


Article

“The Greatest Experience Ever”: Benefits of Participation in High-Adventure Activities for Youth

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Abstract: High-adventure programs typically take place outdoors in remote locations and include several days of challenging activities. Research on high-adventure programs consistently finds positive outcomes for youths. Most high-adventure programs feature 10 key principles that are closely aligned and sometimes overlap with the three defining features of positive youth development (PYD) programs: adult–youth connection, allowing youths to lead, and youths learning new skills. The present study uses data from a large national-scale study of youth and adult leaders in Scouts BSA to assess the connection between participation in high-adventure programs and PYD outcomes. Using a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design, we found that participation in high-adventure activities was associated with higher mean levels of youth communication, citizenship, sense of purpose, and leadership when compared with youths who only participated in summer camp programs or those who did neither high-adventure nor camp programs. No differences between activity groups were found for the ability to make ethical/moral decisions, connection, joy/fun, or perceived cultural humility. Both significant and null findings are discussed in light of PYD literature.

Keywords: high adventure; positive youth development; leadership; purpose; mixed methods



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1. Introduction

Positive youth development (PYD) is a framework that focuses on promoting positive youth outcomes rather than reducing undesirable behaviors, often through engagement in positive youth development programs [1,2]. PYD outcomes are often conceptualized as the five Cs of PYD: confidence, caring, character, competence, and connection. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that when youths possess all five Cs, a sixth C emerges, namely contribution [3]. Successful programs that aim to promote PYD typically include the Big 3 features of PYD programs: (1) sustained relationships with caring adults; (2) opportunities for building new skills; and (3) fostering youth leadership opportunities [4]. The Big 3 have been validated across adolescent age [5,6], individual characteristics (e.g., chronic illness [7], youths at risk [8], and ethnic background [9,10]), contexts (e.g., in-school activities [11], community-based programs [12], sports/recreation programs [13], and service-oriented programs [14]), and more recently, cultures (e.g., the Caribbean [15], East Africa [16]; South Africa [17], and Central America [18]). Examples of PYD programs that incorporate the Big 3 include Scouts BSA (formerly Boy Scouts [19]) and 4-H [20]. Some PYD programs, such as Scouts BSA, incorporate “high-adventure” activities.

High-adventure programs typically take place outdoors in remote locations and include several days of challenging activities [21]. Specifically, high-adventure programs are risky, uncertain, and/or unpleasant, and they often require living and cooperating with others while taking on exciting challenges [22]. These programs offer youths with opportunities to strengthen their mental and physical abilities and to overcome difficulties while pursuing individual as well as group objectives. The goals of these programs often

include the promotion of youth confidence, humility, self-reliance, and outdoor survival skills [22].

Research on high-adventure programs consistently finds positive outcomes for youths. For example, urban youths in the US who participated in a 3-day high-adventure camp experience demonstrated improvement in social competence and self-improvement capacities [22]. Youths who participated in a 9-day hiking program through the Alps demonstrated lower stress, higher mindfulness, and higher life satisfaction scores [23]. A group of college-age students who participated in an 8-day wilderness survival program (with activities such as hiking, climbing, swimming, and fishing) demonstrated less stress and more mindfulness, self-efficacy, happiness, and life satisfaction compared to a control group who did not participate in the program [23]. Youths who participated in Broadreach, a 3-week water-based adventure program where participants learn skills related to sailing, fishing, and diving, demonstrated increased self-efficacy [24]. Adventure programs likely share commonalities that contribute to their effectiveness in achieving programmatic outcomes.

1.1. Ten Principles of High Adventure Programming

Most high-adventure programs feature one or more of the 10 key principles that are closely aligned and sometimes overlap with the three defining features of PYD programs: adult–youth connection, allowing youths to lead, and youths learning new skills [21]. The first principle of high-adventure programming is that adults serve in key supportive roles such as mentors, role models, demonstrators of key interpersonal skills, and educators [25–27]. This principle is closely aligned with the Big 3 principle of “adult–youth connection”, which has been linked with greater emotional support [28], improved mental health [29], having more fun [30], and an increased sense of connection with others [31].

The second principle is that opportunities in high-adventure settings are holistically challenging, prompting youths to tap into social, emotional, cognitive, and physical strengths [32]. By overcoming tasks perceived to be risky, youths gain confidence to tackle problems and utilize innovative solutions [21]. Challenging settings provide an opportunity for youths to develop increased commitment towards working through challenges for the good of their team, promoting a commitment to performing one’s duty as a citizen [33].

The third principle is that the high-adventure setting must provide a “positive social context” [21]. Diverse, rather than homogeneous, groups create an environment conducive to positive social interactions, and they can help build a sense of connection between and among youths and their mentors [27]. Positive social contexts provide a sense of security, promoting positive socioemotional development and mental health [34].

The fourth principle is that youths have the opportunity to achieve positive development in unfamiliar, outdoor settings [35,36]. In these environments, youths obtain new perspectives on their families and homes of origin, work through cognitive dissonance, and overcome productive anxiety to achieve growth [32]. Challenging nature-based experiences also promote ethical decision making [34,37], leadership [38], citizenship and social responsibility [39], and increased joy and fun [22,40].

The fifth principle is the development of leadership skills and autonomy, which is aligned with the Big 3 concept of allowing youths to lead [41]. Youths develop enduring leadership skills in experience-based settings [38] and develop autonomy by making decisions that drive their outdoor experiences [21].

The sixth principle is that youths work towards a goal and engage in high-quality enriching activities over time [21]. When youths have the opportunity to work together towards a goal, the benefits include relationship building and connection with others [42], as well as greater communication with peers [26].

The seventh principle is the opportunity to gain and practice skills through authentic experiences [43], which is aligned with the Big 3 concept of opportunities to learn new skills [3]. Through opportunities to build skills via novel experiences, youths gain immediate feedback that can be applied to skill mastery and real-life skill building [44].

Skill-building activities in youth programming have been associated with better communication with others [45], more social responsibility, and a sense of citizenship [46].

The eighth principle, reflection [24], helps youths make connections between program goals and transferable life skills [47,48] and can support youths' discussion and critical thinking skills [36]. Opportunities for reflection in youth programming is associated with a greater sense of citizenship [49] and connection and communication with others [22].

The ninth and tenth principles of high-adventure programs are connections to external contexts and continuous planning and evaluation [21]. Connections between programs and relevant partners such as community resources or schools are the keys to positive youth development outcomes. Effective programs invest in integrating the program, community resources, and families [41]. To ensure that outdoor high-adventure programs maintain high quality and effectiveness, it is important for leaders to consider feedback from diverse stakeholders and adhere to theory-based curriculum and planning [47,50].

1.2. Youth Programs and Positive Youth Outcomes

PYD-infused youth programs, including high-adventure programs, are linked with a myriad of positive youth outcomes. Below, we briefly review the literature on PYD programs and several key youth outcomes: communication, ethical and moral decision making, connection to others, citizenship, purpose, leadership, joy/fun, and cultural humility. These developmental constructs are important foundational characteristics that can prepare youths for a successful transition to adulthood.

Communication allows youths to develop social skills and build relationships [51]. Effective communication has been linked with more positive social interactions, a greater ability to set goals, and higher academic achievement [52]. PYD programs that incorporate communication skills training have been found to be effective in promoting positive outcomes for young people [53].

The active involvement of youths in ethical and moral decision making is particularly important during adolescence, a period characterized by growing autonomy [54]. In the five Cs model of PYD, ethical and moral decision making is part of the construct of character [3]. Programs that emphasize character have been found to lead to positive outcomes, including greater spirituality and overall thriving [55].

PYD emphasizes the importance of fostering youths' positive relationships and connection to others; connection to others is associated with various positive outcomes, including a more positive self-concept and mental health [41]. PYD programs that promote connection to others have been found to be effective in enhancing social skills and prosocial behaviors among young people [56].

Civic engagement or citizenship skills are a component of PYD that relate to contribution [57]; youths who are engaged in citizenship-related activities report greater self-esteem, social support, and optimism [58]. Programs that encourage civic engagement help young people develop a sense of responsibility and commitment to their communities and promote their active participation in civic life as adults [59].

Adolescent purpose involves the intention to accomplish tasks that are both meaningful to the self as well as to the greater community [60]. Developing a sense of purpose is associated with various positive outcomes, including increased well-being, resilience, and engagement in prosocial behaviors [61]. PYD programs that promote purpose have been found to be effective in enhancing young people's motivation, goal-setting skills, and overall life satisfaction [3]. PYD programs that incorporate strategies to foster purpose promote positive youth development; these programs help young people explore their interests, values, and strengths and provide opportunities for them to make meaningful contributions to their communities [62].

Leadership is associated with various positive outcomes, such as the development of humanitarian social concern and values [63] and civic engagement in adulthood [64]. Specifically, PYD programs that promote leadership have been found to be effective in enhancing young people's emotional learning and teamwork skills and in forming ties with

community members [65]. Leadership-focused programs can help adolescents develop essential skills such as communication, problem solving, and decision making [66].

Although not typically an independent feature of PYD, joy/fun is part of an Aristotelian perspective that links happiness with leading a virtuous life [67]. Joy/fun is also a key component of intrinsic motivation [68]. When adolescents experience joy and fun in PYD programs, their positive outcomes can be enhanced, including increased overall well-being, resilience, and engagement in prosocial behaviors [69]. PYD programs can help young people develop a sense of enjoyment and fulfillment in their lives, and provide opportunities for them to engage in activities that promote positive emotions and experiences [55].

The concept of perceived cultural humility includes the development of a process-oriented approach to competency, which includes the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the person. Perceived cultural humility involves an ongoing process of self-exploration, self-critique, and a willingness to learn from others; it means entering a relationship with another person with the intention of honoring their beliefs, customs, and values, acknowledging differences, and accepting that person for who they are [70]. Programs that promote cultural humility enhance adolescents' understanding and appreciation of diversity, promote empathy and respect for others, and reduce prejudice and discrimination [71].

1.3. What Are the Scouts BSA High-Adventure Programs?

Scouts BSA has four high-adventure bases: Philmont Scout Ranch, Florida Sea Base, Northern Tier High-Adventure Base, and Summit Bechtel Reserve. The four bases offer programs that are similar in length (typically, they run for 6–10 days) but differ in their settings and key activities. Philmont is located in the mountains of Northern New Mexico and offers backpacking and hiking expeditions through rugged terrain. Participants carry their own gear and supplies, cook their own meals, and navigate using maps and compasses. Sea Base is located in the Florida Keys and offers a variety of aquatic programs, including snorkeling, scuba diving, sailing, and fishing. Participants may also participate in conservation efforts and marine biology studies. Northern Tier is located in the boundary waters area between Minnesota and Canada. Northern Tier offers canoeing and winter camping expeditions. Participants paddle through wilderness areas, set up camp each night, and explore the natural beauty of the region. Summit Bechtel is located in West Virginia and offers a range of outdoor activities, including ziplining, rock climbing, mountain biking, and white water rafting. Scouts participate in programs focused on the development of outdoor skills and leadership. All high-adventure bases offer challenging outdoor wilderness experiences that require participants to work together, learn new skills, and step outside their comfort zones. Because of the unique and intensive nature of high-adventure programs, they can have an outsized impact on youth outcomes such as communication, ethical and moral decision making, connection to others, citizenship, purpose, leadership, joy/fun, and cultural humility.

1.4. Research Questions

The present study uses data from a large USA-based national-scale study of youth in Scouts BSA to address the following research questions: (1) Is participation in high-adventure programs associated with positive youth developmental outcomes? We hypothesize that youths who participate in high-adventure programs will have more positive outcomes when compared to youths who participate in summer camps only or who do not participate in high-adventure nor summer camp programs. (2) Are associations between participation in high-adventure programs and youth outcomes sustained, even after accounting for tenure in scouting and geographic region? We hypothesize that the links between high-adventure and youth development outcomes will be sustained, even considering covariates of time in scouting and geographic region. In addition to addressing

these research questions, we incorporate quotes from qualitative interviews from both Scouts as well as their adult leaders that give context to our quantitative findings.

2. Method

2.1. Design

We used a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design to incorporate data from both qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data; this design involves the simultaneous implementation of both quantitative and qualitative strands during a single phase of a research study [72]. In this design, the researcher collects data and conducts an analysis concurrently, integrating the results from both strands to address the research questions. This design allows for the integration of different types of data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic and address research questions from multiple perspectives [73]. In the current study, the focus is the quantitative data; the qualitative data are used to supplement and support the quantitative findings.

2.2. Sample

Our youth sample comes from the first wave of the 3-wave nationwide longitudinal Building Evidence in Scouting Together (BEST) study, with 4121 Scouts across the US completing online surveys between March and July of 2019. The study was originally designed to examine the impact of adult leaders on the character outcomes of youth. All participants gave their informed consent (and assent where applicable) for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Montclair State University (protocol #IRB-FY17-18-1105).

Scouts who participated in the survey were approximately evenly split in their geographic region: 24% were from the northeast, 28% from the south, 32% from the central region, and 16% from the west. Youths who participated in the survey identified as White/Caucasian (91%), Asian (8.2%), Hispanic/Latinx (7.1%), Black/African American (3.0%), Native American (4.6%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1.5%), Middle Eastern or North African (1.6%), and other ethnicities (0.7%; the total is more than 100% because Scouts could select more than one category). Scouts described their gender identities as male (98%), female (1.8%), or other (0.2%). Ages of scouts ranged from 9 to 20 ($M = 14.0$; $sd = 1.9$). To measure SES, the following question was included in the survey [74]: "For most of the time in your family, which of the following statements best describes your family situation?". Responses included 0 = We have a hard time buying the things we need (low; 3%), 1 = We have just enough money for the things we need (middle; 16%), 2 = We have no problem buying the things we need, and we can also sometimes buy special things (upper middle; 68%), and 3 = We have enough money to buy almost anything we want (upper; 13%). Most Scouts were native English speakers, but 13.6% spoke non-English languages; 83% had married parents. To assess youths' time in scouting, Scouts were asked, "For each of the grades listed below, check a box if you participated in Cub Scouts or Boy Scouts/Scouts BSA for more than six months of that school year". Years in scouting was calculated by summing all participating years; the total ranged from 0 to 13 ($M = 6.1$, $sd = 3.1$).

A subsample of 106 Scouts was selected to participate in interviews using a purposive stratified sampling approach. This approach ensured that the interview samples would be diverse (e.g., including both males and females, from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, and from both higher and lower SES). The interview subsample had similar demographic characteristics as the full sample. Their ages ranged from 10 to 19 years ($M = 14.1$; $sd = 1.8$). Region of the country was approximately evenly split (northeast = 26%, south = 26%, central = 23%, west = 25%). The majority identified as male (87%; 12% as female; 1% as other). The subsample reported their race/ethnic backgrounds as White (88.0%), Black (6.6%), Latinx (9.4%), Asian (10.4%), Hawaiian (1.9%), Native American (9.4%), Middle Eastern (1.9%), or other (1.9%). SES distributions were similar (0 (low) = 3%; 1 (middle) = 17%,

2 (upper middle) = 60%; 3 (upper) = 20%). Fewer Scouts in the interview subsample spoke non-English languages at home (8.5%), and 83% had married parents. Years in scouting was slightly lower for the interview subsample, ranging from 0 to 11 years ($M = 5.8$; $sd = 3.4$).

A total of 1663 adult leaders completed surveys (these survey data are not used in the current study). A subsample of 110 leaders were selected to participate in interviews, also using a purposive stratified sampling approach. Adult interview participants ranged in age from 24 to 79 years old ($M = 51.5$; $sd = 10.6$). They were approximately evenly split across all regions of the country (northeast = 22%, south = 27%, central = 26%, west = 26%), and were predominantly male (86%). The majority of adult interview participants were White (91%); additional racial/ethnic backgrounds included Black (0.9%), Latinx (5.5%), Asian (2.8%), Hawaiian (0.9%), Native American (3.7%), and Middle Eastern (0.9%). Most were married (84.5%), had a bachelor's degree or higher level of education (71.0%), and reported an annual income of USD 75,000 or higher (77.9%).

2.3. Survey Measures

2.3.1. High-Adventure Program Participation

Scouts were asked to indicate how many times they attended various scouting experiences, including BSA Summer Day Camp, BSA Summer Overnight Camp, Philmont, Summit Bechtel, Sea Base, and Northern Tier. Responses ranged from 0 = never attended to 5 = 5 times or more. Day camp and overnight camp codes were collapsed; Scouts who have attended day or overnight camp (coded as 1; $n = 3613$) were compared to those who never attended (coded as 0; $n = 460$). A minority of scouts participated in at least one high-adventure experience (coded as 1; $n = 585$) compared to those who never attended a high-adventure program (coded as 0; $n = 3462$). We examined Scouts who participated in a high-adventure program (regardless of whether they participated in summer camp; $n = 585$), Scouts who participated in summer camp (but NOT in high-adventure experiences; $n = 3017$), and those who participated in neither a high-adventure program nor summer camp ($n = 433$).

2.3.2. PYD Outcomes

Positive youth developmental outcomes include communication, ethical and moral decision making, connection to others, citizenship, purpose, leadership, joy/fun, and perceived cultural humility. For all scales, a mean score was calculated, with higher scores indicating greater levels of a particular variable. For example, a higher score on the leadership scales indicates greater opportunities for practicing leadership skills.

Communication. The communication scale was adapted from a measure of youth leadership developed by American Institutes for Research for the School's Out for NYC project, sponsored by the New York Department of Youth and Community Development. Youths responded to three questions assessing their communication skills; a sample item is "I listen to others when I make decisions". Responses ranged from 0 = Completely Disagree to 5 = Completely Agree ($M = 4.18$, $sd = 0.65$). Reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.61$).

Ethical Decision Making. The measure of ethical decision making was composed of three items adapted from a measure of developmental assets [75]. Youths rated the extent to which ethical and moral decisions are important in their lives on a six-point scale ranging from 0 = Not Important to 5 = Extremely Important. A sample item is "Telling the truth, even when it's not easy" ($M = 4.21$, $sd = 0.74$). Reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$).

Connection to Others. The measure of youth connection was a four-item scale adapted from the school caring relationships scale developed for the California Healthy Kids Survey [76]. Youths reported on their caring relationships with an adult in their troop on a six-point scale ranging from 0 = never true to 5 = always true. A sample item is "Within my troop, there is an adult who really cares about me" ($M = 4.61$, $sd = 0.71$). Reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$).

Citizenship. Adolescents' beliefs regarding their commitment to civic engagement were measured with two items [58]. Youths rated the extent to which they believe it is important to know what is going on in the world and to know about their country's government, even if they are too young to vote. Responses were given on a six-point scale ranging from 0 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree. A sample item is "It's important for me to know what's going on in the world" ($M = 4.33$, $sd = 0.81$). Reliability was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$).

Purpose. The Claremont Purpose Scale (12 items total [77]) was used to measure three dimensions of purpose, with four items for each dimension: meaningfulness, goal-directedness, and beyond-the-self orientation. All items included a unique response scale based on the question asked; sample items reflect the response scale for that item. A sample item from the meaningfulness subscale is "How clear is your sense of purpose in your life?" assessed on a five-point scale ranging from 0 = Not at all clear to 4 = Extremely clear. A sample item from the goal-directedness subscale is "How hard are you working to make your long-term aims a reality?", which was assessed by four items rated on a five-point scale ranging from 0 = Not at all hard to 4 = Extremely hard. A sample item from the beyond-the-self orientation subscale is "How often do you hope that the work that you do positively influences others?", and it was assessed by four items rated on a five-point scale ranging from 0 = Almost never to 4 = Almost all the time. A composite score for each of the three subscales was calculated by taking the sum total average of the items within each subscale (meaningfulness $M = 2.73$, $sd = 0.91$; goal-directedness $M = 2.78$, $sd = 0.73$; beyond-the-self orientation $M = 3.12$, $sd = 0.77$); in addition, an overall purpose scale was calculated by taking the mean of all 12 items ($M = 2.87$, $sd = 0.65$). Reliabilities for all three subscales, and across the full scale, were good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$ for meaningfulness, 0.85 for goal-directedness, 0.85 for beyond-the-self orientation, and 0.89 for the full purpose scale).

Leadership. A leadership measure was developed for the current study to assess youths' perceptions of their opportunities to practice leadership skills within their troop. Leadership practice opportunities were measured with 9 items, and responses were given on a six-point scale from 0 = Never True to 5 = Always True. Sample items include: "Scouts get to experience different leadership positions in BSA" and "Scouts take a lead in planning troop activities" ($M = 3.55$, $sd = 0.94$). Reliability was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$).

Five additional items assessed youths' capacity to lead at a higher level [78]. Responses were given on a six-point scale from 0 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. A sample item is "I can usually organize people to get things done" ($M = 3.55$, $sd = 0.94$). Reliability was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$).

Joy/Fun. We modified a scale from the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being [79] to assess joy/fun in scouting. Youths were asked the stem, "When I am involved in a Scouting activity..." for four items, including "I have a lot of fun" and "I feel happy". Response options ranged from 0 = Never to 5 = Always ($M = 3.98$, $sd = 0.83$), and reliability was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

Perceived Cultural Humility. To measure perceived cultural humility, respondents were first primed to identify the part(s) of their cultural background that is most central or important to them. Then, youth responded to 10 items adapted from Hook and colleagues' [70] measure of cultural humility, in which participants rated the extent to which they feel members of their troop demonstrate respect and a lack of superiority towards their cultural background on a six-point scale ranging from 0 = Completely disagree to 5 = Completely agree. Scouts were asked the question stem, "Regarding the core part(s) of my cultural background, members of my troop..."; sample items include "are respectful" and "ask questions when they are uncertain" ($M = 3.64$, $sd = 0.83$). Reliability was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$).

2.3.3. Interviews

All interviews were conducted by a team of trained interviewers; youth interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 min, while adult interviews averaged 60 to 90 min. Interviews were recorded and transcribed; transcriptions were double-checked for accuracy.

Interviews with adult leaders included questions about the leaders' roles and their lifetime experiences in Scouting; training they have received from BSA; how they run their troops and work with Scouts; their relationships with Scouts and adults in BSA; and inclusion and diversity in BSA. Interviews with youth included questions about their time and experiences in Scouting; values and sense of purpose; relationships with other Scouts and adult leaders; their learning, accomplishments, and leadership in Scouting; and diversity and inclusion in BSA.

Interviews were not formally coded, but all interviews were processed with NVivo 12 software by an experienced qualitative researcher. To identify specific times in the interviews where high-adventure activities were discussed, a subset of interview transcripts (110 Wave 1 and 78 Wave 2 adult, 109 Wave 1, 100 Wave 2, and 94 Wave 3 youth) were searched in NVivo for terms related to high-adventure and BSA's high-adventure locations; the search terms included: "high adventure", "Philmont", "Sea Base", "Northern Tier", "Summit", and "Bechtel" (as well as misspellings such as "Filmont", and "See Base"). We also specified that NVivo return text before and after the search terms to provide context. The researcher then read through all of the text that NVivo identified (as well as any additional interview text required for further context). The researcher then inductively identified salient recurring patterns. Each text passage was mapped onto all of the quantitative findings it applied to; many passages fit into more than one. Both youth and adult interviews were included in the processing as a way to frame the quantitative results and triangulate our findings.

3. Results

To address RQ1, after checking that the assumptions were met, we conducted ANOVAs using the statistical package SPSS, comparing the three program groups on all youth outcomes: (1) those who attended a high-adventure program (whether or not they attended summer camp), (2) those who only attended summer camp, and (3) those who attended neither a high-adventure program nor summer camp. To address RQ2, we conducted ANCOVAs, adding covariates of years in scouting and geographic region to the original analyses. To reduce the possibility of Type I error, we report only the findings that are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. To support our analyses for RQ1 and RQ2, we matched quotes from the adult and youth interviews with quantitative findings to determine if the quantitative findings were supported by the qualitative interviews. This mixed-methods design is appropriate when one data set (e.g., the qualitative interview data) provides a supportive, secondary role in a study based primarily on the other data type (e.g., the quantitative survey data [80]).

When we examined differences between the three Scout program groups via ANOVAs, we found that those who experienced high-adventure activities demonstrated significantly higher scores across more than half of the PYD outcomes. Specifically, these include communication, citizenship, sense of purpose (goal-directedness, beyond-the-self orientation, and combined scale), and leading at a higher level. For three outcomes, communication, citizenship, and leading at a higher level, there were mean differences between all three groups; in other words, the means were significantly different between the Scouts who attended high-adventure programs versus summer camp only, between Scouts who attended high-adventure programs and those who did not attend high-adventure programs nor summer camp, and also between those who attended summer camp and those who did not attend high-adventure programs nor summer camp. For three purpose outcomes (combined scale, goal-directedness, and beyond-the-self orientation), there were significant mean differences only between those who attended high-adventure programs and those who did not; the means of the summer camp group and the group that did not attend

high-adventure programs nor summer camp were not significantly different. Between the three programming groups, we did not find differences in the average scores in the ability to make ethical and moral decisions, connection to others, sense of purpose: meaningfulness, practice leadership skills, joy/fun, or cultural humility. Table 1 summarizes the ANOVA findings.

Table 1. ANOVA results examining differences by activity group for youth outcomes.

	High Adventure (N = 560–581) ¹ M (SE)	Summer Camp (N = 2823–2981) ¹ M (SE)	Neither (N = 396–427) ¹ M (SE)	F (2, 3776–3986) ¹
Communication	4.31 (0.03) ^{ab}	4.17 (0.01) ^{bc}	4.10 (0.03) ^{ac}	16.09 **
Ethical Decision Making	4.21 (0.03)	4.21 (0.01)	4.23 (0.04)	0.10
Connection with Others	4.61 (0.03)	4.62 (0.01)	4.57 (0.04)	0.84
Citizenship	4.47 (0.03) ^{ab}	4.32 (0.02) ^{bc}	4.21 (0.04) ^{ac}	13.77 **
Purpose: Combined Scale	2.97 (0.03) ^{ab}	2.86 (0.01) ^b	2.84 (0.03) ^a	7.24 **
Purpose: Meaningfulness	2.78 (0.04)	2.73 (0.02)	2.68 (0.05)	1.33
Purpose: Goal-Directedness	2.91 (0.03) ^{ab}	2.76 (0.01) ^b	2.74 (0.04) ^a	10.38 **
Purpose: Beyond-the-Self	3.24 (0.03) ^{ab}	3.11 (0.01) ^b	3.08 (0.04) ^a	7.77 **
Practice Leadership Skills	4.08 (0.03) ^{ab}	4.00 (0.01) ^b	3.98 (0.04) ^a	3.93
Leading at a Higher Level	3.86 (0.04) ^{ab}	3.54 (0.02) ^{bc}	3.26 (0.05) ^{ac}	51.50 **
Joy/Fun	4.00 (0.03)	3.98 (0.02)	3.96 (0.04)	0.38
Cultural Humility	3.68 (0.03)	3.62 (0.02)	3.70 (0.05)	2.24

Note: ** $p < 0.01$. ¹ *Ns* and *df* are presented as a range, capturing the range of individual *Ns* for each analysis. ^{a, b, c} indicate significant mean differences in activity groups.

The ANCOVAs revealed that after controlling for years in scouting and regions of the country (northeast, south, central, or west), all of the initial ANOVA findings were sustained. The only difference in the findings after adding the controls was that for youth citizenship, there was no longer a difference between the summer camp and neither program groups. The differences between the youths who participated in high-adventure programs versus the other two groups were still significantly different for the same six youth outcomes, including communication, citizenship, purpose (combined sale, goal-directedness, and beyond-the-self orientation), and leading at a higher level. For the ANCOVA findings, even though the overall *F* statistic was not significant for the remaining six outcomes (ability to make ethical and moral decisions, connection to others, sense of purpose: meaningfulness, practice leadership skills, joy/fun, or cultural humility), for two of the outcomes, we found a significantly different score between those who participated in high-adventure programs and those who participated in neither high-adventure nor camp for sense of purpose: meaningfulness and for joy/fun. Table 2 summarizes ANCOVA findings.

Table 2. ANCOVA results examining differences by activity group for youth outcomes ¹.

	High Adventure (N = 560–581) ² M (SE)	Summer Camp (N = 2823–2981) ² M (SE)	Neither (N = 396–428) ² M (SE)	F (2, 3779–3989) ²	η^2
Communication	4.45 (0.06) ^{ab}	4.30 (0.05) ^{bc}	4.22 (0.06) ^{ac}	15.37 **	0.008
Ethical Decision Making	4.28 (0.07)	4.27 (0.06)	4.26 (0.07)	0.92	0.000
Connection with Others	4.67 (0.03)	4.69 (0.01)	4.65 (0.04)	0.58	0.000
Citizenship	4.67 (0.03) ^{ab}	4.54 (0.01) ^b	4.49 (0.04) ^a	6.94 **	0.004
Purpose: Combined Scale	3.05 (0.06) ^{ab}	2.95 (0.05) ^b	2.92 (0.06) ^a	6.75 **	0.003
Purpose: Meaningfulness	2.88 (0.08) ^a	2.83 (0.08)	2.76 (0.09) ^a	1.99	0.001
Purpose: Goal-Directedness	3.00 (0.07) ^{ab}	2.84 (0.06) ^b	2.82 (0.07) ^a	10.03 **	0.005
Purpose: Beyond the Self	3.30 (0.07) ^{ab}	3.18 (0.06) ^b	3.18 (0.07) ^a	5.89 **	0.003
Practice Leadership Skills	4.25 (0.06) ^{ab}	4.17 (0.06) ^b	4.15 (0.07) ^a	3.58	0.002
Leading at a Higher Level	4.01 (0.09) ^{ab}	3.74 (0.08) ^{bc}	3.59 (0.09) ^{ab}	26.36 **	0.014
Joy/Fun	4.12 (0.08) ^a	4.08 (0.07)	3.99 (0.08) ^a	2.66	0.001
Cultural Humility	3.90 (0.08)	3.84 (0.07)	3.92 (0.08)	2.34	0.001

Note: ** $p < 0.01$. ¹ Covariates include Years as a Scout and Region of Country (central region is omitted). ² *Ns* and *df* are presented as a range, capturing the range of individual *Ns* for each analysis. ^{a, b, c} indicate significant mean differences in activity groups. η is a standardized measure of effect sizes for ANOVA models.

To supplement our quantitative findings, the qualitative adult and youth interviews were reviewed and scanned to determine if they supported (or refuted) any of our quantitative findings. In fact, most text concerning high-adventure experiences confirmed the quantitative findings. Related to positive youth development, both adult leaders and youths described a connection between high-adventure activities and youth joy/fun. For example, one Scout described their experience at Philmont:

Last summer, we were going to go to Philmont and one of the shakedown [a *shakedown* is a process to prepare for a high adventure activity in Scouts BSA, where Scouts empty their backpacks and review supplies to ensure everyone is prepared for the activity] that was over 100 degrees, we were doing the hiking. And, I barely remember the actual hiking. [...] And then we went to the lake to swim and everything. And then, when we got back from the lake we finally did set up camp. And, I remember just thinking, this was fun.

Another Scout also talked about how much they enjoyed Philmont: "I hiked 60, 70 miles about, in the middle of New Mexico, which was a great experience [...] And I pushed myself to a new limit and I enjoyed it". Multiple Scouts mentioned mountain biking and the zipline at Summit-Bechtel: "We did mountain biking [...], there were a lot of good mountain bike trails. That was fun. The quarter mile zipline there was also really fun, too". At Northern Tier, the Scouts described enjoying both the winter high-adventure activities with dog sledding and building snow shelters and the warmer-weather activities like canoeing: "It's a bunch of small lakes and so every once in a while you get to the edge of the lake and you have to carry your canoe and all your stuff to the next lake. [...] And then the remaining week we just canoed around the boundary waters and saw the lakes and swam and just had fun". The Scouts also shared their enjoyment of the sailing, snorkeling, and diving adventures at Sea Base: "So we went on a boat for a whole week, and all we did was go out to different places on the reef and snorkel and look at the reef and just get to see it up close and personal".

One Scout described novel experiences at multiple high-adventure camps:

And you get to learn about...In Northern Tier, you can learn about dogsledding and ice-skating, which you wouldn't be able to do here in Alabama. And then in the Florida Sea Base you got to learn about sailing and boating and snorkeling and scuba diving. And then there's also adventure that they just added recently that I want to try where you are taken to an island and dropped off for the week, where you have to find your own way to survive.

The interview data also supported the finding that high-adventure activities help youths develop leadership skills. One Scout talked about leading their group on a back-packing trip: "[...] after spending two weeks of even though being the youngest being the navigator of our group, so it's the map and compass, and the only one without a parent [...] finally getting to the top of the mountain. It's just really peaceful up there, and a big challenge that we got through". Another Scout talked about being able to be the crew leader during their troop's trip to Sea Base. Adult leaders also talked about Scouts leading during high-adventure trips; one noted that high-adventure experiences "are very impactful. They teach the Scouts how to endure physical challenges, I know they're strong enough to do it, and how to be leaders even when they're exhausted and tired, and just dealing with life in general". Another adult leader described an equalizing experience when a Scout stepped into a leadership role: "And so it was, I think, a good experience for me because in that kind of situation, I was no different than they were inside. They were awesome leading with the crew leader more often than I was. And so it was a great experience to kind of really just be led by them and kind of share a totally new experience that neither of us had had".

The interviews also confirmed the quantitative finding that high-adventure experiences strengthen connections between Scouts as well as between Scouts and adult leaders. As one adult leader noted, “I can tell you every kid who went on that trip, it was kind of a bonding experience for them”.

In addition to positive youth development outcomes, several other emergent outcomes were also captured in the qualitative data. Both the adults and youths described that high-adventure experience provided opportunities for the Scouts to try new things, learn, build confidence, and overcome challenges. Other emergent ideas include the role of high-adventure experiences in Scout retention and Scout recruitment (including the recruitment of girls into BSA), and as learning, leading, and training opportunities for adult leaders.

4. Discussion

Youth adventure programs provide a novel physical and social environment where youths have the opportunity to grow [35]. A strength of the current study is the triangulation of qualitative interview data that support some of our quantitative findings. In alignment with previous research [22,26,42,45], our findings support the hypothesis that youths who are engaged in high-adventure activities exhibit more positive outcomes in a variety of PYD domains, including communication, sense of purpose (and the purpose domains of goal-directedness and beyond-the-self orientation), leadership, and citizenship. These significant findings persisted even after controlling for the region of country and length of time in scouting.

The youths in our study who participated in high-adventure programs had better communication skills compared to those who solely participated in summer camp or those who were not involved in high-adventure activities nor summer camp. A key feature of high-adventure programs is the comprehensive challenges that unfold in novel and outdoor settings and are crafted to encourage collective engagement [35]. Embracing perceived risky challenges necessitates collaborative problem solving, often resulting in innovative solutions. This collaborative effort hinges on effective communication, thereby fostering and nurturing the communication skills of youths.

Youth leadership and goal-directedness were also enhanced by participation in a high-adventure activity. Elevated goal-directedness aligns with a fundamental aspect of the high-adventure program: working towards objectives. High-adventure programs facilitate the cultivation of goal-oriented skills by providing opportunities to reach new challenging goals in novel environments. Additionally, our findings underscore high-adventure programs’ success in fostering youth leadership development.

Consistent with prior research [81,82], our findings demonstrate that youths who engaged in high-adventure activities had a stronger beyond-the-self orientation and had higher levels of citizenship compared to those who only participated in summer camp or those who did not participate in either activity. The eighth principle underpinning high-adventure programming is reflection, affording youths the opportunity to cultivate an understanding of themselves and the reverberating impacts of their choices and actions on others as well as the broader community. Reflection instills a sense of responsibility; youths aspire to positively influence others through their actions, motivating youths towards making constructive contributions to their communities and the larger society [83].

The absence of significant differences in perceived cultural humility, such as the practice of asking questions when troop members are uncertain about youths’ cultural background, is perhaps unsurprising. This outcome can be attributed to the lack of cultural diversity in our sample, with 91% of youths identifying as White/Caucasian. Since Scouts BSA participants are relatively homogeneous in cultural and ethnic/racial backgrounds, even if youths participate in high-adventure programs, they may not have the opportunity to work with youths of differing backgrounds; thus, there would be little opportunity to develop skills in cultural humility. It may be that an analysis of a subset of youths who experience cultural, racial/ethnic, or other diversities within their Scouts BSA/high-adventure experience would yield different results vis-à-vis increased cultural humility.

We did not find differences in the Scouts' joy/fun based on the engagement in high-adventure activities or summer camp (or neither) experiences. This may be partially due to ceiling effects; across all youths, the mean score was nearly 4 out of 5 for the joy/fun scale (with a standard deviation of less than 1). This high mean score and low standard deviation underscore the robustness of the Scouts BSA programming, indicating that overall, Scouts are consistently experiencing a considerable level of joy and fun, regardless of their level of program involvement. Certainly, additional research has substantiated that the Scouts BSA program, and other PYD programs, effectively impart a substantial sense of joy and fun to the youth participants [22,40].

Researchers have noted that engaging with nature-based experiences can foster ethical decision-making skills [34,37]. Nonetheless, our study did not reveal a significant increase in moral or ethical decision making. A possible explanation could be the presence of a moderator, such as gender, which might play a role in moderating the effects of high-adventure activities [84,85]. For instance, among boys—the primary demographic in our study—participating in high-adventure activities could be linked to the enhancement of leadership attributes, as our findings indicated. Conversely, for girls, engagement in high-adventure activities might correlate more strongly with an improved capacity for ethical and moral decision making by bolstering girls' moral courage. In fact, previous research has identified that high-adventure activities strengthened girls' moral courage [86,87], which is essential for acting on ethical decisions in the face of potential risks or adversity.

Our findings revealed an enhanced sense of purpose in two of the three purpose subscales: goal-directedness and beyond-the-self orientation among youths who participated in high-adventure activities. We did not find significant differences in the third subscale, meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is a more abstract concept, in comparison to goal-directedness and beyond-the-self orientation; meaningfulness emerges from a blend of multiple elements, such as personal growth, introspection, and a sense of contributing to a broader context [88]. While high-adventure activities can indeed provide exhilarating and demanding experiences, the experiences may be too short or infrequent to trigger the full development of a sense of meaningfulness, especially during adolescence. The detection of how participation in high-adventure activities influence meaningfulness could require a longer-term perspective [89,90], and, as others have suggested, could take into account the duration and intensity of the program as well [91]. In sum, the inherent complexity of high-adventure program challenges, along with principles such as the pursuit of objectives and the encouragement of reflective thought, likely all play pivotal roles in fostering the positive development of youths. Specifically, these programs are associated with improved communication skills, more focused goal-oriented behaviors, and a strengthened commitment to societal contributions, ultimately fostering both a sense of purpose that extends beyond the self and elevated levels of citizenship. Therefore, it may be valuable for organizations with spaces for high-adventure activities to invest in maintaining properties where high-adventure activities take place—for Scouts BSA, these include Philmont Scout Ranch, Florida Sea Base, Northern Tier High-Adventure Base, and Summit Bechtel Reserve. This investment can enrich the youths' experiences that emphasize goal-oriented challenges and reflection, fostering essential skills including opportunities to build a sense of purpose and practice communication, leadership, and citizenship. Such skills are foundational to youths' overall development and help prepare them to navigate the complexities of adult life and adapt to diverse environments.

The current study enriched the existing research by employing a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data sources. This method bolsters the credibility and reliability of our research findings. The convergence and mutual reinforcement of outcomes across diverse methodologies resulted in more resilient and dependable results. For example, our quantitative findings revealed that youths who engaged in high-adventure activities demonstrated heightened leadership skills in comparison to those who exclusively participated in summer camp or remained uninvolved in both high-adventure activities and summer camp. The qualitative data reinforced the

leadership findings, and perhaps helped explain “why” high-adventure programming is so important for the development of leadership skills. The mixed-methods approach offers a comprehensive perspective that captures more than either approach alone.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the current study should be considered. First, our sample displayed homogeneity, primarily consisting of White/Caucasian male youths who were native English speakers and belonged to middle-class families. Therefore, the generalizability of our findings to youths from diverse racial, language, and SES backgrounds is limited. We recommend that future studies explore the advantages of high-adventure activities among diverse youth populations, encompassing various racial, language, and socioeconomic characteristics. Social factors such as socioeconomic status can impact the access to positive youth development programs, including high-adventure programs. Scholarships and community fundraising can increase the access to high-adventure programs for youths from economically disadvantaged backgrounds [92]. Future research on barriers to youths from socially diverse backgrounds attending and integrating into high-adventure programs could examine a youth \leftrightarrow context relationship using the PVEST model, specifically examining how youths of color and poor youths both navigate and make sense of high-adventure activities [93,94].

Second, the absence of comparisons with other programs restricts our ability to draw broader conclusions, as all of the data in our study were collected from Scouts BSA members. Future research could offer comparisons to other high-adventure programs, enhancing the generalizability of these findings and validating their robustness. Most studies of high-adventure programs, however, do not demonstrate sustained effects. Few researchers measure longer-term impacts; they are often not included in the scope or design of the study [45,46,56]. BSA high-adventure programs, however, occur in the scope of year-round BSA participation. In the future, researchers can examine how PYD outcomes of high-adventure programs could be reinforced in year-round BSA activities.

High-adventure activities are instrumental in fostering youth positive development. Thus, establishing robust connections between Scouts BSA, or other organizations that offer high-adventure experiences, with local communities and schools could serve as a proactive approach to creating pathways for more young individuals to engage in similar high-adventure experiences. This strategic effort holds the potential to amplify the advantages for youths who may not otherwise have the opportunity to experience high-adventure programming.

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