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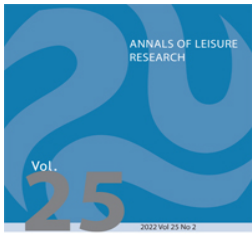
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# Camping at home: escapism, self-care, and social bonding during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

The restrictions imposed by COVID-19 lockdown(s) left many feeling trapped at home. One leisure activity that saw a surge in popularity during lockdown was 'home' camping. Camping has long been associated with positive health and well-being outcomes and during lockdown camping at home was documented across social media platforms as people shared experiences of their micro-adventures. This paper will draw on social media (Instagram) and survey (> 260 responses) data gathered from 'regular' campers and those who had never previously camped during the UK lockdowns. Specifically, we explore: (i) what motivated home camping; (ii) the impact of camping activity on physical and mental well-being; (iii) the role it played in fostering and/or nurturing social relationships in isolating circumstances (iv) how digital practices were incorporated into camping as an activity. As such, the paper will provide a valuable contribution to understand the transformative potentials of restricted leisure practices in the pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

Camping; micro adventure; UK; COVID-19; lockdown; motivations; mental health; wellbeing; social relationships; leisure

## Introduction

The range of lockdown measures put in place by national governments in order to reduce human contact and slow rates of COVID-19 infection had unprecedented effects on citizen's freedom of movement and social engagement (Day 2020). While the impact of the pandemic has by no means been experienced uniformly (Gammon and Ramshaw 2021; Amanatidis et al. 2021) for many households everyday social life was profoundly impacted on work, education, childcare, and leisure unavoidably became 'physically intertwined' (Sivan 2020) within the home (Craig 2020; Erturan-Ogut and Demirhan 2020). This blurring and renegotiation of boundaries was compounded by anxiety, (often acute) loss, exhaustion, and isolation as individuals were confined for extended periods of time alone or with their significant others/housemates (Stodolska 2021).

The impact of the pandemic on leisure, commonly associated with freedom of choice, personal satisfaction, relaxation, and pleasure (Sivan 2020) has also been profound. Restrictions on travel and outdoor exercise resulted in nearly all out-of-home leisure

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suddenly becoming inaccessible (Roberts 2020). Pubs, nightclubs, cafes, and restaurants closed, alongside heritage sites, galleries, museums, libraries, cinemas, concert halls and theatres, civic and community centres, and sports centres and stadiums (Hayes 2020; Roberts 2020). Travel and overnight stays were prohibited and access to public green spaces, parks, and playgrounds restricted (Stoeklin et al. 2021). Despite this, there was evidence of creativity sprouting from the disruption of daily routines (Chrostowska 2020; Baracsi 2020). One response to the boredom, monotony, and constraints of domestic circumstances was the practice of camping at home. Tents were erected in gardens or living rooms or homemade shelters were constructed on trampolines, providing sites of domestic microadventures indoors and out. These microadventures offered an opportunity to 'escape' and camping at home during lockdown(s) experienced a surge in popularity with individuals documenting their activities and connecting across social media platforms.

Camping as an activity has long been associated with a range of positive health and well-being outcomes (Garst, Williams, and Roggenbuck 2010), offering an antidote to everyday routines, improved family functioning and increased social interaction. Camping provides a sense of freedom, exposure to nature and an escape from technology (CCC 2015). In the context of COVID-19 those fortunate enough to have gardens or outside spaces (even balconies) were able to benefit from the ability to reframe camping as a home leisure activity with outdoor recreation and interaction with the natural world providing an important means of coping with stress (Corley et al. 2021; Rice et al. 2020). Whether they camped outdoors or indoors, people likewise reported that the activity promoted a feeling of release from everyday pressures and precipitated better interpersonal relationships within the home.

Although not an activity unique to the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper argues that camping at home was a form of creatively re-imagined leisure; a response to physical distancing and restrictions that also made use of the innovative leisure affordances of online digital spaces (Lashua, Johnson, and Parry 2021) through practices of sharing home camping images and experiences on social media platforms and participation in online events. There is evidence to suggest that this online activity might further promote positive well-being and counter negative well-being. Online events provide a digital space, drawing like-minded people together and facilitating social connection, affirming community identity and values, and boosting resilience in a stressful period (Glover 2021; Jepson and Walters 2021).

Our research did not aim to capture people's feelings and worries about COVID-19 or the lockdown(s) *per se*, rather our intention was to capture the participants' motivations for, and experiences of, camping at home, in a UK context, during this global phenomenon. This paper provides an overview of the findings. The first section situates the research in relation to the growing body of research on health and wellbeing, leisure, outdoor activity, and social relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second section is in three parts. Part One discusses what motivated people to camp at home. Part Two highlights the self-perceived health and wellbeing benefits derived from camping at home. Part Three focuses on the impact of camping at home on social relationships within and beyond the household.

As such, the paper provides an important contribution towards understanding how individuals respond to pandemic-like situations (Robinson et al. 2021) and how certain

behaviours might help to maintain or restore health and well-being during future such events (Corley et al. 2021). More broadly, the findings will contribute to the continued exploration of camping and its attendant benefits, as well as motivations for participation in this activity during times of relative normalcy. It will also contribute to research highlighting the health and well-being benefits of nearby nature particularly within urban areas (Jackson et al. 2021).

### **Life in the UK during the pandemic**

It is unsurprising that the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown restrictions have prompted concerns over mental health and the psycho-social consequences of self-isolation and quarantine (WHO 2020). Mental health professionals have raised concerns about the impact of the pandemic, citing increases in cases of depression, suicide, self-harm and domestic violence as well as a rise in loneliness, anxiety, insomnia and harmful alcohol and drug use (WHO 2020; Kumar and Rajasekharan Nayar 2021). Key policy measures, 'including social distancing and self-isolation, have had unintended detrimental impacts on many aspects of people's lives including psychological and physical wellbeing and levels of physical activity' (Corley et al. 2021, 1). The mental health of children and young people has been particularly badly affected by the crisis (Townsend 2020; Holt and Murray 2021) with a marked rise in emotional symptoms, hyperactivity and/or inattention, and conduct problems (Waite et al. 2021).

Leisure scholars have similarly been concerned with the impact of a shift to home-based activities as leisure as a form of connectivity, choice and freedom has been both vitally needed and dramatically absent (Sivan 2020; Lashua, Johnson, and Parry 2021; Gammon and Ramshaw 2021). In this context, the importance of understanding the value and meaning of lockdown leisure is evident.

### **COVID leisure**

While not a universal experience, for many the COVID-19 restrictions marked a decrease in leisure opportunities and an increase in leisure time. In part, this was a result of the UK Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme wherein employers could put some or all of their staff on temporary leave (or furlough) or because employees were forced into unemployment. In this context, an enforced increase in leisure time whilst sheltering at home might be equated with more free time and the potential for engaging in new or neglected leisure pursuits, or, conversely, may have created or exacerbated feelings of anxiety, helplessness, or depression. For non-essential workers, working from home whilst balancing multiple other responsibilities (childcare, education, housework) often left little or no time for leisure (Burk, Pechenik Mausolf, and Oakleaf 2021). For those who engaged in leisure practices during the lockdown(s) some simply increased the amount of time they spent doing activities they already enjoyed within the home, e.g. watching television, gaming, using electronic media and smartphones (Roberts 2020). People also spent more time engaging with paper media (newspapers, magazines, and books) but far less than they did screen-based media (Erturan-Ogut and Demirhan 2020; Roberts 2020). Many developed new leisure habits (Erturan-Ogut and Demirhan 2020). These included activities such as online family quiz nights, social gatherings, dance, and exercise

classes (Skinner 2020; Stodolska 2021) which helped them maintain social bonds and boost their sense of well-being (Jepson and Walters 2021; Glover 2021). Traditional pastimes such as board games and jigsaws (Butler 2020), sewing and crafting (Smart 2020; Abdel Hadi, Bakker, and Häusser 2021), and baking (particularly bread) (Easterbrook-Smith 2021; Morton 2020) also attracted renewed interest (Lashua, Johnson, and Parry 2021; Stodolska 2021). These 'slower' pursuits, it is suggested, engendered kindness, creativity, and hope and offered people an authentic, meaningful, and transformative experience in a time of instability (Breunig 2020; Conti and Lexhagen 2020; de la Barre et al. 2020).

### ***Outdoor activity and access to nature***

Despite the travel restrictions, people were more likely to participate in outdoor activities (e.g. walks around the neighbourhood, visiting local parks) during the pandemic lockdown(s) (Jackson et al. 2021; Houge Mackenzie and Goodnow 2021). They also reported spending more time in natural environments than usual, particularly if they had a private garden (Robinson et al. 2021). The physical and mental health benefits of spending time in, and engaging with, natural environments such as parks and woodlands are multiple and well documented (Robinson et al. 2021). They include elevated mood, reduced anxiety and stress, increased life satisfaction, increased self esteem, reduced loneliness, and improved sleep quality (Breunig 2020; Haasova et al. 2020; Javelle et al. 2021; Corley et al. 2021; Soga et al. 2021). There is evidence to suggest that neighbourhood greenspace may be particularly beneficial in helping to 'buffer' the psychological and physiological impact of stressful life events (Corley et al. 2021; Jackson et al. 2021; Soga et al. 2021).

A large number (84%) of participants in a study by Robinson et al. (2021) agreed or strongly agreed that spending time in nature had helped them cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. In research on private gardens, Corley et al. (2021) suggest that the amount of 'time spent' in such natural environments during the pandemic was perhaps more important than the type of activity undertaken. Whilst Soga et al. (2021) propose that, despite physical distancing measures, the opportunities that being outdoors afforded mitigated the negative impact of distancing. This combination of a desire to escape the confines of our homes and the beneficial effects of being outside found a perfect outlet in camping at home.

### ***Social relationships and the pandemic***

Extended periods of confinement and isolation were a testing time for many individuals and families as relationships outside the home shifted to entirely virtual contact (Ayuso et al. 2020; Ones 2020). This absence of 'normality' in social relationships has important implications; a rich history of research has pointed to the link between physical and emotional health and social relationships. Strong levels of social support have been linked to a range of long- and short-term mental and physical health outcomes including lower levels of anxiety and depression, the ability to better manage chronic conditions and lower levels of mortality (Philpot et al. 2021). Social relationships also act as a buffer to stressful life events and the kinds of psychological distresses faced

during the pandemic (Umberson and Karas Montez 2010). Research on social relationships during the pandemic has been divided; some studies point to an increase in experiences of loneliness, physical and emotional isolation, and a lack of meaningful interaction during lockdown (Banerjee and Rai 2020; Campbell 2020) while others have cited an increase in perceived social and family connection (El-Zoghby, Soltan, and Salama 2020). Our findings echo these conflicting tensions highlighting the importance of understanding experiences of isolation and the strategies employed to maintain resilient social connections in times of stress (Campbell 2020; Glover 2021).

## Researching home camping

This paper draws on data from 267 responses to a web-based qualitative questionnaire and visual and textual data from 435 Instagram posts. For the purposes of this research, camping at home was defined as overnight stays in tents/home-made shelters (outside or indoors) or other camping-specific accommodation (e.g. caravans, motorhomes, trailer tents) adjacent to the home.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the School of GeoSciences Research Ethics and Integrity Committee.

### *Qualitative questionnaire*

Online qualitative questionnaires are particularly useful when attempting to conduct research during a pandemic, they are cost-effective, have the potential to access large geographically dispersed populations and a diverse sample, do not require face-to-face contact or travel to a location, and allows participants to respond when, where, and how they are able (Braun et al. 2020; Singh and Sagar 2021). For the purposes of this study, a web-based qualitative questionnaire was created and was live between 22 September and 25 December 2020.<sup>1</sup> It comprised 32 multi-format questions designed to gather basic demographic information (e.g. age of person completing questionnaire, age range of campers, how many camped proportionate to number of people in household, home ownership status, household income band, and ethnic group) and explore the motivations, experiences, and behaviours of people who chose to camp at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our aim was to gain a rich insight into camping at home and the subjective well-being of the participants (i.e. how they perceived and evaluated their experiences) rather than achieve statistical representativeness (Braun et al. 2020; Jepson and Walters 2021).

The questionnaire was distributed via a secure web link with a detailed Participant Information Sheet (explaining that participation was voluntary, and providing information on the purpose, risks, and benefits of taking part). A separate page informed participants that completion of the questionnaire was akin to providing their consent to participate. We also asked participants to confirm that they were aged 18 years or over. Given the impossibility of devising a sampling frame from the open population 'people who camped at home during the COVID-19 pandemic' (Sue and Ritter 2012), we used non-random, convenience and snowball sampling approaches to reach potential participants including posting on local community WhatsApp groups in Edinburgh, emailing camping and outdoor-related organizations, and posting on social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)



including posts that tagged camping and outdoor-related individuals, organizations, businesses and events.

Questionnaire participants ranged in age from 18 to 75 years with a spike in the 36–45 years category. The questionnaires were completed by one member of each household; we did not specify that this individual needed to have camped at home themselves. In some instances, these individuals were asked to provide information pertaining to themselves and in others they were asked to answer on behalf of other members of the household (both those who camped and those who had not). The participants were overwhelmingly white (97.8%) and resident in England (69.3%). Just over half (57.3%) owned their own property with a mortgage, and half (53.5%) had a total annual income as a household of £40,001 or more. The majority lived in a sub-urban (33.3%) or semi-rural (39.7) area. Almost three-quarters of respondents (72%) camped away from the home two or more times per year prior to the pandemic and just over half of the participants ( $n = 142$ ) said that they, or someone in their household, had home camped before the Covid-19 pandemic. We are necessarily cautious in making inferences about the phenomenon of camping at home based on our sample population (Sue and Ritter 2012; Braun et al. 2020; Singh and Sagar 2021). The completion of online questionnaires excludes those without access to internet-based and mobile communication technology (Singh and Sagar 2021). We also acknowledge that the sampling methods used likely resulted in further bias toward those who already classified themselves as campers, used social media, owned their own homes, and with sufficient means to own camping equipment.

Just over three-quarters (78.7%) of the questionnaire participants, or members of their household, camped at home between one and four times during the lockdown(s) with around three-quarters (70.8%) of the camps including children aged 0–17 years. The majority of the home camps were outdoors ( $n = 245$ ) and, of these, most were in a private garden accessible only by the household ( $n = 186$ ). The next most popular location was private driveways ( $n = 39$ ). Other outdoor locations included private gardens accessible to several households, on the street or grass verge outside the home, balconies, and privately owned fields. Of those who camped indoors ( $n = 22$ ), most camped in their living room ( $n = 14$ ) or a bedroom ( $n = 6$ ), the remaining two participants, or members of their household, camped in a private hallway accessible only by their household and in a conservatory.

Tents were the most popular type of shelter ( $n = 178$ ) (both outdoors and indoors), followed by campervans or motorhomes ( $n = 41$ ), caravans ( $n = 16$ ), tarpaulins or bivouacs ( $n = 10$ ), and trailer tents ( $n = 4$ ). The participants, or members of their household, who camped in improvised shelters ( $n = 18$ ) used, in various combinations, blankets, towels, sofa cushions, bedsheets, mattresses, bamboo poles, dining room tables, washing dryers, chairs, cardboard boxes, rope, cable ties, children's' play tents, and gazebos.

### **#Homecamping**

During the pandemic, social media platforms and apps became communicative lifelines as the temporal rhythms of daily life were disrupted in unprecedented ways. Social media platforms provided spaces in which individual leisure activities could be shared and connections could be made. Platforms like Instagram were teeming with images of



camping at home setups with various hashtags used to share images of these microadventures. Instagram users can assign text captions, hashtags, user tags, and geotags to their media to record contexts, emotions, and opinions and to link their post to posts with similar content (Amanatidis et al. 2021; Conti and Lexhagen 2020). As such, the platform offers researchers a valuable insight into how people document and reflect on their activities particularly in the context of social media use in lockdown when we became digital by default.

In our research we employed a hashtag search. Defining which hashtags to follow requires an understanding of the ways in which hashtags are emergent and social (Highfield and Lever 2015). Hashtags that 'define' a theme or event take time to reach common consensus. As such sampling decisions around hashtags are temporal and contextual and rely on researchers ethnographically embedding themselves in the platform for extended periods of time; identifying common user specified hashtags, exploring which hashtags are dominant or 'successful', and identifying 'also-ran' hashtags.

From 48 possible user-specified hashtags identified, we selected ten according to frequency of use at the point of sampling: #homecamping, #campingathome, #backgarden-camping, #drivewaycamping, #lockdowncamping, #quarantinecamping, #campinginthe-garden, #campingindoors, #gardencamping, and #homecamp. This yielded posts from around the world and from these we sampled posts published in the UK between 23 March 2020 (start of UK lockdown) and 15 July 2020 (start of lockdown Phase 3 in Scotland). From this, we discounted posts primarily concerned with company advertising (e.g. outdoor equipment), instances of image duplication (e.g. magazine accounts reposting readers' images), and posts by Scout or Girlguiding groups unless they specifically depicted camping activity (e.g. child in tent). We also deleted posts that did not feature the specified hashtags in the original caption at the time of publication (Highfield and Lever 2015).

### ***Data analysis***

The questionnaire and Instagram (both textual and visual) data were collated into the NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis package. After a period of familiarization, a combination of deductive and inductive coding of all the data was then undertaken (with deductive codes revised as appropriate) by both authors and a Research Assistant working independently. For the Instagram data we included only the original image (s), text captions, and hashtags; we did not analyse the comments. The codes were regularly discussed and checked to ensure intercoder reliability, consistency, and distinctiveness. In some instances, counting was used to establish the frequency with which certain terms were used (e.g. cosy) and to enable us to justifiably use statements such as 'often' and 'many' in the discussion. Finally, we used thematic analysis, a popular technique amongst netnographers (Kozinets 2020), to identify overriding themes and unifying ideas in the data.<sup>2</sup> The quotations selected for the paper are those that best represent significant constructs that appeared across the data set. Additional hashtags cited in the text are used in the same way as one would quote interview material reflecting the way people express themselves (thoughts, opinions, feelings, attitudes, etc.) on Instagram.

## Motivations for camping at home

Camping at home can be understood as a microadventure. Microadventures are short-term adventures, undertaken in 'normal places' by 'normal people' (Humphreys 2014). Microadventures reconceptualize adventure from being 'out there' (remote, time consuming and resource intensive) to being 'right here' (close to home, short, and cheap) but still facilitating the benefits of traditional travel and adventure by cognitively or emotionally disconnecting the participant from everyday life (Humphreys 2014; Houge Mackenzie and Goodnow 2021).

The concept of microadventure predates and is not unique to the pandemic lockdown, but the emphasis on adventure that is nearby, simple, attainable, and low-cost held much appeal during this time of restricted leisure. Motivations to camp at home were largely oriented around a desire to find something different to do, to have some fun, to entertain children, and to break feelings of monotony. For many questionnaire participants, the overwhelming experience of lockdown was boredom and anxiety and they felt a need to fill time in a way that would distract them from and allow them to escape the multiple stresses of the pandemic. Camping as an activity provided something different to focus on with participants emphasizing the value and importance of being able to 'create' positive experiences in an attempt to make lockdown more 'fun', life-affirming and memorable (in a good way):

[camping meant] spending great quality time with my husband and children and watching them relax and have fun and lots of giggles, when the world was a very scary place and no one really knew what was happening.<sup>3</sup>

Participants credited camping with boosting their happiness levels, creating excitement, enabling families to create positive memories, and fostering a sense of connection and togetherness (both within and beyond the home).

The experience and value of camping at home extended, however, beyond simply spending a night outside. The act of camping provided a sense of purpose, focus and structure during extended times of confinement with the process of planning (e.g. equipment, location, provisions) and setting up of camp (e.g. pitching, arrangement of bedding, decoration) providing a novel and entertaining distraction. It gave participants, especially children, something to look forward to at 'what was a strange and scary time'. This transferred attention away from work and domestic tasks, distant friends and family, and cancelled holidays 'allowing' participants 'to put tough days down' and gain mental respite. Having camped as a family, one participant said that 'planning the events and then following through' had been 'a fun relaxing bonding experience' for everyone.

Although not directly addressed by the participants, it was clear that the value of camping then came not just from the act itself but from a sense of proactive creativity that gave participants' a feeling of achievement and self-worth:

The lockdown felt overwhelming and overbearing sometimes. My children were off school and college. Camping was a way to focus my energy in terms of preparation (e.g. food/drink) and feeling as though we were getting away from what was becoming mundane. It takes you out of your everyday life.

As such camping as an activity disrupted lockdown routines with participants citing their desire to make the most of difficult situations. The sense of creation and of a facilitation of

fun, articulated in our questionnaire data, was reflected in the Instagram hashtags, #fun, #summerfun, #gardencampingfun, #isolationfun, #funoutdoors, being common descriptors. Hashtags also emphasized the curated nature of these activities with regard to the creation of positive lockdown memories, e.g. #makingmemories, #memoriesmade, #lockdownmemories. One Instagrammer commented,

We're working hard here to weave positive stories for lockdown - dreaming up new and unique adventures where we can! In this story we went to Sardinia - the girls drove for twenty seven hours, we crammed spaghetti into our mouths for tea, somebody stood on somebody else's head in the night after accidentally flashing the neighbours ... and after a hot and humid sleep we were somehow magically transported back to the Land of Home just before nine this morning.

Another wrote, '[it] was so great to be back in our favourite home [tent], and once we were zipped in, we could have been anywhere'. This suggests that camping at home facilitated not just a physical and emotional pause but also an imaginative hiatus and escape from the prevailing circumstances.

In the context of COVID-19, microadventures, as a creative response to travel restrictions, embraced the benefits attributed to adventure travel (e.g. enhanced self-esteem, self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, resilience, and well-being) while reimagining what escapism might mean (Brymer and Schweitzer 2013; Ewert and Yoshino 2011; Houge Mackenzie and Brymer 2020). In western societies the experience of leisure is closely connected to ideas about freedom (Kleiber, Walker, and Mannell 2011) and the loss of freedom in lockdown was keenly felt by participants with narratives of escape and escapism prominent in the questionnaire data:

We all really enjoyed stepping outside from the 4 walls of the house. It was exciting and allowed you to escape reality for a night.

Waking up to the calls of birds and not realizing at first where I was - I thought I was on holiday somewhere out in the wilderness and that the whole pandemic was just a bad dream.

This kind of escapism replicated the liminality afforded by pre-restriction travel and leisure, giving a sense of freedom from daily routines. Camping at home, provided an immersive activity and a shift in environment (however domestic) enabling participants to cognitively disconnect and experience a small taste of the benefits of liminality afforded to travel and adventure (Bloom and Goodnow 2013; Goodnow and Bordoloi 2017).

The importance of camping in breaking the monotony of lockdown was emphasized by participants, offering an opportunity to 'escape the mundane chores' and monotony of the home, 'fractur[ing] lockdown torpor'. This change of pace and routine was particularly salient as boundaries of work and home blurred in new and unfamiliar ways. Participants cited the ability to reframe their domestic settings as an important act of self-care, creating temporary distance from the pandemic:

[camping] allowed distance and perspective from fears about pandemic. Made me feel safe and able to take a distant view of our own lives and situation. Gave us gratitude for the small things. Could switch off from news and social media.

This sentiment was reflected in instagram hashtags orienting around finding and creating positivity in trying circumstances: #getoutthere, #keepsmling, #staystrong,

#beatingthecoronablues #itsthelittlethings, #makingthebestofit. These represent an attempt to reconcile the isolation of lockdown with our desire to keep leisure 'alive' during quarantine despite being conceptually and physically absent (Djurđić 2020). This reproduction of leisure spaces in peoples' homes and social media feeds therefore acted to connect them to their previous lives and to each other in important ways (Gammon and Ramshaw 2021). As Djurđić (2020, 318–319) writes,

Successful home-based spatial approximations don't just symbolize "outside" spaces, they become these spaces. They are these spaces. By upholding the material and symbolic value of the "outside" spaces they mimic, spatial approximations simultaneously physicalize and reimagine collectivistic spaces, and in the process, disrupt the alienating effects of quarantining. Thus, the personal needs fulfilled by these "outside" spaces are realized in the home.

Camping at home and the repurposing of outside space, as a physical and mental activity, connected participants to acts of leisure as an important coping mechanism.

### **Self-perceived health and well-being benefits of camping at home**

A large proportion (87%) of the questionnaire participants agreed or strongly agreed that camping at home during the pandemic had benefited their and/or members of their household's mental health. Camping helped them sleep better, feel more relaxed, feel safe, gave them a sense of purpose, and made them feel more in control.

Several questionnaire participants indicated that being outside in the fresh air helped them breathe 'more easily' and one stated that they had a 'clearer head' after sleeping outside. The hashtag #freshair was similarly used on Instagram. When participants did mention the physical impact of camping at home it tended to be in relation to privations endured, e.g. joint stiffness or back pain from sleeping on the floor. Instagram posts similarly hinted at the discomfort felt by some campers (often parents persuaded to camp by their children) through the use of hashtags like #tiredalready, #willneedanaplater, #send-wine, #WhatHavelDone, and #howlatewilltheystayup.

Many of the questionnaire participants said they had slept better outdoors and had woken up feeling more refreshed. As a consequence, they reported feeling more positive, less stressed, and not as 'mentally exhausted', the latter being a pervasive experience of the pandemic (Marsh 2021). Exposure to light in natural environments has a positive impact on sleep quality and quantity (Dumont and Beaulieu 2007; Düzgün and Durmaz Akyol 2017; Corley et al. 2021) and camping, even for a short period, can be beneficial to human circadian timing and sleep patterns (Stothard et al. 2017). Frequently, studies take place in remote areas away from artificial light, but our research suggests that camping in a domestic garden may have similar benefits with participants documenting their reconnection with the natural light–dark cycle and its beneficial cognitive effects, e.g. 'going to sleep at dark, waking at dawn: nobody grumpy or groggy – all alert'.

Participants were more likely to suggest, however, that their improved slumber and enhanced mood resulted from the soothing effect of their surroundings as they drifted into and awoke from sleep. The sounds made by wildlife and the rain. The peculiar 'smell of tent'. The night sky and sunrises. All of these were sensory stimuli attributed to making participants feel 'peaceful' and 'serene'. Listening to birdsong (in particular, the dawn chorus) is associated with a range of mental health and well-being benefits, including attention restoration and stress recovery (Breunig 2020; Chaudhury and

Banerjee 2020; Soga et al. 2021). For one participant, the myriad effects of sleeping outdoors had led to a broader sense of connectedness to the natural world instilling hopefulness for the future (Chaudhury and Banerjee 2020). They wrote,

It was one of the few moments during lockdown that I actually managed to relax. I felt connected to the (sic) nature, and at peace with the world. The smell of the fresh air and birds chirping that woke me up in the early hours of dawn made me realize, that although the civilisation seems to have gone to hell, the (sic) nature is stronger than that, and that no matter how bad the impact of the pandemic on the economy and infrastructure, we as humanity will pull through, because the planet is our living, breathing home which will shelter and sustain us.

For this participant, and many others, immersion in nature had rekindled an enduring faith in the planetary ecosystem of which humans are a part.

Participants frequently described their camping accommodation as 'cosy', conducive to sleep. It was a space in which they could 'snuggle'; get warm and comfortable and, as applicable, nestle up to their sleeping companion(s). This sense of soporific contentment was reflected in the Instagram use of hashtags such as #cosy, #toastyinatent, and #cosycamping. Instagrammers also noted feeling 'pretty cold but [...] snuggly' and one described their tent as 'all set out and snuggly'. One questionnaire participant spoke of feeling 'cocooned' while others described how they created this cosiness:

I love sleeping in the fresh air. We layed (sic) under the stars first and then got cosy in the tent using many blankets and pillows. We enjoyed listening to the strange noises of nature. We felt disappointed at sunrise as our adventure was over.

In our old folding caravan on the drive, it felt comfortable and homely. It was remarkably quiet and peaceful on our close of an evening, with only the odd sound of traffic here and there as neighbours came home or went out.

Being cosy appeared to make participants feel protected and safe. Indeed, one participant made a direct connection between being cosy and waking up 'less frequently with night-time worries/panic'.

Many of the questionnaire participants said that camping at home made them feel calmer and more relaxed. The camp *site*, particularly for those who camped outside, enabled them to distance themselves physically and mentally from the home. One participant said it enabled,

a release of being away from my work, [the] struggle to keep things turning, meals, Covid-19 media etc. Decreased my anxiety over not being in control.

Parents also noticed that their children were less stressed, less anxious, and more communicative whilst camping;

My youngest son became very worried about Covid and made him very clingy. When we were camping it helped take his mind off the whole crazy situation and could relax and have fun.

Camping acted as a 'positive distraction' (Djurđić 2020) directing participants' attention away from the pervasive pandemic media coverage, or as one participant described it 'the constant barrage of Covid'. One Instagrammer wrote, 'it weirdly felt like a little holiday away from all the craziness'. Being in-camp was akin to stepping out of 'the real world';

[it] made us feel like we were out of the whole lockdown bubble, as we didn't have the TV or need on at all for the days we were 'camping' and just made us feel a bit more normal.

Campers noted feeling 'more positive', 'optimistic', and 'capable' afterwards because the activity 'helped get things in perspective'. This sense of perspective was also evident in the black humour contained in many Instagram posts:

After a record quick journey, we've arrived at our campsite for the weekend. The owners seem lovely (I'm sure the woman is giving me the eye [...] I hope this doesn't get awkward), there's a private fire pit, a BBQ, a children's play area and the showers are hot and free.

Ooooooh what a treat to try this lovely new campsite so close to home! The owners are AMAZING [...] The bathrooms are private (winner) and the tent pitch is close to all onsite facilities[...] The site is super child friendly [...] we think we'll be back really soon (maybe even later this month). Would highly recommend similar sites which we believe are located across the UK.

This fracturing of space between the real world and the microadventure bubble provided a valuable mental, physical and symbolic space.

As well as the benefits derived from the planning and setting up of camp, being in-camp provided a stable rhythm of events which quelled anxiety relating to the pandemic, a routine that individuals could commit to, and offered proof of having achieved something. One participant poignantly wrote,

The structure of the activity gave me a focus for getting through the day with 3 year old twins. I cannot stress how valuable that was to my mental stability with no other childcare options (partner & I worked opposite shifts throughout to cover childcare). If mental health improves so does physical. I felt rejuvenated.

Completing a 'successful' camp (i.e. lasting the whole night, camping for a certain number of nights) felt like an achievement, a positive act at a time replete with feelings of deep uncertainty, stress, exhaustion, and lack of control (Craig and Churchill 2020; Cheng et al. 2021; Dawes et al. 2021). This emphasis on control was echoed in responses that reflected on the role of camping as a form of resistance or mild rebellion. Personal autonomy was much reduced during the pandemic, especially in the periods of lockdown. Home camping was something that people could choose to do as an alternative to being 'stuck in the house together'. It engendered a sense of being in control, of having a choice despite protective measures and behavioural regulations:

At the height of lockdown it felt like we were in control & were able to make the decision to do this. Even though we weren't allowed to actually leave the premises. It felt freeing!

It was like a break and holiday for the night. [...] It was good for my mental health to know I could leave the house and sleep in the garden whenever I chose.

In some instances this was framed in recalcitrant tones aimed variously at the virus or Government legislation,

We felt like we had a holiday. We felt a bit "defiant" of the virus - "beating it". We used our equipment which might have gone unused. I can't remember how we were feeling at the time exactly but it was a positive experience that got everyone involved.

Regardless of expression, these participants reflect an indomitable spirit inherent in many of the questionnaire responses and the Instagram posts of people who camped at home.

A stoicism that advocated focusing one's efforts on what one could control (e.g. one's thoughts and actions) rather than waste one's energy worrying about things that were beyond one's control (Kutch 2021).

### Impact of camping at home on social relationships

Camping at home was valued as an opportunity to spend time alone by those who camped *and* those who did not. In some instances, camping offered couples an alternative to doing the same things together day after day. It offered a 'refreshing change':

It was lovely to have some time together doing something different. My husband and I have worked throughout [the] lockdown and [having] some time out together was important.

When you are confined with the same person 24/7 something different to do is very important.

But participants also described how camping alone (either themselves or their partner) had provided respite from being with one person (however much they appreciated them) all of the time;

It gave me space physically and mentally. The night I spent alone was the best. Just me and my partner together all the time - it made a change.

Participants also described how having a few hours off in solitude, while their partners camped with their child(ren), helped them 'to self-heal, recharge and renew':

Break for Husband who did not camp but who was furloughed and full time carer for our son the majority of the time, indirectly benefiting relationships, stress levels and MH [mental health].

These sentiments were reflected in the Instagram posts with comments such as '[now] the boys are camping and I'm gunna (sic) enjoy my massive bed all to myself for a night' and 'this is where my partner and our 2 children are sleeping tonight [...] I couldn't be more delighted [...] It'll be like a mini break for me!' were common. For one single parent, having the children camp outside offered relief by giving them 'a bit of me time alone in the house'.

Children who camped alone likewise valued the opportunity to escape, to distance themselves, physically and mentally, from their parents and/or siblings. This was reflected in parental responses and those of older children (18+) who participated in the questionnaire;

Yes. It enabled space, [the] relationship between [the] two siblings was better, as one had the room, one had the tent! We were a shielding family, so having personal space was really important!

I got away from the stress that comes with my family and relaxed with just my dogs.

This corresponds with research undertaken by Stoecklin et al. (2021) who found that children appreciated having more time for themselves during the pandemic, in particular, the opportunities it offered for them to decide how they used their time and to develop their own agency.

Some parents used camping at home as a chance to give their children some independence and build trust. An advantage noted by one parent was that having their children



work together to achieve a task (e.g. cooking for themselves) led to a 'diffusion of tension from close living'. The children appeared to embrace this challenge, revelling in the opportunity to be capable, self-directed, self-sufficient subjects (Stoecklin et al. 2021):

My youngest son achieved 116 days out in a tent! We called it 'the extension' and many of our friends [...] ask if he [is] still there!!

With a hint of surprise, participants expressed pride at how their children had 'become a little unit together', noting that they 'were always asking to do it again'. Describing the most memorable aspect of their child's camping activity one parent's profoundly simple response was, 'my son, cooking dinner solo on a campfire. 11 years old'. As such, camping at home offered some children the opportunity to prove themselves in ways that may not have been permitted in so-called normal times, e.g. solo camping.

Camping at home engendered feelings of 'closeness' and 'togetherness' amongst those who camped in a group. Participants said it had 'helped family members reconnect' and had been a valuable 'bonding experience'. This was reflected in the Instagram data through the use of hashtags such as #familyfun, #familytime, #familiesathome. Being together in-camp (even indoors) was different from being together in the house (as usual). Participants spoke of the way it made family members reevaluate each other and appreciate each other's company much more,

I think it enabled us to regroup and have a bit of fun with the kids after the stress of home-schooling them. We were able to step back and enjoy each other's company, with the addition of it being a change of scenery.

Families were brought physically closer and the time they spent together was perceived as being more meaningful. Camping made them 'relax all together, [rather] than separated in different rooms', it was 'quality time together with less distractions'.

An increase in home technology has nurtured 'a more isolationist engagement with leisure, with individuals choosing to virtually socialize and interact with others outside the family than to spend time with them' (Gammon and Ramshaw 2021, 133–134). This situation was compounded during lockdown. Camping at home encouraged families to spend time together in the same space away from television, computers and mobile technology;

It brought us closer together [...] we lit a fire and sat around it talking rather than being inside watching TV or on tablets all in separate rooms. It lifted our spirits.

Participants recalled family members talking more than usual and learning new things about each other, e.g. 'opinions', 'likes and dislikes'. They also spent more time on shared activities, e.g. playing board and card games, sitting around campfires, and toasting marshmallows (or pretending to do so), star gazing. Gammon and Ramshaw (2021, 134) note that during the lockdown(s), Instagram was replete with images of families 'engaging in a variety of traditional board and card games, perhaps in an attempt to reconnect to the way families used to play'. Our Instagram supports this finding with multiple images of parents and children grinning from their sleeping bags in tents and campervans, families sat round campfires, and board games in-progress. This 'disconnection' helped families reassess what was important (Stodolska 2021).

One shared activity facilitated by camping that was particularly highly valued by both parents and children was sleeping in close proximity and ‘all cuddling up together to keep warm’. One participant commented, ‘my son loves the thought of sleeping next to me too which we don’t usually do’. The tactile pressure of close bodily contact is known to have positive health and wellbeing effects; heart rate and blood pressure decrease, levels of stress hormones decrease, and oxytocin (the ‘bonding hormone’) is released promoting a heightened sense of security, calmness, happiness, and mental stability, forming a buffer against negative experiences (Thrive 2020; Kale 2020). Touch is an important form of nonverbal communication with the ability to communicate affection, provide comfort, give reassurance, and strengthen relationships (Thrive 2020; Durkin, Jackson, and Usher 2021). One participant conveyed this indirectly in describing the ‘closeness [felt] to my family as we slept together with my children instead of apart. Therefore love!’. As such, camping at home provided a counter to the touch or skin ‘hunger’ (the detrimental psychological impact resulting from a lack of physical contact) felt by many people during the pandemic as a result of social distancing (Golaya 2021). For those feeling lonely, isolated, and distressed, sleeping in a confined space with other members of their household offered reassurance and comfort.

Camping at home also offered people the opportunity to spend quality time with targeted members of their household. The children in Stoecklin et al’s (2021, n.p.a.) study reported spending ‘more and better time [...] with family members’ and feeling ‘closer to their parents’. Parents used camping at home as a way of engaging with individual children away from the constant presence of their siblings:

Both my husband and I camped separately with our eldest child. It was good one to one time - felt special.

In one heartfelt post an Instagrammer wrote,

This was me at 8am this morning. Last night I agreed to camp in the garden with the four-year-old. [...] I feel like I’ve been pretty absent during lockdown. Physically, as I’ve been shut away working, and emotionally, as I’m often preoccupied with worries about work/ [...] /Covid. Or literally, as I have a strong need for alone time. To give her this special 1:1 time making memories was wonderful. [...] After saying “no” a lot at the moment [...] it felt great to have a “yes” moment.

Copious use of the Instagram hashtags #daddyanddaughtertime, #fatherandsonetime, #dadanddaughter, #dadanddaughtergoals, #motherdaughtertime, and #motherdaughtergoals also reflect this decision-making. Age was not a barrier to this activity. One participant felt that camping at home had ‘improved [their] relationship with [their] adult son who had returned home due to forced unemployment’. Whilst another wistfully recalled the sight of their ‘teenage son decorating living spaces in the garden, possibly for [the] last time ...’. Participants felt their children had found the experience ‘reassuring’ whilst they tended to frame it in terms of successful parenting. This was a source of reassurance not only for the children but also for parents struggling to juggle the demands and blurred boundaries of home and work environments and to navigate parenting in unprecedented circumstances.

Often, participants noted that their camping had prompted conversations with neighbours and passers-by that they would not have had if they had not, for example, ‘been sat

outside our motorhome'. This 'expanded use' of the space around their homes for social interactions made them happier (Mehta 2020), but they also noticed that their activities provided amusement for those living nearby;

I feel it also benefited some of our neighbours who enjoyed watching what we were up to, and even joined us for a brew on the garden wall!

I felt like a kid again. I thought it was funny that I'd pitched my tent in my flat and was camping in my living room. I am a live-in manager at a retirement development and I think some of my residents were slightly bemused!

Not everyone was convinced; one participant wrote, 'the look on my neighbour's face when he realised we'd slept outside our house – he isn't a camper so I think he thought we were fools!'. But camping at home was instrumental in encouraging in-person 'acts of togetherness' (Sivan 2020) during the lockdown(s) (Mehta 2020). Indeed, rather than closing down interactions, the two-meter social distancing barrier appears to have 'established a comfortable datum for interactions with the known and unknown [delivering], in many neighbourhoods, a new *sociable space*' (Mehta 2020, 672, original emphasis). This was a space of intergenerational communication;

The little girl next door, looking out for my flags. She knew that when the flags were flying I was camping.

and shared intimacy;

[The most memorable moment was] drinking whisky and watching the space station with my neighbour who was also camping in his garden.

These encounters (which might also be conceived of as 'events') demonstrate that camping at home, whilst adhering to social distancing rules, strengthened community and social ties promoting psychological wellbeing for individuals and those around them (Corley et al. 2021; Jepson and Walters 2021).

Many campers described the sense of 'camaraderie' and 'solidarity' they felt with others doing the same thing. One Instagrammer wrote, for example, 'Love knowing that the neighbours next door are doing the same thing'. However, campers did not need to be in close proximity to other campers to feel this affinity. Baracsi (2020, 3) notes that,

During this socially, emotionally, physically, and economically demanding quarantine time of the pandemic, an unparalleled number of improvised social flow activities have been created using various social media platforms.

A number of organized virtual camps occurred during the lockdown(s). The most visible on Instagram and those referred to most frequently by the questionnaire participants were Scout and GirlGuiding camps and the Great British Campout organized by Ian Alcorn to raise funds for NHS Charities. Organized to maintain children's social connections at a time when they were prevented from meeting with friends (Stoecklin et al. 2021) virtual group camps made children (and their families) 'feel [like they] were participating in something exciting together'. One participant wrote, '[I] felt part of something bigger knowing my friends were also camping on that weekend'. These 'approximated spaces [did] not replace physical contact, 'real' spaces, or leaving the home' to engage in in-person activities, rather 'they act[ed] as placeholders, where participants [could]

connect with others and share in their need for a given culture, space, or activity' (Djurđić 2020, 320).

Participants in the Great British Campout also exuded a positivity which seemed to stem from being a 'part of something bigger'. For some, this was because camping at home whilst connected virtually engendered a feeling of being together alone; for one participant 'the feeling of still being together with thousands of people despite being on my own' comforted and reassured them even though they were not necessarily lonely. Others embodied what came to be known as 'coronavirus kindness' (Baracsi 2020) experiencing a boost in their own mental wellbeing by helping others (Datu et al. 2021). In donating their 'site fees' to the cause they reported an altruistic 'sense of fulfilment' in 'doing something positive to support the NHS', and 'making a small contribution to the COVID fight'. This supports the claim made by Jepson and Walters (2021) that well-being is as much a motivator in event participation as socialization. Baracsi (2020, 4) notes that human beings 'have a tendency to hope' arguing that it was almost inevitable that, alongside feelings of despair, 'positive thinking, and the need for actions of solidarity would also emerge' during the pandemic. Social media was an important means of communicating and recording these events/actions helping to inform and inspire others to copy (Baracsi 2020).

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic (ongoing at the time of writing) has been a tumultuous time. In the UK, as in many countries across the world, people have experienced unprecedented restrictions on their mobility and social contact whilst simultaneously dealing with drastic changes in their employment circumstances and/or domestic responsibilities. For many this led to feelings of isolation and entrapment as people were alienated from spaces and activities that enhanced their lives and social relationships (Devine-Wright et al. 2020).

Camping at home led to a reimagining of space that challenged normative understandings of our homes as domestic spaces (Byrne 2020). 'Home' transformed and additionally acted as our offices, children's home schools and the primary site of leisure and social interaction. As such, leisure as an activity was also transformed at a time when distraction, escaping and the pleasure of leisure were never more needed. Adapting to these challenges was not easy and the practices of home camping as a form of domestic leisure and microadventure alleviated some of the mental and physical harms of the COVID-19 crisis. As such, our research responds to calls to understand the implications of the pandemic for patterns of recreation in restricted circumstances *and* of the possibilities for reimagining leisure (Devine-Wright et al. 2020; Houge Mackenzie and Goodnow 2021).

Our research shows that people were motivated to camp at home for a variety of reasons. These include a desire to break the monotony of the lockdown, to have fun and create positive memories, and to escape their domestic confinement (both literally and/or imaginatively). People derived a number of self-perceived health and wellbeing benefits from camping at home. Specifically, improved sleep (due to reconnecting with circadian rhythms, the soothing qualities of nature, or the feeling of security it offered), a feeling of being calmer and more relaxed (because it provided a positive distraction and instilled a sense of perspective), and a feeling of being in control (through the structure and rhythm it provided and reaffirmation of personal autonomy it offered). Camping

at home also had a positive impact on social relationships within and beyond the household. Primarily, because camping enabled household members to be apart (spatially and temporally) when needed, it encouraged households to engage in meaningful shared activity, it generated in-person communication with people beyond the household, and heightened campers' sense of self in relation to the wider community.

Our research also raises interesting questions about the intersection of domestic leisure ideas of escapism and technology use. For many of our participants, the escapism they valued from home camping was an escapism not only from the relentless pressures of lockdown but also from the increased screen time and social media use that characterized much of lockdown leisure. In April 2019, the UK government identified excessive screen time as an emerging concern for children during lockdown as we were further pushed into digital spaces in order to work, play and connect.<sup>4</sup> There is an inherent contradiction in home camping functioning as a source of escapism from screen time and a shared form of family leisure while at the same time being an activity that was widely shared on and experienced through social media as people formed connections and shared experiences online. As such our research speaks to a growing body of research exploring how screen time, psychological well being and post pandemic leisure intersect (Akulwar-Tajane et al. 2020; Korhonen 2021).

Camping at home prompted people to engage differently with the space in and around their homes. For many of those who camped outdoors, this precipitated an increased attentiveness to nearby nature that they might ordinarily have been insulated from in the home or have overlooked in their everyday lives. The additional health and wellbeing benefits derived by these campers further highlights the importance of providing and ensuring equal access to safe (preferably private) open spaces adjacent to housing, particularly in high-density urban areas (Houge Mackenzie and Goodnow 2021; Mehta 2020). In particular, our findings point to the value of microadventures, that post-pandemic, might be a way for people to access the benefits of adventure in a more sustained and accessible way.

## Notes

1. The questionnaire was hosted using the University of Edinburgh Jisc Online Surveys platform. Sample questions are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.
2. A list of codes with definitions and examples of how the themes were developed are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.
3. Unless otherwise stated all quotes are taken from questionnaire participant responses. Spelling errors have been corrected to aid readability.
4. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-lockdown-measures-and-childrens-screen-time/>

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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