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“It’s just that little slice of life for you”. The meaning of outdoor swimming in lidos: An occupational perspective

Katherine Arnott  & Hannah Spring 

School of Science, Technology and Health, York St John University, York, England

ABSTRACT

Background: In England, there has been a rapid increase in the popularity of outdoor swimming and in the number of lidos. Research has considered the meanings of outdoor swimming; however, lido swimming remains virtually unexplored. From an occupational science perspective, meaningful occupation is fundamental to positive health outcomes; therefore, deepening understandings of meaning in lido swimming as an occupation is essential.

Aim: To explore the personal meanings of lido swimming and how engaging in this occupation impacts perceived health and well-being.

Methodology: Grounded in an interpretivist methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six adults who swam regularly at a lido in the East of England. Data were gathered in-situ at the lido and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings: The meaning of lido swimming is multi-faceted. Two main themes were identified: connection and belonging, and benefits to well-being. Lido swimming facilitated social and community connectedness, belonging, and connections between the past and present. Benefits to well-being emerged from a sense of purpose, routine, achievement, escapism, and feelings of harmony. These resulted in a strong emotional attachment to lido swimming and to the lido itself.

Conclusions: This research contributes to occupational science theories of meaning-making. Novel findings suggest lido swimming is a distinct form of outdoor swimming with unique contributions to health and well-being. The meanings of lido swimming appear to expand beyond the swimming itself, encompassing deeper meanings of community, connection, purpose, and escapism.

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte : En Angleterre, on observe une augmentation rapide de la popularité de la natation en milieu extérieur, parallèlement à une croissance notable du nombre de piscines de plein air (*lidos*). Si plusieurs travaux de recherche se sont penchés sur les significations associées à la natation en extérieur, la pratique spécifique de la natation en *lido* demeure largement inexplorée. Du point de vue de la science de l’occupation, l’engagement dans des occupations signifiantes constitue un fondement essentiel des résultats positifs en matière de santé ; il apparaît dès lors indispensable d’approfondir les connaissances relatives au sens que revêt la natation en *lido* en tant qu’occupation.

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CONTACT Hannah Spring  h.spring@yorks.ac.uk

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Objectif : Explorer les significations personnelles associées à la natation en *lido* et examiner la manière dont l'engagement dans cette occupation influence la perception de la santé et du bien-être.

Méthodologie : Ancrée dans une approche interprétative, cette étude repose sur la réalisation d'entretiens semi-dirigés auprès de six adultes pratiquant régulièrement la natation dans un *lido* situé à l'est de l'Angleterre. Les données ont été recueillies *in situ*, au sein même du *lido*, puis analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique réflexive.

Résultats : Le sens attribué à la natation en *lido* s'avère multidimensionnel. Deux thèmes principaux ont émergé : le sentiment de connexion et d'appartenance, ainsi que les bénéfices perçus pour le bien-être. La pratique de la natation en *lido* favorise les liens sociaux et communautaires, le sentiment d'appartenance, de même que des liens symboliques entre le passé et le présent. Les bénéfices pour le bien-être découlent notamment d'un sentiment de but, de routine, d'accomplissement, d'évasion et d'harmonie. Ces dimensions contribuent à un fort attachement émotionnel, tant à la pratique de la natation en *lido* qu'au *lido* lui-même.

Conclusion : Cette recherche contribue à l'enrichissement des théories de la science de l'occupation relatives aux processus de construction du sens. Les résultats, de nature novatrice, suggèrent que la natation en *lido* constitue une forme distincte de natation en extérieur, apportant des contributions spécifiques à la santé et au bien-être. Les significations associées à cette occupation dépassent l'acte de nager en tant que tel pour englober des dimensions plus profondes de communauté, de connexion, de sens et d'évasion.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Hintergrund: In England hat die Beliebtheit des Schwimmens im Freien sowie die Zahl der Freibäder (Lidos) stark zugenommen. Die Forschung hat sich mit den Bedeutungen des Schwimmens im Freien befasst; das Schwimmen in Lidos ist jedoch bislang kaum erforscht. Aus einer Occupational-Science-Perspektive ist bedeutungsvolle Betätigung grundlegend für positive gesundheitliche Ergebnisse; daher ist es entscheidend, das Verständnis der Bedeutung des Schwimmens in Lidos als Betätigung zu vertiefen.

Ziel: Das Ziel ist es, die persönlichen Bedeutungen des Schwimmens in Lidos zu untersuchen und zu erforschen, wie die Ausübung dieser Betätigung die wahrgenommene Gesundheit und das Wohlbefinden beeinflusst.

Methodik: Basierend auf einer interpretativen Methodologie wurden halbstrukturierte Interviews mit sechs Erwachsenen durchgeführt, die regelmäßig in einem Lido im Osten Englands schwammen. Die Daten wurden vor Ort im Lido erhoben und mithilfe einer reflexiven thematischen Analyse ausgewertet.

Ergebnisse: Die Bedeutung des Schwimmens in Lidos ist vielschichtig. Zwei zentrale Themen wurden identifiziert: Verbundenheit und Zugehörigkeit sowie positive Auswirkungen auf das Wohlbefinden. Das Schwimmen im Lido förderte soziale und gemeinschaftliche Verbundenheit, Zugehörigkeit sowie Verbindungen zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Positive Effekte auf das Wohlbefinden ergaben sich aus einem Gefühl von Sinnhaftigkeit, Routine, Erfolgserlebnissen, Eskapismus sowie einem Gefühl von Harmonie. Dies führte zu einer starken emotionalen Bindung an das Schwimmen im Lido sowie an den Lido selbst.

Fazit: Diese Forschung trägt zur Theoriebildung der Occupational Science im Bereich der Sinnkonstruktion bei. Neue Erkenntnisse deuten darauf hin, dass das Schwimmen in Lidos eine eigenständige Form des Schwimmens im Freien ist, die einzigartige Beiträge zu Gesundheit und Wohlbefinden

leistet. Die Bedeutungen des Schwimmens in Lidos scheinen über das eigentliche Schwimmen hinauszugehen und umfassen tiefere Aspekte von Gemeinschaft, Verbundenheit, Sinnhaftigkeit und Eskapismus.

RESUMEN

Contexto: En Inglaterra, ha habido un aumento rápido de la popularidad de la natación al aire libre y del número de piscinas tipo lido. La investigación se ha centrado en los significados de la natación al aire libre; sin embargo, la natación en lido sigue siendo prácticamente inexplorada. Desde la perspectiva de la ciencia ocupacional, las actividades con significado son fundamentales para obtener resultados positivos en la salud; por lo tanto, profundizar en la comprensión del significado de la natación en lido como ocupación resulta esencial.

Objetivo: Explorar los significados personales de la natación en lido y cómo la participación en esta ocupación influye en la percepción de la salud y el bienestar.

Metodología: Basada en una metodología interpretativa, se llevaron a cabo entrevistas semiestructuradas con seis adultos que nadaban regularmente en un lido en el este de Inglaterra. Los datos se recopilaban in situ en el lido y se analizaron mediante un análisis temático reflexivo.

Resultados: El significado de la natación en lido es multifacético. Se identificaron dos temas principales: conexión y sentido de pertenencia, y beneficios para el bienestar. La natación en lido facilitó la conexión social y comunitaria, el sentido de pertenencia y los vínculos entre pasado y presente. Los beneficios para el bienestar surgieron de un sentido de propósito, rutina, logro, evasión y sentimientos de armonía. Estos elementos dieron lugar a un fuerte apego emocional tanto a la práctica como al propio lido.

Conclusiones: Esta investigación contribuye a las teorías de la ciencia ocupacional sobre la construcción de significado. Los hallazgos sugieren que la natación en lido constituye una forma distinta de natación al aire libre, con aportaciones específicas a la salud y el bienestar. Los significados asociados van más allá de la actividad de nadar en sí, abarcando significados más profundos de comunidad, conexión, propósito y evasión.

摘要

研究背景: 在英格兰, 户外游泳的热度以及露天泳池 (lidos) 的数量均快速攀升。已有研究探讨了户外游泳的意义, 但针对露天泳池游泳的研究仍相对缺乏。从职能科学视角来看, 有意义的职能活动是实现积极健康结局的核心, 因此深化对露天泳池游泳这一职能活动之意义的理解至关重要。

研究目的: 探究露天泳池游泳的个人意义, 以及参与该职能活动如何影响个体感知到的健康与幸福感。

研究方法: 本研究基于诠释主义方法论, 对英格兰东部某露天泳池内定期游泳的 6 名成人进行半结构化访谈。资料在泳池现场收集, 并采用反思性主题分析法进行分析。

研究结果: 露天泳池游泳的意义具有多元性。研究归纳出两大核心主题: 联结与归属感, 以及对幸福感的促进作用。该活动促进了社会与社区联结、归属感, 以及过去与当下之间的联结; 幸福感获益则源于目标感、规律作息、成就感、逃离现实感与内在和谐的经验, 这些体验使参与者对露天泳池游泳及泳池本身产生强烈情感依恋。

研究结论: 本研究丰富了职能科学关于意义建构的理论。研究发现, 露天泳池游泳是一种独特的户外游泳形式, 对健康和幸福感具有独特价值。其意义远超游泳本身, 更延展至社区、联结、目标感与精神逃离等深层内涵。

In England, swimming remains the fifth most popular physical and leisure activity (Sport England, 2024). While almost 400 indoor swimming pools have closed over the past 14 years (Goodier, 2023), outdoor lidos are enjoying a renaissance (Wood, 2023) with 163 lidos currently operating in the United Kingdom (All the Lidos, 2024). In 2023, colloquially named ‘Year of the Lido’, more English communities committed to future lido projects (Future Lidos, 2024; Pidd, 2023). The rapidly increasing popularity of lido swimming has coincided with the United Kingdom government’s recognition of the importance of local swimming facilities for public participation in active and healthy lifestyles, which are believed to be key to achieving long-term positive health outcomes (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2023).

‘Lido’ originates from the Italian word for ‘beach’ (Historic England, 2018). It commonly describes any stretch of beach or riverbank designated for public swimming, or any outdoor public swimming pool (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). These are a particular type of outdoor public swimming pool focused on leisure- and pleasure-seeking (Future Lidos, 2024), often emulating fashionable beach resorts and including facilities such as diving boards, sunbathing areas, and cafes (Historic England, 2018). Pussard’s (2007) auto-ethnographic study of lidos as public leisure spaces draws on archival research to understand their socially constructed historical evolution from places of disciplinary cleanliness to spaces that democratise and domesticate leisure, making outdoor swimming universally accessible, comfortable, and safe. The controlled environment of lidos, often inclusive of heated water, differentiates it from other forms of outdoor swimming.

Academic interest in the health and well-being impacts and experiences of outdoor swimming and blue space is growing (Murray & Fox, 2021; Overbury et al., 2023), with most literature dating from the past 12 years (Gascon et al., 2017). ‘Wild swimming’ and ‘open-water swimming’ are often used interchangeably (Overbury et al., 2023), denoting swimming in natural waters, yet there has been little consensus on a blue space definition. Gascon et al. (2017) drew on the European Commission’s

BlueHealth project’s broad definition of “outdoor environments – either natural or manmade – that prominently feature water and are accessible to humans” (Hall et al., 2020, p. 2), while White et al. (2020) included all aquatic environments.

Existing studies into personal open-water swimming experiences (Christie & Elliott, 2023; Murray & Fox, 2021), open-water swimming interventions (Burlingham et al., 2022), and effects of blue space exposure (Gascon et al., 2017) demonstrate broad contributions to health and well-being. In their narrative overview of the literature related to blue space, health, and well-being, White et al. (2020) defined well-being as the mitigation of harm, promotion of positive mood or physical activity, and recovery from stress. Well-being is, however, heterogeneously defined within the literature, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and psychological aspects. Studies measured markers of physical and mental health, including motivation, mood, anxiety, and depression, as well as overall life satisfaction and ecological distress (Burlingham et al., 2022; Gascon et al., 2017; Overbury et al., 2023). Furthermore, Britton et al.’s (2020) systematic review identified that underdeveloped descriptions of blue space resulted in conceptual ambiguity and, even in its heterogeneity (Gascon et al., 2017), the body of literature almost entirely disregards lido swimming.

Despite disparities in the literature, a commonality of themes across the evidence increases credibility. Engaging in outdoor swimming or accessing blue space improves physical and mental health and well-being (Gascon et al., 2017; Overbury et al., 2023). Studies examining outdoor swimming courses as health interventions concluded that opportunities to escape from daily life, achieve goals, master new skills, and build social connections contributed to this tripartite benefit (Burlingham et al., 2022; Pett et al., 2022). Explorations of the value of different types and usages of blue space using place capture, a combination of ethnography, participant observation, and emotional mapping, resulted in similar and additional findings. McNamara et al.’s (2020) comparison of studies examining indoor and outdoor blue

space found overall themes of self-discovery, socialisation, and recovery from urban environments. Further, drawing on three hand-picked studies, Massey et al. (2022) argued that regardless of the kind of blue space environment, similar benefits are achieved. The lone qualitative study examining outdoor swimming from an occupational perspective (Murray & Fox, 2021) aligns with the wider evidence, finding themes of mental and emotional well-being and experiences of connection with self and nature. This high-quality study ensured rigour through reflexivity and detailed methodological description.

Ethnographic literature readily aligns with Murray and Fox's (2021) occupational perspective, aiming to understand outdoor swimming experiences and resulting health and well-being benefits (Christie & Elliott, 2023; Denton & Aranda, 2020). In addition, while not contributing to the peer-reviewed knowledge base, outdoor swimming has inspired numerous autobiographical writings, 'water-biographies', providing deep and authentic insights into the outdoor swimming world (Deakin, 1999; Freud et al., 2019; Whitworth, 2017). Experiencing nature connections through outdoor swimming features prominently in the ethnographic and water-biographical literature, as do themes of belonging, restoration, overcoming challenge, and perspectives on self and the world transformed by means of the sensory experience of literal immersion in a new watery world (Atkinson, 2019; Christie & Elliott, 2023; Dahl & Bäckström, 2023). Applying ethnographic methods to the experience of swimming alongside outdoor swimmers has revealed important elements of the mechanisms of meaning that generate health and well-being benefits. This demonstrates a commonality of themes across both academic and autobiographical literature.

The three existing lido swimming studies have explored aspects of personal experiences of lido usage (Anderson et al., 2014), the relationship between perceptions of place and lido usage (Middlestadt et al., 2015), and contributions of lido usage to well-being (Ramos et al., 2021). Despite limited generalisability due to a common location, these studies have a clear methodological description, enhancing their

trustworthiness. The findings of all three studies suggested that lido swimming increases physical, social, and emotional well-being through facilitating physical exercise, social interaction, relaxation, and connection with outdoor blue space, aligning with the wider outdoor swimming and blue space literature.

Overall, the evidence for outdoor swimming as promoting health and well-being is positive but limited due to heterogeneous disciplinary perspectives, unclear methodologies, and poor consideration of the impact of blue space environments on findings (Gascon et al., 2017; Overbury et al., 2023). Although ethnographic and water-biographical writings have contributed to understandings of the personal meanings of outdoor swimming (Dahl & Bäckström, 2023; Denton & Aranda, 2020), further research into outdoor swimming's therapeutic benefits and the influence of different blue space environments is needed (Britton et al., 2020; Massey et al., 2022; Ramos et al., 2021). To date, there exists only one occupational science study into outdoor swimming (Murray & Fox, 2021). The study reported in this current paper explores the personal meanings of lido swimming and how engaging in this occupation impacts participants' perceived health and well-being.

Methods

Occupational science asserts that the meaning of occupation is personally created; individuals ascribe subjective meanings to their occupational experiences (Hitch et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2016). Therefore, this qualitative study was based on an epistemology of subjectivism with an interpretivist methodology. This approach supported the study's aim of generating knowledge about individuals' occupational experiences (Flick, 2023; Green & Thorogood, 2018) to develop deeper understandings within occupational science of what renders occupation meaningful (Roberts & Bannigan, 2018).

Researcher positionality

Both researchers have an active interest and passion for outdoor swimming, this being a strong

aspect of both our identities. KA is a lido swimmer; HS is a wild swimmer. HS has no lived experience of lido swimming, and thus, we were able to see both similar and different elements in the data, allowing for a multi-dimensional exploration. Our own experiences as outdoor swimmers may have added strength to the analysis as our affinity with the subject deepened our understanding of the data, supporting credibility at the data analysis stage.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited using a sampling approach that targeted regular swimmers at an East of England lido. The lido was chosen for KA's first-hand knowledge of the building, which allowed for simpler planning of interviews in situ. In identifying appropriate gatekeepers to support recruitment, we approached the lido management and the chairman of the Friends of the Lido group, which exists to support the maintenance and development of the lido. Gatekeepers were asked to share the study advertisement among their membership and Facebook followers, ensuring a broad reach. Interested eligible participants were invited to respond to the call. Although more people expressed interest in participating, an upper limit of six was chosen for practicality, allowing time for accurate transcription, thorough depth of analysis, and to give a strong platform to all participant voices.

Participants

Eligibility criteria required participants to be fluent in English, over the age of 18 years, and to swim regularly at the lido (at least twice monthly during open season). Recruitment was not based on particular demographics. The first six to respond were included in the study.

Data collection

After giving their informed consent, participants were invited to attend a face-to-face interview at the lido and were offered light refreshments of a soft drink and a snack. It was important to conduct data collection within the physical space of the lido, as the

Table 1. Interview schedule.

Questions and probes
1. Introductory questions including age, regular swimming locations, frequency and distance of lido swimming, length of time since starting lido swimming, and lido membership status.
2. Thinking about a typical visit to the lido, can you describe what you do while you're here and what it's like? (<i>Probes: Do you meet others at the lido? Do you use the other facilities or attend any exercise classes or special events at the lido?</i>)
3. *What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about using the lido?
4. Can you tell me a bit about why you choose to swim at the lido? (<i>Probes: Why did you start swimming here? What drew you to it?</i>)
5. What is it that keeps you coming back to swim at the lido? (<i>Probes: Do you like coming here, and if so, why? What do you feel you get out of swimming at the lido? *Is there anything you dislike or would change?</i>)
6. *Can you tell me about and describe a memorable experience you've had while at the lido? (<i>Probes: What does swimming at the lido mean to you? Can you describe how swimming at the lido makes you feel?</i>)
7. In your opinion, are there any differences between swimming in the lido and swimming in indoor pools or in natural pools (e.g., lakes, ponds, rivers) or in the sea?
8. Do you feel that swimming at the lido has any impact on your day-to-day life? (<i>Probes: Can you tell me in which ways? Is there an impact if you are not able to swim here? *What would you do if you could no longer use the lido?</i>)
9. Is there something else you'd like to add about your experiences of swimming at the lido or what it means to you that we haven't already discussed?

environment played a role in the interview. Interview location has been shown to have an important bearing on the richness of qualitative data collected, acting as a prompt for interviewees (Evans & Jones, 2011; Gagnon et al., 2015; Green & Thorogood, 2018). All interviews were held poolside in a quiet corner of the lido to maximise privacy and minimise the possibility of interruption.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (see Table 1), a widely used and appropriate data collection method for qualitative research exploring personal meanings of engaging in an occupation (Flick, 2023; Green & Thorogood, 2018). Four questions, marked with an asterisk, were taken directly from or heavily inspired by Anderson et al.'s (2014) qualitative study into lido swimming, which, despite not taking an occupational perspective, sought to explore personal experiences of using an outdoor pool. To further ensure questions were understood as intended, the interview schedule was piloted

with a family friend with experience of both lido and wild swimming. Small changes were made for clarity; data from the pilot were not included in the final analysis. The interview allowed participants to offer as much detail as they wished and the researcher to probe where appropriate, thus eliciting rich and credible data (Shenton, 2004). Interviews lasted a mean of 45 minutes, generating a total of 257 pages of transcribed data.

Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis approach to the data enabled us to identify patterns of meaning in the data, with an explicit acknowledgement of our own self-awareness and positionality as researchers (Campbell et al., 2021). We applied Braun and Clarke's (2022) six stages of thematic analysis, a well-established data analysis method for qualitative studies seeking to explore people's lived experiences (Green & Thorogood, 2018; Watts, 2014). This approach aided us in achieving a deep level of engagement with the data to elicit rich insights into the individual worlds of the participants and the meanings of their experiences of swimming in lidos.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy against the recordings. Interview recordings were listened to and transcripts read separately by both HS and KA. Time was spent immersed in the data, reading interview transcripts multiple times to develop a sense of the data as a whole and to identify emergent themes. We made reflexive notes and recorded separately our individual thoughts about what we felt was emerging from the data before coming together to share these. After grouping the data into working themes, we checked them against data extracts. We then honed the themes and developed sub-themes. During data analysis, we constantly revisited the themes and engaged in regular, in-depth discussions about our individual and collective interpretations, taking care in identifying the most accurate approach to represent participants' voices (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Taking this inductive and reflexive approach ensured themes were generated directly from the data and that the influence of our own experiences as outdoor swimmers on analyses was

minimised (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Green & Thorogood, 2018; Trainor & Bundon, 2021).

Written reflections were also completed by KA directly after interviewing to capture initial impressions of the data. This was done again after transcribing and after coding, in order to track any subjectivity and inform the data analysis. This continual process of reflexivity underpinned the credibility and confirmability of the findings (Shenton, 2004).

Ethics

Before being interviewed, all participants were provided with the study information sheet and gave written informed consent for their engagement in the study. Inducements were limited to the offer of light refreshments at the time of the interview. Due to data collection taking place at the lido, it was impossible to guarantee complete anonymity, but all participants have been pseudo-anonymised to maintain confidentiality (Flick, 2023; Green & Thorogood, 2018). Policy relating to researcher safety in a public place was observed (York St John University, 2024). The study was approved by the YSJU Research Ethics Committee (Approval Code: Arnott/Spring/28/05/2024).

Findings

All six participants were women, half of whom were retired. See Table 2 for participant demographics.

Overview: "Everybody that comes here regularly, cherishes it" (Angela)

All six participants identified a strong emotional attachment to the lido, speaking of it with deep affection, feeling blessed to be able to swim

Table 2: Participant demographics.

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Age	Working status
Angela	65	Retired
Erica	47	Working
Gail	70	Retired
Julie	45	Working
Margaret	65	Retired
Rebecca	50	Working

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-theme
Connection and belonging	1. Social connectedness and belonging
	2. Community in practice
	3. Connection between past and present
Benefits to well-being	1. Purpose, routine, and achievement
	2. Headspace and escapism
	3. Feeling in harmony

there. Gail admitted she “*could get quite emotional ... to think of having ‘closed’ slapped on it*”. Others spoke of feeling “*proud that [city] kept its lido*” (Angela) and of their hope that “*people take care of it*” (Erica). This positive emotional attachment is resultant of the findings of the thematic analysis, which describe the meaning of lido swimming as an occupation and, by extension, the meaning of the lido itself to participants. Participants’ love for the lido stems from and encompasses the meanings identified within the thematic analysis. We describe two overarching themes: connection and belonging; and benefits to well-being, each with three sub-themes (see Table 3). The meaning of lido swimming was thus found to be multi-faceted.

Connection and belonging

Lido swimming was meaningful to participants as an occupation that facilitates connection in various ways. Participants derived a feeling of belonging from lido swimming and experienced connections to the past, evoking a strong sense of nostalgia.

Social connectedness and belonging: “We’re friendly here” (Julie)

Lido swimming was valued for presenting opportunities for social interaction and connection, enabled by the lido environment: the picnic benches meant “*it’s easier to linger and chat ... and get to know people*” (Julie). Participants valued the ease with which social connections were formed: “*The conversation starts with, ‘What’s the temperature like?’*” (Angela), and “*people are always really friendly and say hello*” (Margaret).

This sense of ease extended to connecting with the wider lido swimming community. Gail felt that “*people are friendly when we visit other lidos*” and others considered this to be indicative of shared values. Social connections thus extended beyond friendliness to a feeling of belonging to a lido swimming community, which Erica acknowledged is “*nice to feel part of that club*”. Others associated belonging to this community with identifying as a lido swimmer, which was a source of personal pride: “*There’s a lot of local people that have never been in and I just think, ‘You don’t know what you’re missing’, but then it’s not for everybody, is it?’*” (Margaret). Erica commented, “*people are like, ‘Swimming outdoors?! You must be mad ...!’ and I’m like, ‘No it’s really nice, I’m such a hero!’. So yes, there’s the smug factor as well*”.

Community in practice: “It’s a community space that is increasingly rare” (Rebecca)

Participants greatly valued the lido as an inclusive community resource, enabling the local population to connect with each other. It was particularly important that “*you literally see all walks of life down here ... a diverse mix of folk*” (Rebecca), and that the lido did not discriminate by age or body size. The lido’s Olympic-sized pool was frequently mentioned as enabling inclusivity: having plentiful swimming space for everyone meant “*they can have the lanes up ... and still have people having leisure swims as well*” (Julie), demonstrating the lido’s embrace of a diversity of swimmers.

Participants derived vicarious pleasure from seeing others engage in and benefit from lido swimming, describing “*groups of retired people who just look so well off it ... literally living their best lives*” (Rebecca) and a sense of satisfaction from feeling part of “*the human endeavour, watching people engrossed in something*” (Angela). Seeing others enjoying days out at the lido fostered feelings of second-hand joy:

They were probably in their early twenties, you know, they’d got their cool boxes ... dressed like they were going to Ocean Beach in Ibiza ... they were setting up camp for the day and I was like, ‘Oh, good on you girls.’ (Erica)

Moreover, participants considered lidos as community glue, often bringing people together into community groups to reopen or manage their running and upkeep. Lido swimming was considered meaningful for its power to unite people and enact community.

Connection between past and present: “We look back ... reliving our youth” (Erica)

Connection to personal and social history was experienced through lido swimming. Gail delighted in immersing herself in social history: “*I’m swimming in these pools and I’m thinking, ‘Oh what could these walls tell you, the stories’*”. Others similarly appreciated lido swimming for the opportunity to admire the characterful and historical architecture of the building, thus feeling connected to a bygone era: “*[There’s] something about the era and the architecture that I just find really appealing. ... [The] pre-war period ... was a really interesting time in history*” (Rebecca). Alongside its manifestation of historical continuity, the lido was valued for its individual familiarity, having “*not changed at all since it was built*” (Margaret). For some participants, lido swimming was significantly bound up with childhood memories, evoking a sense of nostalgia, connecting their present and their past, and reviving intergenerational family connections. Erica regarded restarting lido swimming in adulthood as “*carrying on a bit of a [family] tradition*”.

Benefits to well-being: “You just go home happy” (Margaret)

Lido swimming was clearly identified as an occupation which positively impacts well-being, enhancing participants’ lives. Participants experienced achievement, gained headspace, and felt in harmony with self and with nature.

Purpose, routine, and achievement: “You feel like you’ve done something” (Angela)

There was a strong narrative of lido swimming as integral to participants’ daily routines, effectively becoming a way of life, which they anticipated continuing into the future. Erica reflected, “*it feels like it’s been years, but ... I only started ... the Easter before [last]*”. Having a well-established routine meant Rebecca did not “*even*

consider swimming anywhere else at this time of the year”. Lido swimming routines were meaningful for providing purpose and satisfaction, providing an invigorating start to the day, and were something to look forward to: “*I do get a little bit excited, like, ‘Ooh I’m going for a swim today!’*” (Margaret).

Participants accessed a strong sense of achievement through their lido swimming routines. Margaret felt “*happy because I’ve done it*”. Meeting personal swimming goals was deserving of a “*little pat on the back*” (Gail), and this sense of achievement lasted throughout the day: “*I’ll feel good sitting at my desk because I’ve swum 2 kilometres already*” (Julie). Participants clearly linked swimming regularly with increased physical well-being, which in turn impacted emotional well-being: “*My arms and shoulders were stronger after a few weeks, and I derived a lot of pleasure from that, and that’s obviously good for your self-esteem*” (Angela).

Headspace and escapism: “It’s just that little slice of life for you” (Gail)

Participants appreciated how lido swimming carved out a portion of time just for themselves, which they experienced as life-giving and revitalising. Participants valued lido swimming “*as much for the headspace as the exercise*” (Julie), enabling them to switch off from the duties and stresses of daily life, or to decompress after work because “*the water is like a therapy*” (Gail). The physicality of lido swimming facilitated problem-solving: “*I would know by the time I’d finished swimming what my priorities for the day were*” (Angela). Lido swimming also gifted participants a sense of freedom and escapism, contributing to headspace and allowing them precious time for themselves: “*I feel more free here. It’s given me the headspace to work through a lot of things in my mind when I’ve needed to*” (Julie), and “*I like escaping down here*” (Rebecca).

Participants reported a strong association between the sense of escapism and the lido’s outdoor setting; being surrounded by nature was key to the value of lido swimming. The simplicity of swimming freely under an open sky, in the fresh air and not being enclosed, facilitated escape from inner thoughts. The proximity to nature was highly valued for the benefits to

mental well-being: “*It’s outdoors ... it’s good for my head*” (Erica). Regarding the lido as an oasis, participants could withdraw physically and mentally and experience “*a holiday in the day*” (Angela) or be anchored in the present moment, “*concentrating on the cold and not what’s in your head*” (Erica).

Feeling in harmony: “It’s life-affirming” (Rebecca)

Lido swimming inspired a feeling of being in harmony with nature and with oneself. Feeling the wind or seeing the sun while swimming made participants feel connected to the world around them, thus enabling them to be “*at one with nature ... in the pool*” (Gail). The proximity to nature facilitated a relaxing, serene, and peaceful experience that was emotionally uplifting:

I’ll be in my stride ... and then the sun will break through and you feel the heat on your shoulders and it just feels like an absolutely perfect moment, and you’ll think, ‘God ... it’s good to be alive’. (Angela)

Immersion in the lido waters took on a spiritual quality, at times comforting and at others transformative. The water was felt to take care of swimmers and was valued for its positive impact on well-being: “*To have your body suspended by water, it’s just so therapeutic*” (Rebecca). Lido swimming was an emotional baptism, leaving participants feeling “*clean, fresh, awake ... energised*” (Rebecca). This deep emotional and spiritual connection with the lido waters moved Gail to expressions of gratitude: “*Thank you pool, thank you water, that was lovely*”. Ultimately, as summarised by Angela, “*it just feels right*”.

Discussion

This study explored the personal meanings of lido swimming and how engaging in this occupation impacts perceived health and well-being. Lido swimming is a distinct form of outdoor swimming, and this study responds to calls in the wider literature for further research into how different types of blue space generate therapeutic outcomes (Britton et al., 2020; Massey

et al., 2022; Ramos et al., 2021). This novel research contributes to the evolving discourse around blue space, health, and well-being, and strengthens occupational science theories of meaning (Roberts & Bannigan, 2018; Wilcock, 2007). The findings encompass themes of connection and belonging, and the benefits to well-being linked to outdoor blue spaces.

The theme of connection and belonging was strong and anticipated: lido swimming facilitates social connectedness and belonging, echoing blue space, outdoor swimming, and occupational science literature. Opportunities for socialisation are evidently valued: participants described how lido swimming encourages easy, friendly conversations with others. Ideas of belonging and community (Burlingham et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2022; Overbury et al., 2023) were evident in accounts of feeling part of a club of swimmers, locally and nationally, which related to participants’ identity as ‘lido swimmers’. These findings align with occupational science theories, which suggest that the construction of personal identity and a sense of belonging via shared occupational participation and social connection are integral to the mechanisms of meaningful occupation (Eakman et al., 2018; Roberts & Bannigan, 2018; Whalley Hammell, 2014; Wilcock, 2007).

A more unexpected finding was that of the lido being valued for promoting community in practice. Besides themes of inclusivity and democratic access (Christie & Elliott, 2023; Pussard, 2007), participants greatly valued the lido as a community resource, aligning with the minimal existing research on lido swimming (Anderson et al., 2014), but also described experiencing heartfelt, vicarious pleasure from other lido users’ enjoyment. Uniquely within the blue space literature, this study reveals deep value in observing the lido in service to the local community. Moreover, participants’ perceptions of lidos as community glue, uniting people behind a singular cause, deepen existing understandings of blue space as a facilitator of social connections (White et al., 2020), demonstrating how lido swimming enacts community.

These novel findings on community reflect occupational science theories that co-occupation enhances well-being (Whalley Hammell, 2014; Wilcock, 2007) and that occupations

which contribute to community and collective well-being provide fulfilment, which is essential to meaning making (Reed et al., 2011; Roberts & Bannigan, 2018; Simaan, 2017; Whalley Hammell, 2014). Moreover, they strengthen arguments that maintain that inclusive community spaces are indispensable to opportunities for collective occupation within local communities and, by extension, to the being, belonging, and becoming of communities (Nyman & Isaksson, 2021). These findings could, therefore, point to the unique nature of lidos as urban community resources, explicitly designed to serve the collective needs of local populations, and often requiring community management to continue operating, in contrast to natural blue space.

One of the most surprising and original findings was the strong connection to the past and sense of nostalgia felt by participants. Participants valued the unwavering familiarity and presence over many decades of both their local lido and of lidos nationwide: swimming in historical lidos enables immersion in social history, aligning with Pussard's (2007) conclusion that contemporary meanings of lidos are partially historically constructed, and with suggestions that occupational meaning is constructed in place over time (Nyman & Isaksson, 2021; Rowles, 2008). Participants also discussed connecting to their personal and family histories: lido swimming is an embodied and situated way to reconnect with childhood memories, evoking intense nostalgia. Similar to open-water swimming (Murray & Fox, 2021), past experiences of lido swimming shape present identities as 'lido swimmers'. This reflects Wilcock's (1998) theory that people become their full selves through occupation, as well as findings which demonstrate that experiencing intergenerational family connection and building self-identity are key to occupational meaning-making (Eakman et al., 2018; Roberts & Bannigan, 2018).

Analysis of the participants' demographics may have provided additional context to these feelings of nostalgia: it has been theorised that emotional bonds to locations associated with occupation are created and accumulate throughout the life course (Rowles, 2008); while considerations of race and the history of Black exclusion from swimming (Black Swimming

Association, n.d.; Vassell, 2023; Wiltse, 2014) could have explored whether this finding is linked to the homogeneity of the sample. Nonetheless, the strength and diversity of the theme of connection and belonging suggest this is a complex and significant component of the mechanisms of occupational meaning.

The second major theme identified was the perceived benefits to well-being. Amongst broader well-being benefits, physical health benefits are a recurrent and major theme in the existing outdoor swimming literature (Gascon et al., 2017; Overbury et al., 2023), but did not substantially feature in this study's findings, despite participants reporting becoming stronger through regular lido swimming. This absence could be explained by a disciplinary perspective, perhaps due to the broad and holistic biopsychosocial approach of occupational science: indeed, the single occupational science paper reviewed similarly identified no notable physical health benefits (Murray & Fox, 2021).

This study revealed a clear narrative of lido swimming structuring participants' daily routines, offering opportunities to experience purpose, satisfaction, and achievement, thus enhancing well-being. The theme of routine is rare within the outdoor swimming literature: only Denton and Aranda (2020) found that social routines of sea swimming increased motivation to participate, which more readily relates to this study's theme of connection and belonging. However, participants in the current study clearly associated lido swimming with daily purpose and preparedness, which aligns with occupational science theories that patterns of occupation serve to prepare individuals for participation in daily life (Royeen, 2014). From an occupational science perspective, lido swimming routines can be conceptualised as occupational 'doing', which is the cornerstone of well-being (Eakman et al., 2018; Reed et al., 2011; Wilcock, 1998), as well as being part of an individual's occupational pattern that structures daily life, imbues it with familiarity, and enables belonging within social environments (Granholtm Valmari et al., 2024).

Conversely, themes of achievement abound within the outdoor swimming literature, regardless of disciplinary perspective or methodology. Meeting the challenge of outdoor swimming by

learning new skills, developing confidence and competence, and discovering personal horizons of strength provides various routes to experiencing achievement and self-efficacy (Christie & Elliott, 2023; Murray & Fox, 2021; Pett et al., 2022). Interestingly, despite the safe and controlled lido waters, the sense of achievement is as apparent in this study as in the wider outdoor swimming literature and evidently increases well-being. Gaining mastery and satisfaction are key elements of occupational meaning (Eakman et al., 2018; Roberts & Bannigan, 2018), as manifest in this study's findings: participants described achievement with reference to personal goals, often aiming for certain swimming distances, and to feeling physically strong in the water. The sense of achievement and personal pride accessed through lido swimming endures beyond the swim itself, producing lasting benefits to well-being.

Similar to much of the outdoor swimming literature (McNamara et al., 2020; Middlestadt et al., 2015; Pett et al., 2022), participants greatly valued lido swimming for affording them time to themselves, describing gaining a sense of freedom and escape from daily life stresses, which was integral to their well-being. The rhythm, cold-water sensations, and outdoor setting of lido swimming facilitated headspace and opportunities to be in the moment. Themes of being in the present moment are apparent in occupational theories of meaning: Wilcock's (1998) suggestion that 'being' in the present moment, distanced from expectations to perform, as fundamental to positive health and well-being, corresponds to theories that being in the moment is an element of meaning-making (Eakman et al., 2018; Reed et al., 2011; Roberts & Bannigan, 2018).

Findings related to headspace and escape were strongly entangled with connection to nature, which is somewhat surprising, considering lidos are man-made, built environments. However, this finding concurs with existing evidence of lido users valuing the outdoor, natural setting due to lack of alternative natural swimming locations (Anderson et al., 2014). Moreover, the majority of the outdoor swimming literature reviewed identified that connection to nature increased feelings of escape from daily stresses and was integral to the restoration

of well-being (Atkinson, 2019; Burlingham et al., 2022; Christie & Elliott, 2023). Comparable to Murray and Fox's (2021) findings, this study explicitly connects lido swimming under an open sky, where nature can be felt and observed, with enhanced mental well-being.

The findings showed a clear narrative of participants experiencing restoration and transformation through lido swimming, resulting in feelings of being in harmony with nature and with self, thus supporting overall well-being. Similar ideas are present across the literature, but most prominent in water-biographical and ethnographic writings. Comparable to findings that sea swimming transformed swimmers' perspectives on their place in the world and re-oriented them to what was important in life (Denton & Aranda, 2020), the rich sensory descriptions of lido swimming in this study underscore the potency of being held by the water and feeling the elements while swimming to effectuate spiritual transformations, restoring swimmers to themselves. Likewise, water-biographies narrate themes of spiritual healing and restoration via sensuous encounters with the water (Atkinson, 2019; Dahl & Bäckström, 2023; Deakin, 1999; Freud et al., 2019; Whitworth, 2017). These findings also correlate with occupational science research: Murray and Fox (2021) found sea immersion facilitated emotional cleansing and reconnection to the true self; a sense of restoration, promoted by spiritual and sensory encounters, is a key component of meaning-making (Roberts & Bannigan, 2018); personal transformation through occupation is also considered as the 'becoming' of the true self (Reed et al., 2011; Wilcock, 1998).

Methodological Limitations

The collection of data at only one lido, during the summer, meant local environmental and temporal factors potentially influenced findings, thus reducing their transferability. Transferability may additionally be limited by the small, homogenous sample, although the homogeneity itself may have strengthened our understanding of this particular group. Self-selecting participants could have introduced potential bias: findings possibly represent those who feel most passionately about lido swimming, rather than

the wider lido swimming community. While strong themes emerged from the collective data, other phenomena may have surfaced from the inclusion of additional participants. Replication of this study at multiple lidos, or with a larger, more diverse sample, would address limitations of this study.

Conclusion

This study situates lido swimming within the wider outdoor swimming literature, demonstrating its unique contributions to health and well-being. The elements of lido swimming that create its overall meaning have been illuminated, responding to the study aims. The findings overlap and align with current occupational science theories of meaning-making, deepening conceptual understandings of being, becoming, and belonging, and thus uncovering the mechanisms by which lido swimming supports health and well-being. The meanings of lido swimming extend beyond the act of swimming itself, encompassing community, connection, purpose, and escapism. The outdoor environment is fundamental to the meaning of lido swimming and to its positive health and well-being impacts. Novel findings align with global perspectives that collectivity is an important part of occupational meaning. Lido swimming is distinct from other forms of outdoor swimming and could play a unique role in promoting public health and well-being.

Overall, this study demonstrates how the complex and multi-faceted experiences of lido swimming significantly influence swimmers' sense of being, becoming, and belonging, and contributes to the occupational science meaning-making literature. Further studies could consider how lido swimming impacts wider public health outcomes and explore lidos' utility as community health and well-being resources. Further research could also explore the year-round popularity of outdoor swimming. Research into winter lido swimming could, for example, consider whether seasonality influences occupational meaning.

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ORCID

Katherine Arnott

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-3910-3583>

Hannah Spring

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9836-2795>

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