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'They are my tribe': How a self-organising women's group built a sisterhood that improved wellbeing and increased social connectedness

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Drawing from a perspective that integrates elements of both subjective and psychological wellbeing, this research explores the experiences of *The Jellies*, a self-organising, all-female open water swimming group. The article outlines how the women's participation in this group created a 'sisterhood' that enhanced and maintained their physical, social and emotional health, social connectedness and affinity for natural aquatic environments ('blue spaces'). This study offers insights into how social workers can act as intermediaries, aiding women in establishing sisterhoods of supportive networks and solidarity.

METHODS: The research employed a thematic analysis to explore the perspectives and experiences of 39 women who belonged to a self-organising, open-water swimming group. Recruitment was through purposeful sampling.

FINDINGS: The research sheds light on the importance of women-only spaces and their contribution to women's overall wellbeing, including fostering a sisterhood of solidarity and mutual support. Swimming provided a context for the women to address their need for physical activity, navigate their emotional landscape and create connections of belonging, support and solidarity. However, culture and gender norms and economic positioning excluded, silenced and marginalised some women from accessing blue spaces.

CONCLUSION: The findings invite social workers to rethink the use of blue spaces as a novel community-building asset and to learn from an organically formed all-women's swimming group about alternative ways to empower and sustain women's overall wellbeing. Social workers can gain insight into how women understand and formalise belonging, and how belonging enables, or not, women to navigate their environmental and emotional geographies.

KEYWORDS: Women; health and wellbeing; blue spaces; social work; sisterhood

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The World Health Organisation (2016) has highlighted the role of urban natural environments for our health. In recent years, researchers (Denton & Aranda, 2020; Foley, 2015, 2017; Massey et al., 2020; Rousseau & Deschacht, 2020) have also documented the positive physical, cultural, economic and psychosocial wellbeing effects to individuals of 'blue spaces'—that is, aquatic environments, including

participation in swimming. Foley's (2015) qualitative research drew on environmental psychology to map the links between spaces, embodiment, movement, health and wellbeing. Challenging and replacing an androcentric approach to understanding self, society, nature, time and place, and focusing on the interactions between feelings, affects, bodies, matter and places, Foley (2015) concluded that swimming is a committed 'healthy act' drawn from an emotional geography and expressed through relationships—with place, family and others. Olive and Wheaton (2021), in examining relationships between blue spaces, sport, physical activity and wellbeing, have interpreted blue spaces as friendly therapeutic landscapes composed of play and communication. They note the physical, social and spiritual benefits that emerge from both individual and community experiences in blue spaces that enable social interaction and allow individuals to be part of a group.

Researchers who have focused on the immersive experience of swimming claim that it benefits mental health and overall wellbeing. Among these benefits are acute and chronic reductions in negative mood, increases in wellbeing and acute increases in positive mood (Burlingham et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2020). Finlay et al.'s (2015) study into Canadian older adults and de Oliveria et al.'s (2019) examination of elderly Brazilian women's mental health concluded that swimming positively affects the lives of older women and enhances their mental wellbeing; it evokes feelings of renewal, restoration and spiritual connectedness; and it improves stress and anxiety levels, self-esteem and quality of life.

However, researchers also caution against an indiscriminate generalisation of any findings that link age, swimming and enhanced wellbeing across the life span. Kiely et al.'s (2021) Australian longitudinal study examining the associations between social connectedness and mental health, and how these vary by age and gender, concluded that interventions (including blue water activities) that promote social connectedness to improve community mental health need to account for age- and gender-specific patterns, and recognise that poor mental health is a barrier to social participation. Notwithstanding Kiely et al.'s (2021) caution, the positive impact of swimming has been established as a proven contribution of urban environments to physical and mental health and overall wellbeing.

Access to blue spaces, and the positive impact of swimming on wellbeing, have been particularly relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is agreement that the global spread of Covid-19 has had a profound effect on all aspects of society, including mental and physical health (Britton et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Pouso et al., 2021), and on people's access to, and appreciation of, blue spaces. Interrupted access to nature focused people's attention on the 'nearby nature' available during the spatial constraints imposed by a range of lockdown measures across different countries and populations (Atkinson, 2021; Maharja et al., 2023).

Scholars (Britton et al., 2020; Doughty et al., 2023; Foley, 2015, 2017; Maharja et al., 2023) concur that the intentional use of nearby blue spaces and the immersive engagement available through swimming helped to mitigate the negative mental health impacts from the restrictions imposed by local and national authorities during Covid-19. In Australia, Schech et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study into the impact of the pandemic on the multi-dimensional wellbeing of individuals, involving 1002 women aged between 30 and 65. They found that the women's utilisation of blue spaces, and the social connection that blue spaces can provide, often played a key role in maintaining wellbeing. Similarly, Doughty et al.'s (2023) qualitative study of 30 participants, aged between 23 and 67, affirmed the agency of blue spaces as enablers of wellbeing. Humberston's (2022) ethnographic studies

of older New Zealanders and Canadians during Covid-19, regarding access to blue spaces during restrictions, challenged socially and politically constructed notions of old age, and arguments that older individuals are vulnerable and need to be kept socially isolated, as erroneous and serving only to reignite and reinforce negative notions of the aged person as vulnerable. It follows that women of any age can benefit from community-based activities and from access to urban spaces during times of restriction and beyond.

However, while the positive impact of access to blue spaces and swimming are a consistent theme in the literature, there remain groups of women who are excluded from accessing blue spaces because of their race or ethnicity. Woods et al.'s (2022) research into beach drowning prevention among the Australian multicultural community identified a number of gender and cultural constraints that prevent women from diverse backgrounds from accessing swimming. These included an absence of a sense of belonging, pressure to preference culture and cultural responsibilities before exercise, the cost and time involved in frequent beach-going, no (or poor) swimming skills, a lack of formal swimming lessons and a lack of confidence in ocean wave conditions. Sawrikar and Muir's (2010) focus on Muslim women in Australia, and their participation in recreation, found that the women saw recreation as an exclusively white institution, which was a barrier to their involvement. Lenneis et al.'s (2022) Danish study went further. They found that Muslim women who appreciated the connection between swimming and wellbeing and women-only swimming spaces were provided with a sense of belonging. In these spaces, the women felt comfortable and safe and were not only protected from males, but they could also avoid the 'white' gaze they encountered in other situations.

Social workers are not strangers to the feminist constructs of 'sisterhood' and the sisterhood's focus on fostering a sense of community, belonging and support among women, the amplification of women's voices, female empowerment, and acknowledgement and addressing of the intersecting factors that affect women differently based on race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability and other identities (Moran & Mapedzahama, 2023; Olive et al., 2021). Nor are they unfamiliar with the benefits of community-based activities as a means of actioning their mandate to engage, build relationships and participate in activities with community members (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020).

Notwithstanding previous research into the benefits of community-based activities such as singing (Hendry et al., 2022), the arts (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) and the use of community programs to build community assets (Cavaye & Ross, 2019; Ife, 2020)—along with the social interaction (Gao & Sai, 2020; Sokolova & Perez, 2021) and cognitive and emotional freedom provided by women-only spaces (Lenneis et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2015)—little has been done by community social workers to understand how the use of blue spaces by female-only groups can improve physical, social and emotional wellbeing. There is limited research on how such groups can develop sisterhoods that emphasise solidarity and mutual support, and empower and unite women, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Similarly, little Australian research has been done into how social workers can use women's access to blue spaces to bring women together, build sisterhoods that strengthen their bonds, and emphasise interdependence rather than independence between and among women.

The research project described in this article addresses this knowledge gap. By focusing on an all-female, open-water swimming group that initially formed in response to Covid-19 restrictions, the study explored how women swimming with other women

Table 1 Participant Age and Employment Status (N = 39)

Age	In paid employment		
	Yes	No	Prefer not to say
30–39	1		
40–49	6		
50–59	13	5	
60–69	4	3	1
70–79	1	4	
80–89		1	
	25	12	1

Table 2 Participants by Nominated Cultural Background (N = 39)

Cultural background	No. of participants
Australian	23
Anglo-Celtic	3
English	3
Irish	1
Italian	1
New Zealander	2
German	1
Scottish	1
Not disclosed	4
	39

built a sisterhood that improved their physical, social and emotional wellbeing and social interactions. In the following sections, the aims and methods of the study are presented, followed by the findings grouped by theme. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings, and an invitation to social workers to rethink the use of blue spaces to aid women in building community and improving overall wellbeing.

Aims

The aim of this research was to draw on the experiences of *The Jellies*, 39 women located in a bayside suburb in Melbourne, Victoria, who access blue spaces and participate in open water swimming. The research drew on the experiences of these swimmers to investigate what social workers can learn about how women use blue spaces and open water swimming to improve their physical, social and emotional wellbeing, and how such groups can foster sisterhoods that create a sense of community and support among women.

Methods

After the research received university ethics approval (HRE23-119), purposeful sampling was used to invite participants to complete a survey. The survey was distributed via a link posted on *The Jellies' WhatsApp* group chat site. The *WhatsApp* link gave participants access to the *Information to Participant, Consent Form* and *Survey*.

The survey, created with the use of Qualtrics©, comprised both multi-choice and open-ended questions. The multi-choice questions collected data pertaining to the participants' profiles, while the open-ended questions invited participants to share their experiences of belonging to *The Jellies*. Additionally, *The Jellies'* moderator gave permission for the group's *WhatsApp*

Table 3 Women in Paid Employment Status and Time of Swim (n = 24)

Age	Time of swim				
	6:15 a.m.	7:15 a.m.	8:00 a.m.	Varies	Not nominated
Not nominated					2
30–39	1				
40–49	3		1	2	
50–59	5	6			
60–69	1	3			
	10	9	1	2	2

Table 4 Age and Length of Membership (N = 39)

Membership length	Age						Total
	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	
1 year	1	3	4	3	0	0	11
2 years	0	1	3	2	2	0	8
3 years	0	3	10	3	2	0	18
4 years +	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
	1	7	17	8	5	1	39

messages to be accessed during the week of 10 to 16 July 2023. These messages provided a snapshot of both the volume and topics of interaction between *The Jellies* members. This served as a form of data triangulation (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

NVivo 10© software was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the data. This analysis involved several key steps: becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; and defining and naming sematic and latent themes (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Semantic themes included coding data at a descriptive or surface level participant characteristics such as context, participant age, employment status, cultural background, number of swimming days, motivation for joining *The Jellies*. Coding at the latent level required going beyond the surface level to a deeper level so as to capture deeper, implicit meanings in the data such as contextual codes (e.g., understanding membership within the context of wellbeing), metaphorical codes (e.g. blue space as a symbol of connection) and axial (e.g., relationship between employment and participation) codes. Thematic coding at the latent level identified four themes: *blue space, Covid-19 restrictions and deciding to swim*; *blue space, emotional geography and wellbeing; blue space social connection and wellbeing;* and *blue space, becoming more, changing and finding identities.*

Pseudonyms (an assigned number for each participant) have been used throughout the reporting of data.

Findings

Context

The Jellies is a group of women located in one of Melbourne's bayside suburbs, which has a median income of $1,792 per week (LocalStats, 2023). *The Jellies* was formed during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. During Covid-19 restrictions, limited exercise was allowed to within a five-kilometres radius from the family dwelling. Membership to the group is via word-of-mouth and is formalised, as noted by one participant, through an informal 'welcome' to the *WhatsApp* space. The group numbers 354 women; however, the number who actively participate has been stated to be between 80 ("I'm not sure how many are regulars ... I'd say around 80" – P11) and 150 ("Of 300+ on the app, probably only 1/4 swim regularly" – P2.

Participant profile

Thirty-nine women responded to the survey posted on *The Jellies' WhatsApp* page during the week of 3 to 25 July 2023. The participants' ages ranged from 30+ to 80+ years, and membership in the group was between one and four years (Table 1). The age group most represented was 50–59 years (middle adulthood). The majority of the 50–59-year-old participants were in paid employment (Table 1).

The participants' cultural backgrounds were predominantly Australian or European (Table 2). The profile reflected ancestries published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2021) for the suburb (English

Table 5 Swimming Pattern by Age Group (N = 38)

Swimming days per week	Age						Total
	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	
1 day	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
3 days	1	3	4	4	0	0	12
4 days	0	1	6	1	0	1	9
5 days	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
6 days	0	2	1	1	1	0	5
7 days	0	0	2	0	1	0	3
I swim when I can – no pattern	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
	1	6	17	8	5	1	38

25.9%, Australian 21.8%, Irish 10.6%, Scottish 8.0% and Italian 4.9%).

The correlation between employment status and participation in *The Jellies* indicated that employment did not hinder participation in the group. There was also little difference in whether women in paid employment swam at 6:15 a.m. or 7:15 a.m. (Table 3).

Membership in *The Jellies* spanned from one year to four years plus. The majority of participants indicated that they had been part of *The Jellies* for three years (Table 4). The 50–59-year-old participants were twice as likely to be members for three years or more.

Participants indicated that there were 2 weekday swim times available: 6:15 a.m. or 7:15 a.m. When asked for their pattern of swimming days, the majority of members indicated that they swam 3 or more days each week, with 3 days being the most regular pattern (Table 5).

Women aged 50 to 59 were nearly three times more likely to swim three or more days per week than women in other age groups. This same group was also more likely to have joined *The Jellies* when the Covid-19 restrictions were imposed in 2020.

The remaining data will be reported under the identified themes of *Blue space and maintaining wellbeing being during Covid-19; Blue space, emotional geography and emotional wellbeing;* and *Blue space, becoming more, changing and finding identities.*

Blue space, Covid-19 restrictions and deciding to swim

As discussed below, participants indicated that *The Jellies* swimming group began in response to the local government imposed Covid-19 travel restrictions. This section explores the participants' connections beyond the household, the use of blue space emotional wellbeing and social connection in combating loneliness during Covid-19. Included in the reasons, discussed later, was the need to find safe ways to exercise and also join activities that would maintain their social, emotional and physical wellbeing while adhering to movement restrictions (Table 6).

Participants recognised that swimming offered them safe opportunities for physical activity while living under the constraints of Covid-19 regulations. For some of the women, accessing the blue space replaced attending fitness facilities such as gyms due to closures: "I joined for exercise when gyms closed" (P1). It also satisfied the desire to find a physical activity that would also be safe: "Initially I joined for safety in numbers to swim out in deep water" (P2).

Moving beyond the physical and safety aspects of swimming, participants noted the

Table 6 Reasons for joining The Jellies

Reason	Total
Social wellbeing	27
Emotional wellbeing	26
Physical wellbeing	29
Combination of two or more reasons	16

physical therapeutic and restorative nature of swimming and cold water as "definitely a salve to aching muscles" (P3). However, not all participants experienced an ongoing link between physical health and blue water swimming. Twenty-six women indicated challenges associated with the physicality needed to maintain their swimming routine. These obstacles included: "lack of fitness – hard to keep up sometimes" (P4); "broken leg" (P5); and missing daily swims because "the ol' bod does not recover as it should" (P5).

Blue space, emotional geography and emotional wellbeing

The blue space played a significant role in shaping the women's experiences and emotions. These experiences included a growing emotional attachment to the blue space and its contribution to emotional wellbeing; the addictive nature of the blue space; the appreciation of the environment; and the centrality of blue space to connection with self and others. These themes are developed in the following section.

Comments from participants who had developed a sustained routine of swimming consistently revealed the nexus between the blue space, swimming and increased emotional wellbeing. They noted that swimming had become "addictive" and that the daily routine had added energy and motivation to their day. As one participant commented: "Now I'm addicted to cold water and the connection and wellbeing l get from being in it. An increased level of energy and motivation for the day's tasks after each swim, keeps me coming back" (P6).

The women's emotional landscapes changed somewhat when the routine of the daily swim was disrupted. Participants experienced feelings of dislocation and joylessness when absent from the blue space: "I have withdrawals when [I am] unable to go for my daily dip enjoying the enthusiasm, joyful vibes surrounding the space" (P5).

Eager to share the "joyful vibes" of their surroundings, 29 photos depicting images of the water, the sunrises and the late-night moonscapes were posted to *WhatsApp* in one week. These images were a way for the participants to connect, appreciate or enjoy aesthetically pleasing scenes of the blue space and surrounds. Participants affirmed the blue space as a place for contemplation and 'self' that they valued beyond the period of Covid-19 restrictions. For these women, swimming had become the context for more contemplative time beyond the pandemic and remains a "time to reflect and chat about day-to-day challenges" (P7).

Participants observed that the blue space helped them to navigate their personal emotional geographies when swimming alone or with a group. Over time, the women's connection with the deep blue space evoked "the emotional joy of being immersed in nature" (P6) and gave personal "time to reflect and chat about day-to-day challenges" (P8). For other women, the blue space allowed for "the sea and the warmth of *The Jellies* [to become] essential to survival" (P7).

Further to the participants' reflections on blue space, Covid-19 restrictions and deciding to swim, were views on blue space, social connection and wellbeing.

Blue space, social connection and wellbeing

As developed in following paragraphs, data indicated "blue space" and its symbolic representation of emotional landscapes, social connections, and personal growth. The blue space served as a multifaceted metaphor

that extended beyond its literal meaning of water, encompassing emotional experiences, social bonds, and individual identity.

Recalling the Covid-19 restrictions that confined individuals to their households, the blue space became a symbol of companionship and connection. Participants were of the view that the opportunity to join *The Jellies* and swim with others satisfied their need for companionship and connection beyond the household group. In this sense "[swimming] became about helping me live through Covid as an extrovert and not becoming depressed, lonely and disconnected. I have a wonderful family, but I needed more during this time" (P9).

Participants opined that establishing or strengthening social connectedness with other members, and strengthening their connectedness to the blue space, had become increasingly important. They felt that membership in *The Jellies* had not only assuaged their need for an expanded network of connections, but it had also developed their personal traits. Participants came to appreciate the overlapping growth in confidence and connection derived from belonging to *The Jellies* and were "grateful for all the amazing women who are extremely selfless and modest. The confidence and connection gained continues to serve me well in my day-to-day life" (P2).

For some, swimming with others and drawing on the established connections was conditional on the emotional landscape. For example, the context chosen for swimming was dependent on their emotional wellbeing and how, company, or not, responded to the need for connection:

> I love the support and community that the group provides, even if I tend to be more organic with my swim times. I tend to swim with a few from a smaller Jelly group on the weekends and just one other friend/jelly a couple of times a week. Often, I swim alone or with my husband. But I know if I want company there is a wonderful and supportive gang to call on. (P10)

As P10 went on to reflect, belonging to the group provided opportunities for engaging in other swim activities and participating in additional recreational and personally enriching events: "I will do the solstice swim and sometimes a monthly moon swim. It's amazing and strikes a chord with my inner "hippy" for want of a better word. People bring treats and candles and mulled wine." (P10)

Adding to P10's musings, was the relationship between membership of the group, a broadening of social connections and the role of both in contributing to emotional wellbeing. Participants agreed that regularly meeting each other outside the swim time for coffee, chats or organised outings had enriched their lives, formed or firmed friendships, and reinforced their feelings of unconditional acceptance:

> I love the connection and conversation, getting to know the women a bit better every time. I also love the little café, sitting by the beach in the open air, hot or cold, the dogs, the birds, bumping into other people from the neighbourhood. What's not to love! It makes me feel part of something very special. It makes me grateful and proud to live in [the area]. (P11)

This view was tempered by other participants who felt that these coffee catchups and group activities organised outside the swim times risked alienating and marginalising members who could not attend the activities. As P1 shared: "Sometimes people can't always make it and you swim alone. Like any social group, you connect with some people more than others. Some people can feel on the outer at times; not as included as others" (P1).

Participants were also invited to ponder whether branding of *The Jellies*, and access to

and purchase of branded products, fostered a sense of belonging and social connection.

Branding—"They are my tribe"

Over the period of 3 years, beanies, swimming caps and dry coats (swim robes) have been branded with *The Jellies'* logo—a jellyfish. Members have the option to purchase these items. Views regarding the importance of wearing the branded items varied. Eight participants did not feel that wearing *The Jellies* associated apparel had an impact on their sense of belonging or group identity. Other participants commented that while the brand was not important, it signalled the influence of the group's culture of warmth and affection on members' lives, as well as the expansiveness the group had provided to their life experiences. The following comment typifies this view:

> I love being able to identify another Jelly because it means there is another swimming buddy around. The branding was initiated as a joke about very clubby clubs which this group is not. People feel a great warmth and affection for what the brand represents to them and what it has opened up in their lives. (P12)

Twenty-eight participants commented that branding signalled the group's identity. As P3 stated, "they are my tribe". Affirming the brand's role in establishing a unique identity, 31 participants held the view that having access to *The Jellies* branded apparel created a sense of pride, familiarity and unity among members that would not otherwise be experienced. P13's comment exemplifies this sentiment: "I have been a tad reluctant to join in the branding but it's lovely now to be able to recognise a fellow jelly. It creates a bit of a spark and always a massive smile when you see another" (P13).

The role of branding and belonging to a tribe in sustaining emotional, physical and social wellbeing was particularly important for one participant who lived alone and had newly joined the group. She was of the view that the brand offered an easy way to navigate belonging and connecting: "It shows 'belonging', being part of a fabulous family, especially for many who live solo plus health issues to name a few life challenges" (P14). Branding also invited others to make and build connections beyond *The Jellies*: "Even swimming alone, I will often get stopped and asked questions regarding swimming and or the Jellies group" (P15).

Blue space, becoming more, changing and finding identities

The Jellies provided the context for women to "become more". As discussed in the following section, the blue space and group membership in *The Jellies* had a transformative and enriching impact on the lives of the women involved. Data suggest the metaphor of "becoming more" indicated that belonging to *The Jellies* had provided a context for women to embark on a journey of personal growth, self-discovery, empowerment and the formation of a sisterhood based around shared life experiences.

Participants indicated that they had "become more" as a consequence of joining *The Jellies*: more outgoing ("Putting myself out there to connect to people I have never met as an introvert"—P2); more connected ("I love the connection and conversation, getting to know the women a bit better every time" (P16); and more supported ("We have coffee, talk about issues affecting us, counsel each other, support each other, plenty of hugs, occasional tears, lots of laughs, encouragement" (P17). "Becoming more" had also extended to the importance of mutual support throughout the life span. For example, the majority view was that discussion among the women was supportive and provided additional opportunities to share each other's life experience. This allowed the women to draw on the wisdom of each other's lived experience, deemed by some in the group

to be "extraordinary" (P18). Conversations between women of a "similar age and/or stage of life led to great conversations and shared understanding of challenges" (P1).

This supportive sharing was affirmed as unique to the all-women's group and critical to women as they move through their life span. As P16 expressed:

> As I grow older, I value more and more my connections with women. I've never really been part of an all-women thing before, but I really see how beautiful it is. The energy is different, the shared empathy and lived experiences. The joy of sharing with women who share a common love of the water is very real. It's grounding, joyful in very simple ways.

Asked whether it was important for the group to be "all female", only two participants answered that they would not be averse to having men in the group. Their thinking was that the participation of men would provide different insights: "I actually don't mind if men, it would be nice to find out their perspective of life" (P20).

The majority expressed a strong view that the women-only group provided an emotional safety and a space where women could share their life experiences. There was a sense that these factors allowed the women a freedom of expression that would not have been otherwise possible. The women only group provided a culture that mitigated against women feeling "self-conscious or intimidated" and was "an important factor [in creating] a safe and inclusive group [where one could] express themselves and be heard".

Safety and inclusiveness were associated with a culture that was "noncompetitive, accepting of older women". Participants were of the view that such a culture was gendered and worked "because it is overwhelming[ly] female, female led".

Data revealed a link between swimming and a growing appreciation of their own bodies. As swimming activity increased, women noticed that they became more attuned and more appreciative of the physical body. Immersion in the blue space had afforded women the license and freedom to embrace their own bodies and to do so in a safe and non-judgemental space:

> I believe it was set up by women for women (or anyone identifying as a woman). We have monthly swims held on a full moon where people have the option of wearing whatever they want or nothing at all. This is something only *The Jellies* are invited to and is a private event. It's important to me as I highly value the sisterhood we have. (P22)

Adding further relevance to the expressed importance of embodiment and its implied impact on emotional wellbeing, P22 highlighted the importance of recognising and accepting that women "come in all shapes and sizes and cultural differences" and that body shape need not be influenced by cultural or societal expectations. The group likewise expressed the view that such groups offered an opportunity to create a sisterhood, where women could nurture women. P9 provided an international lens to this view:

> It's an institution that every beach town should have—we are not the first … and hopefully many more will come. I admired the ladies in Kardamila/Greece in 1999 on a holiday … they would meet every morning at the same spot at the harbour front … stand in the water / swim a bit and talk a lot … I could hear their happy chatter … I loved it … It took me 21 years to find such a group. (P9)

The international experience recognised that groups like *The Jellies* can become institutionalised and offer contexts that support and nurture women "becoming more".

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the profound impact of blue spaces on individuals' emotional, social, and physical well-being, particularly in the context of a women-only swimming group navigating government-imposed Covid-19 restrictions. The study reveals that women of various ages, regardless of employment status, accessed blue spaces, emphasising the universal appeal and inclusivity of these environments.

The study aligns with prior research, such as Britton and Foley (2021) and de Oliveira et al. (2019), highlighting the physically therapeutic nature of swimming and its sustaining of physical wellbeing. This therapeutic aspect of blue spaces, as emphasised by Burlingham et al. (2022), Foley (2015), Massey et al. (2020), and Olive and Wheaton (2021), contributes to the heightened and enriched emotional wellbeing and emotional landscapes experienced by individuals engaged in swimming.

An intriguing aspect illuminated by the study is the intersectionality between embodiment and emotions, forming a nexus that fosters both a sense of individual emotional and physical wellbeing as well as a sisterhood amongst the women-only group. Lenneis et al.'s (2022) and Lewis et al.'s (2015) research on women's use of blue spaces resonates, illustrating how women, in this study, found cognitive and emotional freedom to bond across generations in a supportive and safe environment. This freedom became a platform for creating a sisterhood that extended social connections, where women drew on shared life experiences to manage their individual circumstances.

The study also emphasises the significance of gender-segregated groups, revealing that women sought out such spaces to connect, including times beyond the group swims, supported by a sense of familiarity and belonging. The adoption of swimming apparel and the use of social media, as noted in the study, served as tools for formalising connections within and beyond the blue space. This innovative approach, echoing the findings of previous research, demonstrates how social interactions, group culture, and cohesiveness can build an effective community and community assets.

However, the study brings attention to an important caveat: the invisibility of women from ethnic minorities and those without proximity to the middle-class Australian or European bayside suburb. The intersectionality of poverty, culture, and gender may constrain these women, aligning with Sawrikar and Muir's (2010) suggestion that culturally bound roles can limit participation in groups like *The Jellies*. This highlights a significant challenge—some women are marginalized, unable to access the social, physical, and emotional benefits offered by blue spaces and women-only groups due to systemic inequalities and cultural constraints.

In conclusion, while the study underscores the positive impact of blue spaces and women-only groups on physical and emotional wellbeing and community building, it also raises awareness of the need for inclusivity and recognition of those marginalised by cultural and socioeconomic factors. It emphasises the importance of addressing these disparities to ensure that the benefits of blue spaces are accessible to all, fostering a more equitable and supportive environment for women's wellbeing.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that the participants were predominantly of white, Anglo-Celtic culture. It is recommended that further studies focus on cultures and ethnicities other than white, Anglo-Celtic backgrounds to better understand how women who use and create activities that access blue spaces can be more inclusive of women from other cultures and ethnicities.

Conclusion

The sociality of swimming in gendered segregated spaces should not be forgotten. Covid-19 has shown that women's isolation can be tempered by the use of blue spaces, which can strengthen overall wellbeing and improve their sense of belonging. Beyond Covid-19 the blue space functions as a rich and layered metaphor, representing emotional landscapes, social connections, personal growth, and a sanctuary for self-discovery and acceptance. Contributing to physical, social and emotional wellbeing, blue space encapsulates the transformative power of shared experiences in nature and the significance of community bonds in shaping individuals. Social workers have an opportunity to recognise that blue spaces provide a new and novel frontier for the formation of women-only reciprocal support groups. Aligned with their commitment to the principles of women's solidarity and support, to amplifying the voices of marginalised women and to addressing the disadvantages of intersectionality, social workers can use the findings of this study as a model to create other sisterhoods focused on wellbeing. Insights from this study can help social workers to build sisterhoods of strong connections that increase women's social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

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