Children, Youth and Environments 32(3), 2022

Exploring Camp Community in Online Summer Camp Programs during COVID-19

Megan H. Owens
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Administration
Western Illinois University

K. Dale Adkins
College of Education and Human Services
Western Illinois University

Citation: Owens, M. H., & Adkins, K. D. (2022). Exploring camp community in online summer camp programs during COVID-19. *Children, Youth and Environments, 32*(3), 124-142.
http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=chilyoutenvi

---

Abstract
During summer 2020, many organizations shifted traditional, in-person camp programs online due to concerns from the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explores the intentional design and building process of a camp community in an online program when that format was not the organizations' original delivery mode. The study involved six online camp programs that historically operated in person. Researchers gathered data through interviews with camp directors across three time points during their online programs. The findings revealed distinct components that comprise a camp-specific community with pertinent considerations for youth development organizations seeking to create a feeling of community in their online programs.

Keywords: camp community, communitas, youth online community, summer camp

Introduction

Until summer 2020, providing in-person summer camp experiences was rarely questioned. The COVID-19 pandemic changed that for millions of campers worldwide. In the United States, many organizations halted in-person operations and ventured into the uncharted territory of online camp programs. Many camp professionals were skeptical and apprehensive initially (Summer Camp Professionals, 2020a). Some camp directors could not imagine converting traditions, rituals, and socialization practices to an online format. Yet, the camp industry moved in this direction, which some camp professionals called designing "the longest rainy-day program… ever planned" in an effort to connect the camp community (Shendelman, 2020).

Many environments where youth lived, learned, worked, and/or played during the COVID-19 pandemic changed drastically. While the online camp movement grew and directors contemplated the pandemic's lasting impact, organizations connected with campers and alumni in novel ways online. Initially, the engagement focused on group support and connection during the difficult period. For example, some organizations used Facebook Live or Zoom© to host sing-a-longs (Summer Camp Professionals, 2020b). As summer camp organizations overhauled their program design, we wondered, could the qualities of an in-person camp community be experienced through new, temporary online programs? This study explored the process of transitioning community-building practices and experiences of youth summer camp during the COVID-19 global event. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What comprises a camp community?
2. In what ways did camp directors attempt to create a camp community through these new, temporary online camp programs?

Literature Review

Since the 1860s, summer camp programs have existed to connect campers to nature (Paris, 2008) and develop life skills (e.g. Garst et al., 2011; Sibthorp et al., 2013; 2020). Historically, summer camps have provided experiences unavailable at home such as expeditions or sports (Paris, 2008). These experiences are typically delivered in person (American Camp Association, Inc., 2021), but online camp programs have existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Summer camp programs provide distinct socialization and community-like experiences. These specific experiences have not been explored through the lens of online summer camps, particularly during a global crisis such as a pandemic.

Online communities for youth and adults have emerged through social networking sites (Reich, 2010) and virtual reality experiences (Kovatcheva & Kommers, 2004). Early on, individuals believed that "any erosion in the traditional face-to-face socialability and personal communication or Gemeinschaft (i.e., community connection) in modern societies represented a threat to the quality of civic life, collaborative social exchanges, and the community spirit" (Norris, 2002, p. 11). This perspective insinuated that in-person experiences supported the intact design of community unlike the dispersed nature of individuals online. Youth, alongside

most individuals, have moved their primary interactions online, with some researchers arguing that online spaces are just as natural to youth as a physical space (Szekely & Nagy, 2011).

While an in-person summer camp community is initiated by the program staff, online community formation and continuance appears driven by the youth involved in the experience. For example, popular online communities focused on fandom, interactive media design (e.g., Scratch), social justice, support, or general social networking sites involve a high level of individual initiative (Reich, 2010). These online communities may provide an "escapism" from negative offline experiences for some youth while providing a space to gather with other like-minded individuals (McInroy, 2020, p. 1886).

Summer camp programs are interactive, social environments (Garst et al., 2011). Individuals attending summer camp programs have reported a "second-home feeling" (Dahl et al., 2013, p. 101) or feeling safe being themselves (Darlington et al., 2010). These feelings often derive from forming lasting relationships (Catalano et al., 2004) and being in a welcoming community-like environment (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The process of building a camp community is strongly influenced by intentional planning (Garst et al., 2011). A component of intentional planning revolves around the shared experience that campers have during the program. This shared experience relates to an equalized environment or reduction of personal status symbols, as all campers are in a shared space and participating in similar activities (Baker, 2018; Garst et al., 2011). Baker (2018) connected camps' property design (i.e., closed gates, spaces surrounded by trees) to the ability for campers and staff to feel separated from the outside world and immersed in activities. Rituals, lore, and traditions support the immersive experience leading to "you had to be there to understand" types of stories (Baker, 2018; Paris, 2008).

Online communities form outside the physical boundaries that are paramount to the traditional in-person summer camp experience, and research suggests that youth may be able to form communities online, as well as in person. For example, research on "bedroom culture" highlights the shift of youth activity from the outdoors to inside one's bedroom due to increased usage of personal devices (Livingstone, 2009) and internet-based experiences (Wong, 2020). Some youth considered "hidden" are resistant to in-person interactions but are actually highly engaged with others online (Wong, 2020, p. 1227). While the frequency of online interactions and program-specific experiences (e.g., MIT Junior Summit, 1998) suggest that youth may indeed be able to form online communities, in-person experiences have been foundational to establishing summer camp communities.

The theoretical framework of *communitas* (Turner, 1982) grounded this study's exploration of camp community in online programs. Communitas are metaphorical communities established when individuals step outside societal structures and into a "world of ambiguity and possibility" (Sharpe, 2005, p. 256). Baker's (2018) detailed description of the "camp bubble" suggests that a camp community differs from the sense of community experienced in other settings (p. 26), as when camp staff distinguish between their camp life versus "the real world" (Baker, 2018, p.

31) and when campers bond through an intense wilderness experience (Sharpe, 2005). Olaveson (2001) distinguished communitas as temporary in nature, spontaneous, and immediate (p. 107). Equality among members, lack of status or structure, and having an immersive, shared, and bonding experience are necessary to communitas formation (Olaveson, 2001; Turner, 1982).

Several aspects of communitas may be found among summer camp programs. For example, rituals and rites of passage are experiences fostering community membership that outsiders may not understand (Turner, 1969). Summer camps incorporate traditions such as chants/songs or age-specific trips, and rituals such as ceremonies or events (e.g., Baker, 2018; Paris, 2008). These temporary shared experiences and spaces are distinct to communitas (Olaveson, 2001). Individuals engage with summer camp programs in the same space for a few days up to several weeks. This temporary period spent away from home encourages relationship building within that space due to inter-personal proximity and similar interests (Baker, 2018; Olaveson, 2001).

This study sought to uncover the potential experience of community when the camp setting was transferred from its traditionally in-person setting to online. The occurrence was unique to the global effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this study intended to capture this moment in time when one sector of the youth development field attempted to provide a connective experience for their population.

Methodology

Study Scope and Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the presence of community within newly created online camp programs during summer 2020. Approval for this study was obtained from the university Institutional Review Board. The study was open to all U.S.-based camps without prior experience providing online camp programs. The study engaged directors from organizations providing summer camp programs to various populations with different program designs, and across geographical regions (see Table 1). The researchers gathered data through in-depth participant interviews and employed phenomenology to explore this distinct community experience (Creswell, 2014).

Various disciplines have used phenomenology to guide naturalistic and qualitative inquiries of a particular phenomenon that is experienced by an individual or group of people (Gallagher, 2012). For example, researchers utilized phenomenology to examine the meaning behind unique situations such as the experience of being a caregiver (Sabat, 2009) or experiencing homesickness during camp (Thurber, 1999). Similar to COVID-19 pandemic situations, these phenomena are unlike everyday lived experiences and may benefit from a distinctive approach to explore their contextual meaning. Phenomenology guided all aspects of the study design, particularly identifying the target population, data collection methods, and analysis due to the unique factors: a global pandemic, required social and physical distancing measures, and non-traditional camp program design.

The population engaged for this study was the camp directors that designed and led their online camp programs. Directors have a multifaceted role that involves oversight, design, implementation, and evaluation. The rapid shift from a traditional on-site, in-person experience to the creation of online camp experiences resulted in a more limited workforce. Thus, directors were directly involved with planning and delivering the camper experience that summer. We employed both convenience and snowball sampling for director recruitment. Convenience sampling occurred through two private groups on Facebook (Summer Camp Professionals and Virtual Camp Ideas) and a camp administrator email list managed by the American Camp Association, Illinois Section (ACA-Illinois). We then used snowball sampling of study participants to obtain additional contacts of directors who were leading new online camp programs. The managing administrators of the private Facebook groups granted the researchers permission to post recruitment information, and we submitted the information to the ACA-Illinois Executive Director to distribute via their listserv. Recruitment occurred in May and June 2020. Eligibility requirements were that the director needed to hold a camp administrative role and work at their current camp for at least two years. Initially, 18 directors expressed interest in the study. Seven directors began the study with six directors completing the full study. (One director dropped out for an unknown reason.) Table 1 presents the camp and director information (pseudonyms used for all participants).

Table 1. Camp and corresponding director information

Camp	Director Name	Years' Experience	Camp Information	Online Camp Components

A	Mae	7+	• Location: Mid-Atlantic Region
			• Camp Type: Governmental, non-profit
			• Camp Design: Overnight & day camps
			• Camp Activities: Varies by program theme, generally outdoor-focused
			• Timeframe: Weekly sessions
			• Population: Co-ed, all income levels
				• One 2-week session
				• Activity box: optional, fee
				• Provided free boxes to area homeless and transition shelters
				• Three engagement options:
				  ○ Recorded videos on YouTube© channel
				  ○ Complete activities on own from box
				  ○ Livestreamed activities via Zoom©

B	Felicity	3	• Location: Midwest Region • Camp Type: Independent, non-profit • Camp Design: Overnight camp • Camp Activities: Outdoor skills, creative/performing arts, educational skills • Timeframe: Two 4-week sessions • Population: Co-ed; youth from low-resource households	• Two 4-week sessions • Activity box: free for all • Flexibility for engagement was important • Recorded videos on YouTube© channel • Complete activities on own from box • Livestreamed activities via Zoom©

C	Kari	4+	• Location: Midwest Region • Camp Type: Organizational, non-profit • Camp Design: Overnight & day camps • Camp Activities: Varies by program theme (e.g., career exploration, outdoor skills) • Timeframe: Weekly sessions • Population: Female only, all income levels	• Eight 1-week themed sessions • Activity box: included • Flexibility for engagement • Recorded videos • Complete activities on own from box • Livestreamed activities via Zoom© & Facebook© Live • Virtual fieldtrips
D	Jason	17+	• Location: Mid-Atlantic Region • Camp Type: Independent, non-profit • Camp Design: Overnight camp • Camp Activities: Nature-based programming • Timeframe: Four 2-week sessions • Population: Co-ed, middle- to upper-income levels	• One 6-week session • Class/subject focused • Recorded lessons • Livestreamed classes via Zoom©
E	Brooke	2	• Location: Northeast Region • Camp Type: Independent, non-profit • Camp Design: Overnight camp • Camp Activities: Traditional activities (e.g. arts/crafts, games, outdoor skills) • Timeframe: Four 2-week sessions • Population: Co-ed, all income levels	• Ten 1-week sessions • Livestreamed activities via Zoom©
F	Polly	31	• Location: Southeast Region • Camp Type: Independent, non-profit • Camp Design: Overnight camp • Camp Activities: Traditional activities (e.g. arts/crafts, games, outdoor skills) • Timeframe: Four 1-week sessions • Population: Co-ed, medical diagnosis specific, all income levels	• Five 1-week sessions • Activity box: free for all • Live engagement through video game platform (Discord) • Livestreamed some events

Data Collection and Analysis

The directors participated in semi-structured interviews at three time points during the summer: pre-camp, mid-camp, and post-camp. While we scheduled these interviews as close to these time points as possible, two camps (Camp E and F)

began their online camp prior to the pre-camp interview. The interviews occurred via the video conference platform Zoom© and were recorded with participant permission. Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes. The interview questions focused on elements of communitas and the ways community might emerge in camp programs. Specifically, the pre-camp interview focused on learning how the participants believed the feeling of community developed among campers during an in-person camp. Additionally, the researchers obtained the 2020 online program plans. The mid-camp interview served as a check-in of the online program implementation and discussion of campers' behaviors or actions related to community building. The post-camp interview allowed directors to reflect on the online program, contemplate the presence of community and connection among participants, and discuss techniques for building community online moving forward. To identify core elements comprising a camp community, directors answered the same question at the beginning of each interview: What does the phrase "camp community" mean to you?

Each interview was immediately transcribed verbatim, then the researchers reviewed the interview recording to add behavioral markers to the transcript (Weiss, 1995). Upon completing all interviews, the researchers followed the multi-step process for phenomenological analysis: (1) organized the data into meaning units (e.g., interview foci: camp community definition or online camp community), (2) clustered items within the meaning units, (3) conceptualized the central theme of clusters within meaning units, and (4) compared central themes across the data (Giorgi, 1997; Hycner, 1985). This multi-step process occurred at each interview time period (i.e., pre-, mid-, and post-camp interviews), then we compared themes across each director's data as well as across all interviews according to time period (Churchill & Wertz, 2014).

The researchers employed multiple methods to ensure trustworthiness of this study. Researchers that follow a phenomenological approach engage in bracketing, which is the process of separating a researcher's personal beliefs, feelings, and influencing knowledge from the perspective shared by study participants (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). Memo writing and regular meetings allowed the researchers to identify and separate any personal or professional bias, and identify unique factors in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers collaboratively coded one director's full interview data to ensure proper application of the communitas theoretical framework to the data (Olaveson, 2001; Turner, 1982), then compared codes and discussed their meanings. Once both researchers confirmed their theoretical understanding and application, each researcher analyzed the remaining camps' interview data. Finally, the primary researcher shared the findings of the study (in the form of an accepted conference abstract) with the directors; three directors affirmed the findings and three directors did not provide a response.

Findings

This study explored the formation and experience of community in new online camp programs. The findings suggest that while the directors attempted to provide a

community-building experience there were significant challenges to the full realization of community.

Defining Camp Community

Identifying the presence of a camp community rests on one's ability to understand the community-building process and behaviors exhibited by members. By asking directors to describe what the phrase "camp community" meant to them during each interview, the researchers sought to identify perspective shifts while narrowing the factors contributing to a camp community. Examples of the directors' varied individual perspectives are noted in Table 2.

Table 2. Individual Directors' Perspectives of Community Factors

Community Factor	Example
A feeling	• "a feeling that our campers and our staff have when they're in our camp [that] camp is more than just a camp" – Felicity, Camp B
A place	• "a kind of a specific place" – Kari, Camp C • "I think from a virtual perspective our community shifted a little. I think they've built a community within their homes" – Mae, Camp A
Personal similarities	• "we want our kids and our people to be in a place with people like them, that's the purest definition of community" – Polly, Camp F
Combination of factors	• "a camp group is sort of tossed together, it's not necessarily the people you would choose to associate with but to me it's those two concepts that are the most important concepts: membership and acceptance" – Jason, Camp D • "having a sense of mastery. Camp communities allow kids to develop new skills" – Brooke, Camp E

While the directors expressed nuanced aspects, two primary factors emerged as necessary components to form a camp community: (1) personal belonging and acceptance (e.g., "you really do get to find a home for the parts of yourself that maybe don't feel like they have a home during the rest of the year"; Felicity, Camp B) and (2) people who are supportive and encouraging (e.g., "a group of people who encourage you to do bigger and better things, who support you, and who are willing to try new things with each other"; Kari, Camp C).

These two primary factors are reminiscent of Turner's conceptualization of communitas. Turner (1982) believed communitas maintained an "essential and generic human bond" that is free of judgment and egalitarian (Olaveson, 2001, p. 104). Communitas are recognized as having little to no formal structure or power roles. Summer camps do incorporate structure, which varies according to organization purpose and mission. Yet, the opportunity to feel equally valued and build multiple high-quality relationships, regardless of status, suggests camp community is possible when these primary factors are present (Baker, 2018; Garst et al., 2011; Sibthorp et al., 2020).

Initially, the directors' conceptualization shifted from "a place where" these factors occur to considering how "a group of people" are influential to the process.

Directors began shifting their verbiage at the mid-camp interviews, and people-first perspectives were fully exhibited during post-camp interviews. Garst et al. (2011) suggested that "camp is more than a location or a program; it encompasses the affective, cognitive, behavioral, physical, social, and spiritual benefits that youth receive during and after the camping experience" (pp. 73-74). The individuals involved in the program may have some influence over a campers' feeling of belonging and support (Darlington et al., 2010), which affects community (Olaveson, 2001; Sibthorp et al., 2007).

An important caveat to the definition of camp community is the intentional effort of staff (Sharpe, 2005). For Mae (Camp A), building trust with campers was pivotal to fostering community, as for "some kids, this may be the first stable environment that they've had where they get three meals a day and have a place to sleep. For other kids, this is their 'what is happening?' or 'where is my tv?' [situation]." Felicity's organization believed camp community extended across all associated individuals: campers, staff, volunteers, and board members. This foundation of belonging, acceptance, and a supportive group of people have been the foci of in-person camps (e.g., Dahl et al., 2013; Darlington et al., 2010; Garst et al., 2011; Sibthorp et al., 2007; 2020), which proved difficult, but not impossible, to foster during these online programs.

Directors' Intentional Attempts at Building Community

When planning the online programs, the directors wrestled with design, content, and methods to engage campers. "I want to start off with… What are our values as a camp? How can we maintain those values this summer when we are distant from one another? What do we really want the camp experience to be like for campers?" (Jason, Camp D). Each camp attempted to incorporate their values with interesting and interactive experiences for campers.

> *We really had to get to a place where I was saying out loud repeatedly 'we are not taking traditional summer camp and making it happen on a computer, because they're not the same thing…' We really had to refocus on what is [sic] best parts of our program and how do we give kids those parts virtually… How do we create ways for them to connect with other people* (Mae, Camp A).

The directors described intentionally designing their online camp to foster connection and community (Sharpe, 2005). Some activities worked better than others.

> *Some weeks were much better for experiencing community than others. If they experienced it, it started with a common love of something. A big, big example of that is our Harry Potter week. Our older girls for Harry Potter week were so excited. They were talking to each other. They were bouncing off [each other], they were very excited* (Kari, Camp C).

Regardless of theme, directors indicated the activities that incorporated staff-to-camper or peer-to-peer questions increased camper engagement. For example,

"the activities that there's a lot of sharing, collaboration, opportunity to say 'what decisions did you make when you were baking your cookies or can you show us physically your craft,' I think those have remained our most popular" (Brooke, Camp E).

Intentional program design included experimenting with small groups. Initially, cabin/bunk groups were created for socialization purposes. Only two programs maintained their small groups for the duration of online camp. Camp F's cabin groups interacted spontaneously throughout the session when a camper initiated an online chat then the group members joined the conversation. Camp D led weekly bunk group sessions starting week two. Camp D matched all campers' and staff's schedules to arrange bunk groups, which may have increased engagement compared to programs with pre-set meeting times.

> *We just gave campers a chance to sign up for this if they were interested and tell us what days of the week they were able to meet, whether they had a preference for morning and afternoon… [We] took the staff availability… we came up with nine different time combinations. We also gave campers the chance to let us know if they wanted a same-gender group or a mixed-gender group* (Jason, Camp D).

The other directors encountered issues maintaining the small groups due to inconsistent attendance. Most online programs stopped their cabin groups after the first session, but some directors continued providing all-camp social sessions and campers were randomly divided into smaller groups when attendance was high enough. For example, Camp B "eliminated cabin time. We had cabins and we were getting really inconsistent attendance" (Felicity). Instead, the campers requested an evening all-camp "community time" session for the campers unable to attend the morning session.

Sibthorp et al. (2007) suggested connectedness "begins with one-on-one relationships" but program structure is also important to consider (p. 3). For example, Camp E intentionally used restorative justice circles to help campers resolve conflict during their online program. This process required additional coordination, but the director felt that extra effort was worthwhile for supporting campers' relationships. These attempts to create community through program structure (e.g., online bunk groups (Camp D), community time (Camp B), and restorative justice circles (Camp E)) may have provided some resemblance of the shared space common to in-person programs (Baker, 2018; Garst et al., 2011) that have been seen as pivotal to community formation (Olaveson, 2001; Sharpe, 2005).

Situations That Supported Community-Building

In addition to intentionally structured opportunities for community connection, participants suggested that inside jokes, modified rituals and traditions, and family-centered experiences had the potential to nurture community-building in online camp programs. Inside jokes suggested that campers connected with others and attempted to continue that connection beyond the moment:

> *There were jokes that came out of it… one of our staff members got accused of being a mafia [detective-type circle game popular among U.S. summer camp programs] and he never defended it. His camera was off and he never said anything. Eventually he came back and he was like 'I was in the bathroom, what happened?' Everyone had voted that he was the mafia and he was sent to jail. This joke [stuck] throughout the rest of July, 'Aaron got thrown in jail while he was sitting on the toilet!' The kids loved it!* (Felicity, Camp B)

Rituals and traditions can be potent experiences for community-building (Baker, 2018; Olaveson, 2001; Turner, 1982). Traditions (e.g., closing ceremony) are omnipresent across camp programs (Baker, 2018; Garst et al., 2011; Paris, 2008).

> *We have a tradition at in-person camp: When we are playing a night game for the villain to be thrown into the lake, it tends to be one of the founders of the camp. All the kids chant 'Gabe in the lake.' After every night game he tends to be the villain. We hear it from so many parents, they think it's the best part of the program. They're constantly talking about it… We do run night games on Zoom© and we were running one where a staff member, not Gabe, [was leading it] when the kids kind of unexpectedly started saying, 'Sarah in the lake.' She walked her computer to her bathroom, put her head under her shower and the kids went wild! It was such a cool moment. We can still have these magical moments… on Zoom©* (Brooke, Camp E).

Another example suggested a shift of community connection from campers to family members within the home. During the online program, many families shared photos of their child dressed in silly costumes, independently completing their activity, or engaged with the livestreamed session. This reverse photo-sharing allowed directors to create and livestream the traditional closing slideshow for the campers and families. Similar to the in-person experience, campers responded enthusiastically when seeing their photos.

> *We had parents and families send pictures of their children doing things. I was like, 'oh, we're just going to put it out there. We'll get like a picture or two.' No! We got a lot of pictures. We've been able to do a lot of slideshows. It's really fun watching their faces as we do that... It's been really cool to scroll through and hear them say, 'oh, that's me,' just like they would have at camp. That builds community* (Kari, Camp C).

Some camps saw community form within the home when older siblings helped younger siblings complete projects or when cousins and neighbors participated together during the Zoom© sessions. Camp F added a new parent program focused on supporting and learning from each other. Camp A created family-centric evening programs (e.g., family paint night).

> *You could see a camera at the end of the table and then mom and dad and all the sisters and brothers with easels up and paint out. It was the coolest*

> *thing… We have pictures of dads painting with their daughters and younger siblings painting and just the whole family was engaged. [It] was very, very cool* (Mae, Camp A).

Forming bonds with others is foundational to community-building (Baker, 2018; Olaveson, 2001; Sharpe, 2005). The bonds formed between family members and neighbors may have been more accessible to campers, as peers and staff had limited engagement outside the program time. Additionally, these momentary situations occurred during sporadic sessions unlike the "camp bubble" (Baker, 2018, p. 26), or they extended the opportunities for socializing and bonding common to in-person camp programs (Sharpe, 2005).

Challenges to Community Formation

Each camp faced significant challenges when attempting to foster community within their online program. Some campers participated sporadically or felt there were limited opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement.

> *We do tell them, we honestly think that they're going to get more out of the calls with their video [on] since everything is highly interactive. We think that seeing each other's faces is going to build that sense of community faster and more genuinely. We've made a decision that currently to be the most equitable, most accessible to folks, [we] make the exception 'that if you don't want to turn your video on that's okay'* (Brooke, Camp E).

While equity was one consideration, some directors suggested that certain campers only wanted to be present but not interact with others. "There's an element of being around other people that don't live in their house. There's a value to that for everybody. We all need human interaction, beyond who lives in our building. I get that listening to conversations is enough" (Felicity, Camp B). Similarly, Jason (Camp D) reassured his staff when they struggled with engagement, "if all the camper wants to do is show up to your weekly Zoom© meeting and talk about insects or birds and they don't want to do anything between class that's okay… it's not your fault. You're not a failure."

The decision to *not* turn one's video on might represent their ability to make choices. Many in-person camps allow campers to make decisions, such as which activities they will participate in or where they sit at mealtime. During online camp, campers chose when, where, and how to engage with the activities, their peers and staff. All the programs provided multiple delivery methods for the online program such as activity boxes, recorded videos, or livestreamed sessions to address issues of equity. For example, "we have families who are low income and we know that… buying a bunch of materials… this summer would be a major barrier. We put all that together for them" and ensured "they could access it in a couple of different platforms" (Felicity, Camp B). Nonetheless, campers' ability to choose their engagement level may have affected their community experience.

> *Online is a different level of choice. I think you get to choose how you engage in your community in a different way than being in person. 'So, I can*

> *turn off my screen and you as a presenter or as another member can just think that I don't like to be on camera, and I'm still totally engaged,' whereas in-person, if [they] zone out, it's much easier to see that and to be aware of that and to feel the ramifications of that as a person* (Mae, Camp A).

Not every camper participated each time despite the variety of activities offered. Also, the time between activities ranged from one day to one week, which affected camper attendance.

> *Now the campers had multiple options, multiple different things that [they] could participate in, in a given week. Each one of the things like a particular class or a particular bunk group, each of those only met once a week. This is the short discrete chunks of time that campers were spending interacting with one another. Then they'd have to go for another week without interacting with a thing again. In an on-site session those times together can often last much longer and you don't have to go for an entire week without seeing the same people again* (Jason, Camp D).

The opportunity to build community may not occur during formal activities (Sibthorp et al., 2020). "I think a lot of community forms in downtime. Just chillin' in our cabin [or] we're waiting to go to meals" (Kari, Camp C). As the summer progressed, the directors' acknowledged the most significant challenge to fostering community was the inability to provide the unstructured time imbedded in every in-person camp for example during rest hours, transition times, or meals.

> *We're missing, and there's really no way to get it, it's the unstructured time… Every interaction we have has to be structured—that's just how we're set up. We're missing that. That's where a lot of the fun memories come from. Kids love doing activities, they love sitting around the campfire and singing songs and all of that. But the stories they tell are about when they were just sitting in their cabin during rest hour and someone did something silly or while doing an activity in the art center, they were having a conversation that they remembered. We don't get to do those things* (Felicity, Camp B).

A hallmark of in-person camp is the opportunity to have semi-private conversations with friends and/or staff (Baker, 2018; Dahl et al., 2013; Sibthorp et al., 2007). These conversations may be the foundation of camp community. Sitting next to a friend while building a craft, riding the field trip bus, or late night chats supports deeper connections (Yuen, 2005).

> *One of our staff member's son, age 13, he was like 'this is fine, but I like when the lights are out and we're supposed to be quiet and the counselors are sitting on the porch and we're whispering to each other.' I can't replicate that in any way* (Felicity, Camp B).

The online programs did not allow private online chatting between campers, due to the staff's inability to monitor conversations, concerns with potential bullying or

inappropriate behaviors. The directors collectively agreed that removing private chats hampered community-building despite the need for internet security.

> *It's so hard, because we don't let them private chat for security reasons, so there's no way for me to really know. And that's the hard thing too, because normally you'd see two or three girls going over here and they're learning [together]. We wouldn't be able to tell that if we let them do that in the chat… So it's hard. We've kind of effectively locked down any way for them to develop that community because online safety is such a thing* (Kari, Camp C).

Unstructured time during in-person camp programs has been identified as a potential space for building relationships and overall connection with others (Sibthorp et al., 2020). Yuen (2005) suggested that campers need both public and private spaces during the program to build relationships. Relationship-building is initiated in public spaces while private spaces support campers' desire to converse with peers without staff facilitation, but within a reasonable distance should they need support (Hough & Browne, 2009; Owens & Browne, 2021; Sibthorp et al., 2020). Directors indicated the need to create an online space that mimics the unstructured time during camp. Navigating online spaces is commonplace for youth (Way & Malvini Redden, 2017), as many youth utilize creative methods to address online safety and privacy (Youn, 2005).

Although producing an online camp community was challenging, the directors' efforts were met with some appreciation from campers.

> *The other night I think they almost to a person spoke to just appreciating the chance to have some connection to an interaction with one another this summer… I really think it was the chance, just to be, to have some sort of a tangible or more tangible connection to the camp community this summer that they would not have if they hadn't participated at all* (Jason, Camp D).

Throughout the study, the directors narrowed their perspective of a camp community to the individuals within that program and attempted a variety of experiences to foster a sense of interpersonal connection. After taking time for reflection, the directors intended to use successes and challenges encountered during the summer of 2020 to inform the development and implementation of future virtual programming, as many organizations were in the midst of continued restrictions for in-person activities.

Limitations

This study represents a snapshot during a global pandemic. The small sample of camps and directors does not allow for generalizability, but the perspectives shared illuminate the community-building process undertaken every summer at camp programs. Further study of camp community among pre-existing online programs would extend our understanding of this process.

We attempted to engage campers aged 10-13 years old in this study, however the very low response rate resulted in dropping that data from the analysis. The low response rate suggested that our recruitment and communication method was not effective during that time period. Future studies should include campers' perspectives and the researchers recommend that data be collected at the time of program delivery versus depending on campers' parents or guardians to pass along survey links or requests. Camper data would enrich the broader understanding of camp community in traditional and non-traditional settings.

Future Research

Some organizations are continuing their online programs after learning effective approaches to engaging participants and alumni beyond the camping season. Studying the process of building a camp community may expand our understanding and ability to design connective experiences both in person and online. The additional findings may further enhance our understanding of the lasting learning experiences that have already been found through camp programs (Sibthorp et al., 2020). The composition of community members is another area of study when considering online youth programs. Household cohorts or program hubs (i.e., small group meeting locations) might be a program option when large in-person gatherings are unavailable. Lastly, more research exploring the incorporation of unstructured time for peer engagement is pivotal to online youth communities. Youth need both public and semi-private spaces to build connections with others during programs (Sibthorp et al., 2007; 2020; Yuen, 2005).

Conclusion

During summer 2020, numerous summer camp programs shifted from in-person to online camp experiences. This drastic programmatic shift provided a distinct opportunity to explore community-building experiences among summer camp programs. Through director interviews, this study identified and explored mechanisms for fostering camp community. The directors' conceptualization of camp community shifted from a place-bound feeling to an interpersonal experience that became prioritized when the camp space changed. The online camp programs used interactive experiences to encourage campers to directly communicate with their peers and staff members, as the directors believed those experiences fostered community building. The modified rituals and traditions that were both planned and spontaneous led to campers continuing conversations, discussions, or phrases across the online camp sessions. The directors believed those shared experiences allowed campers to connect to the organization's camp community.

Despite momentary glimpses of camp community, the directors collectively agreed the absence of unstructured time and unencumbered conversations between campers limited the scope of community formation. While camp still occurred and provided an outlet for campers and their families during a time of uncertainty, the realization of the camp community may have been secondary to the novelty of an online summer camp experience. The degree to which lasting connections and/or camp communities formed is debatable. Still, the desire for interpersonal connection became the essence of camp community that these directors attempted to foster through their online summer camp programs. Understanding the

components of a camp community and the situations that support community-building experiences remain important, as professionals utilize online spaces for programmatic engagement with youth.

Dr. Megan Owens *is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Administration at Western Illinois University. She received her doctoral degree from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign specializing in youth development practices in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism. Her research explores youth and adolescent social-emotional learning through recreation. Dr. Owens led research and evaluation for the University of Maryland 4-H Extension and held supervisory roles leading youth and family programs for both park and recreation agencies in Illinois and Indiana.*

Dr. K. Dale Adkins *is Associate Dean Emeritus for the College of Education and Human Services at Western Illinois University. He received his Doctorate of Recreation from Indiana University-Bloomington. Dr. Adkins has been actively involved as a volunteer, accreditation visitor, and board member across the camping industry for the duration of his career while teaching youth development courses through the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism at WIU. He continues to serve in volunteer capacities with American Camp Association sections.*

References

American Camp Association, Inc. (2021, June 29). *Find a camp*. http://find.acacamps.org/search.php

Baker, M. (2018). Welcome to the bubble: Experiences of liminality and communitas among summer camp counsellors. *Journal of Youth Development*, *13*(1–2), 24–43. https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2018.565

Catalano, R. F., Haggerty, K. P., Oesterle, S., Fleming, C. B., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). The importance of bonding to school for healthy development: Findings from the Social Development Research group. *Journal of School Health*, *74*(7), 252–262. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A122921721/HRCA?u=anon~5de27b2a&sid=googleScholar&xid=3a4f7654

Churchill, S. D., & Wertz, F. J. (2014). An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations. In K. J. Schneider & J. F. Pierson (Eds.), *The handbook of humanistic psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 275–296). Sage Publications, Inc.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th Ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Dahl, T. I., Sethre-Hofstad, L., & Salomon, G. (2013). Intentionally designed

thinking and experience spaces: What we learned at summer camp. *Learning Environments Research*, *16*, 91–112. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-012-9124-4

Darlington, E., McWhirter, B., & Eldridge, J. (2010). Summer camp: An exploration of camper reports of connectedness. *American Camping Association Camp Research Symposium*.

Gallagher, S. (2012). What is phenomenology? In *Phenomenology*. Palgrave Philosophy Today. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137283801_2

Garst, B. A., Browne, L. P., & Bialeschki, M. D. (2011). Youth development and the camp experience. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *130*, 73–87. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.398

Giorgi, A. (1997). The theory, practice, and evaluation of the phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, *28*(2), 235–260. https://doi.org/10.1163/156916297X00103

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine De Gruyter.

Hough, M., & Browne, L. P. (2009). Connecting camp mechanisms to camper outcomes: A case for program theory. *American Camping Association Camp Research Symposium*.

Hycner, R. H. (1985). Some guidelines for the phenonmenological analysis of interview data. *Human Studies*, *8*, 279–303.

Kovatcheva, E., & Kommers, P. (2004). Web-based youth communities in the light of cyberspace psychology. *International Journal of Web Based Communities*, *1*(1), 46–57. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJWBC.2004.004798

Livingstone, S. (2009). *Children and the internet: Great expectations challenging realities*. Polity Press.

McInroy, L. B. (2020). Building connections and slaying basilisks: Fostering support, resilience, and positive adjustment for sexual and gender minority youth in online fandom communities. *Information, Communication & Society*, *23*(12), 1874–1891. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1623902

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-6989-3

Norris, P. (2002). The bridging and bonding role of online communities. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *7*(3), 3–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X0200700301

Olaveson, T. (2001). Collective effervescence and communitas: Processural models of ritual and society in Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner. *Dialectical Anthropology*, *26*, 89–124.

Owens, M. H., & Browne, L. P. (2021). Camp counselor as a role model for social-emotional learning skills in camp. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, *13*(1), 8–22. https://doi.org/10.18666/jorel-2021-v13-i1-10543

Paris, L. (2008). *Children's nature: The rise of the American summer camp*. New York University Press.

Reich, S. M. (2010). Adolescents' sense of community on MySpace and Facebook: A mixed-methods approach. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *38*(6), 688–705. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20389

Roth, J. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). Youth development programs: Risk, prevention and policy. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, *32*(3), 170–182. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12606110

Sabat, S. R. (2009). Existential phenomenology and the quality of life of carers and care recipients: A case study. *Dementia*, *8*(2), 163–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1471301209103247

Sharpe, E. K. (2005). Delivering communitas: Wilderness adventure and the making of community. *Journal of Leisure Research*, *37*(3), 255–280.

Shendelman, E. (2020, March 23). Camp and covid: Summer 2020 update. Camp is on no matter what. Tell everyone today!!! To all camp owners, directors, programmers and administrators. [post] Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/groups/175579742455688/search/?q=rainy%20day

Sibthorp, J., Bialeschki, M. D., Morgan, C., & Browne, L. P. (2013). Validating, norming, and utility of a youth outcomes battery for recreation programs and camps. *Journal of Leisure Research*, *45*(4), 514–536. https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/10.18666/jlr-2013-v45-i4-3897

Sibthorp, J., Browne, L. P., & Bialeschki, M. D. (2007). Measuring positive youth development at summer camp: Problem solving and camp connectedness. *Outdoor Education*, 1–13.

Sibthorp, J., Wilson, C., Povilaitis, V., & Browne, L. P. (2020). Active ingredients of learning at summer camp. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, *23*(1), 21–37. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42322-019-00050-6

Summer Camp Professionals (2020a). *Home [Summer Camp Professionals]*. Facebook. Retrieved April 14, 2020 from https://www.facebook.com/groups/camppros/posts/3328733060473658

Summer Camp Professionals (2020b). *Home [Summer Camp Professionals]*. Facebook. Retrieved March 20, 2020 from https://www.facebook.com/groups/camppros/posts/3320651911281773

Szekely, L., & Nagy, A. (2011). Online youth work and eYouth: A guide to the world of the digital natives. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*, 2186–2197. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.07.002

Thurber, C. A. (1999). The phenomenology of homesickness in boys. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *27*(2), 125–139. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021911514768

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago Aldine Publishing.

Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. Performing Arts Journal Publications.

Way, A. K., & Malvini Redden, S. (2017). The study of youth online: A critical review and agenda. *Review of Communication*, *17*(2), 119–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2017.1293838

Weiss, R. (1995). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. Free Press.

Wong, M. (2020). Hidden youth? A new perspective on the sociality of young people "withdrawn" in the bedroom in a digital age. *New Media & Society*, *22*(7), 1227–1244. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820912530

Youn, S. (2005). Teenagers' perceptions of online privacy and coping behaviors: A risk-benefit appraisal approach. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *49*(1), 86–110. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4901_6

Yuen, F. C. (2005). Building community and social capital through children's leisure in the context of an international camp. In T. Delamere, C. Randall, & D. Robinson (Eds.), *Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research* (pp. 1–5). http://lin.ca/Uploads/cclr11/CCLR11-167.pdf