

Research into women and swimming, 2005-2006

1.0 Introduction

To gain a deeper understanding of the many issues surrounding women's participation in swimming, WSF and the Amateur Swimming Association commissioned HNI International to conduct research into women's attitudes to swimming and the barriers that they face. The key questions addressed were: why some women swim, why other women do not swim and what interventionist ideas might make them swim. The research, focused on women between the ages of 25 and 34 years. Swimming has a particular reference to this age group as women's involvement with the activity can take the form of either swimming for their own volition or as a mother with young children. The opinions expressed in focus groups around the country were comprised of a mix of women who both do and do not swim.

2.0 Methodology

The research had both quantitative and qualitative elements to it. Data from the General Household Survey (GHS) were analysed to build up a picture of women's swimming and changes over time and to provide context to the study. Also the results from two surveys in 2002 and 2004 carried out at 99 different swimming pools across the UK were analysed.¹

The qualitative approach composed of nine focus groups which were conducted in the following areas: Lewisham (Women friendly facilities), Bradford (ethnic minority), Wear Valley (Sure Start), Oxford Women's Swimming & Aqua Group (Regular swimmers), Kenilworth Health Club (Health club users), University of Hertfordshire (University staff), Derby City Council (Council employees, mothers group), Littletown Health Club (health club users) and Clarks Shoes (employees).

¹ In total 3,435 people were surveyed in 2004 (2128 women). Of women aged 25-34, a total of 351 women responded.

An average of seven women attended each group. The participants were pre-screened so as to ensure that at least two group members took part in exercise but did not swim, with the balance being comprised of participants who did not swim and did not take part in regular exercise. There was also a control group of women who swim regularly, i.e. at least once a week. Four of the groups were held in an urban area, two in a rural area and three in a suburban environment. Every effort was made to make the groups as diverse and socio-economically representative as possible with young mothers as well as single and married women being equally represented.

3.0 Quantitative results

3.1 The General Household Survey

The 2002 GHS showed that swimming² was the second most popular participatory physical activity after walking – 13.8 per cent of all people went swimming in the four weeks before interview, compared with 34.9 per cent who went walking for 2 miles or more.

Table 1: Participation rates by age and sex in the four weeks before interview (%)

	Any swimming	Swimming-men	Swimming-women
16-19 years	19	17	21
20-24 years	17	15	19
25-29 years	17	14	20
30-44years	20	18	22
45-59 years	13	11	14
60-69 years	7	6	9
70+	3	3	3
Total	14	12	15

Source: General Household Survey, 2002, National Statistics

Table 1 shows the levels of participation in swimming by sex in 2002. It is evident that across the different age ranges, levels of participation are higher for women than men.

However, it women's participation is declining over time. Between 1996 and 2002 there was a decline across all age groups except 45 to 59-year-olds. The greatest decline was

² Includes indoor and outdoor swimming

among the 25 to 29 age group, which showed a 4.3 percentage point decline from 24.2 per cent to 19.9 per cent between 1996 and 2002.

The GHS also reveals interesting statistics regarding participation in swimming of White women compared to their Black Minority Ethnic (BME) counter-parts. Four weeks prior to interview, 15.5 per cent of White women participated in swimming, compared with 9.3% of BME women.

3.2 Survey of pool users 2004 – Weekly behavioural pattern of female swimming

Around 71 per cent of women of all ages who went swimming thought of themselves as leisure swimmers, 19 per cent considered themselves as learners, 8 per cent thought of themselves as competitors or masters and 4 per cent being spectators. For women aged 25-34 the proportions was slightly different, with 59 per cent seeing themselves as leisure swimmers, 27 per cent as learners and 7 per cent as spectators – a much larger proportion than the average.

Over half of (55 per cent) women aged 25-34 went swimming once a week in 2004. The majority of women swam for between 30 minutes and one hour (66 per cent of all women; 69 per cent of women aged 25-34). Less than 20 per cent of women aged 25-34 attended a pool on their own (compared with 24 per cent of all women) with the largest proportion (28%) attending with five or more people.

When asked about their main reason for attending on the day of survey, 35 per cent said to keep fit but 23 per cent (almost one in four) were there not to swim but to watch a child swim. For women aged 25-34, the figure dropped to 28 per cent for fitness but increased to 29 per cent to watch a child swim. Just 20 per cent of all women and 14 per cent of women age 25-34 went for fun.

In another question asked about visiting the pool and not swimming, over 36 per cent of women aged 25-34 said that they visited a pool once a week to watch a child, but not to swim.

Around 40 per cent of women chose to attend swimming pools in the evenings between 4pm and 10pm. For women aged between 25-34 years this increases to over 53 per cent. When asked about the important facilities at a swimming pool, women of this age group highlighted importance of clean toilets (9 per cent), well-lit car parks (8 per cent), and general good maintenance (9 per cent).

4.0 The attitude of women aged 25-35 towards swimming in general

Swimming is an activity that is open to all and is, in theory, accessible to the majority of women but, when it comes to taking part in the activity, the focus groups demonstrated that attitudes are fairly entrenched. The women who swim regularly tended to be committed to regular participation and saw it as:

- Healthy
- Social, if you wanted to be sociable
- Good for combating stress
- Good non-weight bearing exercise
- Something that everyone can take part in
- An activity which you can 'just get on with' (professional woman, Leamington)

But, given that most of the women who took part in the focus groups did not swim either occasionally or at all, there were alternative, very fixed views which saw swimming in a completely different light. These women saw swimming as:

- A time consuming activity
- A 'lot of hassle'(administrative worker, Derby)
- Not enjoyable and rather unpleasant
- A poor alternative given a choice
- Not "a cool thing to do"
- Unglamorous
- Not aspirational
- Not salient to their lives

There are, therefore, problems even in getting women to try swimming in the first place and, seemingly, the longer without swimming, the less likely women are to return to it.

The exceptions to this are women with young children, who return to the swimming pool to ensure their children swim but do not swim themselves. Without exception, whether they had children or not, all the women surveyed stated that they would want their children to swim.

4.1 How these attitudes have been shaped

Asked as to why they had formed these opinions, the women who chose not to swim stated that these views had been shaped by their early experiences when first learning. Comments often made separately from the focus group sessions, included:

- “The pool was always crowded”.
- “Too many people trying to learn at the same time”.
- ‘I was pushed in’. This comment may be an interpretation of the stressful experience of learning in that any physical impact by a second party is interpreted as ‘pushing in’ (swimming is one of the few sports in which learning can be life threatening)(junior manager, Hatfield).
- ‘There was too much splashing’(administrative employee, Lewisham).
- ‘It was so noisy’(homemaker, Bournemouth).

5.0 The attitude of women towards swimming pools

Respondent views with regard to swimming pools were at one, whether the participants were regular swimmers or infrequent swimmers.

5.1 What women like to experience in a pool

Most of the focus group participants were like-minded in stating that swimming should be a special experience. They expected to experience post-modernistic, almost hedonistic outcomes. Swimming without barriers was an important notion for this group of women. Many of the women stated that they would prefer to swim in heated water outdoors. These wants should be considered in two ways- those that are external and connected with the facility offered and those are internalised and have to do with aspirations. The external factors were:

- Plenty of ‘personal’ space in a pool – HNI Consultants interpreted this as both sessions that weren’t too crowded and pools that were sensitively programmed to meet their needs.

- Few young children swimming at the same time- in particular, those respondents who were not mothers prefer to avoid children in pools. These two customer groups could almost be considered to be mutually exclusive as often young people taking part in unstructured swimming sessions prefer to do so without young women being present.
- A considerable amount of ambient light.
- Cleanliness in changing rooms, toilets and all areas.
- Generic fitness programmes offered at the pool to swimmers.
- Minority groups want swimming sessions and lessons without men being present.

The internal factors were:

- The capacity to dive in, glide through the water and swim effortlessly – seen as being hard to attain.
- Swimming sessions for people who hold similar values and attitudes.
- Greater respect for their individuality.

5.2 The comparison of swimming on holiday

Women's attitudes to swimming when on holiday were very different. Swimming was not seen as a chore but as a treat. Much more time was given to selecting a costume and equipment for the holiday. In short, it was seen as 'an occasion' to look forward to.

Respondents stressed that swimming was:

- Part of chilling out.
- Complemented the important past-time of sunbathing.
- Seen as a contributing factor to re-energizing the body and looking good on returning home.
- The smells of the sea were seen as being much healthier than that of swimming in a pool. The smell of salt and sand contributed to the feeling of health.

5.3 Chlorine

The smell of a pool was a concern and was a major contributory reason to how women who do not swim felt about the cleanliness of pools. Instead of the smell of chlorine suggesting cleanliness, it had the reverse effect. Instead of heightening feelings of security with regard to health, it increased anxieties. Chlorine is seen to impact on body

odours after the swim, changing a person's appearance, which contributes to swimming being seen as 'uncool', being bad for the skin and hair and making a swimming occasion longer than it needs to be because of attempting to rid the body of the smell.

Typical comments were as follows:

- 'Chlorine, really concentrated chlorine goes up your nose and effects your head' (skilled, manual employee, Bournemouth).
- 'Apparently you get chlorine dandruff in your hair and it does take a while to wash out. My hairdresser told me' (administrative employee, Bournemouth).
- 'A swimming bath just smells of chlorine doesn't it? That's what it smells of.' (mother and home maker, Bishop Auckland).

5.4 General hygiene

Women also had very definite views about hygiene in swimming pools. The standards in swimming pools did not meet their expectations and managing these expectations remains an issue for pool operators. Part of the problem appears to be that of making pool users understand that they are part of the process in maintaining standards in pools. Respondents stated:

- There was a general feeling that changing rooms are neglected and "put you off".
- Other people's (but not one's own) personal hygiene can be a problem – e.g. 'I've been there when there have been shavings where someone has been shaving their legs'.

6.0 Why some women do not swim

The explanations can be considered in three main categories- internalised, those based on personal experience and external factors (other than personal experience). First, external:

- The inconvenience of pool and gym on different sites – one or the other. Swimming and the gym were often seen as a package of linked activity.
- Lack of flexibility in pool timetables was cited – particularly for young mothers and working women.
- Lack of single sex swimming classes – this can affect "hard to get to" minority groups
- Cost and transport are also issues in some places, especially among those with less disposable income.

Secondly, those based on experience:

- The local pool is too cold – only one person mentioned that a pool was too hot or that the water temperature was adequate.
- The unpleasantness of getting in.
- The barriers too great in the first place – e.g. Asian girls are often not encouraged to go during the onset of puberty.
- Mothers found there was less time to swim oneself because of taking young children
- Breathing difficulties under water was also cited.
- Hassle over kit – carrying wet kit bags, getting dry, too time consuming.
- Ruining one's hair.
- Not being welcomed or understood was a common complaint among those who do not swim regularly.
- Swimming is a "high maintenance" sport – the thought and cost of preparing one's body, shaving and waxing.

Thirdly, the internalised attitudes based on thoughts and beliefs:

- The thought of removing clothing and getting into a cold pool, particularly in winter.
- Lack of cleanliness of the pools.
- Swimming was seen as too individual – almost anodyne – 'you don't meet anyone at the pool' (administrative employee, Wells).
- Amongst the more active women, a belief that you can't sweat enough while swimming and that makes you feel that the exercise is less beneficial than dry land activity.
- Overcoming inertia- with customers who have not exercised for a long period, the thought of going through a pain threshold after such a long time without exercise was also a problem.
- Swimming pools are seen as being sterile.

7.0 Issues for minority groups

Minority group issues are often associated with religious and cultural considerations. These considerations can be varied. In the case of religious considerations, this often means that the greater the level of orthodoxy, the greater the considerations.

Typical issues are:

- Mixed bathing not being permitted within a religion or culture.
- The degree of female body exposure.
- Verbal contact with members of the opposite sex.
- Lack of a female lifeguard or a lifeguard of a similar religion or culture.
- Lack of a female swimming teacher or a teacher of a similar religion or culture.
- Pools that are not screened off.

The respondents from minority groups stated that if general swimming was provided in a sensitive way, i.e. by making all groups welcome and maximising accessibility, then swimming should be accessible to their groups.

8.0 Body image issues

Body image and levels of consciousness in swimming were among the most important issues. The pressure to look good was so strong that it influenced a decision whether to swim or not to swim. Respondent's views were as follows:

- Swimming is a sport where you usually reveal the greater part of your body. This presents difficulties for some women from ethnic minorities and for many other women.
- Anonymity is very important when it comes to body exposure. The fact that a woman might see someone she knew at the pool and who she didn't want to see in her costume was a barrier.
- Body image was less important when on holiday not only because respondents didn't know the other people and were never going to see them again but, in general, women take more trouble over holiday preparations and swimwear.
- In a gym, it was considered not so challenging because less of the body was exposed – "you feel more comfortable".
- Body exposure was definitely less of a concern where the woman was fitter and slimmer.
- Pregnant women were happy to swim either with older people or people who are also pregnant.

9.0 Recommendations

9.1 Interventions

Interventionist approaches need to be sought to engage non-pool users. When women stop swimming, it is hard to re-engage them. These approaches therefore need to both breakdown the barriers identified above and be linked to other incentives that are likely to engage young women.

- Without taster sessions, advertising directed towards those who do not take part and a 'seek out' approach, those women who do not take part are hardly ever likely to go to a pool. As the years go by, eventually the purchasing and cost of a costume of a size to fit a naturally changing body becomes a further barrier.
- Many, more socially disadvantaged women related that there was a lack of control over their own lives. Those with children felt they were already trying to do too much and that swimming would be just too difficult to fit in to a busy life.
- There should be a mix of bathing provision in all pools. Many women are happy to take part in mixed bathing sessions; others prefer to have single sex sessions. Membership of some cultural groups means that young women find it difficult to take part in swimming. Body exposure can become an issue from quite an early age. Women-only sessions should therefore be sensitively constructed with female lifeguards (and swimming teachers where needed) as well as being sited in areas where there are no immediate viewing areas.
- Personalisation of swimming is fundamental to future success. This refers to personal swimming programmes, teachers on hand to assist and offer tips, plenty of personal space and a well thought through and appropriate timetable.

9.2 Future challenges

Through the course of the research HNI has identified the following important challenges for swimming providers of all types. These challenges are hard to tackle and call for planning:

- Ways to make swimming easier for women need to be constantly sought. Providers need to start with the female swimming customer, see the process through their eyes and to then plan backwards.
- Swimming without boundaries was a key issue for women of this age.

- The smell of a pool is a third big issue. Lack of cost effective, appropriate disinfectants to chlorine is hampering progress.
- Swimming pools and swimming are seen as always being the same- somewhat monotonous and 'straight up and down'. For women who do not take part, ways need to be found to communicate that the swimming pool is a changing environment, 'that something new and different is going on here' and that the 'swimming pool has changed from how you remember it'.

9.3 Future policies

Swimming as an activity is likely to be more popular with this age group if it is not regarded as a sport but as either a leisure activity or a 'gateway' to other leisure pursuits.

- It is preferable to offer changing facilities for both sexes as well as young children. These facilities offer parents the option of a mother or father swimming whilst the spouse helps with changing the children and vice versa. This will help to provide some quality swimming time for mothers.
- Care and thought should be given to the wearing of lightweight tops such as t-shirts. These can lead to safety concerns as the swimmer can be dragged down by cumbersome materials and are of concern to some pool operators. This situation could be avoided by offering session times when it is possible to wear these garments. Clearly these need to be low usage times; restricted to safe parts of the pool but this type of flexibility will encourage some larger women to take part.
- Personalisation of swimming is key to future success. By this, HNI is referring to personal swimming programmes, teachers on hand to assist and offer tips, plenty of personal space and a well thought through and appropriate timetable.
- Opportunities to swim need to be maximised at a local level as women are unlikely to travel for more than 10 to 15 minutes. Pool closures and openings are important because facilities need to present appropriate opportunities at the right time of day. New pools are only of benefit if they offer women these opportunities.
- In areas with large minority groups, mixed changing facilities can be a problem and should be regarded as a barrier to be addressed.
- The main target area should be women who do not swim. Initially, they should be reached through just a few points of maximum influence. Friends, relatives and the like are unlikely to bring sufficient influence. Swimming has to be made salient to

their lives. At first, the best routes could be via groups such as Sure Start, local Imams and temples, weight watchers and the play school network.

- In general, pools should look to provide an accessible timetable of both programmed and unstructured swimming that embraces all social and cultural groups and gives everyone the opportunity to take part at an appropriate time of day given that many women in this age group will have family considerations. In short, the maxim should be, 'making it easy'.

10 Conclusion

The women interviewed all want to be able to swim so as to be safe and, without exception, whether a parent or not, wanted children to learn to swim. But many women do not want to go swimming regularly. In these cases, this thought process, which understands the vital role played by swimming for safety, does not extend to swimming for leisure or fitness. Women's attitudes towards swimming appeared to be shaped by early negative experiences. Among those women who do not swim, swimming for health and fitness was not sufficiently relevant. The notion of both keeping yourself fit and healthy and extending your life as a result of swimming was given little weight as people in this age group are more likely to enjoy good health than older age groups. Communicating a need to swim for these women is therefore a complex challenge. Intervention is an important approach. Without taster sessions, advertising directed towards those who do not take part and a 'seek out' approach, those women who do not take part are hardly ever likely to go to a pool. The longer they refrain from swimming, the less likely it is they will participate.

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