



**DIGITAL NATIVES RUNNING WILD:**

Exploring adolescent girls' identity development through wilderness adventure

Amanda Jane Seidler

942407304

Supervisor:

Dr Nicholas Munro

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Social Science:  
Counselling Psychology in the School of Applied Human Science, College of Humanities, at  
the University of KwaZulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg Campus.

May 2020

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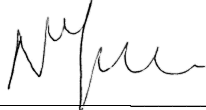
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DN: cn=Amanda Seidler, o, ou,  
email=amandajane.seidler@gmail  
1.com, c=US  
Date: 2020.05.13 13:13:20 +02'00'

\_\_\_\_\_  
Amanda Jane Seidler

12 May 2020

Date



\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Nicholas Munro

Supervisor

12 May 2020

Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- To Dr. Nicholas Munro, my supervisor, thank you. You lead by example. Thank you for your support and guidance and for your efficiency and professionalism. You have been and will always be a source of inspiration to me.
- To Paul Bushell, my internship supervisor who kept me sane and committed to seeing this through with many wise words of encouragement.
- To my friends and family who have shared in the joys of this journey, who have stood by me even though I have often had to sacrifice precious time with them to work on this project, thank you will never be enough.
- To the leadership of St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls, Kloof, KwaZulu-Natal, I thank you for embracing me as one of yours. Thank you for unquestionably allowing this research, for welcoming me into your space and for sharing your knowledge and ideas.
- To the girls and leaders of Group 2, Journey 2018, you are the true heroines. It was an absolute privilege to witness your courage as you experienced the trials and tribulations of Journey. Thank you for being welcoming and for sharing of yourselves so freely. This is your story.

*“To walk in nature is to witness a thousand miracles.”*

*Mary Davis*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	v
List of tables and figures.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1. Introduction.....	1
1.2. Research motivation.....	1
1.2.1. Academic motivation.....	1
1.2.2. Personal interest in the study.....	3
1.3. Contextual background.....	4
1.3.1. Adolescence.....	4
1.3.2. Digital natives.....	5
1.3.3. Journey: the programme.....	6
1.4. Research objectives and questions.....	9
1.5. Dissertation structure.....	9
1.6. Conclusion.....	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	11
2.1. Introduction.....	11
2.2. Understanding the digital native: adolescence.....	12
2.2.1. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial theory of development.....	13
2.2.2. The influence of technification on adolescents.....	16
2.3. Ecotherapy.....	19
2.4. Conclusion.....	25
Chapter 3: Research methodology.....	26
3.1. Introduction.....	26
3.2. Research framework: philosophy and theory.....	26
3.3. Research methodology.....	28
3.3.1. Sampling: method and rationale.....	30
3.3.2. Data collection.....	31
3.3.3. Data management and storage.....	33
3.3.4. Data analysis.....	34
3.3.5. The verification of truth.....	35

## RUNNING WILD

3.4.	Research limitations .....	37
3.5.	Ethical considerations .....	38
3.6.	Conclusion... ..	40
Chapter 4: An introduction to the research findings .....		41
4.1.	Introduction.....	41
4.2.	Participant information... ..	42
4.3.	Bridging the digital divide .....	43
4.3.1.	The world of the digital native .....	43
4.3.1.1.	Pressing pause: digitech and emotions.....	44
4.3.1.2.	Ctrl, Alt, Del: can we reboot? .....	50
4.4.	Conclusion... ..	53
Chapter 5: Running wild and measuring up.....		54
5.1.	Introduction.....	54
5.2.	Running Wild: Journey.....	55
5.2.1.	The journey within.....	56
5.2.2.	Appreciating life .....	61
5.2.3.	Mindfulness, spirituality and transcendence .....	64
5.2.4.	Never say never.....	66
5.2.5.	Awe and wonder.....	69
5.3.	Measuring up.....	70
5.4.	Conclusion... ..	73
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....		74
6.1.	Introduction.....	74
6.2.	Summary of research background, purpose and questions .....	74
6.3.	Summary of research findings .....	75
6.4.	Strengths and limitations of the study .....	77
6.5.	Contextual implications and recommendations for policy, practice and future research .....	78
References.....		80
Appendices.....		94

## ABSTRACT

Ecotherapy as a therapeutic modality has rapidly gained in global popularity in the last three decades. Taking on many forms such as animal- assisted therapy, gardening therapy, outdoor camps or wilderness adventure programmes, ecotherapy utilises the medium of nature and/or the wilderness to develop and grow self-competence, self-mastery, self-discipline and self-identity. This research explores the influence of a structured ecotherapy programme on the psychosocial development of a group of adolescent girls in South Africa in the context of the digital era. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development was used to understand the mechanisms of adolescent psychosocial development which centre around the achievement of competence and growth of self-identity. The relative dearth of South African literature reflecting research in the field of ecotherapy is contrary to evidence of a broad range of existing programmes and interventions that falls within the scope of ecotherapy practice in the country. This research responds to this deficit by contributing to the local knowledge base regarding the efficacy of ecotherapy as a therapeutic and personal development tool for adolescents in the context of the digital age. Transcendental phenomenology was used as the philosophical framework around which the research methodology was structured. The researcher accompanied a group of girls on the ecotherapy programme called Journey as a participant-observer in order to record the lived experience of the girls over a 21 day period. Data from focus group discussions, field discussions and observation notes and recordings were clustered and thematic analysis used in order to capture the essence of Journey and its psychosocial impacts on the adolescent girls. Findings demonstrated the efficacy of Journey as a positive contributor to the psychosocial development of adolescent girls and that the programme provides the economies of scale that would allow replication for other adolescent groups in South Africa.

## LIST OF TABLES

- Table 2.1. Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development..... 14
- Table 3.1. Summary of research and methodology... ..29

## LIST OF FIGURES

- Fig 4.1. Bridging the digital divide..... 43
- Fig 5.1. Outline of Chapter 5: theme summary.....55

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

And men go abroad to admire the heights of the mountains,  
The mighty waves of the sea,  
the broad tides of the rivers,  
the compass of the ocean,  
and the circuits of the stars,  
yet pass over the mystery of themselves without a thought.”

Augustine of Hippo, Confessions

St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls Journey Journal, 2018, p. 1.

### **1.1. Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the principal motivations for the research reported in this dissertation and the contextual backgrounds in which the research objectives and questions are embedded. The chapter documents the researcher's personal and academic impetus behind the study which explores the relationship between engaging in wilderness adventure as a form of ecotherapy, and psychosocial personality development in adolescent females. The psychosocial development theory of psychologist Erik Erikson is briefly introduced as the theoretical framework of the research. The ecotherapy programme used as the case study for this research is described to familiarise the reader with its practical scope and organisation in order to contextualise the research. The chapter briefly introduces the relevance and significance of the research in terms of broadening the knowledge base with regards to guiding ecotherapy practice in South Africa. The research objectives and questions are outlined and finally the dissertation layout is given.

### **1.2. Research motivation**

#### **1.2.1. Academic motivation**

Ecotherapy as a therapeutic modality has rapidly gained popularity since it was formally described by Howard Clinebell in 1996. Also dubbed 'wilderness therapy', 'green therapy' and 'nature based therapy', its use as a therapeutic modality has gained



momentum in many countries including the United States, Canada, Australia as well as in European countries (Russell, 2006). Hoag et al. (2013) indicate that despite the increasing clinical sophistication of ecotherapy, “outcome data on young adults in wilderness therapy are largely non-existent in the current literature” (p. 269) with the focus of research being on process variables rather than specific outcomes that can be used to scientifically evaluate the efficacy of the programme in terms of its impact on personal development. Personal development in the context of this research is taken to mean the activities that a person engages in for the purposes of improving one’s potential and thus one’s life prospects.

Ecotherapy takes many forms. Its scope of practice includes animal-assisted therapy, gardening therapy, outdoor adventure programmes, sports camps, and exercise therapy (Jordan, 2014). Whatever the modality, ecotherapy utilises the medium of nature and/or the wilderness to develop and grow self-competence, self-mastery, self-discipline and self-identity. This research will focus on an adult- facilitated, group wilderness adventure programme for adolescent girls called ‘Journey’. The programme was designed with the aim of increasing the physical competence of the girls, developing their mental robustness and promoting emotional resilience, with the ultimate goal of improving group dynamics and social interaction in the school environment (N. Simpson, personal communication, February 15, 2018).

The relative dearth of South African literature reflecting research in the field of ecotherapy is contrary to evidence of a broad range of existing programmes and interventions that fall within the scope of ecotherapy practice in the country (Zygmunt & Naidoo, 2018). The aim of this research is twofold: firstly, to contribute to the local knowledge base regarding the efficacy of ecotherapy as a therapeutic and personal development tool for adolescents in the context of the digital age; and secondly, to venture the hypothesis that ecotherapy programmes have the ability to contribute to psychosocial development as a structured supportive and therapeutic tools for groups of young South Africans to engage in, providing adequate economies of scale to ensure greater reach.

### **1.2.2. Personal interests in the study**

Driven by a lifetime of engaging in nature-based activities, my curiosity in the personally transformative effects of spending time in nature has been sustained into adulthood on an academic as well as experiential level. This research emerged from an inner suspicion that participating in sport or adventure activities in wilderness settings transfers more to a person than just the sport or adventure activity itself and that the intrinsic value of being physically challenged in the wilderness is what drives its potential as a tool for personal discovery and transformation.

As is evident in Chapter 2 of this research, urbanisation has largely disconnected human beings from the natural world. My experience has been that this disconnect is what often ironically and automatically pushes us out of our comfort zones when we attempt to engage with the vastness and wildness of nature. My own challenges of competing in various sporting codes in wilderness areas and witnessing family and friends overcome the discomfort of 'roughing it', has forced me to reflect on the worth of wilderness experiences as media to personal growth and development. It was a rare privilege to be a participant observer in this research and to be fully immersed in the lived experiences of the girls. Assuming the role of participant observer in the research allowed me to reflect on my own experiences, learn from the experiences of others whilst at the same time gaining deeper insights into the essence of how the wilderness 'works its magic' on humankind. As aptly put by Thoreau (1854):

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to love so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (p. 69)

### **1.3. Contextual background**

In keeping with the phenomenological tradition of qualitative inquiry, which is described in detail in Chapter 3, this research focuses on the interplay and relationships between three contexts; adolescence, the digital era and ecotherapy. Different perspectives of these contexts are described in Chapter 2 in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their collective influence on the phenomena, the experiences inherently fundamental to answering the research questions. The philosophical moorings and definitions of these contexts are explored in Chapter 2 and are briefly described below in order to involve the reader in the process of the “interpretation of human experience” (Neubauer, 2019, p.91).

#### **1.3.1. Adolescence**

Adolescence, the stage of development between childhood and adulthood, is often described as “a period of life characterized by extensive changes in social behaviour and environments” (Kilford et al., 2016, p. 106). While the definition of what constitutes ‘normal adolescence’ is socially constructed with debatable empirical origins (Allen, 2013), literature describes it as a biological phase of development marked by emotional turbulence, partially developed rational thought, social experimentation and “autonomous shifts away from parental expectations” (Botha, 2007, p. 8) with the gradual development of an individual self-concept. Tremendous biological changes notwithstanding, Yeager (2017) outlines the psychological needs of adolescents as follows:

1. “To stand out: to develop an identity and pursue autonomy.
2. To fit in: to find comfortable affiliations and gain acceptance from peers;
3. To measure up: to develop competence and find ways to achieve, and
4. To take hold: to make commitment to particular goals, activities and beliefs” (p.76).

The above-mentioned features of adolescence appear to be evolutionarily grounded in Erik Erikson’s (1963) theory of psychosocial development in which the purpose of adolescence is said to resolve around three major ‘crises’ (Watts, et al. 2009). Transitioning into adolescence, ‘industry (competence) vs. inferiority’ forms the

dominant theme wherein a child will strive to gain peer group approval by achieving certain goals. The 'identity vs. identity confusion' and 'intimacy vs. isolation' crises follow on from this stage. Erikson has been criticised for having a male-dominant view on adolescence and for dividing development up into defined stages (as opposed to a more fluid, organic process).

Erikson postulated that the successful resolution of adolescent crises would result in a confident individual with confidence in her ability to achieve goals and a clear self-identity, capable of securing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships (Watts, et al. 2009); the very goals of Journey as highlighted earlier in this chapter. The developmental stage in which this research is set is the 'identity vs. identity confusion' or as otherwise described to 'fit in or stand out'. As will be seen in the following chapters, one cannot discount the role of the preceding stage of 'industry vs. inferiority' in contributing to the development of a healthy self-identity and social connections in adolescents. The literature review in Chapter 2 will reveal that competence, through direct acquisition of skills or measured through perceptions of feedback by others plays a valuable role in the development of self-identity.

### **1.3.2. Digital natives**

'Digital natives', 'millennials', 'GenerationZ' and the 'iGeneration' are labels that are used interchangeably to describe individuals who were born never knowing a world without an Internet connection. In a pattern reflected in societies across the globe, in "contemporary Western society, adolescents' use of interactive devices, social media, TV and music has been, and continues to be, on a sharp rise" (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017, p. 3) with daily screen time exposure tripling over the last 10 years to an average level of three hours of digital technology use per day.

Arguably, increased technification has positive influences, which include a fresh brand of literacy, rapid information processing, and global influences on decision-making (Mesch & Talmud, 2010). However, studies show concerning developments in the mental health status of adolescents that correlate with the use of digital technology (and increased urbanisation). These include but are not limited to an increase in anxiety, depression, narcissism and other behavioural and mood disorders (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017; Stein, 2013; Twenge, 2014).

Legitimately, “significant numbers of parents regard digital technology as a potential risk, exposing their children to hazards involved in contact with unknown individuals” (Mesch & Talmud, 2010, p. 144), as well as to cyber bullying, distortion of reality, creation of false online identities, misrepresentation of personal life narratives and ‘addiction’ to online personal validation by peer groups and social networks. In accordance with the importance that developmental theory places on social forces on the formation of self-identity, adolescents use digital technology to create and reinforce important social networks at a time when they are also seeking individuation from their immediate families.

In the face of the scientifically proven and the perceived risks of digital technology and social media, there is no denying their pervasive existence and influence on the social world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century adolescent. If Erikson’s psychosocial theory is to hold true in modern times, one could assume then that technification plays an important role in the subsequent development of personality in the digital native. This is an important consideration to factor into the contextual circumstances of this research especially when one considers that during Journey the girls are required to completely abstain from the use of digital technology (hereinafter referred to as digitech).

### **1.3.3. Journey: the programme**

This research focuses on an adult facilitated, group wilderness adventure programme for adolescent girls called ‘Journey’. The programme was developed by an independent single-sex, Christian school in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal and forms a compulsory part of the Grade Nine school curriculum. The wilderness adventure programme was developed in response to a strategic decision by the leadership of the school to provide their students with more intensive opportunities to form healthy peer relationships and promote positive self- identity formation. As will become evident in Chapter 2, outdoor adventure-based experiences have been lauded for their ability to contribute positively to personal development. These programmes “can positively affect a teen’s self-perception, confidence and leadership skills by providing unique experiences and challenging opportunities that develop competence and confidence from within” (Watson, 2019, p. 5).

Journey takes place in the foothills of the uKhuhlamba Drakensberg National Park, KwaZulu-Natal over a period of 21 days. It is one of the longest school-originated programmes of its kind in South Africa. The ninth grade is divided into groups of approximately 16-20 girls in a process that conciliates the need for equal demographic, dietary, physical fitness and special needs representation in each of the groups. Existing friendships and psychological strengths and weaknesses are considered in the group formation process with the intention being to extend each girl beyond their individual psychological, physical and social comfort zones.

Each group is accompanied by two adult leaders who are in turn supported by two logistics teams, one based at the school and one at a central wilderness venue that is chosen for its central proximity to the teams over the three weeks. Medical assistance is provided by a registered nurse who is based at the central logistics venue and travels out to the groups as needed on a daily basis. The adult leaders are tasked with overseeing the girls' health and safety and for providing a supportive social framework for the girls where necessary. The leaders are responsible for pastoral care and emotional support if needed and for facilitating the field debriefings at the culmination of each day.

Every girl is given an opportunity to lead the group for a day on a rotational basis determined by the adults. It is the student leaders responsibility to manage the days' activities, from the wake-up call in the morning, to getting the group to each overnight destination using a map and a hand held navigation device. The leader determines the pace of movement, mealtimes and is responsible for the equitable division of meals on the days when food drops are made to each group. They are also responsible for ensuring that the group is mindful of their impact on the environment (i.e. litter) and for ensuring minimal disturbance to other wilderness users that they may encounter along the way.

The teams depart a day apart over a five day period after a morning dedication with their families in the school chapel. The girls traverse wilderness areas over a distance of 250 kilometres by foot, bicycle, horseback and canoe. The hiking and bicycling sections are self-navigated. The horseback and canoe segments are facilitated by specialist guides. Overnight stops are made according to a pre-determined itinerary and

are spent either in tents or caves. The girls are required to backpack all their supplies for the duration of the trip. This includes tents, sleeping mats, clothes, toiletries and food. Food drops to each group are made every three days by the school logistics team.

The girls were divided into cooking groups for dinner preparation. Each group comprised of four girls equipped with one cooking pot and a methylated spirit burner. Evening meals were prepared and shared by each cooking group. Each cooking group had to collectively decide who would carry certain food items (such as an entire bag of pasta) intended for group consumption at dinner time. They also had to decide who would be responsible for carrying and cleaning the cooking set on any given day. Girls have access to natural cold water sources for example, dams, streams, natural pools for drinking, cooking, bathing and washing clothes. A spade is provided for ablutions.

Contact between groups is avoided for the duration of Journey. Cellphones, tablets and digital devices are not permitted on Journey. Parents are kept up to date with the activities of each group via daily updates from the group leaders who post a maximum of three daily group pictures on the designated Journey Facebook page. Girls receive a letter from home three times (weekly) during Journey and can send handwritten letters home three times in return. Phone calls home using the adult leaders cell phones are not permitted.

The girls are required to spend one hour per day in solitude (solo) for the purposes of self-reflection/ prayer and contemplation of the day's events. It is widely accepted that this time is critical, to allow the girls the space to cognitively absorb their lived experience subjectively, develop new meanings, appreciation and insight to inform their understanding of themselves within the experience itself and their lives back home. A field discussion for debrief purposes is held every evening. The girls spend a full 24 hours in solo on day 11 of Journey. They are not permitted to talk to each other during this time and are provided with their meals by their leaders. At the culmination of Journey, the girls are welcomed back to school by the school principal after a brief devotional and are reunited with their families.

## **1.4. Research Objectives and questions**

This research aims to contribute to the underlying scientific knowledge base of ecotherapy programmes for adolescents in South Africa, with particular focus on assessing their influence on adolescent psychosocial development in the context of the digital era. The objectives and related research questions of this study are as follows:

### **1.4.1. Objectives**

- To explore the influence of a structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls on the girls' relationships with and through digital technology.
- To explore the ways in which a structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls influences relevant adolescent developmental tasks.
- To explore the pre- and post-ecotherapy programme related expectations and experiences in relation to relevant adolescent developmental tasks.

### **1.4.2. Questions to be answered in the research**

- How did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls influence their relationships with and through digital technology?
- What relevant adolescent developmental tasks did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls elicit?
- What are the adolescent girls' pre- and post- ecotherapy programme related expectations and experiences in relation to relevant adolescent developmental tasks?

## **1.5. Dissertation structure**

The first chapter provides the context driving the research with the second chapter, the Literature Review, introducing key concepts, literature and theory that underpin and guide the research. The methodology chapter (Chapter 3), outlines the theory informing the methods used and the manner in which the research was conducted is described. Findings are presented in Chapter 4. The discussion, Chapter 5, makes sense of the findings in the context of the theoretical and conceptual foundations and the research objectives. The final chapter concludes the dissertation with a concise summary of the



project, its methods and the conceptual insights gleaned from its findings in relation to its overarching objectives and questions.

## **1.6. Conclusion**

In this chapter, the reader was introduced to the critical concepts that form the contextual background of the research. Ecotherapy, the foundational concept and the primary academic motivation behind this research is introduced in this chapter as the 'stage' on which the Journey programme takes place. The personal, subjective interests of the researcher in the dissertation topic are declared. Adolescence, a critical phase in the psychosocial development of personality was introduced, in part highlighting the time of life that the 'actors' or participants of this study find themselves navigating. The digital world of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was described to set the scene, with its influences on the already intricate and complex social world of the adolescent discussed. Finally, the research objectives and questions were listed and the dissertation structure briefly described in order to practically orientate the reader.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

When despair for the world grows in me  
And I wake in the night at the least sound  
In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.  
I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
Waiting with their light.  
For a time I rest in the grace of the world,  
And am free.

The Peace of Wild Things, Wendell Berry

St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls Journey Journal, 2018, p. 38.

### 2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the key theories and concepts that provide the structural framework for, and inform this research. The two overarching frames of reference used in this study fall within the broad disciplines of developmental psychology and therapeutics. In an attempt to focus on the key concepts within these frames of reference that link directly to the focus of this study, this chapter will summarise and analyse existing literature pertaining to adolescence, ecotherapy and the juxtaposition of the two in a rapidly advancing technological era.

Adolescence is briefly reviewed first, giving the reader a window into the complexities of this critical life stage relevant to this research. Erik Erikson's psychosocial stage theory is introduced, with particular reference to the stage of adolescence. The ways in which the successful resolution of its associated crises and how this contributes to the overall development of the individual as a key process are discussed. Third, literature pertaining to the influence of digital technology on the life of the modern teenager is

reviewed with the aim of adding depth to the contextual framework of this research. Particular emphasis is placed on how the use of social media platforms manifests into altered patterns of self-esteem, identity formation and social behaviour and communication in adolescents.

Fourthly, the modality of ecotherapy is discussed. Its origins, diverse modalities and therapeutic contributions to psychology are outlined. The concept of ecotherapy is further dissected in order to identify the disciplines contained within its scope that are specifically applicable to this research, namely wilderness therapy and adventure therapy. Existing studies relating to ecotherapy and its specific application as a psychological tool in assisting with the resolution of adolescent crisis as described by Erikson, provide the final literary contribution of this chapter and the foundation on which this research is based.

### **2.2. Understanding the digital native: adolescence**

It is crucial to review the complexities of adolescence before the effects of an ecotherapeutic intervention on this age group can be fully evaluated. It is widely accepted that adolescence is a universal stage of development that all young people go through albeit with variations in the age of onset and biological and psychosocial variations between genders. Hall (1904) established four core assumptions about adolescence that have been widely used in contemporary theories of this life stage: it is a period of transition rooted in biological process; it is marked by inner turmoil and external turbulence, particularly with heightened incompatibility with parents, the 'pre-social' self in each person is accessed and refined and rational thinking is not yet fully developed in this stage.

"While there are certain physiological and social realities that are impossible to deny, scholarship has demonstrated that what is seen as normal adolescence is socially constructed" (Allen, 2013, p. 41). Research into families of young people show that these constructions and normative assumptions about this crucial life stage have had the power to shape and influence both theory and the layman's perception of adolescence. At its most basic level however, it is recognised that adolescence is

marked by a period of powerful biological and sociological transformations that are said to be vital milestones in a person's trajectory towards adulthood (Botha, 2007).

The biological changes most relevant to this research are those that impact on psychosocial development and functioning. "Pubertal maturation leads to increases or changes in the functioning of a number of hormones, including testosterone, estradiol, cortisol, oxytocin, and dehydroepiandrosterone. All of these hormones are related to social and emotional functioning" (Yaeger, 2017, p. 75). Yaeger (2017) goes on to point out the effects that these hormones have on the adolescent and that the added complexity of changing brain structures at this time, making handling conflicting emotional states and social challenges in terms of their psychosocial behaviour, confusing and difficult. This translates into an increased sensitivity and reactivity to social feedback regarding their social status, respect from others and subsequent formation of self-identity. The result is a further increase in the desire to engage in social activities that serve to enhance and improve their feelings of acceptance by others by creating opportunities to earn respect, prove their status and perceived competence (Yaeger, 2017).

Mesch and Talmud (2010) highlight the increasing emphasis that adolescents place on peer relationships in terms of both the quantity of time they spend engaging with friends in relation to their parents and the greater importance that they place on their social relationships to fulfil emotional needs. Psychological well-being in adolescents has been scientifically proven to be directly linked to the quality of their friendships. "Peers act as emotional confidants, provide advice and guidance, and serve as models of behaviour and attitudes" (Crosnoe et al., 2003, p. 333).

### **2.2.1. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development**

Erik Erikson's (1901- 1980) Psychosocial Theory of Development is widely recognised for the influential role it played in the understanding of the path of human development. Erikson divided the lifespan of individuals up into eight stages as follows:

STAGE	PSYCHOSOCIAL CRISIS/TASK	WHAT HAPPENS AT THIS STAGE?
0-18mo	Trust vs. Mistrust Virtue: HOPE	If needs are dependably met, infants develop a sense of basic trust.
18mo-3yrs	Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt Virtue: WILL	Toddlers learn to exercise will and do thing for themselves, or they doubt their abilities.
3-5yrs	Initiative vs. Guilt Virtue: PURPOSE	Pre-schoolers learn to initiate tasks and carry out plans, or they feel guilty about their efforts to be independent.
5-13yrs	Industry vs. Inferiority Virtue: COMPETENCY	Children learn the pleasure of applying themselves to tasks, or they feel inferior.
13-21yrs	Identity vs. Confusion Virtue: FIDELITY	Teenagers work at refining a sense of self by testing roles and then integrating them to form a single identity, or they become confused about who they are.
21-39yrs	Intimacy vs. Isolation Virtue: LOVE	Young adults struggle to form close relationships and to gain the capacity for intimate love, or they feel socially isolated.
40-65yrs	Generativity vs. Stagnation Virtue: CARE	The middle-aged discover a sense of contributing to the world, usually through family and work, or they may feel stagnant and socially isolated.
65 +	Integrity vs. Despair Virtue: WISDOM	When reflecting on his/her life, the older adult may feel a sense of satisfaction or failure (i.e., despair).

Table 2.1. Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development (adapted from [www.arccgis.com](http://www.arccgis.com)).

Erikson purported that the life stages follow each other in progression and that an individual is required to resolve a 'crisis' in each. The successful resolution of a life stage would ensure that the individual develops a sense of competence regarding a particular virtue or trait as well as healthy personality development and can move on to the next stage with no sense of inadequacy or other psychosocial developmental delays (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson, the crisis of adolescence, that is the development of a solid and unwavering self-identity, is the most important task to resolve in terms of living a fully psychologically functional adult life. Deurden et al. (2009) describe this as follows:

The three stages of Erikson's model associated with adolescence are the industry, identity and intimacy stages. The industry stage occurs during mid to late childhood and early adolescence and focuses on the child's desire to function productively in their expanding network of contexts (e.g., family, school, & peers). Identity development is the focus of adolescence and intimacy, which involves the development of close and enduring relationships with peers and significant others, occurs during late adolescence and early adulthood (p. 343).

Of particular relevance to the research questions posed by this study, is the suggestion by Erikson (1963) that the process of identity development is enhanced by an adolescent's exposure to situations that allow them to assert themselves as unique individuals in the presence of significant others. Receiving validation through the feedback of these significant others fosters not just positive self-identity but also feelings of competence in their ability to be effective in their increasingly adult world (Duerden et al., 2009). Erik Erikson takes credit for being the first psychotherapist to conceptualise the use of "nature-guided therapy" (Beringer & Martin, 2003, p. 35). Burns (1998) describes Erikson's life as being rooted in a love for the intrinsic physical properties of the natural world, which he turned to recreationally and therapeutically as a panacea for the chronic physical condition he suffered from. More specifically to this research and developmental theory, as will be seen further on in this chapter, literature points to the effects that exposure to adventure activities in the wilderness have on Erikson's stages that immediately precede and follow the identity stage that the participants of this research find themselves in.

In her proposed model of psychotherapy, Knight (2017) links Erikson's stages of psychosocial development to a therapeutic process that acknowledges that the formation of identity is continuous through an individual's life span and that supportive therapy holds the space for a succession of searches and experimentation with this identity. With the resolution of the adolescence stage crises being identified as critical by Erikson (1968), the timing of therapeutic intervention to prevent maladaptive behaviour and problems in later stages of life is crucial. The potential value inherent the wilderness to be the therapeutic space in which an adolescent in the South African context can experiment with different roles and a new sense of identity is highlighted in the works of Zygmunt (2014).

Erikson (1963, 1968) has also been credited for his acknowledgement of the importance of spirituality in adolescent identity development. He theorised that spirituality plays an important role in a person's ideological perspective of the world and that spiritual convictions provide the framework for this perspective (Gebelt & Leak, 2009). As will be evidenced in Sub- section 2.2.3., adventure programmes in the wilderness can not only assist with successful progression along Erikson's timeline, successfully resolving deficits in the industry stage and paving the way for the stage of

intimacy development, but also foster opportunities for the development of a spiritual identity in the adolescent.

### **2.2.2. The influence of technification on adolescents**

Immediately evident on review of available literature on technification and adolescents is the recency of research conducted on the effects of social media use on adolescents compared with other themes in adolescent development. The use of social media is the focus of technification in this research. Uhls et al. (2017, p. 67) refer to the “first academic collection of research focused explicitly on social networking sites” as having emerged as late as 2007. This section of the literature review will provide a brief overview of research relevant to this study that explores the influence that interfacing with social media has on adolescent psychosocial development. There appears to be a broad scientific acknowledgement that the modern trajectory of youth development runs parallel and intersects with advances in technological communication (Keles et al., 2020; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Shapiro & Margolin, 2014) . Quantifying the psychosocial effects of technification however, on adolescent psychosocial development, is challenged by the exponential rate of change in technological advancement (Keles et al., 2020).

The various definitions of social media centralise around a common conception that it “encompasses forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) in verbal or visual formats (Keles et al., 2020; McCrae & Grealish, 2019). Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram are a few examples of online platforms, the majority of which have associated direct messaging (DM) accessibility.

Statistics regarding cell phone ownership and the use of interactive media platforms (Uhls et al., 2017) such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr and Tik Tok vary widely across published international research. Unicef (2011, p. 5) refers to Africa as the ‘least wired region in the world’ and points to the pertinence of using South Africa as a case study to understand the regional behavioural and psychological implications of increased cellphone usage amongst youth; primarily due to its exponential growth in cell phone ownership and connectivity (Qwerty, 2017; Unicef, 2011). “Despite the digital

divide, the reality in South Africa is that the majority of youth have access to social media” (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018, p. 3). This correlates with findings that trends of increased use of interactive digital communication appear to follow the same patterns across different countries worldwide (Bucksh et al., 2016; Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017), with 92% of the total adolescent population using social media. Thirteen to seventeen year old adolescents use social media the most (Lenhart et al., 2015).

“Adolescents have tripled their time using the Internet over the last 10 years. Total screen time increases with age, and after the age of 15, 60% of adolescents over the age of 15 years spend more than three hours daily looking at screens” (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017, p.2). Facebook, closely followed by YouTube and Twitter are the most commonly used social networking platforms in South Africa (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018). Qwerty (2017) indicates a 15% increase in the number of adolescent social media users in South Africa over a 12 month period alone from 2016-2017, with Instagram use, especially by teenage girls, doubling over this time (NapoleanCat, 2017; Snyman, 2016).

The youth have throughout history relied on technology in order to communicate on an individual and group level. Whilst this reliance has not changed, the forms of technology used has changed drastically (Christoffersen, 2016). As will be seen in the findings in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, literature alludes to an increased reliance on text based communication by adolescents as an additional source of friendship “support and communication” (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014, p.2), provides different avenues of self-expression, is an instant feedback mechanism between self and peers or society and practically and is a channel for organising social arrangements (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017; Keles et al., 2020).

With the focus of this research being on the influence of wilderness adventure on the psychosocial developmental tasks of adolescents, the contradictory dilemma of fitting in or standing out, the benefits and costs to the youth of engaging with the tools of an increasingly digital world are aligned according to the principles of identity development (to stand out) and social connectivity (to fit in). A number of theories are put forward in the literature to explain the delicate balance that exists between the positive contribution that electronic media makes to adolescent psychosocial development and



its negative impact on their mental health (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Shapiro & Margolin, 2014).

In terms of social connectivity and 'fitting in', McKenna and Bargh (2000) use the stimulation hypothesis to explain how face-to-face self-disclosure is so much harder for the digital native than through the safety and relative anonymity of online communication channels. This perceived safety provides adolescents, particularly those with varying degrees of social inhibitions with an opportunity to form 'deeper' friendships of higher quality than they would normally have offline. Expanding on this, the social compensation hypothesis as discussed by McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) proposes that digital natives who have better online social networks may be able to fulfil their social needs more optimally without face-to-face contact and physical cues such as tone of voice, eye contact and hand gestures.

Already gregarious and sociable youth benefit from the rich-get-richer hypothesis (Kraut et al, 2002; Lee, 2009) that purports exponential increases in both the quantity and quality of friendships due to online connectivity. Counter to this theory is evidence that shows that "individuals with limited offline social networks and poor social skills do not develop quality friendships through online connections, and may spend time engaging in low quality connections in lieu of cultivating relationships in real life" (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014, p.4) as per the reduction hypothesis mentioned by Locke (1998). In addition, adolescents with poor self-esteem have been found to share negative messages on social media, often eliciting negative feedback to incorporate into their own identity formation process (Uhls et al., 2017).

Self-disclosure is closely linked to self-identity in online psychosocial development models; by virtue of the feedback that their constructed online identities elicits from an online community; a process critical to identity formation. "Decisions about how adolescents identify themselves, the feedback received on these decisions, and how they view their own profile in comparison to others' profiles are potential factors in individual identity" (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014, p. 6). Increased social connections with like-minded people further reinforce belonging, association and self-identity. In this regard, online personas that closely reflect offline reality, "reflect, complement and reinforce off-line relationships, practices and processes" (Uhls et al., 2016, p. 68) as

digital natives aim for autonomy in their friendships. Borca et al. (2015) and Lenhart et al. (2015) emphasise the power of having a supportive online community on adolescent identity development in terms of them feeling connected, valued and more confident.

Negative impacts on healthy psychosocial development such as depression and social anxiety are linked to the rise of the “objectified self-concept, e.g. judging oneself on the basis of how one is perceived by others” (Uhls et al., 2017, p. 70) or by comparison to the online identities of others. Borca et al. (2015) and Uhls et al. (2017) indicate that many teens may post idealised and untruthful information about themselves in an attempt to rate higher on levels of self-comparison with others and therefore increase their self-esteem. Keles et al. (2020) refer to a correlation “between negative online interaction and both depression and anxiety” (p. 81), with a number of literary sources alluding to the dangers of online communication and social media. Cyber bullying, exposure to age-inappropriate content, online predators and the sheer volume of time spent online at the expense of forming meaningful relationships with family and peers are also mentioned as negative effects of increased technification (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). These dangers are exacerbated by differing self-regulation strategies and the limited ability of the adolescent to manage peer pressure, envy, feelings of inadequacy due to social comparison and ultimately may contribute to increased levels of depression and anxiety in adolescents (Borca et al., 2015).

### **2.3. Ecotherapy**

As alluded to in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, ecotherapy is a broad term used to describe a wide range of therapeutic modalities that take place in an equally diverse range of natural settings, all of which share a common caveat; they are contextually grounded using the natural environment as a medium in which to conduct psychologically therapeutic interventions (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). Clinebell (1996) considers ecotherapy to be an application of ecopsychology as a philosophical and theoretical framework, and describes its objectives as healing and personal growth through healthy interactions with the Earth (Beringer & Martin, 2003, p. 34). Adventure therapy and wilderness therapy fall under the umbrella of ecotherapeutic activities and while “there seems to be no dispute that the fields are related; the nature of the relationship is open for interpretation” (Mitten & Itin, 2009, p.6). Both modalities

rely on the unfamiliar and experiential challenges (based on perceived risk) that take participants beyond their 'normal' way of being in order to encourage psychological, physical and emotional healing and growth (Miles & Priest, 1999). Zygmunt (2014) refers to perceived risk in wilderness adventure programming as being rooted in activities that take place in a controlled and relatively safe environment, that 'push' the adolescent out of their comfort zones in order to develop competence, social acceptance and status, define new roles for themselves and come to terms with their changing physical selves.

Traditional understanding of risk-taking behaviour in adolescence by Erikson (1968) is that it arises from a need to achieve competence, status and role clarification centring around his hypothesis that these are necessary for the resolution of the identity crisis stage. Gleeson et al. (2008) identify that females in South Africa particularly are more likely to resort to risk-taking behaviour in order to be accepted by a social group. Other South African research by Zygmunt (2014) points out that wilderness adventure programmes provide a more secure environment for girls to experiment with risk-taking without experiencing the potentially negative outcomes present in society (e.g., drug abuse, sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy).

Discussions about what constitutes adventure therapy are complicated by the definitional complexity of the terms themselves. Gass (1993) and Nadler (1993) understand that adventure is fundamentally about an exploration in the unknown. There seems to be some agreement that adventure in general and "adventure activities specifically allow one to explore oneself and possibly see oneself in a new way and hopefully in a more empowered and capable way" (Mitten & Itin, 2009, p.7). Mitten and Itin (2009) also suggest that 'therapy' could be broadly interpreted as a simple undertaking to do something that helps someone else. Mitten (1992) acknowledges that being located in nature is perhaps the most fundamental part of the adventure therapy process with the perceived risk of activities or challenges undertaken in the wilderness playing an important role (Estrellas, 1996; Mitten, 1992). Many authors challenge the utilitarian view of nature as a mere backdrop to adventure therapy practices by those involved in the industry (Harper, 2009; Ireton, 2011; Jordan, 2014).

“Wilderness therapy is becoming an evidence-based way of working with adolescents and is gaining recognition in the mental health field” (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017, p. 411). Wilderness therapy programmes take place in natural environments, with varying degrees of remoteness but removed from the influences of urbanisation and technification (Maller et al., 2006). Burns (1998) acknowledges the healing effect of nature in its interdependent relationship with humans, specifically using unstructured interactions that then positively impact on peoples ‘health, healing and well-being (Beringer & Martin, 2003, p. 35). Review of available literature reveals that the natural world has a number of positive effects on the psychological health and general well-being of humans (Beringer & Martin, 2003; Frumkin, 2001; Louv, 2005) providing opportunities for physical movement in a clean environment, reflection and mindfulness, challenges and connection to self, others and the earth.

While Erikson may have found healing by the sole virtue of being in the wilderness, perhaps it is being in nature that is the adventure itself? Literature on adventure and wilderness therapy programmes indicate a wide continuum in terms of the number or intensity of therapeutic interventions contained in each modality; the overarching consensus is that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive and the benefits of adventure cannot be evaluated in isolation of nature as the situational context . To highlight this, Hattie et al. (1997) identified common elements of adventure programmes as:

(a) wilderness or backcountry settings; (b) a small group; (c) assignment of a variety of mentally and/or physically challenging objectives, such as mastering a river rapid or hiking to a specific point; (d) frequent and intense interactions that usually involve group problem solving and decision making; (e) nonintrusive trained leader; and (f) a duration of 2 to 4 weeks. (p. 44)

Beringer and Martin (2003) make a call for a holistic approach, incorporating the healing powers of both wilderness (eco) and adventure modalities. Deurden et al. (2009) call this “wilderness adventure” (p. 356). Journey as an intervention, whether intentionally designed to achieve this or not, appears to heed this call, using nature and activities based in nature to facilitate personal growth, as opposed to formal and theoretically based psychological therapy.

Research indicates widespread acceptance for the power of wilderness adventure activities as a prime backdrop for adolescent psychosocial development. They commonly indicate that “the challenging nature of these activities lead individuals to drop their social facades and become more open to self- reflection and feedback from others” (Deurden et al., 2009, p. 346). Goldenburg, McAvoy and Klenoaky’s (2005) research conclusions centre around the role that the development and strengthening of participants’ individual and unique values as a result of participating in wilderness adventure. “These values have a positive effect on the lives of participants through: the transference of skills to everyday life, fostering awareness, the fulfilment of the self, providing opportunities to achieve personal goals, gaining self- confidence, and building warm relationships with others” (Bosch & Oswald, 2010, p. 66).

Cason and Gillis (1994), Hanna (1995); Hattie et al., (1997), and Wilson and Lipsey (2000) all indicate that wilderness adventure programmes allow participants to develop or refine their leaderships skills, improve self- esteem with subsequent improvements in self-confidence. The inherent provision of opportunities to be “trusted and supported to make important choices requiring personal accountability” (Bosch & Oswald, 2010, p. 66) allow youth to hone skills associated with social and individual competence and self-mastery and to transfer these to their home contexts. Research results in terms of developmental benefits indicate synchronicity with the stage appropriate mastery of developmental tasks as per Eriksons (1960) Psychosocial Stage Model (Deurden et al., 2009).

Dolgin (2014) mentions ‘immersion’ as the most powerful caveat to wilderness adventure programmes, referring to the extended period of time that participants are required to interact in the wilderness, carrying out critical group tasks such as setting up camp, cooking and cleaning. In their research on girls-only wilderness adventure programmes Whittington et al. (2011) reflect the hypothesis that the wilderness setting for these tasks acts a positive contributory factor to the girls’ ability to bond. Whittington et al. (2011) posited that “being in nature (i.e. everyone being dirty, everyone wearing the same clothes everyday) served as an equaliser, and helped people connect based on who they really are, rather than who they are supposed to be” (p. 8). Williams (2000) reiterates the important role that these tasks play in the development of mutual

understanding between participants and therefore stronger interpersonal connections and social support.

In his research on coping mechanisms in adolescents, Dolgin (2014) explores the value of wilderness adventure interventions on resilience (the ability of an individual to adapt to challenging situations). Themes that emerged from his study pertinent to this research are as follows: feeling understood (as an important member of the group), universality (that everyone in the group shares the same challenges and that each individual is not alone in their experience of these challenges), emotional freedom (participants were able to speak openly during group discussions) and a sense of belonging (participants felt connected to one another and reliance between each other for ongoing social support. Jordan (2006) “argues that resilience resides in the capability to significantly and meaningfully connect with others. All people have a need to be appreciated and to contribute to the well-being of others” (in Bosch and Oswald, 2010, p. 65). Themes of the collective involvement of participant empathy and respect for others appear throughout literature, as group dynamics harness the capacity to trust, provide structures for emotional support and enhance feelings of comfort and safety (D’Amato & Krasny, 2011; Martin & Leberman, 2005; Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Russell, 2001; Whittington et al., 2011).

Resilience has long been recognised as a protective factor against mental health problems and subsequent at risk behaviours in adolescents. Raftopoulos and Bates (2011) refer to the positive correlation between (non-religious) spirituality and well-being in adolescents due to a heightened transcendental awareness of a greater power or life force, a sense of meaning in the purpose of life and a connection with the authentic, inner self. South African religiosity is characterised by a wide diversity of both formal religion, traditional spiritual practice and a combination of these. Despite this diversity, Zygmunt (2014) points out that most religious and spiritual teachings convey the sacredness of connecting with nature for the purposes of healing and spiritual renewal.

Well-being linked to spirituality is described by feelings of comfort, safety, connection, self-efficacy, life purpose and meaning and belief in positive outcomes for the future. Shiota et al. (2007) and Williams and Harvey (2001) refer to the connection between being in the natural or wilderness environment with and increased awareness or sense

of spirituality. In their research, Trigwell et al. (2014) empirically support this hypothesis; that not only is there is a relationship between being immersed and connected with nature and spiritual growth but also that spirituality contributes to an individual's overall sense of well-being.

For the purposes of this research, a selection of literature pertaining to the benefits of wilderness adventure particular to girls was reviewed. Research on the unique developmental processes and challenges of girls grew exponentially in the 1990's. Basow and Rubin (1999), Brown (1997) and Way (1995) made important contributions to how wilderness adventure programmes were structured to address these gender-specific developmental needs. McKenny et al. (2008) allude to the fact that "such programmes were developed from two bodies of research: the comprehension that girls struggle with self-esteem, depression, body image and other challenges as they move through adolescence, and the knowledge that participation in adventure programmes can affect positive change in individuals" (p. 532). In South Africa, research has shown that single-gender wilderness adventure programmes afford girls the opportunity to embrace traditionally male-dominated tasks such as making fires, standing guard and leadership during physically difficult activities as they challenge traditional gender stereotypes (Zygmunt, 2014).

In addition to the psychosocial benefits of wilderness adventure already mentioned in this chapter, the data provides "evidence that all-girl programmes can create a safe, inclusive and healthy model of community to challenge negative social dynamics that are characterised by powerful cliques that often involve exclusion and cruel treatment of one another, and allow girls to focus on developing positive relationships with other girls" (Whittington et al., 2011, p. 8). In his research, Zygmunt (2014) points out that research in the context of girls-only wilderness adventures in South Africa has identified improvements in social skills, empathy and appreciation of the diversity of women, by women enrolled in these programmes.

The link between being exposed to the wilderness, nature and spiritual growth has been considered as an important factor for the psychosocial development of adolescent girls especially. Bruce and Cockreham (2004) emphasise the critical role that spiritual development has in how successfully adolescent females form connections with

themselves, others and existentially and embrace eudemonic and productive living. Research in the South African context by Mundy and Judkins (2010) has empirically proven that women-only wilderness adventure programmes improved variables related to community involvement, conflict resolution, leadership, environmental concern, spirituality (religious and non-religious), self-confidence and goal directed achievement.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

A focused overview of the literature is provided in this chapter, with the aim of both introducing the readers to the conversations surrounding the fundamental concepts embedded in this research and to weave these together in order for the reader to understand the delicate relationship between adolescent development, digital technology and the therapeutic effects of the wilderness to mitigate these. Although literature pertaining to the topic of this study is relatively limited, the published academic papers relevant to the research are recent and insightful and give the reader a window through which to conceptualise the relationship between adolescence, technification and the development of self-identity in adolescents.

Adolescence was outlined first, with particular reference to Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development and the developmental tasks of this stage in the human timeline. The influence of technification, interaction with social media platforms and online communications was discussed in the context of their contributions both positive and negative to the psychological health and social development of the digital native. Lastly, ecotherapy, as an antidote to the stressors of modern living and a moderator of the effects of increasing technification was introduced. Detailed focus was given to wilderness therapy and adventure programmes for their contributions to optimal psychosocial development in adolescents and adolescent girls in particular.



## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The difference between ordinary and extra-ordinary is so often just simply that little word- extra.

And for me, I had always grown up with the belief that if someone succeeds it is because they are brilliant or talented or just better than me...

and the more of these words I heard the smaller I always felt!

But the truth is often very different...

and for me to learn that ordinary me can achieve something extra-ordinary by giving that little bit extra, when everyone else gives up, meant the world to me and I really clung to it.....

Bear Grylls

St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls Journey Journal, 2018, p. 118.

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter aims to provide an orientation to the philosophical theory and practical methods used to understand the essence of Journey as it relates to the research questions. Phenomenology as a qualitative research paradigm is discussed and woven into the processes of data collection and analysis. The steps taken to ensure scientific rigour are outlined and the limitations of the research discussed. Ethical adherence forms the final considerations of this chapter.

### **3.2. Research framework: philosophy and theory**

“Qualitative research methods enable [social and] health sciences researchers to delve into questions of meaning, examine institutional and social practices and processes, identify barriers and facilitators to change, and discover the reasons for the success or failure of intervention” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1372). This statement serves to highlight the apparent challenge of embarking on qualitative research, research that is not ensconced by the ‘safety net’ of well- defined and controllable variables, scientific theory and conclusions gleaned from the clinical, impersonal analysis of empirical data

sources. Rossman and Rallis (2017) emphasise that qualitative research is grounded in the theory that “knowledge is obtained by direct experience through the physical senses” (p. 5). In this research study, the researcher attempted to obtain (or generate) knowledge through using “direct experience through the physical senses” (i.e., participant-observation) which as a research approach fits in well with the topic of study and with the experience of the girls, as they embark on the experiential learning inherent in Journey as a wilderness adventure.

This research was guided by an overarching framework of phenomenology. With roots stretching back to philosophical origins in the 1900’s, phenomenology’s primary concern is the relationship between consciousness as an intentional act, an inner or outer experience and a real or imaginary object of experience (Giorgi, 2006). The theory underpinning the discipline of phenomenology as a distinct methodological paradigm for this research is grounded in Edmund Husserl’s transcendental philosophy; that different experiences can be described as they are lived out and that their form can be practically analysed. Transcendental phenomenology is ontologically based in the assumption that the conscious experience of reality is in effect an internal reality, specific to the person experiencing it (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology “studies the subject’s perspectives on their world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subject’s consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings.....without any considerations about the origin or cause of an experience” (Kvale, 1996, p. 53). Husserl believed that that it was the lived experience of an individual that formed its reality, that it was an undiscovered facet of being and that in attempting to understand and draw meaning from it, the researcher has to look beyond the primary senses of sight and sound to cognitive and emotional experiences involving thought and memory (Neubauer et al., 2019).

The nature of the phenomenological approach to research as described by Kvale (1996) highlights a number of its beneficial attributes. In addition to enabling the researcher to note the way in which processes change over time and gain insight into the meanings ascribed to the lived experience by the participants, the gathering of profound, rich and ‘natural’ data allows the researcher to more easily adapt to new

concepts and ideas as they unfold during the data collection process. Evaluating the success or failure of Journey as an intervention designed to influence the developmental trajectory of its participants, required the simultaneous identification and analysis of themes related to the girls experiential context and process. It also required the researcher to identify the links between the context and process and psychosocial implications thereof.

Notwithstanding the beneficial attributes of the qualitative approach, the accountability of research efforts in the field of wilderness therapy programmes have historically been criticised for their lack of empirical procedures. In their paper evaluating the impact of wilderness therapy programmes on behaviourally disordered adolescents, Sachs and Miller (1992) used “a standardized rating scale and direct observation procedures” (p. 90) in order to ascertain the difference in behaviours between a control group and an experimental group as a result of participating in the wilderness programme. They were able to demonstrate that participation in wilderness therapy programmes led to statistically significant changes in behaviour in the experimental population.

The discipline of phenomenology as a research method contributes to the development of contemporary theories of phenomena. The meaning of Journey as an experience relevant to the resolution of psychosocial crises of adolescence was extrapolated from what was actually experienced by the girls and how they experienced it. Their unique perspectives and insights of the experience were woven together by the researcher in an attempt to develop fresh, deeper insight and understanding of the developmental impact of Journey on the girls.

### **3.3. Research methodology**

In his research on wilderness therapy programmes in the United States, Russell (2006) justified the use of case studies and “direct observation of practice” (p. 54) in the development of theory as “the most straightforward approach” (p. 54) with regards to research methodology in the context of wilderness therapy programmes. A multi-method case study approach was used in this research to record, describe and understand the girls’ lived experience of Journey. Particular attention was given to the potential of Journey as an experiential programme to contribute to the resolution of the

crises of adolescence in alignment with Erikson’s overarching theoretical framework of the study. The core crises of adolescence pertain to the development of self-identity and the complexities of social relationships, as well as the development of self-competence related to physical tasks, interpersonal skills, resilience and self-regulation (Erikson, 1959). Embedded in these developmental challenges in postmodern times is the role that exposure to digital technology plays in the formation of these identities, relationships and competence (Mesch & Talmud, 2010).

Multi-method research in this study refers to the collection and interpretation of data using a number of strategies. In this research, inductive focus group discussions, field discussions and participant observations were utilised to collect a comprehensive data set (see sub-section 3.3.2). Information gleaned from the different data sources was synthesised at the end of the data collection and analysis process in order to form a coherent understanding of the research phenomenon. The table below summarises the methods used to operationalise the collection of a range of rich, meaningful and varied data from as many perspectives as possible for the purposes of answering the research questions:

Research questions	Sample	Method	Analysis
How did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls influence their relationships with and through digital technology?	Adolescent girls	Pre- Journey: Focus group discussion(audio-recordings and post-it memos).	Thematic analysis of transcriptions of audio recordings. Thematic analysis of process- mapping output.
What relevant adolescent developmental tasks did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls elicit?		During Journey: Participant observation (handwritten notes and researchers personal audio records), daily inductive field discussions.	Thematic analysis of daily observation records, researcher reflective notes and personal audio records, transcriptions of audio recordings of field discussions.
What are the adolescent girls’ pre- and post-ecotherapy programme related expectations and experiences in relation to relevant adolescent developmental tasks?		Post-Journey: Focus group discussion (audio-recordings).	Thematic analysis of transcriptions of audio recordings.

Table 3.1. *Summary of research methodology*

An inductive focus group approach allowed the researcher to use “the details and specifics of the data to discover important categories, dimensions and interrelationships; by exploring genuinely open questions” (Terre Blanche et al., 2006, p. 213). The process followed during the two focus group discussions are discussed in sub- section 3.3.2. In keeping with the philosophy of transcendental phenomenology, the researcher took on the role of participant observer during Journey. Permission was granted by the school for the researcher to accompany a group of girls at various key points during their wilderness adventure. Participant observations by, and personal reflections of the researcher during the programme were recorded in the form of handwritten field notes and audio recordings. Field discussions (sub- section 3.3.2.) in the form of formal group debrief sessions were held at the end of each day during Journey and were digitally sound recorded.

The aim of the multi-method research design was to allow the researcher to describe the participant experiences during Journey as indepth and as accurately as possible in order to reach a theory or hypothesis that aimed to juxtapose the effects of ecotherapy practice on adolescents against their developmental challenges in the context of the digital age (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Journey as a wilderness adventure, the digital age and the processes of adolescence form integral parts of the epistemological lifeworld of the girls in the research cohort. Understanding this lifeworld as it experienced by the girls requires the incorporation of multiple units of meaning to describe it (Neubauer et al., 2019).

### **3.3.1. Sampling: method and rationale**

Journey, as a wilderness adventure for adolescent girls, was selected by the researcher as it is a well-established programme that has been in operation for seven years. It is supported by a dedicated team of educators, psychologists, facilitators and volunteers that provide the necessary back up to ensure its successful operation. This allowed the researcher to fully engage in the research process without being hampered by logistical detail. The extensive logistical support and experience of the support team also ensured that the integrity of the programme as experienced by the participants was maintained. This allowed the researcher to focus on research outcomes without being hampered or the research diluted by process issues.

In the case of Journey, 106 Grade Nine students take part in the wilderness adventure as a compulsory part of their school curriculum. These 106 girls form the research population. The girls are purposively divided into groups of approximately 16 individuals per group before the commencement of Journey by the school leadership. The different sub-groups remain intact for the duration of the experience and do not have contact with other groups while they are partaking in the programme.

In a process that conciliates the need for equal demographic, dietary, physical fitness and special needs representation in each of the groups, the school leadership assigns student participants to six different groups in a consultative process that aims for an equal spread of fitness levels, medical issues, dietary requirements, race and special needs across all groups. Each group comprised of approximately 16-20 students that were clustered taking into account existing relationships, physical and psychological strengths and weaknesses, dietary requirements and demographics. The researcher was randomly assigned to a group by the school leadership. This group formed the research sample.

### **3.3.2. Data collection**

As referred to in Section 3.2. above, a multi-method approach was used in the data collection process. The data collection process of the study incorporated three distinct phases.

The first phase included the hosting of a focus group discussion prior to the departure of the sample group on Journey (see Appendix B) for a copy of the focus group interview schedule used to guide the topics of the discussion). This phase was also used as an 'ice breaker' between the research participants and researcher. Being a totally non-familiar outsider to the research group at the start of Journey may have compromised the willingness of research participants to share openly in the daily field discussions during Journey had this been the first occasion that the researcher met the girls. This was the experience of researchers studying the psychological experiential learning processes of a wilderness therapy programme in the USA in which the youth purposefully did not engage in detailed conversation with the researcher forcing a change in researcher role to that of outsider, non-participant observer (Holyfield & Fine, 1997).

All 16 student participants were first invited to and subsequently consented to participate in the focus group discussion. Focus group discussions have been lauded for their resource saving capacity but more importantly for their ability to generate large amounts of data that has been meaningfully created through group interaction (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). The girls were encouraged to respond to questions pertaining to their perceived 'relationship' with digital technology. The findings and a process mapping approach were incorporated into the focus group discussion to elicit anonymous individual responses to certain questions for the purposes of thematic aggregation of data. Process mapping is a qualitative data tool used to elicit and organise data thematically from individuals participating in group discussions to obtain a birds-eye view of pertinent issues or topics (Pluto & Hirshorn, 2003).

Participants recorded individual, confidential responses to certain questions on post-it notes, one comment or observation per post-it. For example, one prompt asked the girls to name five positive emotions that they commonly feel or experience when interfacing with people on social media. Using this approach, individual participants added depth to the subsequent verbal discussions, through individual and confidential written contributions. This to some extent circumvents one of the major pitfalls of focus group discussions; that being them running the risk of generalisation when participants' verbal input merely echoes or mirrors that of other participants for the sake of a perceived need for uniformity by participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Once the responses to a specific question had been manually written on the post-it notes by the girls, a general group discussion pertaining to that specific question ensued, facilitated by the researcher.

The second phase incorporated participant observation of the activities that form part of the Journey programme (see Appendix C for a copy of the observation schedule) and daily field discussions. Observations included that of individual and group tasks centred around core daily 'chores', such as camp set up and break down, cooking and washing as well as activities including horse-riding, canoeing, cycling and hiking to certain destinations. For example, using the observation schedule, the researcher recorded notes of instances where certain girls who were experienced horse riders chose to assist some girls who were not. The day, approximated time and individuals involved in the interactions were noted, as was the general mood of the interaction. Any significant

verbalisations were recorded albeit not verbatim. The researcher also noted observations related to social dynamics, physical and emotional difficulties and other specific narrative throughout each day that was of particular relevance to the research. Handwritten observation notes and personal audio recordings were made by the researcher in private at regular intervals during the day, usually when the girls were engaged in camp break down, meal preparation, solo and camp set up. The notes and audio recordings were reviewed in the evenings when the girls had settled into their tents or sleeping bags for the night.

The second phase also included recording the inductive field discussions, facilitated by the adult leaders and the researcher. These discussions, serving as daily debrief sessions, were held with the girls as an already existing part of the wilderness adventure. These sessions, built into the daily programme by the school, are designed to be supportive in nature and provide an opportunity for the students reflect on the formal activities engaged in each day and more unstructured, informal happenings such as relationship dynamics, conflict resolution, spiritual reflections and emotional well-being. The purpose of the field discussions are to allow the students and the leaders to openly communicate their personal challenges and achievements in the presence of a reassuring network of peers and adults.

The third phase incorporated a post- Journey focus group discussion held prior to the girls' return home. Information about the girls' actual experiences versus their expectations was guided by a schedule of questions (see Appendix D).

### **3.3.3. Data management and storage**

The handwritten post-it notes displaying the range of feelings and emotions that the participants were encouraged to identify relating to social interactions on their cell phones for example naming five negative things that 'happen' on their cellphones, were used as part of the pre-Journey focus group interview. These memos were clustered thematically on the same day as the focus group was held and reviewed by the researcher before being locked in a secure location for later use in the data analysis phase.



Audio recordings of pre-Journey and post- Journey focus group discussions and field discussions were captured and stored on a portable dictaphone during Journey. These were transferred onto an electronic hard drive on the culmination of Journey.

Transcriptions were digitally stored. Participant observations were recorded by hand by the researcher in the field and were transferred into digital form and stored on an electronic hard drive within a month of the culmination of the Journey programme.

Similarly, the reflective journaling undertaken by the researcher was typed up and digitally stored. The original handwritten journal notes were stored in a secure location.

Personal audio observation recordings made by the researcher were transcribed and digitally stored.

The necessary precautions were taken to ensure the integrity of the equipment. As per advice given by Easton, McComish and Greenberg (2000) recording equipment and observational notes were protected in the field from weather and situational conditions. The possibility of equipment failure was accounted for with a spare recording device and batteries available.

### **3.3.4. Data analysis**

Phenomenological research requires the application of a certain level of philosophical discipline prior to the commencement of data analysis. Using the concept of transcendence, Neubauer et al. (2019) iterate the need for the researcher to approach data intuitively, without relying on preconceived definitions or idealisations that are grounded in prior knowledge of philosophical frameworks, psychological theory and scientific assumption. The researcher is essentially regarded as a blank slate, using inner and participant experience in order to construct meaning and understanding of the essence of the phenomenon under study.

Reflexive thematic analysis was the methodology used to make sense of the data collected from focus group discussions, field discussions and researcher observations and to identify the patterns of meaning or themes distilled from these sources.

Neubauer et al. (2019) refer to this as ‘transcendental-phenomenological reduction’; the construction and understanding of the essence and meaning of a phenomenon using explicit and latent sources. Examples of explicit knowledge sources in this research are the narratives recorded in the focus group discussions and field

discussions. The researchers personal reflections on the meaning of social interactions and emotionality observed during Journey are latent or conceptual data sources. Braun and Clarke (2006) indicate that thematic analysis is useful in qualitative research because of the flexibility of the method across theoretical frameworks which gives it the ability to “provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p. 5).

Themes in a qualitative analysis as conducted in this research refer to “a pattern of shared meaning, organized around a core concept or idea” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). The themes in this study are essentially micro summaries of the main topics that were raised by the girls, built from coding content from transcriptions, field notes and researcher reflections. Neubauer et al. (2019) refers to this method of data reduction as ‘imaginative variation’, a process by which the researcher intuitively synthesises participant data into a cohesive description of the essence of the phenomenon. Codes, the smaller units of meaning that make up a theme by collating chunks of text were extrapolated from extensive familiarisation of the data sources generated from the mixed methods approach, in an organic and iterative process.

In this research, audio recordings of focus group discussions, field discussions and the researcher’s personal audio recorded observations were transcribed as soon as practical after Journey. Patterns in the data were identified and analysed and grouped according to themes. Themes and sub-themes are responses that give a rich description of the data set; repeated patterns of meaning (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The researcher’s audio reflections were also used as resource tools for data collection and analysis. These were transcribed, analysed, coded and finally, thematically clustered. The researcher in this study essentially took on the role of the storyteller as described by Braun and Clarke (2019), actively interfacing with the data in an active reflexive and recursive manner, interpreting it “through the lens of cultural membership and social positionings, theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge” (p. 849).

### **3.3.5. The verification of truth**

The nature of qualitative research has been indicated as a potential risk for research validity. Terre Blanche et al. (2006) and Babbie & Mouton (2005) highlight the need for any research study to be credible (research that provides results that are convincing

and believable), dependable (extent to which the results of the research can be consistently achieved in different settings using different samples), confirmable (reflects the research questions and is objective) and generalisable (the extent to which the data can be applied to other populations and other contexts).

The soundness of the research method and the truths extrapolated, are dependent on three assumptions of validity; that being that the phenomena under study is fairly common and thus ordinarily experienced, that all the research participants experience the process of the phenomenon in the same way despite demographic diversity, and that the phenomena experienced was that which the researcher intended to study in the first place (Groenewald, 2004). Other notable factors to account for when assessing the validity of phenomenological research are the participants' interest in understanding the nature and meaning of their experiences, their willingness to participate in lengthy research processes and their permission to have their narrative recorded, transcribed and interpreted (Easton et al., 2000).

Data from the various stages of Journey were assessed for their "true fix on reality" (Silverman, 2006, p. 177) using methodological triangulation. This involves using data from multiple sources, in this case focus group discussions, daily field debrief discussions, observation notes and the researcher's personal reflections captured by daily journaling. Facts arising from field observations and focus group themes were cross checked in order to ensure credibility and validity. As a further verification process, respondent validation and member checks of the transcribed narrative were carried out to ensure that the themes that emerged were "believable, accurate and right" (Creswell, 1998, p. 214).

Establishing rapport with the study sample prior to the commencement of Journey, building trust with the study sample and the use of rich, thick description enhanced the validity of the study. The accuracy with which transcriptions were recorded and that meaning through coding was ascribed attempt to give this research as with all qualitative research, the ability to be transferred to other contexts or at least to be used as a theoretical framework in other contexts (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

The researcher, as an observer of reality operated from an objective epistemological standpoint; requiring conscious intention to set aside bias and subjective opinion in order to understand and describe Journey as the lived experience of the girls.

Participant observation that does not seek to manipulate, control or dominate the research environment provides a more naturalistic approach to study the ecotherapy experience as it unfolds. I therefore practiced bracketing during the data collection phase in order to reduce researcher interference or bias on the process of data collection as well as during the thematic clustering of the transcribed material. The practice of the researcher to suspend either bringing their own opinions, attitudes and understanding of the phenomena under study in order to focus on the lived experience of the participant and the essence thereof is often problematic and fraught with 'breaches' in validity (Groenewald, 2004). Avoiding researcher bias requires a conscious and aware discipline to research method. Following the advice given by Holloway (1997) audio recordings were listened to repeatedly in order to capture the 'gestalt' or overall holistic essence conveyed by the words and discussions held with the participants. In this way, the lived experience of the participants was given 'existential immediacy' (Groenewald, 2004) in an effort to reduce researcher presupposition and subjective bias.

### **3.4. Research limitations**

The generalisability of this particular study was compromised by the demographics of the research sample. The fact that the participants originated from a privileged independent school and the all-female composition of the study sample makes it difficult to transfer the interpretations of their experience to a wide range of other settings and therefore to truly validate the findings. In the same manner, the relatively small sample size makes it difficult to generalise the results to a larger population.

A second limitation of this study relates to the time frames of the study. The study assesses the short-term psychosocial effects of participating in Journey; the longevity of the results are therefore not known. Further research would need to be conducted in order to establish whether or not the outcomes hold true in the medium and long term.

From the outset, my selection of the research topic originates from a lifelong appreciation for the positive effects that participating in wilderness- based activities has had on me on a personal level. Whilst every precaution was taken to practice Husserl's 'epoche', a Greek word meaning "to refrain from judgement, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things" (Kazanjian, 2018, p. 6), bracketing proved to be more challenging than originally anticipated. It was difficult to completely avoid interjecting on group discussions with personal experiences or opinions on request from the research participants. Conscious awareness of my own Journey experience was practiced, with daily reflective notes being invaluable to gain perspective on each individual participants Journey experience.

### **3.5. Ethical considerations**

A fundamental and overarching consideration of research involving human subjects pertains to the minimisation of exploitation of the research participants. Wassenaar and Rattani (2016) outline the principles of the Emmanuel Framework for Ethical Research (see Appendix E) as a guide for researchers to protect the autonomy of research participants and balance the distribution of benefits between researcher and subjects as they interact in the research space. I familiarised myself with this framework prior to engaging in data collection. Collaborative Partnerships, Social Value, Scientific Validity, Fair Participant Selection, Favourable Risk-Benefit Ratio, Independent Review, Informed Consent and Respect for Participants are the fundamental principles that guided all stages of this study (Wassenaar & Rattani, 2016).

Ethical clearance was secured from the University of KwaZulu- Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Appendix F & G) prior to the commencement of research. Gatekeeper permission was secured in writing by the principal of the school that operates Journey (Appendix H). Counselling by qualified personnel (the registered psychologist employed by the school) was made available in the eventuality that any participants experienced distress as a result of participation in the research.

The following Gatekeeper conditions were adhered to by the researcher which were obtained utilising the services of an intermediary company (Appendix I):

- Researcher to obtain a Police Clearance Certificate from the South African Police Services prior to having contact with research sample as per the school's request.
- Researcher to submit an affidavit to the effect that she has never been convicted of a sexual offence against a child or mentally disabled person (in terms of Section 46(1), (2) and (3) of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 32 of 2007 and does not appear on the National Register for Sex Offenders (NRSO).

The average age of the research cohort at the time of research was 15 years old. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were permitted to leave the study at any time without discrimination. Parents and research participants were fully informed and educated as to the purpose of the study, intended methodology, confidentiality and potential risks. Parental consent was secured prior to the study commencing (Appendix J). The research participants gave informed consent prior to the commencement of the research (Appendix K).

All transcripts of audio recordings and written data will be kept in securely locked storage facilities for five years following the study. Electronic data will be transferred from the researcher's computer to an external hard drive which will be stored in the same facility as the written data. Electronic data on the researchers computer will then be deleted. After the five year period has lapsed, all written data will be destroyed and all electronic data deleted.

Results of the research will be shared with the research participants, their parents and the school leadership team upon completion of the study. In addition, additional copies of the research will be handed to the school for further use in programme development. Participants were assigned pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. Confidentiality pledges were signed by all study participants in order to protect the confidentiality of each member of the sample in focus group discussions (Appendix L).

The research is not funded by an organization or company.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

Chapter 3 outlined transcendental phenomenology as the philosophical framework that was used to link together the data collection and analysis phases of this research. Focus group discussions, field discussions and participant observation notes and audio recordings were aggregated by the researcher using a process of thematic analysis. Adherence measures to ensure scientific rigour were outlined and the limitations of the research were identified. Ethical considerations formed the closing section of this chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4:           DIGITAL RELATIONSHIPS: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

There is little faith involved in setting out on a journey where  
the destination is certain and every step in between has been mapped in detail.  
Bravery, trust, is about leaving camp in the dark,  
when we do not know the route ahead and cannot be certain we will ever return.

Bear Grylls, A survival guide for life

St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls Journey Journal, 2018, p. 8.

### **4.1.   Introduction**

Transcendental phenomenology as a research approach requires the researcher to explicate meaning from a variety of data sources and generate a pattern of meaning from these sources. The dominant themes and sub- themes that were created by the researcher arising from the thematic analysis of the pre- and post- Journey focus group discussions, field discussions and researcher observations and reflections are presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. The findings are analysed and discussed within the theoretical and literary frameworks outlined in Chapter 1 and 2.

In the pre-Journey focus group discussion, participants were asked to declare prior experience of core Journey activities, for example, bike riding, horse-riding and paddling. The findings about prior experience related to core Journey activities are presented at the beginning of Chapter 4 to contextualise the thematic descriptions that follow in subsequent chapters. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 3, the girls were encouraged to respond to questions pertaining to their perceived 'relationship' with digital technology in the first phase focus group discussion. The findings related to this theme are presented in Chapter 4, with an integrated discussion, in order to address the research question relevant to this topic; how did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls influence their relationships with and through digital technology?



## 4.2. Participant information

During the pre-Journey focus group discussion, the girls were asked to share information about their prior outdoor and wilderness experience in order to contextualise the findings garnered from their narrative and observations made by the researcher during the wilderness adventure. The table below presents experiential data related to the participants elicited during the pre -Journey focus group discussion:

ACTIVITY/EXPERIENCE	Yes	No
Carried a 20kg backpack before	0	16
Carried and erected a tent before	3	13
Slept in a tent before	5	11
Slept in a cave before	1	15
Has used a methylated spirits cooker before?	0	16
Can ride a bike	11	5
Has ridden a horse	8	8
Has been paddling before	7	9
Has been away from family/home for 21 days before	5	11
Has walked for more than 5kms in the wilderness before	4	12
Has ever bathed in a natural pool/river	8	8

Table 4.1. The outdoor experience of the girls prior to Journey training

As evidenced in Table 4.1., before the basic practices at school prior to the Journey starting, none of the girls had real-life experience of carrying a heavily weighted backpack before Journey and only one of the girls had overnighted in a cave. In terms of food preparation, none of the girls had had prior experience of preparing a hot meal using a methylated spirits cooker. Five of the 16 girls had walked more than five kilometres in the wilderness before the start of Journey and five had been away from their families for more than 21 days, the length of Journey.

In order to preserve the confidentiality and privacy of the group of research participants whose personal circumstances are known by school personnel and Journey leaders, it was decided not to present the girls' pseudonyms alongside any distinct biographical data (e.g. race, age, abilities, prior outdoor or sporting experience). The following pseudonyms were assigned to the participants: Robyn, Lihle, Amara, Katy Rebecca,

Nomanda, Tarynne, Refilwe, Hayley, Daniella, Maxine, Grace, Nicole, Sam, Bella, Riley.

### 4.3. Bridging the digital divide

In Section 4.3., the overarching theme created from the thematic analysis of the study data is organised in a way to facilitate ease of reference to the research question; how did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls influence their relationships with and through digital technology? Discussions related to the findings are incorporated in Chapter 4 to provide an integrated insight into the girls' relationship with digital technology in order to capture the full essence of the context of the girls' digital world combined with their experience of wilderness adventure and the complexity of adolescence. The themes are presented below:

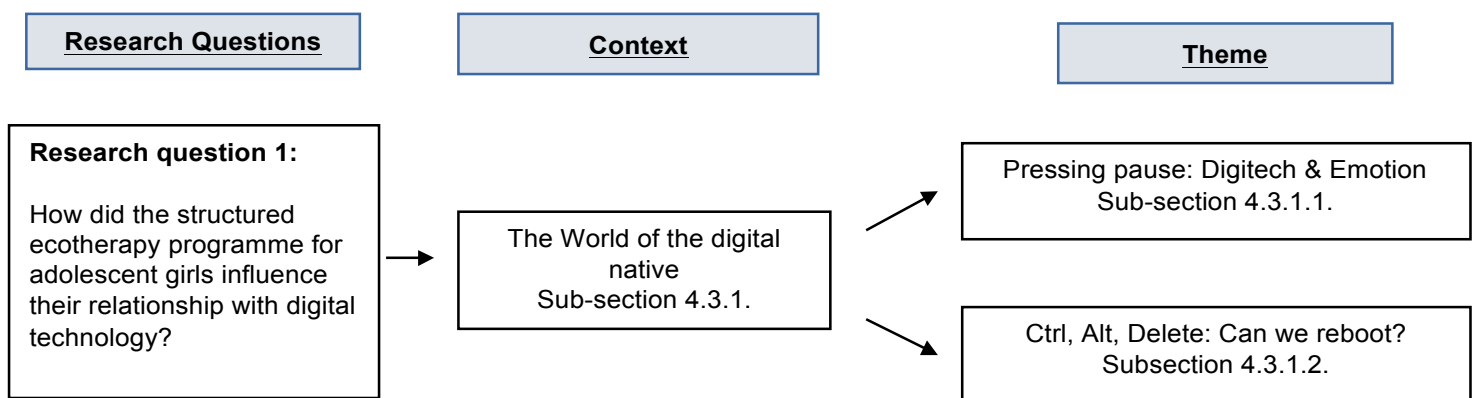


Fig 4.1. Bridging the digital divide: theme summary

#### 4.3.1. The world of the digital native

The relatively broad term 'digital technology' (digitech) was narrowed down by the researcher at the commencement of the pre-Journey focus group discussion to refer to 'cellphones'. During the pre-Journey focus group discussion, it was established that although the girls had ownership of or access to tablets and laptops, personal cellphones were the most commonly utilised form of digitech. The word 'relationship' was deconstructed with the girls. The 'relationship' that the girls had with their cellphones was agreed to mean the feelings or emotions elicited from the use of their cellphones and from engagement with associated social media. WhatsApp and

Instagram were the social media apps most often referred to by the girls as the primary tools for communication between individual girls and groups, with parents and members of the opposite sex, as a way of keeping in touch with the latest peer group activities and keeping up to date with the latest fashions and trends. This concurs with patterns of media use in South Africa and globally as indicated by Gabrielsen and Harper (2017) and Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018).

#### **4.3.1.1. Pressing pause: digitech and emotions**

When asked to rate their feelings about not having a cellphone with them on Journey, 11 of the girls reported only mild concern about being disconnected from social media and messaging platforms. Three were not concerned at all and only two admitted that they would find it fairly difficult to be offline. These opinions seemed to be consistent with subsequent remarks made by the girls during the focus group discussion in response to questions about the negative influences of digitech in their daily lives. These opinions concur with research reviewed in Chapter 2 regarding the impact of social media on adolescent development with more adolescents self-reporting negative associations of interfacing with social media than positive (Uhls et al., 2017). The girls' apparent unconcern at being 'disconnected' could be attributed to one of two factors; firstly reflecting discontent with the disequilibrium in their lives caused by social media as will be evidenced further on in this section and secondly, that the disconnect was less of a concern because the members of their immediate social networks were as equally not available online. Mesch and Talmud (2010) refer to the social inequity and perceptions of power caused by differing status' of online access between members of a peer network; individuals with restricted, limited or no access are said to feel more marginalised or socially isolated and report feeling of inferiority and lower levels of self-esteem compared to those with higher levels of online accessibility.

All 16 of the girls associated feelings of happiness with their cellphones, particularly with reference to receiving complementary or kind messages and being able to easily connect with friends and loved ones. Feeling important and valued were also commonly reported, largely as a response to 'likes' and positive comments on social media. Messages sent on WhatsApp or Instagram are perceived by the girls as the recipients as an indicator of their social desirability and as a demonstration of care by the sender. Nine girls cited their cellphones as valuable sources of entertainment (music, funny

videos, news, memes and jokes). These results reflect the importance of positive affirmations from a supportive peer group on healthy adolescent development. The girls' association of social media with positive emotional states are indicative of the power of the online environment to "reflect, complement, and reinforce offline relationships, practices and processes" (Uhls et al., 2017, p.569). Messages perceived as a demonstration of care by the sender appears to link in with evidence that social media is used extensively for the maintenance of existing friendships and that feeling valued increases self-esteem and provides a safe space for identity exploration and self-disclosure.

The words 'comfort' and 'confident' were used by seven of the girls in their description of how cellphones made them feel, that being behind a screen afforded them a modicum of protection against social 'vulnerability' in their communications. Riley commented that:

*I feel like over the phone you have time to think about what you want to say instead of having to reply straightaway. What you say face to face is in the moment and you have to say what you actually feel without having time to think or asking friends or family what to say back. (Riley, FGI, p. 218).*

This vulnerability was reflected to the researcher in the pre-Journey focus group discussion by Refilwe, Tarryne and Riley who all agreed that they often worried about saying the wrong thing in face to face conversations with peers and that their peers would judge them, reject them or make fun of them. Fifteen of the girls agreed that they would never verbalise the words that they type in a face to face conversation and four of the girls admitted that they could only converse with boys via social media and messaging apps. Some girls mentioned that they were fearful of face to face conversations because they were fearful of the consequences of the things that they said. Grace pointed out that:

*In real life you can't just not listen and ignore what people are saying. I am more confident behind a screen when you can't see all that stuff. You can't see body language or hear tone. If I could see how they reacted to my statements or words, it would impact what I would say next. (Grace, FGI, p. 233).*

This statement from Grace correlates with written observations and audio transcripts from the field discussions, particularly in the first week of Journey. Many of the girls were reluctant to take part in the field discussions or found it difficult to express their thoughts and feelings in front of girls that they had not yet formed trusting relationships with. Prompting and close facilitation were required from the adult leaders to ensure open participation in the discussions by all of the girls. The girls appeared to have difficulty with conflict resolution for seemingly minor issues throughout Journey. Adult leaders were more regularly approached during week two and three by girls unable to find ways to resolve practical issues (disagreements over food distributions, task allocations, timekeeping etc.) and interpersonal problems.

The anonymity afforded to users of social media in their online interactions has been identified as a hinderance to the development of self-identity amongst contemporary theorists (Ellison et al., 2016). The fact that girls declared a preference for the relative anonymity of social media reveals a modicum of aversion to face-to-face contact. In their assessment of online anonymity on adolescent psychosocial development, Ellison et al. (2016) found that online anonymity complements the offline social landscape of the adolescent, giving them the power to reduce uncertainty related to social contexts and selectively experiment with self-expression and feedback.

When one considers that the development of self-identity in adolescence is primarily attained and reinforced using relationships and the full spectrum of relational interaction as the pathway, questions around whether or not online relationships can authentically provide this pathway can be raised. The girls' preference to relying on social media as a means to avoid potentially embarrassing or uncomfortable social interactions could be considered a valid example of the power of digital technology to disenfranchise the youth in terms of developing effective communication skills as referred to by Borca et al. (2015). Whilst conflict resolution during Journey appeared to be difficult for the girls to navigate, it is unlikely that this can be solely ascribed to increasing exposure to technification by the girls in this research. Ging and Norman (2016) do however allude to the role that social media contributes to the "lack of empowerment to confront aggressors, discuss conflict openly with friends or report hurtful incidents" (p.14). While the research supports the notion that online anonymity relating to self-expression

complements social dynamics (Ellison, 2016), the cost of that anonymity in terms of healthy conflict resolution is debatable.

Impatience, anger and annoyance were listed by 11 girls as negative emotional associations with cellphone usage. Feelings of disconnection and loneliness were significant with Tarynne saying that:

*I hate it when like we are out and everyone is just sitting around the table on their phones. Even though I want to talk I usually pick up my phone because there is nothing else to do* (Tarynne, FGI, 236).

Tarynne's experiences support the idea that increased cellphone usage and engagement with social media results in higher levels of loneliness and offline, real-world social disengagement by adolescents (Keles et al., 2020). Evidence in Chapter 2 of this dissertation demonstrated the extensive influence that technification has on the world of the adolescent, partially to the detriment of time-honoured, although culturally specific social norms such as making eye contact during face-to-face conversations. Studies relating to the association between loneliness and social media usage do not clearly delineate if loneliness is caused by social media usage or not (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Research does posit that the loneliness expressed in Tarynne's example, although a construct subjective to Tarynne, could allude to her opinion of online relationships as being inferior to real face-to face friendships and a resultant feeling of being ignored at the table and not valued enough to take priority over other online conversations or media engagement in that moment (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017).

Nine of the girls expressed that they often felt misread in digital conversations, leading to feelings of impatience, anger or annoyance. The girls alluded to digital conversations as being 'fake' because there were no common cues such as verbal tone and body language to rely on to ascertain the authenticity of the message. In addition, it was acknowledged that being able to digitally edit responses often invoked a sense of mistrust regarding the real intention behind the message. Implicit in this label of online communication as fake or inauthentic is the knowledge that the girls have that digital responses are not necessarily made immediately, giving the respondent time to think

about and edit their reply, often consulting with others to do so. In the focus group discussion, the concept of fakeness was carried over to the construction of fake online identities on social media platforms. This aligns with research that draws attention to the dangers of social media with regards to the creation of fictitious online identities by users (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014; Uhls et al., 2017). The girls unanimously acknowledged feelings of inferiority, jealousy and resentment in response to certain social media posts by peers. Social media posts that inspired aspiration for example, showing ownership of designer clothing, idealised body shape or weight or in a desirable social setting were identified by the girls as the primary cause for feelings of inferiority, jealousy and resentment.

The construction of online social identities is mentioned extensively in literature pertaining to adolescent psychosocial development and social media use and is reviewed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Even before the advent of social media, social comparison was recognised as an integral part of adolescent identity formation and the aspirational element of social comparison alluded to by Erikson (1959):

Adolescents are sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared to what they feel they are and with the question of how to connect to earlier cultivated roles and skills with the ideal prototypes of the day. (p. 65)

From the evidence presented in Chapter 2, it could be deduced that the projection of an online identity forms part of identity exploration as adolescents actively and selectively present an online persona. Despite this being proven as an important tool for the development of self-concept, inviting feedback and self-disclosure (McKenna & Bargh, 2000), one could argue that the awareness by their peers of this 'tactic' to gain peer validation decreases its effectiveness. The comments made by the girls indicate that they experience negative emotional outcomes related to messaging and posts, despite being aware of the 'fakeness' of social media in terms of contrived and edited messaging and constructed online identities and even partaking in these practices themselves.

Ten girls said that they often felt anxious, stressed and fearful and eight girls reported sadness as a result of negative online social interactions. These include having fights on Whatsapp, not getting enough likes and feeling judged on Instagram, being left out of Whatsapp groups, messages being read and not replied to, messages not being read and not getting enough messages in one day. The girls could readily identify the sources of anxiety linked to their digital communications. For example Nicole said that:

*I get sad when I see screenshots of something mean someone has said about me to someone else.* (Nicole, FGI, p.324).

Although Nicole labelled sadness as the primary emotion that she felt, her statement above gives evidence of the girls' stated anxiety with regards to trust. Digital messages can be easily shared with other individuals and groups. In contrast to earlier statements where most of the girls agreed that they felt more comfortable communicating digitally, all 16 girls agreed that they often had to think twice before sending a message because they did not trust that the message would remain private (between the sender and the recipient only).

Evidence that the girls are still in the process of developing a secure self-identity in accordance with their life stage (Erikson, 1963) is implicit in comments made by the girls relating to their perceptions of being ignored and undervalued in media. Examples of this given by the girls were related to messaging or gaining a sense of social validation and acceptance from responses to social media posts. It could also be argued that there is evidence of a degree of online immaturity amongst the girls, that delayed responses to messages are absorbed as slights to their self-concept as opposed to reflecting the reality of the recipients timetable or preoccupation with other matters. Nicole's comment reveals a darker side of online social dynamics which is highlighted in research around cyberbullying, online aggression and conflict (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Taken together, the themes of online conflict and breaches of privacy identified by the girls, engendering feelings of mistrust, fear, anxiety and stress correlate strongly with the findings of associated depression, low self-esteem and precarious mental health mentioned in Chapter 2.



Conversations noted in the field observations during Journey linked back to the feelings of anxiety and stress expressed by the girls in the pre- Journey focus group related to digitech. These were mainly associated with the fear of parents reading incoming messages while the girls were away. The pressure of having to navigate the anticipated large volume of messages and posts on social app feeds on their return home from Journey was a shared concern. All 16 girls admitted during field discussions that they were enjoying the break from digital communication. They felt that having the absence of the social pressure generated by digitech gave them more time to think and be themselves.

The findings in the above paragraph are indicative of the contradictions of 'normal adolescence' as alluded to in Chapter 2; the girls apparently disliked the idea of their cellphones being checked on by their parents but were open in admitting that the pressure of online communication is fraught with social and temporal pressure that they often struggled to manage. The skill of self-regulation is still largely undeveloped in the adolescent which increases their susceptibility to external influences on identity formation (Erikson, 1968). The fact that the majority of the girls expressed concern over the fact that their parents would be checking their cellphones while they were on Journey is indicative of the protective regulatory role that their parents still play in terms of restricting access to potential harmful digital technology content. It also appears that technification issues such as privacy, online access and policing of online content by parents have been incorporated into the parent-teenager conflict already prevalent in the adolescent life stage.

### **4.3.1.2. Ctrl, Alt, Delete: can we reboot?**

This is the second theme in sub- section 4.3.1. and centres around the dissonance between the girls' increased awareness of the influence of digitech on their lives as a result of participating in Journey and their perceived control over its negative effects. None of the girls believed that they would be able to sustain the personal commitments that they made during Journey to reducing screen time on their return home. As Hayley aptly said during the focus group discussion:

*I once deleted Facebook and Insta off my phone and I really struggled the first day. Two days later I had to reinstall them because I didn't know what people were talking about at school and hadn't seen the stuff they were looking at so I kind of like felt left out. Even no-one in my group could believe that I had deleted them in the first place.* (Hayley, FGI, 279).

This statement is indicative of Hayley's awareness of the social pressure that exists to fit in with one's peers. To Hayley, fitting in means that she is up to date with the latest social events and that she can be seen to be contributing meaningfully in social interactions with her peers. Hayley's statement explicitly reveals the important role that social media applications play in keeping adolescents connected with peers and global current affairs. Hayley's statement gives further evidence of issues discussed in previous chapters and paragraphs, of the influence that digitech has on the personal and social identity of the adolescent. On a more subtle level her statement is also suggestive of the addictive behaviour relating to the use of social media platforms that has been identified in research; that there is a dependency factor involved that gives rise to its continued use (Keles et al., 2020).

The review of literature in Chapter 2 indicated that there is a correlation between the use of digital technology in adolescents and negative mental health issues that extend to that of self and social identity formation. This correlation echoes the findings in this chapter regarding the influence of digital technology, specifically social media, on self-identity and socialisation factors in adolescent girls. In the contemporary world of the digital native asking the question, 'can we reboot?', may be rhetorical taking into account the reality of increasing technification being an unavoidable and predictable way of life for adolescents (Moreno, 2010). Despite her effort to reboot, Hayley's perception was of social isolation which induced her to reconnect her social media and messaging accounts. Rapid improvements in technology will continue to play an increasing role in the way in which adolescents communicate with each other and interface globally and as evidenced by Hayley's comment above, there appears to be no going back, no rebooting.

In their book, Mesch and Talmud (2010) refer to 'social diversification', a term used to describe the way in which adolescents use technology to not only maintain their existing

social ties but to expand them to social contexts that do not exist without the technology. Using social diversification, internet connectivity creates a space in which existing friendships can be maintained and linkages established to social resources outside the homogeneity of the peer relationships. All 15 of the girls reacted to Hayley's stated attempt at disconnecting from social media with disbelief and questioned the logic of her decision to refrain from social media use. From the ensuing discussion, it could be deduced that the girls do not only place value on social media in terms of connecting them with their existing peer network but also with external social networks which correlate with research by Lenhart et al. (2015). Being up to date and in the know with regards to current social happenings appeared to be highly valued by the girls in terms of the level of their social status and acceptance into a social groups. This seems to reiterate the point that the exposure of young adults to a world outside of that which they physically occupy plays an important role in autonomy, expansion of social networks and new patterns of identity formation; which literature in Chapter 2 ascribes to being the role of the adolescent life stage.

Social networking is seen as a critical way of avoiding social isolation and can be seen as an avenue for youth empowerment, a way in which they can transcend traditional factors such as demographics, economic status, place of origin and limitations imposed on them by family circumstance. To some extent, the modern adolescent has become increasingly adept at social multi-tasking, having the ability to switch between offline resources and online media in terms of how they stay in contact (Borca et al., 2015). Hayley's experience seems to highlight her awareness of the level of tension between her offline and online social worlds which she attempts to self-remediate. The effect of the intensity of this tension on the mental health of the adolescent in general remains to be seen. Mesch and Talmud (2010) allude to the 'normalisation' of online media consumption at some point in the future. This refers to the integration of digital technology into the life of the adolescent, who will increasingly make adaptations to their social use thereof to mitigate the effects of misuse and tension. Hayley's attempt to disconnect from social media may not have been a realistic move socially. The resultant discussions by the girls on this issue reflected their increasing awareness of the need for increasingly safer online practices or digital literacy. This could be compared to the process of homeostasis in the natural world that ensures the healthy balance of the whole; the networked individual.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

This chapter began by highlighting the prior experience of the girls in terms of the core activities that are included as part of Journey for example; horse riding, cycling and canoeing. This was done as a means to contextualise the prior experience of the girls with the findings outlined in subsequent sections of Chapter 4 and those included in Chapter 5. Findings related to positive and negative aspects of the girls' relationship with digital technology and with social media in particular were summarised and interpreted within the contextual framework of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The remainder of the key findings will be discussed in Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER 5:        RUNNING WILD AND MEASURING UP**

You deserve to be in spaces and relationships that  
make you happy;  
That feed your soul and help you grow.  
You are worthy of connections that are  
loving, nourishing and genuine.  
Before you settle for anything less than,  
remind yourself that the places you visit and people you journey with  
through life should make you feel  
safe, loved and enough.

Alex Elle

St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls Journey Journal, 2018, p. 28.

### **5.1.    Introduction**

In Chapter 5, the themes generated from the data are presented and discussed in order to answer the second research question which asks: what adolescent developmental tasks did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls elicit? The data and discussion pertaining to the third research question follows, the third research question being; what are the adolescent girls' pre- and post-wilderness programme related expectations and experiences in relation to relevant adolescent developmental tasks?

This chapter is thus divided up into two parts as shown in Figure 5.1. below. The main themes of the Journey experience labelled Running Wild, elicited by the researcher through analysis of audio transcripts of field discussions, observation notes and personal reflections of the researcher are described first. In the second part, the girls' expectations of the Journey in terms of their personal development; mental, emotional and physical are outlined with their reflections made during the post-Journey focus group discussion. Discussions of the findings are integrated into each section.

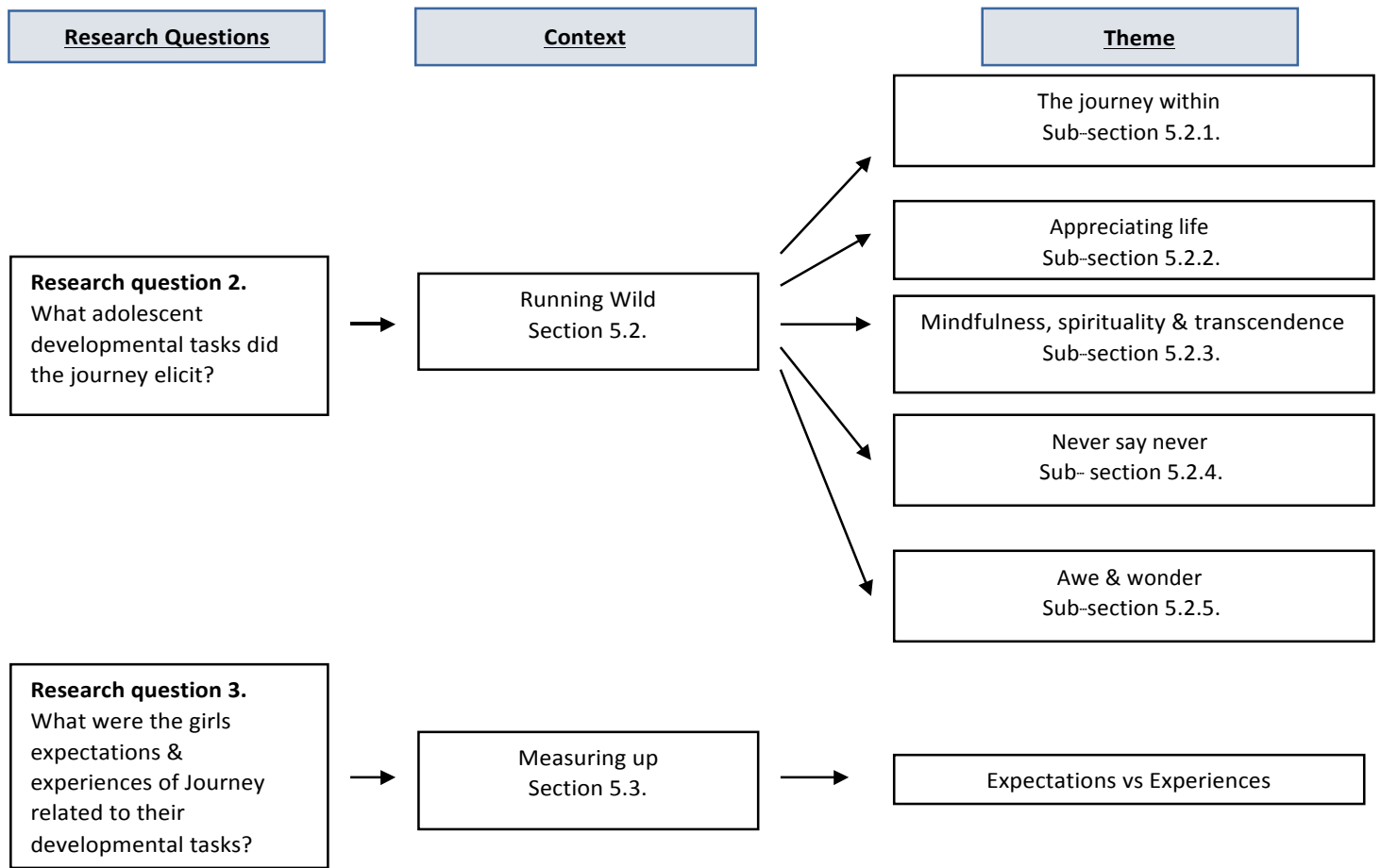


Fig 5.1. Outline of Chapter Five: theme summary

## 5.2. Running wild: Journey

Section 5.2. explores the main themes of ‘Running Wild’, the title given to describe the contextual experience of Journey by the adolescent girls. ‘Running Wild’ is used as a descriptive phrase that highlights the complexities of adolescence, of the turbulence of this period of self-discovery described by Deurden et al. (2009) in Chapter 2 which serves to enable adolescents to achieve individuation from family, develop competence and a stable self-identity. The themes “the journey within”, “appreciating life”, “mindfulness, spirituality and transcendence”, “never say never” and “awe and wonder” are presented and discussed in Section 5.2. Section 5.3. explores “expectations vs. experiences” as a theme related to research question three.

### **5.2.1. The journey within**

The title of the theme “Journey within” reflects the personal and internal processes that the girls went through during the Journey. The girls were called to attend to a personal reflection through the practice of regular quiet mindfulness and quiet time throughout the programme. Solo time, consisting of one hour was set aside daily for the girls to spend some quiet time alone. The girls were encouraged to use this time to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings about the social and physical experiences of the day, write letters home, pray, journal and take a break from the industriousness and noise of camp life.

The participants appeared to be affected by an awareness of the simplicity of living in the wilderness with Kayla making reference to “how amazing it is that we have everything that we need with us” (Kayla, FD, 656). In field discussions, the girls spoke about the fast pace of their lives and how they valued the relatively uncomplicated, predictable routine of Journey, similar to discussions held by participants in research by Greffrath et al. (2011) and Whittington, et al. (2011). For many of the participants, having reduced pressure of social interactions, digitech communications and academic and sporting commitments appeared to enable them to focus on what they said was really important to them in life for example, their families, close friends and making academic progress. The girls expressed that they felt more disciplined, that they were able to plan and feel more in control of their lives in the wilderness and that through shared experience, the importance of relationships and people in their lives was heightened.

Experiencing seclusion and not being able to communicate with the other girls for the one hour daily solo session was distressing to some girls in the beginning. Nine of the girls mentioned their discomfort with being ‘alone’ with their thoughts in early field group discussions. They were grateful that the journals that were given to them had prompts and topics to direct their thoughts into a more focused structure cognitively. As time passed, it became evident that the girls increasingly came to value this solo time, to the extent that in the last week of Journey none of the girls reported the same discomfort with the exercise. The girls were often overheard reminding the leader in charge of the scheduling for the day to remember to include time for solo. The value of solo time was reflected by Kayla:

*There are no distractions out here and time seems to stand still. At home it is always loud and we are always rushing from place to place. I feel like I have space in my head to think here. (Kayla, FD, 714).*

This comment from Kayla is reflective of the increasing importance that the girls placed on having time to pause and reflect on their internal perceptions of the day. A full 24 hours spent in solo occurs halfway through the wilderness adventure in order to provide the girls with the opportunity to cognitively and emotionally consolidate their experiences in the first half of Journey. The girls are housed in individual tents in proximity to one another. They may leave their tents to take short walks but are not permitted to make eye contact or talk with the other girls. The timing of this is purposeful; it comes at a time when the participants have reached a stage of physical adaption that allows more personal capacity to focus on psychological transformation. This aligns with research on processes inherent in wilderness adventure programming that engender them as effective agents of psychosocial development in adolescents (Botha, 2007; Greffrath et al. 2011; Russell, 2000).

Despite their apprehension about being completely 'alone', conversations with the girls during field discussions after the 24 hours solo revealed how all 16 of them were relieved to have a break from the social intensity of Journey to spend time with themselves and gain a better understanding of their lives and how they could learn from the Journey experience. These reflections are consistent with findings by Russell (2000) that experiencing solitude was the single most significant contributing factor to the personal development of adolescents on wilderness adventure programmes. After the intensity of full-time social interactions during the first half of Journey, a number of the girls described their 24 hour solo as a surreal experience as commented on by Refilwe below:

*It was kinda weird at first. I slept a lot, wrote letters to my parents and then like I felt kinda lost, like there's only so much you can think about. My mind went quiet, like blank, there was nothing there. (Refilwe, FD, 552).*

The relief evident in Kayla's comment in the previous paragraph as she acknowledges the break that the 'space' of the wilderness affords her is echoed by Refilwe's comment



about her mind going 'quiet'. The nature of the Journey experience requires the girls to adapt to a physical and social landscape quite different to that of their normal lives. In their research, D'Amato and Krasny (2011, p. 239) refer to the "disorientating dilemma"; the process by which an individual is taken out of their normal environment, removed from their normal frames of reference and social cues in order to develop "critical self-reflection, social interactions; planning for action and building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships." The 'disorientating dilemma' can be linked to the term 'crisis' used by Erikson (1960) in his description of the developmental tasks that need to be overcome at a particular life stage in psychosocial development. It can also refer to what is often described as a turbulent and turmoil-filled life stage, that of adolescence, which is brought on by significant biological and psychological changes (Yaeger, 2017).

Findings from this chapter and from the literature review in Chapter 2 indicate that time spent engaging with social media by adolescents is increasing (Bucksh et al., 2016; Gabrielsen & Harper, 2017). It could be deduced that this, combined with academic, sporting, cultural and social commitments, allow negligible opportunities for the girls to engage in self-reflection and introspection. The findings from this research support the notion that being in the wilderness changes the frame of reference for the girls and provides a supportive space for quiet introspection without distraction (Greffrath et al., 2011). It could be posited that solo time provides welcome relief from this disorientating dilemma but is a disorientating dilemma in itself. Ironically, the space afforded appeared to be disorientating for the girls in the beginning; it appeared that they almost didn't know how or what to think in the absence of their normal, almost frenetic, engagement with and feedback from offline and online sources. These findings correlate with research pointing to the influence of being in the wilderness on personal psychosocial efficacy where "participants are given the opportunity to take control and responsibility for their own process of growth" Greffrath et al., 2011, p. 355).

The participants reflected on existing relationships with their friends and family units consistently throughout Journey. Eleven of the participants repeatedly expressed that they were struggling with being separated from the significant others (parents, siblings, teachers and friends) in their lives. In her comment below, it is clear that Amara felt an

affinity for her group members but that she was able to differentiate peer friendship from enduring, unconditional familial bonds.

*Like no offence people and I love you all don't get me wrong but I miss having people around that really know me, like right now my sister would just look at me and she would know....*(Amara, FD, p. 701).

Implicit in Amara's comment, made during a field discussion, is that she feels comfortable to express her feelings about her familial allegiances to the group- at a time when adolescents seek individuation from their families (Botha, 2007). Amara's experiences on Journey did, to her own admittance, bring the importance of family to her immediate awareness. Of consideration is whether or not the girls new found appreciation for members of their immediate families was due to having heightened awareness of the value and roles that they played in their life induced by enforced separation from them, or as a result of being in an unfamiliar social milieu. Amara's comment is suggestive of the proven value that adolescents place on the feeling of 'safety' within their close social networks (Deurden et al., 2009). It is also reflective of the important role that having close trusting peer relationships play in the formation of healthy a self-identity in adolescence (Botha, 2007). It could be argued that the girls unconsciously developed a heightened awareness of and appreciation for close familial bonds by the temporary absence of trusted and familiar peers vital for emotional fulfilment as alluded to by Mesch and Talmud (2010).

Ironically, in 'normal adolescence' as referred to in Chapter 2, the unfamiliar social milieu as referred to in the previous paragraph has been identified by developmental experts as an importance facet of adolescent psychosocial development (Crosnoe et al., 2003). Crosnoe et al. (2003) further explain that the exploratory process of engaging with individuals, either online or offline, that come from outside common family or peer networks allow the adolescent to tap into new, different and undiscovered roles and relationships. This is seen to broaden the adolescents' self-identity and worldview and to allow them to differentiate themselves from familial, cultural and social norms and expectations (Yaeger, 2017). There was evidence that the participants were enjoying the opportunity on Journey to reinvent themselves to some degree. "I would

normally...” was a phrase heard in debrief to describe how a participant would normally engage and interact with their parents and peers and that Journey had given them an opportunity to re-evaluate the role that they play in their relationships. The participants mentioned that being ‘forced’ to engage and collaborate with people that they did not normally associate with had given them an opportunity for introspection and to learn new socialising skills as found in research conducted by Dolgin (2014).

The effects of being ‘forced’ to engage and collaborate was a sentiment noted from many of the girls throughout Journey indicating that they would either probably not do this or do it on a less intense scale if left to their own devices. The girls were challenged to work together as a team and to be transparent in their communications with each other both informally and during field discussions. Common to research reviewed (Deurden et al, 2009; Gass, 1993), “having nowhere to hide” as expressed by Kelly (Kelly, FD, 1145) was echoed by many of the girls during field discussions as they attempted to describe the challenge of openly communicating their true feelings to others in the group and ‘being truly ourselves’ (Kelly, FGD, 1145). Kelly’s description implicitly gives evidence of the social intensity and relative lack of privacy that the girls experienced on Journey. This was reiterated by Riley below:

*Out here you can’t just give up or not speak to someone if they have offended you. You have to solve your problems otherwise you will just make it worse and if everyone sees you crying you just have to get over that.* (Riley, FD, 2038)

Riley’s comment captures the difficulty that some of the girls showed in terms of emotional expression and regulation and conflict resolution during Journey. Emotional breakdowns were observed and noted frequently by the researcher during Journey. Outbursts indicative of impatience, frustration and sadness occurred as the girls struggled with the intensity of the physical challenges, of being completely responsible for ensuring their own basic needs (food, warmth and rest) were met and with navigating themselves through a relatively staged and contrived social context. The emotionality witnessed by the researcher is indicative of the effects of the significant physiological and biological changes that are noted to occur in adolescence as referred to by Yaeger (2017).

It is clear that the girls were challenged to reflect internally on the way in which they were used to coping with emotional difficulties and conflict. Riley's comment is indicative of the recognition that the girls shared in field discussions of the need to change their outlook with regards to interpersonal conflict, to be more positive about their ability to overcome the emotional and physical challenges of Journey and to focus on improving relationships for the future. The field discussions acted as agents of change; a place where the girls could express their individual physical, mental and emotional difficulties and receive feedback from their peers. This is a process that has been discussed in preceding chapters of this dissertation as an important mechanism for adolescent psychosocial identity formation. Through a shared narrative, the girls were also able to find solidarity in hardship and adversity; a process which appeared to unify the group and enhance inter-personal bonds, consistent with positive outcomes of wilderness adventure programmes as described in research by Beringer and Martin (2003) and Wilson et al. (2000)

### **5.2.2 Appreciating life**

On day one of Journey, the girls are sensitively reminded of the fact that approximately one billion people around the world live on less than one dollar a day. One of the first challenges that is set for the girls is to survive on the South African Rands equivalent of a dollar a day (R20.00 on Journey 2018). Each girl is given R20.00 with which they are to purchase meals for themselves for a day. In the store, all 16 girls were observed pooling their resources as one group as they grappled with the best economies of scale that they could achieve together. Debates ensued regarding menus and meal planning. Later that day, Hayley commented that she found the challenge extremely stressful:

*We couldn't agree on what to buy. Some people thought that bread and peanut butter was ok for lunch and that we should have eggs for dinner but then a whole pile of people complained that they don't eat peanut butter. I ended up not saying anything because I couldn't handle the conflict. (Hayley, FD, 89).*

The observations highlighted above elicit notions of hesitancy, indecision and unease in relation to interpersonal relationships and personal expression. Scheduled at the beginning of Journey before the girls have had a chance to bond with each other to form a unified community based on trust and mutual respect, this task required the girls

to work co-operatively for the benefit of the whole. On a theoretical level, this exercise appears to be an example of the type of experiential learning that wilderness adventure programmes have been lauded for (Stevens, 2010; Whittington et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). Working together towards a common goal has been empirically proven to increase personal efficacy and attributes such as leadership skills, decision-making and self-confidence and skills related to optimal group functioning including effective communication, negotiation, conflict resolution and trust (Bosch & Oswald, 2010).

Twelve of the girls mentioned that they had had more than enough to eat and that although choosing what to buy together had been difficult, they had also realised how important it was to listen to the opinions of other people and to negotiate respectfully with each other.

*Like, I don't really, like know most of these people well enough so it was hard for me to voice my opinion and I felt bad cos I know I shouted at Grace and I told her that fruit wasn't important but maybe it was important to her and I just feel I could've handled it better than I did. (Tarryne, FD, 108)*

The regretful tone of Tarryne's reflection could be construed as being a positive outcome of the challenge and reiterates the importance of the daily field discussions to as a way in which to mentally and emotionally consolidate daily experiences. The important role that adult leaders play in adolescent wilderness adventures in terms of facilitating participants to maximise the opportunities for personal development cannot be underestimated (Sachs & Miller, 1992). Given the time to reflect on this challenge together under the sensitive and diplomatic guidance of their adult leaders, the girls were able to openly express some of the challenges of the task and the learnings that they had distilled from it. Some girls felt that they were too assertive in coming up with a solution and that they didn't take other people's opinions into account. Others wished that they had stepped up to the challenge more and been more confident in voicing their opinions. In their papers, Crosnoe et al. (2003) and Erikson (1968) refer to the importance of adolescent self-expression and subsequent feedback from significant peer relationships and social networks in identity development. Cultivating an opportunity for self-expression, this task gave the girls an opportunity to reflect on the their projection of themselves, their roles in the interaction and feedback from others.

Reflecting on the challenge can be seen as being as integral to the learning experience as the process of the experience itself. Encouraging the girls to analyse their roles and verbal expressions and explore alternative courses of action resulted in explicit personal commitments from the girls to experiment with and adopt different courses of action in their interactions with each other (Judkins & Mundy, 2016). This implies a sense of accountability to each other, that successfully acquiring competencies related to interpersonal functioning would be valued by their peers as a form of social acceptance. The findings above practically concur with Erikson's (1958) psychosocial theory of development which describes the resolution of the 'identity vs. role confusion' crises in the adolescent stage and the solving of the tension of 'fitting in vs. standing out' as alluded to by Yaeger (2017). It was found that the combination of awe-inducing, wilderness-based physical challenge, opportunities to reflect and groupwork were the foundation on which the girls could solve these developmental crisis by exploring peer relationships and their role in these relationships, develop new competencies and increase their self-confidence as a result of positive feedback from a supportive peer group who were in the same situation as themselves.

The challenge gave the girls the opportunity to reflect on their own relatively economically-disadvantaged lives. Together the group confronted difficult feelings regarding taking what they have at home for granted and guilt for not appreciating it more. Refilwe and Bella commented that they often went grocery shopping with their mothers and that they would often just add luxury items to the trolley without asking or checking the cost of the item first. All sixteen participants expressed gratefulness for the resources that are available to them to achieve their academic and personal potential in life such as sufficient food, clean water, clothes, a good education and families that love and care for them. These reflections indicate the further development of self-awareness and gratitude in the girls and is alluded to in Raftopoulos and Bates (2011). They postulated that conscious awareness of one's circumstances and gratitude are important components of the development of resilience in adolescents, the ability to draw on the strength of the inner-self.

'The road less travelled' was a term used by Amara (FD, 566) during one of the field discussions. Although her use of the term was idiomatically incorrect, on further prompting by the researcher, she indicated that she was referring to the fact that she

did not personally know of any other people outside of the students in her school who manage to 'survive' for so long out in nature and do all the challenging physical activities. She was also referring to the minimalistic way of living on Journey, that it was outside of what was considered normal to their lives. Being exposed to the elements without the traditional protection of home resources, close friends and familial support for an extended period of time was something that none of the girls had experience of. Both Amara and Refilwe agreed that even though taking the 'road less travelled' and participating in Journey was one of the hardest things they had ever done, they agreed on what a privilege it was to have the opportunity. As Refilwe said:

*I am so grateful for the sacrifices that my parents make to send me to a good school. I um know that they work hard and ya have a lotta stress and I sometimes complain about never seeing them but without that I wouldn't have the chance to do this.*  
(Refilwe, FD, 452).

This statement reflects Amara and Refilwe's explicit awareness of and appreciation for the opportunities that are made available to them in their everyday lives and the choices available to them; which may have been heightened by the more simplistic way of living implicit in the Journey experience. This process is consistent with findings of research (Bosch & Oswald, 2010; D'Amato & Krasny, 2011) conducted amongst adolescents engaging in similar wilderness adventure programmes; that a growing awareness and heightened appreciation for their current life circumstances is engendered as a result of the programme. Of particular interest to South Africa is that this awareness and appreciation has been recorded in samples of troubled teenagers from economically-disadvantaged populations (Zygmunt, 2014).

### **5.2.3. Mindfulness, spirituality and transcendence**

Discussions with the girls revealed that one of the biggest psychological hurdles that they had to overcome on Journey was not knowing what the planned itinerary was from one day to the next. The girls said that not knowing what each day would bring was unsettling and anxiety-provoking in the beginning but that they eventually learnt as Refilwe said '*to just go with the flow*' and to live in the moment. (Refilwe, FD, 1088). The girls identified that the beautiful scenery, having each other to rely on and reading the encouraging words in the letters from home helped them to stay positive in the midst of

hardship. The girls used the word 'surrender' to describe the strategy that they used to cope with the mental and physical challenges that they had to get through. Daniella described her coping strategy almost as a revelation:

*I'm just like pretending that each day is a box girls and I uh get to open a new box 20 times until this thing is done. I also know that if the day is really hard, the thing that keeps me going is that tomorrow will be a new day and another box and then soon I will be going home. (Daniella, FD, 1705).*

The researcher noted that a few of the girls consistently cited their relationship with God as a motivating and reassuring factor in their ability to bear hardships that at times threatened to overwhelm them. Many of the girls commented on the fact that they had prayed during solo times. Most of the daily leaders chose to begin and end their tenure leading a group prayer, calling on their faith for the strength and courage to sustain them as a group through the difficult times. Of particular noteworthiness, was the shift during Journey, in the nature of discussions towards more transcendental topics when faced with particularly spectacular and awe-invoking scenery. Research by Trigwell et al. (2014) describes the process of 'nature connectedness', the emotional resonance with the natural world as an integral part of the development of resilience, improved mental health and general well-being.

Lying under the stars one night at the top of the hill looking for shooting stars inspired an hour long discussion about the real or imagined existence of God, how the earth was created and questioning of the meaning of human existence. Observation notes recorded that the girls mentioned that they could definitely feel that something or someone much bigger than themselves was 'out there'; a thought that they admitted brought them feelings of comfort and unity with each other. Following on from that, came the expressed realisation that the personal and social difficulties that they had been having with each other during Journey were insignificant in the face of the vastness of the wilderness. Raftopoulos and Bates (2011) refer to this as 'existential well-being', which gives individuals a sense of life purpose and that the opportunity to be fulfilled and positive exists.



The findings show that the wilderness presents an optimal environment for wilderness adventure participants to reflect and gain perspective on their lives. The girls' collective acknowledgement of being a smaller part of a greater whole implies a feeling of connectedness to an entity that gives meaning to their lives; with every girl reporting strengthened belief systems as a result of participating on Journey. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) refer to this as the power of spiritual upliftment as a process and identify it as one of the most important caveats to personal development in wilderness adventure programmes. Linkages between being in the wilderness and spiritual upliftment were alluded to in Chapter 2; with positive correlations being made between them. Embedded in the findings of this research is the explicit role that being in nature played in the spiritual upliftment and well-being of the girls. It was clear from discussions with the girls and observations of their experiences that they drew strength and happiness from an increased sense of spiritual fulfilment. These findings support the hypothesis that there are distinct links between time spent in the wilderness, spiritual upliftment and the development of psychological resilience (Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011; Trigwell et al., 2014).

### **5.2.4. Never say never**

Weather-related themes dominated field discussions in the first week of Journey. Adapting to their new lifestyle and being dependent on the sometimes inclement weather conditions were difficult for most in the early days, apparently largely due to the participants having different expectations of the experience. Some of the girls said that they would have enjoyed themselves a lot more had it not been so cold and if it had not rained on the first two days. Others were more pragmatic, expressing appreciation that they had been through the worst that nature could throw at them and that things couldn't always be that easy.

The girls identified that being able to survive and thrive with just the contents of a backpack, sleeping in a tent, washing clothes and dishes and the uncomplicated nature of the daily routine made them feel proud of themselves. This increased perception of competence and efficacy influenced their sense of achievement which was frequently related to what the people (family and friends) at home would think of them. Daniella was heard to say that:

*My mom will never believe that I ate all this kind of food and actually lived. No, I'm telling you at home I am very fussy about what I eat. Also she complains that I never help in the kitchen and she is worried what kind of adult I'm going to be if I don't even know how to look after myself.* (Daniella, FD, 538)

Despite all of the participants expressing varying degrees of concern over their ability to handle the physicality of Journey prior to departure, the daily physical challenges provided them with noteworthy opportunities for personal transformation. The phrase '*before Journey I never thought I could....*' became commonplace in discussions as the participants celebrated their achievements of competency and courage with increasing self-confidence as each day passed. The participants were challenged socially in their physical endeavours which served to strengthen the participants interpersonal relationships and appreciation of each other as in conjunction with adding depth to group dynamics. The main physical challenges that presented themselves centred around themes of fitness, competency and emotionally facing fears centred around not being able to cope physically.

Researcher observations indicate that half of the group appeared to struggle with the weight of their packs, most especially on the longer distance or uphill hiking days. At these times, the girl leaders were observed having difficulty keeping the group together with the faster paced and fitter girls demonstrating a certain level of impatience with "the slowpokes that didn't bother to do any of the pre-training that they recommended" (Grace, FD, 1554). The participants were however generally encouraging and upbeat with each other in the physical challenges, most especially when members of the group appeared to be struggling emotionally as a result of being physically overwhelmed. Group members were observed giving coveted food items to girls who had lost or damaged theirs and sharing the backpack contents of tired friends amongst themselves to lighten their load. These observations highlighted the general tendency of the girls to rely on each other during times of hardship, to develop trust and to motivate each other not to give up.

The bike-riding, horse-riding and canoeing segments of the programme posed a significant challenge to some of the participants, centred around both competency issues and fear factors. As can be seen from Table 4.1., five of the girls could not ride a

bike properly, eight had never ridden a horse before and nine had no experience of paddling a canoe. On many occasions it was evident that these girls that were stretched beyond their psychological capacity whilst engaging in physical challenges; a fundamental feature of wilderness adventure programmes as described in Chapter 2.

The physical challenges of Journey had social outcomes linked to them. In as much as the girls had to adapt to living outdoors and being required to navigate long distances on foot or by bike, canoe or horseback, they also had to adapt to a new social environment whilst engaging in these activities. Observations and field discussions indicated that the girls had to learn how to negotiate and circumvent inevitable character differences between individuals or groups of individuals in order to secure effective group functioning and for emotional support. Inter-personal conflict was noted particularly during observations of food preparations and food allocations during food drops, where emotions often ran high in relation to the equal or unequal distribution of tasks and negotiations over securing more of the desirable food items included on an otherwise relatively monotonous menu.

The use of transcendental phenomenology and the role that the researcher took as a participant observer enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how the explicit processes in Journey influenced the more implicit processes of psychosocial development in the girls. Review of similar programmes (Hattie et al., 1997; Mitten, 2002; Moote & Wodarski, 1997) reveals that the contextual process of Journey compare favourably to similar programmes conducted both nationally and internationally; the contexts being out in nature, physical challenge, solitude, groupwork and responsibility for meeting basic needs such as nutrition, shelter and rest. This suggests that Journey contains the basic foundational elements needed to direct the adolescent girls towards opportunities for enriched psychosocial development.

More specifically, literature indicates that ‘successfully overcoming challenges and developing competence serves as catalysts for identity development’ (Duerden et al., 2009, p. 343). If one was to operationalise this statement in terms of the Journey experience, the girls lived experience of challenging themselves physically and actively engage in cooperative task correlates with associated psychosocial constructs such as increased competence, exploration of roles and social identities and peer feedback.

This suggests a positive link to the process of self-identity formation which requires an individual to increase levels of self-confidence and a more effectual locus of control. Being immersed in an environment and experience outside the boundaries of their normal existence appeared to provide the girls with a context in which to experiment and explore traditionally held social roles and responsibilities as well as to reflect on and challenge commonly held beliefs related to self.

#### **5.2.5. Awe and wonder**

The title of this theme refers to the feeling of reverence that was invoked in the girls when they experienced or witnessed particularly awe- inspiring features of the natural landscape. Before Journey, all but two of the girls stated that they didn't normally spend a significant amount of time outdoors or in nature and that they were apprehensive about being outside and exposed to the elements for such a long period of time. On Journey, as their comfort levels with being in the wilderness increased, all 16 of the girls expressed admiration for the beauty of nature and appreciation for its harmonious and balanced functioning in alignment with research conducted by Deurden et al. (2009). Exclamations of awe and wonder were frequently noted most particularly directed at the majesty of the mountains, the colour of the sunrises and sunsets and the enormity of the night sky. Riley was outspoken in her amazement:

*Jeez guys, I'm actually scared! I've never been in a place where I've felt so small!*  
(Riley, observation notes, 109).

This comment from Riley reflected the increasing awareness that the girls appeared to develop throughout the Journey; that they were a microcosm of a system much bigger than the suburban living that they were accustomed to. The girls expressed more motivation to spend more time in nature on their return home. As one girl aptly said,

*I'm going to try to see more sunrises because I dunno what it is, they make me feel its good to be alive and they are so amazing and they happen every day when I am hugging my pillow ignoring my mom telling me to get up. I'm going to set my own alarm at home more.* (Tarryne, observation notes, 112).

Although the girls frequently commented on the beauty of nature and the landscape around them, there was no evidence to indicate that their outward appreciation was being transformed into an internal desire to take an active role to protect the environment as found in other literature. Minimising the environmental impact of Journey is highlighted in the briefings held for the girls and leaders prior to departure. Observations during Journey however recorded daily instances of the leader having to remind the girls to pick up litter and to leave overnight camp sites in a pristine condition. This is contrary to popular research related to the impact of wilderness adventure programmes on adolescents where participants in similar programmes express an increased feeling of custodianship for the natural world (Deurden et al., 2009). In trying to understand this deviation from research findings on the same theme, one could hypothesise that the girls remained in a 'survival' state throughout Journey which could be theorised to narrow their focus towards more critical tasks related to eating, resting and taking care of personal belongings.

### **5.3. Measuring up**

The last research question is, what are the adolescent girls' pre- and post- ecotherapy related expectations and experiences in relation to relevant adolescent developmental tasks? Data relevant to these questions was collected from the pre-Journey focus group discussion (Appendix B) and the post- Journey focus group discussion (Appendix d) held at the culmination of Journey prior to the girls being reunited with their families. The findings are presented and discussed in Sub-section 5.3.1.

#### **5.3.1. Expectations versus experience**

In the focus group discussion held prior to Journey, all 16 participants expressed concern over their ability to cope with certain, if not, all elements of the programme. Not being able to complete Journey in its entirety was a very real fear for six of the girls. The physical challenges that the girls would have to complete on Journey were cited as the primary reason why the participants felt that they would not make it. Conversely, seven of the girls admitted that they would be devastated at not being able to cope with the experience emotionally that may result in them being sent home. All the girls reported that they would feel disappointed in

themselves for not finishing what they had started and that they would feel as they had disappointed their families, friends and school.

Since its inception at the school in 2011, Journey has become ingrained in the school tradition as a rite of passage, integral to the Grade 9 curriculum. The girls fear of failure, of not completing Journey, seemed to be reflective of the importance that the wilderness adventure holds as a school tradition. The girls mentioned that they engaged in narratives at school about Journey from a young age. Intentional or not, this appears to further entrench the aspirational element of Journey into the social identity of the girls; that once they have successfully completed the experience they gain true belonging as members of the school. Hints of proving ones physical competence in solidarity with peers were made in reference to being more socially accepted and 'earning' the right to be called a St. Mary's girl. Perceptions of expectation from family, friends and teachers seemed to weigh heavily on the girls as they grappled with fear, self-doubt and excitement in varying measures.

Nine of the participants were very concerned about not knowing some of the group members very well. Conversations with them revealed a certain level of insecurity about their own value and worth and that they felt increased pressure at having to impress unfamiliar group members. The other seven participants were more relaxed and excited to get to know students from their own school that they would not normally interact and socialise with. They saw it as an opportunity to learn about different people and to appreciate those differences.

Conversations around the social aspect of Journey are indicative of the life stage of the girls, in which they embark on a process of self-exploration in order to develop a secure identity. As seen in the literature in Chapter 2, the development of self-identity is dependent on self-expression and disclosure amongst a supportive network of trustworthy peers. The girls concern with not knowing some of their group members well enough could be indicative of the importance that the girls place on feeling safe in their social networks and of their uncertainty regarding being accepted by people outside of their traditional social network as discussed earlier in this chapter. This was clearly evidenced in the early days of Journey as the girls attempted to find their places in the group as discussions focused on the sharing of personal information and

alliances were repeatedly formed and broken. The degree of reticence shown by some of the girls to openly discuss their feelings about their experiences in the first week of Journey could be construed as indicative of wariness to self-disclose, of as yet to be developed trust in one another and of othering as group cohesion had not yet developed or solidified.

Prior to the start of Journey, all the girls anticipated that they would come out mentally and physically stronger as a result of engaging with the experience. It was apparent even before the culmination of Journey that physical, mental and emotional transformations were taking place in the girls. After one particularly long, windy hike, Katy was overheard to say:

*It feels like the longer we spend out here, I forget who I have to be back there. It's like we've all taken the nature in and changed. I feel different on the inside, better, stronger, like there's nothing I can't do or handle back in the outside world'. (Katy, FD, 1579).*

During the post-Journey focus group discussion, the girls were clear and unanimous that the support by their parents, friends or school before Journey (to improve their level of preparedness for the challenges that they would experience) whilst helpful, would never have fully prepared them for what they actually experienced. The girls admitted that even though they had heard useful snippets of 'survival' information from the girls who had done it the previous year, the actual experience was nothing that they could have ever imagined it would be.

*When I think of Journey it was the best and worst thing I've ever done. If I think about what I was worried about in the beginning, it all came true all of it and sometimes worse than even I could think of but we made it guys....we made the hardest thing. (Amara, FGI, 1091)*

Despite the fact that the girls anticipated emerging from their Journey experience mentally and physically stronger, it was unclear at the end whether or not they understood the mechanisms of change that they anticipated and experienced. Their comments suggested that they were relying on imagination and anecdotal evidence from previous Journey participants in their conceptualisation of the Journey experience.

In reviewing and comparing the transcripts of the first focus group discussion and the post-Journey focus group discussion, it is evident that the girls were well-prepared for Journey in terms of knowing what equipment they needed and that they had had a certain level of exposure to information about the physical challenges inherent in the wilderness adventure. It is debatable if this level of preparedness extended to their cognitive and emotional resources. If one considers that their entire lifeworld reference point was changed overnight, their disorientation and subsequent fluctuations between the experience between the 'best thing' and the 'worst' thing seems to have a sound basis. The girls unanimous affiliation with both Katy's and Amara's comments are indicative of the transformative power of Journey as evidenced by the findings in this chapter and that of published research in Chapter 2.

### **5.4. Conclusion**

In this chapter, the major themes and topics that were devised from the Journey data were highlighted and discussed in response to the research questions. The digital world in which the adolescent girls are situated, contextualises how digitech informs and influences the formation of their individual and social identities, which are at the same time constantly interfacing with their rapidly emerging online identities. In this chapter, the outer, more practical experiences of the girls during Journey were juxtaposed against their inner growth towards personal development. Finally, the girls expectations versus their actual experiences were briefly discussed in the context of resolving developmental tasks as outlined by Erik Erikson. The chapter that follows will discuss the findings in the context of pre-existing literature and other research in order to fully understand the strengths and limitations of Journey as an ecotherapy programme on adolescent psychosocial development.



## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

And so from the hills we return refreshed in body, mind and spirit,  
To grapple anew with life's problems.  
For awhile we have lived simply, wisely and happily:  
We have made good friends: we have adventured well.

Frank Smythe

St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls Journey Journal, 2018, p. 148.

### **6.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents a brief summary of the contextual background to the research, its purpose and questions. The main findings are condensed in response to the research questions and the strengths and limitations of the research are briefly discussed. Finally, the contextual implications of the research are highlighted and recommendations for policy, practice and future research proposed.

### **6.2. Summary of research background, purpose and questions**

The impetus behind this research originated from the researcher's long standing interest and participation in wilderness-based activities. The synergy between the wilderness experience, physical activity and adolescent well-being is of particular significance to the researcher. The researcher set out to first understand the complexities of adolescent psychosocial development in the context of the digital age, and secondly to find out if participating in an ecotherapy experience called Journey, would mitigate the effects of using digital technology and elicit progression towards the psychosocial development tasks of adolescence as theorised by Erikson (1959).

Using a research methodology underpinned by the philosophical tradition of transcendental phenomenology, the researcher sought to understand the essence of Journey through recording and interpreting the lived experience of the girls whilst on Journey. A multi-method approach was used, incorporating focus group interviews, field discussions and personal observations and reflections by the researcher who took on

the role as participant-observer during the Journey. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher was able to cluster the data into eight overarching themes; “pressing pause: digitech and emotion”, “ctrl, alt, del: can we reboot?”, “journey within”, “life appreciation”, “mindfulness, spirituality and transcendence”, “never say never”, “awe and wonder” and “expectations vs. experiences”.

The themes were collated in order to bring sense and meaning to the three research questions:

- 1) How did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls influence their relationships with and through digital technology?
- 2) What relevant adolescent developmental tasks did the structured ecotherapy programme for adolescent girls elicit?
- 3) What are the adolescent girls’ pre-and post-ecotherapy programme related expectations and experiences in relation to relevant adolescent developmental tasks?

### **6.3. Summary of research findings**

The aim of this research was to explore the interrelatedness between adolescent psychosocial development in the context of the digital era and participation in Journey, a school-based wilderness adventure programme.

Focus group discussions were held prior to the commencement of Journey, for the purposes of familiarising the girls with the researcher and for gaining a deeper understanding of the way in which the adolescents in the research sample interface with digital technology, specifically with regards to the use of social media. In response to research question one, positive and negative psychosocial effects associated with the use of social media communication platforms were noted. It was found that negative effects notwithstanding, social media platforms will continue to play a vital role in how adolescents define themselves and explore the dynamics of inter-personal and peer group relationships.

The Journey experience was examined for its potentiality to provide a contextual framework to elicit and augment psychosocial developmental tasks related to

adolescence. A combination of audio-recorded field discussions and participant-observations (audio-recorded reflections and field notes written by the researcher) were used as data collection tools. This research provided evidence that Journey inherently contained features or themes similar to those found in research relating to wilderness adventure programmes locally and internationally. These themes were critically analysed in order to establish their process efficacy and value as contributing factors towards the psychosocial development of the girls.

As anticipated, findings related to research question two lend support to the theory that wilderness adventure programming and specifically Journey in this case, can be used as an effective tool in terms of sending adolescents on a trajectory towards positive psychosocial development. According to Erikson (1959) this involves the resolution of the 'identity vs. role confusion' crisis in the adolescent stage; solving the tension of 'fitting in vs. standing out' as alluded to by Yaeger (2017).

Data was collected from the focus group discussion held prior to the commencement of Journey for the purposes of capturing the girls expectations of the wilderness adventure. Another focus group discussion held at the end of Journey was used to record their assessment of the experience. The information from these focus group discussions was interpreted for the purposes of reaching conclusions in response to the third research question. Findings revealed that the girls demonstrated stage appropriate psychosocial apprehension about Journey related to self-efficacy, competence and social inclusion and acceptance. According to feedback from the girls, participation in Journey correlated positively with increased self-confidence, feelings of pride and accomplishment and mutual respect for each other.

The research findings were synthesised, analysed and juxtaposed with similar research in order to address the main of the study; the evaluation of Journey as a positive contributor to the psychosocial development of adolescent girls. It was concluded that, in harmony with Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, Journey as a wilderness adventure programme provided the contextual framework for experiential self-development opportunities for the girls. It is suggested that nature acted as both a mediating factor, allowing the girls the time and space to self-reflect and dissociate from

their busy lives and a motivating factor, giving impetus to develop abilities related to self-expression, skill acquisition and positive psychosocial identity development.

#### **6.4. Strengths and limitations of the study**

The paucity of research relating to ecotherapy was alluded to in Chapter 1. Further investigation suggests that this could be due to the fact that although the practical application of ecotherapeutic modalities is utilised in South Africa, its grounding in scientific and theoretical principles has been limited (Zygmunt & Naidoo, 2018). Any benefits or positive influences on individuals partaking in these programmes have been extracted by intrinsic attributes of the experience of being in nature, of experiencing challenge and of inter-personal exploration.

Attempts to understand the positive change that occurs in individuals after participation in wilderness adventure programmes are often process bound, as the researcher seeks to understand what actually ‘happens’ on the programmes versus seeking to explore the mechanism of change for example the disorientating dilemma alluded to in Chapter 5. Transcendental phenomenology was useful in understanding the essence of these mechanisms of change for example, what the experience of solitude meant to an individual and how the girls perceived the increase in their self-confidence and ability for self-expression as a result of participating in a wilderness adventure programme. The actual lived experience of the girls provides a rich background for the conclusions drawn in this research. In as much as qualitative researchers need to be cautioned against bias and subjectivity as highlighted in Chapter 3, it could be theorised that the personal interest of the researcher in adolescent development and the possible mitigating effect of ecotherapy on negative mental health outcomes and risky behaviour in teenagers contributed to the accuracy and depth of the research findings.

The main limitations of this research as briefly alluded to in Chapter 3 are related to two factors, firstly the demographic characteristics of the research cohort and secondly, the longevity of the stated beneficial effects of Journey. This research focused on examining the influence of a school-based ecotherapy programme designed for girls, on the psychosocial developmental of adolescent females. The sample population was drawn from a South African independent fee-paying school based in an upmarket

suburb. The findings are therefore not transferrable on the grounds of gender, that is they cannot be assumed to be true for adolescent males. Socio-economic factors in South Africa are linked to wide variances in the lived experience of adolescents related to family dynamics, access to education, risk taking behaviour and health. This suggests that the starting point to assess adolescents participating in wilderness adventure programmes may not be the same; which may make the reference point for the effectiveness of the wilderness adventure programme different for different groups.

Secondly, the research findings are situated in a defined period of time, approximately one month, from the first focus group interview to Journey to the second focus group interview at the culmination of Journey. The research findings clearly outline the beneficial effects of wilderness adventure programming on adolescent females; they do not however give evidence of the permanence of these benefits. Further longitudinal research is needed to ascertain if the effects beyond Journey and the length of time that they are sustained or continue to have an impact on the psychosocial development of the girls.

#### **6.5. Contextual implications and recommendations for policy, practice and future related research**

As indicated in this and other research, there are more negative effects of technification of adolescents than positive, particularly with regards to the use of social media and associated messaging platforms. Review of available literature and findings from the focus group discussions in this research suggest that adolescents find it difficult to regulate the time that they spend on social media because of social pressure. More significantly, it was found that adolescents struggle with the nature of online communication in the absence of context and social cues such as tone of voice, eye contact and timeous responses. This highlights the need for increased focus on digital literacy programmes that focus on the practical skills related to the use of digital technology as well as on the softer skills, the awareness and practice of effective digital communication that enhances psychological and emotional well-being and connection.

Future research efforts on Journey in particular could focus on the longevity and long-term impact of the findings as mentioned in the previous section. The findings of this

research make it clear that the girls would in all likelihood return to their pre-Journey levels of social media consumption despite the fact that most of them admitted the negative influence it has on their lives with regards to the amount of time they spend interfacing with it and the negative outcomes it has on their mental health. It could be argued that the immediate psychosocial advantages found inherent in Journey may not transcend into long-term effects. Further longitudinal research is necessary to investigate this in order to inform possible practice, for example creating opportunities for the girls to consolidate learnings from their experience at various intervals for the rest of their high school tenure.

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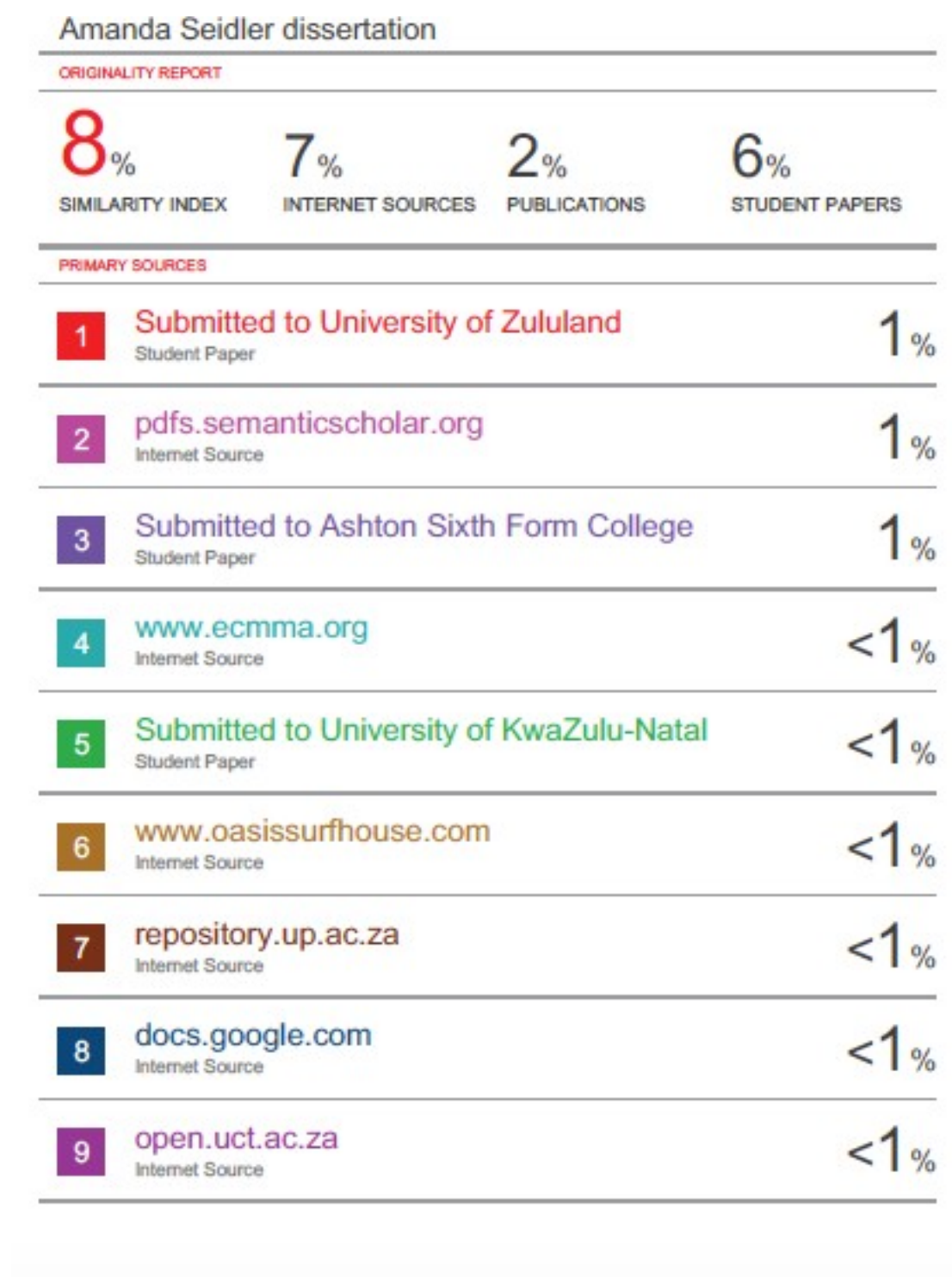
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. TURNITIN REPORT



10	<a href="http://mafiadoc.com">mafiadoc.com</a> Internet Source	<1 %
11	"Encyclopedia of Adolescence", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2018 Publication	<1 %
12	<a href="http://everywomanblog.com">everywomanblog.com</a> Internet Source	<1 %
13	<a href="http://docplayer.net">docplayer.net</a> Internet Source	<1 %
14	<a href="http://www.tandfonline.com">www.tandfonline.com</a> Internet Source	<1 %
15	<a href="http://www.justice.gov.za">www.justice.gov.za</a> Internet Source	<1 %
16	Submitted to University of Pretoria Student Paper	<1 %
17	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net">hdl.handle.net</a> Internet Source	<1 %
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20	Submitted to Mancosa Student Paper	<1 %
Submitted to Leeds Metropolitan University		

## APPENDIX B: PRE-JOURNEY FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION OUTLINE

Time	Activity and facilitator prompts/questions
20 mins	<p><u>1. Introduction and consent</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- arrival of students, welcome by facilitator, familiarisation with venue.</li> <li>- review of rationale for study, review of consent forms</li> <li>- discussion re 'groundrules' for focus group discussion i.e. confidentiality</li> </ul>
40 mins	<p><u>2. Open discussion areas and prompts</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- general feelings about participating on The Journey related to life/relationships/sport/cultural activities/family life etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o What are your thoughts about participating in the upcoming Journey?</li> <li>o What are you most concerned about physically?</li> <li>o What are you most concerned about emotionally?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- areas that the students think they will enjoy the most and why <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o What are you most looking forward to on The Journey and why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- areas that the students think that they will enjoy the least and why <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o What are you least looking forward to on The Journey and why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- how the students hope to benefit from the experience i.r.o personal identity, social relationships, self mastery (link to Eriksons stages of development- adolescence). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o How do you think The Journey will influence your sense of who you are and your relationship with yourself?</li> <li>o How do you think The Journey will influence your relationships with others.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	<p><u>3. Stimulus activity (Process mapping)</u></p> <p>Each student is given a pad of post-it notes and a marker. When prompted/questioned by the researcher, each student will write their answers/thoughts/comments pertaining to that particular prompt on a post-it note.</p>

	<p>These will be collected by the facilitator after each prompt and randomly stuck on a whiteboard, organised question by question. The first 2 questions will be easy to answer 'sample' questions to familiarise the students with the process.</p> <p>Prompts/questions will be organized as follows:</p> <p>2.1. Name 5 positive emotions that you experience on a regular basis as a result of communicating on your mobile phone/computer by means other than direct telephonic conversation i.e. sms, whatsapp, FB messenger, Instagram messaging, etc.</p> <p>2.2. Give 5 examples of things that 'happen' on your mobile phone/computer that makes you happy.</p> <p>2.3. Name 5 negative emotions that you experience on a regular basis as a result of communicating on your mobile phone/computer by means other than direct telephonic conversation i.e. sms, whatsapp, FB messenger, Instagram messaging, etc.</p> <p>2.4. Give 5 examples of things that 'happen' on your mobile phone/computer that does not make you happy.</p> <p>2.5. Do you think you would communicate differently if you were face to face with a person versus via mobile phone/computer?</p> <p>2.6. Why? (as a follow on from the above question) Any number of responses can be given.</p> <p>2.7. In what situations is it easier to communicate with someone using your mobile phone/computer as opposed to face-to-face if that was an option (name as many as you want)?</p> <p>2.8. How do you feel about not having your mobile phone/computer for 20 days on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being totally uncomfortable and 10 being totally comfortable?</p> <p>2.9. What do you do to make yourself feel better when you are angry/sad/lonely/confused/stressed? Any number of responses can be given.</p>
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## APPENDIX C: RESEARCHER OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Brief description of context or activity i.e. meal preparation, washing, hiking etc.**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Which girls are involved?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**What is happening? Why is this significant?**

\_\_\_\_\_

Physical (e.g., how do the girls cope with the physical challenges associated with the activity?)	Cognitive (e.g., how do the girls cope with the cognitive challenges associated with the activity?)
Interpersonal (e.g., how do the girls cope with the interpersonal challenges associated with the activity?)	Emotional (e.g., how do the girls cope with the emotional challenges associated with the activity?)

## APPENDIX D: POST-JOURNEY FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION OUTLINE

Time	Activity and facilitator prompts/questions
20 mins	<p><u>1. Introduction and consent</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- arrival of students, welcome by facilitator, familiarisation with venue.</li> <li>- review of rationale for study, review of consent forms</li> <li>- discussion re 'groundrules' for focus group discussion i.e. confidentiality</li> </ul>
40 mins	<p><u>2. Open discussion areas and prompts</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- general feelings about the experience of Journey related to life/relationships/sport/cultural activities/family life etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o What are your thoughts about Journey as an experience compared to what you expected from it at the beginning?</li> <li>o Were your fears (if you had any) about coping justified?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- areas that the students think they enjoyed the most and least and why <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o What did you most enjoy and why?</li> <li>o What did you least enjoy and why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- how the students hope to benefit from the experience i.r.o personal identity, social relationships, self mastery (link to Eriksons stages of development- adolescence). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o How do you think the experience of Journey will influence your sense of who you are and your relationship with yourself in the future?</li> <li>o How do you think the experience of being on Journey will influence your relationships with others in the future.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## **APPENDIX E: EMMANUEL FRAMEWORK**

The Emanuel Framework (Wassenaar & Rattani, 2016) practically outlines the ethical issues that need to be taken into consideration for research involving human participants. The ethical considerations of this research have been populated against the framework below:

### **1) Community participation**

An informal fact finding exercise was conducted prior to the research topic being suggested regarding the hierarchical structure and composition of the study site. A meeting was held with the overall project co-ordinator for Journey to establish if the school would permit outside research to take place as well as to verify the chain of command at the school and the correct communication channels/protocol to use for all stakeholders involved. This exercise was undertaken to ensure institutional 'respect' and inclusiveness of all stakeholders in the study.

Primary stakeholders have been identified as follows (order does not indicate significance):

- School leadership (includes Executive Head of School, Head of High School, Project leaders and other teachers/adult facilitators of Journey).
- Students (those participating in the study sample and those participating in Journey but not part of the study sample).
- Parents (of the students in the study sample and those of the other Gr. 9 students not included in the study sample).
- The entire school community (teachers, parents, students and associates).
- Service providers (companies or individuals contracted by the school for the provision of services directly related to Journey).

Gatekeeper access to the research site was secured (see Appendix G).

### **2) Social value**

The school leadership was consulted prior to the formulation of the research proposal with regards to the proposed topic of research. This was done to ensure that the study contributes in a meaningful way to the site specific evidence that currently exists regarding ecotherapy and Journey and that findings can be used to further enhance the programme outcomes in the future. This study is not funded by internal or external parties therefore no financial conflict of interest exists that may influence the research findings.

### **3) Scientific validity**

Limitations of research design and researcher subjectivity are mentioned in the research.

### **4) Fair participant selection**

This study proposes to research the ecotherapeutic influences that participating in Journey has for the study sample in the context of the digital era. The school under study was selected for the following reasons:

- Its successful track record w.r.t. running a programme of this nature.
- Strong school leadership evident.
- Willingness shown by the school community to participate in the research.
- Convenience in terms of spatial proximity to the researcher.

The main limitation of this study is its applicability and generalisability to the broader South African community. Research findings could be distilled to a broader community of beneficiaries in the context of findings regarding the suitability of ecotherapy to mitigate the challenges of adolescence, especially in a group setting. This may prove to be an economically viable way of extending the reach of therapeutic interventions in community settings.

#### 5) Favourable risk-benefit ratio

It is estimated that at least a third to a half of the data collected for this study will be collected using participant observation and audio recording of feedback sessions that occur as part of the daily routine of Journey. It is aimed to mitigate any potential observer effect as far as possible by introducing the researcher to the study sample prior to Journey and by formalising her role as an integral part of the sample group. The study participants will be briefed regarding the study objectives, assured w.r.t. confidentiality concerns and choice to refuse to participate with their suggestions and concerns addressed at the outset. **Please refer to question 3.1. of this form for further detail.**

Risks to the researcher can be assumed to be relatively low other than the normal risk of travel to the study sites and of undertaking research in the field with exposure to forces of an unpredictable natural environment.

#### 6) Independent ethics review

This study will be subject to an independent ethics review by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC).

#### 7) Informed consent

Informed consent will be secured from the parents of the students making up the sample using the adapted version of the HSSREC template. Written, informed assent will be secured from study participants. Parties mentioned above will be informed as to the topic and nature of the research, its objectives and methods and information will be disseminated regarding the sharing of research findings. The researcher will be introduced in her professional capacity as a student psychologist doing research under the ambit of UKZN.

#### 8) Ongoing respect for participants

Participants will be treated with respect and dignity throughout the research process.

## APPENDIX F: ETHICAL APPROVAL



04 February 2019

Mrs Amanda Jane Seidler (942407304)  
School of Applied Human Sciences – Psychology  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Mrs Seidler,

Protocol reference number: HSS/0681/018M (Linked to HSS/0237/018)  
Project title: Running wild: Ecotherapy for digital natives?

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

In response to your application received on 21 June 2018, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

Dr Shamila Naidoo (Deputy Chair)

/ms

Cc Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Munro  
cc Academic Leader Research: Dr Maud Mthembu  
cc School Administrator: Ms Priya Konan

### Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Rosemary Sibanda (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/8350/4557 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4609 Email: [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za) / [snymanm@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:snymanm@ukzn.ac.za) / [mohunp@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:mohunp@ukzn.ac.za)

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)



Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

## APPENDIX G: RESEARCH TITLE CHANGE APPROVAL



04 May 2020

Mrs Amanda Jane Seidler (942407304)  
School of Applied Human Sciences – Psychology  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Mrs Seidler,

Protocol reference number: HSS/0681/018M (Linked to HSS/0237/018)

New Project title: Digital natives running wild: Exploring adolescent girls identity development through wilderness adventure

### Approval Notification – Amendment Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application and request for an amendment received on 23 April 2020 has now been approved as follows:

- Change in title

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form; Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully

Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Cc Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Munro  
cc Academic Leader Research: Dr Maud Mthembu  
cc School Administrator: Ms Priya Konan

---

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building  
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000  
Tel: +27 31 260 8360 / 4867 / 3867  
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/research-ethics/>  
Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

## APPENDIX H: GATEKEEPER PERMISSION



### St MARY'S

Diocesan School for Girls, Kloof

P O Box 178, Kloof 3640, South Africa

High School Tel: 031-7649800

High School Fax: 031-7640011

Junior Primary: 031-7649831

Senior Primary: 031-7649829

Primary School Fax: 031-7647867

International: 27-31-7649800

Email: admin@stmarysdsg.co.za

Website: www.stmarysdsg.co.za


9 March 2018

Amanda Seidler  
P O Box 2205  
Everton  
3625

#### PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

This serves to confirm that permission is hereby granted for Amanda Seidler (student number: 942407304) to conduct research of St Mary's DSG, Kloof "The Journey" both at the school and out in the field. It is acknowledged that the title of the research is:

***Running Wild: Ecotherapy for digital natives?***

  
Mrs J Kinsey  
Head of High School

*Service before Self, God before All*

Member of the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa  
St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls, Kloof NPC  
Reg. No. 2000/028893/08 • 024-420-NPO

Directors: R I Allan-Reynolds MPD Conwen (Retired) (Chairman) JA Emond B G Dunlop CDD Evans DB Lousman

## RUNNING WILD

☆ **Sally Davies**

13 March 2018 at 1:42 PM

To: Nicholas Munro, Nicky Simpson, Lesley Finlay Cc: Amanda, Jo Kinsey, [and 1 more...](#)

Inbox - africaticours.co.za

SD

Re: Masters student and The Journey research - Amanda Seidler



Hi Nicholas

Long time no hear. - I hope youre well. Sorry for delay I was just wanting to chat to Nicky Simpson beforehand. Yes I am available (although mainly based in the Primary School) and Lesley Finlay - a Social Worker is based in the High School- so yes, there are psychological support structures in place. Naturally it depends on the intensity of support a learner may require - if they have a total 'meltdown', we may refer out, but in short, yes we are available. Nicky is away at the moment but said she would fill us in when she returns.

I hope this answers your query.

Kind regards

[See More](#) from Nicholas Munro

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### **SALLY DAVIES**

Educational Psychologist/School Counsellor

031 764 9844



031 764 9800 | St Mary's Road | P O Box 178, Kloof

[stmarysdsg.co.za](http://stmarysdsg.co.za) [f](#) StMarysDsgKloofOfficialPage

*Inspired Girls Remarkable Women*



## APPENDIX I: POLICE CLEARANCE



PO Box 1310  
Hyper By The Sea  
Durban North  
4053  
[www.the-guardian.co.za](http://www.the-guardian.co.za)  
Tel: 031 001 0101

Guardian Investigations  
Po Box 1310  
Hyper By The Sea  
Durban North  
4053

11 April 2018

Dear Sir / Madam

This is to confirm that Amanda Jane Seidler, ID 7601310181084 has had their details checked in accordance with the regulations set out by the Registrar of Sexual Offences.

It has been found on 11 April 2018 that Amanda Jane Seidler does not have his/her name recorded in the Register of any crime contemplated in the Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act of 2007 (Act No. 32 of 2007)

This screening was done by Marc Hardwick.

M.C. Hardwick  
Guardian Investigations

## **APPENDIX J: HSSREC INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS**

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### **UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)**

**APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL**  
For research with human participants

#### **INFORMED CONSENT: RESEARCH PARTICIPATION**

**Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research of The Journey, 2018.**

Date:

Dear parent/guardian of student,

My name is Amanda Seidler, and I am currently completing a Master of Social Science (Psychology) degree at the University of KwaZulu- Natal (PMB).

I would like to invite you to consider giving your consent for your daughter to participate in a study that involves gaining a deeper understanding of her experience of The Journey. The aim and purpose of this research is to generate knowledge about how ecotherapy or wilderness therapy impacts on the lives of adolescents in South Africa in the context of the digital age. The study is expected to enrol all the participants in your daughter's assigned group for The Journey. The duration of her participation if you give permission for her to enrol and remain in the study is expected to be one day on a suitable date specified by St. Mary's DSG before The Journey begins and one day on a suitable date specified by the school once The Journey is complete and at various intervals pre-arranged with the school during The Journey. This study is self-funded.

The study will involve two focus group discussions that will invite your daughter to share personal opinions, feelings and experiences. It will involve observations and audio recording of a selection of her daily group feedback sessions whilst on The Journey. It will also involve observation by the researcher at certain points on The Journey experience. It is not anticipated that information elicited will be of a different nature to that that already arises and is openly discussed as part of The Journey. We hope that the study will create a deeper understanding of the psychological benefits and challenges of The Journey so that St. Mary's DSG can use this information in evaluating the programme for future participants. In addition, the results of the study will contribute to locally relevant information about ecotherapy as a medium for psychological healing in South Africa.

Should participation in this research cause your daughter mental or emotional distress beyond that which the Journey facilitators can assist her with, she will be offered access to the school psychologist at St. Mary's DSG to assist with resolution thereof.

## RUNNING WILD

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number ).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at (provide contact details) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

### **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Please note that participation in this research is voluntary and your daughter may withdraw from the research process without discrimination at any time. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation in the research, she will not incur penalty or loss of treatment or other benefit to which she is normally entitled as part of The Journey. Should she wish to withdraw from the study, she is required to inform her Journey group facilitator.

Your daughter's participation in the study will be terminated by either her Journey group facilitator or the researcher should they be of the view that her participation is negatively disrupting her Journey experience in any way or if her participation in the study is causing her emotional or mental distress.

Should your daughter's participation in the study be terminated either by herself or by her group facilitator or the researcher, any data pertaining to her will be discarded immediately and not used for the purposes of the study.

There are no costs borne by you as a result of your daughter's participation in the study. She will receive a small gift reimbursement for participating in the study and contributing to the research material.

Personal information divulged by your daughter in the course of this research will remain confidential by anonymity. Her name will not be recorded as part of the interview or focus group procedures or as part of the daily group sharing that will be observed by the researcher observing The Journey. Any audio recordings of the previously mentioned data collection procedures will be destroyed immediately following the anonymous transcription thereof. Transcripts of audio recordings and electronic data collected during the research will be kept in a securely locked storage facility by the researcher after which all data will be destroyed.

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### **CONSENT (Edit as required)**

I (Name of parent/guardian ) of (name of student) have been informed about the study entitled "RUNNING WILD: ECOTHERAPY FOR DIGITAL NATIVES? by AMANDA SEIDLER.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

## RUNNING WILD

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my daughter's participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that she may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that she is usually entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to my daughter as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at [amandajaneheidler@gmail.com](mailto:amandajaneheidler@gmail.com) or 082 922 5186.

If I have any questions or concerns about my daughter's rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

### **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my daughter's focus group discussion and observe and audio record the daily group sharing session whilst on The Journey. YES / NO

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness  
(Where applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Translator  
(Where applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **APPENDIX K: HSSREC INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS**

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### **UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)**

**APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL**  
For research with human participants

#### **INFORMED CONSENT: RESEARCH PARTICIPATION**

**Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research of The Journey, 2018.**

Date:

Dear Name of Student (to be inserted)

My name is Amanda Seidler, and I am currently completing a Master of Social Science (Psychology) degree at the University of KwaZulu- Natal (PMB).

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves gaining a deeper understanding of your experience of The Journey. The aim and purpose of this research is to generate knowledge about how ecotherapy or wilderness therapy impacts on the lives of adolescents in South Africa in the context of the digital age. The study is expected to enrol all the participants in your assigned group for The Journey. The duration of your participation if you choose to enrol and remain in the study is expected to be one day on a suitable date specified by your school before The Journey begins and one day on a suitable date specified by your school once The Journey is complete and at various intervals pre-arranged with the school during The Journey. This study is self- funded.

The study will involve two focus group discussions that will invite you to share personal opinions, feelings and experiences. It will also involve observations and audio recording of a selection of your daily group feedback sessions by the researcher at certain points on The Journey experience. We hope that the study will create a deeper understanding of the psychological benefits and challenges of The Journey so that St. Mary's DSG can use this information in evaluating the programme for future participants. In addition, the results of the study will contribute to locally relevant information about ecotherapy as a medium for psychological healing in South Africa.

Should participation in this research cause you mental or emotional distress beyond that which your Journey facilitators can assist you with, you will be offered access to the school psychologist at St. Mary's DSG to assist with resolution thereof. This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number ).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at (provide contact details) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

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Please note that participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw from the research process without discrimination at any time. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation in the research, you will not incur penalty or loss of treatment or other benefit to which you are normally entitled as part of The Journey. Should you wish to withdraw from the study, you are required to inform your Journey group facilitator.

Your participation in the study will be terminated by either by your Journey group facilitator or the researcher should they be of the view that your participation is negatively disrupting your Journey experience or if your participation in the study is causing you emotional or mental distress.

Should your participation in the study be terminated either by yourself or by your group facilitator or the researcher, any data pertaining to you will be discarded immediately and not used for the purposes of the study.

There are no costs borne by you as a result of participation in the study and you will receive a small gift reimbursement for participating in the study and contributing to the research material.

Personal information divulged by you in the course of this research will remain confidential by anonymity. Your name will not be recorded as part of the interview or focus group procedures or as part of the daily group sharing that will be observed by the researcher observing The Journey. Any audio recordings of the previously mentioned data collection procedures will be destroyed immediately following the anonymous transcription thereof. Transcripts of audio recordings and electronic data collected during the research will be kept in a securely locked storage facility by the researcher after which all data will be destroyed.

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**CONSENT (Edit as required)**

I (Name of student ) have been informed about the study entitled “RUNNING WILD: ECOTHERAPY FOR DIGITAL NATIVES? by AMANDA SEIDLER.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

## RUNNING WILD

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at (provide details).

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my focus group discussion and observe and audio record the daily group sharing session whilst on The Journey. YES / NO

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness  
(Where applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Translator  
(Where applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX L: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION CONFIDENTIALITY PLEDGE**

Name:

As a participant of this focus group discussion, I understand that it is my personal responsibility to not disclose what it discussed here today with any person outside of this focus group discussion. Therefore, I agree to maintain confidentiality about what was discussed during this focus group discussion and who discussed it. By signing this pledge, I promise to keep the comments made by the other focus group participants confidential.

Signed:\_\_\_\_\_Date:\_\_\_\_\_