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## Older Women's Leisurely Engagement with Water: A 'Wetrospective'

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**ABSTRACT:** Water is a vital but underexplored dimension of older women's leisure. While aquatic activity is often framed through health promotion or 'active ageing' discourses, such framings can obscure the complex entanglements of embodiment, gender, environment and social life. This paper presents findings from a scoping review of 36 peer reviewed studies that examined older women's engagements with water across diverse contexts and activities including swimming, aqua aerobics, surfing, rowing and wild swimming. Four clusters of meaning emerged: water as supporting physical and mental well-being; water as a medium for identity and agency; water as a site of belonging, memory and spirituality; and water as context for social connection and mutual support. These practices illuminate water's role not only as a therapeutic resource but also as an agentic, affective and political force. By foregrounding older women's watery leisure, we highlight tensions of safety and autonomy and of inclusion and exclusion, and we call for a hydrological turn in gerontology that is attentive to joy, risk and belonging.

**KEYWORDS:** Water, older women, scoping review, embodiment, water-based leisure

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### INTRODUCTION

Water is everywhere and everything. It covers most of the planet, comprises most of our bodies, and flows through the infrastructures, rituals and ecologies that sustain us (Linton, 2010). It is both a universal element and profoundly local; it is imbued with cultural meaning, political contestation and environmental urgency (Ballester, 2019; Chen et al., 2013). Water is also an important site and medium of leisure and recreation. Its flows and affordances invite play, ritual and renewal, making it a space where pleasure, health and social life intermingle (Roberts and Phillips, 2018).

Older adults' access to water-based leisure has long been framed through narrower discourses of "active ageing", health promotion, and social participation (see, for example, Ayán et al., 2017; Butson et al., 2025; Terra de Oliveira et al., 2024). Such framings, however, often overlook the more complex experiences of ageing bodies in relation to environments. Scholarship has long acknowledged the therapeutic and instrumental benefits of aquatic activity, but less often has it asked what water *does*, that is, how its material, affective and social properties actively participate in shaping older adults' lives.

A report by *Outdoor Swimmer* (2022) noted that the number of people finding their place in the water continues to rise, with the fastest growing demographic being women. For older women especially, water-based leisure represents a critical yet understudied arena. Swimming, soaking or simply being near water can offer freedom, joy and connection, while also surfacing vulnerabilities linked to gendered expectations, ageing bodies and environmental change. These practices highlight the promise and the precarity of watery leisure. They can be sites of empowerment and resilience, but also of exclusion, surveillance or risk. Attending to older women's experiences therefore complicates dominant health promotion narratives, drawing attention to how water itself – as material, affective and political – co-shapes the possibilities of later life leisure.

This article responds to the paucity of scholarship that explicitly theorises older women's relationships with water in leisure and recreation. We conducted a scoping review across multiple disciplines and identified 36 studies that could help us answer the question, "What does existing literature reveal about older women's relationships with water in leisure contexts?" In what follows, we chart the extent and nature of what is currently known about older women's engagement with water and, equally, the silences and absences that delimit this knowledge. In mapping the existing empirical landscape of older women and water, we seek to set an agenda for future scholarship that centres the intersections of gender, age and water, through frameworks that honour complexity, embrace embodiment, and resist reducing water to a backdrop for individual health outcomes. Indeed, attending to older women's aquatic leisure illuminates how ageing, gender and environment are mutually entangled, and how watery practices carry implications far beyond the pool or shoreline. This enables us to ask what it means to live, age and thrive with water. As societies grapple with ageing populations, changing climate, wellness imperatives, the importance of place in ageing, and inequalities in access to nature and leisure, the stakes of these debates extend beyond scholarship to broader questions of justice, infrastructure and care.

## CONTEXT

Gerontology has increasingly begun to question long-standing instrumental approaches to nature that position environments primarily as resources for human use. The first of these approaches emerges from extractivist logics rooted in settler-colonial nation-building, where landscapes are valued for what can be taken from them (Langhorst and Bolton, 2017; Caretta and Zaragocin, 2020). A second and more subtle instrumental framing appears within biomedical and leisure studies research, which celebrates nature for the measurable health benefits it provides to ageing populations. Studies have documented the therapeutic value of parks, shorelines and outdoor activities for older adults, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Levinger et al., 2022). These studies have been critical for infrastructure and policy development. Similarly, Finlay et al. (2015) and Pool et al. (2023) demonstrate how access to green and blue spaces such as gardens, rivers and coastal areas supports physical activity, reduces loneliness, and enhances overall well-being in later life. While this body of work foregrounds the importance of environmental access, it often treats nature as a passive delivery system for wellness, an inert backdrop against which human ageing unfolds. It is this intersection that our scoping review seeks to interrogate.

Recent theoretical interventions seek to move beyond such one-directional models. They ask not only what nature does for older adults but how ageing itself is co-constituted through relationships with more-than-human worlds, in an "all-world aging" (Andrews, 2022) or a "gerontology of everything" (Lupton, 2024). Katz (2024) articulates this as "aging together-with", suggesting that humans do not age alone, but rather do so alongside animals, infrastructures, atmospheres and elements. Rather than seeing nature as a setting, we are invited to see it as kin. Woodward's (2022) reflections on old-growth forests enact this sensibility, portraying trees not as symbols of longevity but as elders, as living archives of time with whom reciprocal bonds can be formed. Jewusiak (2023) similarly proposes a "senescent environmentalism", arguing that ageing bodies and ageing ecologies are entangled temporalities, both

of them devalued under capitalist logics of productivity. To age, in this view, is to enter into shared rhythms of slowness, decay, endurance and care across species and environments.

Water renders these entanglements intensely material. Blue space studies have shown that proximity to rivers, lakes or oceans can soothe, restore and revitalise older adults (Finlay et al., 2015; Pool et al., 2023; Völker and Kistemann, 2011). Indeed, Foley's foundational work in blue spaces (see, for example, Foley, 2015; Foley et al., 2019; Foley and Kistemann, 2015) positions water not merely as a therapeutic backdrop but also as an active, relational environment that generates what he and colleagues term "hydrophilia", that is, an embodied and affective draw toward water that shapes how people live, move and find meaning. Beyond such effects-based perspectives, however, lies a deeper question: what does it mean for ageing bodies to meet water as a force rather than a facility? Unlike parks or walking trails, water is not only seen but touched, inhaled, entered. It lifts bodies otherwise weighed down by gravity; it shocks, embraces, resists. Older women's engagements with water offer a uniquely generative site through which to explore how ageing is lived, not *despite* vulnerability but *through* relational exposure to more-than-human elements. In shifting the focus from nature as therapy to nature as co-presence, this article aligns with a growing movement in gerontology that embraces and engages with climate (Haq and Gutman, 2014; Zhang and Chen, 2024), environment (Wahl and Weisman, 2003), and geography (Skinner et al., 2016). This movement seeks not merely to advocate for ageing *in* nature but to understand what it means to age *with* it.

## METHODS

Scoping reviews are, "a preliminary assessment of the potential size and scope of available research literature" (Grant and Booth 2009: 95). They are an increasingly ubiquitous knowledge synthesis tool that summarises the, "extent, range, and nature of research activity (...) to convey the breadth and depth of a field" (Levac et al., 2010: 1). Given the lack of available research on our topic of interest, we have aligned our approach with Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage protocol in order to "map *rapidly*" (Mays et al., 2001: 194; emphasis in original) the body of available literature in our field of focus. The mapping protocol includes: identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies to include, extracting and charting data, and summarising and disseminating findings. It is worth noting at the outset that, in keeping with the scoping review method, this review makes no claim to evaluative judgement. As is characteristic of scoping reviews, it charts the terrain of what currently exists in the literature and, in doing so, necessarily reflects the boundaries and blind spots of that existing landscape, such as homogenous portrayals of older women and myopic attention to Global North contexts.

### Identification of the research question

Our overarching question was: What does existing literature reveal about older women's relationships with water in leisure and recreational contexts? This prompted a number of secondary questions, including: How do women age with water? How does water enable leisure, belonging and identity? And, conversely, how do structures of inequality shape who gets to experience water in these ways and who is excluded? These questions are all focused on the intersections of leisure, gender and water. The questions themselves were kept broad in order to capture as wide a range as possible of disciplines, methodologies, theoretical underpinnings and different ways of knowing.

### Identification of included studies

The following seven databases were searched, representing a range of disciplines: Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, EBSCOHost, Geobase, SportDiscus, Social Science Citation Index and Medline. Searching this broad spectrum of databases captured the multi-disciplinarity of water studies, age studies, and feminist approaches. To complement the above databases, Google Scholar was also searched. In addition to the databases listed above, given the diversity of topics that may be differently

indexed in databases, we hand-searched via reference harvesting and forward citation searching. Table 1 outlines the core concepts (older age, women, leisure and recreation, and water) and the corresponding search terms used in the various databases.

Table 1. Search terms

Overarching term	Search terms
female	female OR wom*n OR lad*
ageing	older OR ageing OR aging OR elderly OR senior OR middle-aged OR "middle aged" OR baby-boomer OR "baby boomer" OR mid-life OR "mid life"
leisure	leisure OR recreation OR "leisure activit*"
water	water OR scuba OR swim OR lake OR ocean OR pool OR aqua* OR beach OR sea OR sauna OR canoe OR kayak OR paddleboard OR fishing OR surf* OR ski OR raft* OR dive OR diving

Our use of the search terms 'older' and 'women' were not without conceptual complexity or contestation, as both terms are socially, culturally and politically constructed, rather than fixed or universally agreed upon. In some articles, 'older women' referred to those who are 55 or older, while other articles characterised them as 60 or older, and some considered them to be 65 and older. In still other papers, the terms 'older' and 'senior' were used without being as clearly defined. As age studies scholars have long argued, age is both a demographic category defined by number of years (chronological age) and a category contingent upon life circumstances (such as disease) that may cause one to feel older or younger than one's chronological age (Grenier, 2012; Johfre and Saperstein, 2023; Settersten and Mayer, 1997). In terms of gender, we also acknowledge that the term 'woman' is not solely biological, but rather is intimately related to sociocultural norms and values. As theorists of intersectionality cogently argue, race, age, gender, ethnicity and social class are entangled and form part of the complexity of identity (McCall, 2005). In both our original conceptualisation and in the research literature surveyed, 'older women' is a variable and fluid category that is shaped by its cultural and sociopolitical context; this variability applies both within and across nation-states.

### Selection of included studies

The second and third scoping review stages were not discrete consecutive processes in that, in the course of reviewing articles for inclusion, slight adjustments to the search terms and inclusion/exclusion criteria occurred. This was particularly necessary given how few articles explicitly explored the impact of gender on leisure-related experiences in/with water, thus necessitating less strict inclusion criteria. Ultimately, to be included for analysis, articles had to meet the following criteria:

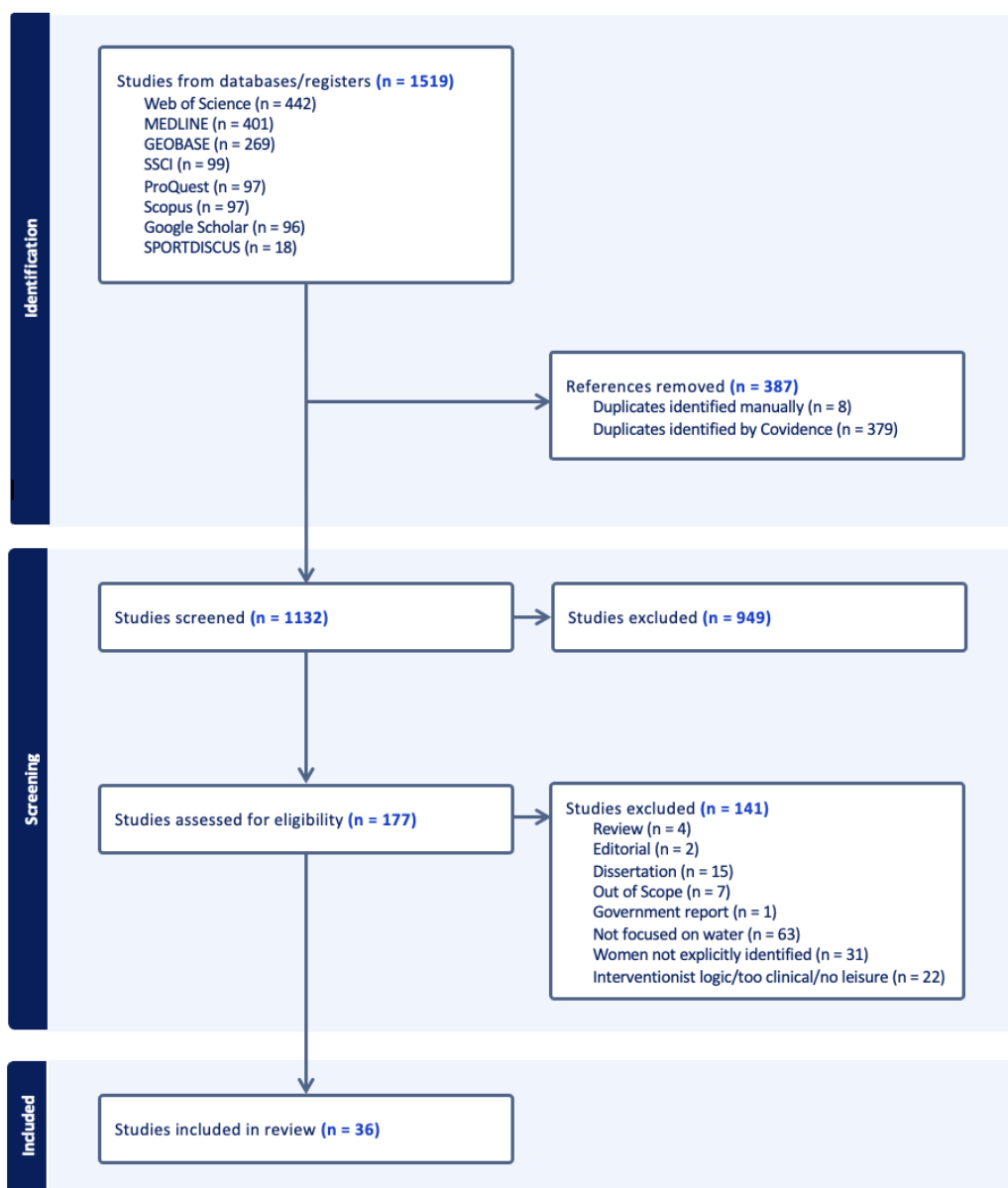
- Peer reviewed
- Full-text available in English
- Explicit and full focus on water (not a water activity in comparison with other land-based activities)
- Substantially describe older women's perceptions of, experiences of, and/or attitudes towards water-linked leisure activities (more than a simple reporting of how many women were in the study)

Given the paucity of research at the intersection of older women and water, we made a deliberate methodological decision to include studies that were not exclusively focused on older women; that is, we

accepted studies that included older women alongside other age groups, or included groups of older men alongside older women. To be included, studies needed to move beyond incidental age reporting to offer a meaningful discussion of how older age shaped, mediated, or was implicated in women’s engagement with water. We excluded papers that merely listed participant ages without any analytical engagement with age. Our results draw only on those findings that speak directly to the age dimension of participants’ experiences and we have been deliberate in not overextending age-specific conclusions where the authors themselves do not make them.

We documented the identification, screening and selection of included (and excluded) articles using a modified PRISMA flow diagram (Liberati et al., 2009) as a means to convey transparency in our decision-making processes.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram



As outlined in the PRISMA chart (Figure 1), an initial search retrieved a total of 1519 records (the majority of Google Scholar records were retrieved via citations and hand searching). These were then imported into Covidence, a web-based software platform that supports scoping reviews; 387 duplicates were then identified and removed. Author 1 then read through 1132 records using the title, abstract and keywords to eliminate 948 of them. Authors 1 and 2 then went through the remaining 179 records, reading through full texts to determine whether they fit our inclusion/exclusion criteria and to judge their relevance to our research question. When disagreements occurred, the authors met and revisited the text to determine whether it should be included. Of those 179, we excluded 143 records as they were reviews ( $n = 3$ ), editorials ( $n = 2$ ), dissertations ( $n = 15$ ), government reports ( $n = 1$ ), were not focused on water ( $n = 63$ ), did not explicitly identify women's perspectives or experiences ( $n = 22$ ), were focused on water as a clinical intervention ( $n = 22$ ), or were out of scope ( $n = 7$ ). Accordingly, we include here a total of 36 articles for analysis.

### Data extraction and charting

Scoping reviews are known for their ability to provide a "comprehensive and panoramic overview" (Davis et al., 2009: 1388); the purpose of systematic reviews, on the other hand, is to assess the quality of the evidence in each article (Grant and Booth, 2009). In the fourth stage of our scoping review (data extraction and charting), we thus sought to highlight the "key themes, trends, and patterns in the articles under study" (Rumrill et al., 2010: 403). To that end, we examined each article to extract particular information, and then catalogued the data in a table that included: citation, keywords, study location, water activity, aim or research question(s), sample composition, research design or method, understanding of leisure, theoretical lens or approach, findings or outcomes, and other notes.

We were cognisant of the "rational-technical thrust" (Pope 2003: 279) characteristic of knowledge synthesis methods. Scoping reviews, as with many knowledge syntheses, are often presented as straightforward, impartial processes, with researchers searching, screening, charting and synthesising. What ultimately becomes 'known', however, is shaped by each decision in the synthesis process, including which databases to search, which keywords to privilege, or how strictly to enforce inclusion criteria. Without reflexivity, it can be easy to lose sight of the scoping review's capacity for "textually mediated organization of knowledge" (Dalmer 2020: 2362), where the method dictates what 'counts' as evidence and whose voices are included. By keeping this critical awareness present, we tried to remain attentive not only to what was visible in the literature, but also to what was absent, and to the silences produced by the knowledge synthesis process itself. In practice, this critical awareness manifested in team discussions where we interrogated our keyword choices and inclusion decisions and documented moments where the review process itself seemed to be producing silences, for instance when dominant health-focused terminology obscured studies that engaged with water through cultural, spiritual or leisure-oriented frameworks.

## RESULTS

Across 36 studies, older women's engagements with water surfaced as currents of vitality, identity, belonging and connection that flowed well beyond therapeutic frames. Water appeared not only as backdrop but as resource, risk and agentic force, pulling bodies and meanings into new alignments. Facilitators, barriers, tensions and silences made visible in the articles revealed water as a contested terrain where bodies, environments and politics meet in later life.

### Study locales

The distribution of study locations reveals both breadth and concentration. Sites spanned multiple regions of the world, including North America, Europe, South America, South Asia and Oceania. The strongest clusters were in the United Kingdom (13 studies), Australia (8), and Nordic countries (6 across

Denmark, Sweden and Finland), with additional representation in Canada, the United States, Poland, Hungary, Brazil, Sri Lanka and New Zealand. While this reflects a diverse international reach, the coverage was weighted towards the Global North, particularly Anglophone and European contexts. This is likely a partial consequence of our own searching strategies (focusing on articles published in English).

We were also intrigued with the scholarly 'locations' of publication. Only two journals appeared more than once in our sample, with the *Annals of Leisure Research* and *Leisure Studies* featuring four and three articles, respectively.

### Water activities

Outdoor swimming in its many forms emerged as the most frequently reported water-based activity (n = 13); this was followed by aqua aerobics or aquacise (n = 5) and indoor swimming (n = 3). Other activities such as surfing, rowing, scuba diving, kayaking, sailing and looking out at the water appeared occasionally. A more detailed overview of activities included is available in Table 2. Activities are as described in each study.

Table 2. Water activities

Water activity	Number of articles
Aqua exercise/aqua aerobics	5
Beach going	1
Boat ownership	1
Kayaking	1
Looking out at the sea	1
Rowing	2
Sailing	1
Scuba diving	2
Stand-up paddling	1
Surfing	4
Surf lifesaving (SLS)	1
Windsurfing	1
Swimming	15
• Indoor swimming (in pools)	3
• Women-only swimming (in pools)	1
• Open-water swimming	3
• Wild swimming	3
• Coastal swimming	1
• Swimming	4

## Affordances of water

In reading across the sample, four clusters of water's affordances for older women emerged.

### *Cluster 1. Physical and mental well-being*

Across the 36 studies included in this scoping review, one of the most consistently reported functions of water for older women was its contribution to physical and mental well-being. Multiple qualitative and mixed-methods studies described water-based activities as supporting bodies in ways that were both embodied (reducing pain, easing mobility, enabling movement) and affective (improving mood, reducing stress and producing feelings of energy or calm). Older participants in studies of aquatic activities, for example, emphasised reductions in musculoskeletal pain and increased ease of movement after regular pool- or sea-based activity (Evans and Sleaf, 2012; Drohomirecka and Wojcieszewicz, 2016; Ábel et al., 2023). Studies of cold-water swimming and wild swimming similarly reported accounts of energising or therapeutic effects, where immersion in cold water was described by participants as restorative (Pound et al., 2024; Bates and Moles, 2024a, 2024b; Boocock, 2025). Surfing and surf-therapy programmes (Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Hackerott et al., 2024) and studies of aqua aerobics and structured pool programmes (Drohomirecka and Wojcieszewicz, 2016; Ábel et al., 2023; Currie, 2022) likewise registered improvements in mood, reduced levels of stress, and increased self-reported well-being among participants.

Sensory and somatic descriptions recurred. Women described the feeling of buoyancy, the dampening of joint pain, and the distinctive sensory properties of different water settings (warm indoor pools, cold ocean, sheltered ponds) as being integral to well-being (Allin, 2018; Watson, 2019; Peters, 2016). Several authors note that these sensory registers are constitutive of coping strategies. Immersion becomes a means of emotion regulation or can be a ritual for managing grief, anxiety or the exhaustion resulting from caregiving roles (Testa, 2024; Hansson, 2024). Emma Boocock (2025), for example, provides a brave autoethnography of how using blue spaces – in her case specifically immersion in bodies of water – has enabled the author to rebuild parts of herself following the death of her father.

Notably, the sample often framed these effects as palliative rather than strictly curative; that is, water did not necessarily 'fix' chronic conditions, but it changed the lived experience of those conditions, making everyday life more manageable and pleasurable (Hansson, 2024; Evans and Sleaf, 2012; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019; Gregory, 2023).

### *Cluster 2. Identity and agency*

A second cluster concerned identity, skill acquisition and agency. Across contexts, from Masters rowing to surf lifesaving and from kayaking to late-life scuba diving, water activities provided opportunities for older women to take on new roles, develop capabilities, and (re-)narrate themselves in ways that departed from earlier life scripts (Toepell et al., 2004; Caudwell, 2011; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019; Allin, 2018).

In acquiring new technical skills such as mastering a stroke, negotiating surf or operating a small craft, confidence and conceptualisations of oneself were (re)built. Masters rowing participants and women who took up scuba diving or sailing framed their participation as an embodied project of "becoming" (Toepell et al., 2004; Caudwell, 2011; Hackerott et al., 2024). The literature repeatedly links skill acquisition to narratives of autonomy and resilience. Learning to manage one's body in water often translated into a broader sense of competence in everyday life, and participants described pride in overcoming both technical and emotional challenges (Gregory, 2023; Rich et al., 2022).

Women-only groups and gendered spaces emerge as particularly salient for identity formation. Studies of women-only swimming collectives and gender-segregated sessions emphasise how these contexts created safe conditions for risk-taking, learning, and the reconfiguration of selfhood (Barry et

al., 2024; Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b). A participant in Evans and Sleaf's (2012) study noted that women-only aqua aerobics sessions helped alleviate her trepidation; according to this participant, "It might not be true, but you feel like people are looking at you and laughing [in open sessions]. Here we're all the same and it's not like that, like it is on a beach or something. It's all enclosed and no-one can see you" (ibid: 522). These spaces were described as sites where women could cultivate alternative narratives, reframing themselves as, for example, 'rowers', 'ocean swimmers', or 'surfers', which are identities that carry social capital and a sense of continuity across the life course (Testa, 2024; Caudwell, 2011; Wheaton 2017, 2019).

The studies in the sample also highlight the interplay between identity and wider cultural discourses. Beach-body narratives (Field et al., 2019) and anxieties about visible signs of ageing (Evans and Sleaf, 2012) were reported to shape both the uptake and the experiential quality of water activities. Autoethnographic and life-course studies emphasise how water-based practices enable older women to inhabit continuity and change simultaneously; that is, they can maintain embodied practices from earlier life while also experimenting with novel roles and collectivities (Caudwell, 2011; Wheaton, 2017; Peters, 2012). Engagement with water mediated processes of agency. It enabled skill development, identity work, and new social roles that were generative of self-esteem and social recognition.

### *Cluster 3. Belonging, memory and spirituality*

A third cluster of meaning that emerged across the reviewed studies concerns the role of water in producing belonging, sustaining memory, and evoking spiritual or sacred sensibilities. Water sites often became civic commons, that is, places imbued with attachment, identity and meaning that exceed the instrumental logics of health promotion. Several ethnographic and qualitative studies documented how wild-swimming spaces, coastal beaches and lakes functioned as symbolic landscapes. Women reported profound attachments to specific sites, often narrating them through memory; they evoked childhood swims with family, formative teenage summers, or rituals of grief and renewal later in life (Watson, 2019; Peters, 2016; Boocock, 2025).

Spiritual and transcendental dimensions also frequently appeared. Studies of wild swimming and cold-water immersion describe experiences of awe, communion with nature, and sensations of timelessness or transcendence (Corry et al., 2024; Pound et al., 2024; Bates and Moles 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Allin, 2018; Peters, 2012). Watson (2019) conceptualised such practices as producing "liquid passions", that is, affective bonds that blur distinctions between material environment, embodied subject and social world. These affective registers highlight how water becomes more than backdrop; it is encountered as a living, agentic element that enables belonging and meaning making.

Belonging also manifested in collective cultural terms. Indigenous women's relationships with rivers, coasts and aquaculture practices, for example, were described as being deeply disrupted by colonial land and water politics (Stronach et al., 2019). These experiences were further shaped by intersecting dimensions of identity and power that included age, Indigeneity, gender, and the ongoing effects of colonialism. For migrant and minority women, pools and open-water contexts became sites where cultural and religious politics shaped belonging. Lenneis et al. (2022a, 2022b) describe how Muslim women in Denmark cultivated belonging through women-only pool sessions while simultaneously confronting wider exclusions through burkini debates. These examples underscore that belonging is relational and contested and that water sites can be both sanctuary and site of exclusion.

Memories, rituals and spirituality also intertwined. Seasonal plunges, annual swims, or structured rituals such as surf lifesaving ceremonies created rhythmic attachments that imbued water with continuity and symbolic depth (Onken et al., 2024; Testa, 2024). Such practices cultivated a sense of place-belonging that sustained older women's engagement across time and anchored identity and social life in watery environments.

#### *Cluster 4. Social connection and mutual support*

The fourth cluster evident in the literature emphasises sociability, companionship and the forms of mutual support generated through water-based leisure. Studies across diverse activities such as swimming, surfing, rowing, aqua aerobics and surf lifesaving highlight that participation is rarely a solitary endeavour. Women repeatedly described safety, motivation and enjoyment as dependent on being "in it together" (Barry et al., 2024; Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Hackerott et al., 2024).

Group-based practices such as aqua aerobics, swim clubs or Masters rowing created collective routines and rituals that supported adherence and enjoyment (Rich et al., 2022; Onken et al., 2024; Watson, 2019; Testa, 2024). Showing up was made easier when friends were expecting them; laughter, joking and shared celebration magnified the positive effects of participation.

Mutual support was also expressed in mentoring and intergenerational dynamics. Surf lifesaving clubs and surf-therapy initiatives fostered explicit mentoring relationships in which older women were both recipients and providers of guidance (Onken et al., 2024; Rich et al., 2022; Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Peters, 2012). Peters' (2012) ethnographic fieldwork reveals that the "Polar Bears", an informal group of African American early morning swimmers on Martha's Vineyard, have maintained community since the 1940s due to a combination of mentorship, play, song and attention to religious or spiritual practices. These relationships position older women as active contributors to community resilience.

Social connection was especially significant in contexts of vulnerability or marginalisation. Boocock (2025) documents how wild-swimming collectives provided spaces for companionship during bereavement. Similarly, culturally specific sessions such as women-only swimming hours for Muslim women created a collective sense of security and solidarity that enhanced participation (Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b). For immigrant women or those new to aquatic activities, the presence of supportive peers and mentors reduced fear and facilitated gradual entry into participation (Corry et al., 2024; Wheaton and Liu, 2024).

Finally, community was sustained through the collective rituals and shared traditions described in the previous section. These events were described as markers of belonging and continuity, binding participants across generations. These social worlds were not incidental but central, in that the conviviality, joking and shared rhythms of participation constituted water sites as "third places", that is, as social spaces that were separate from the two typical social environments of home and workplace (Oldenburg, 1989).

#### **Water framing**

As we analysed what water afforded older women and the potential it carried for older women's lives, we began to take note of the ways in which water itself was understood, studied and framed. In doing so, we identified three recurrent framings, each of which steers the questions that researchers ask and the outcomes they emphasise; these framings were utilitarian/resource, risk/management, and agentic/vital.

First, many studies treated water instrumentally as a resource for health promotion and policy. These accounts foreground measurable gains (physical activity levels, pain reduction, cost savings) and are attentive to programmatic design, that is, curriculum for aquatic therapy, optimal frequency of sessions, and planning of facilities (Evans and Sleaf, 2012; Drohomirecka and Wojciszewicz, 2016; Ábel et al., 2023; Currie, 2022). Such framings are useful for translational aims such as integrating aquatic programmes into clinical pathways or community health plans; however, they can obscure meanings that are not easily quantified such as joy, ritual or place attachment.

The second framing of water was in a risk-management discourse that includes concerns about drowning, hypothermia, infection, safety protocols and infrastructural safety. This discourse was detected in some articles, implicitly shaping how activities are organised and received (Pound et al., 2024;

Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Bates and Moles, 2023). These water-as-(potential)-risk framings offer points of consideration around control, surveillance, and access to watery spaces.

A third and more conceptual strand of discourse appearing in the sample treated water as agentic, that is, as a material and affective force that co-shapes human practices and social worlds. Authors in this vein described water as vibrant or lively and as shaping people's bodies, emotions and politics (Watson, 2019; Barry et al., 2024; Bates and Moles, 2024a, 2024b). These accounts highlight co-constitution, that is, the mutual shaping of water environments and human participants' experiences, attachments and community formations. Such a framing opens analytic space for questions about environmental ethics, place politics and the multisensory ways in which water participates in the creation of a sense of well-being and belonging.

Interestingly, these framings are not necessarily mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist and often contest one another, sometimes within a single study. A study of cold-water swimming, for instance, may report measurable mood improvements (resource), may note institutional concerns about safety (risk), while also centering participants' narratives of awe and belonging (agentic). This coexistence of framings demonstrates the layered ways in which water is apprehended in research (Pound et al., 2024; Bates and Moles, 2024b; Boocock, 2025). How water is framed – whether as resource, risk or agentic force – powerfully shapes both the kinds of questions researchers ask and the possibilities older women encounter in practice.

## **Flows and dams: Facilitators and barriers to watery engagement**

### *Barriers to participation*

Across the 36 studies, barriers to older women's engagement with water-based activity were widespread and diverse, spanning structural, social, cultural and embodied dimensions. A recurring structural issue was access to facilities and environments. Several studies documented how participation was limited by inadequate transportation options, restrictive opening hours, and costs of membership (Pound et al., 2024; Toepell et al., 2004). Natural water settings were more accessible in some rural and coastal regions; conversely, however, they tended to be hindered by poor infrastructure such as lack of changing facilities, toilets, or safe entry points, thus rendering them less welcoming for older bodies (Berthiaume et al., 2025; Toepell et al., 2004; Pound et al., 2024; Currie, 2022).

Cultural and gendered expectations emerged strongly as barriers. Several studies showed how older women experienced surveillance, judgement or shaming in aquatic environments, especially related to body size, modesty norms or perceptions of ageing bodies (Field et al., 2019; Evans and Sleaf, 2012; Toepell et al., 2004; Watson, 2019). These pressures discouraged some older women from entering leisure centres or participating in group swimming where they experienced heightened visibility of their bodies. For Muslim women, for example, barriers included not only modesty norms but also institutional failures to provide gender-segregated or culturally safe spaces (Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b; Hansson, 2024).

Risk framings themselves created barriers. Institutional safety concerns around drowning, hypothermia or liability were often used to restrict access or limit independent activity. Cold-water immersion groups, for example, sometimes excluded older women who were deemed "too vulnerable", regardless of the women's own agency or adaptive practices (Pound et al., 2024; Toepell et al., 2004). Such exclusions highlight the tension between paternalistic protection and women's own negotiation of risk.

Embodied barriers included chronic illness, disability, or pain that limited participation. While aquatic environments often mitigated joint stress or facilitated rehabilitation, several participants reported fluctuating energy levels or conditions such as arthritis or cardiovascular disease, which required careful

management and thus could dissuade regular attendance (Ábel et al., 2023; Drohomirecka and Wojciszewicz, 2016; Currie, 2022).

Finally, climate and environmental change were additional barriers to participation. Several studies noted pollution and deteriorating water quality, algae blooms, and unpredictable weather patterns as constraints that rendered natural settings unsafe or less desirable for swimming (Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Pound et al., 2024). These environmental changes intersected with broader issues of social inequality, in that those with fewer resources had fewer alternative options when favoured sites became unusable.

### *Facilitators of engagement*

Despite barriers, a wide range of facilitators enabled older women's ongoing participation. Central among these were social supports. Group-based programmes, peer encouragement, and intergenerational participation all provided motivation, accountability and joy (Berthiaume et al., 2025; Corry et al., 2024; Onken et al., 2024; Rich et al., 2022; Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Peters, 2012). The formation of women-only groups or culturally sensitive sessions created safe spaces where older women could participate free from judgement or surveillance (Barry et al., 2024; Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b; Onken et al., 2024; Corry et al., 2024).

Environmental design and accessibility also mattered. Warm, clean and well-maintained facilities encouraged participation, while natural settings with gradual entry points, benches and safe parking increased older women's confidence (Bates and Moles, 2024a; Corry et al., 2024; Berthiaume et al., 2025; Barry et al., 2024; Burtscher and Britton, 2022). The sensory aesthetics of water such as its coolness, clarity or seasonal beauty acted as facilitators by making activities pleasurable and meaningful; this helped sustain long-term engagement beyond instrumental health goals (Watson, 2019; Hackerott et al., 2024; Field et al., 2019; Bates and Moles, 2024b).

At the level of embodied experience, the buoyancy of water facilitated movement and reduced pain. This enabled women with chronic conditions to engage in activities they could not sustain on land, such as aqua aerobics and swimming (Ábel et al., 2023; Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b; Drohomirecka and Wojciszewicz, 2016; Currie, 2022). Participants repeatedly described feelings of freedom, lightness and energy as motivators that drew them back to water settings.

Personal agency and identity work also acted as facilitators. Many women deliberately sought out water practices as an environment in which to craft new identities as, for example, adventurers, Master rowers, athletes or spiritual practitioners. The sense of self-expansion they gained sustained engagement (Toepell et al., 2004; Caudwell, 2011; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019; Allin, 2018; Wheaton 2017, 2019). Seasonal rituals, commemorations and collective performances further reinforced attachment and commitment (Testa, 2024; Barry et al., 2024, Corry et al., 2024).

### **Tensions**

Our synthesis suggests that older women's engagements with water are deeply complex and that they are marked by tensions that reveal that watery practices are not only about exercise and/or leisure but are also entangled with wider questions of identity, politics and environment. Perhaps the most prominent in our sample is the tension between safety and autonomy. While social and cultural attitudes emphasise keeping older, assumedly vulnerable, bodies 'safe' and risk-free (Katz, 2011; Martin, 2012; Howarth, 2014), some participants emphasised the right to self-manage risk. They framed risk-taking itself as pleasurable, empowering and life-affirming (Pound et al., 2024; Watson, 2019; Corry et al., 2024; Bates and Moles, 2023). A second tension is observed between inclusion and exclusion. While some programmes fostered welcoming spaces, others inadvertently reproduced social hierarchies through cost, cultural insensitivity or body-norm policing (Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b; Onken et al., 2024; Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Evans and Sleep, 2012). Efforts to create safe spaces for a particular group

(such as women-only swims) sometimes produced exclusions for others, thus highlighting the complexity of designing universally accessible aquatic programmes (Watson, 2019). A third tension that we observed was between instrumental and intrinsic values. While health promotion literature framed aquatic activity primarily as therapeutic exercise, many women prioritised fun, joy and spirituality. Where institutional discourses ignored these non-clinical outcomes, participants reported disengagement or frustration (Evans and Sleaf, 2012; Drohomirecka and Wojciszkiwicz, 2016; Currie, 2022; Ábel et al., 2023). Fourth and finally, environmental tensions emerged around contested uses of natural water. Conflicts over access, safety regulations, and environmental degradation highlighted how leisure practices intersect with broader ecological and political debates (Barry et al., 2024; Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Peters 2012, 2016; Pound et al., 2024). Women's water-linked practices are therefore not only personal but political; they are entangled with debates over rights to water, community stewardship, and sustainability.

### Absences

While this scoping review revealed rich accounts of women's engagements with water, it also highlighted striking absences. Across the 36 studies, only a minority engaged to any degree with gender as an analytical category and/or with a feminist theoretical lens (exceptions were Lenneis et al., 2022a; Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Testa, 2024; Field et al., 2019; Bates and Moles 2023, 2024b; Onken et al., 2024). More often, women were mentioned descriptively as participants or as a target demographic for health promotion, without interrogating how gendered power dynamics shaped their experiences. This absence risks reproducing the invisibility of older women in leisure studies, water studies and public health discourses.

Age was also rarely theorised. Older participants appeared in samples but were not discussed in terms of ageing identities, age-related embodiment, intersectional identities, or intergenerational differences. Except for a brief discussion of continuity theory and successful ageing (Gregory and Dimmock, 2019), the sample contained scant gerontological theory on age and ageing as a lifelong, variegated process of transitions (Grenier, 2012). Older women's practices were thus often collapsed into generalised narratives that flattened the specificity of their experiences. This absence also limits recognition of the creative ways older women might resist or reconfigure normative discourses of ageing through water-based practices, whether by reclaiming vitality, challenging ageist assumptions, or crafting new intergenerational roles. Other notable gaps included intersectional dimensions of inequality. Race and class were largely absent, except in a handful of studies that noted the predominance of white, middle-class swimmers in Western contexts (Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b; Onken et al., 2024; Peters 2012, 2016; Stronach et al., 2019; Bates and Moles, 2024a). As was previously noted, the coverage was weighted towards the Global North, particularly European contexts. Studies also rarely considered differing abilities, despite many participants reporting chronic health and mental health conditions. Overall, the studies did not distinguish between different age ranges, life stages or intersecting social positions; the sample thus lacked any deeper examination of how age, race, class, health or colonial histories differently shaped women's experiences and practices.

Unexpectedly, leisure was rarely explicitly articulated, including with regard to how authors understood leisure, what theories or frameworks of leisure underpinned the work, or what participants understood to be 'leisurely'. Many activities were assumed to be 'leisure', and watery places were assumed to be spaces where leisure can and does take place. That said, a very close reading of the 36 articles indicated that older women generally described water as a place of sensorial pleasure and exhilaration where laughter, adventure, and even risk-taking were embraced as meaningful ends in themselves (Watson, 2019; Allin, 2018; Field et al., 2019; Drohomirecka and Wojciszkiwicz, 2016; Lenneis et al., 2022b; Bates and Moles, 2024b; Burtscher and Britton, 2022). Playfulness appeared both in light-hearted social exchanges and in the thrill of challenge, while sensory aesthetics and ritual rhythms such as sunlight on waves, the beauty of the sea, seasonal plunges and post-swim teas imbued aquatic practices with symbolic depth and continuity (Bates and Moles, 2024b; Peters 2012, 2016; Barry et al.,

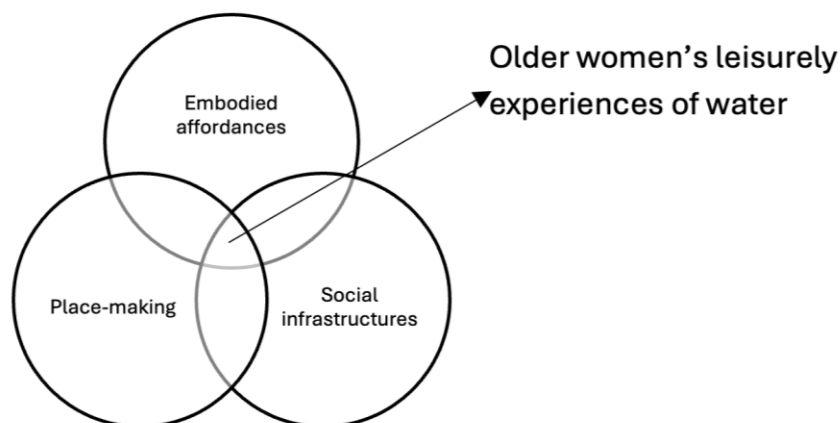
2024; Hackerott et al., 2024; Corry et al., 2024; Onken et al., 2024). Taken together, this close reading, using a leisure lens, reveals that water for older women operates simultaneously across multiple registers; it is a site of therapeutic support, pleasurable play, social connection, cultural meaning and political contestation. Attending to leisure is crucial as it foregrounds outcomes that are typically marginalised in policy and health discourses, including pleasure, beauty, fun and agency.

These silences highlight the need for future research that treats gender, age, race and ability as structuring, intersecting forces rather than as descriptive variables. Without this, the transformative and constraining effects of water on older women's lives remain only partially illuminated. Equally, the absence of a structured leisure framework in this area of research risks reducing aquatic engagement to therapeutic or functional terms, overlooking how pleasure, play, ritual and creativity shape participation. This narrowing not only flattens the diversity of older women's practices, but also obscures the very sources of vitality and meaning that sustain watery engagement.

## DISCUSSION

Centering older women's practices with water opens a critical vantage point. It links the intimate textures of embodied leisure with broader ecological and political currents. It suggests that if scholars wish to understand ageing in times of demographic and environmental change, they must attend to water's vitality, its affordances and constraints, and its capacity to make and unmake social worlds. To fulsomely understand older women's aquatic engagements, we must move beyond health metrics and examine the wider sociocultural forces that shape how water, and ageing, are experienced. The studies in this review reveal that participation is not a simple matter of choosing to swim, bob, surf, float, paddle or immerse; rather, participation is produced and shaped through the interaction of bodily capacities, social arrangements and the meanings attached to aquatic environments. By synthesising our findings into a framework that locates older women's experiences of water at the intersection of three vectors (embodied affordances, social infrastructures and place-making; see Figure 2), the complexity of water's role in older women's lives is slowly revealed. Water becomes at once therapeutic and risky, inclusive and exclusionary, playful and political.

Figure 2. Interacting sociocultural forces that shape older women's experience of water



### **Embodied affordances**

Across the studies, water's interaction with ageing bodies was central. Its buoyancy reduced pain, supported mobility and enabled physical activity that was otherwise not possible (Ábel et al., 2023; Evans and Sleep, 2012; Lenneis et al., 2022a; Wester and Eklund, 2011). Cold-water immersion was described as invigorating, mood enhancing, and fostering of resilience (Hackerott et al., 2024; Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Pound et al., 2024; Boocock, 2025; Drohomirecka and Wojcieszukiewicz, 2016). Water also afforded sensory pleasures in the form of immersion, rhythm and coolness, which sustained participation beyond utilitarian health gains (Watson, 2019; Bates and Moles 2023, 2024a, 2024b). These embodied affordances were not uniformly enabling; for some respondents, cold or polluted water posed risks (Burtscher and Britton, 2022), while for others, surveillance of ageing bodies curtailed participation (Field et al., 2019; Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b; Onken et al., 2024; Evans and Sleep, 2012).

### **Social infrastructures**

The organisation of aquatic practices shaped women's opportunities. Facilitating infrastructures included women-only swim hours, accessible facilities, peer mentors and supportive instructors (Toepell et al., 2004; Currie, 2022; Lenneis et al., 2022a; Field et al., 2019; Pound et al., 2024; Corry et al., 2024). Barriers, on the other hand, included high costs, rigid regulations, inadequate transportation, and exclusionary norms (Drohomirecka and Wojcieszukiewicz, 2016; Currie, 2022; Peters 2012, 2016; Berthiaume et al., 2025; Toepell et al., 2004; Pound et al., 2024; Hansson, 2024). Social infrastructures thus mediated the extent to which embodied affordances could be realised; that is, the same body in water might thrive or struggle depending on surrounding supports.

### **Place-making**

Finally, older women's engagements with water were profoundly shaped by processes of place-making. Beaches, ponds, rivers and pools were not neutral backdrops, but rather were sites of memory, attachment and spirituality (Corry et al., 2024; Testa, 2024; Barry et al., 2024; Watson, 2019). Collective rituals, seasonal plunges and shared narratives transformed water sites into civic commons that were imbued with personal and communal meaning (Watson, 2019; Peters 2012, 2016). Place-making also intersected with politics; an examination of debates over burkinis, land access, or water quality revealed how aquatic spaces are contested, and how these contestations shape who does and does not feel they belong (Burtscher and Britton, 2022; Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b; Onken et al., 2024; Watson, 2019; Hansson, 2024; Evans and Sleep, 2012).

### **Intersection of vectors**

Crucially, these three vectors did not operate in isolation; the same cold wave, swimming pool or shoreline could be enabling or excluding depending on how it interacted with ageing bodies, social arrangements and place-based attachments. When embodied affordances, supportive infrastructures and meaningful places aligned, older women described water as joyful, sustaining and transformative (Corry et al., 2024; Bates and Moles 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Pound et al., 2024; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019; Boocock, 2025; Testa, 2024). When one or more elements were absent, water became a site of alienation or exclusion, for example when infrastructures were excluded, when bodies were surveilled, or when places were unsafe (Lenneis et al., 2022a, 2022b; Onken et al., 2024; Evans and Sleep, 2012; Peters 2012, 2016; Watson, 2019).

### **A hydrological turn in gerontology**

Older women's practices on, in, around, and with water offer a critical site for rethinking not only ageing and leisure, but also human-environment relations.

Thinking 'with' water unsettles conventional approaches to ageing and leisure. It requires frameworks that recognise water not only as backdrop or instrument, but also as agentic, affective and political. Water enables belonging, self-making and resilience, even as it carries risks, exclusions and conflicts. Engaging seriously with these complexities requires analytic frameworks that move beyond health promotion logics to encompass feminist, materialist, political-ecological and critical gerontological perspectives.

We suggest there is a need for a hydrological turn (Chen et al., 2013) in gerontology, and we propose that hydrofeminism offers a generative framework from which to move forward. Pioneered by Astrida Neimanis (2012, 2017), hydrofeminism is a feminist perspective that explores the interconnectedness of bodies, water and the environment. In insisting on the entanglement of bodies and waters, hydrofeminist approaches unsettle the Cartesian ideal of discrete self-sufficient individuals and draw attention instead to fluid interdependencies. From this perspective, older women's leisure is reframed as relational practices rather than individual behaviours. Older women's watery practices are not merely leisure or therapy, but are relational acts that stitch together bodies, environments and communities. A hydrological turn in gerontology thus has the potential to foreground water's agentic role in shaping experiences of ageing, belonging and care, while situating older women's engagements within wider struggles over ecology, equity and sustainability. Taking up this approach opens up new methodological and conceptual possibilities; it encourages attending to the multisensory, affective and material dimensions of water practices that often elude conventional measures and methods in research and policy. It also invites more situated, relational and politically attuned accounts of ageing, illuminating how older women's engagements with water both reflect and reshape broader socio-environmental conditions.

## CONCLUSION

This scoping review of 36 articles demonstrates that water occupies a central but underexamined place in the lives of older women. Across diverse studies, four clusters of water's affordances emerged: water as a source of physical and mental well-being; water as a medium for identity and agency; water as a site of belonging, memory and spirituality; and water as a context for social connection. Water is a material force that shapes, and is shaped by, embodiment, by a social infrastructure that structures inclusion and exclusion, and is also a place imbued with memory and meaning. Water is variously framed as resource, risk and agent, and these framings actively contour the lives of older women. The frictions between safety and autonomy, inclusion and exclusion, and utility and joy expose aquatic practices as contested aquatic terrains where bodies, environments and politics meet. In this light, water is not simply something to be managed or consumed; rather, it is a lively medium through which identities, attachments and values are negotiated. In moving this field forward, scholarship and practice must embrace this layered multiplicity where health, joy, risk and belonging are understood as coexisting in older women's watery worlds.

This review also reveals a significant theoretical gap. Most studies are anchored in biomedical or health promotion frameworks that, while valuable, reproduce a homogenising approach to understandings of age, gender, nature, water and place. We argue that gerontology would benefit from what scholars have called a "hydrological turn" (Chen et al., 2013), that is, a shift towards understanding water not only as a resource or health medium but also as a cultural, affective and political force that is co-constitutive of human life. This review offers the first evidence base for such a turn within gerontological scholarship. Bringing hydrofeminism into conversation with gerontology opens space to reconceptualise ageing itself, not as individual decline to be managed through health interventions, but rather as a deeply relational and elemental process in which bodies, waters, places and histories are entangled. In moving this field forward, scholarship and practice must embrace a layered multiplicity where health, joy, risk and belonging coexist in older women's watery worlds. It must honour not only what water does *for* older women, but also what older women and water *do together*.

Older women's engagements with water are marked by joy and constraint, freedom and inequity, individual resilience and collective belonging. Recognising this complexity requires moving beyond narrow frames of health promotion to appreciate leisure, identity and politics as integral dimensions of aquatic life. This review underscores the importance of bringing a lens of leisure to future age-based watery studies. Through a leisure lens, water emerges as a source of joy, play, creativity and transformation. Women described exhilaration, laughter and sensory pleasure, alongside practices of ritual, identity-making and collective belonging. These experiences illuminate water not only as a health intervention but as a vital site of leisure that supports meaning making, well-being, identity and belonging across later life. Recognising this complexity opens new possibilities for designing inclusive, culturally safe and joyful aquatic spaces that support well-being across the life course, including into later life.

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