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## **Chilling Together: An Anthropology of Cold Water Swimming**

Sweere, Lilianne

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# CHILLING TOGETHER: AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF COLD WATER SWIMMING

Lilianne Sweere  
Supervisor: Dr. Sabine Luning  
MSc Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology  
Specialisation: Global Ethnography  
Leiden University  
Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
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The cover picture depicts me, standing in an *ice channel*. The photo was taken by Fenwick Ridley.

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## 1. Introduction

My project 'Chilling Together: An Anthropological Study of Cold Water Swimming', focuses on the social and anthropological aspects of cold water swimming. For most people, this may seem like a strange sport to do. It is painful, the weather in the winter can be horrible, and it seems like impossible to do. When I started doing it, I came to know the sport as 'ice swimming'. Very technically, the sport of ice swimming is defined as swimming in water colder than 5°C. Although it is a relatively new sport, it has been getting more media attention and has increasingly become a part of people's lifestyles. I am an ice swimmer myself. I have been doing the sport since 2020 when the swimming pools closed during the COVID lockdown in the Netherlands. Sometimes, when I get ready for a swim, there are bystanders who ask me questions. The first one is generally one of disbelief: "Are you really going swimming in there?". Since my answer to that question is always yes, they mostly move on to two other questions out of curiosity. The first one is: "Why do you do it?". The answer to this question is linked to the concepts of lifestyle, personhood, and community. For my research project, I found it particularly interesting to look at how other people experience cold water swimming and whether the experience would differ based on gender. I wanted another perspective, from other people that do the sport in a different way than I do. The other question "How do you do it?" is equally interesting. The answer to that question concerns the concepts that are key to my research: embodiment and enskilment, which will be explained further in the conceptual framework. The groups I observed and participated with, go about the sport fundamentally different from what I do. Whereas I was always focused on the competitive aspect of it, for them it seemed to be more about community and they did not share my competitiveness, with some exceptions. The exploration of a world within this sport that is familiar yet strange sparked my interest. I wanted to explore the differences between my own 'how' and 'why' with theirs. When I got the opportunity for this research project, I almost immediately knew I had to investigate this. Most of the knowledge I had accumulated on the sport came from doing it competitively. I learned the ins and outs by adhering to the official rules and safety guidelines set by the International Ice Swimming Association (IISA). This is why I started out by calling it ice swimming. However, because the water temperature was not always below 5°C, and my participants do not participate in ice swimming competitions, I will also use the term 'cold water swimming'. Swimming has been a passion of mine for the last 18 years. For the last four years, I have gained experience in cold water swimming. As an experienced ice swimmer, I have accumulated knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of the sport and the profound impact it can have on both the body and mind. It gave me an advantageous position during my research of this sport as I could anticipate some of the elements that are deemed highly important, such as safety, and look out for ethical issues.

### 1.1. Object of Study

The object of this study was to get more insight into the total embodied experience of cold water swimming, while also focusing on the contributions it can make to community, personhood, and lifestyle, and the differences in gender. The research aims to contribute to the academic debate of cold water swimming, ice swimming, and outdoor swimming. More contribution to this debate is necessary, as the sport is gaining popularity quickly. Any insight towards the experience, will help to contribute to this debate. Additionally, I hope that employing mixed multimodal methods will offer valuable insights into research methodologies for swimming and other outdoor sports. My hope is that my methodological approach will encourage other researchers to think outside of the box when it comes to methodology, and to show that it is not necessary to only stick to traditional methods.

## 1.2. Research Question

During my research, the main question I was focused on was:

*How does the embodiment and enskilment of cold water swimming in Northumberland, UK, serve as a way to develop personhood, lifestyle, and a sense of community across gender differences?*

To answer this question, I have split the research into sub-questions, which I will use to address various aspects of the main research question. The first sub-question *“Is there a noticeable difference in how women and men embody and enskil cold water swimming?”* focused on the embodiment and enskilment of cold water swimming. Men and women must deal with different problems while learning to swim. For women, menstruating can be a substantial influence on their performance, which is something men do not have to deal with. In turn, women generally float better in the water, which means having a good body position in the water might be easier for them than it is for men. Men and women additionally have in general a different percentage of body fat, which might influence how well they can both handle the cold. I wanted to see in my research if and how these differences affect the way men and women embody and enskil ice swimming. My expectation was that there would be a noticeable difference. In chapter four, I discuss how I approached this subject and I aim to illustrate aspects of cold water swimming enskilment, and embodied experience of cold water swimming.

The second sub-question *“How does the practice of cold water swimming in Northumberland, UK inform and create a community?”* aimed to find out more about community making, where I looked at the individual sense-making processes: How do the cold water swimmers define the concept of community themselves? The concept of community can be subjective, and mean something different to different people. I wanted to see how the swimmers would approach it and if they felt like their group could be defined as a community. I looked through tangible interactions that I believed could create a community. My assumption was that the extreme cold, swimming together, taking care of each other, warming up together, celebrating wins, and sharing discomfort together, make them a community. I aimed to get an answer for this question, by critically analysing the input I got from interviews, my observations, and informal conversations. I will discuss this in chapter five.

Thirdly, I used the sub-question *“How does the gender composition of different cold water swimming groups in Northumberland, UK, influence the behaviour and activities of the community?”* to get a closer look at the gender differences between the groups, instead of focusing on individual differences within embodiment, as I did in sub-question one. This will be discussed in chapter six.

Lastly, I aim to answer *“To what extent does a person’s lifestyle practice shape and affect their motivation and development of participants’ social aspect of personhood in the context of cold swimming?”*. By looking at different people’s lifestyles, I wanted to see how much cold water swimming is a part of people’s lives. To research this question I looked at different elements of a person’s lifestyle such as their job, other hobbies, and how substantial swimming is to their life. The hope was that the information regarding lifestyle would help me develop indicators that can lead me to why people start cold swimming in the first place and might provide insight into how this develops their personhood. I also wanted to look at how cold water swimming has changed the social aspect of personhood for the participants. For example, if being one with nature could make a person more environmentally conscious. In chapter seven I will focus on the concepts of this question. I will also try to situate the previous chapters in the broader context of lifestyle, and aim to connect them.

### 1.3. Research Context

Between the fourth of January and the fourth of April 2024, I did three months of fieldwork to work on this research project. I drove by car all the way down to the Eurotunnel and then up north again when I reached the UK. I was staying in a farmhouse, fifteen minutes driving away from my main research location. The area was surrounded by fields, hills, and sheep, and always provided me with a beautiful drive to anywhere. The location of the lake was perfect for research about ice swimming. As mentioned before, for ice swimming the water needs to be colder than 5°C. In the Netherlands, there is in general only one or two weeks per year when water in swimming venues has that temperature. Because the lake is further north than any body of water in the Netherlands, and it lies at a high altitude, there was almost a guarantee that the water was cold enough for ice swimming, a guarantee that is not present in the Netherlands. In reality, the lake was not always colder than 5°C.

#### 1.3.1. Swimming groups and their location<sup>1</sup>

When my research project came up there were various considerations towards the location. First of all, it needed to be in a country where it was winter. Otherwise, the water temperature would be too warm to qualify for cold water swimming. This narrowed my decision down to the northern hemisphere. Second, it needed to be in a country where I speak the language. I wanted my participants to be able to describe their experiences in their own language. This narrowed it down to countries in the northern hemisphere, where they speak Dutch, German, Spanish, or English. I made a conscious decision to not do my research in the Netherlands, as I would be too biased by my personal experience, and I would be too familiar with the people that do this sport. Additionally, if I went to another country, I could compare my experience in the Netherlands. In German- and Spanish-speaking countries, I did not know anybody who did the sport.

In 2022, during an ice swimming competition in the Netherlands, I met Fenwick Ridley. He is the CEO of H2oTrails, and he is well-known worldwide within the ice swimming community. He is a professional ice swimmer and has multiple Ice Swimming World Championships medals (silver and bronze). At his company, he is also an Open Water Lifeguard, responsible for harbouring the safety of all swimmers. He is part of Ice Swimming Team GB and he is an IISA2 Official Observer. He specializes in long distance ice swimming and once did a 3000m swim in 3°C. He mentioned back in the Netherlands, that he had a good amount of winter swimmers<sup>2</sup> who had signed up. We had a good click and stayed friends. His location was ideal for my research. He organised around four swims per week and he had a steady group of swimmers. When I asked him if I could do my fieldwork there, he was enthusiastic. This made my decision easy and I chose to set up my fieldwork at his location in Northumberland, UK.

During my fieldwork I ended up going to four different swimming groups. I initially started out at H2oTrails, and from there, through snowball sampling, I met up with three other groups. Here, I will shortly describe the different groups and the location. In chapter six I will elaborate further upon the various swimming and dipping groups.

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<sup>1</sup> You can find a map of all swimming locations I went to in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Those who swim between end of October until the beginning of April.



1 Logo of H2oTrails, copied from the H2oTrails Facebook page.

#### 1.3.1.1. H2oTrails led by Fenwick Ridley<sup>3</sup>

As mentioned before, H2oTrails was started by Fenwick Ridley. Additionally to lifeguarded swimming sessions all year round, the company organises swimming courses, sauna and dip sessions, and paddleboarding sessions. The lake, where the company is located, is called Sweethope Loughs. It consists of two lakes which combined are around 60 hectares. The location is 240m above sea level, which makes it one of the coldest swimming spots in the UK, and it is why during my research the water temperature did not go above 10°C. Between the lakes, there is a crossing which is surrounded by hills and lined with trees. Additionally, the lake's natural setting, surrounded by trees and hills, significantly contributes to why people participate in cold water swimming, which I will further discuss in chapter four. The H2oTrails venue, where members enter the water, is set up on privately owned land, so you must be a paying member to swim there. The fact that the members are paying, adds a socio-economic level to my research. I used the observations I made as an indicator towards socio-economic class. Memberships, a (mandatory) winter workshop, neoprene products, cars and *Dryrobes* are expensive and point towards a certain level of economic stability. However, I did not look into the socio-economic class beyond these observations. I am not sure how accurately these observations can represent socio-economic class, so I will not focus on this any further in this thesis.

The number of swimmers per session at this group was a little less than what I was expecting initially, but nonetheless, I have observed 70 different swimmers in the time I have been there. In observing the group, it became immediately clear that even though this is technically a mixed swimming group, in practice, there was always a greater number of women present during the sessions<sup>4</sup>. I also noticed a difference between men and women in their interaction and community behaviour, which I will address further in chapter six.

I spent most of my fieldwork time here. There were around three or four swims per week, mostly in the morning or early afternoon. Sometimes, swims were cancelled or extra swims were added, and I participated in a few sauna and dip sessions.

#### 1.3.1.2. The Blyth Bluetits<sup>5</sup>



2 Logo of the Bluetits, copied from the Bluetits website

In the fourth week of my research, Fenwick went to the European Ice Swimming Championships in Romania. Since he is the lifeguard at H2oTrails, that meant the sessions of that week were cancelled. I did not want to waste a week, so I started looking for other active swimming groups in the area. Facebook is an excellent place to find other swimming groups. I am not sure why, but open-water swimmers seem to prefer communicating their swim over Facebook, rather than some other form of

social media. I became a member of twelve open-water swimming groups in the UK, to see if there were any groups nearby that I could join during that week. Some were public groups, but some were private, such as the Blyth Bluetits. I requested to become a member, and when I was accepted into the group, I looked at how often they swam and where they swam, as I did not immediately realise 'Blyth' was the name of

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.h2otrails.co.uk/> for more information.

<sup>4</sup> The specific demographics of how many men and women were present during the sessions, can be found in the appendix.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://thebluetits.co/> for more information.

the place and not just the name of the group. Blyth is a town along the coast. It was about an hour's drive from my location<sup>6</sup>. It was a bit far, but it was worth it since I had trouble finding other groups. The dips took place in various places along the coastline of Blyth at various times. So instead of a lake, they went into the sea. The Facebook group has a post where people can comment on when and where around Blyth they are swimming. Liking the comment is your way of saying "I'm coming too". Which is what I did. I asked the organiser of the dip if she would mind if I joined for research purposes. She did not. The swim I joined was early in the morning, at sunrise. I was slightly disappointed that only two people came to the dip, but it was wonderful, and they were very welcoming. This morning, there were only two women, but they are open to anyone who would like to join. I learned that next to the 'casual' swims, they also organised 'special' swims around natural phenomena such as a full moon or sunrise. Additionally, I learned that the Blyth Bluetits is part of a bigger organisation of swimming groups worldwide, but mostly in the UK. It was started by Sian Richardson in September 2014. She shared her love for cold water swimming with multiple people, and the group grew and split into more groups. In 2020, the Bluetits became an official social enterprise capable of handling the growth of a fast-growing community (Richardson, 2022). The origin of the name is not quite clear, but speaking to some of the members, it is assumed that it is a wordplay of the fact that breasts get cold from cold water swimming, so 'tits' turn blue. A bluetit is a bird, which is on the logo, and they refer to different groups as a flock. Because it was quite far away, I only joined three times: that first 'normal' dip on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, then for the 'Snow Moon' session, and the 'Equinox Sunrise' session.



*3 Logo of the Mermaid Cove Club, copied from their Facebook group*

### *1.3.1.3. Wild Sea Women (recently renamed to Mermaid Cove Club)<sup>7</sup>*

Additionally, in the fourth week, I met up with the Prudhoe Penguins at Cullercoats Beach, which is also along the shoreline, so the swimmers swim in the sea. To reach the beach, you need to walk down a ramp. When the tide is low, you have a beautiful sandy beach with some coves. In the water, there is a seawall protecting the bay from most of the waves. This makes the bay a popular spot for swimming and dipping, as the waves are not as big. The Prudhoe Penguins were just a small group of friends,

four women, that I came in contact with via one of the other swimmers I met in the area. And while they gave me some insights, due to scheduling, I did not follow up with them aside from that dip. While I was there, there was also another group at the beach. There were around maybe fifteen to twenty women; they had a campfire, and in the sea, they were chanting. Because the group was so big and they had a certain ritual around it, I was curious and wanted to know more. I found out they were called the Wild Sea Women. Initially, I tried talking to them that evening, but I felt slightly cut off in the conversation. It was still in the first month of fieldwork, and I was still figuring out how to approach people, but I was a little insecure and did not pursue it further that evening. My curiosity remained, so I looked the group up on Facebook and requested to join, thinking it would be better to join a swim officially. I contacted the admin, not wanting to intrude on their private swim session, asking if I was welcome to join and if they would grant me access to do my research. It took a while, but in the last two weeks, I was granted access to come by. The group Wild Sea Women Cullercoats, like the Bluetits, is a split-off group from the original one. Hayley Dorian started the original one in

<sup>6</sup> See all the swimming locations I went to in the Appendix under 'Map Swimming Locations'.

<sup>7</sup> This is a women only group. You can find them on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/share/33PVrfUxvXxc7iE8/> (only for women who want to dip in Cullercoats).

the initial COVID lockdown. Her sessions would be organised a certain way, with guided breathing and a dip, her inspiration coming from Wim Hof. The Wild Sea Women Cullercoats followed this. Recently, Hayley completely stepped down, so they had to change the name if they wanted to follow the same principles. They now changed their name to the Mermaid Cove Club, led by Alison Gordon. I only joined two sessions in weeks twelve and thirteen.

#### 1.3.1.4. The Iceguys Tyneside<sup>8</sup>



4 Logo of the Iceguys, copied from their Facebook page

In the last two weeks of my fieldwork, after spending almost three months looking for more men who do cold water swimming, I found out about the Iceguys during an interview. I looked online for more information and found a website and a Facebook page. I saw on their Facebook page that they were promoting concepts such as mental health and community among men and were participating in more activities aside from swimming, promoting mental health for men. I was very surprised to find this group, as I had been searching for men-only groups on Facebook and had not come up with anything yet. I asked them for more information because it was not listed when and where they were swimming. At the same time, I was nervous that I would not be welcome because I am a woman. In their reply, they said I was welcome to join their mixed dip on Friday evenings. I was happy to accept the invitation, but at the same time, I wanted to join their men-only dip to see how it would differ from the other mixed groups and the women-only group. I contacted them again and agreed that I could not come to the pre-dip and dip, but I was welcome to talk to the men while they were warming up and having their hot drinks. They explained that they also do not allow female partners of the men and that they wanted to have a safe space for men to work on their mental health. During the mixed dip, I learned that at the same time as the men-only dip, there was a mixed dip 100 metres away from it, which the women from the mixed dip invited me to. So I could join the mixed pre-dip and dip from the Chitter Chatter Challenge and then talk with the Iceguys. The Tyneside Iceguys is a group that split off from the original one. The original one was started by Chris Nicholas in Sunderland. It spread once the group became more popular. On occasion, the Iceguys and the Wild Sea Women collaborate on activities. In total, I joined two mixed dips and one men-only dip, in weeks twelve and thirteen.

#### 1.3.2. How to Define 'Cold' in Cold Water Swimming

*During my fieldwork, the warmest water temperature was 9.4° C, and the coldest was 0.5° C. To compare: in the winter, the coldest temperature you can get from your shower, if you turn it all the way down, is around 11° C. In summer, this is around 16° C. The sea during a 'Nieuwjaarsduik'<sup>9</sup> is, on average, around 8° C.*

The temperature of the water is important to cold water swimmers. It is one of the questions that I always hear someone ask during cold water swimming. What I, or other people, mean by 'cold' is essential to know because 'cold' is a relative word that describes the temperature and differs from person to person. Somehow, it seems more important to know in the winter than in the summer. Most likely because the colder the temperature, the higher the risk of hypothermia. A water temperature that is one degree Celsius warmer or colder can already make a huge difference to the swimmer.

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<sup>8</sup> See [https://www.nxymultisports.co.uk/iceguys\\_northeast](https://www.nxymultisports.co.uk/iceguys_northeast) or <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100075742187487> for more information.

<sup>9</sup> A Dutch tradition on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, where thousands of people run into the sea for a dip, to celebrate the new year.

The word 'cold' can mean something different to different groups of swimmers. Sometimes, when I go swimming in the swimming pool, I can hear people say, "Oh, the water is cold today", while the water temperature at most inside swimming pools is around 28° C. For different competitive swimming branches, there are global rules relating to the temperature. World Aquatics states that swimming pools for competitive swimming must be between 25° C and 28° C. Anything below is seen as cold, and anything above as too warm. Triathletes swim outside and wear a wetsuit as long as it is allowed. This has two reasons, the first one being that wetsuits provide buoyancy, which makes you faster, and the second one is relating to the water temperature. For longer distances, World Triathlon allows wetsuits up until 24.5° C. Up to this temperature, the water is seen as cold enough to wear a wetsuit. In open water swimming, World Aquatics regulations state that below 18° C, a wetsuit is mandatory, so they find that below 18° C qualifies as cold. Below 16° C, the competition will be cancelled because it is too cold. Ice Swimming is clearly defined by IISA<sup>10</sup> as swimming in water temperatures below 5° C.

Different associations have different definitions for 'cold', and so do different people. People who never swim will probably find 30° C already cold. Experienced winter swimmers will probably say that 18° C feels warm. How you define cold can also depend on where you grew up. People who grew up around naturally cold lakes or close to the sea, where they went swimming as kids, will probably not define water around 18° C as cold. However, this might be experienced differently by people who grew up around warmer bodies of water, such as the Mediterranean. For the purpose of this research, cold water swimming, to me, means swimming in a water temperature under 10° C.

### 1.3.3. The Difference between Cold Water Swimming and Open Water Swimming

To understand the context of this research, it is important to understand the difference between cold-water swimming and open-water swimming. At first sight, cold water swimming and open water swimming are quite similar. Both are done outside, the technique of different swimming strokes is the same, and you can mostly use the same equipment. However, there are also substantial differences, the biggest being the temperature. As previously explained, what qualifies as 'cold' is socially constructed because of the subjectiveness of the word. The level of cold I am writing about brings significant risks to the sport, which makes it different from open-water swimming.

The first risk is already at the start when a swimmer enters the water. Because of the extremely cold temperature, even skilled swimmers experience a *cold shock response*. This refers to a series of involuntary actions your body takes when immersed in cold water. Your heart rate and blood pressure increase, you have a gasp reflex, and you start hyperventilating (Knechtle, Waśkiewicz, Sousa, Hill, & Nikolaidis, 2020). The gasp reflex and hyperventilation are especially dangerous because they increase the risk of drowning.

A second risk occurs when you stay in the water longer. The risk of hypothermia is substantially higher in water under ten degrees. Your muscles cool down, and you get tired more easily, but if you stay in long enough, you can get disoriented and confused. Some people even experience a form of amnesia, similar to when people lose their memories when they drink too much. The problem with this is that if you are disoriented, confused, and tired, you also increase the risk of drowning, which makes cold-water swimming more dangerous than open-water swimming.

These risks are also why ice swimming, as defined by IISA, qualifies as an extreme sport. That 'extreme' element makes the sport, in my opinion, so much fun and challenging. It is something that not everybody can or wants to excel at.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information visit <https://internationaliceswimming.com/>.

Another difference with open water swimming is the process after swimming. For cold water swimming, it is normalised to stay at the location for at least thirty minutes after swimming, drinking something hot, and warm up before you go on your way properly. This is not necessary for open-water swimming, as your body temperature does not cool down as much. And where you can leave your wet bathing suit on in the summer, doing this in the winter will increase the risk of hypothermia, because your body temperature cools down even more after swimming.

Because of the risks of cold water swimming, there is a greater need to do this sport with more people, while with open water swimming, there are fewer risks, so there is less need for a swimming buddy.

#### 1.3.4. Dip or Swim

In outdoor swimming, people often discuss a dip or a swim. While this does not sound like an important difference, it is because it relates to the type and intensity of the activity. A dip or a swim can additionally be experienced differently. With a dip, people go into the water. What they mostly do, then, is just float or 'bob' around. They do this mostly while talking with fellow swimmers or enjoying their surroundings. Generally, when people go for a dip, it is also slightly shorter than a swim. A dip, within this sport, is meant to give you all the benefits of the cold water without resulting in hypothermia. In really cold temperatures, people would stay in for ten minutes on average. At sea locations, they mostly do a dip instead of a swim. The sea has a strong current, which can easily drag you anywhere, and the waves are mostly incredibly challenging to swim in. The cold water groups I visited along the coast, were there for dipping. Especially when you are short on time, a dip might be a nice way to get some benefits from the cold water, with the ability to do something else afterwards quickly. When it is called a swim, it means that people swim a longer distance in a certain stroke (most likely breaststroke or front crawl). With a swim, people are more likely to challenge themselves. They might aim to make more metres and stay in longer. The biggest difference is that with a swim, people move from one place to another instead of staying around the same spot when you dip. People who swim during the winter most likely do that in lakes, as there are not as many dangers except for the cold as in the sea.

#### 1.4. Set-up<sup>11</sup>

Here, in the introduction, I have given an introduction to the subject and discussed the object of study. Additionally, I have discussed my research questions and have given some context around my research context. In the next chapter, I will discuss various concepts related to my research questions and my object of study. In chapter three, I will thoroughly explain which methods I used and why. I will also further elaborate on the ethical considerations I had to make. The four chapters after that will each aim to contribute to the answer to each of the sub-questions. Chapter four will focus on the embodiment experience, enskilment, and benefits of cold water swimming. In chapter five, I will discuss how community is defined by my participants. I will additionally discuss community building within cold water swimming groups. Chapter six will continue with the concept of community but focus on the gender composition of the different swim groups. Chapter seven will aim to situate the previous chapters in the broader context of lifestyle and will discuss in what way cold water swimming is part of the lifestyle of my participants. In chapter eight, I will present my conclusions related to my research questions. I will additionally reflect on the research and give suggestions for

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<sup>11</sup> In this thesis I make use of my own videos and soundscape, which are uploaded to YouTube as unlisted (meaning only people with access to the link can access the video). For a more meaningful engagement with my thesis, I recommend watching the videos and listening to the soundscape. Some of the videos are uploaded in 360°, which means you can use the cursor to move around in the video, and see different keyframes. I would advise to adjust the quality on YouTube to the highest quality. It does require a high internet speed.

further research. Then, I will briefly list who provided me with funding. After that follows the Glossary, where I will explain various terms used in this thesis. In the Appendix there can be found additional context for my research. When something can be found in the Appendix, I have put this in a footnote.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

In the past, the interpretation of play and sports focused more on biological models (Besnier & Brownell, Sport, Modernity, and the Body, 2012). This approach became important for education and human development but was not adopted within anthropology. Within anthropology, this debate focuses on two approaches: sport as cultural performance and play, and sport as an everyday practice and serious life (Besnier & Brownell 2012, p.454). Geertz and Turner focused on cultural meanings and had a more symbolic approach to researching sports. Mauss' article 'Les Techniques du Corps' was an important starting point for anthropological research about sports. He introduced the concept of 'habitus' which was later adopted by Bourdieu. It focuses on how learned ability varies between different social settings (Mauss 1934, p.73). Bourdieu's practice theory, which developed from Mauss' earlier work, is based on his interest in social structures. He wanted to know how "*sports inscribed social class onto the body*" (Besnier & Brownell 2012, p.449). Turner was more interested in sports events than habitus, like Bourdieu, because he felt that those kinds of events would show in a better way how people assign meaning to a certain sport. Using the fundamentals that were developed as presented in the debate on the anthropology of sport was detrimental to my research.

The concept of embodiment was developed from the fundamental work of Mauss and Bourdieu. Embodiment is the way of describing everything you feel through bodily experience connected through occupied space. In other words, it means that you experience certain activities not just by processing what is happening, but you experience it with your whole body. This includes, for example, what kind of emotion is released when doing the activity or how something feels on your skin. Especially in cold water swimming, the embodied experience is important. The extremely cold water does something to your body, and what it does to your body can be relevant when it comes to developing personhood. However, embodiment does not only relate to personhood. As Pink (2011) suggests, "*we should start thinking about bodies as part of places*" (Pink 2011, p.347). Creating a place can be done using a variety of contexts. First, the body plays a crucial role in defining a place through its movement and sensory interactions with the environment, such as seeing, smelling, touching, hearing, and altering the surroundings by leaving footprints, exhaling, and making sounds. Second, viewing a place as a form of gathering gives us a metaphor to understand how creating a route brings together various elements like objects, people, social interactions, experiences, and reflections as parts of that place (Pink, 2007). According to her, if we consider the body as an organism and, therefore, part of the environment. She explains that if we think about the body in that way, we might "*recognise that the body provides us not simply with embodied knowing and skills that we use to act on or in that environment, but that the body itself is simultaneously physically transformed as part of this process.*" (Pink 2011, p.347). Littlejohn (2020) describes how the ocean is an active subject and not only an object of knowledge (Littlejohn, 2020). Thus, on the one hand, there is this angle where our bodies become one with the environment, and on the other hand, the ocean becomes a living being as part of humanity. Considering both these approaches, the metaphor that Brymer and Gray (2009) use, where the participant and the environment, in this case, the water, interact in a similar way as dance partners, works well for my research setting. Nature-based sports involve embodied actions that happen through direct contact with nature. The body learns to navigate the world by reacting to the unpredictable and sometimes chaotic and changing elements of nature (Humberstone, 2011). Although interacting with bodies of water, as one does with swimming, can open bodies up to life-enhancing experiences, it can equally open up life-threatening experiences (Foley, 2016). This danger might be part of the attraction. Seligman et al. (2015) explain how living with difference signifies not having control of the experience. However, not having control appears to be what we find exciting, especially when it comes to sports and other forms of play (Seligman, Wasserfall, & Montgomery, 2015). While it is easy to just consider the positive aspects of cold water

swimming, it is equally important to consider its dangers and discomforts. In chapter four of my thesis I will be focusing on how my research participants embody cold water swimming. I will analyse this with the help of a soundscape.

From the concepts of embodiment, practice theory, and habitus, a new concept was developed: enskilment. Enskilment is used by various other authors. One of the authors that is often mentioned when explaining this concept, is Tim Ingold. In his book, he explains enskilment as *“the embodiment of capacities of awareness and response by environmentally situated agents”* (Ingold 2000, p.5). Woods et al. build further upon this definition as they describe that, ‘to enskil something’ is actively learned by *“embodied-embedded attentiveness”* (Woods, Rudd, Gray, & Davids 2021, p.1), where a person aims to become more reactive to other people and their surroundings by using the senses. Variables through which enskilment is analysed lie in the senses and how they are experienced in a certain context. According to Woods et al. (2021), participants should be stimulated during enskilment to interact with all the senses in the setting that they are experiencing (Woods, Rudd, Gray, & Davids, 2021). In the methodology section, I will make clear how I used certain assignments to analyse this. Combining embodiment and enskilment leads to the formation of sensory ecologies, as described by Carter et al (2022). They describe how the body, the senses of the body, and the environment can never really be separated and produce these ecologies. They explain: *“...sensory ecologies are produced through the refinement of enskilled movement of bodily materials in specific spatial and temporal confines.”* (Carter, Heath, Jacobs, & Rana 2022, p.242). They continue: *“These ecologies are made through dedicated “techniques of the body” (Mauss, 1973) that require specific refined movements of specific parts of the body that are combined to produce whole body movements in different kinds of spaces.”* (Carter, Heath, Jacobs, & Rana 2022, p.242). They also explain that the body is *“a consciously produced social object”* (Carter, Heath, Jacobs, & Rana 2022, p.244) which is constantly reconstructed and redeveloped by the mechanisms of the body, but also by its relation to the environs (Carter, Heath, Jacobs, & Rana, 2022). For cold water swimming, the environment is cold water and your community, but also the animals, the sounds, the sights, and the area. Many people likely learn the sport actively through their bodies, through the cold. And even though ice swimming has a lot of mental aspects as well, an essential part of the sport is getting the body adapted to the cold. This is slightly different from the embodiment of cold water swimming, where you experience swimming with your body more passively. With the enskilment of cold water swimming, a person is trying to actively teach their body to deal with the cold temperatures so that the body can stay in for longer periods of time and swim further distances.

Until recently, enskilling something was assumed to be genderless. What Jasmijn Rana argues (Rana, 2022) is that enskilment is never gender-less. Enskilment is based on social construction, which means gender is always a part of it. She argues that by investigating how women learn to run. She drew on her own experiences as a runner and described how having breasts influences women when they run (Rana, 2022). As a swimmer, until reading Rana’s article, I had not considered that I learned to swim differently from my male teammates. Another author that goes further into this is Karen Throsby (Throsby, 2016). Her book focuses on marathon swimming, but many habits marathon swimmers have overlap with cold water and outdoor swimmers. She argued how menstruating is supposed to be invisible while swimming and how it is not something that is openly talked about, but it does affect women. The evidence she has is a description of a meeting she attended before crossing the English Channel. The meeting was about pooping, puking, and peeing while swimming, and at one point, one of the female swimmers asked about menstruating, and the room went silent; nobody really knew how to address it, and eventually, a female coach was asked to step in (Throsby, 2016). Menstruation might have a bigger influence on cold-water swimming than it has on open-water swimming. For cold water swimming, how well a person performs or can handle the cold

depends a lot on other factors. Having period cramps can limit a person when doing any sport; however, how a person is emotionally feeling can severely impact how that person performs in cold water swimming, more so than with open water swimming or competitive swimming. Additionally, the way women get feedback and the subjects women get feedback on might be different than it is for men. These gender-related differences could mean for my research that women might enstil cold water swimming differently than men do.

Gender is an essential aspect of one's personhood. Personhood is a concept where individuals have a moral agency and share the state of being a person. This concept is also often used in relation to law and legality because only people with personhood have rights. Additionally, personhood relates to a sense of morality. Being a 'person' is defined by Mauss and Durkheim as an *"inescapable component of human cognition"* (Barnard & Spencer 2010, p.532). On a fundamental level, personhood shows who you are as a person: your story and how you define yourself. A second aspect of personhood is how it is socially constructed by engaging with the environment and the social network a person may have (Pina-Cabral, 2021). Being a morally good person is often important to many people. It is important to a lot of people to be the best version of yourself. By using the concept of personhood, I would like to find out if part of the reason that people do cold swimming is that they want to better themselves as a person, to become the healthiest, fittest version of themselves. And to aid others with the same goal. Hence, personhood can contribute to answering why people learn ice swimming. What would they want to get out of it, and what would they personally like to enstil? Are they doing this as a way of self-improvement? Are they trying to enstil their immune system, and would that even be possible? And how would that make them a different (better) person?

Different people have different lifestyles. The concept of lifestyle focuses on practices in everyday life. According to David Chaney, lifestyles are *"sets of practices and attitudes that make sense in particular contexts"* (Chaney 2002, p.3). Originally, Alfred Adler, an Austrian psychologist, used this term for *"a person's basic character as established early in childhood"* (Harper, n.d.). When I researched cold water swimming, I wanted to take a look at how this sport fits into people's lives. I asked the interviewees what kind of job they had, or sometimes it came up during informal conversations. I also asked about other hobbies they might have and how swimming influenced their lifestyle. Questions regarding lifestyle helped me further determine why people participate in cold water swimming. For example, if somebody has a very stressful job, cold water swimming could be a way for that person to relax and reduce the feeling of stress. If a person lives in a busy, chaotic city, cold water swimming might be an activity that is used to connect with nature. According to Brymer and Gray (2009), *"the interplay between adventure athletes and the natural world is, in fact, crucial for many participants"* (Brymer & Gray 2009, p.135). I suspected that nature might be a crucial element for my research participants as well. On top of that, it is important to find out the amount of time people spend on cold water swimming. It can reflect on personhood as well; cold water swimming could be a way of living for some people or part of their philosophy.

The cold water swimming community is a place where different people with different lifestyles can connect over at least one thing they have in common with everybody: the experience of going into extremely cold water. Traditionally, cold water swimming is considered to be a communal sport for one important reason: safety. With the risk of hypothermia, strong currents, and waves, it qualifies as a high-risk sport. It is important that people take care of each other. Many outdoor swimmers I know strongly advise against going alone. Even in the water, they suggest it is important to have other swimmers close so they can watch out for possible problems. In addition to taking care of each other as a way of connecting, there are a few other ways that can create a sense of community. During my research, I tried to combine the concepts of lifestyle and personhood and see how similarities in

people relating to those concepts can add to the sense of community that people experience in cold water. David Howes describes in his article (Howes, 2019) how multisensory anthropology can contribute to social research. Howes describes that from a multisensory anthropologist's point of view, sensory values are social values, and social interaction is sensory interaction (Howes 2019, p.22), which means that embodiment can contribute to how cold water swimming connects people and gives people a sense of community. Another factor that might contribute to a sense of community includes the experience of extreme cold and the challenges that come with it that all cold water swimmers have to go through. Similarly, the enjoyment of warming up together and the feeling of achievement, celebrating each other's wins, and giving encouragement to other people when it is needed can also immensely contribute to forming a community.

### 3. Methodology

When preparing for my fieldwork, I decided to go with a multimodal approach towards researching the embodiment and enskilment of cold water swimming and the differences between gender in cold water swimming communities. I am an experienced swimmer myself, familiar with cold water swimming as well, so I thought out carefully how to get the most out of my fieldwork. Fundamentally, the research was built around participant observation. Participant observation was meant to balance the 'inside' and 'outside' of events. It was about me grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically. However, I had to step back to "*situate these meanings in wider contexts*" (Clifford 1983, p.127). As a fellow cold water swimmer and thus an 'insider' to this community, I easily gained access to this community, but I also had to consciously be aware not to take any observations for granted (Denton, Dannreuther, & Aranda, 2020).

Participant observation was essential to my research. It involves engaging in a sensory learning process to understand and partially adopt the perspective of the people being studied (Pink, 2007). Humberstone (2011) argues that to understand nature-based sports it is useful for the researcher to reflexively experience the activity (Humberstone, 2011). I wanted to use participant observation to research embodiment and enskilment. Combining those concepts leads to the formation of 'sensory ecologies' as described by Carter et al (2022). They describe how the body, the senses, and the environment can never really be separated. According to Merleau-Ponty, the human experience was a combination of consciousness, body, and environment, where the memory of the experience was prompted by a sensory experience instead of by empirical facts (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). I realised that fully portraying this experience might be hard to impossible, as an experience can never be truly captured. I wanted to use this method to look for differences regarding gender. I was wondering if women and men get different advice on how to enjoy cold water swimming or if the attitude of the instructor would be different towards men or women. As Rana (2022) argues, enskilling a sport is always gendered (Rana, 2022). As a female swimmer myself, I had not realised before that I might have learned to swim in a different way than some of my male teammates. Participant observation seemed like a good method to investigate that angle closer.

I used ethnography and auto-ethnography to record and convey the experience as closely as possible. The concept of ethnography as a participatory practice emphasizes learning through embodiment, sensory engagement, and empathy rather than just a combination of participation and observation (Pink, 2009). According to Ellis and Bochner (2000) in Bryman (Bryman, 2021) auto-ethnography is a highly reflexive and personal writing style, which has detailed descriptions about the day-to-day activities and experiences of the researcher. It "*displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural*" (Ellis and Bochner (2000) in Bryman, 2021). In the analysis of chapters four, five, six, and seven, I aimed to be reflective. Alongside the stories and experiences of my research participants, I included my own experiences, either from swimming in the Netherlands or during my fieldwork. To accurately do that, I kept a highly detailed journal of all the swims I did or observed. I moved on from only participating to reflecting upon my own experiences, which is what is considered to be auto-ethnography (Moors, 2017). Occasionally, I let go of my own expertise to discover new perspectives and experience the activity through the eyes of the research participants. I needed my body's experience because I wanted to centre embodiment in my research, and as many other space-place methodologies seeking to do that, my body was an active part of the research process and could not be ignored (Bell, Foley, Houghton, Maddrell, & Williams, 2018).

Additionally, I used methods to make my research more interactive. One of those methods was soundscaping. Soundscaping is a method which provides an auditory description of a situation. Analysing the sounds people make, combined with the sounds of the environment, added an extra

layer to my research, where I could reflect on the swimmers' relationship with the world they swim in. In the soundscape, I specifically focused on the first few minutes in the water to capture the initial response to being immersed in cold water. I wanted to see if I could attribute meaning to the screams, puffs, laughter, and other sounds that were present in those first few moments. Additionally, I wanted to know if you could hear the interaction with the environment, how that would influence the embodiment and enskilment, and how that might inform personhood. I tried out different settings and set-ups and educated myself on soundscaping, using Littlejohn's practical and theoretical guide on sonic ethnography (Littlejohn, *Sonic Ethnography*, 2022), before I left for the UK. In that guide, he gives advice on sound settings, recording material, and editing. During the fieldwork, I decided to record via the recording app on my phone. The phone was located in my *tow float*. This had a few advantages and disadvantages. An advantage was that my phone could stay dry, and the recorder was not directly visible and did not directly change the sight of the environment. I had informed my participants about this beforehand. This way the method was perceived less intrusive than it might have been were the recorder on the outside of the *tow float*. Another advantage was that the recorder was sheltered slightly from the wind. A disadvantage was that because the recorder was in the *tow float*, it was further away from the participants, so sometimes the sounds turned out muffled or sounded far away. Additionally, every time the recorder moved inside the *tow float*, you could hear that on the recording. Sometimes, this sound was very loud, and it was also difficult to distinguish this from the sound the wind made. In editing the soundscape, I chose to overlap four different swim sessions to best illustrate the intense reaction to immersion in cold water. I specifically chose four sessions that were close to each other. The water temperatures of those sessions were 0.5°C, 0.5°C, 1.5°C, and 5.2°C.

I also used video recording. I had prior experience with using an Insta360 camera on a *tow float*, as I had used it on previous swims and had basic knowledge of the editing program. I knew the quality of the camera was good, and because it filmed all the surroundings, it could serve as an immersive way of illustrating certain settings and experiences. Films that depict other people's experiences reflecting the physical connection between the filmmaker, me, and the swimmers, can invoke responses that help us empathize with those



5 Here you can see me, with my camera set-up. The yellow 'bag' is the tow float, and you can see the camera sitting on top. Picture taken by Brenda Lowry

experiences, though we interpret them through our own personal and cultural background (Pink, 2007). The *tow float* I had, had a special clip, which you could screw the Insta360 or another action camera, such as a GoPro, on top of. Since the Insta360 is slightly taller than a GoPro, it needed more weight in the *tow float* to balance out the camera so it would stay upright. I used a magazine for this<sup>12</sup>. It was just heavy enough to balance the camera but not so heavy that the *tow float* would be too heavy to swim with. The editing program for the camera is called Insta360 Studio. It allows you to set all the keyframes and export them. For the purpose of this thesis, I exported some of the videos to YouTube as unlisted. I shared the link to the videos with my participants, as sharing the files was impossible due to the sizes of the files. Sharing the videos gave me very positive feedback from the participants, and it made the research more interactive.

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<sup>12</sup> The magazine I used was called 'Linda', coincidentally gifted by my good friend Linda.

Alongside providing the surroundings and creating an immersive video with which people could interact, using the camera on top of the *tow float* also led to a fairly new form of interviewing. Denton et al. (2020) discuss a 'swim-along' interview method, similar to the 'walk-along' method. According to Hockey and Collinson (2006), to deeply understand the emplaced and the embodied aspects of an activity, it is necessary for the researcher to move along with the participants (Hockey & Collinson, 2006). I was already doing that, as I was swimming along with my participants. The option of the camera on top of the *tow float* provided me with a way of recording informal conversations in the water. With the 'swim-along' interview method, I could gather the data while my participants participated in the activity and moved through the setting I was exploring. This way of interviewing allowed for a more refined analysis of the *"sensory experience, embodiment, emplacement, about what changes and what stays the same, and about the configuration and reconfiguration of assemblies of objects, spaces, people, ideas and information"* (Büscher & Urry 2009, p.110). Using this method I hoped to potentially access the uniquely immersive understandings of cold water swimming, as well as contribute to *"the emerging canon of visceral and sensory methodologies"* (Denton, Dannreuther, & Aranda 2020, p.2). This method also provided some different insights into the experience, as it also recorded the somewhat less pleasant experiences of cold water swimming, such as the pain when getting in the water or the struggle with motivation. With a sit-down interview, most of the experience is focused on the good aspects, as that is what people get out of it. In my fieldwork, I used the 'swim-along' interview method, as described by Denton (2020), slightly differently. Instead of official interviews with previously thought-out questions, I kept it to more informal conversations to see what would naturally come up. This method also informed certain differences between the swimming groups I investigated. The different groups would go about the swim slightly differently, with different experiences and surroundings. This method additionally recognises the importance of place. In nature-based sports, the location is less seen as 'just a thing', and more *"as an event and as the coming together of the previously interrelated constellation of processes"* (Denton, Dannreuther, & Aranda 2020, p.2). This method can also provide insight into the sometimes in-the-moment, fleeting embodied aspects that you cannot get from sit-down interviews. It can additionally more thoroughly illustrate how the swimmers interact with their environment, much better than you can do in a sit-down interview. To use this method, it is important that the researcher is a strong swimmer and has experience with the dangers of open water and cold water swimming. You need to be aware of your own body, not push it too far, but also look out for the participants so that you do not push them too far. It is also an advantage if you can keep up with all of the participants.

Sit-down interviews can complement this method. I used the interviews to provide a broader context and triangulate the insights I had gained from the 'swim-along' method. I had sit-down interviews with 25 of the participants. Unlike Denton's method, where she combined the 'swim-along' interview method with a sit-down interview directly after the swim, I chose to have the sit-down interview, not directly after the swim. There were various reasons for that. The location where we were swimming did not have any changing rooms and did not have a room to sit inside comfortably. The weather was always unpredictable, so sometimes it would rain, or there would be a lot of wind. Interviewing outside after the swimmers had been swimming in cold water and were slightly hypothermic did not seem safe to me. Additionally, I did not want to inconvenience any of the swimmers, as the swims were already during the day, and people had obligations such as work or family to get back to. For the interviews, I let the interviewees pick the place, as I was unfamiliar with the area, and we discussed a time that would fit both our schedules. For some of them, this did mean that I interviewed them directly after the swim, as that would best fit their schedule and mine. By letting them pick the place, I discovered some interesting coffee shops. I also interviewed participants at their homes. The

advantage of interviewing people at their homes is that I could also more or less see what their drive to the swim location was like. The area is fairly rural, so for some people, the aesthetics of the drive is part of the experience of going to a swim session.<sup>13</sup> Another advantage was that there was not a lot of background noise, as was sometimes the case in coffee shops, and there was more privacy. They also had the space to show me some of their equipment or logbooks, which was not the case at the coffee shops, as most people did not bring any items. I started doing the interviews in the second half of my fieldwork when I had built sufficient trust with my participants, and I had gotten to know the people so I could select whom to interview. In my selection, I took various criteria into account. First of all, it was important that the people I interviewed did the sport regularly. Because I wanted people who had made this sport as part of their lifestyle. I used my observations to determine that, as I had noted down who came often to the swim sessions at H2oTrails. Second of all, because there were so many women, I wanted to have some male perspective as well. So I interviewed some extra men, even if they did not come as regularly as some of the women to the sessions. Aside from that, I also wanted some outsider perspectives from people who did not swim at H2oTrails and who did not have to pay for their swim. This led to the selection of the 25 interviewees. I recorded all of the interviews with the recording app on my phone, and used 'Transkriptor' to transcribe the interviews. I removed all the recordings from my phone directly after transferring them to my Dropbox Vault. The set-up of the interviews was semi-structured. I had prepared various themes around swimming that I wanted to discuss, such as, but not limited to, the experience of cold water swimming, gender differences, mental and physical benefits, defining the concept of community, and environmental awareness. Initially, I had wanted to focus on socio-economic class as well, but as I had gotten to know the participants, it felt inappropriate to ask them directly about this in the interview. The shortest interview was 58 minutes, and the longest 129 minutes.

In a meeting with Jasmijn Rana, we discussed the possibility of doing different exercises with the participants to further explore the embodiment and enskilment of cold water swimming. I came up with five assignments for the participants who were willing to participate in this part of the research. The set-up of this was that they had to do or think about the assignment during the swim, and they could reflect on this in a small notebook, which I got for each of the participants, at home directly after the swim. Where Denton used the sit-down interviews to reflect on the swim with the participants directly after the swim, I used the notebooks to gain access to these insights. It was important to me how they would express themselves when they had some time to think it over. I gave them the freedom to use as many or as few words as they wanted and said that they were even allowed to draw, paint or put in pictures if they would like. In practice, all participants wrote out their thoughts, and nobody used drawing or related methods to express themselves. During the last five weeks of my fieldwork, I started the assignments with the people who swam regularly. Initially, I started out with seventeen participants. This number dropped slightly with every new assignment. The drop in numbers was not because the participants did not want to participate anymore but was related to the fact that they were not able to come to the swim due to other commitments. The last assignment was only done by five participants. Using a focus or task group can gather data on the individual, the group, and the interactions within the group (Bryman, 2021). I have mostly used this method to gather data on the individual embodiment and enskilment, and not as much on group interactions, as the assignments were unrelated. As with the other methods, I hoped to use it to see a gender difference in enskilment or embodiment. However, there were not enough men participating to substantiate any definitive conclusion. The exercises I came up with, listed below, were designed to give me insights on different aspects of the embodiment or enskilment of cold water swimming.

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<sup>13</sup> A general map of the interview locations can be found in the Appendix under 'Interview Locations'. No participant names are linked to the location.

### **1. Neoprene glove exercise**

1.1 *What were your expectations before going in? How were you feeling?*

1.2 *What did it feel like in the water? Can you describe the difference between the two hands?*

1.3 *During and after warming up both hands, what was the difference between the two?*

### **2. The Senses**

2.1 *What did the bottom feel like?*

2.2 *Can you describe the things you saw while swimming?*

2.3 *Can you describe the sounds?*

2.4 *How did the water feel on your skin?*

2.5 *What did the water taste like?*

### **3. The body**

3.1 *Listen closely to your body, what are the signs it is telling you to get out?*

### **4. New Challenges**

4.1 *What did you try out and why?*

4.2 *What was the result? How did it feel?*

### **5. Emotions**

5.1 *Which emotions can you identify during the session? Focus on before swimming, during swimming and after.*

Number one was related to enskilling new skills in the water, as was number four. Assignments number two, three, and five were meant to focus on the embodiment of cold water swimming and how the swimmers interact with their environment. I discuss the results of these assignments further in chapter four. The insights I gained here, in combination with the previously named research methods, provided me with a very elaborate illustration of the cold water swimming experience. Combining these methods was necessary to come as closely as possible to describe the full experience. Every method, on its own, would not have given me the insights that I have now from doing multimodal research.

Aside from all the previously mentioned methods, I additionally used my critical observations to inform my decisions during the research. They helped me determine who to ask what and how to best navigate the research. I also used snowball sampling to gain more information on different swimming groups, create a bigger group of research participants, and broaden the research perspective. My observations, in combination with participant observation, are what mostly helped me explore the dimension of gender within swimming groups, where other methods were not as effective due to the limited number of men. In chapter five, where I talk about gender in cold water swimming, it is important to be critical and keep in mind that all the conclusions are based on a very small number of men. Some of the conclusions could be attributed to coincidental similarities in personality, for example. It is also important to consider my positionality here. Whereas I can give some insight into certain aspects of the female experience of cold water swimming, it was difficult at times to reflect on the male experience of this sport.

All of the recorded data was stored on a password-protected Dropbox Vault to ensure its secure protection.

### 3.1. Ethical Considerations

As with any research, ethics are fundamental. First and foremost, an anthropologist's commitment to the research participants should focus on avoiding harm or wrong (Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association, 2009). This includes being respectful and open-minded to the beliefs of the research participants. For my research, it was essential not to impose my own beliefs and opinions about cold water swimming on the participants. I tried my best not to influence any of the group dynamics and their sentiments about cold water swimming. However, becoming part of the group and interacting with people did, to some extent, lead to a change in interactions. In my opinion, I did not change anything in a negative way, but it would be naïve of me to think that I did not change anything at all.

Regarding presenting the results in this thesis, *"issues of identity and representation"* (Sluka 2012, p.198) will always be at risk. It is unavoidable that this thesis will be read by some in the studied community (Sluka, 2012). The ethical concern here is that it is impossible to anonymise a face. These videos and pictures might potentially be harmful when publicly shared. Because of this, I will make sure to present my results as accurately as possible without identifying my participants with the nuance it deserves. I will not link any of the participants' names to the quotes, pictures or videos, and I will only use the videos that I deem essential for the analysis. After careful consideration, I have decided, due to the extremely collaborative nature of this project between the participants and me, to share this thesis with the research participants upon request. I will put a message out in the private Facebook groups of my participants and in the newsletter of H2oTrails that they can request a copy of my thesis if they want to read it. That way, it is not just out there for anyone to read. I would deem it unethical not to share this work with the people who cooperated in it after the huge amount of effort the participants put in.

During my fieldwork, I decided which ethical standards to apply, relying on the codes of ethics from the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) of the UK and on my own moral and common sense. Most importantly, I did not want to harm my research participants in any way.

I had to consider some ethical challenges in the methods I used. To anticipate some of these challenges, I always told people I was not there to impose or judge. The first challenge was regarding the video and sound recordings. During swimming, the participants are in their bathing suits. This exposes a huge amount of the body. While the participants might feel comfortable with that at the location, around the people they know, at the moment, it is something entirely different to feel comfortable with that on video for research. I know that, most likely, showing skin is not a significant issue in the swimming community. However, this is an assumption I made based on my experience with groups in the Netherlands. It is possible there is a cultural difference in the UK, where they might not be as comfortable, so I had to be cautious about this. It was an advantage that the camera and the recorder were on and in the *tow float*, as this was less intrusive than putting a camera directly under someone's nose. Still, I ensured that everyone who came to the swim sessions knew about the camera and gave verbal consent to being filmed. If somebody did not want to be filmed, or I got the feeling the person agreed but was not happy about it, I made a note of it and made sure to edit them out of all the footage presented in this thesis. On this topic, and as mentioned before, you can notice I make use of quite a few videos and photographs in my analysis later on. Before selecting the footage for my thesis, I expressively asked the people in the footage again, if I had their consent to put it in there. As other anthropologists might corroborate, consent in this field of study is more of a process, than just getting some forms signed. I deemed it necessary to keep checking in if I still had the participant's consent instead of blindly accepting that I did. I also did this for the soundscape. As I

have mentioned before, the videos have been uploaded to a private YouTube account as 'unlisted', meaning only the people with the link can access the video

In line with this ethical concern, I had to be conscious about people getting dressed before and afterwards. Getting dressed is part of the experience. There were no closed spaces to get dressed in at the locations, so everybody got dressed out in the open. I found this was not an issue for most people, and even though it is slightly less normalised in the UK to get dressed out in the open than it is in the Netherlands, nobody made a big deal about it. Still, it is best to avoid undue intrusion (Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK, 1999). This is why I stayed away from my camera and from the people getting dressed. I tried not to bother them with questions while they got dry and warm as quickly as possible. As I got dressed most of the time, too, at the same time as my participants, I do not think that my position as a researcher made any of them feel uncomfortable. I participated in small talk while getting dressed and sometimes helped people out with dressing. Sometimes, people helped me out, too. This was considered normal within this community, so I had no ethical problem with this. I made sure not to overly observe people getting dressed and not to make them more vulnerable than they already were in those moments.

Additionally, there were some considerable ethical concerns regarding the 'swim along' method. There are legitimate concerns regarding the participant's safety, as open water, especially in the winter, can be dangerous and bring extra risks. I am well aware of most of the dangers of cold water swimming and would never do anything to endanger the swimmers. However, I initially took for granted that my participants were also aware of all the dangers. My assumption that the swimmers are strong and capable enough not to get hurt while swimming in cold water did have a legitimate foundation. Most of the fieldwork was at H2oTrails under the supervision of the lifeguard. The people who swam there had to do a mandatory winter workshop to learn about open water safety at cold water temperatures. I knew about this beforehand but had not gotten to know the people yet, so I did not know what they specifically learned in the workshop and what the level would be. I trusted that they had the knowledge to remain within their own safe limit. For the next project, it would be important to consider that further. The other groups I swam with were organised so that everybody was swimming at their own risk, which everybody was aware of. So again, I assumed everybody was aware of the dangers, which is not always a fair assumption. I want to stress that in my participant observation and the 'swim along' method, I did not try to influence any of the participants. I did not dictate how long they should swim or push them to stay in longer. If somebody was hypothermic or not doing well, I made sure to drop everything to help out. So, I did not do anything that could endanger the research participants based on my experience and common sense.

There were also some ethical dilemmas in the notebook assignments I designed. Especially when dealing with the first assignment. Swimming without a neoprene glove was more painful than I had anticipated. This goes against one of the primary rules of ethics: "Do *no harm*". I had not designed this assignment with the intention of hurting my participants. I was so used to swimming without any neoprene that I did not realise how much cold water can hurt if you are not used to it. I thought the body would get used to it within a few minutes. I knew that doing this exercise would not hurt anybody permanently, and I stayed in the water alongside the participants for the entire duration of the exercise, watching everybody closely to make sure nobody got into trouble. In assignment four I asked them to challenge themselves. I made sure to emphasise that the challenge should be something doable and not dangerous. For this exercise, I was also in the water with them, keeping an eye out along with the lifeguard. This provided a safe space for the participants to try out something they had been wanting to try out. With these assignments, it is important to consider who is participating and act accordingly. I purposefully did these assignments towards the end of my

fieldwork so I knew who could participate, and I was sure they would be fine after the assignment. Researching swimming with multimodal mixed methods in the water is definitely a challenge and should only be done by someone with experience with the sport's intricacies. Additionally, I was concerned for people's privacy because I had them write their reflections down in notebooks. Because writing can be a very private and intimate recording mode, I made sure to analyse the notebooks with the utmost care. All excerpts I took from the notebooks for the analysis were made anonymous so the identity of the research participants would be as safe as possible.

During interviews, I encountered some ethical challenges as well. The first one is the method of data collection. I recorded all of my interviews so I could participate more naturally in the interview without having to make too many notes. Before the start of the interview, I asked all the interviewees for their verbal consent. After that, I would put my phone down on the table and not pay much attention to it so the conversation could progress naturally. After the interview, when I got home, I would immediately put the recordings in the Dropbox Vault and delete the recordings from my phone to make sure the data was protected and could not be leaked. To transcribe the interviews, I paid for a slightly more expensive transcription program called 'Transkriptor', which had clear rules on data protection. As for the interview topics, some of the topics were somewhat sensitive, such as mental health problems, traumatic events, or physical problems. I aimed to always treat these topics with sensitivity and inquired if they were sure they wanted to talk about it. I made sure that it was clear we could stop the interview at any time, and if they were not comfortable with the line of questioning, we would move on to a different subject. When I did the interviews in public places, I kept the volume of my voice down. The concern is that people from public places can listen to the conversation, so it is important not to speak too loudly. In the Appendix, I have a map of all the interview locations I have been to. This map is only to illustrate the area I covered, and I took care not to have any specific addresses there. Even though I visited people's homes, this map only illustrates the general area, so it cannot be used to identify any of the interviewees.

## 4. Icy Waters, Warm Hearts: Embodying and Enskilling Cold Water Swimming

*Journal entry: Tuesday morning, 9<sup>th</sup> of January*

*Only yesterday, I got to the house where I would stay for three months of fieldwork after an exciting weekend in Cheltenham. I was still getting used to everything, especially driving on the left. I wanted to skip out on the first swim session because it was planned early in the morning, at ten o'clock. I did not sleep great, and I was still slightly tired from driving six hours yesterday. But I was invited to come by and meet the swimmers, and I was really excited to do so.*

*When I drove up there for the first time, I was still unsure how to get there, where to go and where to park. The lake was only a fifteen-minute drive from the location where I was staying, and the road to it had lots of hills and trees and fields along the side. The access to the lake sits on private land, and when you enter the area, the terrain changes from fields to woods. The drive down to the lake was exquisite. It was cold outside, but otherwise, the weather was good.*

*I got there ridiculously early because I hated being late, and I met the man who manages the fishery with his wife. They were just moving in and renovating after taking over the fishery from somebody else. I played with his dog for a while when the lifeguard showed up. He and I met during an ice swimming competition in the Netherlands last year, and I felt we had a good click. I had also seen him over the weekend, but it was nice to have a more casual conversation. I talked to him for a while and tried to help out where necessary. Some of the swimmers arrived, and I went to introduce myself and what I was doing while the lifeguard was setting up the boat he used to supervise the swim session.*

*When the lifeguard was almost ready, the swimmers undressed, and got ready to swim. Even though I had decided not to swim, the beauty of the lake and the enthusiasm of the swimmers and the lifeguard convinced me, and I got ready, too. I was surprised to see them wearing neoprene, as most people I know in the Netherlands who do this sport swim without it. On the other hand, they were surprised to see me without any neoprene, in my bikini. They also wore a neoprene hat and, on top of that, a bobble hat to limit the amount of warmth escaping from their heads. Why the hat needs to have a bobble on top is still unclear to me, but if nothing else, it makes for a cheerful sight. Lastly, we all wore a tow float.*

*To get deep enough into the lake to swim, there is a fifty-metre walk to the first buoy. I had not anticipated how hard that walk would be for me. I had not swam in over a month to prepare for my fieldwork. The water was extremely cold (around 3,5 °C), colder than I had been in all season, and the lake floor was filled with medium-sized stones. Walking in barefoot hurt so much that I immediately better understood why the swimmers wore neoprene socks. The stones in the cold felt like small knives that were stabbing my feet repeatedly every time I took another step. I was relieved when we reached the first buoy and were finally deep enough to swim. I talked for a short while with the women before starting to swim. I need to swim to keep warm and not feel the cold so much. So after talking for a while, I started swimming around the course. The course that was set up consisted of four buoys, set up in a rectangle. Swimming from the first to the second buoy would be around 60 metres, and from the second to the third would be around 40 metres. The whole course would be around 200 metres.*



6 Set-up of the Winter Course. Number one to four are the buoys in the order people swim in. Five marks the entrance to the water. Photo taken by the author.

*Even though it was only 200 metres, I struggled with it. My hands felt like they were at least three times bigger than normal, and I felt immensely out of breath. So, after one round, I went out, feeling intensely cold. The other swimmers stayed in longer and went out when they felt they had enough. This depended on the skill and the cold acclimatisation of the swimmer, the weather conditions, the water temperature, how they slept and how well they ate, so this could differ per session. My cold acclimatisation was down the drain since I had not been swimming for a month, had not slept very well, and was tired from travelling.*

*I tried to get dressed as quickly as possible, as that is the trick to avoid getting hypothermic after swimming. Everything wet needed to be removed, and I needed to get dry and dressed as fast as possible. The immense pain in my hands was making it difficult for me to get dressed, and I was panicking slightly. However, the pain subsided after a few minutes, and I managed in the end.*

*After getting dressed, we sat around the table; I drank some hot water, while others had some hot chocolate or tea and some snacks. We talked about the swim, about work, and what to do in case of an emergency while the lifeguard is still on the water (spoiler alert for those who know: it is to honk the horn of the car, so he knows there is trouble and will come out to help). After what I would guess would be around thirty to forty minutes, everybody got up to go on with their day again. They needed to get back to work, to their family, or to their*

other plans for the day, and I needed to properly warmed up, and figure out where to get groceries.



7 The position of the table in relation to the lake. The swimmers huddle around the table to warm up and enjoy a hot drink and food. Photo taken by the author.

The journal entry above describes my first swim session during my fieldwork. And even though the sessions would differ from session to session, this is, generally, what a swim session at H2oTrails would look like. In every session, the weather and water temperature were different, influencing how long the swimmers stayed in and how far they swam. And even though every session had its regular swimmers (those who almost always come that day of the week), there could be other swimmers and a different amount of swimmers. The swim sessions occurred every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday morning and Saturday at noon. The most popular day in the week to swim was Saturday. But Tuesday seemed to be a close second<sup>14</sup>. My cold acclimatisation improved over time, and I managed to stay in longer, which meant I could observe longer.

Every time new swimmers came to a session, I introduced myself again and explained what I was there to do. There was an advantage to introducing myself as a researcher and as an ice swimmer. Because of my experience, I was accepted fairly quickly into the group and connected with the other people. I felt welcome and like I had become part of the community. I was included in the conversations, and sometimes people even send me funny, mostly swimming-related videos<sup>15</sup>. My participation in the sessions as a swimmer also came with the advantage that I could talk to people while they were swimming. This took me right to the moment where the participants were experiencing and embodying cold water swimming. Because a *tow float* was mandatory, it also gave me a more 'natural' way to gather data. I started using audio and video recording during swimming using the *tow float* described in the methodology.

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<sup>14</sup> More details on how many people attended per swim session at H2oTrails, can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>15</sup> See for example this video on Dry Robes:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHH9251rjE&ab\\_channel=SarahWeiler](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHH9251rjE&ab_channel=SarahWeiler)

## 4.1. Soundscaping: Entering the Cold Waters

Sound is a powerful medium to illustrate certain elements. By eliminating vision, the situation can be interpreted differently. The interpretation of sound depends on the cultural context of the listener. Therefore, what is heard and how this turns into something meaningful is socially constructed (Grasseni, et al., 2022). From the recordings I made during swimming, I made a soundscape. I tried to capture the connection between being in ice-cold water and how people interact with their surroundings by making a soundscape of different swim sessions. I aimed to make the dimension of 'cold' audible and convey the powerful sounds it can bring out of people. I also hope to illustrate certain elements of the natural world, such as ice, wind, and water, and how people interact with those elements. Within the soundscape, I focused on the initial moments in the cold water, the first five minutes, rather than capturing the whole swim. At this time, people walk up to the first buoy, experience cold shock, and react to that. At a certain point in the soundscape, you can also hear the transition when the cold shock wears off. The soundscape ends shortly after that. The recordings I used for the soundscape were from days when the lake was covered in ice. The water temperature was under one degree Celsius. By observing multiple swims and dips, I learned that the colder the water is, the longer it takes people to get in and acclimatise, and the louder the recording is. The reaction upon entering cold water can be different for everyone. Some scream or make other noises, whereas others focus on breathing and stay quiet. I combined the audio of four different sessions to illustrate this first reaction to immersion in extremely cold water:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaWwAAQqzxc&ab\\_channel=Liliannesweere](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaWwAAQqzxc&ab_channel=Liliannesweere)<sup>16</sup>

In the following sub-chapter, I will discuss different dimensions of this soundscape.

### 4.1.1. The Symphony of the Ice: Symbioses between Nature and Swimmers

*"I love how peaceful it is at Sweethope, I like to listen to the gentle sound of the water moving with each stroke I take through the water. I could also hear my breath, and sometimes people talking. Most times you hear people laughing."* (Participant S, Notebook Assignment 2.3)

The natural world and people's interaction with it are considerable parts of outdoor sports (Brymer & Gray, 2009). This is no different for cold water swimming. Unsurprisingly, as the sport is practised outdoors, nature, in this case, the cold water, significantly influences the practitioners of the sport. The experience of extreme outdoor sports, defined by Brymer as *"outdoor leisure activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death."* (Brymer & Gray 2009, p.136), is often compared to a fight or a battle against nature, where the participant has to conquer nature and prove they are more powerful. It can be seen as the ultimate battle, human vs. nature, and as the main reason to do an extreme outdoor sport (Brymer & Gray, 2009). However, as Brymer's research corroborates, the extreme outdoor sports experience is better comparable to a dance, which *"...recognizes a dynamic, rhythmical, harmonious, fluid, and responsive interplay between the extreme sport participant and nature."* (Brymer & Gray 2009, p.138). After analysing the recordings, observations, informal conversations, and interviews, I think most participants would agree that cold water swimming is not about conquering the cold but more about being part of it at the moment, feeling the connection to nature, as a partnership. One of the interviewees describes the experience:

*"Maybe sometimes the swallows will come and see, swoop around the surface of the water in the springtime, which is really nice. Other dragonflies will be flying around on the surface as well. Or there might be fish. Occasionally you do bump into a fish. So there's definitely more*

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<sup>16</sup> Dates of the soundscape were on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 27<sup>th</sup> of January. In the appendix you can see how many people were present on that date and what the water temperature was.

*of an awareness of being outdoors in nature. And that's part of the experience." (Participant P, during an interview)*

This interviewee showed that there is a certain awareness among swimmers when swimming outdoors. If you see the body as an organism and thus part of the natural world which is interacted with, as Pink (2011) describes, the partnership, as Brymer and Gray (2009) explain, becomes even more clear. It is not about conquering the environment. Humberstone (2011) agrees with the notion of a partnership: "Arguably lifestyle sport participants in their passion for their activities may find values that are counter to capitalistic consumption and sympathetic to nature not as a resource but as 'partner'" (Humberstone 2011, p.500). If anything, there are self-imposed challenges that swimmers strive to conquer: staying in longer, swimming further, going colder:

*"I love the fact that I challenge myself, you know, I do feel that I have done that, and so it feels like I've achieved something. It's kind of different somehow from other things that you do. You don't get the same sense of achievement. I do other nice things I love, but the swimming gives me a sense of I've actually achieved something here. And not everybody in the world's doing this right now." (Participant E, during an interview)*

The point I aim to make with these two excerpts is that in cold water swimming, there is a certain symbiosis between the natural world and the swimmer. With symbioses, I mean that when the swimmer immerses in the water, the water is being influenced by the swimmer by moving it around, but the swimmer is equally influenced by the water. To be conscious of your place in the environment. These two interviewees were not the only ones showing awareness. Most could give a thorough and reflective description of how nature is a part of their cold water swimming experience. They interact with their surroundings but without actively trying to disturb or destroy them.

This dimension of nature and our interaction with it is clearly present within the soundscape. In the coming paragraphs, I identify three sounds of the natural world that are audible in the soundscape: ice, water, and wind. After that, I will dive deeper into human sounds and what they could mean. Additionally, I will reflect on the meaning behind this interaction.

Ice is the first element in the soundscape I would like to focus on. The water temperature is extremely cold, the lake is frozen, and on top of the lake, there is a small layer of snow. There is an icy wind while we are standing on the side, waiting with apprehension and anticipation. There are thirty minutes of preparation before we go in, which is not audible in the soundscape, as you cannot swim in a frozen lake. The lifeguard needs to cut out the ice to allow the swimmers to go in. To do that, he uses his special axe (which no one can touch) and cuts an *ice channel*. This *ice channel* is a straight line, approximately two metres wide, ending in half a circle, which is big enough to fit around six or seven people. The line reaches the first buoy, fifty metres from the shore. The time it takes him to cut the channel depends on how thick the ice is. When it is ready, we can go in.

The cracking of the ice is one of the first things I can clearly distinguish from the soundscape. It sets a calming tone for the background. I find the sound ethereal, and for me, it leaves room for the imagination to imagine an incredibly beautiful landscape. However, my research participants thought differently. When asked to listen to the soundscape, they described the sound of ice as chips in boiling oil, opening a crisp packet, a landslide of breaking branches, ice skating, when moving the smaller pieces over sheets of ice, interference, like the sound of plates being stacked, and knives being sharpened on a stone.

On a practical level, the presence of ice means that not only the air temperature but also the water temperature is incredibly cold. And to those who have never experienced this, it will be hard to

imagine what this exactly feels like. Even for experienced cold water swimmers, it is almost impossible to suppress the *cold shock response* in this temperature. With this, there is a certain pain level, which all ice swimmers must learn how to deal with, as one of the interviewees told me when describing the first encounter in the water below 5 °C: *"I remember him saying things like: "That feeling that you're feeling, that's not pain, that's just your skin adjusting to the water." And I was like: "No, that's pain. That feels like pain."* (Participant G, during an interview). Pain can be a way of embodying and is, therefore, socially constructed (Denton, Dannreuther, & Aranda, 2020). In this case, the lifeguard gave advice, probably with the intention of making accepting and embodying the pain easier. But everybody deals with their feelings and embodiment in a different way. So even if one person says that it is just the feeling of your skin adjusting, that might not be true for others, who engage differently with the environment and their own bodily responses. Additionally, cold water swimming gives a feeling of exhilaration. Swimmers often refer to it as 'swimmer's high'. On a less practical level, ice makes room for a spiritual experience. The swimmer, rather than fighting against the elements, adapts to the cold in an attempt to connect with nature. Someone mentioned during an interview that *"It's a great stress reliever, because for me, when I'm in the water, I just feel as though I'm a part of creation. And, you know, I just love it, being part of nature."* (Participant B, during an interview). Being part of a bigger whole can be a powerful feeling that might offer peace and serenity. From my own experience, I find that there is something particularly magical about sitting in the lake, surrounded by ice, picking up some pieces and throwing them, listening to the serene clashing sound that makes, while also looking at the trees, being conscious of the sounds the surroundings make, combined with the laughter that goes along with most of the swim sessions. It offers room for reflection: who am I, and how do I fit into this bigger whole?

The second element I will focus on is water. Based on how the water sounds, it is possible to determine what kind of area you are in. This is why it is essential to the soundscape. People who are familiar with the sound of water, might have no problem determining to which kind of body of water they are listening. There is an auditorial difference between lake water and seawater. The wind is stronger at the beach because it is not sheltered like some lakes. This causes the waves to be higher and stronger, making them more present in the sound recording. There is also a certain rhythm in how the sea moves. The sound of the breaking of the waves is rhythmic, consistent, and predictable, and to me, it is not surprising that people use this sound in meditation or to fall asleep. However, contradictory to the relaxing and peaceful sound, swimming in the sea can be exhilarating and dangerous. It is easy to forget how much force big waves can have. This is why swimming in the sea is not something to be careless about. The discussion on whether doing extreme sports is more comparable to a partnership or a battle is particularly relevant when dealing with swimming in waves. There is so much force in the sea that it is often seen (by non-swimmers) as something to battle. However, the sea is not consciously fighting, and it is naïve to think that a person could actually 'win' against the sea. This is why the idea of an interactive relationship with nature fits better when dealing with cold water swimming.

The experienced listener will know, based on the sound from the soundscape, that the recording was taken in a lake. In a lake, the sound of the water is different. It moves around people as they go through it and interact with it. The people are directly responsible for the sounds the water makes on the audio recording. The initial comment at the beginning of this subchapter, made by one of the swimmers after being asked which sounds she remembered from the swim, illustrates how moving through water is an interaction. Even though there is no sound of swimming through the water in the soundscape, the water interacts with it. People are walking through it to get to the first buoy so they can enjoy their dip. In a way, this sound of the water moving in a lake is more peaceful than the sea because it lacks some of the excessive force the sea has. And where people swimming at sea can

hardly influence the sound of the water, the sound of the water at the lake is more collaborative. The swimmers interact with it, making it move, pushing the ice through the water, and immersing once they are ready and deep enough.

Thirdly, I will focus on wind. In my opinion, the sound of the wind is never as serene and relaxing as the sound of ice or water. I always find the sound slightly ominous, the way it whistles through the trees. The wind makes swimming a bigger challenge as well. Not only during swimming, when it causes waves on the lake, but also afterwards, as an interviewee describes: *"It's the wind, when you get out, it depletes me really quickly. And I think that's my biggest enemy, the wind."* (Participant I, during an interview) And while natural elements such as water and ice are mostly referred to as something to go along with and enjoy, the wind seems to leave a different sentiment. Although not by everyone, by most, the wind is seen as something that will negatively impact the swim. One person said:

*"The worst thing probably is the wind. That's when I least enjoy it. Although you do [enjoy it]. Like that time it was really windy and I swam out to the buoy and I was coming back and Fenwick said, go on your side, because I was having trouble breathing. But I still quite enjoyed the challenge of getting through the waves."* (Participant R, during an interview)

The wind is something that all swimmers have to accept during their swim because it is almost always present. There were only very few occasions where there was no wind at all when I did my fieldwork. It makes the water unpredictable, and it is more difficult to breathe in the waves than it is when the water is flat and calm, as the person above also pointed out. Only once was the swim session cancelled because of the weather, not because of the rain or the temperature, but because the wind was too strong, causing stronger waves. Illustrating the influence it can have on a swim.

In the four sessions included in the soundscape, the wind was not too bad, but the recorder easily picked up the sound. Additionally, it is hard to distinguish the wind's sound from the recorder's sound when it moves inside the *tow float*. The wind can also drown out some other sounds, such as birds or other animal noises and audio of people talking.

Along with the sounds of nature go the sounds of people braving the natural world. In the beginning of the soundscape, listening to the people, you can hear questioning, complaining, swearing and denial: *"It has got to be warmer in the water"*. This initial question of "Why am I doing this?" is a phenomenon I would like to describe as a "healthy sense of reluctance"<sup>17</sup>. Interviewing made clear that almost everyone goes through this when preparing or when walking into the water. Especially on days when the weather is horrible with a lot of wind or rain. One person told me during an interview:

*"And I don't know if it's the buzz you get when you get out and you feel all tingly as you warm up, because every time you get there and every time you get ready to go in the water, you think, why am I doing this? And then you get out and you're like, that's great. And you want to go back."* (Participant R, during an interview)

I describe it as a healthy sense of reluctance because you make your body go into extreme temperatures, so to me, it is logical that you hear an inside voice tell you: *"Don't do this"*, which is healthy to think about, because the sport carries some serious risks, as explained in the research context.

After the audible, initial moment of doubt, you can already hear some breathing, a quick and pulsating sound in combination with some gasps as people deal with cold shock. People progress to

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<sup>17</sup> "Gezonde tegenzin" in Dutch

releasing different sounds. For some, this is in the form of screaming; others start laughing, and there is even some singing. You can hear the lifeguard giving advice and monitoring everybody's safety. Next to that, you can also hear someone checking up on someone else, illustrating how 'normal' it is to keep an eye on fellow swimmers and ensure everybody is okay.

In the soundscape at 3:36, you can hear a distinct transition where the laughter dies down, and we discuss the water temperature. This transition represents the moment that the body and the mind accept the pain of the cold water, and the *cold shock response* wears off. In the soundscape, the breathing becomes a little less heavy. The sound changes from only laughter into conversation. This moment and the moments after are where you can start to enjoy your surroundings and feel yourself being immersed in the elements of nature discussed earlier. This is probably where people get the most benefit from. When you stay shorter, you only experience reluctance and pain. However, when you give your body a chance to acclimate, you can feel the peace it can bring, especially when you are surrounded by forests or nature. You have time to listen to the sounds around you, and you can look at the scenery. On the other hand, when you stay in longer or too long, hypothermia starts, and although you might not notice it when still in the water, it will make the recovery harder and more tedious.

During the soundscape, I was not totally acclimatised due to the temperature not being so cold in the Netherlands, which is why my breathing in the background sounds so heavy. Acclimatisation is a significant part of embodying and enskilling cold water swimming. To better understand the experience of cold water swimming, I had participants do assignments relating to how they experience it. I will discuss this thoroughly in the coming subchapter.

## 4.2. The Embodiment of Cold Water Swimming: A Task Group

As described in the conceptual framework, embodiment can be defined in three parts: the sensory experiences of your body, the environment, and the interaction and social construction between the two. The environment is the cold water, the other swimmers, and anything else around you for cold water swimming. Many people inevitably learn the sport actively through their bodies, through the cold. And even though ice swimming has a lot of mental aspects as well, an essential part of the sport is getting the body adapted to the cold. This is slightly different from the embodiment of cold water swimming, where you experience ice swimming with your body more passively. With the enskilment of cold water swimming, a person is trying to actively teach their body to deal with the cold temperatures so that the body can stay in for longer periods of time and swim further distances.

To research how cold-water swimming is embodied and enskilled in my research population, I set up a task group. Swimmers who came to swim sessions regularly got different assignments that they could do or think about when swimming. I designed five different assignments, focussing on different aspects more thoroughly explained in the methodology. I will discuss the results of these assignments in the coming subchapter.

### 4.2.1 Different Task Groups

*One of the main functions I use on Facebook is Facebook groups. I am not joking when I tell you that thirty-two of the sixty-nine groups I am a part of are swimming-related. Being a part of so many popular swimming groups means I see many of the same questions from new swimmers who have just joined the group. One of the questions that is asked a lot in winter is, "I am new at winter swimming, and I would like to try it; what sort of equipment do I need?". I have noticed a significant difference in advice in the comment section in Dutch open-water swimming groups and UK open-water swimming groups. The comments in the Dutch Facebook group mostly suggest just taking it easy and trying it out without any extra*

*equipment (you just need a bathing suit, swimming cap, and a tow float). However, the advice is totally different when I compare that to the comment section in the UK open water Facebook groups. The first piece of advice is to buy neoprene socks, gloves, and a neoprene swim cap.*

Initially, I was surprised when I observed cold water swimming groups in the UK and saw people swimming with more neoprene than I was used to in the Netherlands. I was not sure what was behind this difference. The more Facebook groups I joined, the more I realised this difference already started earlier than just at the swimming location. It started in the preparation before people even tried out the sport. In the phase where they are still researching how to go about it and how to be safe. Since most cold water swimmers I met already got the gloves and socks before they started to swim in cold temperatures, I was interested in how they would experience swimming without neoprene and wanted to see if this was something they could *enskil*.

This led to the first assignment. Because most heat is lost through your head, I did not want them to try it without a cap. Additionally, I felt that keeping the socks on was important because the lake floor is filled with stones. Therefore, I chose to convince them to go without neoprene gloves. The fingertips have the most nerve endings, so coincidentally, that is also the part of your skin where you can feel the most. They were apprehensive when asked if they would like to participate in this assignment. I intended to ask if they would swim without both gloves, but people were reluctant to do so. Instead, I adapted the assignment and convinced people to swim with only one glove. People still reacted apprehensively but were now willing to give it a try. The apprehension is made clear by this reflection of one of the participants:

*“Before going in for a swim my expectations were mixed; partially curious on the difference between the gloved vs ungloved hands and how big a difference gloves actually make against the cold. How I’d be able to tolerate the cold on the ungloved hand? On the other hand questioning why I’d agreed to do this?/why did I agree to take part in this lunacy?/this wasn’t the best idea I’ve ever had. There was an element of: if others are doing this, man up and get on, some swim with significantly less neoprene than I do all year round. It’s only one hand.”* (Participant Y, during an interview)

I gave them a notebook so they could write down their experience, focussing on three points: expectations before (such as the example above), the experience during, and what the warm-up was like after. Focussing on the difference between the gloved hand and the ungloved hand. I tried to pick participants who would come regularly so they could also participate in weekly assignments. I thought that this first assignment was probably the one that most people would say no to. Indeed, some people did not want to participate. But, if they were willing to participate in this, they would most likely be willing to participate in the other assignments. The first assignment had some interesting results. First of all, all participants were nervous before this assignment, without exception. This seemed to be a big step out of their comfort zone. At first sight, this might seem strange. Because if their entire body has *enskil* cold water swimming, then why would it be such a big deal to have one hand without neoprene? The expectation was that they were going to feel a lot of pain, cold, and numbness in the ungloved hand. Funnily, the swimmers had a very conscious thought process about which hand they would wear the glove on. Everybody chose to wear the glove on the dominant hand so they could have better movement on that hand later, assuming that they would not be able to use the ungloved hand for a longer time. They reflected on this in their notebook. One example:

*“I chose to wear the glove on my right hand as this is my dominant hand and I expect to find it difficult to undress and dress with my cold gloveless hand. I expected my ungloved hand to*

*feel colder quicker and go numb. I was interested to feel the difference.”* (Participant I, Notebook Assignment 1.1)

My expectation on how this would go is that people could easily get used to this but had not given it a chance before this assignment. Because the advice of swimming with neoprene came so naturally before even starting, and with everybody using neoprene, it almost seemed like a cultural difference. But I thought if they just do not wear the neoprene, the body will accept that pain, get used to it, and learn to cope with it without them feeling too much pain. This turned out slightly different than I expected<sup>18</sup>. In the water, I was somewhat surprised at how much pain people experienced during the exercise. They had a lot of difficulty putting their hands in and found it quite hard. I had hoped that it would not hurt anymore after a while, but even towards the end of the swim, people still told me it hurt. Somebody described it in the notebook:

*“I'm first to reach the water with a "let's get this done" attitude. In I go - well, my body and right (gloved) hand go, but a very brief dip with my ungloved left hand sends it shooting up out of the water. It's very painfully freezing! I keep trying to put it in, but my breathing is too fast, the water is too cold (only for my left hand!) and I find myself saying aloud "I can't do it!" several times. This is most unlike me! But it was painful!”* (Participant E, Notebook Assignment 1.1)

By giving them this exercise, I was hoping to see if they could actively enskill their body to accept the pain and move through it, but as the glove exercise shows, this is not enskilled in one session and takes time. This shows that even though the rest of the body has cold water swimming enskilled, this is clearly not true for the hands. Thus, enskilling is a process that the whole body needs to take part in; only certain parts are not enough. Some people got used to the feeling. This participant describes the experience:

*“When I got in the water I was a bit scared to put my bare hand in. when I put it in, the water felt very cold – colder than on my hand wearing the glove. For the first 5 minutes my bare hand was painful especially on the palm of the hand. My hand in the glove had slight pain to the fingertips. At around 7 minutes the pain in my bare hand disappeared completely and I had no tingling in my fingertips. My gloved hand continued to have slight pain in my fingertips. I stayed in the water for about 15 minutes in total. The rest of my swim from 7-15 mins had no pain, numbness or tingling in my bare hand and only slight pain in my gloved hand fingertips.”* (Participant T, Notebook Assignment 1.2)

This illustrates that, in this case, the body did learn to deal with the pain, and the hand could be used normally, showing the potential for enskilling.

The most surprising insight came after doing the assignment. The experiences of the swimmers surprised both them and me. Out of seventeen people, eleven experienced that their ungloved hand had warmed up quicker than their gloved hand and even felt warmer for a while:

*“On getting out of the water I felt slightly more pain in my gloved hand and no pain at all in my bare hand. I usually have to remove my swim gloves immediately and put on woollen gloves but I did not feel I had to do that immediately. I felt my bare hand warmed up more quickly than my gloved hand.”* (Participant V, Notebook Assignment 1.3)

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<sup>18</sup> You can watch the experience of the glove assignment here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAeNn3jNBJs&ab\\_channel=Liliannesweere](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAeNn3jNBJs&ab_channel=Liliannesweere)

Even though the experience in the water was more painful for the ungloved hand, the recovery for most went better. On some level, I think the body did enskil how to warm up after exposing the hand to cold water, even if it did not enskil to accept the pain during swimming yet. It makes sense that recovery is something that is faster enskilled than pain. Pain is usually there as a warning system, so to me, it is logical that your body might not want to enskil getting used to the pain.

The next assignment I designed was focused on how the cold water swimming experience is embodied. I focused on different senses and wanted to know how they were experienced by the participants. Only eleven people took part in this assignment. This drop in participants is because the other six people did not have time to attend the swim sessions the weeks after. Nobody dropped out because they did not want to take part anymore. The assignment was based on four senses: hearing, sight, touch, and taste, and it was only given after the swim because I did not want the swimmers to focus on all of the senses. I asked them what they saw during their swim, what they heard, what the 'bottom'<sup>19</sup> felt like, what the water felt like on their skin, and lastly, what the water tasted like. The aim here was to acquire more knowledge on embodiment and to see which senses they did not notice. After analysing the notebooks, one thing immediately became clear: Taste is not the main focus during the swim. Five participants said they did not taste it, and three participants were not sure but gave it a guess anyway. The rest described the taste as peaty, woodland, earthy (but not in an off-putting way), fresh, smooth, and cold. To me, this is not surprising. I only ever notice the taste of water if it has an exceptionally strong taste, such as salt water or chlorine. But in fresh water, I do not notice the difference, as I do not actively drink the water or try to get it in my mouth. The two sub-assignments on touch were also less reflected in the notebooks. What the lake floor felt like was mostly described as 'stony'. The limited reflection is due to the participants having neoprene socks on, so they cannot feel the lake floor as well as without socks. However, they did make an effort to describe it. With the taste, people did not notice it, but with the floor, they described it, even though they might have felt it less. They could also describe it in this way because they knew many stones were on the lake floor and not because they felt it. However, the stones make the lake floor incredibly uneven, so even with neoprene socks, it is hard to walk on. This makes it impossible to ignore the lake floor. Even if the participants had not actively experienced the sensation in their feet, I believe they would have definitely been aware of the lake floor. The sub-assignment of what the water feels like on the skin had some surprising answers. I had thought people would describe how their skin felt when being in cold water. Instead, the participants described the characteristics of the water. The most used words to describe the sensation were 'cold' and 'smooth'. Some swimmers felt as if the water "*seeping into your bones*" (Participant H, Notebook Assignment 2.4) and one person said it was "*Clean, fresh, cold initially but after that it's a wonderful free feeling, almost as if the skin is absorbing the water.*" (Participant A, Notebook Assignment 2.4). These comments illustrate that the water is embodied with your whole body. Even though it only touches your skin, you feel it not just on your skin but inside you, your bones, and every part of you. On some level, this could even be interpreted as becoming 'one' with the water; you absorb it, and it absorbs you. This notion of becoming 'one' with the natural world was also discussed in relation to the soundscape in subchapter 4.1.1. in the soundscape, I discussed the sounds I heard and how I interpreted those. In this sub-assignment, I asked the participants to reflect on the sounds they heard. Similar to my point explained in the soundscape, the way the participants describe sound illustrates a strong connection to nature: "*I remember hearing the wind, dogs barking, the sound of the water as it hit me (like a gentle clap), my breath. The sound of other swimmers encouragement and gasps as they enter the water. The*

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<sup>19</sup> With 'bottom' I meant lake floor, but in a discussion, a few weeks after that assignment, I discovered that some of the swimmers initially thought that with 'bottom' I had meant 'butt'. This was a clear example on how formulating your words well is important, but it gave all of us a good laugh.

*rendition of Happy Birthday, laughing and joy.”* (Participant F, Notebook Assignment 2.3), but it also shows they are conscious of the people around them. The positive tone in how they describe the sounds other people make shows how nature is important, and people are too. The last sense I asked them to reflect on was sight. The reflection from the participants was, for many, the most detailed part of the assignment. For my research, I tried to pay attention to people’s interactions, not necessarily my surroundings. In the reflections they gave me, it is clear that they were very attentive to their surroundings. Some of them were attentive enough while swimming to distinguish different birds flying over. Combining these reflections with the reflections they gave on sound shows how aware the swimmers are of their surroundings and that they are not just focusing on swimming. This reveals that it is not only the activity that is part of the experience, but the surroundings also contribute to this experience. During interviews, I asked if starting outdoor swimming and connecting with nature on that level made the swimmers more environmentally aware. This seemed to be the case for most people I interviewed. They were especially more aware of the water quality<sup>20</sup>.

Additionally, to embodiment via the senses, I wanted to know how conscious the swimmers were of their own bodies in the water. This is where the third task came in. An important part of cold water swimming is being aware of your body. When in the water, watching out for hypothermia, your body gives signs that can tell you it might be time to go out of the water. The question then becomes how well people listen to those signs. Analysing the notebook entries showed me that some of the people let their minds decide when to go out instead of their bodies. They would make a plan in advance on how much to swim or how long to stay in, in opposition to other people, who base their decision on bodily signs such as numb, painful, or stiff hands, cold feeling of the gums on the lower teeth, stiff jaw, and numbness in the breasts. This reflection illustrates how the participants are very aware of their own bodies in the cold water. However, it is important to know that they have been taught this. All winter swimmers have to take a mandatory winter workshop, where these hypothermia signs are discussed. In my task, I asked what the specific signs for the specific session were, as that can differ from session to session. In reading the entries, I noticed that people wrote generalisations for this assignment. For example:

*“1. I firstly take into account several factors: How I feel before I go in. E.g. am I well, tired, unusually cold? (I take care to hydrate and eat well). The water conditions. E.g. smooth, choppy. I try to guess approximately the temperature as this helps me to work out how long I might safely stay in. 2. Once in, the main signs that determine when to get out are the temperature of my hands and feet. When they start to feel cold (my Reynaud’s might start to return), I know that I have about 15 minutes before the shivers start, so I exit then to get dressed as quickly as possible. 3. At around 5° and under, the rest of my body feels cool, almost a burning sensation on my thighs, so I don’t really heat up. But usually I decide before I enter how long I’ll stay in and how far I might swim. I never push it until I’m uncomfortably cold.”* (Participant E, Notebook Assignment 3.1)

In this entry, the swimmer first writes about factors that influence the swim. However, then it is not noted which applied to this specific session. This is also true for the water conditions. Then the entry continues with the ‘main’ signs. Again this does not specify the signs of today. Additionally she describes what the signs are under 5 °C. This was not applicable to the session because it was not under five degrees. She finishes that ‘usually’ she decides before entering the water when to get out,

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<sup>20</sup> Sewage spills are happening more and more often in the UK. People try to put pressure on water companies to keep the water quality decent. More information on this topic can be found in this article from the Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jun/22/catastrophic-scale-sewage-spills-england-and-wales#:~:text=In%20March%20it%20was%20revealed,scale%20from%20the%20year%20before> .

the use of the word 'usually' pointing to a generalization. The wording in most of the other entries was similar. From the notebook entries on this assignment, it was not entirely clear which level of awareness the swimmers have of their bodies in the water. On the one hand, it could be that the signs they generally have were also present during the session on which they were basing the notebook entry. On the other hand, I think it is a possibility that the swimmers are aware of what are supposed to be the signs, because they have been taught in a course how everything is supposed to feel. In addition, if they have been taught how they are supposed to react to cold water and how hypothermia is supposed to feel, it could be that this assignment points more to enskilling rather than embodiment because it is actively taught through the body.

For the fourth assignment, I wanted the participants to pick a challenge. I had noticed during interviews and informal conversations that people would say, *"I would like to try this out"*<sup>21</sup>. With this assignment, I wanted to nudge them towards doing something that they had been wanting to try out for a while now but never did. With this assignment, I also wanted to look at their willingness to enskill something new in the water. They all showed a good attitude, and some reported being left with a feeling of achievement when they completed their own set challenge. Others, who did not necessarily report that they completed their challenge, did say that they would keep trying, showing that they are willing to learn new skills in the water actively:

*"Decided to try swimming to yellow buoy and back with Lilianne. Staying near and keeping me on track, doing backstroke mainly. Success, felt quite elated, it's a big step forward for my confidence. Hopefully I can build on that, especially with warmer weather approaching and without wetsuit."* (Participant J, Notebook Assignment 4.2)

It is always scary to try out and learn new skills. I think that is why they did not try this challenge on their own before. This assignment, in particular, was interactive and engaging for my participants. I let them come up with a challenge themselves while also being there and supporting their challenge.

The last assignment revolved around emotions. Emotions are a big part of embodiment. I asked the participants to identify the emotions they were feeling before, during, and after swimming. For this assignment, I had only five people in the task group left. As mentioned earlier, people experience anxiety and apprehension before the swim. This was visible in the notebook entries<sup>22</sup>. What I found most noticeable about this assignment is the emotions the swimmers experience after instead of during swimming. They describe their emotions after swimming as happy, relaxed, relieved, proud, satisfied, and having a sense of achievement. This shows the positive impact cold water swimming can have.

#### 4.2.2. Reflections

Analysing all of the notebooks and observing the effort the swimmers put into the assignments positively surprised me. Seventeen people ended up filling in the notebooks. And I have to commend the good sportsmanship they showed. Especially on the first assignment, which was a hard one for most people, they really gave it a good try and did not immediately go out to get their glove on and back out. The level of effort they gave to writing their reflection in the notebooks was also impressive. Some people typed out entire pages, really going into depth about their experience. The depth of people's reflections ensured I could make a valuable analysis from their experience, and their good attitude made my research more engaging and rewarding for both parties. I am especially

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<sup>21</sup> 'this' refers to a specific challenge, which differed per person. E.g. putting the head underwater or going deeper.

<sup>22</sup> See the complete notebook entries for this assignment in the Appendix under Notebook Assignment Five.

impressed with the people who participated in all five assignments and sometimes did assignments twice to give a better insight into my data. The dedication they had towards my research

### 4.3. The Perception of the Mental and Physical Benefits of Cold Water Swimming

During informal conversations and interviews, I discovered various perceived benefits of cold water swimming. I write perceived, because I have no medical background, and am not trained to measure hormone levels or pain levels in people. These benefits are, therefore, only based on what people told me about their experience, which I have to take at face value, and not based on medical data.

One of the physical benefits experienced by multiple people is that it helps with rheumatoid arthritis<sup>23</sup>. This disease affects mostly women between the ages of forty and sixty. The average age of cold water swimmers I interviewed was around fifty. Therefore, it is not surprising that there were multiple swimmers dealing with this disorder. One of the symptoms of the disorder is inflammation of the joints. One of the swimmers explained in an interview what effect cold water swimming had on her arthritis:

*But what I started to see, quite early on when I went, because the swimming class was in the summer. So when I'd done that swim workshop, it was summertime. So my joints were quite bad because my arthritis, it was worse in the heat. So I think from the very first time when I went in, and I got home and I said my, I just feel like all of my joints had just gone whoosh and being released, in a way. And then I thought, well, I don't know whether that's got much to do with it. It could be psychological, it could be anything. Let's go and see with this. But over time, it's meant that I can stop all my medication. Which is brilliant. And again, in the summer I feel a lot more joint release. But again, like I said, my joints are worse in the heat than in the winter. My joints aren't and had never been so bad in the winter. But when I was doing it in the winter, I thought: I wonder if it reverses and it makes the joints a bit stiffer or not quite so good, but actually perfect. Perfect. (Participant A, during an interview)*

This excerpt of the interview explained what a big impact cold water swimming made on her life. She was not the only person with arthritis who felt relieved from some of the symptoms after cold water swimming. However, some did specify that they knew people who had arthritis, for whom cold water swimming did not offer relief, but added that neither did all medication.

Another physical benefit some of the women experience is that it helps relieve some of the symptoms of menopause. Initially, I planned on researching if menstruation had an influence on the ability to cold water swim, or vice versa, instead of menopause; however, most of the interviewees were already either experiencing menopause or past it. Some of the women were still going through menopause and said swimming in cold water helped with the symptoms they experienced. For example, this woman:

*"The swimming helped with [menopause]. Not everybody is affected the same, but I've seemed to be very affected with brain fog, hot flushes, emotional. I could cry for no reason. So definitely cold helped because I couldn't think of anything else. I could only focus on what I was doing and that just emptied my head and made me feel better." (Participant I, during an interview)*

However, there were some younger women. Most of the younger women I interviewed said they do not go swimming when menstruating. One woman, when asked if her menstruation influences cold water swimming, responded with:

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<sup>23</sup>An inflammatory disorder that affects the joints, among other body parts.

*Yes, I don't go. Why would you put yourself through that? I just curl up on the duvet, eat lots of chocolate and don't go anywhere until I feel better. Ow god, no, the idea of swimming, oh no, nooo. Why would I put myself through something when I'm already going through something?* (Participant K, during an interview)

Even though not all women have the same symptoms of menstruation, this quote from one of the swimmers illustrates what it is like for many women and how that can seriously impact their daily lives. The woman who said this, can be in ice cold water, under 5 °C, for an hour without having problems. However, combining it with menstruation is out of the question. Most, but not all, younger women I interviewed expressed the same sentiment, where they would not go swimming when on their period. A few said the cold water swimming lessened the menstruation cramps.

Another physical benefit that was reported by the participants is weight loss because cold water supposedly creates more brown fat, which helps with the metabolism of your body and helps you lose weight. And it helps with back pain, according to one participant:

*"Prior to my injury, I could perhaps go two or three times a week to the pool and swim a mile each time, but after my spinal surgery, I couldn't get back to that level of fitness because if I do too much, it hurts. But the cold does help and I feel relaxed and I'm not tense. It's just how to manage that constant level of pain. And I take medication to help sometimes. I haven't taken it a lot less since I've started swimming, and I don't know if it's the swimming or it's the time I give myself to do that, when I take that time out and we go up together, we have a bit of a chat and a giggle and we've all got lots going on, so it's quite nice for all of us to be away from that."* (Participant I, during an interview)

Even though the relief of the back pain cannot be definitively contributed to the cold water on its own, it is the total embodied experience that relieves the pain. So, it is also the social interaction, in combination with the cold, that has an effect and leads her to take less pain medication.

Next to the physical benefits that people experience, they also experience mental benefits. Mental benefits are not as easily perceivable as some of the physical ones, such as losing weight or being able to stop pain medication. In my experience, people who cope with anxiety or have the tendency to overthink seem to benefit most. Down below, some of the interviewees elaborate on this:

*"I think the winter swimming is one day where I don't have to necessarily think about everything. It's almost like I can't think of anything else other than being in the water. So it switches my brain off a bit, which is good because like most people, I have 50 million things all happening at the same time. And I sleep really well after a swim or a dip, so that's good because I don't sleep well, generally."* (Participant D, during an interview)

*"I think because I'm so used to never hearing my mind stop. I've tried to find the things that I like to do because since leaving high school I haven't really focused on me and what I do outside of work. So I made it my mission this year to find something that I like to do. And I think it equally challenges me to go out of my comfort zone, but it also gives me that kind of peace of mind. It calms everything down. You just feel good for doing it."* (Participant L, during an interview)

*"I think the reset, the removal from your mind of anything that's concerning you, anything you're worrying about, anything that's maybe just been keeping you awake or consuming you, it just goes and your perspective gets reset and you can look at things with new eyes. I think that's the best thing."* (Participant G, during an interview)

*“It wasn't until a couple of years ago I was using the water to help fix anxiety. And basically I was going through quite a bit of troubles. And sometimes I would come from the water to train. I couldn't. I just had to get in there and totally bathe my mind, get, a bit of a switch off and come out, and I would actually not feel as anxious.”* (Participant Z, during an interview)

The relief from anxiety symptoms comes from a logical place. Participant D states that they cannot think about anything besides the water. From experience, I know that being in a temperature that is cold really focuses the mind on one thing: the cold. The feeling of pain and pins and needles can be overwhelming, but, if nothing else, it is a great distraction from anything else that might be on your mind. That your mind is so laser-focused on the cold can also point to your body's survival instinct. It keeps you focused on the cold to survive, and in order for you to do that, it sometimes becomes difficult to focus on other thoughts.

During my research I have also learned that many people started cold water swimming to deal with a traumatic event. This could be events such as the death or sickness of a loved one, a messy divorce, depression, or being diagnosed with a disease. Even though I am not going into the specific traumatic events of my participants to protect their privacy and personal life, one of the participants said, *“The swimming, for me, is a release after a traumatic event”* (Participant B, during an interview).

It was clear to me that people benefit mentally from cold water swimming. There are physiological tests that could be done to see if it also improves the dopamine level and the endorphins. This was not possible within the scope of my research, so I can only refer to what was said to me during interviews. There is some introductory research supporting the idea that cold water swimming could be good for mental health. Currently, there is no strong scientific basis for that statement. However, in the swimming world, the notion is widely accepted as true. There is ongoing research investigating the possibility of using cold water swimming as an alternative way to treat depression. So, even if there is no definitive proof yet, there does seem to be a correlation between maintaining good mental health and cold water swimming.

In this chapter, I have analysed my results on embodiment and enskilment, which I researched and presented using different methods. I tried to address as many aspects of the total experience as possible. It was my initial belief that I would have been able to see a noticeable difference between how women and men embody and enskil cold water swimming. However, during my fieldwork, and after analysing my results, it has become clear to me that the number of men that came to swim sessions was too small to base any conclusion towards gender differences in these two concepts on. It was impossible to tell if the differences between embodiment and enskilment were gender-related or personality-related, so I just focused on general embodiment and enskilment instead of trying to distinguish minuscule and maybe insignificant differences.

In the next chapter, I will focus on community building. I will explain how community is defined by my research participants, how it was different from my experience with cold water communities in the Netherlands, and how laughter, shenanigans, and shared pain form the basis of a cold water swimming community.

## 5. Community Building in Cold Water Swimming Groups

### 5.1. Defining community

*"A community. Just people coming together with a common interest."/ "It's a connection, means that you belong, and if it's with a group of people, then connection and belonging can lead to community."/ "Community can be different things. It's a group of people in its most basic form. It all depends on common goals and common interests."/ "It's the people around you, the people you interact with and the people who you have things in common with. There's body language involved, but you still get the same feeling of people who you are on the same wavelength with and who you click with versus people who you don't."/ "It's about support, belonging and not feeling isolated."/ "It's having people around you who enjoy the same thing as you, who root for you. Everybody has their part to play in it. And you draw strength from the different parts of the group, and that's really nice."/ "Something shared. Mostly values, but also something in common with the people around you."/ "People who want to be together and are experiencing something each time."/ "People doing things together, sharing a purpose."/ "A group of people or an environment where you support each other or work towards a common goal. Everyone has their own little roles and either works towards common goals or support each other in a common goal."/ "Where everyone's enjoying being together, having conversations, getting the same thing out of it. It is a safe space. There's a real kind of community element to the people who are swimming through the winter. It's like they're kind of the hardcore ones. And there's a real sense of togetherness as a result of that."/ "It's a sense of belonging. It's a sense of we will share a common interest. It's moral support sometimes and friendship."/ "It's helping each other out, support."/ "It's a group of people who have common interests and common goals, work together, look after each other."/ "People who look out for each other and help each other. It's about people who have that similar interest or experience, that kind of lived experience. They will look out for each other. They'll share. They'll share experience or stories or food. It's people who have like-minded interests, look out for you like a family feel. There are some people who come, they swim, they get in their car and they leave. They don't necessarily chat, and that's fine, but they're all there together. They're all there doing it together."/ "In very rural areas, community is quite a normal part of life. It means there's people around, and people know their neighbours, recognise people, say hello to people when you're out and about. People look after each other, people care about each other, and check in on each other."/ "Togetherness, sharing energy, you know, community. And this sort of thing is sharing the joy, sharing the pains, sharing the transition, sharing everything. It's all about sharing. There's a lot of sharing in amongst the winter swimming community."/ "It's just people to talk to, to relate to shared experiences."/ "If somebody needs a bit of help, you can help them. If you need a bit of help, there's somebody there to help you, and you don't have to work at it. It's just there. Just people being together. Especially in this life and with all the hatred and the wars, we actually have these communities we can belong to and just think, I'm just going to my people today, and connect with them, and there's certainly a shared interest and on some level you're like-minded, but we're all very different as well. And there's a kind of generous spirit about it."/ "People who you click with, who you have something specific in common. Not necessarily people you would generally come across but people with something in common, usually a sport or an activity."/ "Community is a funny thing. Community is people, that you enjoy the company of. There's normally some sort of common theme. Sports tends to be a bit different also because you've got a natural shared interest, whether it be cold water swimming or something else."/ "We're a community because we're all overcoming something*

*and it's harder. It's the fact that we all sit around afterwards and chat because we're warming up. We're all doing the same thing together. Whenever you go to the winter group, there's always somebody talk to afterwards. We're part of it." / "Communities are people around you where you have some kind of connection. And that might be just geographic, it might be because of social activity, it might be personal connections. But you can have levels of communities that you're in and overlap." (Definitions on community, given by the interviewees)*

In studying communities, the definition of that concept tends to differ depending on the historical era and the research discipline. Communities were often seen as a small social scale linked to a certain location. In classical anthropological approaches, communities were “characterized in terms of: (1) common interest between people; or (2) a common ecology and locality; or (3) a common social system or structure” (Barnard & Spencer 2010, p.142). However, with globalisation making the world more and more interconnected, the approach towards community has become more symbolic and less dependent on a location. As Gupta & Ferguson (2012) mention, it becomes less about cultures and people “as spots on the map” (Gupta & Ferguson 2012, p.378). The focus now lies on how it is drawn as an aspect of social life, how cultural meaning is attributed to the notion of community, how that relates to others, and how membership is assigned (Barnard & Spencer, 2010). The definition of community is always changing, and it is therefore important to define it in the specific research context rather than just use a more general definition.

During the interviews, I asked the interviewees how they define community because I wanted to research their community within their own definition of it. In the vignette above, I have written out all the interview definitions. As you can see there, most of the participants agreed that a community is built on a shared interest. It is more defined in a symbolic way than based on location. In the vignette they talk about how community for them is to connect with other people. Having a connection is important. But it does not stop there. For many, it was also about helping each other out, trusting each other, and being with each other. It has been a while since community has been defined as a group of people limited to one location. In the way my participants describe community, it is clear they take a more symbolic approach. Only one person mentioned that he could define it geographically. Even if the participants do not find location relevant to the definition, it is important to consider the location when picking a swimming group. Different swimming groups can be seen as different communities. However, joining a certain swimming group is often closely related to location. The communities need a place to swim in. In the northeast of England, there are not many spots where people can freely swim due to the amount of privately owned land. People might go on their own, but officially organising a swim with multiple swimmers is mostly done at public locations, where the spot is deemed safe for swimming. So there are only so many places people can go. My participants might define community as like-mindedness and shared values, but when it comes to deciding which group to join, most decide to join a group based on practicalities, such as the driving distance. Since for many, swimming is a big part of their life and their routine, it means that the location needs to be somewhat close to their home. For regular swimming, the driving distance is not likely to go over 1,5 hours. Another practicality that is important in choosing a group, is when the swims are, so it can fit into the schedule. Once a swim group is picked, people seem to not change it, except for when they no longer live in the area. Thus, choosing a group is based on practicalities, but becoming part of the community of that group is based on shared interest and connectedness. And once the people formed their community, or became part of it, the location seems to no longer matter. Some of the people also go to different locations with the same group of people that they connect with if, for example, the swim at their original location is cancelled. The main definition of community I will be using in this thesis is a group of people who are connected by a shared interest or

experience. I do sometimes go into some of the other definitions listed in the vignette. I have to reflect that the definitions were taken from 25 of the regular winter swimmers whom I interviewed, so this does not include everyone's definition.

## 5.2. Alone Together: Individual Swimming as Opposition of Community

*Back in the Netherlands, I am part of two different cold-water swimming groups. One, I organised myself in Leiden, where I would take members from E.L.S.Z.W.V. Aquamania<sup>24</sup> and introduce them to cold water swimming. This started during the first COVID lockdown when all the sports facilities were closed. Every time we would swim, we would go as a group. We meet at a certain place, travel together to the lake, wait until everybody is there (in case people are travelling from different directions), and then get dressed and go into the water. Only after everybody was over their cold shock response would we start swimming. I felt responsible for the people I would bring, so I always watched out for everybody to be in good shape. During swimming, we would also stick together. If there were different paces, we always ensured one faster person was behind or next to the slowest of the group. When we reached a certain distance, we would wait until the group was complete again and check if everybody was still capable of swimming by checking finger movement and asking simple questions, such as "How much is one plus one?" because hypothermia can affect cognitive abilities. And most of the time, we would go out at the same time as well, depending on how big the group was. No one would swim alone or without the supervision of a bystander who would walk along. In this situation, there was, of course, no lifeguard present. So, we are responsible for our own safety, and we would have to watch out for each other. We have not had any incidents so far. After getting dressed, everybody would stay until everyone was sufficiently warmed up before going home.*

*In the other group, the setup was slightly different. The swim session was on private land, and people would pay to participate. There would be multiple lifeguards on location. Everybody entered the water simultaneously, so the lifeguards had an overview of all the swimmers. They also had a buddy system. In the buddy system, you could only swim with a buddy. You had to stick with that buddy and swim at the same pace or the same stroke. They would also encourage you to talk to that buddy regularly to check cognitive functions. If your buddy went out of the water, you needed to go out of the water or find another buddy. This system was mostly for safety. It made safety the responsibility of the whole group. Being forced to swim with other people would also clearly add a social element because you would do it together, which would contribute towards being a community. You would make friends quickly, especially if you are new to the sport and do not know anybody yet. You could swim with and get to know your buddy. Afterwards, the organisation would put out hot chocolate and cookies so people could warm up properly. People would hang out for at least one cup of hot chocolate and some cookies before going home.*

Based on my experience in the Netherlands, I was expecting to observe a similar set-up to swimming in both groups I had been a part of. First of all, I was expecting people to drive up together, as the location was so rural. Second, I thought people would stick together while swimming, and that would contribute to their feeling of community. However, when I got to the UK and spent time at H2oTrails, my initial observations led me to believe that the communal aspect was less important at H2oTrails. In my observations, I noted that most people would drive up alone instead of car share, and they would mostly talk to people they already seemed to know. When it came to swimming, they would

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<sup>24</sup> A student swimming association in Leiden, which I have been a member of since 2016.

enter the water together, and talk a little bit, but once the swimming started, many, although not all, people separated and swam on their own. This was strange to me, and I was a little disheartened because this changed my perception of how communal this sport is. I did not understand why everybody swam separately, while to me, that was clearly more dangerous and less fun<sup>25</sup>. Initially, I interpreted this as a lack of community because they were not swimming together. The only part I could, at that moment, contribute to community, was the warming-up after, where people would sit around the table and drink their home-brought hot drinks and food.

After a while, when I spent more time at H2oTrails and got to know people better, I started interviewing. During the interviews, I asked how they viewed their community. This is when I discovered that people do have a strong sense of community at H2oTrails. This is clear when reading the vignette at the beginning of this chapter. However, there was another dimension I had not considered up until this point. Many of my interviewees, told me that the feeling of being part of a community was part of the reason why they would come cold water swimming. However, it was not the only reason. For many swimmers, this was also a place to empty their minds, feel their connection to nature, and focus on mental health. So, at least for a part of the session, they enjoyed swimming alone. I learned that when they swam individually, this did not mean that they lacked or opposed community, as I had initially interpreted. To them, different needs need to be met to be satisfied with a swim. One swimmer noted:

*"I love being out [in the back of the course] because not many people do the full course. A lot of people do back and forwards here. And to be honest, I quite like being out in that bit and just looking across the lake and seeing what I can see in the trees and on the riverbank and watching birds flying over, listening. Just listening and being. Just enjoying being out."* (Participant U, during an interview)

During the conversation, this interviewee discussed that she is not swimming for the community aspect of it but rather to be outdoors, empty her mind, and focus on mental health. But she also said that she enjoyed being part of a community, talking to people before and after the swimming, having a chat and getting to know people. But for some other people, it is one of the main reasons that they are going:

*"I love communities of people, wherever that is. You don't get that in the swimming pool: you just go swimming, you get dressed, you get out. But for me I love the swimming at Sweethope and I think the people are a really big thing. I have a real interest in what draws people into swimming, into fresh water or wild water swimming. Community and hearing people's stories, I think that's just, I think that's one of the most important things in life, really."* (Participant B, during an interview)

The interviewee above noted that although community is a big part of the reason for going, it is not the only thing he gets out of it: *"Some people take drugs to get the high that you get swimming in the cold water."* (Participant B, during an interview), illustrating that he also gets some physical or mental benefits from cold water swimming.

My impression was that the focus of cold water swimming was more on mental health than on community in the UK, while in the Netherlands, it is my experience that community and togetherness are prioritised over mental health. This does not mean that the community aspect is not significant in the UK, because as I found after spending three months in the UK, community is clearly an important part of the experience.

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<sup>25</sup> Or as I would say in Dutch: 'ongezellig'.

### 5.3. Laughter, Shenanigans, and Shared Pain as a Way of Community Building

In the first sub chapter, I have explained how my participants define a community as sharing a connection or common interest and sharing joy and experiences. In chapter four, I describe how it is generally experienced in a positive way. What I noticed in many of the swims is that there is always a lot of laughter. This is also corroborated by the notebook assignments I discussed in chapter four. When we look again at what people wrote down about the sounds they heard during a swim, laughter seems to be a common theme:

- *"I heard the wind, voices of other swimmers, water lapping, laughter, the sound of my body as it went through the water."* (Participant J, Notebook Assignment 2.3)

- *"Laughter and chat. The breaking waves. The wind. Someone singing! My breathing."* (Participant C, Notebook Assignment 2.3)

- *"I remember hearing the wind, dogs barking, the sound of the water as it hit me (like a gentle clap), my breath. The sound of other swimmers encouragement and gasps as they enter the water. The rendition of Happy Birthday, laughing and joy."* (Participant F, Notebook Assignment 2.3)

- *"I heard water, wind moving the leaves at trees. I heard bird song and lot of lovely people laughing"* (Participant K, Notebook Assignment 2.3)

- *"I love how peaceful it is at Sweethope, I like to listen to the gentle sound of the water moving with each stroke I take through the water. I could also hear my breath, and sometimes people talking. Most times you hear people laughing, especially Fenwick, who has such an infectious laugh, it's a joy to hear!"* (Participant S, Notebook Assignment 2.3)

In his book, Phillip Glenn (2003) explains how laughter plays an essential role in how meaning, identity, relationships, society, and culture are shaped. *"Through laughing, and laughing together, we contribute to the ongoing creation, maintenance, and termination of interpersonal relationships."* (Glenn 2003, p.2). It has strong social dimensions and can, therefore, contribute to community building. It is inherently social, and in many social settings, laughter invites laughter (Glenn, 2003). Laughter connects people. I observed during the 'swim-along' that there are often shenanigans going on prior to or in combination with laughter. See, for example, this video:

<https://youtu.be/vlOIH1uK3AQ>

In this video, we were doing a Sunday Easter Swim at H2oTrails. It was a beautiful day, one of the first days in ages when the sun came out, and the weather was just beautiful. It was also one of the first days we set foot in the summer bay<sup>26</sup>. What specifically stood out to me was the high spirits that everybody had. During this particular swim, I was swimming with a few women around my



*8 Easter Sunday Swim Session. Photo taken by the author.*

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<sup>26</sup> The summer bay is still in the same lake, but the entrance is a bit further up the road. The entrance to the water is more sandy compared to the winter bay, but you are further away from your car and there is less of an overview.

age (27). We were just giggling, singing around (out of pitch), and enjoying the sun. We stayed in for a long time. But not only in good weather is there a lot of laughter and shenanigans. I found that sometimes when the weather is at its most horrible, the most laughter occurs. This second video was taken just before doing an *ice channel*:

[https://youtu.be/VMaLE1x\\_I\\_4](https://youtu.be/VMaLE1x_I_4)

At this session, the weather was cold, wet and windy. We were waiting for the lifeguard to cut the *ice channel*. As I explained in the previous chapter, there was a healthy sense of reluctance. But in situations like this, you signed up to swim, you drove all the way over to the lake, so you are going into the water. One of the women started dancing to keep warm, and the others joined in. Even if it did not keep them warm, it definitely kept spirits high and was good for a laugh. Little moments like these, where you laugh with the group, overcome the same cold and the same weather circumstances, and share experiences, are what build community the way the participants describe it.

Even though cold water swimming is generally experienced in a positive way, dealing with pain and discomfort is part of the experience as well. Overcoming that together can lead to building a stronger community. In this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31828T8zDZY>

we are doing an *ice channel* together. As chapter four explains, an *ice channel* can only be done when ice is on the lake. The water temperature was below 1° C. This *ice channel* came after the warm-up from the previous video. Getting into the water was no easy feat, but spirits were still high from the warm-up, and even though the weather was not great, everybody was in a great mood and ready to go in. When looking closely at the video, you can see small signs of how hard it is to be in that temperature. You can see how much effort it costs when we all dip simultaneously (see video at 2:22), and you look at the facial expressions. We have the gasp reflex and try to get used to the temperature. But even though we are clearly in a tough situation, there is still some laughter. In addition, what I noticed about this video was how supportive the group was of each other. The combination of supporting each other, sharing discomfort, and playing around in the water (see 4:30 in the video) is uniquely suited to form a strong community. People are comfortable enough to show others their playful side before and during swimming.



9 Having tea around the picnic table while warming up. Photo taken by the author.

It is not only before and during swimming that community is built. After swimming, when it is time to warm up together is a substantial part of it. Everybody sits around the picnic table, shivering together, often still in the rain or the wind, drinking something hot like hot chocolate. Staying around is partly for safety reasons because driving before you are warmed up is unsafe. However, as was clear from the many tea sessions I attended, the after-talk is part of the session and is greatly enjoyed by most

people. Talking about the experience in the water and the plans for the day or problems in life also contributes to community

building. At some of the other groups, they sometimes organise a campfire to sit around and eat marshmallows.

In interviews, most participants communicated that there is a difference between the summer and winter communities. In the winter, people stay around longer, even though the weather is worse. They feel like the winter community is more tight-knit, as there are fewer people going to the swims, but those people come more regularly, so getting to know each other becomes easier.

That I had become part of the H2oTrails community became most clear on the day I left to go home. I had been spending three months with them, and I could feel we had built a connection over time. During the last swim, the weather was once again horrible: windy and raining a lot. But we had brought cake and other snacks, and there was tea. We were huddled together in a recently renovated room so we could at least remain dry while eating cake. They had written me a card, including pictures from the past three months. We had a big group hug:

<https://youtube.com/shorts/tMXXzDhiNE8?feature=share><sup>27</sup>

Their welcoming attitude towards me was an example of how they behaved towards each other as well. I have observed them to always be supportive of each other, with a lot of empathy, and always showing interest in other people. They help each other out, share their love of swimming with everybody there, without judgement on skill or gender, and sometimes hang out besides swimming as well.

In the next chapter, I will explore the different swimming communities I visited and illuminate the differences in community behaviour between men and women. Additionally, I will discuss how a difference in gender composition affects the group.

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<sup>27</sup> This video was taken by Fenwick Ridley.

## 6. Exploring Gender Differences in Swimming Communities

*"Women just seem to be more prepared to keep themselves active and healthy and mentally healthy. I think so often men have to prove things, or they appear to have to prove things and are more competitive."* (Participant J, during an interview)

As I mentioned before, when I started out my fieldwork, I was trying to keep track of as many details about the swim session at H2oTrails as possible. I kept track of who came to which session, what the water temperature was, and what kind of items people generally brought with them, among other elements. After the first few weeks, I could tell quite a few more women than men were attending these sessions. This was curious because I did not notice this difference back in the Netherlands, and at the ice swimming competitions I had been to, there were generally more men participating. And when men participated in the swims, they showed more isolating behaviour.

Initially, I thought this segregative behaviour and the fact that there were not many men was just a coincidence. But when I then visited another mixed group, the Bluetits, where there were also almost no men, it became more of a pattern. I started looking at different Facebook groups, trying to see if I could find a group with more men, but I only found women or women-dominated cold water swimming groups. I asked around, but most of my participants were women, who also did not know of many men who did cold water swimming. As I stated in the research context, in the last two weeks of my fieldwork, I discovered the Iceguys, contradictory to what I had seen before; they did focus on community and mental health.

I started noticing the different behaviour between men and women at H2oTrails. The first observation was that there were generally more women than men present. Secondly, men behaved slightly differently during the swim than women did. They were not mingling with the rest of the group, with a few exceptions. Most of the men who came, wore a wetsuit, whereas most women only wore neoprene socks and gloves. While the women would stand around and talk in the water before actively swimming, the men would just start with their swim and swim rounds without talking much. They kept to themselves, swimming rounds of front crawl with their head in the water, not communicating with anyone. And while, as I have explained in the previous chapter, women like to keep to themselves too during swimming, they did seem to communicate more. Women also swam more breaststroke with their heads out of the water, giving them more chances to take in their surroundings and enjoy the landscape. The difference in swimming style was always the most visible on Saturdays when most men came to the session. I could also see a slight difference in average age, with men being slightly younger. The most noticeable difference came after the swim. The women huddled around the picnic table for a chat, and some hot drinks, and the men would again keep to themselves and stand beside or sit in their car. Occasionally, the men would form their own tea group, but they rarely joined in with the women's tea group. This observation made me curious about why that is, which is why I started asking interview questions about it. One of the men said

*"I'm not a massively chatty person anyway, so... And I think when I'm concentrating on... I'm thinking about, how am I swimming? Am I feeling okay? How far am I going to go when all those things happen. I think the talking bit kind of drops off the other side. That's... My brain kind of forgets to do that bit of it."* (Participant P, during an interview)

As he says in this excerpt, he is not massively chatty. This sentiment was shared by most men I interviewed, although not all. Because the number of men who regularly swam in the winter was small, it was difficult for me to distinguish if I could attribute the differences in behaviour to differences in gender or to the specific personality of the men I interviewed. When I got the

opportunity to visit more mixed-gender swimming groups, I was hoping to meet more men and see if anything was different than at H2oTrails.



10 Sunrise Dip with the Bluetits. Photo taken by the author.

The mixed group I found, which seemed to have quite a few members, was the Blyth Bluetits. The dip was early in the morning, at sunrise. During my fieldwork, that moment might have been the most beautiful sunrise. The sea was incredibly calm, and the video I took was described by the participant as *“the most relaxing thing to watch”*<sup>28</sup> As I mentioned in the research context, I was slightly disappointed that there were only two people who came to the dip. And they both had to leave early to get to work. However, I discovered during the ‘swim-along’ and the informal conversation after that they also organise ‘special’ swims, where more people come. These special swims were planned around

astronomical events like full moons or equinox sunrise.

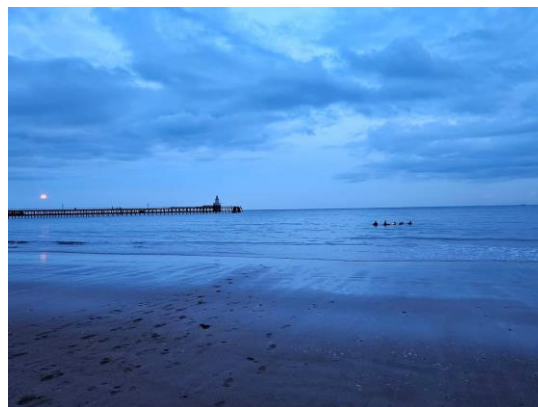
The influence of the sun and moon on life on Earth is celebrated in many cultures. Within the swimming community, the moon and the sun are also important places. Nowadays, the sun is seen as a force that supplies life, whereas the moon is seen as mystical and occult: *“The sun’s immense power over Earth and its creatures is scientific fact; to endow the moon with equal power is to embrace fairy tales and ghost stories.”* (Jabr, 2017). The gravitational pull of both the sun and the moon influences the tides of the ocean (United States Government, sd). Different moon phases exert a different gravitational pull on the ocean. The most drastic tides are at New Moon and Full Moon (Murmson, 2018). Other astronomical events relating to the moon and sun (solar/lunar eclipses) also influence the tides. As the moon and sun affect the oceans, they indirectly influence the swimmers that swim in that ocean. The moonlight can also influence ocean life, as it influences reproduction, migration, and the internal clock of different ocean flora and fauna (Jabr, 2017). While this does not directly influence swimmers, indirectly, it influences the surroundings the swimmers interact with, as natural connections are important aspects of place responses while swimming in the ocean (Foley, 2016).

The full moon dips have been gaining popularity worldwide. The full moon brightens the whole ocean, making the landscape light enough to swim in instead of the darkness. It is also different to experience ‘your’ swim spot under the cover of darkness and the full moon’s light (Ryan, 2021). As I wrote previously, the moon is often a symbol of the mystical and the occult. Some people believe that a full moon can create energies and certain types of magic that *“cleanses the soul, increases our senses and draws a stronger connection between us and nature.”* (Ryan, 2021). This magical, spiritual part of full moon swimming is not for everyone, as some people might just like the challenge of swimming in the dark under the full moon.

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<sup>28</sup> Watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SO253NzMak>. This is also a good example of how I approached the ‘swim-along’, as I describe in my methodology.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, I went with the Bluetits on a Snow Moon dip. 'Snow Moon' is the name for the full moon in February. Less commonly, it is called the hunger moon. The Native Americans gave this name to the full moon because February was typically a snowy month in North America (Kane, 2020). According to the book 'Moon Magic' (2020) the Snow Moon has a magical significance as well: "With colder temperatures in many areas, and increased time inside, consider basking in the Full Moon's glow while



11 Snow Moon dip with the Bluetits. Photo taken by Lizzie McBride.

observing Nature's beautiful winter landscape. Honour your individual beauty and gifts at this time, too." (Kane 2020, p.28) Unfortunately, basking in the full moon's light was impossible due to the amount of clouds that day. However, we caught glimpses of it. The tide was low, and there was almost no wind, so the sea was calm. Normally, after a full moon swim, the Bluetits organise a campfire, and people hang around after. Unfortunately, the rain set in quickly after the swim, which meant no one stuck around to do a campfire. I had hoped to have better luck with the Equinox Sunrise dip on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, but once again, it was raining quite a



12 Equinox Sunrise Dip with the Bluetits. Photo taken by the author.

lot, so everybody left, although one or two people stuck around for coffee at Greggs<sup>29</sup>. Even though I missed out on the campfire and talked with the group afterwards, I did notice that there were almost no men during both dips. During the Snow Moon, the group consisted of nine women. During the Equinox sunrise, there were twelve women and one man. I did not go to the dips often enough to notice any difference between men and women, but what I could observe was that even though men were welcome to join, they just did not. And nobody seemed to know why.

Even though the Bluetits and H2oTrails are both mixed-gender groups, their swim set-ups differ slightly. At H2oTrails, the swim is organized and supervised by a man, while for the Bluetits, it is organized by women. The Bluetits dip instead of swim, and there is no official lifeguard. The H2oTrails swim more structurally organized at set times each week, whereas the Bluetits go whenever they want. Additionally, the Bluetits pay more attention to the 'special' swims I just mentioned.

The next dip group I went to was the Wild Sea Women. As I mentioned in the research context, they are a women-only group and have been recently renamed the Mermaid Cove Club, as their prior leader stepped down. However, while I was there, they were called the Wild Sea Women, so I will refer to them by that name.

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<sup>29</sup> A British bakery chain.

Joining that group was a very different experience for me. Most of the swims I did fundamentally had a similar set-up: You arrive, get ready, dip or swim, get out, get dressed, and have tea while warming up. The Wild Sea Women took a different approach<sup>30</sup>. They started with a name circle, where everybody said their name. From the community-building perspective, I think this is a quicker way to get to know the other swimmers. In both groups, there was no name circle until that point, and I learned the names only by my own effort. In interviews with the



12 Group Picture Wild Sea Women. Photo taken with self-timer.

participants at H2oTrails, I learned that quite some swimmers who have been seeing each other regularly and chatting with each other do not know most of the names of the people they swim with, with some exceptions. Starting with an introduction is a more active way to build community instead of letting it form independently. It made me feel immediately included, and I can only imagine that other people who go for the first time feel the same. After the name circle, there was a warm-up exercise and some meditation. Meditation was not necessarily relaxing for me, but I could see it was calming the other women and that they benefited from it. We took a group picture and then went into the sea:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FetiuFAmOQ><sup>31</sup>

In the sea, we were running in a circle, hand in hand, as you can see in the video as well. In a very literal way, the circle connected all of us while doing something we were all interested in. There was also the freedom to yell loudly, which we did together: *“WE ARE WILD SEA WOMEN”*. The experience of the session was almost spiritual. Being in the evening made the session even more spiritual and magical, even without a full moon. After we came out, we sat in a circle around the campfire, having marshmallows and chatting about life and swimming. Interestingly, whereas most Bluetits or H2oTrails members had a background in swimming before they started doing it in the winter, here it seemed that quite a few people did not have a background in swimming and did it for the connection to nature; the advertised health benefits, and the welcoming community.

I have observed the women-only group to be more spiritual. According to Zuckerman in *Psychology Today* (2014), women are more likely to be spiritual or religious than men. He mentions that this could have to do something with how men and women were socialised differently: *“boys are socialized to be assertive, independent, and rebellious, while girls are socialized to be acquiescent, relational, and obedient, which then manifests itself later in life with women being more open to religion than men.”* (Zuckerman, 2014). It could also have to do something with the roles we traditionally attribute to different genders. We mostly assign nurturing and caregiving roles, such as

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<sup>30</sup> For a full description of the session, you can go to the Appendix, where I have added my fieldnotes from the 27<sup>th</sup> of March.

<sup>31</sup> This video is made at night, so it is very dark.

raising children and caring for the sick, to women (Zuckerman, 2014), making them more likely to be active in community behaviour and be open to spirituality.

Until now, I had almost exclusively spoken to women about cold water swimming. The absence of men from mixed swimming groups and my inability to find men-only swimming groups made me curious as to why that is. Especially because nobody else seemed to have a definitive answer for it either. I started asking around during the interviews why they thought men did not participate as much in cold water swimming. They came up with a few interesting theories. One of the theories was that women might be better equipped to handle the pain of cold water swimming. As one of the men said: *“Women have a greater tolerance for pain, which must come naturally because I've seen my children get born, you know, and there's a lot of pain involved, but there's a reward at the end, so you get through it.”* (Participant G, during an interview). This theory was additionally supported by somebody else, who made the observation that most men come in wetsuits, supposedly to protect themselves from the painfully cold water, while women swim in *skins*. A second theory discusses that men tend to be more competitive than women and need a more structured place to go, as opposed to the leisurely setting of outdoor swimming. Another theory supported what Zuckerman said when he wrote about women having nurturing roles: *“Women and particularly older women who stereotypically have been mothers or kind of had dependence at some point. They have a little bit more of a nurturing kind of community, while men prefer to be solo swimmers”* (Participant I, during an interview). Another participant said: *“I do wonder whether because it's predominantly women, it makes it more, more daunting for men to join in.”* (participant F, during an interview). However, one of the most interesting theories I heard was this one:

*“It's the way [cold water swimming] is kind of marketed or shown and I think it goes back to mental health. I know that there's been a big push for male mental health, but there is that kind of stereotypical view of men being strong, men not showing weakness or anything like that. So when it is marketing the mental health thing, then I feel like you've got that pre notion that men need to be strong and not talk about the feelings.”* (Participant L, during an interview)

So because it is marketed for mental health, and mental health for men is still taboo, men do not want to do it. I found this an interesting angle.



13 Group Picture Mixed Dip Iceguys Tyneside. Photo taken by a member of the Iceguys.

In the last two weeks of fieldwork, I encountered the group Iceguys. This was a men-only group dipping along the coast. The core values of this group, focused on community and mental health for men. I was intrigued, especially because of the last theory on why men do not come to cold water swimming. Setting up a meeting with them proved slightly difficult, as I have mentioned in the research context. I was nervous about going to that first (mixed) dip with them. Up until that point in my fieldwork, I had connected well with all the groups, but those groups were women-dominated, so I fell right into the category and knew what to expect. I did not know anything about this group. Additionally, because

they only allowed me at the mixed dip, I thought that, like with the other mixed groups up until that point, the group might end up being women-dominated. At the mixed dip, there were seven men and two other women. Finally, a group that was men dominated. They started out their session with a

breathing exercise and then went into the water<sup>32</sup>. Most of them stayed for exactly ten minutes. When they went out, they got dressed quickly and left immediately after. The leaving quickly afterwards had more to do with the dip being on Friday evening. People wanted to go home quickly and enjoy the weekend.

The Sunday directly after, I went again. This time to the men-only dip. As I have explained in the research context, they wished to keep the group on Sunday women free. I could, however, join the Chitter Chatter Challenge group, which swam simultaneously in the same place. I could see them do the same breathing circle from a distance. The Iceguys group looked incredibly big on Sunday. If I had to guess, I would say there were around 30 men on the beach for that session. This group was substantially bigger than any of the other dips I had been to. After the dip, everybody went to Crusoe's, and I did get permission to talk to the men there. Crusoe's is a coffee shop on the beach, which opens at 08:30. By the time all the swimmers are dressed, it is also 08:30, so the place went from totally empty to having more than 40 swimmers inside. Additionally, they have the rule that if you have been in the sea, you will get a free refill on your drink. This illustrates how big the cold water swimming culture is in the UK. Talking to the men was illuminating. I discovered that their group was based around two main values: community and mental health for men. One of the members described the community experience at the Iceguys as 'not a typical men's group' as you sometimes see in football, where the atmosphere was always toxic and competitive. He said that at the Iceguys, he felt genuine support and connection, which he did not in other male groups. The attention they give to mental health for men is impressive. One of the men explained to me that some of them specifically come for that purpose, as they have struggled with trauma, depression, or addiction. Before starting the breathing exercise on Sunday, they can share something fun with the circle, e.g. getting a new job. They keep that circle positive, as it can be daunting to talk about the more difficult things in a group of 30 people, where you might not know everyone. Then, when they go into the water and break up into smaller groups, there is space to talk about the more difficult subjects in the company of good friends and the sea. I was surprised at the amount of extra activities they also organise to promote community and mental health outside of swimming. And even if on Friday everybody left quickly, on Sunday, I sat at Crusoe's with them for a good three hours, talking about swimming, mental health, the importance of community, and the best sunrises and sunsets we have seen during swimming.

In the previous groups, I discussed how men in mixed groups did not substantially participate in community building and explained some possible theories as to why that is the case. However, when observing the Iceguys, they seem to participate in community building and even explicitly focus on their own mental health. Then, the question becomes, why do men seem to participate in community building when it is exclusively with men, but they do not when mixed with women? Unfortunately, finding out where this difference comes from was outside this study's scope.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how cold water swimming becomes part of a lifestyle.

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<sup>32</sup> Watch the 'swim-along' video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z3Jo2ChR0M>.

## 7. The Cold Water Lifestyle

*"Once you start outdoor swimming, that is what holidays become about: where can I swim?"*  
(said during a sauna and dip session)

For many pages now, I have discussed cold water swimming as a sport or activity that people can participate in. However, for many people, cold water swimming is much more than just a sport; it is a way of life, intrinsically linked to other dimensions of their lifestyle. For many whom I interviewed, swimming already started early on as kids. It seems to be a trend as Foley (2016) also discusses that *"Many talked about swimming as children and teenagers, often a hiatus in their early adult years, but a return to the water in later life."* (Foley 2016, p.46), suggesting that swimming will always be a part of people's life. While three months was too short to thoroughly research every aspect of every participant's lifestyle and how cold water swimming became a part of that, I did look for small indicators that would suggest an impact on lifestyle bigger than 'just' a sport.

One of those indicators was that the swimmers plan their lives around swimming and swimming spots. I learned during the first swim I went to that at least two of the women rearranged their work schedule so they could do swimming. So rather than plan swimming around work, as people mostly tend to do with hobbies, work was planned around swimming. One participant notes:

*"I always had a swim kit in the back of my car because I travelled a lot with work. So if I ever was finished working but was staying somewhere and they had a pool or a lake close by, then I would go for a swim, or if I was on the way back and I would pass a pool that was open, I would go for a swim."* (Participant A, during an interview).

Thus, swimming was made to fit into daily life. As discussed in chapter four, cold water swimming was often experienced to relieve anxiety. In talking with the participants about their jobs, I found that at least over a third of the swimmers I interviewed worked in the health industry. Quite some of the swimmers worked as nurses in the ICU or different departments; some had other roles in the hospital, and there was at least one general practitioner. Why so many people from the health industry do cold water swimming remains unclear. Perhaps they are more likely to appreciate the advertised health benefits than people in other lines of work. Another reason could be that there is a high-stress level associated with those jobs, and they will benefit most compared to other branches. This is only my own speculation, as the scope of my research was not broad enough to deeply investigate this. The participants I talked to who did not work in the health industry also experienced high levels of stress and anxiety in their jobs, and cold water swimming was a way for them to cope with that. Using cold water swimming as a coping mechanism attributes deeper meaning to the activity. Thus, to a certain level, it is part of a lifestyle more than a hobby that is done only for fun.

The opening quote suggests that another part of life, taking holidays, is planned around swimming, too. On many occasions, I listened to participants who told me about all the beautiful swimming holidays they took. Where they went for a few days or a week with their outdoor swimming best friend or group of friends to a beautiful location for swimming. A popular option for such a location would be the Lake District, as many people told me. Additionally, the lochs in Scotland are beautiful and popular, too, with the added bonus that they have a cold water temperature on average due to their northern location and altitude. Aside from taking holidays with friends and the specific purpose of going swimming, people told me their holiday with family was planned around swimming, too:

*"I've got a list of places that I want to go and I've booked our summer holiday based on that. Maybe four or five places I want to go, just within a couple of hours around here. And like I*

*say, when we go away in the summer, we're going to the Lake District because there's a couple of places around there that I want to go."* (Participant F, during an interview)

Outdoor swimming has also had an effect on the environmental awareness of the swimmers and was therefore influential on their personhood: being a morally good person, in the engagement with the environment, and to themselves. During interviews, I was told that, especially when it comes to water quality, people have become more aware. One of the participants explains:

*"So it does tend to be, because we're swimming in the sea, very aware of single use plastics and trying to cut down on that kind of thing, very much lobbying our politicians and media, local media and the local water company. We have an app that tells us when there's been a pollution alert, when they've had to open the gates to allow the pollution into the water. So every time it happens, which is often, the whole group are firing emails to all of these people just to make it sure that they're not ignoring us. And sometimes the only way you can do that is to badger people and, you know, talk to your local politicians, tell them about your experience of what's going on in the water, what we're seeing on the beach. After bad weather, there's been a pollution warning because it is horrible, you know, and we're swimming in there. I would definitely say that I'm now more aware of that side of things."* (Participant O, during an interview)

She was not the only one concerned about water quality; she tried to improve her habits, such as cutting down on single-use plastics. Other participants considered themselves to already be environmentally aware or have become more so after swimming outdoors. Participant O's comment, *"We're swimming in there,"* seems essential. Some of the participants tried to be conscious of what kind of items they buy so that they do not hurt the water environment, e.g. swimsuits from recycled plastics and sunscreen that are not toxic to the water life.

Even though most participants did not get into cold water swimming to become more environmentally aware, it influenced how they interact with the world. As I explained in chapter four, the participants were trying to get to a healthier, happier version of themselves and supporting others in doing the same. Thus, in combination with becoming a 'better' person in relation to others and becoming a better version of themselves in relation to their own health and happiness, it seems that cold water swimming significantly contributes to the personhood of the swimmers.

I realise that the indicators I found that cold water swimming is a significant part of the lifestyle are only introductory. However, I do believe they are significant enough to carefully conclude that cold water swimming, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is more than just a sport; it is a way of life.

## 8. Conclusion

In chapter four, I discussed how cold water swimming is embodied and enskilled. I used various methods, such as the 'swim-along' interview, participant observation, and a task group, to provide extensive insight into the embodied experience. Initially, I looked for differences between men and women and how they embody and enskil cold water swimming. However, the number of men present at the swims was too small to base a conclusion on. What I discovered is that the embodiment of cold water swimming is intrinsically linked to the environment, and interacting with nature is, for many, a big part of the experience. The participants also experience significant physical and mental health benefits, and although I cannot corroborate this with medical data such as hormone levels or bloodwork, I do believe that cold water swimming makes a positive impact. Even if hormone levels do not reflect this, the placebo effect can also be powerful.

In the fifth chapter, I let my participants define the concept of community to further explore community building in cold water swimming groups. I compared the community in the UK with my experience of cold water swimming communities in the Netherlands. The practice of cold water swimming informs and creates a community by combining laughter, shared experiences and discomfort, and connection between the participants. Essential in this community aspect is the non-judgemental attitude and the support people receive while doing an activity everybody there loves to do and is passionate about.

Chapter six continues on the concept of community but looks more into the difference in gender composition and the interaction of the group. To investigate this, I went to four different cold water swimming groups. I can cautiously conclude that women's groups exhibit slightly more spirituality than men's or men's-led groups. The focus for women lies more on community bonds, while men focus more on personal accomplishments, such as bettering their own mental health. That does not mean that men do not exhibit community-building processes or spirituality or that women do not focus on mental health. Additionally, it is unclear how representable this result is since I only visited one women-only, one men-only group, and two mixed-gender groups.

The seventh chapter focused on how cold water swimming fits into lifestyle, where I identified some indicators that suggest the extent to which cold water swimming is part of the participant's lifestyle practice. However, researching the full extent of cold water swimming's impact on lifestyle and vice versa would take much more than three months of fieldwork. I do want to conclude that the participants experience the impact on lifestyle and the development of personhood positively.

Within this research project, I tried to go for an extensive approach to illustrate the experience as completely and as closely as possible, even though a totally accurate description of an embodied experience is nearly impossible. Three months were too short to investigate all angles of this experience. I believe this research could have benefited from more fieldwork, where more groups, especially men-dominated groups, would be visited for longer. I would also suggest making it an interdisciplinary study, where the anthropological approach can build on a medical one that looks into the physiology of the swimmers, while cold water swimming, and an environmental approach to see how outdoor sports can contribute to sustainability.

I want to conclude this thesis with a short reflection: I thought I was already somewhat of an expert in cold water swimming. Doing fieldwork, engaging with the academic literature about this topic, and talking to other swimmers and other researchers about it has proved to be an incredibly enlightening experience, which I am most grateful for. I will take all the knowledge with me while continuing my cold water swimming endeavours. As one famous Disney Princess says: *"The cold never bothered me anyway."* (Elsa of Arendelle, 2013).

## 9. Glossary

*Ice channel* – A straight line, cut out of the ice, so people can swim or dip in it, depending on the length of the channel.

*Tow float* – A floatation device which is attached with a cord to the waist of the swimmer. It has the purpose to make the swimmer more visible in the water, and can be leaned on in case of an emergency (even though most *tow floats* specify that it is not a lifesaving device). You can put your important items in some *tow floats* so they do not get stolen.

*Choppy* – A Northumbrian expression for the body of water having small waves with white water crests.

*Cold shock response* – The initial bodily response, when immersed in cold water. This can include a gasp reflex and hyperventilation.

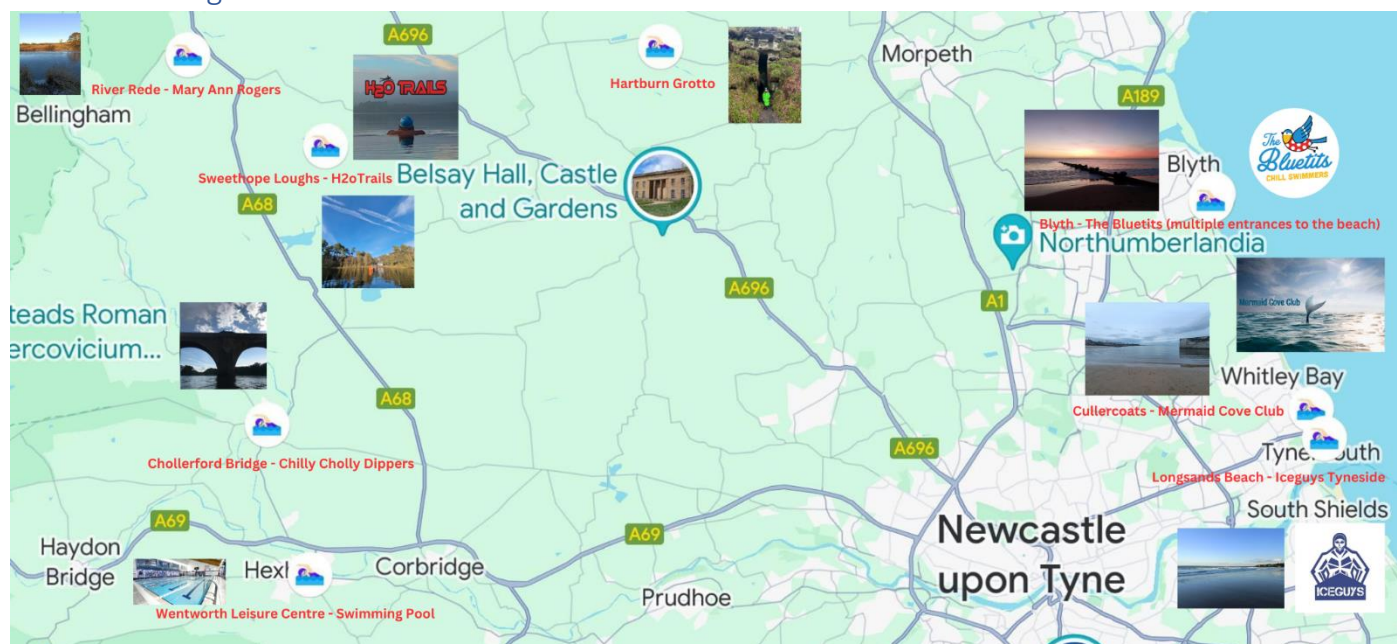
*Dryrobe* – These are special kinds of robes, mostly used for outdoor swimming. They are meant to be big, so you can get dry and changed under them. Dryrobe is technically the name of the brand. However, other brands are often also referred to as a Dryrobe.

## 10. Funding

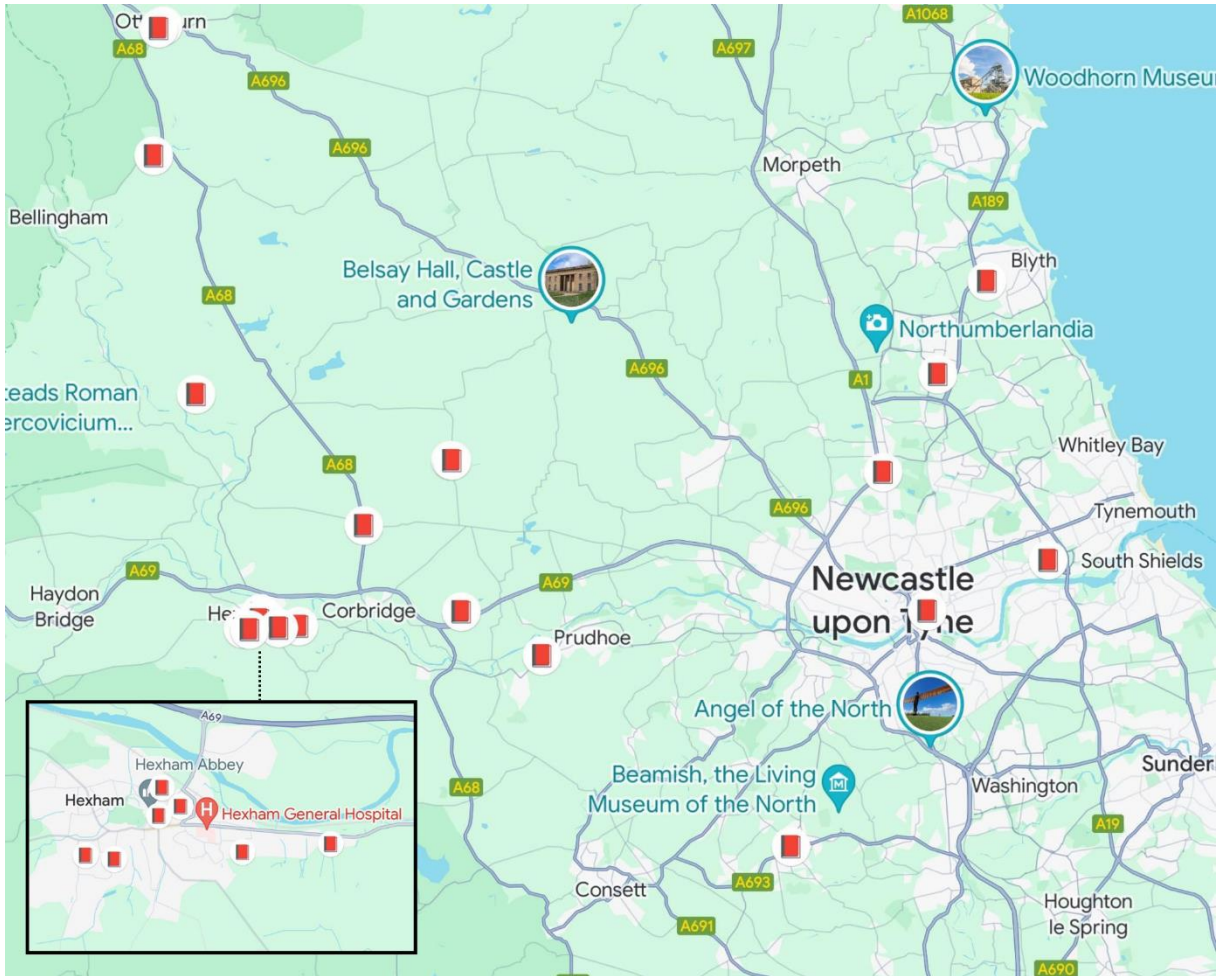
This research project received funding from Curatorenfonds, Quintusfonds, and LUSTRA+.

## 11. Appendix

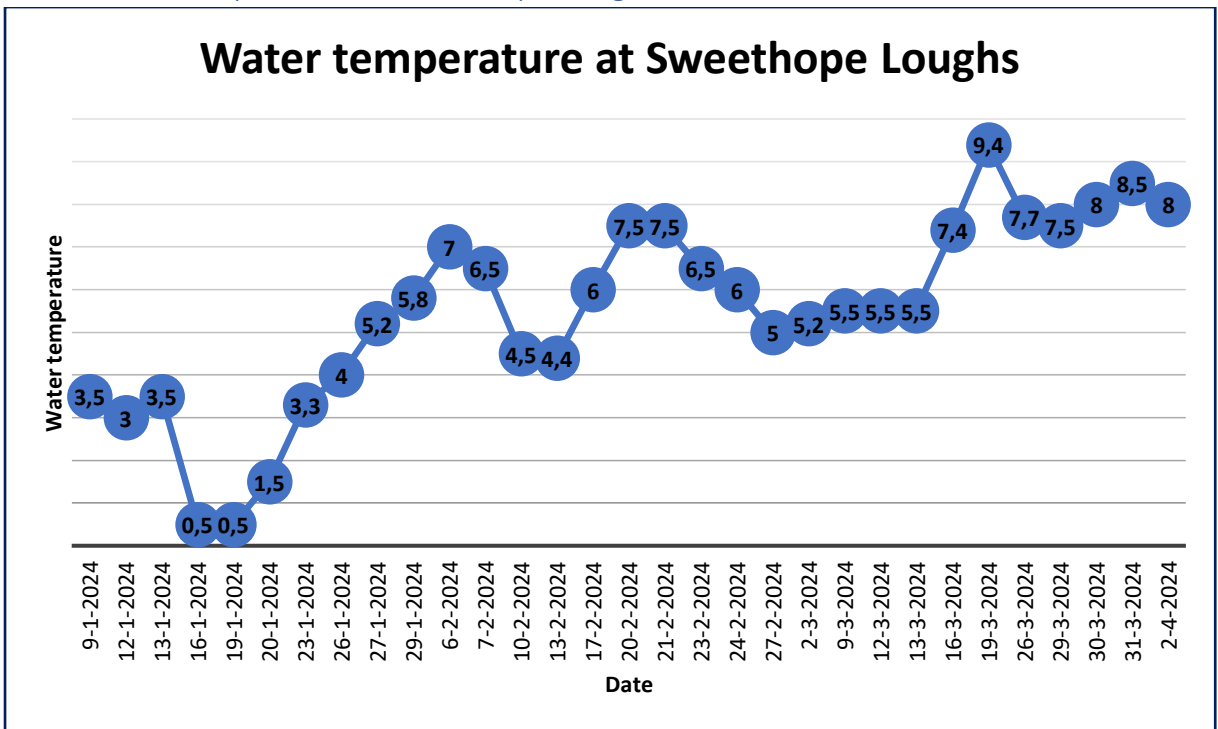
### 11.1 Swimming locations



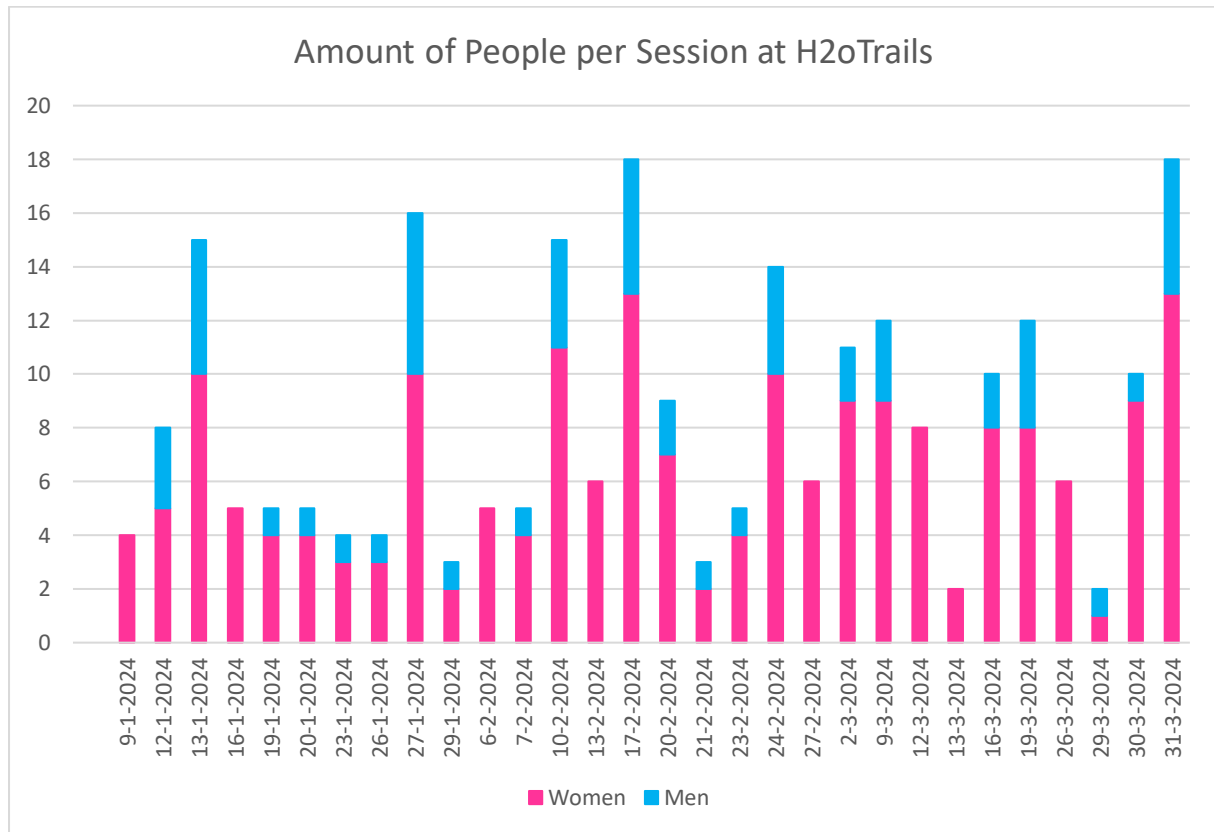
### 11.2. Interview Locations



### 11.3. Water Temperature at Sweethope Loughs



## 11.4. Amount of People per Session at H2oTrails



## 11.5. Notebook Assignment Two

### 11.5.1. What did the bottom feel like?

1 "Quite rocky, but also I have to wear soled neoprene boots as the soles of my feet are very sensitive and it would be too painful for me otherwise. I occasionally enter barefoot in the summer, but only when it's a sandy entry"

2 "The bottom felt uneven and gravelly with small stones, and some larger stones, I felt muddy as you went deeper into the water."

3 "no entry"

4 "The bottom of the lake was very uneven. Sometimes sharp stones could be felt but more often the stones were smooth. I had neoprene socks on"

5 "Stones felt sharp under foot. Wearing socks but it was difficult to walk in and out. Sharp stones underfoot and trying not to stub toes on rocks staking up."

6 "no entry"

7 "Bottom felt very stoney walking in. Was totally unaware of the bottom once swimming. Coming out felt the same as going in."

8 "The bottom of the lake starts quite muddy and soft but soon turns to more rocky, with occasional large stones."

9 "I was wearing socks but I could tell that the bottom of the lake felt soft ad a little spongy, pleasant to walk on."

10 "The bottom felt stony, some sharp stones on the bottom of my feet. It also felt deep even when I was only up to my waist."

11 "Stony."

#### 11.5.2. Can you describe the things you saw while swimming?

1 "A cormorant flew overhead as I set off. The sky was different colours in different directions, depending on where the sun and clouds were. The windmills were moving quite fast. I always look at the view over the far side of the lake. I was noticing who was coming into the water, and who was on the side. All interspersed with watching the water and what it's doing. E.g. today there were little waves gathering, a slight chop. I love the frog's eye view!" (it's when you see things from the same place as a frog would i.e. submerged, but with your eyes at water level)

2 "While swimming I saw trees, movement of trees in the wind, the occasional bird, other swimmers."

3 "The little waves in the water. The other people, how far they were swimming. The trees. The yellow buoy. The wind turbines. The sky colour."

4 "I always take time to see. I look at the shore line, the trees and paths. I could see 2 people walking, some people spectating, 2 dogs playing. I saw a cormorant flying overhead towards the windmills and further into the distance the darker clouds. I noticed as I swam the wind caught the ripples on the water and caused small droplets of water to spray. I move over the surface of the water. I also noticed other happy swimmers."

5 "Blue sky and white clouds moving across the sky. Trees moving in the breeze. Cormorant flying overhead. Other swimmers. The water as it moved as you swim through it."

6 "I saw a wide range of birds including swan, heron and swallow/wren. I also saw a fish bubble appear in the water at a distance."

7. The yellow buoy, people, the trees, sky, and I was aware of the freshness of the air. This was the most prominent vision."

8 "It was a very calm day, so I was more aware of the landscape in the background this week."

9 "I didn't look under the water but above the water I could see the steam of my breath moving across the surface of the water, and the light reflecting on the ripples of water with each arm stroke. When I am swimming, I like to watch the wind turbines turning to calm my breath, I also like to watch the way the water moves, especially on a calm day. I could also see Fenwick in his boat and the other swimmers around me."

10 "I saw ripples on the water and bubbles. I could see the trees around the edge that were dark green. The water was black. I saw the mist in the distance. I swam past one man and saw another getting into the water."

11 "Trees/clouds, wind turbines, grassy shore, bench, waves, ripples on water."

#### 11.5.3. Can you describe the sounds?

1 "I was chatting here and there, and only in for about 10 minutes. I forgot to listen! I love listening to the water when I do front crawl."

2 "I heard the wind, voices of other swimmers, water lapping, laughter, the sound of my body as it went through the water."

3 “Laughter and chat. The breaking waves. The wind. Someone singing! My breathing.”

4 “I remember hearing the wind, dogs barking, the sound of the water as it hit me (like a gentle clap), my breath. The sound of other swimmers encouragement and gasps as they enter the water. The rendition of Happy Birthday, laughing and joy.”

5 “The sound of the water slapping against your hands. Someone singing. My own breath; breathing in and out loudly as I adjust to being in water.”

6 “I heard water, wind moving the leaves at trees. I heard bird song and lot of lovely people laughing as they swam.”

7 “Quiet. I was able to hear people talking and talk with them but the overriding sense was of quietness.”

8 “I don’t remember many ‘natural’ sounds (there was no wind, and only slight rain at the end so it was quite a placid/still atmosphere, but I was aware of voices/parts of conversations drifting over.”

9 “I love how peaceful it is at Sweethope, I like to listen to the gentle sound of the water moving with each stroke I take through the water. I could also hear my breath, and sometimes people talking. Most times you hear people laughing, especially Fenwick, who has such an infectious laugh, it’s a joy to hear!”

10 “It sounded quiet and peaceful. I could hear voices but they seemed quite far away. I could hear the wind but it was quiet.”

11 “Water, wind – trees, splashing, nothing, people chatting.”

#### 11.5.4. How did the water feel on your skin?

1 “Initial sensation is so cold that I don’t notice anything else except the temperature. Once Swimming, it feels silky and smooth”

2 “The water felt cold, smooth, tingly, achey on head and face. Invigorating.”

3 “Cold!!”

4 “The water felt smooth on my skin. It was painful but not in a bad way. Almost like gentle needles and then after a few moments it almost feels like a blanket wrapped around me.”

5 “Water was cold and at first seemed to seep into your bones. When the water splashed onto your face it was refreshing.”

6 “At the start the water felt like it was stinging my skin but this changed to tingling and then numb for a while until warm up with more tingles.”

7 “Clean, fresh, cold initially but after that it’s a wonderful free feeling, almost as if the skin is absorbing the water.”

8 “I was wearing a wetsuit so had limited skin contact with the water.”

9 “The water felt painfully cold at first, but that eased. I was wearing a wetsuit today so I didn’t feel the water much, it warmed up in my suit which was comfortable.”

10 “The water was cold on my skin. My skin felt tingly. When I was swimming the water felt calming on my skin”.

11 “Cold, tingly, prickling my skin.”

11.5.5. What did the water taste like?

1 “Head up breaststroke only today, and I’m not aware of I having swallowed any!”

2 “I find this difficult to answer! Smooth.”

3 “I wasn’t focusing much on taste. Cold, peaty.”

4 “The water tasted cold, fresh and smooth. It tasted clean, I try not to ingest too much but it doesn’t worry me if I swallow a little.”

5 “Water had a peaty/woodland taste.”

6 “Not sure... Fresh.”

7 “Don’t usually taste the water.”

8 “On this occasion I don’t think I swallowed any water, but on previous swims, it has an earth taste (but not offputting).”

9 “I didn’t taste the water.”

10 “I didn’t taste the water.”

11 “Didn’t taste it!”

## 11.6. Notebook Assignment Five

11.6.1 Which emotions can you identify during the session? Focus on before swimming, during swimming and after

1 “**Before (usually a bit of a mix!)**: Happy to be here, anticipation, enthusiastic, expectant of a good time, interested to know how my body will respond today, adrenalin, challenging, wish the sun would come out, glad it’s not windy, wonder at what gets me here when it looks so grey and uninviting, not looking forward to starting to take off my clothes because it’s cold. **During**: Initially challenged, exhilaration once submerged, enjoyable aloneness while swimming, sometimes enjoyable chat while swimming, in touch with survival instinct, in the moment, in touch with my body, peaceful, merge with the surroundings/at one, heightened sense of being alive. **After**: togetherness, happy to be part of this community, sense of achievement, peaceful, powerful, invigorated, heightened sense of being alive, cathartic, strong, warm and cosy, in touch with my body, satisfied, valued by the company, enjoy the camaraderie, privileged to be able to do this, in the moment, feel part of something, feel I’ve had a physical and mental reset, ready for anything.”

2 “I was slightly apprehensive before the swim after an enforced break for health reasons of about a month. But I was looking forward to it although I still didn’t feel brilliant. I felt positive that it would help me, getting in the water. It was quite windy – not my favourite – and I did feel the cold more than usual, probably because of the above!! I felt more confident as the time ticked by and much better in my head and really enjoyed it. When I got out I felt much better much more relaxed and less jittery. Felt relief at getting back to normal routine and having a giggle with friends. My pulse rate had been very high since being unwell – unusual for me. It has dropped a lot post swim which is what I had hoped would happen.”

3 “**Before**: anxiety, excitement. I usually feel quite anxious before a swim, especially in winter. Today I was also a bit stressed and fed up generally. **During**: Getting in, anxiety increases in the first few minutes as my body gets used to the cold. once I start swimming I get a warmth and a calmness. I

focus on my breathing and my anxiety goes. It can come back if I think too much (e.g. if I panic that I'm out of my depth) but generally I feel in control of it. **After** and once I have warmed up, I feel good, relaxed and happy. I feel stress has left my body and feel I can cope more with life."

4 "**Beforehand** – a low level of anxiety and apprehension, perhaps nervousness in anticipation of the cold. **During** - The pre swim emotions seem to melt away as I walk in deeper and deeper. By the time I'm in the water and have swam half way to the yellow buoy I feel a sense of calm and joy. I feel happy and relieved and strong. I also get a big thrill. **Afterwards** I felt incredibly happy, proud that I'd been in the cold again but mostly just joy and happiness."

5 "**Before:** When I set off from home I am always looking forward to the session and feeling positive; I enjoy the drive up. Once I arrive and see the water I feel apprehensive; then wondering if I'm able to do this. **During:** At first when the cold hits I feel annoyed/uncomfortable. I have to push through and get to the first buoy. Once that initial feeling is over I start to enjoy the session. It makes me feel happy looking around and taking in the scenery, the trees, the water. **After:** as soon as I have the water I get chillier and it is about getting dressed as quickly as possible. Once clothes are on, there is a satisfied feeling; enjoyment while sitting having a hot drink and talking to other members of the group."

### 11.7. Journal Entry Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> of March

I saw the women come down the ramp and went up to them. I immediately got hugged by them while I introduced myself. I felt somewhat awkward at first. They were still setting up a bit. They dug a hole, and put some aluminium in, to make a campfire. Few by few, more women came, all were greeted with a hug. Alison was leading the group today and she was setting up the music and working out the meditation. After everybody was presented we started the session.

1. First we started with an introduction. Everybody had to say: Hi, I'm (name) and the group would reply with "Hi (name)". We went full circle and ended with me. Then I got a moment to introduce myself and what I am doing, and to ask permission for the video. Everybody was okay with it. They did request me to share my thesis when it is ready. We also congratulated somebody who got a job.
2. 3 women were late but quickly said their name as well.
3. Then Alison guided some warm up. So you had to sit with your legs stretched out, and then we loosened up the neck, rolled the shoulder, stretched the lower back and wiggled everything.
4. After the warm-up, there was a short meditation session. Alison had some meditative music in the background and talked through the meditation. She told us to envision planting a flower, nurture it, and watch it grow, and that it is very much like nurturing ourselves and our hopes and dreams. You could either sit or lay down, whatever was comfortable for you. Towards the end she said to wiggle your toes and fingers and then slowly open your eyes when you are ready. Most women lay down during the meditation.
5. Something went wrong with the set-up of the meditation, but to support Alison, we did a circular group hug around the fire.
6. Then we got ready for the dip and everybody was changing. Most/all people wear gloves and socks/water shoes, but no one was in wetsuit. When everybody was ready we made a group picture.
7. We went up to the water, and lots of women were holding hands while walking in. In the water we made a circle, and then started walking round. Alison was yelling things which the group then repeated like: "we are sunflowers" "we are powerful" "we are wild sea women". Then we dipped all on the count of 5 (because people were not ready on 3). We stayed in a little while longer, and Alison was taking pictures of everyone. One by one people went out.

8. People were already dressed or getting dressed. It was pretty warm out, so I was not really in a hurry. I got sand everywhere.
9. Once dressed you could sit around the campfire and have marshmallows. There were a few smaller groups within the bigger one, but it all seemed very open, friendly, and accepting. There was casual conversation about swimming, camping, driving, and my research as well.
10. When people left, the campfire was cleaned up, so no trash was left behind, and the hole was closed again with sand. The women who were left over walked together to the car park, where after another hug, people departed.

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