

Christie, Mark ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4246-0895> , Elliott, David ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4790-2354> and Wilbraham, Susan ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8512-0041> (2025) Freedom, fun, friendship and freezing! Women's perspectives of participation in open water swimming. Sport in Society .

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/8662/>

***Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.***

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

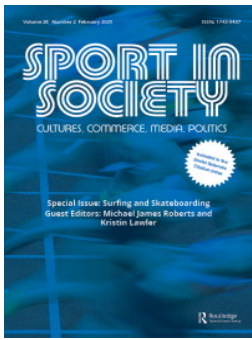
- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
  - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

**You may not**

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).



# Sport in Society

Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcss20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcss20)

## Freedom, fun, friendship and freezing! Women's perspectives of participation in open water swimming

Mark Christie, Dave Elliott & Sue Wilbraham

To cite this article: Mark Christie, Dave Elliott & Sue Wilbraham (27 Feb 2025): Freedom, fun, friendship and freezing! Women's perspectives of participation in open water swimming, Sport in Society, DOI: [10.1080/17430437.2025.2470158](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2025.2470158)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2025.2470158>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Feb 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 103



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Freedom, fun, friendship and freezing! Women's perspectives of participation in open water swimming

Mark Christie, Dave Elliott and Sue Wilbraham 

Institute of Health, University of Cumbria, Lancaster, UK

## ABSTRACT

Current figures show women are less physically active than men. This disparity has led to an increased drive to encourage more women to become physically active. Identifying 'female-friendly' activities might promote increased participation. Despite assumptions that women prefer indoor exercise modes, a particular activity challenges this belief: open water swimming (OWS). Data indicates that most OWS participants are female. This study therefore aimed to explore women's experiences of OWS. Utilising group interviews, twenty-four female participants shared their reasons for engaging in OWS, the personal meaning it holds, and the perceived benefits derived. Data analysis revealed three core themes: (1) transformative impacts upon personal agency; (2) salutogenic benefits derived from OWS and blue spaces; (3), social connectedness, belonging, and support. Findings suggest female open water swimmers derive impactful health benefits and enhanced personal and social capital. Given its popularity, OWS could be an important option to increase women's physical activity participation.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 March 2024  
Accepted 7 February 2025

## KEYWORDS

Open water swimming (OWS); liberation; empowerment; nature connectedness; social capital; personal agency

## Introduction

### *The participation gender gap*

Participation in regular physical activity can provide numerous physical, mental, and social benefits and as such, involvement is advocated for all (WHO 2022). Despite concerted efforts to increase participation, many individuals still fail to meet the recommended guidelines (Sport England 2023; WHO 2022). This is particularly true for women (WHO, 2021; Sport England 2021). To address the physical activity 'gender gap', there has been an increased effort to encourage more women to become physically active through public health campaigns such as the UK's 'This Girl Can' initiative (Cla 2019; Sport England 2021). Whilst such efforts have achieved some success, the gender difference has not been fully annulled. For example, the most recent UK data shows that approximately thirty-nine percent of women still do not engage in physical activity sufficiently to induce the associated health

**CONTACT** Dave Elliott  [david.elliott@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:david.elliott@cumbria.ac.uk)

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

benefits; this compares to thirty-five percent of men (Sport England 2023). Social and environmental factors have been identified as important influences on women's uptake of exercise. For example, discouragement, financial costs, family and child commitments, lack of time, perceptions of a male dominated and hostile sport/exercise environment, and availability of exercise venues can be barriers that are more likely to impact women's involvement (Albright, Maddock, and Nigg 2005; Ansari and Lovell 2009; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2018; Kaim 2015; Sport Scotland 2023; Women in Sport 2009). Self-consciousness and fear of judgement can also impact women's willingness to partake in exercise (Seal et al. 2022); this might be especially pertinent when using onsite changing room and showering facilities (Clark 2019). In addition, issues surrounding self-efficacy, perceived competency, perceived risks and social support are also believed to be important contributors to female sport and exercise engagement (Edwards and Sackett 2016).

It is not only in relation to physical activity rates where gender distinctions exist; although empirical data is limited, there are indications that women are more likely to participate in indoor, gym-based activities such as aerobics, yoga, spinning, Pilates and pool swimming (Sport England 2021; VicHealth 2019; Zandt 2023). In contrast, men are more likely to undertake strength-based, competitive, and outdoor activities. Accounting for such differences, it has been suggested that activity choices might, in part, be attributed to the belief that women are more motivated to exercise for extrinsic outcomes such as appearance and physical condition, rather than competition and ego goals (Molanorouzi, Khoo, and Morris 2015; Zervou et al. 2017) and as such, indoor, gym-based activities might be perceived as being more effective for the attainment of such outcome goals. Socioeconomic barriers including time and resource can also be especially restrictive to women's access to sports (Ansari and Lovell 2009); this might be particularly so for activities considered to be resource heavy. It is also likely that the experiences women have in outdoor spaces, including harassment and risks to personal safety (Kilgour and Parker 2013) have an influence. Risk avoidance might also impact the types of activity women undertake (Frick 2021; Apollo et al. 2023). Research has also shown that women are less likely to be involved in what might be considered as extreme sport activities, that is, physical activities that carry a risk of physical injury or even death. For example, Frick (2021) reports that only a third of cliff, and free divers are female. Likewise, Apollo et al. (2023) show that the majority of those partaking in adventure sports tourism (e.g. mountain climbing, ultra-marathon trail running) are male. Despite evidence revealing some of the issues surrounding participation rates and exercise choice, there is one activity that appears to contradict the narratives surrounding gender trends – and that is open water swimming.

### ***OWS environments and relevant theoretical frameworks***

OWS refers to swimming outdoors in natural settings (lakes, lochs, rivers, tarns, sea). In the UK, Outdoor Swimmer (2021) estimates that 65% of those partaking in swimming outdoors are female. Indeed, the attractiveness of the activity amongst women has led to the creation of several female-centric groups such as the 'Blue Tits' network. OWS can be considered an extreme activity (Willig 2008), as it is regularly undertaken in what can be harsh environmental conditions including cold-water, rain, wind, currents, and waves. In addition, OWS is often performed in unorganised environments that lack key safety features such as lifeguards, rescue buoys, safety boats and changing facilities. Dangerous underwater obstructions are often present and participants can succumb to potentially life-threatening

conditions such as hypothermia, cold water shock, and after-drop (Knechtle et al. 2020; Outdoor Swimming Society 2022; Tipton and Bradford 2014), thus conforming to the definition of an 'extreme' activity as offered by Willig (2008).

Despite such hazards, OWS can be extremely beneficial. Regarding physical well-being, whilst no specific empirical data exists on recreational OWS outcomes, swimming in general has been shown to have a positive impact upon numerous physiological systems including cardiovascular and cardiometabolic health and also body composition (Moffatt 2017; Tanaka 2009). OWS has been found to improve many aspects of psychological health, and it is this feature that differentiates OWS from the more traditional exercise forms. OWS is often performed in what has been termed 'blue space' and this in itself has been shown to have a profound impact upon mental well-being, e.g. enhanced mood, feelings of restoration and stress reduction (Brown 2020; Massey et al. 2020). A number of theories have been advanced to explain the relationship between outdoor environments, in this instance blue space, and mental health. Stress Reduction Theory (Ulrich et al. 1991) for example, maintains that mere exposure to such locations automatically elicits an 'evolutionary' psycho-physiological stress reducing response (Joye and van den Berg 2011). Another prominent concept is Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan 1995) which posits that the pleasant stimuli derived from natural settings diverts attention away from life stresses (e.g. work, family, study) and negative thoughts. In addition, it is also maintained that nature-based experiences can enhance mental well-being by providing opportunities to satisfy basic psychological needs such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy along with associated eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing and feelings of transcendence (Passmore and Howell 2014; Pritchard et al. 2020). Research evidence does support such conceptions. Questioning outdoor swimmers about their experiences, Murray and Fox (2021) found 'immersion in nature', 'shared experience', 'emotional cleansing', 'connection' and improved 'mental strength' to be commonly cited responses. Similarly, Denton and Aranda (2019) interviewed participants as to their perceptions of sea swimming and reported themes such as 'transformative' (changes in mind, body, and identity), 'connecting' (a sense of belonging to nature, place, and others) and 're-orientating' (disruption to the sense of time, space, and body) as being particularly prominent. Whilst there is little doubt that part of the appeal of OWS relates to its environment, the associated challenges associated with OWS can also lead to improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem/efficacy (Christie and Elliott 2023; Van Tulleken et al. 2018). These are in addition to recognised mental health benefits derived from simply partaking in exercise (e.g. Saxena et al. 2005).

It is also apparent that many of the proposed benefits reflect the tenets of the PERMA model of psychological well-being (Seligman 2011). According to the PERMA model, well-being comprises of cognitive happiness (e.g. life satisfaction), hedonic happiness, and eudaimonia. Attaining these states is contingent on five key elements: specifically, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments (Kern et al. 2015). Whilst each of these components can contribute to wellbeing in their own right, when combined, the effects are magnified. It is also claimed that a collective sense of wellbeing can be obtained through having positive experiences with like-minded people in shared interest groups (e.g. in OWS, a 'Blue Tits' group). As such, the PERMA model offers an additional framework in which to evaluate women's psychological attachment to OWS.

In summary, despite efforts being made to increase female involvement in physical activity, a participatory 'gender gap' still remains. Despite being at odds with the traditional view of

'female-friendly' activities, OWS appears to be particularly appealing to women. Importantly, many of the health outcomes (physical, social and mental) align with the aims of WHO (2021). To date, there has been surprisingly limited research focused solely on women's OWS experiences and as such, this investigation aims to uncover why OWS is considered such an attractive option. The study has three broad aims: (1) to identify the specific reasons as to why female participants engage with OWS; (2) to appreciate the specific benefits female swimmers derive from OWS, and any negative outcomes experienced; and (3) explore the experience of OWS from a female perspective. Such information might help in the promotion of OWS and ultimately help eradicate the current physical activity gender imbalance.

## Methodology

### Participants

The study recruited 24 female outdoor swimmers (Mean age = 53 years) with a diverse range of participation profiles (see Table 1). The majority of participants expressed a preference for 'skin swimming' (i.e. swimming *without* wetsuits). Recruitment occurred across multiple OWS locations in the United Kingdom. Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, whilst references to specific locations (Figures 1–3) were substituted with broader geographical descriptors (e.g. Lake District, South Wales) to further promote confidentiality.

### Data collection procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of [WITHHELD] ethics board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Data collection involved five group

**Table 1.** Participant data with pseudonyms.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Years OWS	Rec or competitive	Swimmer or dipper	Solo or group	Wetsuit or skins	Summer or winter
Angela	57	Manager holiday lets	8	Both	Both	Group	Skins	Both
Kim	46	Psychologist	11	Both	Swimmer	Group	Wetsuit	Both
Cathy	55	None	14	Both	Swimmer	Both	Skins	Both
Jackie	48	Diploma assessor	11	Both	Both	Group	Both	Both
Susan	46	Health & wellbeing team leader	11	Both	Both	Group	Both	Both
Yvonne	41	Skills coach	7	Recreational	Swimmer	Group	Wetsuit	Both
Carrie	50	Teacher	4	Both	Swimmer	Both	Skins	Both
Veronica	62	Retired	5	Recreational	Both	Both	Skins	Both
Janet	62	Semi-retired invigilator	8	Both	Swimmer	Both	Skins	Both
Vanessa	52	Trainer	4	Both	Swimmer	Both	Skins	Both
Francesca	42	Sales engineer	2.5	Recreational	Both	Both	Skins	Group
Florence	58	Teacher	3	Recreational	Both	Both	Skins	Both
Rosie	45	Tourism assistant	1.5	Recreational	Both	Both	Skins	Both
Juliet	54	Dentist	45	Recreational	Both	Both	Both	Both
Anne	56	Paraplanner	12	Both	Swimmer	Both	Both	Both
Leanne	59	Endurance sports coach	10	Both	Swimmer	Both	Wetsuit	Summer
Lily	58	Homemaker	6	Both	Swimmer	Both	Both	Both
Jean	60	Retired emeritus professor	37	Recreational	Both	Group	Both	Both
Louise	45	Civil servant	2.5	Recreational	Both	Both	Skins	Both
Shirley	57	Independent shop owner	4	Recreational	Both	Both	Both	Both
Caitlin	56	Administrator	7	Recreational	Both	Both	Skins	Both
Jennifer	54	Nurse	1.5	Recreational	Both	Both	Both	Both
Olivia	51	Activities co-ordinator	1.5	Recreational	Both	Both	Skins	Both
Edith	68	Retired	1	Recreational	Both	Both	Skins	Both



**Figure 1.** One of the swimming locations in the Lake District.



**Figure 2.** Another swimming venue in the Lake District.



**Figure 3.** A South Wales swimming location.

interviews, providing an efficient means of capturing diverse qualitative insights. These sessions were predominantly conducted in person within field settings, except for one session held online due to logistical constraints. Some pre-determined interview questions were used to help facilitate discussions, but the emphasis was upon a flexible approach to allow participants the opportunity to elaborate on their unique experiences.

Interviews averaged 71 min in length and primarily addressed participants' motivations for engaging in OWS, its perceived benefits, and reflections on personal experiences (see Table 2 for sample questions). To build rapport and enhance authenticity, the lead researcher (MC) actively participated in swimming with each group, and maintained reflective field notes documenting the swimming context, activities, and related interactions. Interviews were conducted shortly after the swimming activity, either at the water's edge or in locations overlooking the blue space, to evoke immediate and authentic accounts. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Data analysis

Data analysis followed the protocol of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This approach involved iterative familiarisation with the data, coding, and theme generation by the research team, which included MC and the two desk-based researchers (DE and SW). Initially, analysis was conducted independently to balance emic and etic perspectives, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the data (Smith and McGannon 2018). MC's close involvement with data collection and participants was complemented by his colleagues' detached, objective scrutiny, ensuring robust and balanced interpretations.

Thematic coding combined theoretical constructs (e.g. attention restoration, social capital, nature connectedness) with emergent data-driven codes (e.g. fun, support, empowerment). Additionally, *in vivo* codes captured salient participant expressions (e.g. 'buzz', 'thrill', 'smash expectations') (Charmaz 2006). Regular team discussions refined and validated the themes, allowing for flexible revisitation of analytical stages to ensure accuracy. This reflexive approach promoted richer interpretations of meaning beyond simple consensus (Byrne 2022).

To enhance rigour and trustworthiness, participants reviewed and validated the transcripts and findings through thematic posters (Figure 4) featuring exemplar quotes (Nowell

**Table 2.** Sample questions.

Theme	Open-ended question
Motives	STARTER (to help relax and encourage subsequent conversations): So, why did you start OWS? Go around each person
Motives	Do you prefer doing OWS solo, or in a group (or like both)? Why?
Motives	Where and when do you prefer to do OWS, and why?
Meaning	Can you describe for me what OWS means to you?
Meaning	Have you had any negative experiences doing OWS? If so, what & why?
Health	Some outdoor swim groups for men have a core focus on mental health, because men reportedly struggle to give voice to their personal worries. Is that something you have found a need for, or identify with in any way?
Health	Has OWS participation enhanced your physical health? If so, how?
Agency	Has OWS participation made an impact in your life outside of swimming? If so, what, how, why?
Agency	Has OWS participation changed you in any way? If so, how, why?
Meaning	If you were to sum up OWS, what words would you use, and why?





**Figure 4.** Thematic poster provided to participants.

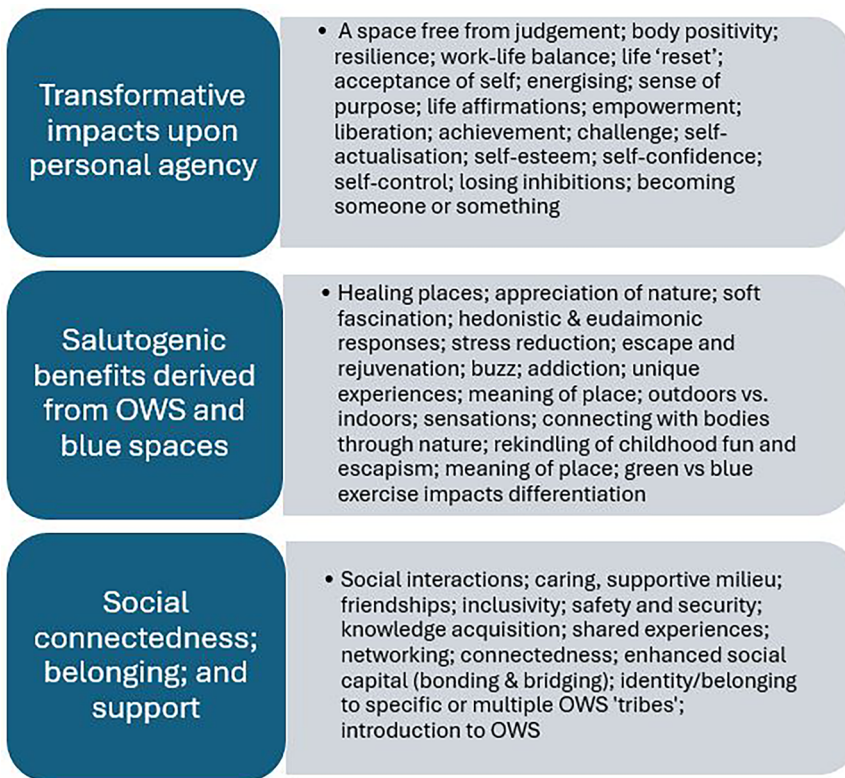
et al. 2017; Xerri 2018). Adopting a constructionist epistemology, the coding process thus emphasised both the recurrence and meaningfulness of participants' narratives in addressing the study's aims.

## Findings

Three core themes were identified in the data (Figure 5, with exemplars in Figure 6), which describe the impacts upon personal agency derived from OWS participation; the salutogenic (health promoting) benefits; and finally, the social connectedness, networks and support that organically occur through OWS interactions. These themes map directly to the study's stated aims. All three provide evidence to facilitate an understanding of Aim 1, why participants engaged with OWS (e.g. eudaimonic and hedonistic impacts, achievement, challenge), Aim 2, the benefits derived from OWS (e.g. physical/mental wellbeing impacts, personal agency enhancements, body confidence) and finally, Aim 3 (e.g. sensations, escape, connectedness, belonging, liberation).

### **Theme 1: transformative impacts upon personal agency**

A key theme emerging from the interviews was the enhancement of personal agency through OWS. Participants described how OWS fostered confidence, resilience, self-control, and independence, which in turn rippled into other aspects of the swimmers' lives. OWS provided a 'safe space' for self-expression and personal growth: to 'be' themselves, or 'become' someone. This led to new life directions, including environmental activism, career shifts such as becoming an OWS coach, or becoming a competitive open water swimmer. For example, Jean became more politically engaged, particularly in environmental campaigns including 'Surfers Against Sewage', due to increased awareness of water pollution and the negative impacts on the eco-system as well as on the health of recreational water users.



**Figure 5.** Core themes with sub-themes.

For some, OWS initially evoked anxiety, yet overcoming these fears bolstered confidence in their daily life. As Lily explained:

*'...there's always a little bit of trepidation – always; but there's a feeling that you're building resilience as well. If you can do this, get in cold water, subconsciously it helps you in other situations: you think, "well, I can do that. So why can't I deal with the other nonsense in my life?"'*

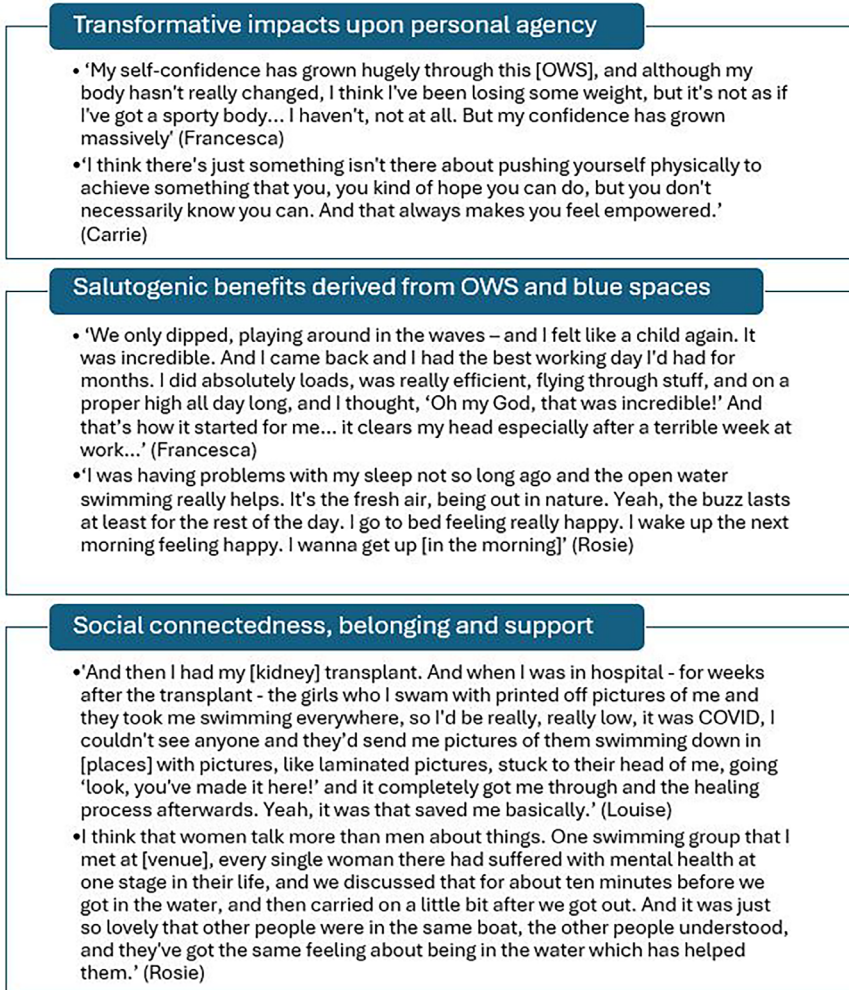
Many swimmers associated OWS with terms such as 'empowerment', 'freedom', and 'liberation'. Francesca, for example, gained new-found confidence in her appearance through her bolder choice of swimwear in terms of both colour and reduced body coverage:

*'I was always the one trying to find costumes to hide bits I'm not happy with... and my latest costume choices... well, the one I wore today, it's neon pink, you couldn't get any brighter, I'm loving wearing that, I feel comfortable wearing that and I never, ever, would've said that before.'*

The physical challenge of OWS (e.g. cold, even icy waters; being battered by waves; wind chill; swimming distances) also fostered a sense of achievement and self-belief. Carrie noted:

*'There's just something about pushing yourself physically to achieve something you hope you can do but don't necessarily know you can, and that always makes you feel empowered.'*

Veronica, meanwhile, found entertainment and joy in winter swimming:



**Figure 6.** Core themes with exemplars.

*'...your focus is just being in there, not competing or doing any great distance, but embracing the experience – and that's what keeps me going through winter. And then, sitting with hot chocolate after, my teeth chattering, literally! That's what does it for me.'*

For some, OWS served as an entry point to more substantive challenges, such as Vanessa, who found herself committing to an English Channel relay. OWS as a purposeful endeavour also appeared to subvert gender norms, as women discovered they could match or surpass men in endurance and cold-water tolerance; in that respect, Jean highlighted that OWS was a 'levelling' physical activity.

Additionally, OWS challenged conventional notions of athleticism. Carrie appreciated how body diversity was not a barrier to success:

*'...some of the most incredible swimmers are people who don't look typically athletic... I love that because I'm not – and I love smashing people's expectations.'*

Many participants similarly experienced an evolution in body positivity and self-confidence. Susan shared:

*'I don't get self-conscious [now]... I can get into that water not giving one care about it. I've learned to just embrace it, be who I am and what I look like, and it's given me confidence to not worry about it'*

These enhancements to personal agency extended to a sense of liberation when changing by the water, where participants abandoned societal norms of modesty and self-consciousness:

*'...we don't even see the nakedness'. (Yvonne)*

*'...those two fishermen in Scotland who would never get over what they saw that day!' (Kim)*

*'We were so liberated, we just got naked!' (Susan)*

'Getting [nearly] naked' often in the presence of new acquaintances was thus normalised, a stark contrast to the more regulated, formal, and conventional behaviours regarding indoor pool environments (e.g. segregated changing).

OWS also enabled participants to momentarily shed the responsibilities of adulthood, as Jennifer noted:

*'...when you're an adult, you don't have fun like children do. This [OS] is fun! We're just like kids again.'*

The field researcher (MC) gained a strong impression in conversations that OWS addressed deep-seated insecurities swimmers held about sports participation from childhood. Those who had negative experiences with school sports – whether due to lack of interest, skill, or confidence – found OWS to be an activity they truly enjoyed. Anne felt she had '*found herself*' through OWS, building confidence and self-esteem through swimming with friends and gradually increasing distances.

Nearly half of the interviewees identified as both recreational and competitive swimmers, with several coming from backgrounds in triathlon or club swimming. Jackie transitioned to OWS after an ankle injury, while Yvonne and Leanne used OWS to regain fitness following serious health setbacks. And while competitiveness was not a primary focus, some participants embraced the challenge of events, progressing from novice to long-distance swims, further extending their identity as an open water swimmer. Although several talked up a goal-driven approach as driving their current participation, nonetheless it was apparent to MC that fun and camaraderie were central to any group swim. The collective endeavours helped negate any pre-swim anxieties whilst facilitating a motivational climate that lent itself to goal actualisation, no matter what types of personal goals were sought (e.g. simply having fun, achieving a set distance, or successfully entering an event).

OWS also became a means of healing from emotional trauma. Carrie, whose marriage ended suddenly, found solace and empowerment in swimming:

*'It was a real 'this is for me' moment when everything had gone out of my control. I didn't want my marriage to end, it was all very sudden, and I needed something that was just for me, that made me feel proud, gave me something to focus on, and hopefully made my children feel proud.'*

Ultimately, in summarising this first theme, OWS provided participants with resilience, knowledge, confidence, liberation and empowerment, offering a transformative experience that extended far beyond the water.

## **Theme 2: salutogenic benefits derived from OWS and blue spaces**

Swimmers enthusiastically described numerous health and wellbeing benefits derived from their engagement with OWS and blue spaces, for example sharing how immersion in cold water suppressed physical discomforts and contributed to mental clarity. From a physical health perspective, swimmers testified to the positive effects of OWS on their bodies; for example, Francesca found that whereas indoor pools caused her skin to flare up (due to eczema), wild swims held no such concerns. Many noted the support and weightlessness offered by the water, which assisted in the alleviation of transient or more longstanding physical aches and pains. Louise's story stands out as a powerful example of the physical health dividends: diagnosed with a serious health issue, her wild swimming journey became integral to her mental and physical well-being:

*'I got told some really bad health news and needed something; OWS was the thing that got me through everything. When you get told all of a sudden, 'you need to have a kidney transplant, to start dialysis, your kidneys have stopped working properly'... and I was 43, a mum of two, and I was like: 'but I feel absolutely fine, this isn't going to define me' and I found cold-water swimming, and just getting in, it was like 'I'm gonna chuck myself in that lake. I'm gonna put myself in there and swim'. And the first time I did it, all that 'oh my God, you're sick' went out of my head'.*

Leanne, meanwhile, found OWS helped her through the onset of a mystery illness:

*'...they never really found out [what the cause was], but my nerves didn't really work properly for about eighteen months. I couldn't move my legs or move my body without pain for a while so water eased that and that's where I found movement'.*

The psychological benefits of OWS were particularly emphasised, including stress relief, emotional release and enhanced focus. For example, Jean referenced a notable impact in the 'psychological healing' it had provided to get her through several 'tough times', providing a greater sense of self-control and resilience. Kim, Jennifer and Susan described how the water freed them from stress, marking wild swims as 'me time', an essential mental (and physical) reprieve:

*'You just dump stuff in the water... like you leave it behind' (Kim)*

*'It's like that escape from the men, and the young children – it's "my time"'. (Susan)*

*'It's just like all the stress, kids, job, life, work, bills... all of that just goes'. (Jennifer)*

Further, participants noted that OWS facilitated mental clarity and the processing of emotions in a way that other forms of exercise did not; for example, Francesca enthused that after an early morning swim, she had a 'brilliant day at work', whilst Jackie noted:

*'It doesn't matter whatever's happened at work or at home... once you've been in the lake, your mind becomes clearer, happier, and more productive'.*

Many cited the solace they derived:

*'It's so beautiful, a very meditative and a nice experience – I'm just completely in my own head. I just find a lot of peace.'* (Florence)

The scenic landscapes not only offered inspiration, but also reinforced a *raison d'être* for being an open water swimmer:

*'Every time I look up... it's that view; that reminds me of why I've got in.'* (Angela)

Beyond extolling the direct physical and psychological benefits, participants frequently spoke about their connection with nature during OWS and highlighted the sensory experiences such as the feeling of water on skin and the beauty of the landscapes. This intimate relationship with nature was especially pronounced when swimmers were immersed in the water at eye level. Anne, Leanne, and Lily all contrasted the experience of green, land-based outdoor exercise with the feeling of being '*completely enveloped*' by the water and environment. Whilst many spoke of their love of the outdoors with other pursuits such as hiking, cycling, and running, there was consensus that OWS offered a very unique quality:

*'There's nothing that gives you the buzz of swimming, especially cold-water swimming... nothing compares to it exercise-wise... when you're swimming, and stop, you're not grounded, you're floating, suspended, weightless... you're completely surrounded.'* (Louise)

The psychological construct of experiencing a 'buzz' was alluded to by many swimmers, complemented by hedonic descriptions (e.g. 'exhilaration', 'exciting', 'feeling great', 'amazing', 'incredible', 'endorphin rush', 'addictive'). Such hedonism appeared more profound in winter, when more dips than swims were typically undertaken (in water temperatures <7°C). Carrie highlighted '*the euphoria of throwing yourself into cold water, skirting hypothermia and surviving... it's thrilling!*' while Veronica noted that winter swimming was more about '*embracing the actual experience*'. By association, several swimmers also spoke of an accentuated focus on breathing with winter swimming, induced by the initial shock of entering freezing water (sometimes as low as 4°C).

The valued connection with the environment extended to night swims, where the experience was enhanced by the unfamiliarity of darkness. Caitlin described night swims as '*more powerful in many ways*', adding that they were '*incredibly peaceful*' and made her more aware of herself and the elements (Figure 7).

Yvonne even referenced how her frequent connection with blue spaces developed a keen understanding of lake conditions:

*'...we get to know the waters that we're swimming in, so I know in certain weather, the lake will be pulling me to the left, or it'll be really difficult to sight on such a buoy... I love how we all know the water.'*

Further, many drew stark contrasts between OWS and indoor pool swimming, for instance Cathy described how she now found traditional pool swimming uninspiring:

*'I actually find it quite difficult to get in the pool and swim now because it's just mind numbing... it's just walls.'*



**Figure 7.** A 'night' swim.

In contrast, OWS offered both a mental and physical reward, with Veronica adding, *'There's never a bad swim... it's very, very rare you leave outdoor in a poorer state than when you went in'*.

The practice of OWS participation also evoked a return to childhood experiences with nature. Francesca reflected on how OWS allowed her to reconnect with the joy of playing in the water, as she had in her youth:

*'...when we were kids, so we used to have days playing; balls, swimming, jumping in, splashing, whatever. And we were always taught about fauna and flora...and I think I lost some of that, as life takes over and you're not a kid anymore, so you can't just go play in the lake. But now I've found that you can go and play in the lake. I've found a little group now, and that's what we like to do – play time. It's brilliant. It's like feeling like a child. And I don't think you have enough times in your life, when you're an adult, when you actually feel like a kid again. I feel this is my little environment, I know it – and I've got it back'*.

Despite the many benefits, some swimmers mentioned the discomforts of open water swimming, such as the occasional encounter with underwater plants or the shock of cold temperatures; suggesting not all experiences were restorative or free of stress. Reference was also made to 'swimmer's itch', a condition derived from a duck mite parasite present in shallow waters. However, these discomforts were often viewed with humour or light-heartedness, and participants generally brushed them off. Still, the rewards of the practice far outweighed the discomfort. As Rosie put it, the sensation of direct water contact on skin, without a wetsuit, made the experience more intense:

*'I don't like wetsuits. They're a hassle. The sensations are heightened when the water is directly on your skin'*.

In summarising this second theme, swimmers embraced the embodied notion that the landscapes they engaged with offered both therapy and health promoting qualities, literally 'washing away' stress and everyday worries through their water-based experiences. For

many, it was more than just exercise – it was a therapeutic retreat, a way to reset, and a way to regain a sense of play and joy in their lives.

### **Theme 3: social connectedness, belonging, and support**

It seemed that most of the interviewees were introduced to OWS through friends or relatives rather than discovering it independently. Others joined through coaching sessions and then sought like-minded swim ‘buddies’. This highlighted an acknowledgement of the sport’s inherent risks (e.g. cold water shock, riptides, hypothermia; after drop; underwater obstructions) and the need for support from fellow swimmers and experienced coaches. The camaraderie helped swimmers navigate personal limits without judgment, as Jennifer described:

*‘I’ve gone in [lake] before now and it’s just literally too cold for me... but I haven’t felt guilty because I haven’t swum... There’s no shame!’*

Beyond the physical act of swimming outdoors, the social aspect was clearly equally valued. MC noted that conversations before and after swims flowed freely, creating an immediate sense of belonging, even for newcomers (including himself, especially being a male in a largely [older] female space). The shared experience of being an open water swimmer provided an easy entry into discussions on conditions, destinations, achievements, and challenges. The act of swimming together – moving side by side toward a pre-determined target such as a marker buoy – fostered a sense of unity and relaxation, contrasting with the structured, often isolating environment of indoor pools.

Whether novice or experienced swimmer, it was evident that the complete experience – from arrival, disrobing (sometimes clumsily getting into swimwear or wetsuit), the swim itself, emergence back onto dry land to redress quickly (again, with some clumsiness), and subsequent warming refreshments on the beach or slipway afterwards – were all part of a collective sense of attachment to ‘place’, an attachment that appeared strengthened with each subsequent encounter and shared experience. Notably, some suggested that OWS fostered this extent of social interaction much more so than other sports they had hitherto experienced.

The sense of belonging extended beyond local groups, with online networks providing guidance, support and inspiration: for example, posting warnings about the presence of blue-green algae in inland water; sharing tips on equipment purchases; highlighting forthcoming events; and, for Florence, becoming bolder in kit purchases of kit through the national ‘Blue Tits’ network:

*‘...there are some spectacular women in some outdoor groups, who take extraordinary pictures of themselves. I’ve bought one of the swimming costumes and it’s ‘never knowingly subtle’. The Blue Tits kit is all huge eye-catching polka dots, bright, colourful and loud – it’s fantastic!’*

Social media facilitated connections across locations, helping swimmers arrange meetups while traveling. Francesca admitted her growing attachment to OWS through her social media feeds:

*‘My Facebook and Instagram are all pretty much OWS and waterfall groups... Even if I’m not swimming, I’m living it vicariously to get a little fix.’*



However, as groups grew, managing safety became a challenge. Susan described how a once-small group swelled to thousands, complicating meetups and increasing responsibility for experienced swimmers:

*'You didn't want that responsibility of going out with people you didn't know... So, we set up a different group.'*

Despite these challenges, online groups remained valuable for organising safe swims and offering emotional support, or, as Yvonne put it, "*Women support women, and make things happen!*". Swimmers like Louise suggested OWS participation had forged new, and close, friendships, such that swimmers could recognise when others were struggling:

*'A friend of mine will turn to me and go, 'What's wrong?' And I'll say, 'Oh actually yeah, there is something wrong' – because when you're in the water, you're stripped bare. You're looking after each other, and it's like, 'Yeah, I do need a bit of a chat.'*

Louise's exchange with a swim partner is not untypical of a relationship that appears a natural consequence of frequent social encounters in blue spaces – whereby an appreciation of ability, technique, location-specific hazards or features, and prior experiences of bodily response to cold water immersion – are freely transacted in a spirit of mutual support, which swimmers felt might not be so readily offered up in land-based contexts. This natural camaraderie encouraged swimmers to take their first steps into OWS and push their limits. Kim emphasised the role of female support networks:

*'As a group, we buoy each other up. Everybody's like, "You can do it!" And' it's like, "Yeah, why aren't I doing it?"'*

For Carrie, the group provided a lifeline during her divorce:

*'Meeting these guys has absolutely been my life raft... It's not just about the swimming but the meeting up that has kept me going.'*

Whilst the majority stated a preference for group swimming, most were open to swimming solo occasionally, whilst acknowledging it provided a very different experience: one typically where they adjusted their swimming range (e.g. staying closer to shore), or ensuring a spotter was present to raise an alarm if anything went awry:

*'I've swum on my own a few times, the first time was last year and it was very eerie and misty, it was lovely, but I didn't feel that safe because I was on my own. So, I literally was just in and out' (Rosie)*

For many, however, the social dividends meant an explicit preference for group swims:

*'[solo] it's just not as fun. You don't get to shout and scream and swear to let off steam!' (Shirley)*

The inclusive, welcoming nature of OWS was a common theme, with Edith noting the infectious laughter and kindness within her group:

*'I've been in this group for ten months and don't think I've ever laughed so much... We have so much fun, and the people are always nice.'*

Louise highlighted how OWS fosters a sense of equality:

*'We're all from different walks of life... but when we're in there, we're all the same.'*

However, some acknowledged the privilege of accessing blue space, with Leanne noting barriers related to transport, affordability, and socioeconomic status:

*'We're generally white middle class, reasonably well off... Buses don't regularly go to outdoor places.'*

Some also observed gendered differences in how men and women engaged with OWS. Veronica suggested that men seemed more focused on performance and training, whereas women were drawn to the camaraderie:

*'For me, there are two sides to it: the swimming and the group camaraderie... And I think that's more a women's thing – it's an opportunity to be part of something at any level.'*

Despite being a male newcomer to predominantly female groups, MC found himself welcomed into this space, reinforcing the inclusive nature of the activity as noted in an excerpt from his field notes (Figure 8).

## Discussion

This study sought to examine the allure of OWS for women, with a specific focus upon what meaning it holds for them, why they participate, and the perceived benefits derived from participation. Three themes were identified within the participants' accounts which, in combination, described how OWS promoted a range of personal agency impacts,

'I arrived early to ensure I'd find a car space, and, more importantly, locate where the ladies meet. I needn't have worried; it was as described in their very helpful pre-visit instructions! It wasn't long before several women arrived, most with beaming smiles. I could already sense the strong bonds between them. 'Are you Mark?' one of the offered before I could make my own introductions. 'Yes, hi' I said, making good eye contact with as many as possible – which was comfortingly reciprocated. Conversation soon flowed, and I was struck how keen they were to even adjust their swim distance to suit me, after I hinted that the nearest buoy at 350m was a target I was happy to aim for. 'Yeah, we'll all do that then today' was the friendly response... no hint at all as if that wasn't challenging enough, despite some having already alluded to having entered length of lake swim events. Interviews over, we set about stripping off to get into our swim costumes (no wetsuits here – but it is summer!), and although I felt the need to change a respectful few metres away from the group – probably a hangover from the regimented strictures of segregated pool swimming changing rooms - we set out for the marker as agreed, sometimes chatting, other times just enjoying the rhythm of our bodies cutting through the water alongside each other, but with a respectful gap between. At the buoy, there was more discussion about various issues such as goggle anti-mist sprays (as mine had fogged up a bit!), who swam in winter, the gorgeous views, and 'uh oh, here comes the wake from the steamer!' At no point did I feel uncomfortable as a male entering their 'territory' – quite the contrary, they wished more men would join in – although some joked as long as it wasn't their husbands!'

(MC's Field notes, Swim 3)

**Figure 8.** Field notes excerpt.



**Figure 9.** Word Cloud relating to the meaning and value of OWS to participating women.

salutogenic benefits – especially in respect of psychological health – and enhanced acquisition of social capital. The evidence presented, moreover, underscores how OWS plays a pivotal role in the women’s lives, almost to an addictive level of engagement (which in itself may be a potential issue if for whatever reason access became problematic), with the social connectedness, and connection to nature, highly valued as key by-products of participation. A word cloud featuring expressed sentiments of the meaning and value of the OWS experience is featured in [Figure 9](#).

### ***Theme 1: transformative impacts upon personal agency***

The first major theme noted the swimmers’ acquisition of important personal agency outcomes, including greater self-confidence, enhancements to skills (motor or personal), resilience and self-control. Such enhancements have the potential to positively impact other areas of the swimmers’ lives (Lim and Dixon 2017; Streetman and Heinrich 2023). Further, as noted by Hancock, Lyras, and Ha (2013), the women ostensibly challenged gender expectations of participation in an activity considered as extreme. From the perspective of enhanced personal capital, many of the women highlighted how OWS was an activity that filled a specific void or need in their lives. For some, the activity revoked their indifference to organised sport. OWS offered an opportunity to challenge themselves, whether through year-round swimming (including in very cold weather), improving distance/duration of swimming, entering events or even acquiring new skills in coach education. Others mentioned how OWS has led to an increased awareness of conservation issues and the development of a sense of environmental activism. Enhanced personal agency was also evidenced by testimonies that highlighted impressive personal adjustments to overcome the impacts of injury or illness.

Respondents suggested there was always a sense of purpose to every swim (e.g. for fun, adventure, or meeting others), with resultant satisfaction; findings consistent with those of

Christie and Elliott (2023). Such purposeful swims acted as a gateway to empowerment, governed by the ability of the women to match or even surpass their male counterparts – whether simply in terms of tolerating the cold water, or in OWS performance – thus perceiving OWS as a more level playing field compared to the vast majority of land-based sports. Roth and Basow (2004) argue that often women’s physical capabilities are underestimated, with differences over-exaggerated. Thus, it is suggested at least some of the physical differences between women and men might be socially constructed. The fact that women can perceive themselves as equal to men in OWS contexts might therefore challenge some notions of male dominance in sporting pursuits and offer up opportunities to not only encourage more women to become physically active but also aspire to be more performance level oriented. This has the potential to broaden their sporting horizons beyond OWS as they acquire greater self-efficacy. It also reflects the potential for women’s empowerment as facilitated by a newly popularised, [arguably] postmodern ‘sport’, unshackled from the male hegemony associated with traditional sports (and co-existent masculine values such as toughness, aggression, and power), thus providing space for an emphasis upon differentiated values such as freedom and expressing individuality (Lim and Dixon 2017). Relatedly, women emphasised feelings of liberation, for example over losing inhibitions regarding displaying nakedness in public, or any sense of shame regarding body image, a narrative that was also noted by Bates and Moles (2022) in a lakeside study.

Taken together, the enhancements to personal agency described by the swimmers are consistent with theoretical conceptions of eudaimonic wellbeing (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) noted by Ryff (1989). They also align with Ferguson and Gunnell (2016) view that eudaimonic wellbeing emphasises a need for individuals to optimise their potential and sense of purpose, so that their lives become enriched as meaningful, worthwhile, and valuable – particularly important for women of middle age (as in this sample), who appeared to have hitherto faced significant challenges to their well-being. Lastly, many of the sentiments expressed can be seen to orient with the ‘Accomplishment’, ‘Meaning’ and ‘Positive Emotions’ elements of the PERMA model (Seligman 2011) *via* obtaining success (however they personally defined success), satisfaction and advocacy.

### ***Theme 2: salutogenic benefits derived from OWS and blue spaces***

From a salutogenic perspective [theme two], McDougall et al. (2022) and Christie and Elliott (2023, 2024b) highlight the growing evidence supporting the physical and psychological health benefits of OWS. They noted the therapeutic impacts upon specific impairments and illnesses and the transformative effects of water immersion. Although a few of the swimmers mentioned physical ill-health conditions benefitting from OWS, largely it was the psychological impacts they accentuated in their testimonies. Foley (2017) suggests a ‘therapeutic resilience’ is promoted through OWS, in an accretive sense with each swimming encounter; this appeared to have resonance with those women who attested to difficult phases in their lives, and how OWS helped them manage specific traumas or problems. As noted by Barnard (2018), research regarding gender inequalities suggests the multiple roles and associated demands women typically experience on a daily basis are a cause of lower levels of well-being in women of middle age, and so if OWS can alleviate these pressures, this may be a significant element in the attractiveness of this outdoor activity to women.

Respondents found nature connectedness a key factor in their enjoyment of OWS, but also in freeing up the mind from the worries of role responsibilities. Women found they could effectively ‘declutter’ and ‘escape’ from such concerns and feel refreshed to re-enter the fray post-swim. The absorption, soft fascination, restoration and almost spiritual experiences swimmers described through nature connectedness (enhanced by sharing such experiences) aligns closely with the ‘Meaning’ and ‘Engagement’ elements of PERMA. Indeed, Moles (2021) describes a similar account of swimmer interactions and relationships in water, where distracting thoughts linked to land-based life ‘ebb away as the swim progresses’. Interestingly, many cited the value of childhood experiences as a potential influential factor on present day participation. Indeed, Rosa et al. (2018) and Thompson, Aspinall, and Montarzino (2008) suggest there is tentative evidence that adult connection to nature, and the development of pro-social behaviours, is rooted in the regularity of positive interactions in natural contexts during childhood. Further, recollecting childhood experiences in blue spaces might also explain the positive, hedonic feelings derived from OWS (Suszek, Kofta, and Kopera 2019) and thus might represent a potential moderating factor influencing both participatory behaviour and associated salutogenic benefits. These deep echoes of families, friends and encounters with blue spaces from childhood (Christie and Elliott 2023; Foley 2017; Rosa et al. 2018) is a common finding in the limited qualitative research surrounding OWS experiences and may be a useful means of reawakening interest in participation for those currently physically inactive.

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) – empirically supported across the literature for several decades (Jones and Littzen 2022) – posits that for environments to be restorative they need to be of meaningful ‘extent’, i.e. being expansive spaces or contexts (Roe and McCay 2021). This chimes with the awe and wonder the women expressed about the scenic vistas they were typically experiencing as part of their open water endeavours, and the specific meanings they attached to such experiences. It should also be noted that the women’s endorsement of environments as being beautiful are also aligned to the proposals of ART and Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) that natural settings provide an aesthetic benefit (Herzog et al. 2010; Kaplan and Berman 2010). The unique features respondents cited may be a key reason that women are calmed and experience stress relief (as conceptualised by SRT). A body of research on soundscapes has shown that auditory qualities of the natural environment can influence wellbeing in a range of ways including heightening of senses (Kjellgren and Buhrkall 2010), however, affective response and interpretation of noises is personal and intricately linked to meaning making and associations with past experience (Ratcliffe 2021). Indeed, the heightened sensory experiences associated with night and/or winter swimming suggest the embodiment of hedonistic responses (e.g. joy, delight, exhilaration) and behaviours (e.g. laughter and screaming on entry) *via* immersion in cold water, and blue spaces. Hedonism, as expressed in such emotive terms in response to surroundings and immersion, has parallels in the affective responses referenced by swimmers in a study by Foley (2017). The ‘buzz’ many women associated with OWS participation has been similarly noted in studies by McDougall et al. (2022), Christie and Elliott (2023) and Thompson and Wilkie (2020). It may be the hedonism associated with OWS experiences is a key mechanism in stress reduction and corresponding mental uplift (Buckley 2020), and symptomatic of the strongly expressed emotional bonds the women appeared to associate with blue spaces; but also, as identified in the third theme, the social bonds they created through swimming encounters. The notion of embodiment (Kiverstein 2012) is also very

pertinent here, whereby swimmers' emotions and behaviours are essentially grounded in the sensory experiences derived from immersion in cold water.

It should however be noted that swimmers did occasionally experience 'scary nature' (Mcphie and Clarke 2018), so that whilst nature connectedness largely held positive meaning and value, it could also provide experiential deficits, for example in the form of algal blooms, water pollution, riptides, and even parasitic infections (Christie and Elliott 2024a). This has implications for managing expectations for novice open water swimmers to ensure an early negative experience does not mitigate against continued participation.

### ***Theme 3: social connectedness, belonging and support***

In respect of the socialisation dimension [theme three], the field researcher was struck by the seemingly equal weight women gave towards the social component of group swims. Whilst some swimmers also suggested they liked the occasional solo swim (typically for maximising restoration), it was apparent that the banter before and after each swim, sharing of cake during conversations, the (sometimes awkward) laughing and screaming on entry to the water, undressing and redressing rituals, and the often hastily organised pre- or post-swim group photograph for Facebook, were highly valued parts of the experience. These behaviours ostensibly acted as a gateway to enhancing social capital both individually and collectively through shared experience, facilitating social connectedness, new friendships, knowledge exchange, and exciting adventures (explicitly representing the 'Relationships' element from PERMA). The effect even extended beyond the context of the swimming encounters themselves, and into other social interactions and engagements. It is interesting to note that although much research has focused on the individual benefit of restoration (noted in theme two) that natural environments provide, it has been theorised that there may be group benefits too; dyad restoration, i.e. collective improvement to wellbeing, may result from improved dynamics between people environments that are pleasant (Hartig et al. 2013). Therefore, the benefits of the natural environment may aid the interpersonal relationships and sense of community the groups fostered.

There was, however, a general acknowledgement that the women felt privileged in having access to blue spaces as many of the UK population are arguably excluded from the potential benefits of nature in lacking proximity to such environments. Some of this concern has been recognised in the modern era concept of 'nature deficit disorder' (Louv 2005), driven by increasing urbanisation (Dallimer et al. 2014; Ren et al. 2023) and the UK's designation as one of the most nature depleted countries in the world (Hayhow et al. 2016). This is compounded when more remote locations are problematic at best for major urban dwellers to reach without major commitments in terms of time, travel, and associated cost. And whilst, paradoxically, many spoke of how inclusive OWS is as an active pursuit, the study sample appeared less than 'inclusive', given all participants were white, mostly drawn from professional occupations (e.g. education, administrative, health) and almost exclusively over 50 years of age. One potential barrier for specific population groups is that some cultures promote modesty, and therefore OWS may be at odds with these expectations; so that while OWS is attracting more women than other activities, it may not be attracting women from a diverse range of backgrounds.

## Conclusion

This study explored women's lived experiences of OWS, focusing on their motives, benefits, and what it means to be an open water swimmer. Findings highlight both individual benefits – such as psychological well-being and personal agency – and social rewards gained from being part of a supportive community. Participant experiences support both ART and SRT theories and also align with Seligman's PERMA model, demonstrating how OWS fosters happiness (positive emotions), deep engagement, strong social connections, a sense of purpose through nature immersion, and empowerment through achievement. Women are drawn to OWS for its inclusive, non-judgmental environment, which fosters self-actualisation, freedom, and empowerment. The opportunity for self-expression – whether through playfulness, colourful swimwear, or feeling less self-conscious – was particularly valued. These insights are useful for practitioners, including coaches, health professionals, facility operators, and governing bodies, to better understand and support women's open water participation.

As OWS grows as a mass participation activity, challenges remain, including education on water safety, preparation, and equipment. While OWS offers an inclusive space for women in sport, systemic barriers such as childcare and travel constraints persist, requiring attention from policymakers and practitioners.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## ORCID

Sue Wilbraham  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8512-0041>

## References

- Albright, C., J. E. Maddock, and C. R. Nigg. 2005. "Physical Activity before Pregnancy and following Childbirth in a Multi-Ethnic Sample of Healthy Women in Hawaii." *Women & Health* 42 (3): 95–110. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j013v42n03\\_06](https://doi.org/10.1300/j013v42n03_06).
- Ansari, W. E., and G. Lovell. 2009. "Barriers to Exercise in Younger and Older Non-Exercising Adult Women: A Cross Sectional Study in London, United Kingdom." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 6 (4): 1443–1455. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph6041443>.
- Apollo, M., J. Mostowska, A. Legut, K. Maciuk, and T. Dallen. 2023. "Gender Differences in Competitive Adventure Sports Tourism." *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* 42: 100604. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2022.100604>
- Barnard, A. 2018. "Well-Being, More Than a Dream: Women Constructing Metaphors of Strength." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (9): 1186. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01186>.
- Bates, C., and K. Moles. 2022. "Bobbing in the Park: Wild Swimming, Conviviality and Belonging." *Leisure Studies* 43 (6): 887–899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2085774>.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2019. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11 (4): 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.
- Brown, S. 2020. *The Social Benefits of Blue Space: A Systematic Review*. Bristol: Environment Agency.
- Buckley, R. 2020. "Nature Sports, Health and Ageing: The Value of Euphoria." *Annals of Leisure Research* 23 (1): 92–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2018.1483734>.

- Byrne, D. 2022. "A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke's Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Quality & Quantity* 56 (3): 1391–1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>.
- Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Christie, M., and D. Elliott. 2023. "I Get Headspace Here... You Forget Everything When in Outdoor': Motives for Participation and Perceived Benefits Derived from Outdoor Swimming: A Rapid Ethnographic Study." *Sport in Society* 26 (12): 2108–2131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.233428>.
- Christie, M., and D. Elliott. 2024a. "You Have to Respect the Water': Participant Experiences of Appreciating and Managing the Risks Associated with Open Water Swimming – A Rapid Ethnographic Study." *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education* 14 (3): 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.25035/ijare.14.03.03>.
- Christie, M. A., and D. Elliott. 2024b. "From a Dark Place to a Blue Space: Open Water Swimming Transformed Our Lives." *Sport in Society* 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2024.2357231>.
- Cla, T. 2019. "Time to Tackle the Physical Activity Gender Gap." *The Lancet Public Health* 6: E 1077–86.
- Clark, A. 2019. "Exploring Women's Experiences: Embodied Pathways and Influences for Exercise Participation." *Societies* 9 (1): 16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc9010016>.
- Coen, S. E., M. W. Rosenberg, and J. Davidson. 2018. "It's Gym, like Gym Not Jim": Exploring the Role of Place in the Gendering of Physical Activity." *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 196: 29–36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.10.036>.
- Dallimer, Martin, Zoe G. Davies, Katherine N. Irvine, Lorraine Maltby, Philip H. Warren, Kevin J. Gaston, and Paul R. Armsworth. 2014. "What Personal and Environmental Factors Determine Frequency of Urban Greenspace Use?" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 11 (8): 7977–7992. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph110807977>.
- Denton, H., and K. Aranda. 2019. "The Wellbeing Benefits of Sea Swimming. Is It Time to Revisit the Sea Cure?" *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 12 (5): 647–663. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1649714>.
- Edwards, E. S., and S. C. Sackett. 2016. "Psychosocial Variables Related to Why Women Are Less Active than Men and Related Health Implications: Supplementary Issue: Health Disparities in Women." *Clinical Medicine Insights: Women's Health* 9s1: CMWH.S34668. <https://doi.org/10.4137/CMWH.S34668>.
- Ferguson, L. J., and K. E. Gunnell. 2016. "Eudaimonic Well-Being: A Gendered Perspective." In *Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being*. Cham: Springer.
- Foley, R. 2017. "Swimming as an Accretive Practice in Healthy Blue Space." *Emotion, Space and Society* 22: 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2016.12.001>.
- Frick, B. 2021. "Gender Differences in Risk-Taking and Sensation-Seeking Behavior: Empirical Evidence from Extreme Sports." *De Economist* 169 (1): 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10645-020-09373-y>.
- Hancock, M., A. Lyras, and J. P. Ha. 2013. "Sport for Development Programmes for Girls and Women: A Global Assessment." *Journal of Sport for Development* 1 (1): 15–24.
- Hartig, T., R. C. M. Ong, and S. L. Syme. 2013. "Vacation, Collective Restoration, and Mental Health in a Population." *Society and Mental Health* 3 (3): 221–236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869313497718>.
- Hayhow, D. B., F. Burns, M. A. Eaton, L. Bacon, N. Al-Fulaij. 2016. "State of Nature." England. The State of Nature partnership.
- Herzog, T. R., P. Ouellette, J. R. Rolens, and A. M. Koenigs. 2010. "Houses of Worship as Restorative Environments." *Environment and Behavior* 42 (4): 395–419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916508328610>.
- Jones, Reo J. F., and Chloé O. R. Littzen. 2022. "An Analysis of Theoretical Perspectives in Research on Nature-Based Interventions and Pain." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (19): 12740. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191912740>.



- Joye, Y., and Agnes van den Berg. 2011. "Is Love for Green in Our Genes? A Critical Analysis of Evolutionary Assumptions in Restorative Environments Research." *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 10 (4): 261–268. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2011.07.004>.
- Kaim, D. 2015. "Barriers to Women's Participation in Sport and Active Recreation." *International Journal of Physical Education, Sports and Health* 2 (1): 96–98.
- Kaplan, S. 1995. "The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Towards an Integrative Framework." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15 (3): 169–182. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-4944\(95\)90001-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-4944(95)90001-2).
- Kaplan, S., and M. G. Berman. 2010. "Directed Attention as a Common Resource for Executive Functioning and Self-Regulation." *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 5 (1): 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691609356784>.
- Kern, M. L., L. E. Waters, A. Adler, and M. A. White. 2015. "A Multidimensional Approach to Measuring Well-Being in Students: Application of the PERMA Framework." *Journal of Positive Psychology* 10 (3): 262–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2014.936962>.
- Kilgour, L., and A. Parker. 2013. "Gender, Physical Activity and Fear: Women, Exercise and the Great Outdoors." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 5 (1): 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2012.71861>.
- Kiverstein, J. 2012. "The Meaning of Embodiment." *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4 (4): 740–758. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-8765.2012.01219.x>.
- Kjellgren, A., and H. Buhrkall. 2010. "A Comparison of the Restorative Effect of a Natural Environment with That of a Simulated Natural Environment." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30 (4): 464–472. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.01.011>.
- Knechtle, B., Z. Waśkiewicz, C. V. Sousa, L. Hill, and P. T. Nikolaidis. 2020. "Cold Water Swimming—Benefits and Risks: A Narrative Review." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17 (23): 8984. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17238984>.
- Lim, S. Y., and M. A. Dixon. 2017. "A Conceptual Framework of Sport Participation and Women's Empowerment." *Managing Sport and Leisure* 22 (5): 400–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2018.1499437>.
- Louv, R. 2005. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Massey, H., N. Kandala, C. Davis, M. Harper, P. Gorczynski, and H. Denton. 2020. "Mood and Well-Being of Novice Outdoor Swimmers and Controls during an Introductory Outdoor Swimming Programme: A Feasibility Study." *Lifestyle Medicine* 1 (2): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/lim2.12>.
- McDougall, C. W., R. Foley, N. Hanley, R. S. Quilliam, and D. M. Oliver. 2022. "Freshwater Wild Swimming, Health and Well-Being: Understanding the Importance of Place and Risk." *Sustainability* 14 (10): 6364. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14106364>.
- McPhie, J., and D. A. G. Clarke. 2018. "Nature Matters: Diffracting a Keystone Concept of Environmental Education Research – Just for Kicks." *Environmental Education Research* 26 (9–10): 1509–1526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2018.1531387>.
- Moffatt, F. 2017. "The Individual Physical Health Benefits of Swimming: A Literature Review." In *The Health & Wellbeing Benefits of Swimming: A Collection of Seven Academic Reviews*, edited by I. Cumming, 8–25. Leicestershire: Swim England.
- Molanorouzi, K., S. Khoo, and T. Morris. 2015. "Motives for Adult Participation in Physical Activity: Type of Activity, Age, and Gender." *BMC Public Health* 15 (1): 66. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-1429-7>.
- Moles, K. 2021. "The Social World of Outdoor Swimming: Cultural Practices, Shared Meanings, and Bodily Encounters." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 45 (1): 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723520928598>.
- Murray, E., and J. Fox. 2021. "The Meaning of Open-Water Swimming for Adults in Ireland: A Qualitative Study." *Irish Journal of Occupational Therapy* 49 (2): 89–95. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOT-10-2020-0016>.
- Nowell, L. S., J. M. Norris, D. E. White, and N. J. Moules. 2017. "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.

- Outdoor Swimmer. 2021. "Trends in Outdoor Swimming Report." <https://outdoorswimmer.com/news/trends-in-outdoor-swimming-report-available-now/>.
- Outdoor Swimming Society. 2022. Is It Safe? <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/is-it-safe/>.
- Passmore, H.-A., and A. J. Howell. 2014. "Nature Involvement Increases Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being: A Two-Week Experimental Study." *Ecopsychology* 6 (3): 148–154.
- Pritchard, A., M. Richardson, D. Sheffield, and K. McEwan. 2020. "The Relationship between Nature Connectedness and Eudaimonic Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 21 (3): 1145–1167. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0203000>.
- Ratcliffe, E. 2021. "Sound and Soundscape in Restorative Natural Environments: A Narrative Literature Review." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12: 570563. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.570563>.
- Ren, Q., C. He, Q. Huang, D. Zhang, P. Shi, and W. Lu. 2023. "Impacts of Global Urban Expansion on Natural Habitats Undermine the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity." *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 190: 106834. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2022.106834>.
- Roe, J., and L. McCay. 2021. *Restorative Cities: Urban Design for Mental Health and Wellbeing*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Rosa, C. D., C. C. Profice, and S. Collado. 2018. "Nature Experiences and Adults' Self-Reported Pro-Environmental Behaviors: The Role of Connectedness to Nature and Childhood Nature Experiences." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9: 1055. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01055>.
- Roth, A., and S. A. Basow. 2004. "Femininity, Sports, and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 28 (3): 245–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723504266990>.
- Ryff, C. D. 1989. "Happiness is Everything, or is It? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-Being." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57 (6): 1069–1081. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069>.
- Saxena, S., M. Van Ommeren, K. C. Tang, and T. P. Armstrong. 2005. "Mental Health Benefits of Physical Activity." *Journal of Mental Health* 14 (5): 445–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638230500270776>.
- Seal, E., M. Nicholson, N. McNeil, A. Stukas, P. O'Halloran, and E. Randle. 2022. "Fear of Judgement and Women's Physical (in)Activity Experiences." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 57 (3): 381–400. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902211016631>.
- Seligman, M. E. P. 2011. *Flourish*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Smith, B., and K. R. McGannon. 2018. "Developing Rigor in Qualitative Research: Problems and Opportunities within Sport and Exercise Psychology." *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 11 (1): 101–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357>.
- Sport England. 2021. "This Girl Can: Campaign Summary." London: Sport England. <https://www.sportengland.org/funds-and-campaigns/this-girl-can>.
- Sport England. 2023. "Gender." London: Sport England. <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/research/gender>.
- Sport Scotland. 2023. "On Track: Research & Data Spotlight." <https://sportsotland.org.uk/about-us/our-publications/archive/on-track-research-data-spotlight-being-active/>
- Streetman, A. E., and K. M. Heinrich. 2023. "Female Empowerment through Sport: An Exploratory Narrative Review." *Sport in Society* 27 (5): 804–819. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.2270443>.
- Suszek, H., M. Kofta, and M. Kopera. 2019. "Returning to the Present Moment: Thinking about One's Childhood Increases Focus on the Hedonistic Present." *Journal of General Psychology* 146 (2): 170–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221309.2018.1543646>.
- Tanaka, H. 2009. "Swimming Exercise: Impact of Aquatic Exercise on Cardiovascular Health." *Sports Medicine (Auckland, N.Z.)* 39 (5): 377–387. <https://doi.org/10.2165/00007256-200939050-00004>.
- Thompson, C. W., P. Aspinall, and A. Montarzino. 2008. "The Childhood Factor: Adults' Visits to Green Places and the Significance of Childhood Experience." *Environment and Behavior* 40 (1): 111–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916507300119>.
- Thompson, N., and S. Wilkie. 2020. "I'm Just Lost in the World: The Impact of Blue Exercise on Participant Well-Being." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 13 (4): 624–638. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2020.1761433>.

- Tipton, M., and C. Bradford. 2014. "Moving in Extreme Environments: Outdoor Swimming in Cold and Warm Water." *Extreme Physiology & Medicine* 3 (1): 12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2046-7648-3-12>.
- Ulrich, R. S., R. F. Simons, B. D. Losito, E. Fiorito, M. A. Miles, and M. Zelson. 1991. "Stress Recovery during Exposure to Natural and Urban Environments." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 11 (3): 201–230. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(05\)80184-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(05)80184-7).
- Van Tulleken, C., M. Tipton, H. Massey, and C. M. Harper. 2018. "Outdoor Swimming as a Treatment for Major Depressive Disorder." *Case Reports*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bcr-2018-225007>.
- VicHealth. 2019. "Females and Physical Activity: What the Research Shows." *Victorian Health Promotion Foundation*. Accessed January 18, 2024. <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Females-and-physical-activity.pdf>.
- Willig, C. 2008. "A Phenomenological Investigation of the Experience of Taking Part in 'Extreme Sports.'" *Journal of Health Psychology* 13 (5): 690–702. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105307082459>.
- Women in Sport. 2009. "Barriers to Sports Participation for Women and Girls." Accessed January 31, 2024. <https://womeninsport.org/resource/barriers-sports-participation-women-girls/>.
- World Health Organisation (WHO). 2021. "Physical Activity." Accessed January 31, 2024. <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/fact-sheets/item/physical-activity>.
- World Health Organisation (WHO). 2022. "Physical Activity." Accessed January 31, 2024. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity>.
- Xerri, D. 2018. "Two Methodological Challenges for Teacher-Researchers: Reflexivity and Trustworthiness. The Clearing House." *A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas* 91 (1): 37–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2017.1371549>.
- Zandt, F. 2023. "The Most Popular Sports & Activities in the U.S." Accessed March 23, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/chart/30240/respondents-who-do-the-following-sports-at-least-occasionally/>.
- Zervou, F., N. Stavrou, S. Koehn, K. Zounhia, and M. Psychountaki. 2017. "Motives for Exercise Participation: The Role of Individual and Psychological Characteristics." *Cogent Psychology* 4 (1): 1345141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2017.1345141>.