like three hours. So we eventually just drove home. This could happen anywhere. But Arizona is a little red. I'm not just gonna camp on somebody's property. If it's not clear that I'm allowed there, I'm not really going to risk it and put up a tent and say, 'oh, it'll be fine'. There's a lot of gun owners there. (Kiera, Female, 37, AZ)

For Kiera, the feeling of uncertainty lies in an experience of mismatched expectations, as well as the fact that the host is a stranger. Ariadne echoes this sentiment:

Hipcamp still feels a little more new. I'm at the mercy of somebody else.
This is their land. They can do what they want. (Ariadne, Female, 35,
CA)

What my research establishes, then, is that uncertainty is embedded into every layer of the booking process. Accordingly, new digital strategies and skills have thus emerged to manage the risks associated with this “fundamental modern experience” (Zinn, 2006: 277). For campers, uncertainty initially stems from the experience of not knowing if access to public campsites, and thus public land, is attainable due to the increased competition for campsites. Proceeding from the development of this new leisure constraint is a new set of digital competences that are drawn upon to gain access to campsites and thus perform the camping practice, ranging from setting up Google Calendar alerts to using reservation bots. The emergence of camping peer-to-peer accommodation platforms that streamline the booking process by opening up private land to campers is symptomatic of the uncertainty around access and are used as a digital strategy to make camping more accessible. Yet campers still feel a sense of distrust due to the companies’ profit motive and UGC affordances.

4.6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine how the preparation phase of the camping practice is changed through the use of digital technology. This exploration has determined that, while the pre-trip stage of camping has always involved an intensive amount of preparation due to changing environmental conditions and the lack of urban infrastructure, much of this work has moved into the digital sphere. As such, Wiley’s (1995) tensions between wilderness and technology are manifesting digitally before campers even get to the campsite. To ease the amount of uncertainty and risk associated with camping, and conversely to gain knowledge and security, campers use UGC as a strategy to gain more granular and up-to-date insight into what conditions and ambience to expect. Consequently, campers feel a sense of psychological comfort going into the experience, which is indicative of a larger trend in the camping community that is moving towards more comfortable experiences. As a corollary to this, the notion of trust was examined as it relates to government-run

sites and UGC. My research found that government-run sites are perceived as either lacking sufficient information about campsite conditions or containing information that is low quality, and are thus deemed less trustworthy than informational content generated by the camping community. That said, an undercurrent of mistrust exists in UGC because of the inherently subjective quality of photos and reviews, thus imbuing the pre-trip planning process with the uncertainty that campers are paradoxically attempting to diminish by their use of UGC. Lastly, my research has found that digital skills and knowledge are required for booking campsites due to the competition for this limited resource, generating a new leisure constraint. By using these digital skills, campers can gain access to campsites on both public and private land that are likely unattainable to those who do not have the digital know-how. Yet, knowledge of using camping accommodation platforms as a way to gain access to campsites is also fraught with questions of trust and uncertainty, as there is less known about the campsites, their hosts, and the sense that campers are being sold a product.

In sum, the camping practice has changed in that digital work has become a part of the pre-trip phase, with campers developing new digital strategies to facilitate the camping experience while also attempting to mitigate the risk of uncertainty that is created by the digital technologies used. Having examined the ways in which the pre-trip planning phase of the camping experience is impacted by the use of digital technology, I will now address the on-site phase of the camping experience, looking specifically at how digital technologies are influencing perceptions of safety and risk.

Chapter 5: Onsite: Risk, Safety and Digital Technologies

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the digital strategies implemented to mitigate the uncertainty that is felt by campers before a camping trip. This chapter will move on to examine the impact of digital technologies during the onsite phase of camping trips. Specifically, I am interested in the ways that technology is used to maintain a sense of safety from the risks, both objective and subjective, associated with the camping experience, as well as the social, experiential, and physical effects these technologies have on modern day campers. The chapter begins by examining how simplicity and scarcity characterize traditional camping experiences due to the lack of infrastructure. I establish that a scarcity mindset extends to the way digital technologies are used because they provide a sense of safety for campers. Following this, the chapter examines the communicative and navigational affordances of digital technologies and their impact on perceptions of safety. Lastly, the chapter explores how Hipcamp, as a peer-to-peer accommodation platform, impacts technology use at private campsites and examines what this reveals about how campers perceive this social environment. In sum, then, the chapter develops an updated understanding of the onsite phase of camping experiences, recognizing that a spectrum exists in the way that technology is used, or not used, that reflects the perceived safety against the risks of the natural and social environment. Through this examination, a more nuanced and updated understanding of risk and security is provided, which is one of Wiley's (2005) integrated tensions between wilderness and technology.

5.2 Traditional Camping: Digital Technologies and Scarcity

Recreation experiences are constructed through multiple phases, each with distinct characteristics (Pabel and Prideaux, 2016). While the planning phase is significant for many campers as digital preparation helps establish expectations and excitement for the trip, the onsite phase is where campers immerse themselves in the place, people, culture, and environment (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966; Hammitt, 1980). The previous chapter noted that camping “embraces discomfort and lack - not so much

as pleasures in and of themselves but as reminders that less is often more” (Germann Molz, 2014: 19). The characterization of camping as an activity in which ‘less is more’ is aligned with a traditionalist sensibility, where camping involves sleeping in a tent either in remote wilderness or at a site that includes access to a range of rudimentary ancillary services (Brooker and Joppe, 2014; Collins and Kearns, 2010). Campers, then, embrace “self-imposed simplicity” (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020: 353). This was something observed in my research. Indeed, participants highlighted this simplicity by emphasizing how streamlined their gear is for camping. As Rhett succinctly states:

Camp, utility, sleep. (Rhett, Male, 35, Washington, D.C.)

Lara and Corinne describe in greater detail the reasons why campers must pare down to the basic necessities:

You're really kind of limited to what you can bring based on what you can hold and set up. I think the fun part of camping is you really have to make it work for you because you're carrying everything in! You're carrying in your cook site. You're carrying in your camp. And I think that's the rewarding part of camping. (Lara, Female, 32, CA)

You can't just be like, there's a store down the street. It's like, no, you gotta bring your food. (Corinne, Female, 35, CA)

While campers plan for the lack of basic necessities in the pre-trip phase, the onsite phase consists of navigating how to live with the limited resources that were brought to the campsite. What these participants are describing, in effect, is that resources are scarce while camping both because campers must bring everything they need with them to live outdoors and because of the lack of infrastructure that is inherent to camping. Collins and Kearns (2010:59) note that “if all inclusive resorts and luxury hotels are one end of the tourism accommodation spectrum, then campgrounds surely lie at the other”. This is because permanent buildings and amenities are deliberately not provided for shelter. Depending on the type of camping trip and its

corresponding setting, different risk considerations are addressed by campers (Snyder and Evans, 2017). Symptomatic of the lack of infrastructure, the risk of not having the basic necessities for a comfortable camping experience, or for survival in more remote campsites, becomes an important part of the onsite experience (Beffort, 2015; Tawrell, 2006). Accordingly, risk mitigation strategies are paramount. One of these strategies is that campers must ration the limited resources they have (Beffort, 2015; Tawrell, 2006). While the resources that have been rationed have traditionally included necessities for survival, like food and water, participants often spoke of their risk mitigation strategies including digital technologies, and in particular, the way mobile phones are used. The following extracts support this point:

So, I try to keep my phone charged but I try to keep it away while I'm camping. (Rhett, Male, 35, Washington, D.C.)

I'm more careful with it because I want to conserve the battery. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

You don't have consistent access to your phone battery necessarily so it's a little bit more of a scarcity mindset, and being slightly more strategic in that sort of way. (Kendall, Female, 30, NV)

Valerie also speaks of the preservation of battery being important, but provides greater detail as to why by linking her phone to its utility in emergencies:

I think there's always a little bit of a worry that you'd run out of battery. So you'd use it less. Because there's no way to charge it until the next day. I would probably stop using it and turn it not fully off but on airplane mode even if it was at thirty percent and just to like, whatever emergency could happen. Like maybe the car doesn't start the next day and you need to find out where to go. So the comfort level with the phone being around, I'd say it's pretty nice as just a crutch if anything goes wrong. (Valerie, Female, 37, CA)

What Valerie is describing is the sense of safety and security that phones can provide, which is supported in surrounding literature (Hardley and Richardson, 2021; Saker, et al., 2023). The idea that digital technologies are essential for managing the risks associated with camping was something other participants highlighted as well:

I mean, anything could happen right? People can get injured, weather could turn, fires could break out. It's from a safety issue, being able to know that we can get help or that I can get help, especially if I'm solo. Having technology is really important to me. (Romy, Female, 50, CA)

Another great example, Brian and I went backpacking in the Redwood Basins and we could not locate water. I didn't bring my phone on that trip, and I remember feeling incredibly anxious about our situation, about access to water and knowing where we're going. (Ariadne, Female, 35, CA)

In each of these excerpts, participants speak of the phone being viewed as a necessity for safety because of their communicative and geo-locational affordances, which is consistent with existing literature (Saker, et al., 2025). Yet what is different here is that their awareness that their battery life, and thus the use of the phone, is a limited resource while camping. The scarcity mindset, and the risk mitigation strategies that result from it, have evidently now extended beyond necessities like food and water to the way that campers think about their digital technology use. Humans place a higher value on an object that is scarce (Goldsmith, et al., 2020; Ladeira, et. al, 2023). Participants placed great value on their phones precisely because the battery needed to keep it powered was a scarce resource. This resulted in them using these devices less, which is a strategy I call 'digital rationing' and is a key part of the experience for campers. Driven by the lack of infrastructure to support charging one's phone, campers are rationing their phone usage in order to preserve battery life. In effect, campers are digitally disconnecting (Syvertsen and Elin, 2020) as a digital rationing strategy. While digital disconnection has been noted in camping literature as a way for campers to escape the stresses of daily life and gain immersion in the natural environment (Conti and Farsari, 2024; Dickinson, et al.,

2016; Gomez, et al., 2015), my research identifies that digital disconnection can paradoxically be viewed as a necessity for ensuring safety precisely because of the scarcity mindset of camping.

While digital disconnection, through the act of turning off one's phone or putting it into airplane mode, is part of the experience of digital rationing, another risk mitigation strategy utilized is to bring additional gear that will extend battery life. This point is supported by Adele in the following extract:

I do take an extra precaution to bring a portable charger because I don't want to be caught with a dead phone. I think just in case, particularly when I think about traveling alone as a woman. (Adele, Female, 34, CA)

For Adele, bringing a portable charger is a decision made to ensure her safety as a woman, which is supported by research that indicates that women, in particular, perceive phones as weapons of self-defense and more effective than a traditional weapon (Cumiskey and Brewster, 2012). Adele takes a future-oriented approach to safety in that, by bringing a portable charger, she takes proactive actions aimed at preventing injuries and ensuring that her environments will be safe (Raheemy, et al., 2025). Jasper similarly highlights this proactive measure against the possibility of harm:

It's also good to have a backup battery pack in case your phone dies. Having a backup battery pack is good. It's a simple thing to just bring a small little half pound battery pack that will help you out if you do run out of power. I've never run out but maybe I forget to put it on airplane mode, or even if it is on airplane mode, it still drains the battery. So it's just a backup safety thing to be able to plug it in if I need to. (Jasper, Male, 33, CA)

Interestingly, both Adele and Jasper speak of the possibility of their phones running out of battery instead of the actual experience of this occurring. Mitsui (2022:3) notes that the experiences of scarcity are distinct from perceptions of scarcity in that “for

those who perceive themselves to be experiencing scarcity, these perceptions can be internalized into a framework of thinking, otherwise known as the Scarcity Mindset” where attention is “focused almost exclusively on the scarcity at hand.” Campers focus on the scarcity at hand precisely because mobile devices are perceived as providing safety. It is widely accepted that perceived danger and risk can cause stress and that coping mechanisms are used to regain a sense of safety (Joost, 1956; Miller and McCool, 2003). Bringing a backup battery can thus be interpreted as a coping mechanism, which is supported by literature that suggests that, “when confronted with undesirable conditions, recreationists are likely to either change their behavior, attempt to change their environment, or change the way they evaluate a situation” (Miller and McCool, 2003). For campers whose use of digital technology is framed by a scarcity mindset, bringing additional gear to reduce the level of scarcity is an attempt to change their environment while campers that reduce usage of their devices are exhibiting a change in behavior. Indeed, these technologies have become so important that some campers won’t partake in a camping experience without them. As the following extracts demonstrate:

I would say, there's an added layer of reassurance. I would never leave my phone at home to go do a trip like this. I mean, an emergency situation, whatever that may look like, just being able to react to any kind of situation like that. Again, just a layer of reassurance there, of knowing there's an escape hatch if something goes terribly wrong.
(Nico, Male, 35, TN)

I certainly wouldn't go on a camping trip without it. There's an aspect of it as well that, even in cases where I don't have cell service, I can still connect because I have the satellite location feature. So, I do take a lot of comfort in that, particularly where, if I'm out of cell service, I could send my location to friends and family. (Grant, Male, 26, WA)

Evidently, digital technologies, and mobile phones in particular, can influence the perception of safety while camping even as their use is paradoxically diminished as a scarce resource. Grant notes a recent development in smartphones that impacts

feelings of safety, which is the satellite location feature on iPhones. As of 2025, iPhones have a satellite location feature that allows users to share their location when outside of cellular and Wi-Fi coverage, as well as the ability to contact emergency services using the Emergency SOS feature when cellular signal is not available (Apple Inc., 2025). What Grant's experience points to is that it isn't the phone itself, but rather the affordances, or what actions the phone permits, that can provide a sense of safety. Social practice theory indicates that a practice can be changed by introducing new elements, like new features of digital technologies. Accordingly, let me now turn to the communication and navigation affordances of mobile phones and examine what impacts these have on the perceptions of safety while camping.

5.3 Communication and Navigation as Lifelines

The risks associated with camping are numerous and revolve around the natural environment as well as the lack of infrastructure and emergency services (U.S. Forest Service, 2025). DeClerck et al (2013:197) point out that the treatment of outdoor recreational injuries are different from urban ones, "owing to increased response times, limited personnel and resources, challenging terrain and weather, difficulty of transportation, and extended time to definitive care." Accordingly, the ability to contact emergency services in the event of an emergency is important. Yet, the infrastructure to provide cellular service isn't available at every campsite, especially those that are more remote, which has implications for perceived safety. Indeed, when cellular service is unavailable, campers can feel as if safety is compromised, as Kiera relays in the the following extract:

It was a multi-day hike, and on the last day a woman fell and was pretty injured, she definitely needed help to get out. But there was no cell service until not just the end of the hike, but then another forty-five minutes. So we were the first people that she came across. We called when we got out, but it was gonna be seven hours until someone got back to help her. In that case I think there is an element that it would be nicer if it was more accessible. (Kiera, Female, 37, AZ)

Alden details a similar experience regarding the safety implications of lacking cellular service:

You know I've been trapped in remote sites before, where trees fell down and blocked the gravel road on the way out. I carry a small saw in my vehicle, but the tree was so big there was no way I was getting out there. I guess about an hour later the trucks come my way. Had they not come, I don't know what would have happened. I think having the ability to make contact with people is probably the biggest, and if you end up anywhere remote, losing signal is the biggest thing. (Alden, Male, 40, S.C.)

Kiera and Alden both describe emergency situations that are exacerbated by the inability to contact others for help. Interestingly, the only way in which these situations resolve themselves is through a chance encounter with other people. As Alden notes, had other people not come, he would have been in an even more severe situation. Thus, the lifeline in the emergency was the result of coincidence and these campers had to be reactive in the way they approached the emergency. Their experiences cast light on the importance of having cellular service precisely because it allows for communication, allowing the campers to be proactive in their ability to get help. Indeed, studies have shown that communication technologies can change perceptions of risk and be beneficial in emergency situations in wilderness (Martin and Pope, 2012). While Martin and Pope (2012) found that outdoor recreationists who had communication technologies with them were likelier to take greater risks, like traveling solo or going off-trail, few of my participants mentioned this. Instead, my research found that the shift in risk perception was due to the peace of mind that was provided by the ability to communicate and did not result in greater risk-taking behavior. This point is supported by Dorian:

I upgraded both my wife and I to the iPhone 15 this year, which has that satellite feature. And you know we haven't had to use it. But it's nice knowing that it's there. We're not super hardcore hikers or adventurers and we don't go off trail but in some of these places, even

if you're on trail there can be no service, right? So I mean, that's just more peace of mind and knowing that it's there (Dorian, Male, 38, NY)

Other participants also appreciated the peace of mind that is provided by having a digital connection:

The ability to get out a SOS call through satellite with the phone. I do appreciate that sense of, in an emergency, I would have the ability to get a message out that could save a life, mine or somebody else's, which is relatively recent. If I was camping with my daughter. I'd rather be connected. (Rhett, Male, 35, Washington, D.C.)

I guess it does make me feel safe. Now there's an SOS feature on the iPhone where if it's a true emergency, I could still call 911 even though I don't have service. (Steven, Male, 48, CA)

There's a satellite SOS feature on Apple now. I've never had to use it. But theoretically you can get in touch with emergency services through that. So that gives me a lot of comfort. If I need to have it, it's there. (Grant, Male, 26, WA)

As these participants allude to, and Grant explicitly states, the potential for digital connection that is provided by digital technologies like the iPhone 15 produces a sense of comfort. I would suggest that this is another instance of the 'comfortable camping' trend that I highlighted in the pre-trip stage of the camping experience described in chapter four, but one that has shifted to reflect the 'evolving state of mind' that marks each state of the camping experience, where new considerations must be taken into account (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001; Hammitt, 1980). Whereas the pre-trip stage was about managing uncertainties using digital technologies like UGC and Hipcamp, with comfort being facilitated by the promise that the experience will meet the personal preferences of the camper, the onsite phase of comfortable camping is different in that it is characterized by the management of safety. In other words, comfortable camping during the onsite phase

is about the ontological security that is provided by cell reception. This, in turn, allows digital technologies with communicative affordances to become “comfort-generating objects” (Pineau, 1982: 273) as they create the ability to communicate with others should one need to. One of these “comfort-generating objects” is the SOS feature. Notably, the comfort that is derived from this feature is the potential for connection to emergency services which can engender a sense of ambient presence (Hardley and Richardson, 2021), thus highlighting how the management of safety is key to the onsite experience. I would also suggest that thinking about the SOS features reveals how much wilderness campers perceive themselves to be in both because of the general lack of cellular service and the necessity of relying on emergency services for help. This is supported by literature that states that digital technologies, and in particular, mobile phones, can shape how environments are experienced (Evans and Saker, 2017). In other words, by thinking of and perceiving the SOS feature as important, the natural environment takes on the qualities of wilderness. The connectivity and sense of presence that phones provide may generate feelings of comfort along with the simultaneous recognition that phones won’t provide safety in situations of bodily risk (Hardley and Richardson, 2021). This point is supported by Kendall as she juxtaposes the comfort provided by connection with the reality that help likely won’t come quickly in the event of an emergency:

Just the idea that you could call for help, even though I'm pretty aware of how long it takes. You're out camping, and it's not super fast, but just the idea of it is nice. (Kendall, Female, 30, NV)

Lorelai also recognizes that the comfort that connectivity provides doesn’t mean that the results is camping trip that is free from bodily harm:

So, backpacking in Tahoe, Granite Chief Wilderness, phones don't really work out there and there's bears so that always makes me a little bit nervous. If one of us gets hurt up there and stuff, one of us would have to run pretty far down a pretty steep trail to get help. Things

happen fast when they happen, so phones can't do much a lot of the time. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

The recognition of this paradox could also result in the reliance on one's own abilities and more traditional ways of getting help, where navigational and problem-solving skills, as well as a reliance on park rangers, were deemed more appropriate. The following two extracts highlight this point, as Corinne and Vernon describe emergency situations they have experienced and their decision-making process throughout:

It's just like, okay, we just need to get to our access point to get on the trail and walk back to where our van is parked. I don't always feel like I need to jump on my phone. What am I gonna do? Rent a helicopter right now to come get me? No, I don't need a freaking helicopter. We're hiking. This is the whole point of being here. I know some people get more nervous when they don't have all the answers (Corinne, Female, 35, CA)

I feel resourceful enough to be able to get the help. We realized that a fire might start really quickly and we didn't have service so we couldn't check. It was actually pretty scary. The conclusion we came to was, we knew where the Ranger station was and we could drive there any point and ask them because they have radios and they're really on top of that sort of thing. (Vernon, Male, 32, CA)

The reliance on skills, experience, and knowledge as opposed to technology is supported by outdoor recreation literature (Shultis, 2015). Indeed, both Vernon and Corinne are experienced campers who have been going camping since they were young. This is perhaps why they feel more confident in approaching a potentially dangerous situation without digital technology that can provide connection to emergency services. Rhett, another experienced camper, highlights the accountability one experiences in the absence of the connectivity that digital technology provides:

It's only up to us. You better hang that bear bag correctly. God forbid something bad could happen. You need to be accountable to your safety. I appreciate that, too. Part of the mindfulness of the trip is taking your steps seriously and paying attention to your footing and not getting yourself into a bad situation when you don't have connectivity. As a young man I appreciated that sense of self-reliance and independence. I grew up in a time where I didn't have a cell phone and didn't miss it then. (Rhett, Male, 35, Washington, D.C.)

For Rhett, Corinne and Vernon, the ambivalence or rejection of using the communicative aspects of digital technologies as a safety measure means that they are embracing the wilderness skills that have developed over time. Indeed, there is a nostalgic quality to Rhett's description of resourcefulness as a "younger man." Self-reliance is appreciated within outdoor recreation and viewed positively among campers in particular (Jirásek, et al., 2017; McDougall, 2010). Rural and wilderness settings provide opportunities to fulfill the aspiration of returning to a more traditional and basic way of living, which is in contrast to urbanism and modernity (Christou, et al., 2018; Creighton, 1997). The choice to disconnect from the communicative aspects of digital technologies and instead rely on one's own skills while camping thus becomes a way to both reinforce nostalgia and accountability. In addition, I would suggest that opting to disconnect from all communicative affordances of digital technologies while camping has developed into a novel risk that is only made possible through the introduction of digital technologies into the camping experience and is an example of pleasurable risk-taking in which a sense of pleasure of control over danger is part of risk-taking (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). In other words, choosing to digitally disconnect provides the illusion of increasing danger, when in reality, danger is not increased and it is instead that the communicative potential is lessened.

Campers' attempts to maintain a sense of control over perceived danger, or security in the face of risk (Wiley, 2005), were also observed in their use of maps during the onsite phase of camping trips. Maps, whether digital or print, are important to

camping because much of the camping experience and the activities associated with it, like hiking, require navigation of the natural environment, or “planning a route and moving through space to a destination” (Ishikawa, et al., 2008). Navigation of the natural environment is qualitatively different than an urban environment due to the lack of dense landmarks and structured layouts that can allow for intuitive route-following, with wilderness containing terrain that is non-linear and constantly changing (Dai, et al., 2018; Topete, et al., 2025). The difference between urban and natural environments is underlined by Dorian in the following extract:

We usually look at the trail map. And we figure out, okay, here's the loop that we're going to do. We always have a plan because that affects how much water you'll bring and how much food you want to bring. It's the complete opposite of being in a new city with the phone where you're with Google Maps and Google translate. You can really just go to a random neighborhood and just wander around and I don't worry because I can just uber back. I don't really mess around with that kind of thinking when I'm camping or hiking. (Dorian, Male, 38, NY)

Here, Dorian outlines the stakes of using a map while camping by alluding to the fact that, in wilderness, the luxury of making mistakes and getting lost because one can “uber back” is not possible. This is largely because resources are limited, which echoes the scarcity mindset that was referenced earlier in the chapter. Accordingly, the risk of getting lost, or taking an unintended route and having to backtrack, has greater consequences while camping. Digital maps, in particular, were viewed as a way to mitigate this risk. Kendall supports this point, stating:

In the High Sierras there are trails which are great but there's a lot of unmarked scree. And so you are just sometimes going across a talus field with complex rolling boulders, and it's like, am I gonna get cliffed out in the next 200 meters and then have to go another 100 up or another 100 down? And so anytime you have a pre-existing map of the area that can help you see a little further than whatever might be

blocked by the complex topography right in your front view is kind of nice. (Kendall, Female, 30, NV)

Lorelai likewise describes digital maps as providing the ability to “see”:

It has saved me from getting lost many, many times, because of GPS and you can see where the heck you are, and it's super easy to navigate. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

For both Kendall and Lorelai, digital maps metaphorically extend their sight, allowing them to visualize and understand their position within the natural environment more effectively, especially when the terrain is difficult and seemingly unreadable. Digital maps, can be conceptualized as a form of tool embodiment, which “allows us to perceive the tool as a part of our body” and “extend the capabilities of the body self” (Lin, et al., 2023:1). For Richardson, (2007:205-206), the merger between digital technology and the body “invokes certain kinds of being-in-the-world, and particular ways of knowing and making that world.” For these participants, digital maps have become a way of knowing the world, allowing them to successfully navigate the natural environment. In successful navigation, “people first need to orient themselves in space, namely to know where they are (location) and in which direction they are facing (heading). And then they need to plan a route with an understanding of where a destination is located” (Ishikawa, et al, 2008: 74). Lorelai points to a feature of digital maps, GPS, that extends her vision by providing the positional information that is needed while navigating, making it easy for her to follow the route shown on the screen as it continually updates based on her movements. Similar to Kendall’s experience, Luna highlights the importance of this dynamic positional information when terrain is difficult to read:

I was hiking, doing a 24 mile day hike through the Enchantments, and it's all rock based so you're just following these rock towers. It's nice to have that reassurance that I'm not walking the opposite direction of where we're supposed to be going. Or more towards the springtime, trails are maybe not cut through yet from the winter because they're

overgrown. So I feel more secure. Because I'm able to look at the map and be like, okay, we are going in the right way (Luna, Female, 26, WA)

The reassurance that Luna describes was likewise felt by other participants:

Just knowing where you are on a map is really reassuring for me personally. Being able to leave that camp at 9 p.m was only possible because I have a phone and I can see where do we want to go? You can pull up Google Maps. (Miles, Male, 40, CA)

And then also Google Maps, even if you don't have great service, the GPS is still firing. I have that level of safety. I don't need to worry about anything. I know I'm on the right path right now. (Corinne, Female, 35, CA)

As these extracts demonstrate, understanding one's position in relation to the natural environment can generate a sense of reassurance and comfort while camping. The risk of getting lost is minimized because campers do not need to continually update their position mentally in relation to the surrounding space as one would need to do with a physical map (Ishikawa, et al., 2008). This points to the way digital maps reduce spatial decision-making load because they not only provide positional data but also provide automatic routing (Griffin, et. al., 2024). Indeed, "it is the various senses of security people gain by using digital maps as legitimate resources that inform their experiences and practices" (Hanchard, 2020: 302). What my research suggests, then, is that both the reduction of decision-making and the minimization of risk that digital maps provide can have impacts on how campers experience their camping trip, making it more comfortable precisely because it is perceived as safer. In other words, digital maps allow campers to feel safer because they provide knowledge, and thus certainty, and offload the decision-making associated with that knowledge. Further, there is a level of certainty in using digital maps during the onsite phase that is not experienced in the pre-trip phase planning process precisely because campers are actually experiencing the environment that they were attempting to plan for, with digital maps providing real-time information about the

environment. While using UGC can produce uncertainty in the attempt to gain more information about the anticipated camping experience, digital maps create a sense of certainty when immersed in the experience precisely because of the knowledge they impart to campers. Knowledge was also attained through the contextual information embedded within digital maps, as the following extracts demonstrate:

I use AllTrails a lot when I have my phone in nature to find hiking in the area because there's a ton of pictures to give you an idea of what the hike is like, and it shows terrain. So you know, you're not gonna go on a 3,000 foot hike accidentally. The digital map always has more information. It's just easier to tell what's going on. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

We use CalTopo so we have a bunch of different land use cover layers on that. Sometimes Gaia. Most of the time it is around a point of interest, be it a trail network, a particularly beautiful peak, sometimes a hot spring. USGS has a hydrothermal hot spring layer, which is pretty sick, so you can actually look up where all the hot springs are near you if you just look for that ArcGIS map. A lot of online mapping goes into it. (Kendall, Female, 30, NV)

Instead of a fixed, symbolic representation of terrain that is provided by physical maps, digital maps can include more detailed and contextual information that is relevant to the type of information that campers seek when onsite. Navigation, thus becomes a data-rich experience that allows a different engagement with place precisely because the contextual information that digital maps provide are imbued with social meaning (Zook and Graham, 2007). For example, photos are generated by other campers, and map layer functionality places value on different features of the natural environment. In addition, Lorelai's experience indicates that the contextual information that digital maps provide impacts the paths that are taken, as pictures of the terrain show her what to expect and whether or not a hike is too difficult, therefore impacting her decision-making. It may be suggested, then, that these campers are engaging with a hybrid space, called DigiPlace (Zook and

Graham, 2007), that blends virtuality and physicality where information that is ranked and mapped digitally is used to navigate and understand physical places. Hanchard (2020) suggests that digital maps are perceived as veracious representations of reality in which legitimacy depends on continually updated and revised sources of information. The trust that campers place in the accuracy of information, both contextual and locational, is significant here, as it means that the use of digital maps is changing the onsite camping experience into one that is perceived as safer. In other words, “senses of place, personal safety, reassurance (including not having to rely on others), and ontological security...combine as different senses of security that people gain from using digital maps” (Hanchard, 2020: 307).

At the same time, it is precisely the security that digital maps provide that can lead to an overreliance on their use. While digital maps are often downloadable, the GPS features that so many participants described as being useful in navigation and the reassurance that it provides are not always reliable. Unlike physical maps, which can withstand environmental conditions and are not dependent on power or satellite signals, GPS relies on a digital technology that is powered by batteries like a smartphone or a Garmin InReach. As such, GPS is vulnerable to battery drain. Further, in certain natural environments like dense forests, the satellite signal that GPS relies on may be obstructed and prevent it from being used. When this happens, campers can be placed in a position they are unprepared for. Valerie highlights this in the following extract:

I did get lost with a friend once trying to get to whatever hike we were on and we didn't have service. We just picked a place to go. It wasn't until I got lost that it made me realize that I probably should have some sort of a plan. Because you can really get lost! (Valerie, Female, 37, CA)

Here, Valerie must fall back on her own decision-making skills by picking a route and following it without the certainty that having service, and thus GPS, would provide. It wasn't until she was without service did she realize that she had not developed the

navigational skills required for camping in wilderness. Ariadne similarly describes a situation in which this overreliance was acutely felt:

We needed to see a GPS map where we could zoom in and try to find the nearest water sources so we could filter some water. You know, people did this stuff well before cell phones and they managed to get out alive to find one another. Their methods of doing that I don't know. I *do* know how to use my phone so I do feel like there is this false sense of security. There's almost too much security I put in my phone, like I'm gonna be fine. (Ariadne, Female, 35, CA)

Ariadne recognizes that she is ill-equipped to deal with the very real danger of a situation in which she cannot find water while camping in the wilderness. She notes that her reliance on digital maps reveals itself to be a “double-edged sword” (Cuthbertson, et. al., 2004:1) where a false sense of security has been fostered and the skills needed to navigate wilderness have not been developed. General navigational skills include orienting, triangulation, and estimating distance, yet advances in technology, such as GPS have been viewed as replacing the map and compass as a method of navigation (McFarlane, 2004). As such, it is important to note that for Ariadne and for other participants whose experiences have been detailed in this chapter, knowing how to use one's phone to navigate in wilderness is arguably a skill, albeit one that is mediated through digital technology rather than the direct experience of wilderness. Developing skills is ongoing through continued practice and being challenged in new environments (Barry, et al., 2023; Mees, et al., 2021), which is what these campers are doing when they camp in the natural environment. Whether campers are using layers or other contextual information to understand the natural environment or using GPS to follow a route that contains terrain that is difficult to read, I would argue that these can be conceived of as novel digital wilderness skills that have developed in a camping practice in which digital technology use has become more prevalent. Having developed these digital wilderness skills, campers feel a sense of security in the natural environment that would not be possible without using digital maps. As Mullins (2014: 326) posits, “skilled learning and practice are processes through which people shape and are

shaped by their environment while coming to know the aspects of it intimately.” However, these digital wilderness skills are only valuable in certain wilderness environments, ones that are characterized by cellular or satellite connectivity, and thus may have adverse effects on the experience of campers who have solely relied on digital maps for navigation while camping. In other words, digital wilderness skills are only as valuable as the environment permits.

Thus far, this chapter has examined the impact of digital technology within traditional camping environments in which connectivity may or may not be guaranteed, thus revealing how safety is perceived through the communicative and navigational affordances of digital devices. The idea that campers can reach emergency services, as well as the ability to use dynamic and contextual positional data, enhance perceptions of safety, thus making the experience more comfortable. While using digital technologies to mitigate the risks associated with the natural environment is evidently a key component of the traditional camping experience, which more or less occur on public land, less traditional environments for camping are becoming more popular due the high demand but limited supply of public campgrounds (Rice, et al., 2022). Indeed, private campsites whose use is facilitated through peer-to-peer accommodation platforms may have implications for the way that safety is perceived while camping. Hipcamp, in particular, was noted by participants as a qualitatively different camping experience where the social aspects of the host and guest relationship became important considerations for risk and safety, which will be examined in the following section.

5.4 Hipcamp, Hospitality and Social Fears

As my research has demonstrated, the onsite phase of a camping trip requires different strategies for mitigating the risks associated with camping, like wildlife encounters, injuries, scarce resources, adverse environmental and weather conditions, and getting lost. Camping, though, is widely accepted as a social experience in which camping activities are almost always social and who accompanies a camper is perceived as more important than the activity itself (Garst, et al., 2009). While these experiences are often positive, social tension certainly can occur. Research suggests that conflicts can arise in the relationship between

recreation managers and campers (Clark, et al., 2009) and that a common concern among solo hikers is the fear of getting hurt by another individual (Coble, et al., 2003). Participants in this project echoed concerns around safety with regard to other campers. The following two extracts support this point:

I think my main fear would actually be other people. I'm actually much less afraid of wildlife or natural hazards. It's like stranger danger. Car camping on a service road can feel scary, especially if you have to sleep by yourself. That feels a little bit less safe. (Kendall, Female, 30, NV)

I'm not worried about a bear, I'm worried about that guy! (Valerie, Female, 37, CA)

Both Kendall and Valerie describe their concerns regarding safety by juxtaposing a fear of other campers with aspects of the natural environment. In effect, they are echoing the dualism between “wilderness and civilization, nature and human” as opposites, which is common in wilderness literature (Lewis, 2007: 9). It is also notable that these two participants are women, with research showing that camping or hiking may put women in a more vulnerable position in which they might experience fear due to the risk of violence (Henderson and Bialeschki, 1993). As a man, Vernon also highlights the dualism between man and nature but does so from the perspective of the one being threatening as opposed to the one being threatened:

I'm also very aware of the fact that I'm like a 6'3 large dude and depending on who I'm walking up to, that might feel really threatening to them, especially because of that isolation. You've heard that question, would you rather be trapped in the woods with a bear or a man? I'm well aware that I am a man who people are going to take as threatening. (Vernon, Male, 32, CA)

This perspective is not unusual, as Coble (et al., 2003) found that men and women often express fear that a male individual might hurt them while they are hiking alone. Importantly, though, Vernon recognizes that the environmental isolation or remoteness that can be experienced while camping can contribute to feelings of fear when coming into contact with other campers. In effect, he is alluding to how people perceive themselves to be more exposed to hazards because of the lack of infrastructure and the feeling that help may be far away, which was highlighted earlier in the chapter. As my research has established, having digital technology available while camping helps reduce the perception of risk when camping in more traditional campsites due to the communicative and navigational affordances of digital technology. Nonetheless, my research has also found that Hipcamp campers feel less isolated because of the connection to a host, making them feel less isolated. Alden's supports this point in the following extract:

I've definitely been in remote areas camping before where having my phone did feel better. But because of the proximity to someone else's private home, who I felt would have been available if something bad had happened, it changed that risk for the better. I think really, it boils down to proximity, to any form of help or civilization (Alden, Male, 40, S.C.)

While Alden indicates that he feels less physically isolated while using Hipcamp, and thus doesn't need to rely on his phone in case of an emergency situation, I would also argue that Hipcamp is a different experience precisely because there is a digitally mediated relationship between the host and camper that develops before campers arrive at the campsite. Hipcamp listings provide information about the host as well as reviews that often indicate how helpful or friendly the host is. Research suggests that digital features like photos and reviews can increase the level of trust and safety for guests (Tussyadiah and Park, 2018; Mao, et al., 2020; Ye, et al, 2019). Further, users can contact the host through the Hipcamp website and establish a line of communication before arriving. Jolie details this in the following extract:

It did have a space to introduce yourself and I did to tell her who we were and where we were going. I wanted her to feel comfortable that we would be staying on her land and I didn't want her to be surprised by anything. I did ask her if we would be needing to check in with someone, physically or not. She called us when we were on our way to town, and let us know that the office would be closed, but our name would be on a spot on the board. (Jolie, Female, 43, TX)

Upon arrival, then, there is at least some knowledge about the host and the property that users will camp on. This information, in turn, can engender a sense of credibility with the host and the experience upon arrival (Lu, et al., 2016; Reddy and Sailesh, 2024) as exposure to self-relevant information can develop the interpersonal relationship between individuals (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Further, in the peer-to-peer accommodation business model, the self-disclosure that takes place through online interactions plays a pivotal part in the relationship development between guests and hosts (Moon, et al., 2019). When online and offline communications are candid and positive, guests and hosts can develop favorable attitudes toward each other (Wang, et al., 2012). Many participants described how the Hipcamp host made them feel welcome during the experience, leading to positive feelings. Lara details this in the following extract:

You typically meet the person as you enter the property. I think what's kind of cool about it is it really feels like you're being welcomed into somebody's area or space. You can tell pretty quickly the hosts that are really excited about having people around and really care about their property or whatever feature that's on it. (Lara, Female, 32, CA)

Alden has a similar experience when being greeted by the host upon arrival:

After I got everything set up I walked out and they just greeted me. They asked if I needed water, they asked me if I wanted to have the camp lights plugged in because they had a bunch of string lights plugged for the camp. It was just kinda like having a concierge there. It

wasn't there to get in the way but someone who was there to try and make your stay as nice as they could. You've got to be a little bit more forward thinking than most people are or at least more trusting than most people are. (Alden, Male, 40, S.C.)

Both Lara and Alden point to the notion that even though they are camping, Hipcamp camping can be perceived as being characterized more by hospitality in which the experience of the guest is the highest priority (Varley, et al., 2018). By being greeted by the host, a Hipcamp user can feel as if they belong on the host's property, which is an extension of their home. Indeed, "a sense of homeliness, belonging and comfort are the core qualities" in hospitality contexts (Varley, et al., 2018: 143). What Alden's and Lara's experiences indicate is that hosts may provide both the necessities for camping, like water, as well as a sense of comfort through offering to help set up camp or point out interesting features on their land. Hosts, then, can act both as guides and concierge, which establishes a sense of belonging in their private space. Hosts can also trigger a sense of well-being because of their duty to protect visitors (Lashley, 2015). For participants, this was felt most strongly in the perception that the host was reachable. Miles details this in the following extract:

I would say the only difference really with say a state-run campsite is that through the app, I theoretically have a direct message thread with the host. If there's a question I have you know, do you have fresh water or something like that? So I think there is a benefit to you know, just having a liaison (Miles, Male, 40, CA)

For Miles, the fact that he is digitally tethered to the host through the Hipcamp app makes him feel as if his needs are going to be met. Valerie similarly finds comfort in knowing that the host can be reached:

I don't know if it's true or not, but I felt like there was someone at the end of the phone. It's kind of that idea that there is someone who is going to answer. Someone who you can hold accountable for because

it's this company trying to make money and be public and have an image (Valerie, Female, 37, CA)

Both Miles and Valerie speak of the potential for communication as opposed to the actual experience of communication with the host. Their experiences echo the way that campers feel safe knowing that communication is possible with emergency services, and thus a sense of ambient or copresence is established (Hardley and Richardson, 2021). Where the difference lies, though, is that Miles and Valerie are less concerned with the ability to communicate in case of emergencies and more concerned with having someone that is accountable to meeting their needs regardless of it being an emergency situation. This shift in focus reflects the way they approach the Hipcamp environment. Indeed, and as mentioned, digital technologies can shape how environments are experienced (Evans and Saker, 2017). For Hipcamp, then, the riskiness of the environment is diminished precisely because of the digital reachability of the host. Romy supports this point by noting how the availability of the host contrasts with her experience of camping on public lands:

They leave you several different ways to get in touch with them should you need to, where it's different than a public place. I've spent enough time in the backcountry that if I've gotta take care of myself, I will. But at a Hipcamp, I think they care about the review right? It's so important to them. It's so important to them that they they're gonna make sure the bathrooms work, and if they don't they're going to come down and take care of it (Romy, Female, 50, CA)

For Romy, the accountability she feels for her safety shifts to being shared with the host because she knows that the host's actions will ultimately be determined by the hospitable actions that are necessary for getting a good review. Literature suggests that a 'chilling effect' (Manokha, 2018) can occur from reviews in which individuals change their behaviors to be aligned with the perceived norms or expectations of guests. In effect, Romy is relying on this digital 'chilling effect' in order to share responsibility for her well-being. I would suggest, then, that the risks associated with the natural environment were of less concern for Hipcamp campers precisely

because it is a digitally mediated hospitality experience. First, a sense of trust is established before the experience from the digital information that is provided about the host and confirmed through the welcoming and hospitable behaviors of the host while onsite. Second, the reachability of the host, often facilitated through digital means, as well as the reputation system mechanisms of the Hipcamp platform and the expectations they set for hosts, allow campers to shift some of the responsibility for their well-being, and by extension safety, to the host. The sense that the Hipcamp camper is a guest that is camping on someone's private land and that they are being hosted means that the idea of wilderness and its accompanying safety concerns diminish. Accordingly, my research found that very few participants mentioned the necessity of digital technologies to manage safety while camping at Hipcamp sites. Instead, the digitally mediated hospitality experience was deemed inherently safer.

It is important to note that camping in developed campgrounds, in which a campground manager provides customer service and performs duties related to the maintenance and operation of the campground (Ziprecruiter.com, 2022), can also be conceived as a hospitality experience. Campers pay a small fee to be able to set up their tent for the night on public lands. Yet, participants spoke of this as different because of the lack of interaction between campers and campground managers that is normally expected and experienced onsite. The following extracts demonstrate this point:

Like campground hosts are the greatest people on the planet. I love them. They're doing such a great service. But responsiveness is not their forte (Rhett, Male, 35, Washington, D.C.)

I've seen campground hosts at the federal, state, public sites and they're typically there. I think what's interesting about it is that you don't interact with them. (Lara, Female, 32, CA)

Campground managers do not cater to a camper's needs in the same way that Hipcamp hosts do, partially because they are not seen as digitally accessible or

digitally responsive, as Rhett points out. While campground managers may have knowledge of the natural environment and can provide information that may help impact a camper's safety (LaPage and Bevins, 1981), these extracts indicate that they are seen as less available and thus it is often the camper's responsibility to gather this information or proactively ask for help. Campground managers therefore appear to be more service-oriented in that they are focused on fulfilling a customer's specific needs rather than making customers feel welcome (University of the Potomac, 2025). Valerie describes the service mindset, as opposed to the hospitality mindset, that characterizes interactions with campground managers:

They're there to be there. They're just like a toll booth operator.
(Valerie, Female, 37, CA)

That said, there is a familiarity to campground managers that influences the perception of them as safe, as Ariadne details:

I actually really prefer the State Park, "Hello, Ranger man. Goodbye. We probably won't talk again" experience. That for me is a little more comfortable than like "Yes, I'm sleeping on your land tonight, sir." It feels more routine. This has been done for years and years...I think there maybe is some semblance in my head, whether that's false or not, of safety with the Park Rangers versus I don't know this stranger. Granted, Park Rangers are strangers, too, but I guess I trust that there's some vetting involved with hiring (Ariadne, Female, 35, CA)

This familiarity, and thus perception of safety, may be due to their role within a traditional institution like the United States National Park Service, in which a sense of institutional trust is felt (Mao, et al., 2020). Indeed, I would suggest that Park Rangers are 'familiar strangers' in that they are seen repeatedly in the same contexts, are recognized but not often interacted with, and are a part of the routines within a specific context (Milgram, 1977). While Milgram (1977) conceived of familiar strangers as part of urban life, this concept can extend to the natural environments of campsites. By being familiar strangers, there is a sense of predictability with Park

Rangers which reduces uncertainty and lowers perceptions of danger, as Ariadne highlights. Regardless of their digital availability, they are an expected part of the social environment, imbuing the experience with a sense of benign familiarity which can be a source of security (Zahnow and Corocoran, 2024). On the other hand, Hipcamp hosts, while providing a digitally mediated hospitality experience that in many ways reduces perceptions of danger within the natural environment, were often viewed as strangers without any of the familiarity. The risks shifted, then, to the unfamiliarity of the Hipcamp host. Lorelai explains further:

And there's that anxiety that you're gonna piss off the host. You're gonna do something wrong. They're gonna catch you smoking weed. And they're whatever Mormon who knows and you want to be respectful. Whereas the State Park. If you're being rowdy, they might come and say, shut up! They might call the police, the police will say, shut up! But you're not gonna get a bad review. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

What is important to point out here, is that the anxiety that Lorelai describes has more to do with the potential for not sharing the same concept of what is considered appropriate behavior on the Hipcamp owner's land and the consequence of getting a bad review. Instead of the bodily harm occurring from the natural environment being a concern, the risk has shifted to take on a digital and social character. Lorelai continues to explain her logic in the following extract:

With public campsites, you're more anonymous. Because there's just a lot more people, whereas at a Hipamp, they know who you are. They booked you. They saw your face. It's like Airbnb. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

Romy similarly considers the risk of getting a bad review when using Hipcamp, even in a situation in which the Hipcamp host is making her feel uncomfortable:

Sometimes your gut just tells you. You're sleeping in a tent on someone's property. It was just a vibe we got that we were just like, let's make sure that he knows that neither of us are alone. I just wanted him to know that I was with somebody else. We altered our behavior a little bit. There is also the rating right? You are the guest of the host, and it's not like you're not anonymous. So that could be a great thing, or it could be not a great thing right. (Romy, Female, 50, CA)

Lorelai and Romy both highlight that reviews influence their behavior at the campsite. To these campers, it is imperative to build, maintain, and control one's online reputation, and the risk of getting a bad review causes them to self-regulate even in the face of the potential for real bodily harm, as was the case with Romy. Judging and evaluating others has become a characteristic of sociality in digital culture (Molz, 2014) Accordingly, the review mechanism is a “regulatory and disciplinary power encouraging self-discipline and self-regulation” (Roelofsen and Minca, 2018: 177). Manokha (2018:228) notes that “individuals become conscious that they are under surveillance, that data about their online (and also offline) activity are being collected and stored by various entities, that the digital traces they leave may be gathered and analyzed in ways and for purposes that they do not know of and at points in time that are not known to them either”. The effect that this digitally mediated sociality has is that the freedom that is traditionally associated with wilderness, and thus the traditional camping experience, is not realized when using Hipcamp. In other words, the digital surveillance mechanisms that constrain behavior ultimately reveal that campers are not experiencing wilderness and are instead, much more within a hospitality context.

While the digitally mediated hospitality context was an important element that influenced risk perceptions for Hipcamp campers, so too was the idea of camping on private land as opposed to public land. In the United States, private land carries meanings that go beyond ownership. Private land is often associated with personal liberty, exclusion of others, and the idea that the owner of the land makes the rules that others must follow (Blomley, 2016). Camping on private land, then, can shape social interactions because the land owner is seen as an authority figure. For

participants, this has the effect of making the social risks to safety more concerning than those associated with the natural environment. Romy explains further in the following extract:

Ultimately, I want to have a good relationship because you're on somebody's private land. So I think for safety reasons, I think I'm more conscious of it in Hipcamp than if I was at a public campground.
(Romy, Female, 50, CA)

For Romy, being a good guest and maintaining a good relationship with the host is explicitly linked to being on private land, which is in turn, connected to her perception of safety. In other words, the host's understanding of their land as private means that there is greater risk in upsetting the host as opposed to a public campsite. Kiera, who has camped at both public campgrounds and Hipcamp, likewise felt that staying on private land meant that there was an element of danger that is derived from her perception of landowners, as she details in the following extract:

But Arizona is a little red. I'm not just gonna camp on somebody's property. If I'm not clear that I'm allowed there, I'm not really going to risk that and put up a tent and say, oh, it'll be fine. There's a lot of gun owners there. I think you just want to be a little bit more conscious that someone might come over and say, Why are you here? (Kiera, Female, 37, AZ)

Here, Kiera describes an instance in which the Hipcamp host did not greet her, thus removing an integral element of hospitality and leaving her to make sense of the experience herself. Not only is this a novel experience that is not associated with the routines and familiar strangers of camping at public campgrounds, but the expectations of hospitality are not met, thus creating a more disorientating, unpredictable, and uncertain experience. Safety has been conceptualized as “a state in which hazards and conditions leading to physical, psychological, or material harm are controlled in order to preserve the health and well-being of individuals and the community” (Maurice, et al., 2001: 328). When Hipcamp users lose this sense of

control given the authority of the hosts, as landowners, the experience is perceived as potentially more dangerous. In other words, an unequal power relationship is integral to camping on private land. Indeed, Kiera's recognition that many landowners in politically conservative states are gun owners and that she could be seen as trespassing on private land means that the experience of safety shifts from the natural environment to the social one when using Hipcamp. Valerie and Miles detail a similar experience when the element of hospitality that is expected from Hipcamp is missing:

We were driving by, it was probably like 10 p.m., and it was really dark and the neighborhood seemed not very social or neighborhoody and we just decided it's not for us. It seemed kind of weird. It was kind of almost industrial as well. (Miles, Male, 40, CA)

Obviously you're more exposed because of the tent situation. It was very much a sketchy town by the water. It just seemed like someone's garbage dump. So we didn't even get out of the car. We had already had a kind of feeling, we didn't see any people. It just kind of looked like a really trashy home. And we didn't even know where the camping would be. It was kind of like a dead town. I felt kind of polluted. I don't know, none of it felt right (Valerie, Female, 37, CA)

Steinmetz and Austin (2014: 512) contend that environmental "cues send signals to individuals of the potentiality of personal danger, and therefore, affect an individual's attitudes about safety." In the absence of any markers of hospitality, such as the presence of Hipcamp hosts to greet them, the environment becomes more menacing for Miles and Valerie. Certainly, the physical condition of the private land was critical in arousing a sense of danger and fear for Miles and Valerie because it served as a corollary to the character of the host, with the darkness of the neighborhood and the shoddy quality of the home feeding into the notion that it was unsafe to camp there. For my purposes, this again demonstrates how Hipcamp, at least for some users, is a qualitatively different experience of safety precisely because it is a digitally mediated hospitality experience in which the expectation of hospitality and the

ownership of land influences perceptions of risk. While in traditional camping contexts, the use of digital technologies is perceived as mitigating the risks associated with the natural environment, the digitally mediated hospitality context of Hipcamp meant that social risks came to the forefront of the camping experience.

5.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine the impact of digital technologies on perceptions of safety and risk during the onsite phase of camping trips. This exploration has determined that a scarcity mindset characterizes traditional camping experiences and that this scarcity mindset now extends to the way in which digital technologies are used. Digital technologies are viewed as critical for safety. However, because of the lack of infrastructure to keep them powered, campers must use a digital disconnection strategy that I call 'digital rationing' to ensure safety. Moving forward, the chapter examined the specific affordances of digital technologies that are perceived as providing a lifeline for campers during the experience, finding that communication and navigation were critical for perceptions of safety and risk reduction. The communicative affordances of digital technologies, and in particular the SOS feature, become digital 'comfort-generating objects' precisely because they engender feelings of ambient presence (Hardley and Richardson, 2021). The SOS feature also reveals the extent to which campers perceive themselves in wilderness, while the reliance on skills for more seasoned campers, as opposed to the communicative affordances of digital technologies, provide an opportunity for nostalgia and accountability. Digital maps were also critical for perceptions of safety because they are an embodied way of "knowing the world" (Richardson: 2007: 205-206), providing reassurance from the positional knowledge, reduction in spatial decision-making, and contextual information that they provide. My research also found that campers are developing digital wilderness skills, like digital navigation, that can provide safety in digitally connected environments but these skills can put campers in dangerous situations when they are not coupled with traditional wilderness skills. Lastly, my research found that campers who use Hipcamp have a qualitatively different experience of safety precisely because it is a digitally mediated hospitality experience. The digital information that is provided before the experience can establish trust in the host, while the onsite experience is

perceived as being safe because of the hospitable environment that the host creates, as well as the digital reachability of the host and the reputation system mechanisms that enforce hospitable behavior. Because of the shift of responsibility for well-being from the camper to the host, I posit that the risks associated with the natural environment were of less concern and thus digital technologies were not as important in mitigating them. That said, a sense of heightened risk was also evident because of the novel social environment of Hipcamp, where hosts are not 'familiar strangers' like campground managers, the potential for negative reviews, and an uneven relationship between the camper as guest and the private landowner as host. In effect, the digitally mediated hospitality environment of Hipcamp allows the risks from the natural environment to fall into the background and the risks from the social environment to move to the foreground, where the host is considered the greatest risk to safety.

In short, the camping practice has changed in that the communicative and navigational affordances of digital technologies are deemed essential to campers' perceptions of safety, yet there is a paradox in that they are not used as often when infrastructure is lacking due to a scarcity mindset, thus exposing the value of traditional wilderness skills. In addition, Hipcamp, as a digitally mediated camping experience that is characterized by hospitality, highlights the risks of camping among strangers while also diminishing the sense of risk associated with wilderness precisely because of the host guest relationship. Having examined the ways in which perceptions of safety during the onsite phase of the camping experience are impacted by the use of digital technology, I will now address another aspect of the onsite phase, as well as the post-trip phase, which is digital connectivity and how it affects the way that individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip.

Chapter 6: Liminality, Digital (Dis)connection and Digital Mediation

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined how digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the onsite phase of the camping experience. This chapter will continue to examine the onsite phase of the experience, as well as the post-trip phase, through the concept of digital connection. Specifically, I am interested in how digital connectivity affects how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards. The chapter begins by examining why campers are digitally disconnecting, and what they are disconnecting from, establishing that camping is a liminal experience where campers engage differently with their phones in an effort to heighten social presence. Following this, the chapter examines how campers are maintaining a sense of sensory presence in the digitally elastic experience of camping, how this impacts digital technology use and how campers make sense of it in light of the emphasis on digital disconnection. In particular, this section examines how digital technologies become valued for their utility in enhancing the sensory experience through digital mediation. Lastly, this chapter explores how campers return to everyday life in the post-trip stage of the experience, and what this means in terms of digital connection. Accordingly, the chapter develops an updated understanding of both the onsite phase and the post-trip phase of camping experiences, recognizing that the manner in which digital technologies are used, or not used, is in service of enhancing social and embodied presence, which in turn preserves the liminal experience in a digitally elastic space. Through this examination, two of Wiley's (2005) integrated tensions between wilderness and technology, solitude vs. connectivity and mediation vs. direct experience, will be better understood specifically as they relate to the camping experience.

6.2 Disconnecting from Digital Sociality, Preserving Liminality

Tourism experiences have commonly been conceived of as liminal, where individuals move physically and mentally away from everyday life (Ayazlar and Ayazlar, 2024). The concept of liminality also extends to camping as a tourism experience, where the onsite phase provides individuals with the opportunity to feel detached from daily

routines, demands, interruptions and expectations (Ayazlar and Ayazlar, 2024; Vidon, et al., 2018). For campers, the feeling of escape is a primary factor in motives for going camping (Garst, et al., 2009; Rantala and Varley, 2019). Yet, digital technologies can be distracting during the camping experience, complicating the notion of escape, as we live our lives “never truly far from our next digital interaction” (Altmaier, et al., 2024: 2). Indeed, escape can prove difficult when campers feel the need to suspend their engagement with their phones but inadvertently fall into everyday uses, as Luna explains:

Sometimes it's a little embarrassing how much you reach for your phone. And I'm like, I literally can't do anything on this. Why am I even looking at it? I'll go to reach for my phone and open it. And it's like, what am I gonna do? I'll look at photos. I guess. I don't know. (Luna, Female, 26, WA)

Luna's experience is representative of the corporeality of mobile phones as media devices, where phones become extensions of one's body and are pocket containers of photo archives (Richardson, 2007). As an extension of one's body, physically disconnecting from it, or not reaching for it in Luna's case, becomes difficult to do. Escape can also be made more difficult when the entire camping experience is facilitated digitally through a peer-to-peer accommodation platform, like Hipcamp, precisely because of the prospect of being reviewed. Romy explains further in the following extract:

Your rating is important because sometimes, especially in a Hipcamp kind of situation, other hosts will judge whether or not they approve your visit based on your rating, right? So you want to make sure that you have a good rating and are getting good reviews so that you can get the sites you want to get. I think people, on Hipcamp, and maybe this is my own assumption, but you're coming to their land, and they want to make sure that you maintain it the way they want (Romy, Female, 50, CA)

For Romy and other Hipcamp campers, a sense of escape from digital technologies is harder to attain because Hipcamp's reputation system mechanisms make getting a good review a top priority precisely because there are implications for access to other Hipcamp camping experiences. Escape can also be made more difficult when mobile connectivity means that the communicative affordances of digital technologies can divert attention from the camping experience. This point is supported by Grant in the following extract as he describes how focus can shift from his surroundings to his phone while at the campsite:

There are times when that happens and I really dislike when that happens. Usually, that's because something has drawn my attention to the phone. Maybe something important workwise or something important personally that I have to then step away from and deal with. I feel that as a negative, like there's sort of like a knee jerk, 'Oh, I need to deal with that, let me go.' But then afterward, I'll be like that's really not what I wanted to be doing right now (Grant, Male, 26, WA)

Adele notes how using one's phone can be perceived as removing oneself from the context of camping because of the phone's ability to distract:

I think whether social media or playing a game, or even bonding to friends and family, I would say being on the phone, you're taking yourself out of the context. (Adele, Female, 34, CA)

What Adele and Grant are effectively describing is the phone's ability to take them psychologically elsewhere even when physically present (Björklind, 2019; Gergen, 2002; Saker, et al., 2023). Dustin (et al., 2019) contend that smartphones have the capacity to "distract our attention from the immediacy of our surroundings to the smartphone itself, and we miss much of what is going on around us while ensconced in our smartphone technology." In these instances, Grant and Adele are digitally tethered to their everyday social lives, which they perceive as distracting and unwanted. These unwanted intrusions could come in the form of push notifications

and other alerts, as was the case with Grant. But they could also arise from falling back into everyday routines, as Corinne explains in the following extract:

And then sometimes you fall into the routine of like okay, I'm going into bed, and it's like, Oh, look! Something did load! That's a funny meme, and then you keep scrolling, and then it's like nope. This is not the time to be doing that. Let's kind of tailor it back a little bit. (Corinne, Female, 35, CA)

Interestingly, Corinne self-disciplines because she feels that the way that she is using her phone, as part of an everyday routine, is not appropriate while camping. With digital elasticity, tourists remain "electronically linked to their home worlds as they explore their identity and the worlds of others" as ongoing digital connections provide connections to normal daily life (Pearce, 2011:41). The ability to remain digitally connected while camping is a more recent experience as cellular coverage has expanded into wilderness areas and campgrounds are beginning to offer Wi-Fi (Helms, et al., 2019). Accordingly, the experience of digital elasticity is a novel experience for campers. The ability to be digitally tethered reflects the digital elasticity of modern camping experiences and means that campers are now needing to manage what uses of digital technologies are appropriate in the environment, which is guided by the meanings and norms associated with the camping practice. In effect, new competencies are being developed to manage the effects of digital technologies. What digital elasticity is doing for these participants, then, is challenging the ability to truly escape into what has traditionally been a liminal experience. In an effort to maintain the sense of escape that is diminished by digital elasticity, campers are choosing to digitally disconnect, as Corinne explains:

We don't need to be checking our work email right now. This is when you can kind of disconnect and not feel like you have to be constantly within reach from your boss or certain people. (Corinne, Female, 35, CA)

Dorian similarly digitally disconnects while camping:

I go camping to disconnect, to get away from my daily life. Being a lawyer involves a lot of screen time, a lot of being on your phone. And I think the phone, for better or for worse, is the embodiment of what I'm trying to get away from. (Dorian, Male, 38, NY)

For Dorian and Corinne, the phone represents digital mediation and hyperconnectivity, and digital disconnection is employed as a strategy while camping to escape temporarily from coerced digital participation, which is consistent with digital disconnection literature (Alter, 2017; Barassi, 2019). Digital disconnection, then, can serve as a way to “get away from daily life.” Lara similarly explains how digitally disconnecting while camping engenders feelings of escape:

It's my nice chance to not be glued to my phone at all times. And I think I'm always glued to my phone. With social media and the notifications and everything you get when you're at home. You fall into this really nasty trap of being handcuffed to your phone and looking at it all the time. So it's a nice little freedom when you're camping to not be tied to it. (Lara, Female, 32, CA)

Digital disconnection at the campsite creates a sense of freedom and control over phone usage that is only made possible while camping. Both Dorian and Lara reveal that camping provides an experience with their phones that is different from their experience at home. Indeed, what my research indicates is that the camping experience can remain liminal precisely because it creates an opportunity to use digital technologies in a way that is different from everyday life. As digital technologies are pervasive in everyday life, liminality, as a part of modern camping experiences, can only be made possible by a change from the way that digital technologies are used in everyday life. For example, by choosing to engage with work and his social life while at the campsite, Grant's ordinary life was brought into the camping experience precisely because his phone use reflected his phone use from home. Essentially, digital technologies have the ability to both deprive campers

of a liminal experience and facilitate liminal experiences depending on *how* they are used.

In liminal experiences, a “reversal of habits” (Graburn, 2001:44) occurs that enables individuals to loosen social expectations. For participants, the “reversal of habits” was most evident in the way that campers were disconnecting from the norms associated with the digital sociality that is experienced in everyday life. In particular, expectations for responsiveness shifted. Kiera’s experience Lorelai’s experience supports this point:

I think when we tell people we're camping, there's no expectation of keeping in touch, whereas in my normal, everyday life, my parents would be way more concerned if they called and I went hours without even acknowledging it. (Kiera, Female, 37, AZ)

Similar to Kiera, Lorelai indicates that a shared understanding exists among her social circle about responsiveness while camping:

People know you're camping. So if they text, I'm like, Meh. Usually when I'm on little trips it feels very less urgent to reply to people. If it's my sister, or my husband or friends, I'm like talk to you later. Especially if they're like oh, I'm having a bad day. I'm like not right now. Whereas at home, oh, yeah, absolutely. I dig in. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

Lorelai and Kiera’s phone usage reflects two markers of liminality. First, by opting not to respond to their family and friends, which is contrasted to how they would do so in ordinary life, Kiera and Lorelai are suspending their social roles, which is consistent with the idea that liminal experiences can lead individuals to become “free from the responsibilities brought on by gender, fame, status, role, social class and other structures” (Turner, 1982:48). Second, Kiera and Lorelai respond more slowly than she would at home, indicating that a “reversal of habits” occurs (Graburn, 2001:44). Indeed, research shows that norms exist around response times, where delayed responses violate conversational norms and the pressure to respond promptly is a major component of social availability norms (Halfman and Rieger, 2019; Hall and

Baym, 2012). Interestingly, by suggesting that there is a shared understanding among their social circle regarding responsiveness while camping, it indicates that norms around digital disconnection may be emerging as more campers opt out of digital sociality at the campsite. Other participants similarly changed their response times, as is detailed in the following extracts:

Yes, it's slower when I'm camping. If I'm home it's more immediate.
(Serena, Female, 30, CA).

I'm not, like, as focused on having my phone right on me every moment of camping as I am in real life. So I may not be as quick to respond to texts. (Nico, Male, 35, TN)

Lorelai, Serena and Nico's phone use shifts to mirror the idea of slowing down, which is an aspect of slow tourism and one of the reasons why people camp (Garst, et al., 2009; Peluso, et al., 2021). These participants indicate that norms around response time are suspended while they are camping, as their phone usage reflects slowness. Their experiences give credence to the notion that liminal experiences while camping result from disconnection from everyday digital sociality. It is important to note that a digitally elastic camping experience allows for the intrusion of their ordinary life into the camping experience, as they still receive digital communication from family and friends. This, of course, is not disputed. But the maintenance of liminality is in choosing to break from established norms around responding, which means that they were using their phones differently from everyday life. Put another way, the suspension of digital social norms is indicative of the liminality of the experience. For some campers, there is a desire to suspend digital social norms in order to achieve a liminal experience, but it is difficult to do so because breaking from society's expectations of behavior often results in social consequences (Edgar, 2008). In these instances, a lack of cellular connectivity aids in the ability to hold boundaries that are otherwise too difficult to hold in everyday life, as the following extracts demonstrate:

It feels more freeing because then I don't feel like I am choosing myself over them, because then I feel like, well, now, I can't do anything about it. So it takes away my control over it so I don't have to feel guilty or anything. (Serena, Female, 30, CA).

It feels like a really safe retreat from some of those boundaries I'm not really good at enforcing in my own life. Being off the grid gives you no choice. So it does the work of the boundaries for you in a way that you don't feel even aware of. It took the decision out of my hands. The boundary is there. You cannot contact. (Lina, 40, Female, OR)

The repercussions from norm violations are not experienced by these participants because the lack of cellular service is generally accepted as a logical reason for unresponsiveness. A sense of empowerment emerges from the ability to hold this boundary as digitally disconnecting in this manner is ultimately a rejection of the communicative affordances of digital technology that allow for “anywhere, anytime” availability and connectivity, or perpetual contact, which is a key feature of everyday life (Björkland, 2019; Katz and Aakhus, 2002). Constant connectivity can result in individuals feeling a loss of a sense of space, physical proximity, and closeness to each other (Syvertsen, 2020). Consequently, onsite social experiences change from the utilization of these opting out strategies, as digital technologies have implications for the degree of social presence between individuals (Misra, et al., 2014). What this permits is a sense of heightened presence, as Rhett details in the following extract:

Part of the beauty about camping to me is just being present in the moment, not thinking about what's going on, you know, at a different space and time. Like when we're on our phones, you go on Instagram and you can see what everyone's doing on their trip in Spain and feel, oh shit, well, maybe we should do something too. I don't linger on that stuff. I'm focusing on the here and now which I tap into while camping. (Rhett, Male, 35, Washington, D.C.)

Adrian explains how disconnecting from digital sociality affects him as well:

It helps me to be present where I am and also to be present with the people around me. Because we interact with each other. We talk, we do activities. Whereas if you bring the phone with you're more likely to look at it (Adrian, Male, 33, New York)

As Osler and Zahavi (2022: 1128) contend, “we encounter embodied others not through disembodied communication but by seeing, hearing, and touching them. Intentions and feelings are conveyed not just through words but through nonverbal means.” Based on this research, I would suggest that Wiley’s (2005) tension between solitude and connectivity is not representative of modern camping experiences. Wiley describes this tension as: the connectivity that mobile communication devices make possible affects the experience of solitude that has been a motivation for outdoor enthusiasts, essentially asking “if one can always be connected to the Internet, work, friends and family via electronic communication, can one ever truly be alone in wilderness?” (Shultis, 2012:112). My research finds that solitude is not a primary motivation for campers, as social interaction is one of the salient themes of camping (Garst, et al., 2009). Instead, social presence is what campers are seeking in the onsite phase of a camping experience precisely because so much of everyday life is mediated by technologies. Thus, a more accurate reflection of the tension exists between social presence and connectivity.

In each case, then, my research demonstrates that various “unplugging strategies” (Tanti and Buhalis, 2017) are employed to preserve a sense of liminality in the camping experience, as campers are using digital technologies in a way that is markedly different from their everyday. By interacting with their phones in a different manner while camping, it creates a different social experience between campers and the people in their ordinary lives, where boundaries around digital communication are perhaps held more firmly or the responsibility associated with everyday social roles loosen. It also has the effect of increasing social presence for companions during the onsite experience, which means that a more accurate reflection of the tension between wilderness and technology, that is specific to camping, is between social presence and connectivity.

This isn't to say that strategies of digital disconnection or partial connection haven't been observed in daily life (Licoppe, 2004; Light and Cassidy, 2014; Schrock, 2015). Instead, it is exactly camping's original conception as a liminal experience, as *removed* from everyday life, that this research updates, taking into account the presence of digital technologies during the onsite experience and theorizing how campers are utilizing opting out strategies to make meaning from the continuum of digital disconnection practices (Moe and Madsen, 2021). Because digital technologies pervade ordinary life, liminality while camping is thus marked by the usual expectations of phone usage being suspended, as well as the corresponding change in social experiences. Conti and Farsari (2024: 537) posit that escapism does not depend on "the essential absence or presence of generalizable, essentialist technological objects but on the meaning placed on them and how they could be negotiated through embodiments and translations of disconnection." Indeed, by disconnecting from digital sociality, I would suggest that the way campers perceive their phone has the potential to shift in meaning from a social object to one that is valued or disregarded for perhaps a different meaning, which is what the next section will examine.

6.3 Sensory Presence, Digital Mediation and the Utility of Mobile Devices

As my research has demonstrated, a tension between social presence and connectivity exists during the onsite phase of the camping experience, in which abstaining from ordinary digital sociality created by digital technologies can result in a heightened sense of social presence. By altering their use of digital technologies while at the campsite, campers are thus able to maintain a sense of liminality, or the sense that an individual is physically and mentally moving away from everyday life (Ayazlar and Ayazlar, 2024). Significant here is the notion that individuals can *physically* move away from everyday life. Indeed, participants expressed a sensory immersion in the natural environment as being different from ordinary life. This point is supported by Adrian in the following extract:

There's the sensory experience. So there's things you see, hear, and smell that are different than our normal day to day experience, because

we're in the woods or in a place that is not developed. (Adrian, Male, 33, New York)

Jasper similarly expresses the sensory experience as being different than ordinary life:

It's very clear that we're all going into this wild place to have a fully immersive, sensory experience where you get a dose of nature to refresh yourself, and almost like a cleanse in a way. (Jasper, Male, 33, CA)

For both Adrian and Jasper, immersion in nature is in direct contrast to urbanity, as it is conceptualized as a “wild place” that is “not developed.” This perspective is supported by literature that suggests that urban residents embrace camping as a temporary retreat into natural places (Young, 2022). Indeed, camping is unique in that it is a leisure activity that situates participants directly in natural landscapes instead of built environments. As such, the daily tasks and routines that are normally confined within physical structures - like cooking, sleeping, and socializing - are all conducted outside, leading to most of the camper’s time being spent in nature. Jasper notes the restorative qualities of being immersed in nature, which is consistent with the conceptualization of nature as restorative and beneficial for one’s well being, where “engaging with the natural environment involves immersing oneself physically in it, thereby attaining personal, social, and health benefits (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001; Hassell, et al., 2015; Huang, et al., 2025: 661). Those who are more connected to nature and feel a strong relationship with the natural world tend to have higher levels of well-being and personal growth (Pritchard, et al., 2019). Alden likewise sees immersion in nature as a primary reason for camping:

I definitely go to immerse myself in nature. Because it's like breathing in new fresh air that you don't have on a daily basis, you know, at a more spiritual level. (Alden, Male, 40, S.C.)

Camping has been conceived as a pilgrimage that restores and refreshes because 'pilgrims' exit their everyday world into a place that allows them to feel transformed (Young, 2022). By speaking of their immersion in nature, these participants are alluding to the fact that they desire to have direct experiences with nature as opposed to mediated experiences, which is one of Wiley's (2005) tensions between digital technologies and wilderness. Indeed, part of the motivation for digitally disconnecting is that technologies mediate so much of everyday experiences (Chan, 2022). As it relates to the camping experience, this sentiment is echoed by participants, with Nico explaining why he uses his phone less while camping:

Just wanting to be present in the environment I'm around, so not wanting to be distracted by things that aren't there. I'd say it's easy for the phone to kinda take you out of the experience. (Nico, Male, 35, TN)

Romy similarly notes how mobile technology can result in sensory disconnection from the natural environment, leading to a diminished sense of sensory presence:

Sometimes it's easy to get sucked in and then I'll realize, you're not present. Because if I go back to what I started earlier in this conversation about part of why I do practice forest therapy, it's about being aware in the moment in nature. And the phone can kind of break that a little bit. And sometimes I'll catch myself and be like you're not present. You just happen to be here and you're on your phone or you're in your email or in your Slack (Romy, Female, 50, CA)

Both Nico and Romy consider the way that phones can distract from an embodied sensory experience, thus preventing immersion, which has been noted in literature (Barkley and Lepp, Dustin, et al., 2019; Stavrinos, et al., 2019). Indeed, mobile devices can distract from one's surroundings and drain focused attention, resulting in inattention blindness (Atchley, et al., 2012; Dustin, et al., 2019; Strayer and Drews, 2007). Because sensory immersion in the natural environment is so important to these participants, and mediated experiences can be perceived as preventing this

type of immersion, digital technologies are deemed unuseful. Adrian highlights this point when he describes why he uses his phone less while camping:

Life is not lived when looking at a computer screen. And the benefit of being in nature is that we're experiencing something new...There are things our brain needs and benefits from that you don't get from your phone. (Adrian, Male, 33, NY)

Logan provides more detail as to how the mediating effects of digital technologies influence his rationale for digitally disconnecting:

I think the point of camping to some degree is the detachment or the removal from these everyday inorganic contacts and stimuli. So to put yourself in the context and then not remove the inorganic pieces...reflects your attachment to how much of a crutch those things are. (Logan, Male, 35, CA)

Digital technology is a creation of modernity (Brey, 2003) and inherent to American conceptions of wilderness is the notion that modernity threatens the individualism, freedom, and authenticity of being in the natural environment (Cronon, 1996). Those seeking authenticity through natural environments yearn for spaces apart from everyday existence because it allows them to combat the alienation that is felt in modern society (Knudsen et al., 2016; MacCannell, 1976; Oakes, 2006; Vidon, 2019). Digital technologies, then, are being used less while camping when they are viewed as mediating everyday life in a way that is both addictive and inauthentic, and camping serves as an antidote and a retreat from this inauthenticity. In other words, by removing “inorganic” digital technology from the natural environment, which is the environment within which camping takes place, some campers are seeking an experience that is different from the everyday. But it is not just that these participants are using their phones less because they inhibit immersion, and thus a sense of liminality. This also has the effect of changing the perception of the phone to being disadvantageous precisely because it distracts from the natural environment. Indeed, when the phone is perceived as diminishing social presence, people disconnect from

digital sociality and thus the phone becomes less of a social object. When the phone is perceived as diminishing sensory presence through digital mediation, and thus being inauthentic in the natural environment, people disconnect from using it and thus the phone becomes less useful.

While this may be the case for some campers, others did not find the presence of digital technologies to be problematic. For campers that did not express a desire for a purely unmediated experience, digital technologies were not perceived as diminishing immersion in the natural environment, as long as the norms around everyday digital sociality were shifted. Stuart highlights this point in the following extract when describing how he handles the communicative affordances of mobile phones:

Normally, I would respond to them immediately. For a camping trip, I would not respond to them at all. I don't really need to detach myself. I feel like I'm in this hybrid where I still want my technology. And I'm enjoying both worlds, you know. (Stuart, Male, 48, CA)

In essence, Stuart is able to disconnect from everyday sociality and maintain a liminal experience while still using his phone and taking advantage of the digital elasticity that is characteristic of modern camping experiences. This 'hybrid' way of using digital technologies while camping, where a camper disconnects from digital sociality to maintain a sense of liminality but remains connected to these same digital technologies because it provides some sort of value to the experience, allows for digital technologies to take on new meanings associated with utility. Indeed, my last chapter established that digital technologies that had cellular connection were valued for their communicative and navigational affordances because they led to increased perceptions of safety. Evidently, then, when digital technologies are used in a way that is perceived as useful, the way that they mediate the natural environment is not viewed negatively. This again highlights Conti and Farsari's (2024: 537) contention that the ability to escape, or in this instance, to establish sensory presence, is not the presence or absence of the a certain digital technology, but the meaning placed on it and how it can be "negotiated through embodiments and translations of disconnection." Indeed, participants often spoke of the phone as being a tool that

could actually augment sensory presence. Romy demonstrates this in the following extract:

If you use it to enhance your nature experience, go ahead. If it overtakes the nature experience, then why is it overtaking the nature experience? I personally think that if technology is going to enhance your nature experience, great. As long as it's not consuming. But I also know the balance right. (Romy, Female, 50, CA)

Romy echoes Stuart's assertion that detaching oneself from their mobile device is unnecessary when it can be used in a way that is not detrimental to the experience of the natural environment. For Stuart, this explicitly means disconnecting from digital sociality. While Romy doesn't identify what affordances of digital technologies could "overtake" the nature experience, and thus her immersion in the natural environment, she feels confident that she can balance her phone use in a way that doesn't mean she needs to disconnect. In effect, Romy is framing her phone as a tool that is valued for its ability to augment the sensory experience. This, in turn, ensures that the liminal aspects of the camping experience can still be realized, as a deeper sensory engagement and feeling of embodied presence is possible (Kaplan, 1995). The notion that phones can augment the sensory experience of camping is notable, as it means that the experience of one's corporal schema is not fixed and is instead tied to our perception of the world, as Merleau-Ponty theorized (1962). Indeed, the way that campers perceive phones as augmenting the sensory experience reveals that technological materials and mediations can influence our corporal schema (Richardson, 2007). In other words, digital devices were seen as having the ability to allow campers to engage in the physical world differently and in ways that impacted the embodied sensory experience. For example, many participants spoke of the way that using digital technology to watch movies or play music blended into their sensory experience of the natural environment, thus enhancing their perception of it. For Lina, watching a movie on her iPad with her husband during inclement weather became a blended sensory experience, as is detailed in the following extract:

We're in this yurt watching a movie with no electricity, no lights, listening to the pouring rain. But watching movies, one was an intense scary movie. One was a rom-com. And it just felt really different than doing that at home. Where, at home, if we're watching a movie, we're both picking up our phones. We're both distracted. It just felt like a really lovely date. (Lina, 40, Female, OR)

Lina's experience highlights the way that digital technologies can shape how environments are experienced, as the entertainment affordances of the iPad allowed her to engage more sensorially in the surrounding environment (Evans and Saker, 2017; Hardley and Richardson, 2021). It also highlights how different environments encourage different technology uses, where the home environment is more ordinary and thus is deemed more acceptable in being an object of distraction. The camping environment, on the other hand, is liminal and discourages phones being used in a distracting way precisely because it is perceived as different from ordinary life, which is consistent with the findings discussed in the previous section. Many campers pointed to digital technologies providing audio that helped augment the sensory experience, as the following extracts demonstrate:

There's a lot of these like narrative podcasts. We basically listen to an audio book podcast while staring at the stars. So we are able to unplug from the screens, but still have some kind of entertainment when it was just the two of us. (Eva, Female, 37, CA).

Having it for music really enhances it. We always go to sleep pretty early when we go camping, but there's that downtime at night where you're just kind of hanging. And especially if it's just the two of us, adding the ambience of music really feels magical. (Lina, Female, 40, OR)

Even though listening to music or a podcast is viewed as entertainment, the way that Eva engages sensorially with this entertainment means that more of her senses are being engaged. For Eva, the audio was combined with her visual appreciation of the

stars. For Lina, listening to music creates a special atmosphere at the campsite, one that is difficult to replicate elsewhere, thus imbuing it with a magical quality. Serena similarly finds that music can help with the ambience of the campsite and enhances her sensory presence. In the following extract, she explains the ebbs and flows of this blended sensory experience:

Sometimes you just want to listen to the river babbling, but other times the music can be calming. There's different songs so when you're in a group, you have more upbeat music that kind of helps the group have this energy to them. But when it's later in the evening or winding down, it's nice to have more calming simple music, and you can still hear the river behind the music, too. So it's kind of intermittent. It's not the whole time. But sometimes the music can help you. (Serena, Female, 30, CA).

Framing the use of the phone as a tool also opened up opportunities for campers to take advantage of the ways in which the phone digitally mediates the camping experience. Rhett details how his use of an app called iNaturalist, which allows users to record observations about the natural environment through photos and videos, share with fellow naturalists, and discuss findings (iNaturalist, 2025) and an app called PictureThis, which identifies plants, enriches his experience:

There are some cool tools, like iNaturalist or PictureThis, that can identify plants and enrich my experience. What is this flower like? This was a camping trip down the southwest. These are globe mallows. They were the sickest flowers that I saw while I was down there. And I wouldn't know that if I didn't have my phone to be like, oh, cool! What is this flower? What's its deal? Where does it grow? Where can I find it again? What time of year does it show up? What's it related to? There's more information that I can learn with digital tools that does enrich my experience. (Rhett, Male, 35, Washington, D.C.)

In effect, the way that Rhett used his phone made mediation a tool for knowledge attainment, thus enhancing and deepening his experience of the natural environment. Lorelai, who also uses iNaturalist, similarly experiences a deeper appreciation for the natural environment, as she explains in this extract:

I'm looking at it now from more of a conservation viewpoint, as a volunteer. I'm having to document and record now that I'm becoming a naturalist. (Lorelai, Female, 42, CA)

In a way, Lorelai's digitally mediated engagement with technology actually led to a liminal experience while camping, as it allows her to create a new identity as a naturalist and shift her perception of the natural world. Serena also notes how digital mediation, as opposed to direct experience, can foster an appreciation for the natural environment:

If we're paused somewhere that's really cool, and I want to paint this, and it's like an itch in your fingers. You just gotta do it. Now I'll just take my phone out and I'll just start drawing it. And it just is nice because it gives me a moment to really just appreciate the small details I'm really in love with and just get them down in detail on my phone. (Serena, Female, 30, CA).

While these participants detail an appreciation of the land that was fostered and experienced onsite through digital mediation, many participants also spoke of the importance of taking photos and videos during the onsite phase as a way to create digital records of the sensory experience that could be revisited in the post-trip phase of the camping trip. For some campers, the purpose of creating these digital artifacts was to relive the sensory experiences in a therapeutic way, when the stresses of ordinary life became difficult in the post-trip stage. Alden highlights this point in the following extract:

I was able to capture quite a few videos of the waterfalls there. So I keep those memories of nature now. I can find them later and go back

because the peacefulness of those water features is a meditative thing. A microsecond of a photograph doesn't do it justice at all. You gotta be able to hear the water. (Alden, Male, 40, S.C.)

By taking a video, Alden is able to “hear the water” and thus sensorially experience the benefits of his onsite digitally mediated immersion in the post-trip phase of the camping experience. While it might not be the same embodied immersion that is experienced within nature, it is still meaningful to him and contributes to his well-being, which is supported by literature that states that pictures of nature can improve mental health and that viewing pictures after a trip can help with memory recollection (Berman, et al., 2008; Kim and Chen, 2021). Stellan also takes photos in an attempt to relive sensory experiences after the trip, as he details in the following extract:

A lot of times, Katie and I will take a video of a particularly beautiful spot on the trip and do a slow pan around the area for like a minute. That's a lot of times really nice if we're having a stressful day in the future, to be able to just pull that up and be like, we were here a while ago. You know, put you back in that moment. (Stellan, Male, 35, WA)

In this instance, Stellan's phone use reflects the slow tourism mindset of camping experiences, where slowing down is a salient feature of the onsite phase of a camping trip (Garst, et al., 2009; Peluso, et al., 2021). Accordingly, some of the benefits of slow tourism extend to the post-trip phase through virtual objects. In addition, these videos become “comfort-generating objects” (Pineau, 1982:273) which is reminiscent of the way that the virtual representations of the campsites, when using UGC in the pre-trip planning phase, are comfort-generating objects. That said, the difference lies in that the comfort comes from the way that the camper can recognize himself in this virtual environment during the post-trip phase, as the sensory experience of the onsite phase of the trip is recollected. Thus a feeling of familiarity is engendered that lends itself to feelings of comfort (Pineau, 1982). Photos were also viewed as being able to provide a sensory experience after the trip:

Photos are better at helping you remember the actual sensations, like the physical sensations of being there. (Serena, Female, 30, CA).

These recalled “sensations” meant that participants were able to establish a connection to the land both during and after the experience, as is evidenced in the following extracts:

Because when I take a photo camping, it's not really the people in the photo. So I think that's a little different. Often, when we go on vacation, we're taking photos of us at a restaurant. The photos that I take while camping are almost always just of the land. And so I think that helps me later feel connected to that feeling in that environment and makes me want to go back to it. (Lina, 40, Female, OR)

Kevin and I went backpacking in Glacier National Park in Montana, and we were there during bear grass season. There are these really beautiful big, blooming white flowers. We have a ton of pictures and it does it no justice compared to being in person. But we have so many of those pictures in our house and seeing that reminds me of being there, the smell, the experience, like talking about it, watching how they moved in the wind. So I would say, for sure the tech benefits help the connection. (Ariadne, Female, 35, CA)

For Lina and Ariadne, pictures help them establish a connection to the land, or a sense of place attachment, in which “people attribute meanings to a location and in turn people become attached to these locations” (Tonge, et al., 2013: 43). What is significant here, is that the place attachment was directly tied to the onsite sensory experience and would not have been possible had the camping experience not been digitally mediated. Travel experiences have been conceptualized as creating “flashbulb memories” wherein individuals retrieve their experiences vividly because they are significantly different from people’s ordinary lives (Kim, 2010). In each of these instances, then, participants were creating what I call “digitally mediated

flashbulb memories”, where the liminal experience of camping was preserved through the digital mediation that augmented the sensory experience onsite. In turn, this allowed participants to more vividly remember the sensorial experience through digital artifacts in the post-trip phase. As my research has demonstrated, the camping experience remains liminal, but that liminality is characterized by the way that digital technologies are used, or not used, to impact feelings of social and sensory presence in a way that is deemed different from ordinary life. As such, an examination of the way that campers return to the everyday use of digital technologies from the liminal experience of camping, and its implications for our relationship to these technologies, is warranted.

6.4 Full Digital Connection and the Return to Ease

Time outdoors is often positioned as a distinct break from everyday routines and responsibilities, especially in the experience of a return from outdoor recreational activities that have elements of digital disconnection (Helms, et al., 2019). Indeed, this research has established that camping can be conceived as a liminal activity, where campers remain connected or choose to disconnect to various uses of digital technologies in an effort to maintain a sense of immersion, either social or sensory, in the experience. When coming back from what was perceived to be a digitally disconnected camping trip, which was facilitated through a disconnection from digital sociality, some participants felt sensory overload, as Lina details in the following extract:

So there's a moment in the car where we hit the spot where suddenly the phone goes. Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, and you get all of your text messages, emails, Instagram alerts. So there's always that moment of oh, like my protective cocoon has come off. (Lina, Female, 40, OR)

For Lina, the protective cocoon that had been established was from her disconnection from digital sociality during the onsite phase, as each alert that she describes comes from social media or the communicative affordances of her phone.

In this way, her liminal experience has ended and she has returned to full digital sociality. This return to full digital sociality was also highlighted by Serena:

It's like a little bit of an explosion more than usual even before the trip, because everything's been piling up since you've been not attending to it as much. (Serena, Female, 30, CA)

What Serena is referring to is the 'explosion' of everyday tasks and responsibilities that she is returning to, which again indicates that the liminal experience has ended. Just as the liminality of camping was facilitated by digital technology use precisely because that use was outside of the ordinary, the return to the everyday is facilitated by digital technology and its communicative affordances. In other words, Serena's phone acted as a reminder of her roles and responsibilities that had been suspended during the onsite experience. Ariadne also uses a sensory metaphor for the way she perceives coming back from a digitally disconnected camping experience:

I'm back to this being a normal part of my day. And an 'I should check what I missed while I was gone' kind of a feeling. I don't love that. I wish that feeling of 'I should be away from it, and don't need it' could carry on more than it does. I feel like it does end pretty abruptly, like, okay, the fast is over. I can check my email now. It kind of feels like an, 'okay, we fasted. Now, let's get back to eating full meals' kind of sense when it comes to technology consumption. (Ariadne, Female, 35, CA)

Having "fasted" from digital technology, she is ready to resume her digital consumption practices as before. In each of these extracts, the sensory experience of the camping trip, in which one is immersed in the natural environment, is shifted to take on a more digital character. Instead of fresh air, new smells, and the sound of babbling creeks, participants are now taking in digital sounds and digital images, which has the effect of distracting them from everything else.

Roy and Harti (2025: 72) contend that "the overstimulation of the senses, particularly through screens, causes a sudden transition from one mental state to another, trapping the individuals in a state of restlessness." While this

hyperconnectivity and sensory overstimulation may drive campers to disconnect during the onsite experience, the return was felt differently for many campers in that it was a resumption of normalcy. Nico describes his return to full digital connection in the following extract:

It's like just bathing in the Internet. It's like catching up on everything I've missed. Kind of business, as usual. (Nico, Male, 35, TN)

Nico's experience points to the notion that the overstimulation from digital devices is, essentially, business as usual. In other words, returning from the socially disconnected camping experience is a return to normalcy. It is in the post-liminal phase, or reincorporation, in which the individual returns to normal social life (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909). Reintegration into ordinary structures and the re-absorption into the social order (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909) was reflected in the way that participants used their phones upon return. Jessa highlights this in the following excerpt:

But after that's over, like everything goes back to normal normal texting, normal phone calls, same thing as before the trip. (Jessa, Female, 35, CA)

Like Nico, Jessa's return to normalcy means that her digital technology use became characterized by its ordinariness. Indeed, Helms et al., (2019: 14-15) found that participants in their empirical study "slipped back into" ordinary habits of spending more time on phones than was considered desirable, where being away made it easy to disconnect or only engage with devices in "deliberate moderation." What this points to is that coming out of a digital disconnected camping experience means that the liminality that encouraged different conceptions of the phone is no longer there. Indeed, participants were no longer thinking of ways to heighten a sense of social presence and sensory presence within their post-trip social and physical environment in an effort to protect the liminality of the camping experience. Instead, regaining digital connection was noted for its impact on the senses, but this impact was deemed a part of ordinary life. Indeed, this highlights how different environments

encourage different technology uses, where the return to one's home meant that all ways in which digital sociality was suspended were reintegrated into daily life, including its impact on the sensory experience.

Another aspect of the reintegration of digital sociality after a digitally disconnected experience is that it revealed the mundanity of everyday digital sociality. Dorian describes this mundanity in the following extract:

I mean, you're on your phone again. Right? I mean all the non essential stuff comes to the front again with your phone. So social media, emails, texts, all that stuff. (Dorian, Male, 38, NY)

As noted in the previous chapter, camping experiences are characterized by a back to basics approach, in which the streamlining of gear means that only the essentials are brought, like food, water, shelter, and the appropriate clothing. While at the campsite, digital technologies were used in a way that reflected their utility, becoming tools that were helpful in terms of safety and augmenting the sensory experience. Ordinary digital sociality was disconnected from precisely because it was deemed non-essential. By regaining a connection to digital sociality, its non-essential character was highlighted even in its relation to ordinary life. Dorian's experience, then, reflects the way that the mundanity of ordinary life was a key part of the return from the liminality of the onsite phase of the camping experience. The following two extracts further highlight this point:

We got a number of random texts and messages came through. Nothing urgent or important. It was just kind of like, oh, yeah, you know the background noise of various friends and stuff. (Stellan, Male, 35, WA)

Finally, when I do get connected, it's like junk emails and spam texts like, Oh, okay? Well. That life threatening emergency didn't happen (Ariadne, Female, 35, CA)

While there is a certain mundanity to regaining full digital connection and the digital sociality it provides, this was not necessarily viewed negatively, as Kendall points out in the following extract:

There's maybe a little bit more gratitude and appreciation for how you're interacting instead of maybe a sense of like, why isn't this content more interesting or engaging, like technology, frustration or fatigue. It feels a little novel. I think you're not quite as burned out by it.
(Kendall, Female, 30, NV)

Research that looks into the mundane pleasures of everyday life indicate that mundaneness is important and that creating sensational “wow” experiences are not always necessary for positive affect (Kanis, et al., 2008). Mobile phones have even been characterized as ‘mundane’ because they have increasingly become a part of people’s daily life practices (Kanis, et al., 2008). As my research has suggested, the meanings and value that campers give to digital technologies, and in particular mobile devices, change throughout the camping experience depending on the camper’s perception of the environment. Thus, the perceived disconnection from digital technologies during the onsite phase revealed how much appreciation there is for them in ordinary life, even if they are considered mundane. In a sense, the discomfort of disconnection matched the discomfort of camping, where a certain lack characterizes the experience, thus making it more difficult (Molz, 2014). With the return to full digital connection participants described a new appreciation not only in the mundane uses of digital technologies, or the mundane digital sociality they connected to, but for the ease and convenience they provided participants after the onsite experience of lack. The following extract illustrates this point:

You had that easy connection now. I could easily get directions to where I needed to go and text and call people quickly. I feel like I just noticed that or appreciated that. I'd say it's like coming back to your own bed, you know. It's comfortable and easier and simpler. (Stellan, Male, 35, WA)

My research highlights, then, that the onsite stage of the camping trip resets the relationship to digital technologies in a way that can only be experienced when regaining connection in the post-trip phase. Whereas campers begin their onsite experience with the intent to escape from hyperconnectivity and digital sociality, they end the experience with a new appreciation for the way it makes their lives more “comfortable and easier and simpler.” While this newfound appreciation is short-lived, it does reflect the idea that the liminal experience of camping extends to digital technologies in that the meanings ascribed to them and the way they were subsequently used mirrors the three sequential stages of liminality (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909) . Indeed, campers digitally disconnected in the beginning of the trip, or the pre-liminal phase, where a symbolic or physical departure occurs in liminal experiences. During the trip, or the liminal phase, the norms associated with digital sociality and digital technology use were suspended and transformation became possible through the way that digital technologies were used to enhance sensory presence. Upon reincorporation in the post-liminal phase, digital technologies were newly appreciated for the way that they made lives easier. What this means, then, is that a camper’s liminal experience is deeply entwined with the digital technologies that are used during and after the experience.

6.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine how digital connectivity affects how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards. This exploration has determined that feelings of escape can prove difficult due to the many ways that digital technologies can distract from the camping experience, with the corporeality of mobile phones, the reputation-system mechanisms of Hipcamp, and the communicative affordances of mobile phones being provided as examples. It was then proposed that campers are developing new competencies to determine what uses of digital technologies are appropriate in the camping practice and to manage their effects, because of the digital elasticity of modern camping experiences. The chapter then examined how campers are digitally disconnecting in an effort to preserve a sense of liminality that is characteristic of camping trips. My research suggested that the camping experience can remain liminal precisely because it creates an opportunity to use digital technologies in a way that is different

from everyday life. In other words, digital technologies have the ability to both deprive campers of a liminal experience and facilitate liminal experiences depending on *how* they are used. It was then established that a “reversal of habits” was occurring in the way that campers were using their phones to loosen the social expectations of digital sociality, with campers ignoring digital communication, delaying it, or relying on a lack of cellular connectivity to enforce boundaries. This indicated that the way that campers were using their phones reinforced a liminal experience, thus heightening feelings of social presence while at the campsite. It was then suggested that an update be made to Wiley’s (2005) tension between solitude and connectivity that was more reflective of the camping experience, where a tension exists between social presence and connectivity during the onsite phase of the camping experience. The chapter then moved on to establish that the sensory experience of immersion in the natural environment while camping was of great importance to campers, where digital technology use was perceived as inauthentic to some campers and therefore it was important to disconnect, making them less useful. The chapter then discussed the ways in which campers found utility in digital technologies that could augment the sensory experience, which meant that digital mediation could help with sensory presence. Instances of this were discussed, the blended sensory experiences of music and movies, the knowledge attainment from apps, and the virtual ‘comfort-generating objects’ of photos and videos that were used to recollect the onsite sensory experience during the post-trip phase. My research found that the liminal experience of camping was preserved through the digital meditation that augmented the sensory experience onsite. Lastly, the experience of gaining full digital connection after the camping trip was explored, finding that the liminal uses of the phone were not extended to the onsite phase but was valued for the comfort and convenience that it brings to ordinary life.

In short, the camping practice has changed in that, while remaining liminal, the liminality is characterized by the way that campers connect or disconnect from specific uses of the phone that have an impact on feelings of social and sensory presence that are deemed different from ordinary life. The liminal experience did not extend to the post-trip phase, as campers may have appreciated the ease the phone brought to ordinary life, but it did not result in lasting change in the way digital technologies were used. In the final chapter, then, I will draw my findings together to

provide a more detailed understanding of the social, experiential, and physical impacts of digital technology on each phase of the camping experience.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to advance an understanding of the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies on each phase of the camping experience, from the pre-trip planning phase, to the onsite phase, and finally the post-trip experience. Accordingly, my thesis has addressed the following questions:

1. What digital strategies are employed to navigate the pre-trip planning experience?
2. How does the use of digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the camping trip?
3. How does digital connectivity affect how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards?

In order to answer these questions, context and theory were provided in the first two chapters of this dissertation. Chapter one provided a detailed description of the context and meanings associated with camping, outlined a framework for understanding the ways that digital technologies can change the social, experiential, and physical aspects of the camping experience, and explored tensions that may arise from using digital technologies in wilderness. It then proceeded to detail gaps in literature as well as the expected contributions of this research in response to these gaps. Chapter two explored literature that is pertinent to this topic, tying each phase of the camping experience to Wiley's (2005) tensions between wilderness and technology. As such, the concepts of uncertainty and comfort were examined in their relation to the pre-trip phase of camping. An understanding of the concepts of risk and safety were developed in their relation to the onsite phase of the camping experience. Lastly, the concepts of social presence and digital disconnection were discussed in their relation to the onsite and post-trip phases of the camping experience. Notably, the construction of these concepts by social actors was seen as key to understanding their malleability in the camping experience and the potential for alteration by digital technologies. Chapter three detailed my chosen methodology and justified its appropriateness because of the ontological and epistemological

orientation of the research as well as the type of information this research is interested in understanding. By outlining the context of this study, detailing the concepts pertinent to the questions being asked, locating the gaps in literature, providing a systematic means of answering the research questions, I was able to then move onto the data analysis chapters. As the first of my findings chapters, chapter four addressed the first research question, which asked what digital strategies are employed to navigate the pre-trip planning experience. Chapter five addressed my second research question, which asked how the use of digital technologies impact perceptions of safety during the camping trip. Chapter six, as the last of my findings chapters, addressed my third research question, which asked how digital connectivity affects how individuals socially and physically experience the camping trip onsite and afterwards. Through these data analysis chapters, an understanding of the social, experiential, and physical impact of digital technologies on each phase of the camping experience was developed. Accordingly, this concluding chapter will summarize the key findings of this dissertation. The chapter will then follow with a discussion of the limitations of this research, how these limitations can be addressed, and recommendations for future research.

7.2 Findings

My contributions to research as well as the gaps in the literature were discussed in my introductory chapter as well as my literature review chapter. The findings of my research will now be detailed so that I can make these contributions explicit:

Pre-Trip

- Participants use UGC to reduce uncertainty, providing a level of psychological comfort that is consistent with the “comfortable camping” trend within the modern camping practice:

For many of my participants, utilizing UGC was a digital strategy employed in the pre-trip planning stage of the camping experience to ensure a comfortable experience when onsite, where comfort derived from the management of expectations. For these participants, the use of UGC allowed them to gain more granular insight into a potential camping trip, which was deemed

valuable for two reasons. First, it allowed them to preemptively manage the risks associated with the onsite camping experience, like unclear campsites or unsafe trails. In other words, the pre-trip information, and thus knowledge, that UGC provided reduced the uncertainty around safety that would normally be felt going camping. Second, it allowed them to ascertain the ambience and aesthetics of a campground in order to secure the type of campsite that the camper was seeking, as the variety of campgrounds can engender uncertainty as well. In particular, photos and reviews were seen as especially useful in planning because campers could virtually experience potential campsites. This, in turn, provided the illusion that these participants had already experienced the campsite, which reduced anxiety around a camping experience that is characterized by the risks associated with living in the natural environment. As such, the photos and reviews became 'comfort-generating objects' (Pineau, 1982: 273) in their ability to alleviate the risk of the unknown. While scholars have criticized the use of technology in wilderness for its ability to transform wilderness from an 'unknown' place into one that is predictable, it is this reduction in uncertainty that is precisely what campers are seeking when they use UGC. Through this digitally produced reduction in uncertainty, the trend of 'comfortable camping' was extended to the pre-trip phase of the experience, where comfort was facilitated less by amenities and more by the promise, provided by digital technologies like UGC, that the experience would meet the personal preferences and degree of risk a camper was willing to accept.

- The balancing act between trusting and distrusting the quality of digital information adds an additional layer of digital work to an already intensive planning process:

The quality of the digital information sought in the pre-trip planning phase led to campers doing additional research, and thus additional work, to gain clarity on the future camping experience. Many participants noted that planning camping trips requires considerable preparation and more work than other forms of leisure because of the lack of infrastructure and basic necessities

that is inherent to a camping trip. For these campers, much of the preparation for camping had moved into the digital sphere, where participants were distrustful of the information provided by government-run websites because it was not seen as up-to-date and reflective of current conditions, thus creating a new risk that participants were unwilling to take. This is significant, as it contests the idea that the highest level of trust is afforded to information on State government tourism websites (Burgess, et al., 2009). Instead, informational authority and trust was placed in the camping community, where uncertainty characterized the information provided by UGC, albeit at a level or risk campers were more willing to accept. The subjectivity of reviews and potential inauthentic photos, in particular, stood out for these campers as being unreliable, imbuing the pre-trip phase with a sense of uncertainty that is directly related to the core of UGC's functionality. Accordingly, my research found that campers didn't know what digital information sources to trust, which meant that they put more effort and time into the digital planning phase to reach an acceptable level of certainty. In other words, digital technology imbues the camping practice with a level of uncertainty that campers are paradoxically attempting to diminish by using UGC in the first place.

- Participants applied novel digital skills and strategies to reduce the uncertainty that was created by a leisure constraint characterized by digital barriers to public lands:

For many of my participants, the increased popularity of camping and the limited supply of public campsites meant that new digital strategies had to be employed and digital skills developed to be able to book a campsite and move forward to the onsite phase of the camping trip. In other words, booking campsites had become a competitive endeavor and participants with the digital skills and knowledge were more likely to be able to move past the planning stage, even if it required more digital labor. For example, knowing how to book a campsite online, when to do so, and how to set digital reminders meant that campers had a higher likelihood of booking a campsite. This had the effect of minimizing the uncertainty of the booking process but

campers had to put in more digital labor to get a campsite. In addition, participants “strayed off the beaten path” of traditional booking sites and engaged in new social experiences through the use of social networking sites for booking. One particular strategy that emerged from this research was the use of peer-to-peer accommodation platforms like Hipcamp to camp on private land, where the amount of time and effort it took to reserve a campsite was reduced as private land was opened up. As the platform was created by a for-profit technology company, this led campers to both feel as if the experience was more streamlined than government-run booking sites but also led to feelings of distrust due to the profit motive and the UGC content on the site. Accordingly, my research found that the tension between risk and security (Wiley, 2005) took on a new dimension in the pre-trip phase where the risk of being unable to have a camping experience led to the creation of digital strategies to gain access to wilderness. Importantly, this meant that a new leisure constraint was identified in which those without the time, knowledge, or digital skills were less likely to be able to experience camping on public land.

Onsite

- A scarcity mindset framed how participants used mobile devices and coping mechanisms were employed to regain a sense of safety:

For some of my participants, the scarcity of resources and lack of infrastructure that is typical of a traditional camping experience was reflected in the way digital technologies, and in particular, mobile devices were used. Participants highlighted the importance of mobile devices for maintaining a sense of safety when navigating the risks associated with camping in the natural environment. Accordingly, participants placed higher value on the ability to use a phone in case of an emergency where the phone could be used to call emergency services or provide critical locational information for rescue. In other words, it was the affordances, or what actions the phone permitted, that impacted perceptions of safety. The increased value of the phone meant that campers created coping mechanisms that were used in an

effort to regain a sense of security while in a scarcity mindset. The first coping mechanism that was identified in my interviews was 'digital rationing', in which participants reduced their phone use or digitally disconnected from cellular connectivity in an effort to preserve battery life. Unlike previous studies that have found digital disconnection to be a strategy for escape or for immersing in the natural environment (Conti and Farsari, 2024; Dickinson, et al., 2016; Gomez, et al., 2015), my research indicates that digital disconnection made participants feel as if they were safer. The second coping mechanism that was identified through interviews with my participants was to bring additional gear that extended battery life, which had the effect of reducing the stress of an environment and experience that was characterized by scarcity. While bringing the additional gear was not necessarily a huge physical burden, it is very much consistent with the notion that campers are continuing to minimize the discomforts associated with an outdoor experience by bringing more gear that is associated with contemporary life and the comforts of home (Brooker and Joppe, 2020; Garst, et al., 2009). What should be underlined is that, while the scarcity mindset had the effect of making some participants feel unsafe, the coping mechanisms that were implemented were entirely about the phone's value in establishing a connection to the outside world, should they need it.

- The trend of comfortable camping was seen in the the way that the communicative and navigational affordances of digital technologies made some of my participants feel safer, but safety was predicated on cellular connection:

When cellular connection is available, mobile devices can be used to communicate with others as well as to navigate the environment through the utilization of digital maps. While cellular connection is rarely a concern in urban environments, a wilderness environment does not always have the infrastructure to support it. For many of my participants, then, the ability to be digitally connected allowed them to utilize these features which subsequently made them feel safer and more comfortable within the natural environment.

Accordingly, digital technologies with communicative and navigational affordances became 'comfort-generating objects' (Pineau, 1982: 273) during the onsite phase where the management of safety was the chief concern. For participants, the SOS feature stood out as providing peace of mind when camping, which did not have the effect of allowing them to take more risks as some research suggests (Martin and Pope, 2012), but instead allowed them to relax given the possibility of communication with emergency services. At the same time, for some campers, there was a recognition that communicative affordances wouldn't necessarily reduce the chance of bodily harm, which made it easier to reject using digital technologies while camping and instead rely on the wilderness skills that they had developed over time. This had the effect of making the disconnected camping experience more pleasurable, as it provided the illusion of increasing danger and proving one's abilities through self-reliance, when in reality, it was just that the communicative potential was lessened.

Many participants also spoke of digital maps, and in particular GPS, as making the environment and their navigation of it feel safer. As getting lost was perceived to be a very real risk for participants, digital maps allowed them to visualize and understand their position within the natural environment and prevent this risk from actualizing. This had the effect of making participants feel as if they could 'see' the natural environment more effectively, allowing them to extend the capabilities of their own body (Lin, et al., 2023; Richardson, 2007). In addition, the dynamic positional information provided by GPS, as well as the contextual information that can be added to digital maps, made the experience more comfortable because of the reduction in spatial decision-making, where participants spoke of being on the right path and being able to quickly know where to go and what routes to take. In other words, participants felt safe in the certainty that digital maps provided and the digital wilderness skills that developed from their use, as these skills allowed them to know aspects of their environment in a digitally mediated, but more intimate way (Mullins, 2014). At the same time, participants spoke of the way that certainty was compromised when digital connectivity was not possible, as

digital maps proved to be a “double-edged sword” (Cuthbertson, et al., 2004:1) in which overreliance on this technology prevented the development of traditional navigational skills. While participants intimately knew the environment when it was digitally mediated, allowing them to make sense of it and thus feel safer, this intimate knowledge evaporated in instances where digital connection was not possible. This meant that, for the participants that relied on the communicative and navigational affordances of digital technologies, the perception of safety within the natural environment was entirely predicated on cellular connectivity.

- The digitally mediated hospitality environment of Hipcamp allowed the risks from the natural environment to diminish:

As my research has demonstrated, the use of digital technologies made some participants feel differently about the natural environment, fostering a sense of safety from its hazards and minimizing the perceived risks associated with the onsite camping experience, like getting lost. For participants that used Hipcamp, facilitating the camping experience through the digital platform had the effect of making them feel less isolated while onsite because a relationship was established with the host. The digital information about the host and the experience that was gathered before the trip, the digital reachability of the host both before and onsite, and the reputation mechanisms inherent to the platform, highlighted the hospitality context of the Hipcamp campsite. This context meant that campers could shift some of the onus of well-being, and by extension safety, to the host. As such, campers perceived the camping experience differently, where the danger associated with the natural environment lessened and in turn, the perceived value of digital technologies in mitigating those risks diminished as well. At the same time, the use of Hipcamp also impacted perceptions of safety in that hosts were less familiar to participants than the ‘familiar strangers’ (Milgram, 1977) of Park Rangers at public campgrounds. The lack of social familiarity and the prospect of a bad review from the host made the Hipcamp experience more

uncertain for some participants, causing them to self-regulate in a way that reduced the social and digital risks of misaligned behavioral expectations. The effect that this digitally mediated sociality had was that the freedom that is associated with wilderness, and thus the traditional camping experience, was not attainable for Hipcamp users. In addition, for participants that used Hipcamp, the experience of safety was markedly different from the experience of public campsites because of the meanings associated with private land ownership. The unequal power relationship between landowners and campers meant that, in the absence of outward hospitality while onsite, the experience of the environment became more menacing. What is important here is that the digitally mediated hospitality context of Hipcamp gave rise to new social experiences and concerns about safety, which had the effect of making the safety concerns about the natural environment less important than those of the digitally mediated social environment.

Onsite and Post-trip

- In an effort to preserve a sense of liminality while camping, participants are disconnecting from the digital sociality that is experienced in ordinary life

For some of my participants, the camping experience remains liminal, but that liminality is characterized by the way that participants used, or did not use, digital technologies to impact feelings of presence in a way that was deemed different from ordinary life. The liminal experience of camping, in which participants felt removed from ordinary life, was only made possible through “unplugging strategies” (Tanti and Buhalis, 2017) that allowed for digital technologies to be utilized in a way that was different from their everyday use. Participants found digital technologies to be distracting during the camping experience for reasons that included the corporeality of mobile phones, the reputation system mechanisms of Hipcamp that encouraged a sense of self-consciousness, and the communicative affordances of digital technologies that drew attention away from the participant’s immediate surroundings. This had the effect of making it difficult for participants to achieve the sense of escape from ordinary life that is critical to a liminal

camping experience. In particular, digital elasticity (Pearce, 2011) acted as a digital tether for participants, connecting them to their home worlds during the trip. In the effort to preserve camping as a liminal practice, where home worlds did not intrude, participants digitally disconnected from the aspects of digital sociality that were deemed more representative of ordinary life. These included norms around digital responsiveness and digital availability, subsequently creating a “reversal of habits” from ordinary sociality (Graburn, 2001:44). In other words, liminal experiences while camping were the direct result of participants disconnecting from everyday digital sociality and engaging in a more liminal digital sociality in which the boundaries around digital communication were held more firmly and the responsibility associated with everyday roles loosened. This had the effect of heightening a sense of social presence between individuals at the campsite, which was desired by participants and perceived as different from everyday life as so much of everyday life was mediated by digital technologies for these participants. What this revealed, then, was that Wiley’s (2005) tension between solitude and connectivity was not representative of modern camping experiences. Instead, a more accurate reflection of the tension exists between social presence and connectivity. In sum, because digital technologies pervade ordinary life, liminality while camping was thus marked by the usual expectations of digital technology usage being suspended, as well as the corresponding change in social experiences for participants. This revealed that, when digital technologies were perceived as diminishing social presence at the campsite, participants disconnected from digital sociality and these digital technologies diminished in social importance.

- When digital technologies augment the sensory presence and connection to the natural environment, they are valued for their utility:

For many of my participants, the value placed on the sensory experience of immersion in the natural environment guided their use of digital technologies during the onsite phase. For those participants that viewed the mediating qualities of digital technologies as preventing direct experience of the natural

world, and thus a sense of sensory presence, digital technologies were perceived as inauthentic. This had the effect of changing how digital technologies were used, causing these participants to disconnect more completely in an effort to preserve sensory presence. Other participants did not desire a purely unmediated experience, preferring a hybrid disconnection experience in which participants disconnected from digital sociality to maintain a sense of liminality but remained connected to these same digital technologies because of their utility in augmenting the sensory experience through digital mediation. This had the effect of creating a deeper sensory engagement than everyday life, thus preserving the liminality of the camping experience for participants. Participants used digital mediation to augment sensory presence in three ways. First, using digital technology to watch movies or play music blended into participants' sensory experience of the natural environment, thus enhancing their perception of it. Second, participants used a variety of apps to gain knowledge of the natural environment which had the effect of deepening their experience of it, and thus their appreciation of it. Third, and lastly, participants took photos and videos that mediated the experience onsite, but had the effect of allowing them to recollect the sensory experience of immersion in the natural environment after the trip had ended. Photos and videos, then, became "comfort-generating objects" (Pineau, 1982: 273) for their ability to impact well-being and also had the effect of increasing a sense of place attachment through the recollection of the sensory experience that the photos and videos afforded. Participants created what I call "digitally mediated flashbulb memories" where the liminal experience of camping was preserved through the digital mediation that augmented the sensory experience onsite.

- Liminality did not extend to the post-trip phase, but participants discovered a new-found appreciation for the mundanity and ease that characterize digital technologies upon return

As my research has demonstrated, the meaning and values that participants ascribe to digital technologies change throughout the camping experience and

are dependent on the participant's perception of the environment. In the post-trip stage of the camping trip, in which full digital connection is reestablished, participants no longer used digital technologies in a way that reinforced the liminal camping experience. Instead, the digital sociality that had changed during the experience, resumed to normalcy. For participants, this meant that gaining full digital connection could be experienced as sensory overload in which the communicative affordances of digital technologies were more difficult to dismiss than at the campsite. This also had the effect of giving the post-trip sensory experience a digital character through the digital sounds and images, which distracted from everything else. In addition, because the liminality of the onsite phase did not progress to the post-trip phase, participants experienced a return to normalcy in the way they used their phones, "slipping back into" ordinary habits (Helms, et al., 2019:14-15). This meant that regaining full connection was mundane, but this mundanity was welcomed by participants, as the disconnection from digital technologies during the onsite phase revealed how much participants appreciate them in ordinary life. In addition, participants expressed newfound appreciation for the comfort, ease, and simplicity that digital technologies grant to ordinary life. Accordingly, this suggests that the onsite phase of the camping trip resets the relationship to digital technologies in a way that can only be experienced when regaining connection in the post-trip phase. It also suggests that the liminal experience of camping extends to participant's perceptions of digital technologies, where the meanings ascribed to digital technologies and the way they were subsequently used mirrored the three sequential stages of liminality. In turn, this revealed how the participant's liminal experience is deeply entwined with the digital technologies that are used during and after the experience.

7.3 Contributions of Research

My research contributes to an understanding of digital technologies and camping in many ways and fills the gaps in literature that were identified in the first chapters of this dissertation. I will outline five ways in which it does so.

- My research focuses on the tensions between wilderness and technology specifically as they relate to camping as a practice in the United States, with its own set of materials, competencies and meanings.

As established in chapters one and two, the use of technology within wilderness has been conceptualized as creating tensions for outdoor recreationists with regard to risk versus security, solitude versus connectivity, mediation versus direct experience, and knowledge versus the unknown (Wiley, 2005). However, research has not been undertaken in relation to the specific practice of camping and instead has either focused on other outdoor recreational activities (Dustin, et al., 2019; Pope and Martin, 2011; Warner, et al., 2020), other geographical contexts (Dickinson et al., 2016; Shultis, 2015) or has provided suppositions without empirical evidence about the vague and more general concept of wilderness (Carlson, et al., 2016; Wiley, 2005). What is noteworthy about my research, then, is that I have empirically examined these tensions as they relate to camping as a specific practice, and within the context of the United States, which has its own associated meanings, competencies and materials. What this has contributed is an understanding of the way that digital technologies are impacting the lives of American campers, which is an increasingly popular form of recreation with almost 80 million active camper households (2020). Therefore, my study contributes to research revolving around camping and the impact that digital technologies are having on the social, experiential, and physical aspects of this specific practice.

- My research focuses on each stage of the camping experience as opposed to focusing on just one phase.

As was established in chapter one, outdoor recreational experiences are multi-phasic and dynamic (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001; Hammitt, 1980; Harmon and Dunlap, 2017). Most empirical research related to camping has gravitated towards understanding onsite visitor experiences as opposed to the

pre-trip and post-trip phases (Garst, et al., 2009; Huang, et al, 2025). Each phase has its own characteristics and is characterized by evolving states of mind of the participant (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966; Hammitt, 1980), which means that focusing on just the onsite phase of the experience neglects the other impacts that may arise from digital technology use. For example, by examining uncertainty, which is characteristic of the pre-trip stage of any recreational experience, my research was able to identify how uncertainty is experienced by campers through the digital technologies they use and then link this concept to how safety is experienced in the onsite phase. What my research contributes, then, is a deeper understanding of each phase of the camping experience and how its characteristics are impacted by digital technologies which, in turn, provides a more holistic view of the effect that they are having on campers.

- My research contributes to understandings of new and current iterations of technologies

In their review of emerging issues and directions for research with regard to technology in wilderness, Carlson (et al., 2016) note that the effect of newer technologies like cell and satellite phones, GPS units, information sharing via the Internet, and personal locator beacons, are not well studied and understood in terms of their biophysical, psychological and behavioral impacts. Accordingly, they suggest that this be rectified through empirical studies. My research directly answers this call by providing empirical research that examines the way that newer and current iterations of digital technologies are impacting the social, experiential, and physical aspects of the camping experience. Major digital technology trends, including mobile broadband, peer-to-peer platforms, user-generated content, and smartphones with new capabilities and applications like Emergency SOS, are all addressed and examined in my research. Accordingly, this research provides an overdue and update to camping literature that takes into account these developments.

- My research contributes to understandings of uncertainty and the impact of using digital technologies in the pre-trip planning phase of camping

The use of digital technologies, and especially social media, in the pre-trip planning stage of a recreational trip and its impact on the expectations for the onsite experience has been widely studied in outdoor recreation literature, especially as it impacts the initial perception and selection of a destination (Hafidz Al Fajar and Erlangga, 2025; Low, et al., 2022; Mollin, et al., 2025). What is notable about my study is that I have explored how the uncertainties that are inherent to the camping experience, due to the hazards associated with the natural environment, the lack of infrastructure, and the scarcity of public campsites, can be seen as impacting the digital strategies that are employed in the pre-trip phase, but also how the digital technologies themselves can feed a sense of uncertainty. In other words, my study is unique in that it looks at uncertainty from two angles, from the practice of camping itself as well as the uncertainty that results from digital technology use. Following this, my research adds to discussions revolving around the use of digital technologies in the planning phase and their effect on the already uncertain experience of camping.

- My research contributes to understandings of the ways that safety is experienced in different digitally mediated camping contexts

There are pieces of empirical research that explore the impact of specific digital technologies on outdoor recreation, notably cell phones, satellite phones, and personal locator beacons (Heggie, T.W., Amundson, M.E., 2009; Pope and Martin, 2011). However my research both contributes to this body of research and differs from it by looking at how specific affordances of these digital technologies, like navigation and communication, are influencing how safety is perceived, instead of highlighting the implications for search and rescue, which is the focus of previous studies. My research also adds to discussions revolving around digital technology and safety for outdoor recreationists through an examination of how Hipcamp impacts feelings of

safety during the onsite experience. In general, there is very little research that examines peer-to-peer accommodation platforms that are specific to camping and in particular, the way that the unique social aspects of a digitally-mediated hospitality experience might impact considerations for safety.

- My research contributes to understandings of presence and the impact of digital connection on the perception of liminal camping experiences

There is an established body of research that examines digital disconnection in leisure, how it is experienced, and the motivations behind it (Harmon and Duffy, 2023; Pearce and Gretzel, 2012; Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier, 2021; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). The liminal experience of outdoor recreation has also been explored in existing research (Ayazlar and Ayazlar, 2024; Carnicelli Filho, 2014; Vidon, Rickly & Knudsen, 2018). What is different about my research is that it not only connects the two threads of research to the camping practice, but does so through the concept of presence, which is pertinent to both liminal experiences and digital disconnection. In turn, by examining how campers are navigating digitally elastic spaces, this study contributes to an understanding of how presence can serve as a link between research on liminality and research on digital disconnection.

7.4 Limitations of Research

Limitations exist within this research which will now be addressed. First, this research employed a qualitative case study as its methodological strategy and design. This decision was justified by the type of information that this research was interested in understanding. Accordingly, the results of case study research can be criticized for their lack of generalizability, leading to questions regarding their validity. Because case studies are context specific, the results of the research cannot be generalized to a broad population. For example, a study conducted in a different country could yield other results due to different conceptions of the natural environment and digital technology. Yet, it was never the intention of this research to

make generalizations and was instead to focus deeply on a specific case of a burgeoning phenomena that may lead to additional research questions (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Indeed, the aim of this research was to provide insight into the way that digital technologies might be impacting the social, experiential, and physical aspects of a camping experience and I have used a standard research strategy which strengthens the validity of the study. While this may be true, a mixed-methods approach might have exposed new findings as to the effect of digital technologies on the camping experience because the approach adds “depth and breadth” and creates a more “holistic picture” of a study (Wasti, et al., 2022). Future projects could employ this approach.

Reliability is another limitation due to the utilization of snowball sampling and the potential for sample bias in which the sample is influenced by the preferences and social networks of the initial participants. This can lead to an unrepresentative sample which also has implications for generalizability. As noted in chapter three, it was difficult to recruit campers using social media. As such, snowball sampling was warranted in order to gain access to a larger sample and thus achieve data saturation. While this research is not interested in making generalizations, the resulting composition of participants from snowball sampling may have led to different results than if the sample was not based on social networks. For example, sixteen of the twenty-nine participants in this project were from California, which is likely a result of snowball sampling. In recognizing this limitation, future projects could take a different approach to sampling that increased reliability.

Using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method is also a limitation. Interviews can often result in participants giving answers that elicit the approval of the researcher (Biggam, 2015). Because I was aware of this possibility, I took steps to address this limitation by using an interview guide that permitted consistency with the questions asked and topics addressed. In addition, instead of relying on one form of data collection and instead combining it with another data collection method, triangulation would be possible in “an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint” giving it “a more balanced picture of the situation” (Cohen and Manion, 2000: 254; Feldman et al., 2018: 147; Johnson, Long, White, 2001). For example, participant observation, participant diaries, or focus groups could have

increased the credibility and validity of results (Wilson, 2014). Future projects could thus utilize more data collection methods.

Another limitation with the interviews is that they were all conducted online using a video conferencing platform. While this was justified for convenience and cost-effectiveness, there are relational and communication barriers with online interviewing that are not as strong as in-person interviews (Lobe, et al., 2022). Future research could have the researcher conduct interviews in-person.

Limitations related to the reliability of the study are also found in the use of thematic analysis. The amount of information provided in interviews can lead to a breadth of things that can be said about the data collected. This can result in unfocused analysis and findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While this limitation was addressed by using the theoretical framework detailed in the literature review as a basis for thematic analysis and by focusing on the repetition of topics in the data set, another form of analysis could ensure focus. For example, by using content analysis and systematically counting the frequency of keywords or themes, focus could be more easily achieved. Accordingly, future projects could employ a different form of analysis depending on the questions being asked and the information that it is interested in.

While it is important to point out the ways in which this research is limited, the research I conducted is ultimately valid because I used research strategies, data collection techniques and data analysis methods that are often used within the research community. Further, they are appropriate to my research objectives.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Research

My research has aimed to understand the social, experiential, and physical impacts of digital technology on the camping experience. Emphasis has been placed on uncertainty and comfort, risk and safety, as well as presence and digital disconnection within the three phases of a camping experience. As this emphasis is quite specific, there are many ways that future projects could contribute to knowledge in the field. These focuses can be broken into three categories: other potential impacts of digital technologies, Hipcamp as a specific technology, and methodological changes. As it pertains to the first category, future research could perhaps explore how a specific technology is being used throughout the camping

experience. As artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming more ingrained in the technologies used for outdoor recreation its impacts are relatively unknown and could be an interesting aspect to explore, especially as it relates to some of the focuses and findings of this research. In addition, camping norms have not been extensively studied. Understanding what behavioral norms exist within the campground and during the onsite phase of a camping trip, as well as what norms are altered through the use of digital technologies, is a pertinent area of study. Indeed, participants in this research often spoke of perceived proper phone use as opposed to improper phone use while camping, which implies the existence of social norms. Pursuing this thread could prove fruitful.

As for the second category, Hipcamp emerged as an interesting demographic of campers whose entire camping experience is facilitated by technology. My findings could be built upon here, focusing specifically on how Hipcamp campers use technology throughout each phase of the trip, with existing studies regarding peer-to-peer accommodation platforms forming a theoretical foundation. Consequently, this could open up an opportunity for understanding how concepts like emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and 'touristification' (Guttentag, 2013) are applied in a wilderness context. The guest and host relationship could be studied or a comparison of public camping and private camping experiences could reveal differences in the way that digital technologies are impacting each recreational activity.

Methodologically speaking, future research could employ a different research methodology, possibly a survey, in order to make larger generalizations about the impact of digital technologies on the camping experience. In this vein, expanding the sample beyond the United States could reveal interesting findings about the way that digital technology use is perceived while camping. As mentioned, camping within the United States is its own practice, with associated meanings, materials, and competencies. A different context is essentially a different practice, which means that the experiences of campers from a different country could highlight similarities and differences to the American camping experience and thus deepen an understanding of the impact of digital technologies on this popular form of outdoor recreation. Regardless of the path that future studies take, my research can serve as a starting point for future research precisely because it has examined the social, experiential,

and physical impact of digital technologies on each phase of the camping experience, producing findings that both provide insights and lead to more questions about the continually evolving practice of camping.

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Appendices

Appendix A Participant List

Table 1: Participant List

Name:	Sex:	Age:	Location:	Occupation:	Used Hipcamp:
Adrian	M	33	New York	Program Manager, Tech	Yes
Alden	M	40	North Carolina	IT Business Analyst	Yes
Valerie	F	37	California	Engineer	Yes
Miles	M	40	California	Product Designer	Yes
Lara	F	32	California	Marketing, Tech	Yes
Dorian	M	38	New York	Corporate Counsel	No
Grant	M	26	Washington	Software Engineer	No
Adele	F	34	California	Product Manager, Tech	Yes
Sachin	M	31	Massachusetts	Software Engineer	Yes
Romy	F	50	California	CEO, Tech	Yes
Jolie	F	43	Texas	Videographer and City Clerk	Yes
Logan	M	35	California	Legal Director	Yes
Sable	F	33	California	Nanny	Yes
Vernon	M	32	California	Holistic Psychotherapist	No

Ariadne	F	35	California	Homemaker	No
Kiera	F	37	Arizona	SVP Customer Success, Tech	Yes
Eva	F	37	California	Production and Project Management, Animation	No
Lina	F	40	Oregon	Employee Training and Development	No
Stellan	M	35	Washington	Mechanical Engineer	No
Jessa	F	35	California	Freelance Photographer	No
Nico	M	35	Tennessee	Accounting and Finance	No
Corinne	F	35	California	Occupational Therapist	No
Rhett	M	35	California	Marketing, Tech	No
Serena	F	30	California	Nanny	No
Luna	F	26	Washington	Nurse	No
Stuart	M	48	California	Nurse	No
Lorelai	F	42	California	Graduate Student	Yes
Jack	M	33	California	Vineyard Management	No
Kendall	F	30	Nevada	Graduate	No

				Research Assistant	
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Appendix B Semi-Structured Interview Guide with Media

Go-Along

Interview Guide (60 min)

Icebreaker

- Provide information about the study.
 - PhD Researcher in sociology at City, University of London
 - I would like to better understand how our relationship to technology may change when camping.
 - I'm conducting interviews to get an in-depth understanding of this topic.
 - I'll be asking about your experience using technology before, during, and after the Hipcamp camping trip. The interview will be audio recorded.
 - The interview should last close to an hour and the more detail and examples you can provide, the better.
- Answer any questions you have?
- If you don't mind, I'd like to start the audio recording now.

Interviewee and Contextual Information

- Please tell me more information about yourself and the experience
 - Name
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Location
 - Job
 - How often do you go camping?
 - How often do you use Hipcamp?
 - What time of year do you go camping?
 - Do you camp on your own or with other people?
 - Were there other campers at the same campground?

Media Go- Along

Description of method: We'll start with the media go-along portion of the interview. Together we will look at, navigate and talk about your use of the Hipcamp app or website. Do you mind sharing your screen now? I'll start the video recording as well.

Search Process and Use of Filters

- These questions will pertain to the search process.
- Homepage
 - Do you spend any time on the homepage? If so, what aspects of it?
 - Is your search ever influenced by the prepopulated locations in the "search destinations" field?

- Aggregated listings page
 - Show me how you use the aggregated listings page
 - Do you use the map view?
 - What is useful about this view?
 - Do you ever use the connectivity filter? Why? What other filters?
 - Describe the results that you've received
 - How many additional rounds of searching/filtering do you typically go through?
 - What filters do you use and why?
 - How would this compare to how you filter for a hotel/airbnb/regular campsite?
 - How many pages do you typically go through when searching for a campsite?
 - What pictures stand out and why?
- Specific listing page
 - Tell me about how you use the specific listing page
 - What are the most important pieces of information for you when using this page?
 - Do you look at "things to do nearby"?
 - Does this influence what you do during the stay?
- Booking process
 - Do you send a message to the host?
 - What do you typically say?
- Can you provide an example of the kind of camping experience you initially intended to book and what you ended up booking by the end of the search process?
 - What was similar?
 - What was different?
- How does this process differ or resemble the process for booking public campsites?

Digital Communication and Reviews

- Digital communication
 - Go through the top five recent people that you've been messaging, you don't have to show me the messages, but maybe just tell me who this person is and what kind of conversation you've been having with this person
 - If you conversed before the trip, how did this conversation affect your trip?
 - Are many online conversations had during the trip? If so, what are they typically about?
 - Can you give me some examples?
 - How often do you communicate via the website/app?

- Can you give me some examples?
- Reviews
 - What is the review process like for you? Walk me through it
 - Can you expand on this?
 - Is there anything else you can tell me?
 - Can you give me some examples?
 - Is there any information that you choose not to include and why?
 - Can you expand on this?
 - Is there anything else you can tell me?
 - Can you give me some examples?
 - Do you ever leave a negative review? Why or why not?
 - Do you have any examples?

Guest Profile and Host Profile

- Do you mind if we talk a little bit about your self-presentation on the app? You can either show me on the screen or keep it to yourself and explain to me how you present yourself
 - Can you expand on this?
 - Is there anything else you could tell me?
- What information do you include and why?
 - Can you expand on this?
 - Is there anything else you could tell me?
 - Can you give me some examples?
- In other apps (e.g. Airbnb) do you have any differences in the pictures you put as profile pictures or in the information you include? Why?
 - Can you expand on this?
 - Is there anything else you could tell me?
 - Can you give me some examples?
- Do you ever look at host profiles? If so, what do you look at/for?

Wrap-Up

- Is there anything that you'd like to add that we haven't touched on in this portion of the interview?

Table 2: Pre-Trip Questions

Main Question:	Follow Up Questions:
What motivates you to go camping?	● Can you expand on this? ● Is there anything else you could tell me?
How does camping compare to different types of vacation?	● Can you expand on this? ● Is there anything else you could tell me?

	• Can you give me some examples?
How did you find out about Hipcamp and what motivated you to use Hipcamp in particular?	• Can you expand on this? • Is there anything else you could tell me? • Can you give me some examples?
How do you plan your camping trips?	• How did you use Hipcamp or any other digital technologies (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, Strava) to plan the trip? • How does this compare to planning a trip to a public campground? • Can you give me some examples?
What are the differences between Hipcamp and public campgrounds?	• Can you expand on this? • Is there anything else you could tell me? • Can you give me some examples?
What online information was most important to you when choosing which campsite to book? E.g., pictures, videos, reviews	• Why? • How does this compare to planning a trip to a public campground? • Can you give me some examples?
How did this information impact your expectations for the trip?	• What impact did this have on you going into the trip? • Did it impact your excitement? • Please provide examples.
Did any of this information help you feel connected to the land you'd be camping on?	• Please elaborate on this.
Did you communicate with the host before the trip?	• Please elaborate on this. • How did this impact the trip? • Please provide examples.
Has access to campsites/booking public or private campsites ever been an issue or prohibited you from going camping?	• Can you provide an example?
Has difficulty in accessing information	• Can you provide an example?

about a public or private campsite ever been an issue or prohibited you from going camping?	
Have you ever felt that the information that you've provided online with Hipcamp (e.g. profile picture, location), or that has been provided about you (e.g. reviews), has had an impact on being able to book a campsite?	• Can you provide an example?
Is there anything else you'd like to add or expand upon?	

Table 3: Onsite Questions - Personal Relationship with Technology

Main Question:	Follow Up Questions
How did you use your phone while at the Hipcamp campground? (e.g. social media, documentation, communication, information, entertainment)	• Was this different from using your phone in other spaces (home, public campground)? • Can you elaborate on this? • Did it enhance your experience? How? • Did it detract from your experience? How?
Were you ever without your phone or connectivity (e.g., internet access, cell service, wifi)?	• Please describe. • How did it feel? • Did you seek out connectivity if you didn't have it?
Did you ever purposely disconnect from technology during your stay?	• Why? Why not? How? • Describe the experience.
Did having your phone impact how safe you felt?	• Please describe. • Did having your phone/connectivity play a role in taking new risks?
Did you ever find that you were focused on your phone instead of your physical surroundings?	• Please describe.
Did using your phone change how you interacted with your surroundings?	• Were you able to explore your surroundings more?

	Did you feel more in control of your surroundings?
Did any of the digital technologies used (your phone, the Hipcamp app, etc.) help you establish or preserve a connection to the natural world?	Please describe.
Did you feel like the importance of your mobile phone changed while camping? (greater or lesser)	Please describe.
Did any of the campsites feel like they were 'Instagrammable'?	- Please describe. - How did this make you feel?
Is there anything else you'd like to add or expand upon?	

Table 4 : Onsite Questions - Social Relationship with Technology - Companions, Other Campers, Hosts

Main Question:	Follow Up Questions:
Did you feel that it was socially acceptable to be on your phone at the campsite? Why or why not?	- Please describe. - How does this compare to other places? (e.g. home, public campground)
When was it socially acceptable to be on your phone? When was it not socially acceptable?	- Please describe. - How did you know? - How does this compare to other places? (e.g. home, public campground)
Were some ways you used your phone more acceptable than others?	Please describe.
Did anyone ever comment on you using technology?	What was said?
Were you ever self-conscious or mindful of using your phone while camping?	- Please describe. - Were there any differences with camping at a public campground?
Did you ever find yourself trying to hide the fact you were using digital technology?	- Please describe how you changed your behavior. - Please describe why you changed your behavior.

How did you feel about others using their phones while camping?	• Please describe.
Did your use of digital technology ever prompt social connections, either in person or virtually?	• Please describe.
Did you share any of the experience with anyone that was not currently on the trip with you while you were camping?	• Examples: Social media, texting, sending pictures/videos, facetime, AllTrails, Strava • When? • Why? • What did you choose to share?
Did you feel connected to your social life at home/work while at Hipcamp? If so, how did you maintain that connection?	• Please describe.
Did you feel like this was a private or a public experience?	• Please explain. • How did this compare to camping at a public campground?
Did you interact with the host during the experience? Please describe.	• Was the host present? Or did you interact online with the host? • How did this compare with camping in a public campground?
Were you ever prompted by the host, either in person or through signage at the campsite, to share your experience online with others?	• Please describe • If so, did you do so? • How did this make you feel?
Did you ever alter your behavior or interactions with hosts to maintain good reviews/high ratings with Hipcamp?	• What about how you deal with different expectations or conflicts with hosts or other campers? • Do you behave differently at a public campground without personal reviews? How so?
Is there anything else you'd like to add or expand upon?	

Table 5: Post-Trip Questions

Main Question:	Follow Up Questions:
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Please describe your experience with the ratings and feedback features of Hipcamp.	• Was leaving a review important to you? • If so, why? • How does this compare to a public campground?
Did your relationship with digital technology change upon returning from your trip?	• Was it used more after the trip? Used less? More aware of it? • Please explain.
Did you have any online interactions with the host, or anybody you met at the Hipcamp, after the experience?	• Please provide examples.
Did you publicize your trip in any way after the experience?	• Describe how and why. • To whom? • Does this practice differ from camping at a public camp site?
Has camping at Hipcamp sites led to any recurring interactions or friendships with the hosts?	• Please describe. • Are you more likely to return to that Hipcamp site because of the host? • Are these relationships different from the relationships made on public campsites?
Did your use of digital technology help preserve a sense of connection to nature?	• Please describe.
Did any of the interactions you had result in a stronger connection to the land you were camping on?	

Is there anything you would like to add, or anything these questions have led to you reflecting on?

Appendix C Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Interview Guide (60 min)

Icebreaker

- Provide information about the study.
 - PhD Researcher in sociology at City, University of London
 - I would like to better understand how our relationship to technology may change when camping.
 - I'm conducting interviews to get an in-depth understanding of this topic.
 - I'll be asking about your experience using technology before, during, and after the camping trip. The interview will be audio and video recorded.
 - The interview should last close to an hour and the more detail and examples you can provide, the better.
- Answer any questions you have?
- If you don't mind, I'd like to start the audio recording now.

Interviewee and Contextual Information

- Please tell me more information about yourself and the experience
 - Name
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Location
 - Job
 - How often do you go camping?
 - What time of year do you go camping?
 - Do you camp on your own or with other people?
 - Were there other campers at the same campground?

Table 6: Pre-Trip Questions

Main Question:	Follow Up Questions:
What motivates you to go camping?	● Can you expand on this? ● Is there anything else you could tell me?
How does camping compare to different types of vacation?	● Can you expand on this? ● Is there anything else you could tell me? ● Can you give me some examples?
How do you plan your camping trips?	● How did you use digital

	technologies (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, Strava) to plan the trip? • Can you give me some examples?
What online information was most important to you when choosing which campsite to book? E.g., pictures, videos, reviews	• Why? • Can you give me some examples?
How did this information impact your expectations for the trip?	• What impact did this have on you going into the trip? • Did it impact your excitement? • Please provide examples.
Did any of this information help you feel connected to the land you'd be camping on?	• Please elaborate on this.
Did you communicate with the anybody from the campground before the trip?	• Please elaborate on this. • How did this impact the trip? • Please provide examples.
Has access to campsites/booking public or private campsites ever been an issue or prohibited you from going camping?	• Can you provide an example?
Has difficulty in accessing information about a public or private campsite ever been an issue or prohibited you from going camping?	• Can you provide an example?
Is there anything else you'd like to add or expand upon?	

Table 7: Onsite Questions - Personal Relationship with Technology

Main Question:	Follow Up Questions
How did you use your phone while at the campground? (e.g. social media, documentation, communication, information, entertainment)	• Was this different from using your phone in other spaces (home, public campground)? • Can you elaborate on this? • Did it enhance your experience? How?

	• Did it detract from your experience? • How?
Were you ever without your phone or connectivity (e.g., internet access, cell service, wifi)?	• Please describe. • How did it feel? • Did you seek out connectivity if you didn't have it?
Did you ever purposely disconnect from technology during your stay?	• Why? Why not? How? • Describe the experience.
Did having your phone impact how safe you felt?	• Please describe. • Did having your phone/connectivity play a role in taking new risks?
Did you ever find that you were focused on your phone instead of your physical surroundings?	• Please describe.
Did using your phone change how you interacted with your surroundings?	• Were you able to explore your surroundings more? • Did you feel more in control of your surroundings?
Did any of the digital technologies used (your phone, etc.) help you establish or preserve a connection to the natural world?	• Please describe.
Did you feel like the importance of your mobile phone changed while camping? (greater or lesser)	• Please describe.
Did any of the campsites feel like they were 'Instagrammable'?	• Please describe. • How did this make you feel?
Is there anything else you'd like to add or expand upon?	

Table 8: Onsite Questions - Social Relationship with Technology - Companions, Other Campers, Campground Managers

Main Question:	Follow Up Questions:
Did you feel that it was socially acceptable to be on your phone at the	• Please describe. • How does this compare to other

campsite? Why or why not?	places? (e.g. home, city)
When was it socially acceptable to be on your phone? When was it not socially acceptable?	• Please describe. • How did you know? • How does this compare to other places? (e.g. home, city)
Were some ways you used your phone more acceptable than others?	• Please describe.
Did anyone ever comment on you using technology?	• What was said?
Were you ever self-conscious or mindful of using your phone while camping?	• Please describe. • How does this compare to other places (e.g. home, city)
Did you ever find yourself trying to hide the fact you were using digital technology?	• Please describe how you changed your behavior. • Please describe why you changed your behavior.
How did you feel about others using their phones while camping?	• Please describe.
Did your use of digital technology ever prompt social connections, either in person or virtually?	• Please describe.
Did you share any of the experience with anyone that was not currently on the trip with you while you were camping?	• Examples: Social media, texting, sending pictures/videos, facetime, AllTrails, Strava • When? • Why? • What did you choose to share?
Did you feel connected to your social life at home/work while camping? If so, how did you maintain that connection?	• Please describe.
Did you feel like this was a private or a public experience?	• Please explain.
Did you interact with any campground managers or rangers during the experience? Please describe.	• Was the campground manager or ranger physically present? How often? • Did you interact online with anyone representing the public campsite?
Were you ever prompted by the	• Please describe

campground manager or rangers, either in person or through signage at the campsite, to share your experience online with others?	• If so, did you do so? • How did this make you feel?
Did you ever alter your behavior or interactions with hosts to maintain good standing with the campground management?	• What about how you deal with different expectations or conflicts with campground management or other campers? • Do you behave differently at a place with personal reviews (e.g. Airbnb)? How so?
Is there anything else you'd like to add or expand upon?	

Table 9: Post-Trip Questions

Main Question:	Follow Up Questions:
Do you ever leave reviews for public campsites?	• If so, why?
Did your relationship with digital technology change upon returning from your trip?	• Was it used more after the trip? Used less? More aware of it? • Please explain.
Did you have any online interactions with anybody you met at the campsite, after the experience?	• Please provide examples.
Did you publicize your trip in any way after the experience?	• Describe how and why. • To whom?
Has camping at public campsites led to any recurring interactions or friendships with other campers or campground management?	• Please describe. • Are you more likely to return to that campsite because of the management? • Are these relationships different from the relationships made elsewhere?
Did your use of digital technology help preserve a sense of connection to nature?	• Please describe.
Did any of the interactions you had	

result in a stronger connection to the land you were camping on?	
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Is there anything you would like to add, or anything these questions have led to you reflecting on?

Appendix D Hipcamp Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

REC reference number, date and version of information sheet

REF: ETH2324-0329

Date: 18 October, 2023

Version: Version2

Title of study: The Sharing Economy Goes Wild: An Examination of the Spatial, Social and Experiential Impact of Hipcamp on Wilderness Camping

Name of principal researcher: Eryn Parker

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep.

What is the purpose of the study?

Research has indicated that digital disconnection, comfort, hospitality, and accessibility are all salient aspects of the social world of camping. The use of a digital platform like Hipcamp potentially introduces tensions to these four aspects and may thus alter the way that recreationists view and participate in this leisure activity.

In particular, I would like to gain an understanding of the impact that peer-to-peer accommodation platforms for outdoor camping, like Hipcamp, might have on the motivations and values, social interactions, and means of access to recreation for its users. Accordingly, I am interested in exploring the following questions:

- How might the traditional camper motivations of digital disconnection and escape be altered through the use of Hipcamp and its mechanisms of surveillance?
- How is the concept of comfort constructed by landowners and experienced by campers?
- How do landowners and campers understand the role of the host and how does this affect social interactions between these two groups?
- What are the ways that Hipcamp may impact accessibility to outdoor recreation for campers?

Why have I been invited to take part?

I am interested in understanding the experiences of a range of Hipcamp users (regarding age, gender, ethnicity). You have been invited to take part because you have camped or hosted campers using Hipcamp within the past 6 months, you reside in the United States, and you are over 18 years old.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Once the data has been anonymised/published, you will no longer be able to withdraw your data. Additionally, any data collected up to the point of withdrawal will be retained.

What will happen if I take part?

Agreeing to take part in this project will involve participating in one semi-structured online interview expected to last 60 minutes. Part one of the interview will explore your thoughts and feelings about your use of Hipcamp and its impact on your camping experiences. Part two of the interview will include a walk-through of the Hipcamp mobile application or website and a discussion around your use of it (e.g. search engine interface, listings page, profile, inbox, trips and other related elements). A follow-up interview may be requested and will occur on an agreed upon date/time. The interview will be audio recorded and, if permitted, the walkthrough will be video recorded.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I do not foresee any disadvantages or risks in taking part in this study. Yet, there is the possibility that you may be uncomfortable providing answers about your camping experience or walking through your Hipcamp app. To address these potential concerns, my questions are sensitively worded and all personal data will be anonymized and kept confidential. Additionally, participants can refuse to answer, challenge, or withdraw from the research project at any point.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I hope that participating in this research project will provide an opportunity to both reflect on and share your unique experience and perspective of using a digital platform to facilitate camping. Additionally, I hope that this research will yield insights into the ways that Hipcamp may be altering the camping experience for you personally, as well as for the broader camping community.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you would like to take part in this research, please complete and sign the consent form. I will then schedule an online interview with you at your earliest convenience.

Data privacy statement

City, University of London is the sponsor and the data controller of this study based in the United Kingdom. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The legal basis under which your data will be processed is City's public task.

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in a specific way in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personally identifiable information possible (for further information please see

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/public-task/>).

City will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study as necessary. If you wish to receive the results of the study, your contact details will also be kept for this purpose. The only people at City who will have access to your identifiable information will be members of the research team, and, if appropriate, individuals with responsibility for monitoring and auditing at City, including of research projects. There may be occasions when regulatory authorities may access research data in accordance with their statutory powers. City will keep identifiable information about you from this study for 10 years after the study has finished.

You can find out more about how City handles personal data by visiting <https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/policies/data-protection-policy>. You can also read City's general privacy notice by visiting <https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/policies/general-privacy-notice>. If you are concerned about how we have processed your personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) directly <https://ico.org.uk/>.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All of the information you provide, including any personal data, audio recordings, and video recordings will be kept confidential to ensure anonymity and will be used for the purposes of this study and any future publications. Participants will be given pseudonyms and direct quotes will be anonymized through the use of these pseudonyms. Digital data will be securely stored in a password protected laptop and in City, University of London's cloud storage (OneDrive) and all files will be encrypted. Data will be kept for 10 years and will be destroyed thereafter.

What will happen to the results?

The results of this study will be made publicly available in City, University of London's open access repository, City Research Online, and in EThOS, the British Library's thesis discovery service. Further, the results of this study will be used to write academic articles exploring the ways that digital technologies are changing our

experiences of, and relationship to, the outdoors. In each instance of publication, anonymity will be maintained.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City, University of London Department of Sociology and Criminology Research Ethics Committee.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is The Sharing Economy Goes Wild: An Examination of the Spatial, Social, and Experiential Impact of Hipcamp on Wilderness Camping

You can also write to the Secretary at:

Annah Whyton
Research & Enterprise Office
City, University of London
Northampton Square
London, EC1V 0HB
Email: senaterec@city.ac.uk

Insurance

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study, subject to the terms and conditions of the policy. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Further information and contact details

Dr. Michael Saker

Senior Lecturer in Digital Sociology and Societal Change

City, University of London



Professor Dan Mercea

Professor of Digital and Social Change

City, University of London



Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix E Public Camper Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

REC reference number, date and version of information sheet

REF: ETH2324-0329

Date: 31 May,

2024 Version:

Version 2

Title of study: The Sharing Economy Goes Wild: An Examination of the Spatial, Social and Experiential Impact of Hipcamp on Wilderness Camping

Name of principal researcher: Eryn Parker

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep.

What is the purpose of the study?

My research asks how our relationship to digital technology might change throughout the camping experience and aims to understand the impact that this form of recreation might have on the motivations and values, social interactions, and means of access for campers.

Significantly, the context in which we use digital technologies shapes our relationship with them. Our experiences with digital technology are “an ever-changing result of the interplay between the user, technology (i.e., devices), other individuals, and the environment as a whole” (von Terzi, Tretter, et. al, 2021: 2). Following this, I am interested in the experiences of two groups of campers within different social and environmental contexts: campers at private campgrounds whose experience is mediated through the digital peer-to-peer accommodation platform Hipcamp, and campers who do not use Hipcamp and instead use public campsites. Four questions arise from the aim of this research:

- How is digital (dis)connection managed, both personally and interpersonally, throughout the camping experience?
- How do digital technologies influence the degree to which risk or comfort is felt throughout the camping experience?

- How does the use of digital technologies impact interactions with different social groups, both in person and virtually, throughout the camping experience?
- In what ways do digital technologies impact accessibility to camping experiences?

Why have I been invited to take part?

I am interested in understanding the experiences of a range of campers (regarding age, gender, ethnicity). You have been invited to take part because you have camped at a public campground, you reside in the United States, and you are over 18 years old.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Once the data has been anonymised/published, you will no longer be able to withdraw your data. Additionally, any data collected up to the point of withdrawal will be retained.

What will happen if I take part?

Agreeing to take part in this project will involve participating in one semi-structured online interview expected to last 60 minutes. The interview will explore your thoughts and feelings about your use of technology and its impact on your camping experiences. A follow-up interview may be requested and will occur on an agreed upon date/time. The interview will be audio recorded and, if permitted, will be video recorded.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I do not foresee any disadvantages or risks in taking part in this study. Yet, there is the possibility that you may be uncomfortable providing answers about your camping experience. To address these potential concerns, my questions are sensitively worded and all personal data will be anonymized and kept confidential. Additionally, participants can refuse to answer, challenge, or withdraw from the research project at any point.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I hope that participating in this research project will provide an opportunity to both reflect on and share your unique experience and perspective of using technology throughout the camping experience. Additionally, I hope that this research will yield insights into the ways that our relationship to technology may change when camping and how technology is potentially altering the camping experience for you personally, as well as for the broader camping community.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you would like to take part in this research, please complete and sign the consent form. I will then schedule an online interview with you at your earliest convenience.

Data privacy statement

City, University of London is the sponsor and the data controller of this study based in the United Kingdom. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The legal basis under which your data will be processed is City's public task.

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in a specific way in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personally identifiable information possible (for further information please see <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/public-task/>).

City will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study as necessary. If you wish to receive the results of the study, your contact details will also be kept for this purpose. The only people at City who will have access to your identifiable information will be members of the research team, and, if appropriate, individuals with responsibility for monitoring and auditing at City, including of research projects. There may be occasions when regulatory authorities may access research data in accordance with their statutory powers. City will keep identifiable information about you from this study for 10 years after the study has finished.

You can find out more about how City handles personal data by visiting <https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/policies/data-protection-policy>. You can also read City's general privacy notice by visiting <https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/policies/general-privacy-notice>. If you are concerned about how we have processed your personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) directly <https://ico.org.uk/>.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All of the information you provide, including any personal data, audio recordings, and video recordings will be kept confidential to ensure anonymity and will be used for the purposes of this study and any future publications. Participants will be given pseudonyms and direct quotes will be anonymized through the use of these pseudonyms. Digital data will be securely stored in a password protected laptop and in City, University of London's cloud storage (OneDrive) and all files will be encrypted. Data will be kept for 10 years and will be destroyed thereafter.

What will happen to the results?

The results of this study will be made publicly available in City, University of London's open access repository, City Research Online, and in EThOS, the British Library's thesis discovery service. Further, the results of this study will be used to write academic articles exploring the ways that digital technologies are changing our experiences of, and relationship to, the outdoors. In each instance of publication, anonymity will be maintained.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City, University of London Department of Sociology and Criminology Research Ethics Committee.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of

the project is The Sharing Economy Goes Wild: An Examination of the Spatial, Social, and Experiential Impact of Hipcamp on Wilderness Camping

You can also write to the Secretary at:

Annah Whyton
Research & Enterprise
Office City, University of
London Northampton
Square London, EC1V
0HB
Email: senaterec@city.ac.uk

Insurance

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study, subject to the terms and conditions of the policy. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Further information and contact details

Dr. Michael Saker

Senior Lecturer in Digital Sociology and Societal

Change City, University of London



Professor Dan Mercea

Professor of Digital and Social

Change City, University of London



Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix F Participant Consent Form



Participant Consent Form

Name of principal investigator/researcher

Eryn Parker

REC reference number

REF: ETH2324-0329

Title of study

'The Sharing Economy Goes Wild: An Examination of the Spatial, Social and Experiential Impact of Hipcamp on Wilderness Camping'

Please
tick or
initial box

1	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information dated 31 May (Version 2) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving a reason without being penalised or disadvantaged.	
	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the time of publication.	
	I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	
	I agree to the interview being video recorded.	
	I agree to the use of anonymized direct quotes.	
	I agree to City recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information and my consent is conditional on City complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	

	I agree to my the reuse of my data for future studies which have been given ethics approval.	
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	I would like to be informed of the results of this study once it has been completed and understand that my contact details will be retained for this purpose.	
	I confirm that I understand that my anonymous data will be made open access for the purpose of journal publication.	
	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.