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## Female Youth Participation in Outdoor Adventure Activities and Resilience: A Retrospective Qualitative Study

### Abstract

Outdoor Adventure Activities (OAA) show promise in their ability to positively impact resilience in youth. However, research into the impacts of these experiences on women is lacking. This paper presents the findings of a study which aimed to gain insight into how OAA participation during youth might impact women's resilience. Ten women, who had engaged in OAA during youth, took part in focus groups, and completed a creative task expressing their participation experiences. Thematic analysis identified four main themes: 'I Can!', The Impact of Others, Managing Stress and Risk, and Freedom. These participants perceived OAA during youth to have influenced their resilience. The impacts were mainly, although not exclusively, positive. The themes are explored and discussed within the context of existing research, illustrated by the artwork of the participants. The paper presents considerations for the design and facilitation of OAA with female youth to maximise benefits on resilience.

### Keywords

Resilience, Female, Youth, Outdoor Adventure Activities

## 1. Introduction

Resilience building is more crucial than ever before (Jackson et al., 2021) due to global changes (Taylor, 2020; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020), which are impacting the health and well-being of young people (Jackson et al., 2021). This is especially true for young women who often internalise problems, leading to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Manner et al., 2020). Therefore, effective resilience building interventions could increase the chances of female youth growing into resilient women with fewer psychological difficulties in later life (Yildirim et al., 2021; Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016).

Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) highlight that despite discrepancies, most definitions of resilience encompass the ability to ‘bounce back’ following negative events and adaptive systems which protect the individual when faced with stress (Ewert & Yoshino, 2011). In this paper, resilience is defined as an individual’s capacity to cope, and positively adapt, in the face of significant change, stress, and adversity, viewing resilience as dynamic, with the potential to be enhanced by environmental factors and personal attributes (Lee & Cranford, 2008; Masten, 2004). This definition encapsulates the two core concepts of adversity and positive adaptation, whilst also recognising that this is fluid and influenced by internal and external factors.

It has been suggested that participation in outdoor adventure activities (OAA) during youth could lead to improved resilience (Fernee et al., 2021; Allan & Mckenna, 2019), lower levels of stress, better emotion regulation, and increased self-esteem (Cooley et al., 2020). However, to develop effective, targeted interventions, more research is required to identify the mechanisms of resilience building and who is most likely to benefit (Evans et al., 2020; Prince 2020; Whittington et al., 2016).

The aim of this research was to contribute to knowledge by investigating how women who participated in OAA during youth, perceive this to have impacted their resilience. In this paper, the term ‘female’ is used to describe someone who defines themselves as being a woman or girl (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). However, it is acknowledged that not all the literature cited in this paper will have defined ‘female’ in this way. As research often fails to differentiate between sex and gender (Tibubos et al., 2021), within this paper it has not always possible to be explicit about whether the literature cited is referring to biological sex or gender identity. The following paper will discuss the findings of this research within the context of existing literature, before proposing implications, practical applications and areas requiring further investigation

## 2. Literature Review

The mechanisms through which participation in OAA builds resilience are beginning to be understood (Kelly, 2019; Allan & Mckenna, 2022). However, the mechanisms responsible for resilience building in female participants of OAA remain under researched (Whittington & Aspelmeier, 2018) and the debate on whether the mechanisms which influence resilience are dependent on gender remains unresolved (Allan, 2021; Blaine & Akhurst, 2021). Research often fails to make adequate gender distinctions, therefore, drawing conclusions based on current research is problematic (Dray et al., 2017). Furthermore, where differential gender effects are reported, the results are mixed (Khanlou & Wray, 2014). Individual

differences may be responsible for many of the variations (Blaine & Akhurst, 2021) and, as Mitten and Gray (2018) highlight, a publishing bias may exist where research finding no differences goes unpublished. However, it is difficult to ignore the variations which are consistently associated with gender in studies (Dray et al., 2017). For example, spirituality and relationships seem to be more important for female youth resilience building (Allan and McKenna, 2022); whereas for males, development of self-compassion could have a larger effect on resilience (Bluth et al., 2018). This suggests that there may be gender differences in relation to protective factors impacting resilience (Thakur & Cohen, 2022). As the gender differences relating to resilience building through OAA experiences are not yet fully understood (Whittington & Aspelmeier, 2018), further understanding of gendered experiences is needed to draw conclusions.

The challenging nature of OAA may build resilience by encouraging the development of adaptive systems which may affect how participants navigate future events (Overholt & Ewert, 2015). It has been suggested that the intensity of the challenge faced during OAA, correlates with the amount of resilience built and how effectively people cope during subsequent life challenges (Prince, 2020). Furthermore, successfully navigating challenges could also build self-efficacy and feelings of competence which in turn could strengthen resilience and increase overall life satisfaction (Mutz & Müller, 2016; Evans et al., 2020). This could be especially true for young women, who often lack self-confidence, hold themselves back (Mitten & Gray, 2018), and have lower expectations of their abilities in the outdoors than young men (Overholt & Ewert, 2015). Therefore, OAA may deliver more opportunities to discover one's strength. This could partly explain findings which show a greater increase in resilience in females following an OAA experience than in their male peers (Overholt & Ewert, 2015). However, as Mitten (2021) highlights, outdoor programmes which do not include the usual elements of challenge and stress, can produce similar outcomes, suggesting that the usefulness of challenge in OAA requires more research.

Navigating challenge with others and experiencing social support during challenge in OAA has also been highlighted as a resilience building mechanism (Allan, 2021). OAA provides opportunities for social support and connection (Evans et al., 2020; Whittington et al., 2016) which can result in an improved ability to seek social support in other environments (Manner et al., 2020), which has been cited as among the best predictors of resilience (Blum, 1998). Furthermore, experiencing testing conditions with others has been shown to build the social support networks which are particularly important for young women, in being able to cope during testing times (Hartling 2008). However, connections will only be formed, and the environment will only feel supportive, if youth are given choice, control and feel that they are heard, valued, and cared for (Conlon et al., 2018). The appropriate level of support is essential for the social interaction to be useful in the development of self-esteem, self-efficacy and ultimately, resilience (Conlon et al., 2018). Therefore, group members and facilitators could be pivotal to whether OAA experiences are beneficial or detrimental to resilience (Neill & Dias, 2001).

In addition to connection with others, connection with nature may be especially important for young women. Nature exposure during OAA provides psychological space which could encourage awareness of relationships and achievements (Conlon et al., 2018), and enable changes in perception (Lincoln, 2021). Furthermore, being in nature involves

separation from everyday life, which could help young people enhance their resilience by placing them in unique situations, which encourages the development of different coping strategies (Gass, 1993). Evidence suggests that green spaces have greater influence on female stress and self-esteem than in males (Chang et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2020), and a study by Hornibrook et al. (1997) found ‘merging with nature’ to be the second most important component to participants during and all-women outdoor programme. However, it has been noted that gender normative socialisation often engenders girls with a sense that the outdoors is not for them and should evoke fear (Evans et al., 2020). Historically, OAA has been masculinized and viewed as reserved for men (Cosgriff et al., 2010). This could partially explain why some women and girls see OAA as off limits and intimidating. In contrast, other research suggests that girls can find emotional safety in the outdoors and challenge stereotypes (Spencer et al., 2021). The contradicting evidence highlights this as an area requiring further study.

## 2.1 Further Research Required

Gender specific research which explores the impacts of OAA participation on youth who are not classified as ‘at-risk’ or having additional needs is sparse (Roberts et al., 2020; Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016). As are studies on whether benefits of OAA participation on resilience are maintained long-term (Conlon et al., 2018) and existing studies rarely include data more than six months post experience or intervention (Prince, 2020). Also lacking, is robust, qualitative research in this area (Roberts et al., 2020). Qualitative studies are largely in relation to a specific programme or intervention, leading to questions about transferability of the findings. This research aimed to address the gap in qualitative, gender specific research by providing rich qualitative data of female perceptions and experiences of participating in OAA during youth, and the impact on their resilience over time.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This research aimed to gain insight into how OAA participation during youth impacts resilience in women by asking ‘how do women who participated in OAA in youth, perceive this to have impacted their resilience?’. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was adopted because of its potential to provide insight into experiences of OAA and the participants’ interpretation of the meaning of these experiences (Humberstone & Prince, 2020). The participants were asked to reflect retrospectively on their youth experiences and the subsequent impact on their resilience. Creative task elicited focus groups were utilized to enhance the richness of the data and provide a less limiting way of reflecting meaning than some traditional methods, such as questionnaires and structured interviews (Kara, 2015). Furthermore, because artwork can generate deeper insight into experiences and views by offering a safe space for deeper communication and access emotional and symbolic aspects of experience (Van der Vaart et al., 2018), this method was appropriate for meeting the research aim.

### 3.2 Participants and Sampling

Sampling was purposive and aimed to capture participants who differed in age, location, background, and the activities they had participated in. Participants were recruited by sharing a recruitment poster on Facebook groups who's target audiences included women with an interest in OAA. The research was conducted online, meaning geographically dispersed participants could be engaged in a cost-effective way (Gray et al., 2020). Participants were deemed appropriate if they identified as female, were over 24 years of age, had at least one OAA experience during youth, and had internet access. This inclusion criteria enabled a diverse range of participants to be included and, therefore, allowed a range of perspectives to be captured.

Ten cisgender women ( $n = 10$ ) were recruited (table 1). Participants came from a range of professions including psychology, social work, outdoor leadership, journalism, mental health, education, and research.

Table 1: Participant demographics. Total number of participants:  $n = 10$ .

Age Range	Percentage
25-30	30% ( $n=3$ )
31-40	50% ( $n=5$ )
40-50	10% ( $n=1$ )
50+	10% ( $n=1$ )
Location	
England	40% ( $n=4$ )
Wales	10% ( $n=1$ )
Scotland	20% ( $n=2$ )
UK unspecified	20% ( $n=2$ )
Australia	10% ( $n=1$ )

The activities participated in during youth were varied. Some had focused on a single activity and involvement was occasional, whereas others experienced a wide range of activities and were regularly involved in OAA. Details of all activities participated in are shown in table 2. The contexts of activity participation varied. Some participants were part of organised mixed-gender groups, whilst others pursued activities alone, with their peers and/or family, or in a combination of these contexts. None of the participants stated that they had experienced female-only programmes in youth, although, some had participated in female-only groups in adulthood. All participants ( $n = 10$ ) still participate in OAA, although sometimes in a different activity and/or with different frequency than during youth.

Table 2: OAA participated in during youth.

Land Based Activities	Water Based Activities	Snow Based Activities
Hill walking	Ocean sailing	Snowboarding
Camping	Wild swimming	Skiing
Rock climbing	Kayaking	
Mountain Biking	Canoeing	
Horse riding	Windsurfing	
Cycling		
Cross country running		

Mountaineering Scrambling Outdoor education trips		
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### 3.3 Data Collection

Participants were divided into three groups of two and one group of four. They each attended one online focus group which lasted between 60–90-minutes each. Prior to the focus group, the participants received guidance to complete a creative task expressing something about their experience of OAA. The focus groups involved a semi-structured interview, online post-it notes board exercises, and the exploration of their creative tasks. The focus group schedule remained flexible to allow conversations to develop to avoid only following the researcher's agenda and therefore confirmation bias (Fforde, 2017). Participants were asked about their understanding of resilience, before discussing how they felt youth participation in OAA had impacted their resilience throughout their lives. Although discussions were mainly focused on youth participation, ongoing OAA participation and childhood experiences were also discussed by some participants.

### 3.4 Ethics

A detailed analysis of the ethical implications was submitted to Edge Hill University's Ethics Committee and ethical approval was granted before the research commenced. Informed, voluntary consent was obtained prior to any involvement in the study. All participants were well informed regarding confidentiality, data protection, withdrawal rights, risks, and benefits, and consented to involvement based on this knowledge. A distress protocol was developed to support participants during participation, and debrief information distributed following their involvement.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Analysis of the data began during focus groups. The researcher noted poignant themes and shared this with participants who gave feedback and made changes. Involving the participants in data analysis aimed to decrease researcher bias, empower participants, challenge preconceived ideas, and address the participant/researcher power imbalance (Bretherton & Law, 2015; Julien et al., 2013). During the focus groups, participants were asked to share their creative work and the meaning behind them. The other participants offered feedback and asked questions, deepening insight (Van der Vaart et al., 2018). By facilitating this dialogue between participants, more accurate interpretation was possible, and researcher bias reduced.

Transcription was part of the process of immersion in the data (Bolden, 2015) and was part of the analysis process. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six phases framework (2006) to promote systematic and reflective analysis. 'Patterns of shared meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2019) were identified, and the data was coded in NVivo by employing inductive and deductive reasoning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During coding, relevant surrounding data was kept, mitigating de-

contextualization (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Evaluating whether sufficient evidence was present for each theme, was aided by the online post-it notes boards created during the focus groups and the researcher's reflective journal as well as the insight gained from coding.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis established four main themes: *'I Can!'*, *The Impact of Others*, *Managing Stress and Risk*, and *Freedom*. The themes (table 3) were selected based on frequency, commonality to all groups, perceived importance given to them by participants, and relevance to the research question. These findings were identified as relevant due to their alignment with the participants perceptions of factors which influence resilience as expressed during the focus groups (figure 1). Coding was conducted by a single researcher; therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher's positionality, background, and knowledge will have influenced the process of coding and interpretation of the data (Holmes, 2020). During the focus groups, the researcher checked their interpretations of the discussions with the participants, and participants were sent a draft of the reported results following full analysis and asked for feedback. In the following sections, pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity.

Table 3: Themes, Subthemes and Theme Descriptions

Theme	Subthemes	Description
<b>I Can!</b>	Self-belief and Confidence Perseverance and Coping with Discomfort	Experiencing a change in the perception of themselves and their abilities
<b>The Impact of Others</b>	Support and Community Negative Experiences	The importance of other people on the experience and impact thereafter.
<b>Managing Stress and Risk</b>	Managing Stress Decision Making and Risk Management	Developing an ability to manage stress, risks and make decisions.
<b>Freedom</b>	Physical and mental space From their Environment	Experiencing a different environment, routine, social group, space, and version of themselves.



Figure 1: Word cloud depicting the participants views on the factors which influence resilience. The larger the word, the more individuals that named this as a factor which influences resilience.

## 4.1 I Can!

### 4.1.1 Self-Belief and Confidence Through Challenge

All participants were asked whether they perceived their youth experiences of OAA to have had a lasting impact on their resilience. All participants felt that their experiences had impacted their resilience in the long term, although the impact was not unanimously positive. Several possible mechanisms were cited by participants. As in previous mixed-gender research, challenge, self-belief, and competence were cited as important factors (Prince-Embury, 2014; Overholt & Ewert, 2015; Mutz & Müller 2016). Eight participants stated that through OAA they had exceeded their own expectations and experienced a sense of accomplishment. Through overcoming challenge, they felt that self-confidence and self-belief had improved, leading to feelings of increased self-efficacy.

Caroline said:

Outdoor adventure things I kind of see as not easy, I see them as challenging. But it's a good challenge because it's that kind of like, you know what? I can do anything, and I think that kind of carries over into your life and you kind of feel that, well, if I can go and climb that and I don't die, you know, I'm fine. Then you can do anything, you can overcome many other challenges.

This suggests that she was able to use her experience of overcoming challenge during OAA's to navigate other life challenges.

Gina spoke about how, by being able to do something she was not sure she could, she had a positive experience and a sense of being more capable than she thought. This sense of self-assurance was conveyed in her artwork (figure 2) and explanation:



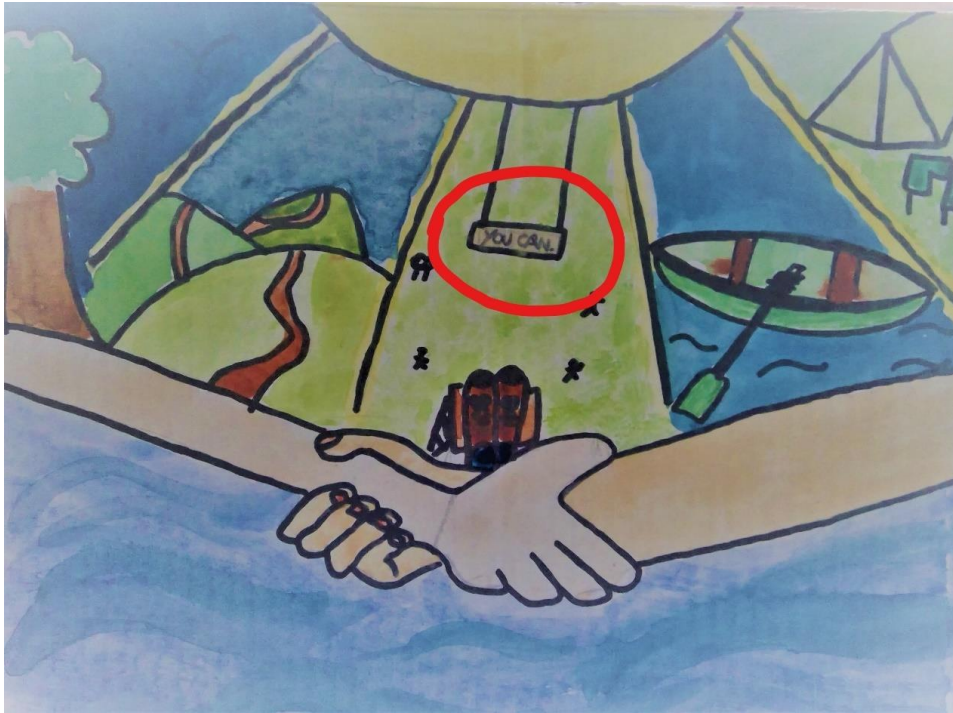


Figure 2: Gina's artwork.

Once you've pushed yourself to do that thing, it's great. So on the little bar that you're grabbing, it says 'you can' - Gina

This study involved participants with differing levels of participation and ability, however, different levels of competency and previous participation did not seem to affect the positive impact on resilience. Participants discussed how challenge was subjective and therefore activities needed to be adapted for individuals to be the appropriate challenge level. The experiences and challenges of OAA were not novel for many of the participants, yet they appeared to gain similar benefits as those for whom it was a new experience. This could challenge the suggestion that novelty of OAA experiences is vital in generating enduring positive effects for young people (Prince, 2020) and warrants further investigation.

#### 4.1.2 Perseverance and Coping with Discomfort

In agreement with previous findings of research involving female and male youth (Hayhurst et al., 2015), the ability to persevere and cope with discomfort was seen as important for resilience building. Participants gave examples of coping with adverse weather, difficult conditions, and lacking equipment, citing these as resilience building experiences. Other participants made links between pushing themselves through mental and physical barriers and subsequently feeling more able to face difficult situations in life.

Elisa spoke of the strength built through perseverance:

It just made me realise that if you can stick at something, you can get the recognition for it but you just...you have to find that toughness, you have to dig deep and just go 'yeah we can get through this' [... ..] I look back and I go yeah, toughing that out I think it built a level of strength there, so you could then apply to other settings as an adult.

Florence spoke about completing her exams after the deaths of two family members:

There was enough resilience there, that had somehow been engineered in me, to still get through my exams. [...] I didn't think of it at the time, but it's like when you fall off the pony you get back on it. If you fail an exam [...] well, you study harder. You do what you need to.

She suggested that her experiences of riding had been one factor in building the resilience needed to cope.

This study deepens the understanding of the relationship between challenge, coping with discomfort, perseverance and building resilience by illustrating specific experiences during youth participation in OAA which participants had been able to use as reference points to help them overcome challenges during youth and into adulthood.

## 4.2 The Impact of Others

### 4.2.1 Support and Community

Building self-belief and confidence was linked with social support and connection experienced through OAA. Participants felt that forming friendships, being encouraged, and belonging were also important aspects associated with resilience building through social interactions. This study and others (Conlon et al., 2018; Booth & Neill, 2017), demonstrate the importance of a supportive environment and the potential for the social interaction during OAA to have both positive and negative impacts on resilience. Experiences, and the impact of these, varied and participants spoke of the importance of encouraging instructors, friendships formed, and a feeling of belonging and connection.

Darcy identified the importance of encouragement and friendships saying:

My friends kept bringing me out of my shell and pushing me to climb, pushing me to go on zip wires, and suddenly I felt like I'd gone from this very timid person that was scared of stepping out of my comfort zone to OK, you can climb, and if you can climb when you're absolutely terrified and you can get to the top of that ledge, then why can't you do the other things you're scared of doing back home?

As in the first theme, 'I Can!', Darcy seemed to experience a sense of self-efficacy through overcoming challenge, however, in this instance, being able to experience this was reliant on the encouragement of others. Darcy explained how she had found lifelong friends through OAA who she still turns to in times of stress for support, and that the positive memories of being accepted have helped her feel she can do anything.

Imogen's artwork (figure 3) showed the importance of community in OAA experiences in her youth. She explained that the triangle represented herself, the green, brown, and yellow ovals showed nature and the circles represented community. The outer circle showed the wider community of outdoor sports, and the inner circle symbolised her community. She explained:

[The triangle] felt like it needed to be a strong solid shape, staying in the middle... with three solid sides, strong, strong colours like sort of, self-belief. The sides are physical strength, mental strength, emotional strength. It's just like there in the middle and unmoving and then everything else you're kind of, taking bits in on it, and then it's kind of absorbing the wider world as it comes, comes in on you.



Figure 3: Imogen's artwork

Imogen felt she had been part of something larger and drawn physical, mental, and emotional strength from the community and nature.

Findings showed relational experiences during OAA participation in youth had mostly positive impacts which were sustained over time. Other research including male and female youth has also demonstrated this (Fernee et al., 2021); however, this study adds that lasting friendships and positive memories of encouragement could be drawn upon during challenges in later life.

#### 4.2.2 Negative Experiences

Participants identified that whilst encouragement and support were positive aspects experienced, there were other experiences which had negatively impacted resilience. Ashley experienced a lowering in self-belief and confidence following OAA participation. She spoke about this during the focus group and showed it in her artwork (figure 4).

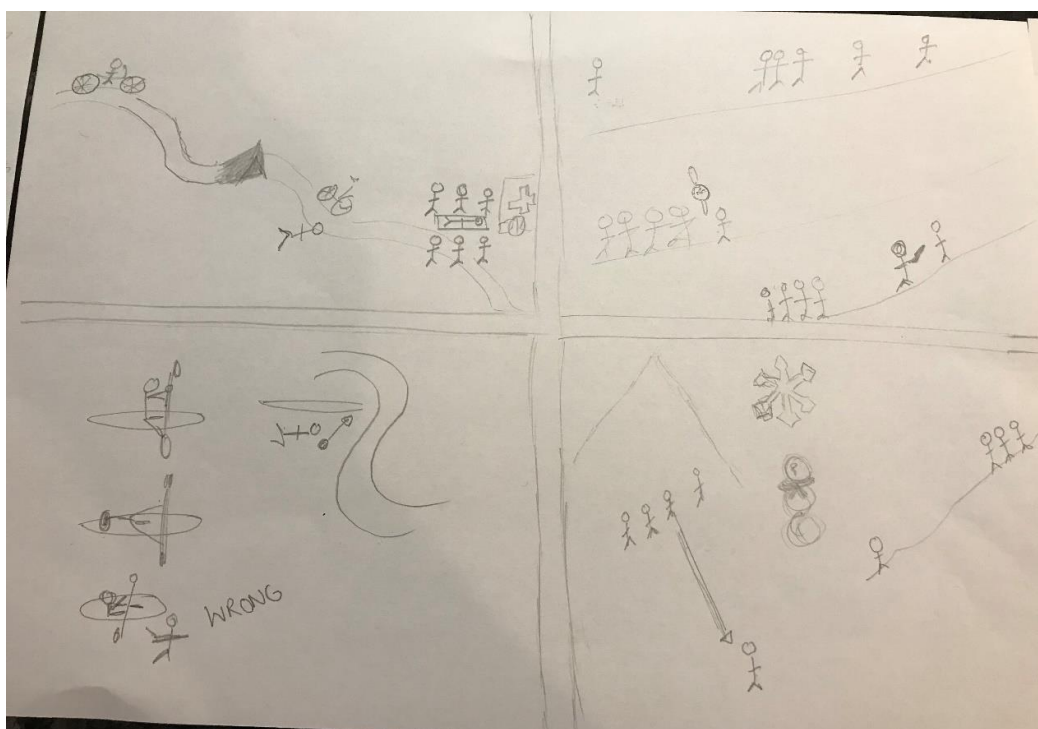


Figure 4: Ashley's artwork

The picture and narrative, showed her experiences of not keeping up with the boys, being left behind, finding out she was not as good at things as she had previously thought and seeing others getting hurt. These experiences had been detrimental during youth and into adulthood. Further exploration to better understand the pervasiveness of these experiences is warranted and may highlight a need for all-female programmes when aiming to promote resilience (Whittington et al., 2016). Other studies have found all-female programmes to be beneficial as they can; allow girls to focus on themselves instead of being concerned about the judgements and reactions of boys, encourage freedom from stereotypes, reduce worries about appearance (Whittington et al., 2017), and reduce the focus on competitiveness (Manner et al., 2020). Furthermore, all-female OAA experiences may provide young people with female role models who could demonstrate that OAA is not reserved for cis-gender, white, males (Mitten & Gray, 2018). The current research suggests that, at least for Ashley, an all-female group, with reduced focus on competition and potentially less fear of judgement, may have been beneficial.

### 4.3 Managing Stress and Risk

Participants found OAA helped them develop strategies for dealing with stressful situations, echoing findings of a study Whittington et al., (2016) which assessed the impacts of an all-girl mountain biking programme. An increased ability to manage stress and difficult emotions, and the ability to make decisions in stressful or dangerous situations to successfully navigate risks, were cited as important impacts of OAA participation in all focus groups. Mixed-gender research by Ewert and Yoshino (2011), concluded that OAA could strengthen the ability to cope with academic stress. This study also identified this as an

impact as participants referenced situations in which OAA had positively impacted their ability to function effectively under difficult circumstances, including coping with academic stress. This applied not only during youth, but into adulthood, backing claims that the ability to manage stress could be a long-term outcome of OAA participation (Whittington & Aspelmeier, 2018).

### 4.3.1 Managing Stress

For some participants OAA had acted, and continued to act, as an outlet for stress, providing a healthier way to manage emotions. For others, OAA offered a way of learning to remain calm and focused when things were difficult or dangerous.

Julia highlighted how the ability to manage emotions during OAA had helped manage daily stress and emergency situations at work. When speaking about climbing she said:

I think that the ability to stay cool in a situation that might be dangerous or stressful can definitely transfer [... ..] you do have to control the fear if you recognise it [... ..] there's no point panicking 'cause you are going to fall if you start to panic, then aren't you? You've got to stay cool so that you can do your best to make the next move and I think there's lots of situations in people's different jobs where, you're gonna come into almost emergency situations.

Other participants spoke about using OAA to manage stress and difficult emotions:

I think it gave me a healthier outlet for when I wasn't feeling so good. A better way of managing my emotions, taking myself outside and having something healthier to focus on.  
- Bella

It kind of transferred so when I got stressed, I'd go and climb. When I was having a rough time, it was like right, lets plan a climbing trip with my friends- Darcy

This study highlighted specific situations and activities which might contribute to the ability to manage stress, which often related to risk engagement. Climbing was repeatedly mentioned, perhaps suggesting that climbing is particularly useful for learning to manage stress and risk. However, a disproportionate number of participants had climbing experience and knew the researcher participated in climbing so may have adapted answers to fit the researcher's existing knowledge. Therefore, this finding would need further research to verify.

### 4.3.2 Decision Making and Risk Management

Participants found that engaging in risk helped them develop good decision-making skills and maintain composure in dangerous and stressful situations. Julia and Imogen spoke about their experiences and the importance of risk management and decision making:

If you're trad climbing [a style of climbing where there is no pre-placed protective bolts, requiring the climber to place protective equipment as they climb], you are putting yourself in a position where there is risk involved [... ..] maybe you're making sure that your gear's all good, but there can be situations where you know that you might take a fall if [... ..] you can't make the move, so it's constant that there's always that risk management. - Julia

Sometimes it's fairly serious decisions that you kind of have to make don't you? And you just have to.... be very decisive and strong, strong in your convictions in order to kind of, get out of a tricky situation. - Imogen

For the participants in this study, engaging with risk was a significant factor in building resilience through OAA because the experiences provided opportunities to practice managing risk and decision making. This differs from the hypothesis that, through risk engagement, OAA provides an opportunity to demonstrate one's robustness and powerfulness and experience one's own resilience through battles with nature (Brymer & Feletti, 2020). Previous research has suggested that, in general, male participants of OAA favor experiences of power and dominance through risk engagement, whilst female participants derive more benefits from social aspects of the experiences and trust activities (Warren 2016; Allan & McKenna, 2019). This research, combined with previous findings (Ungar et al., 2005), may indicate that females respond differently to risk in OAA. It has been proposed that socialisation may be responsible for differences in how people of different genders experience, perceive, and respond to risk (Laurendeau, 2008), however, more exploration of the topic is needed before the importance of risk exposure during OAA to the building of female resilience can be established.

#### 4.4 Freedom

Conlon et al. (2018) stated that psychological space during OAA provides distraction from normal life, increasing awareness and reflection on relationships and achievements for youth. The aforementioned study (Conlon et al., 2018), involved mainly male participants, however, the female participants in the current study also noted the importance of psychological space. The participants perceived psychological space as important for providing a distraction and an escape and they spoke about experiencing; physical and mental freedom, freedom from their normal environments, freedom from usual peers and parents, and freedom to be themselves.

##### 4.4.1 Physical and Mental Space

OAA was recognised by some participants as an opportunity to experience physical space and freedom and freedom from their thoughts. This was particularly important for Caroline whose artwork (figure 5) encompassed her sense of freedom:



Figure 5: Caroline's artwork  
She explained:

I sort of feel like it's a lot about kind of freedom in, like, in your mind and with your mental health and your kind of....out in the middle of nowhere sometimes and you've got this sense of being physically free, but it's that kind of, the mental freedom that means more to me I think. It's this kind of... where you sort of feel very trapped a lot of the time I think,

with your thoughts and things and they're going around in your head and you can't escape and it's that, you have to concentrate if you're doing anything like that, you really have to concentrate, and I think it... breaks you out of that, and it gives your mind this freedom that you can just switch off from everything.

This suggests that freedom was connected to her mental health and well-being and helped her cope with difficulties and feel less trapped.

Tucker et al. (2016), stated that a break from the everyday is an important, but not unique, characteristic of OAA. However, these participants stated they could not get this same feeling from other experiences. Space and freedom experienced during OAA was perceived differently and provided a separation from normality in a unique way. Elisa highlighted the rarity of these experiences:

It felt great and you just felt there was so much space and you were really free. And I don't think you get that in many experiences, I think there's only certain experiences you really get that sense of space and freedom around you, and you don't think about anything else except exactly what's happening in that moment, which is a really good feeling when it does happen.



Figure 6: Elisa's Artwork

#### 4.4.2 Freedom from Their Environment

Freedom and space away from pressures, past determinism, routines, and emotions, was valued by participants, fitting with existing literature (Newes & Bandoroff, 2006; Lincoln, 2021). The natural environment may provide freedom from pressures and usual habits, which allows youths to engage in self-discovery, uncover their strengths, develop new interests, and practice adapting to new situations (Milton et al., 1995; Haaland & Tønnessen, 2022). This was evident in the responses of some participants, however, different aspects of freedom seemed to be important for each participant. For some participants, freedom from their environment meant space from peers and parents, for others it was freedom to be in nature. The importance of OAA in escaping social pressures and discovering themselves was indicated by Heather who said:

You've got the pressure [...] that comes with being a teenage girl [...] then I'd go out of that and, like, particularly in scouts, or guides and then Explorer Scouts, that was a place where I just really discovered who I was, and like, was being me [...] I just remember going there and being like, I'm gonna go meet all these new people who don't know and I'm just gonna be me because there's no one else here.

This suggests a link to self-awareness, self-development, and stress relief which relates to previous mixed-gender research which cited freedom from usual life as the mechanism through which youth experience changes in self-perception during OAA (Garst et al., 2001). Consistent with the findings of a study by Spencer, et al. (2021) which explored the perceptions of young women, participants felt a sense of belonging and found emotional safety in the outdoors. They did not perceive the outdoors as threatening (Evans et al., 2020) and did not see OAA as 'off limits' to females (Cosgriff et al., 2010).

## 5. Strengths and Limitations

Online focus groups were necessary due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and potentially enabled a more diverse cohort to be recruited (Dendle et al., 2021). However, it could have resulted in a digital divide whereby perspectives may have been lost due to the inability to include those without internet connection and technological availability (De' et al., 2020).

Although the retrospective study design was appropriate to meet the research aims (Haegele & Zhu, 2017), clarity on whether participants were referring to experiences during youth, childhood, or adulthood was sometimes difficult to establish. This may have resulted in misleading findings due to child or adult experiences being confused with youth experiences by the participants or researcher. This could be considered a limitation of the research.

As the focus groups, coding, and write up of results was completed by a single researcher, the researcher's personal experiences, perspectives, and position, will have influenced the collection, interpretation, and reporting of this research (Peterson, 2019). However, a researcher's subjectivity is not necessarily a problem, if biases are recognised and worked through then valid research produced (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Engaging in consistent reflection and reviewing the coding and reporting after allowing a time-lapse, enabled the researcher to; identify where their personal perspective may have interfered with interpretations; improved alertness to, and management of, researcher bias; and reduced assumption making (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018).

Participants provided feedback on the researcher's initial interpretations during the focus group and were given the opportunity to feedback on the results following full analysis. During this process, some participants did amend the initial themes proposed by the researcher (for example, by clarifying which themes they felt were most important). However, it should be noted that only two participants responded to the invitation to feedback on the result, confirming they agreed with the interpretations, no amendments were suggested.



## 6. Implications and Practical Applications

This was a small-scale qualitative study, involving participants who had experienced a range of activities, and varied in age, location, and background. They were all white, cis-gender women from western cultures, therefore, implications or applications must be considered with this in mind and within the context of existing literature. However, this research, in conjunction with other studies, does highlight areas of consideration for practice.

This study and others (Blaine & Akhurst, 2021; Whittington et al., 2016) have shown the potential value of OAA in improving female resilience in the short and longer term. This research adds that it may be beneficial to consider OAA for young women as a preventative intervention which could be an acceptable and accessible way for them to increase resilience. However, it is important that these interventions are carefully designed and tailored to the needs of female youth if they are to be effective. For example, by placing more focus on support rather than competition and incorporating more trust-based activities.

When designing and running of OAA programmes for young women, practitioners should consider how to facilitate positive, supportive relationship building, whilst also considering how to mitigate negative relational experiences, such as those experienced by Ashley, which can be damaging to confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, practitioners should be guided by participants to ensure they provide appropriate challenges and that the natural, and social, environment is one that feels safe and supportive. This research demonstrates that challenge level is important, as is letting youth experience risk, discomfort, and separation from everyday life. This could inform future OAA interventions and programmes and is evidence for the value they can provide.

## 7. Recommendations for Future Research

More research into resilience and the relationship to gender is needed to clarify how resilience building during OAA differs depending on gender. Current literature regarding OAA, female youth and risk is sparse, dated, and inconclusive (Allan & McKenna, 2019). This study highlights an important discrepancy and could suggest that risk engagement impacts females differently, warranting further research.

The specific mechanisms related to the effectiveness of outdoor interventions are unclear, therefore, a lack of usable theory of change models exists (Fiennes et al., 2015; Harper et al., 2021). Building on, and refining, current theory to explicate what works for whom, why, and in what contexts would be a valuable area of enquiry. This could lead to the development of theory of change models and, consequently, more effective, and evidence-based interventions to support resilience. Research which interrogates long held beliefs and assumptions on which many interventions are currently based, such as risk and challenge being vital for building resilience through OAA, would make a valuable contribution to the literature (Baldwin et al., 2004); especially if the applicability of these to different populations was considered (Pollock & Harper, 2022).

## 8. Conclusion

This study contributes to literature by providing insight into the impact of OAA on female resilience, and the possible lasting effects. The participants of this study perceived their youth experiences of OAA to have had a lasting impact on their resilience and cited several possible mechanisms; challenge, relational aspects of OAA, opportunities to manage stress and risks, and freedom.

This research aspires to inform further research into the field of youth participation in OAA to build female resilience. Practitioners are encouraged to consider ways in which their practice may influence female youth resilience and develop evidence informed interventions which contribute to female youth developing into psychologically resilient adults. Further research is needed so that these can be developed in the most effective way possible.

### Remarks

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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