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ARTIGO ORIGINAL

# TECENDO MEMÓRIAS: UMA ANÁLISE DAS EXPERIÊNCIAS DE LAZER DE IDOSOS AO LONGO DA VIDA E SUA PARTICIPAÇÃO EM UM PROGRAMA UNIVERSITÁRIO TEMÁTICO

## *WEAVING MEMORIES: AN ANALYSIS OF ELDERLY LEISURE EXPERIENCES THROUGHOUT LIFE AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN A THEMATIC UNIVERSITY PROGRAM*

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## Resumo

Este artigo apresenta parte dos resultados de uma pesquisa de pós-doutorado. O objetivo principal foi analisar as experiências de lazer de um grupo de idosos desde a infância até a velhice. Os objetivos específicos foram identificar experiências de lazer significativas em cada fase da vida e suas características, a quantidade e variedade de experiências de lazer após os 60 anos e suas perspectivas sobre o envolvimento em um programa universitário. Para o desenvolvimento desta pesquisa qualitativa, foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com 15 indivíduos em Bauru, São Paulo, Brasil. Identificamos que as atividades de lazer preferidas passaram das fisicamente ativas na infância para as sociais, com amigos na adolescência e com a família nos estágios iniciais da vida adulta. À medida que os ciclos de vida progridem, as atividades de lazer mais significativas tendem a acontecer esporadicamente. As Atividades Organizadas de Lazer (Organized Leisure-Time Activities - OLTAs) só aparecem em suas preferências após os 60 anos, mas sua frequência e variedade são baixas. OLTAs culturais nem aparecem entre suas preferências. Apesar de participar de um programa universitário, eles o veem como um lazer experiencial funcional e não como um lazer experiencial valioso. Defendemos a importância de fortalecer as políticas públicas nessa área e priorizar a Educação para o Lazer para aumentar a relevância das experiências significativas ao longo da vida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Itinerários de Lazer; Lazer Experiencial Valioso; Envelhecimento Saudável; Educação para o Lazer.

## Abstract

This article presents results of a postdoctoral research. The objective was to analyse the leisure experiences of a group of seniors from childhood to old age. The specific goals were to identify meaningful leisure experiences in each life stage and their characteristics, amount and variety of leisure experiences after the age of 60, and their perspectives on engaging in a university program. For the development of this qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 individuals in Bauru, São Paulo, Brazil. We

identified that preferred leisure-time activities transitioned from physically active in childhood to social activities, with friends in adolescence and with family in the early stages of adulthood. As life cycles progress, the most significant leisure-time activities tend to unfold sporadically. Organized Leisure-Time Activities (OLTAs) only appear in their preferences after 60, but their frequency and variety are low. Cultural OLTAs do not even appear among their preferences. Despite participating in a university program, they view it as a functional rather than as a Valuable Experiential Leisure (VEL). We advocate for the significance of strengthening public policies in this area and prioritizing Leisure Education to enhance the relevance of these experiences throughout life.

KEYWORDS

Leisure Itineraries; Valuable Experiential Leisure; Healthy Aging; Leisure Education.

## 1 Introduction

The world is undergoing a rapid aging process, with the majority of individuals aged 60 and older residing in low- or middle-income countries (WHO, 2022). WHO and other international bodies ponder about "how to add life to these years" (WHO, 2019).

Leisure has become an important, if not central, aspect of life, experiencing a profound revaluation in contemporary societies (Lee et al., 2020; Monteagudo et al., 2012). Significant leisure experiences are predictors of Healthy Aging (Yoon et al., 2021), and are stated as highly beneficial for the elderly in preserving their cognitive, physical, and mental function (Sala et al., 2019; Joulain et al., 2019).

A vast body of literature explores the connection between engaging in OLTAs and well-being during the Old Age. “OLTAs are characterized by having a certain structure, schedule, tend to have clearly defined goals and rules and are focused on skill building” (Bohnert et al., 2010 apud Boelens et al., 2022). Zhao et al. (2023) found that Chinese seniors who engage in more leisure-time activities and do so frequently are more likely to experience Healthy Aging. In a study of French seniors, Joulain et al. (2019) identified that those who participate in more active leisure and social activities outside the home report higher life satisfaction, occupation of time, self-esteem, and fewer symptoms of depression.

Cuenca Cabeza (2014) states that Valuable Experiential Leisure (VEL) effectively contributes to personal well-being through overcoming barriers and enriching the participant's social world. VEL goes beyond the mere use of free time, or simple practices, referring to the experiential value it generates, impacting their quality of life. The benefits associated with VEL are the creation or expansion of the circle of friendships, the perception of social recognition, the feeling of competence that arises as a consequence of acquiring skills and abilities enabling progressive improvement in performance, and the sense of personal enrichment.

According to Cuenca Cabeza (2013; 2014; 2024), this type of leisure does not occur spontaneously but needs to be stimulated, and that can happen through education and training. Several researchers emphasize the importance of Leisure Education to promote relevant leisure experiences (Sivan et al., 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021; Carneiro et al., 2023, WLO, 2020). However, little attention has been given to that (Mobley, 1975; Sivan et al., 2011).

Hutchinson et al. (2023, p. 6) assert that "Leisure Education is one highly relevant and accessible psycho-educational modality that can effectively address [cognitive, motivational, and behavioral changes]".

It is about preparing individuals so that they do not settle for leisure directed at entertainment, fun, or filling the course of days with content, but instead, seek access to leisure experiences that immerse them in processes of improvement and growth (Cuenca Cabeza, 2014; our translation).

Currently, one of the main trends in Leisure Education revolves around "more system and social policy-oriented approaches" rather than the "person-centered perspective (where individuals are expected to take responsibility for their leisure)" (Hutchinson et al., 2020, p. 308). In other words, it is essential to move beyond the individual and focus on the system and policies where Leisure Education processes might reduce barriers, enhance access, increase Leisure Literacy, and/or improve their leisure experiences (Hutchinson et al., 2020).

This article presents results from a Postdoctoral Research undertaken in 2023. The research was prompted by a recognized necessity to address the leisure needs of Brazilian seniors. It aims to advocate for the formulation of public policies, including Leisure Education, inspired by successful initiatives in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Taiwan (Carneiro et al., 2023; Carneiro et al., 2024), such as Learn How to Take Care of Yourself, Too! developed by Charters (2006), Leisure Education and Awareness Program (LEAP) by McMahan (2007), Project BHEL: Be Healthy and Enjoy Leisure developed by Dattilo et al. (2021), N.A.T.U.R.E. Program by Curtis (2021), and others.

Qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research was conducted to analyse the leisure experiences of a group of seniors participating in a program at the Open University for the Old Age (UNATI).

In this study, memories are understood as autobiographical and narrative constructions, rather than as objective records of past events. Research in gerontology and life-course studies shows that autobiographical memories in later life are selectively reconstructed and imbued with meaning, contributing to identity continuity and to the interpretation of personal trajectories over time (Grilli et al., 2022; Fritsch et al., 2023). Accordingly, the leisure memories narrated by older adults are approached as meaningful reconstructions through which individuals interpret how leisure has been experienced, valued, constrained, or transformed across different stages of the life course.

The metaphor of weaving is used to conceptualize leisure itineraries as processual, cumulative, and non-linear trajectories. Contemporary leisure studies define leisure itineraries as dynamic paths shaped over time by individual choices, social roles, historical contexts, and structural opportunities or constraints, rather than as isolated practices (Monteagudo et al., 2012; Cuenca Amigo et al., 2014). From this perspective, leisure experiences function as threads that are interlaced throughout life, producing patterns of continuity, rupture, scarcity, or diversification. Thus, weaving memories captures how remembered leisure experiences contribute to the narrative construction of leisure itineraries, linking past experiences to present engagement and situating leisure in old age within a broader life-long process (Atchley, 1989; Janssen & Murre, 2008).

For clarity, the term leisure is used consistently throughout the manuscript. Capitalization is employed only when referring to Leisure as a specific theoretical construction, as defined in the literature; lowercase usage refers to the general meaning of the term.

## 2 Methodological paths

Leisure Education is, according to Mundy (1998, p. 5), "a total development process through which individuals gain an understanding of leisure, of themselves in relation to leisure, and of the relationship between leisure, their own lifestyle, and society." According to Kono et al. (2023), it is an approach to achieving well-being. Hutchinson et al. (2020, p. 314) state that Leisure Education Programs (LEP) are

important for individuals to "understand the role of leisure in their lives and access meaningful leisure experiences."

Brazilian researchers, like Fukushima et al. (2021, p. 113), state that “in general, Leisure Education Programs optimised individuals’ overall lives, evidencing the benefits of leisure engagement.”

The objective of this research was to analyse the leisure experiences of a group of seniors across the lifespan, identifying meaningful experiences at each life stage and their characteristics, the amount and diversity of leisure experiences after the age of 60, and the participants’ perceptions of their engagement in a university-based program.

The choice of seniors enrolled in a university program was intentional. University Programs for the Elderly have expanded significantly in different countries as a response to global demographic aging and are aligned with the principles of lifelong learning, active aging, and social inclusion promoted by the United Nations 2030 Agenda (Martínez Martínez & Caballer Miedes, 2019). These programs represent structured spaces where leisure, education, sociability, and personal development intersect, making them particularly relevant contexts for investigating leisure experiences in later life.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between September and December 2023 in Bauru, SP, Brazil, following approval from the institutional Ethics Committee and with formal authorization from the professor responsible for the University Program for the Elderly (UNATI). Participant recruitment was carried out in collaboration with the program coordinator, who assisted in scheduling the interviews. Inclusion criteria were: (1) being enrolled in UNATI; (2) being 60 years old or older; and (3) being in full possession of cognitive and mental faculties.

The data collection involved 15 individuals aged 60 or older who consented to participate in the research. All interviews were conducted in person, audio- and video-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word. The transcripts faithfully reproduced the participants' original speech, without textual editing, grammatical correction, or linguistic standardization.

The interview item list consisted of three sections. The first section contained sociodemographic, cultural, and gender-related questions; the second section focused on questions related to leisure experiences throughout life, and the third specifically addressed participation in UNATI as a leisure experience, based on Maciel et al. (2021) and Maciel et al. (2023). Categorization of age groups also followed the proposal of the authors which includes childhood (0 to 12 years old), adolescence (13 to 19 years old), early adulthood (20 to 39 years old), middle adulthood (40 to 59 years old), and old age (60 years old and beyond).

Following the thematic framework proposed by Cuenca Amigo et al. (2014), leisure experiences were initially categorized into seven Thematic Areas. However, to enhance conceptual precision and ensure greater fidelity to participants’ narratives, we expanded the category Hobby and Game to Hobby, Play, and Game.

This methodological decision does not represent a departure from the original framework, but rather an analytical refinement. Contemporary leisure studies literature recognizes play as a distinct mode of leisure engagement, characterized by spontaneity, intrinsic motivation, and symbolic or imaginative expression, which cannot always be fully captured by the concepts of hobby or game alone (Stebbins, 2015; Proyer, 2012). Empirical studies further demonstrate that playful engagement remains meaningful across the course of life, including adulthood and old age, contributing to well-being, coping, and social interaction (Yarnal & Qian, 2011; Clifford et al., 2022).

Therefore, the inclusion of play as an explicit analytical term strengthens the validity of the thematic categorization, aligns the framework with contemporary theoretical debates, and allows for a more nuanced interpretation of informal and playful leisure experiences reported by participants.

In addition to thematic qualitative analysis, descriptive quantification was employed by counting the frequency of leisure experiences reported within each Thematic Area and life stage. The use of numerical indicators did not aim at statistical inference or generalization, but rather at enhancing analytical rigor, transparency, and pattern recognition. Methodological literature supports the use of numbers in qualitative research as a means to identify tendencies, visualize distributions, and strengthen interpretive validity, particularly in comparative and longitudinal analyses (Sandelowski, 2001; Maxwell, 2010; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). By combining narrative depth with systematic organization of empirical evidence, this approach contributes to a more nuanced and credible interpretation of leisure experiences across the lifespan.

## 3 Results

The results of this study are presented in three parts. The first part explores the leisure experiences considered by the elderly as their preferred in each phase of their lives, from childhood to old age, showing preferences and transformations throughout life.

We identified the preferences of the interviewees, delving into the activities that brought them enjoyment, their companions, and the barriers they faced in experiencing these activities. In the second part, we analyzed the quantity and diversity of all the leisure experiences they engage in Old Age. The last part indicates interviewees' perceptions on their involvement in a University Program, assessing whether they view it primary as a functional activity or as VEL.

The interviewees (I), ranging in age from 63 and 76, are predominantly female (80%). Among them, 09 are married, and 08 have completed or partially completed higher education. Eleven interviewees (73%) are retired and live with one or two people, while seven are responsible for the care of others. Their professions are diverse, including homemakers, professionals, public servants, among others. Just over half (60%) initiated their participation in UNATI a few months ago, while 40% have been part of the program for 6 years or more.

### 3.1 The most significant leisure experiences in each life stage and their main characteristics.

#### 3.1.1 Childhood (up to 12 years old)

Based on the interviewees' narratives, the analysis of preferred leisure experiences during childhood indicates a predominance of the Hobby, Play, and Game Thematic Area among participants who grew up in rural contexts in Brazil during the 1950s and 1960s. These experiences primarily involved informal and physically active play at home or in nearby areas, typically shared with family members and/or friends. Such activities were reported as frequent, with most interviewees indicating daily engagement. When barriers were mentioned, they were generally related to household or school responsibilities, as well as parental—particularly maternal—authority. Notably, nearly half of the participants stated that nothing prevented them from engaging in the leisure activities they most enjoyed during childhood.

"I had a very good childhood, really good, and I feel sorry for my grandchildren, my children, who didn't have any leisure like that." (I2, 76 years old).

#### 3.1.2 Adolescence (from 13 to 19 years old)

In the adolescence phase, we notice shifts from the Hobby, Play, and Game Thematic Area to Sociability in places slightly more distant from the domestic environment (club, church, others' homes). The companionships continue to be family and/or friends. Preferred leisure experiences transition from high frequency in childhood (every day) to mainly weekends during adolescence.

"It's because at that age, during that phase, we worked more. So leisure was more restricted. It was more like whenever there was time because there was schoolwork, duties, and my father was quite strict. You had to study and present good grades, or else he would get mad. But it was all like going to church because we would leave home." (I4, 63 years old).

"[...] at the family's house [where I worked], I would just work. And I had the weekends off, me and my sisters, they would release us on Sundays, and we would go home. Then, at home, we would spend the whole day out. We were stuck all week, and didn't go anywhere." (I5, 74 years old).

Some interviewees depict adolescence in Brazil during the 1960s as a period already fully focused on work. Some interviewees had the opportunity to balance work with studies, while others did not.

In general, the barriers to leisure during this period are mainly domestic obligations, financial resources, and paternal authority.

Despite gender not being the focus of this research, none of the male interviewees mentioned domestic obligations as a barrier to practicing their preferred leisure activity, highlighting gender differences regarding household tasks such as cleaning and caring for others. This fact is reflected in leisure patterns throughout life, where male interviewees, despite forming families at some point, never cited domestic duties as barriers to their leisure experiences in adulthood and/or old age, unlike female interviewees.

### 3.1.3 Early Adulthood (from 20 to 39 years old)

In the early adulthood phase, like adolescence, Sociability remains predominant, primarily with one's own family. The interviewees stated having too little time for leisure due to domestic and family obligations. Therefore, in this phase of life, it becomes a core task to reconcile personal interests with the schedules and spaces of others.

"I got married at 30. Then, at 34, I had my first child [...]. And the second was born in '96 [...], I was 36. Then, it was more about working and taking care of the children. I put them in daycare. I worked and balanced taking care of the house. [...] Little leisure time." (I4, 63 years old).

"So, during this phase, at 19 years old, I already started dating my current husband. So, I dated for six years, got married at 25, and soon after, I became pregnant. So, leisure, I did have, but not much. Because I worked at home, continued to sew, and the leisure we had was going to the company club where my husband worked. So, we used to go to his company's countryside club, so that was more of our leisure. Attending church, you know. That was more my leisure." (I7, 69 years old).

Among the interviewees, many underwent radical changes in their leisure preferences, including the Thematic Area. This is the case with I9, who, when asked about leisure-time activities from the age of 20 to 49 years old, she responded:

"Oh, I used to dance. But after I had my daughter, I focused more on her. I became a mother 24 hours a day. Because it wasn't fair, you know, to leave the child with my mother and go out dancing. So, I became that full-time mom, only going out where I could take [her]." (I9, 63 years old).

None of the interviewees mentioned OLTAs as preferred in this phase of life.

3.1.4 Midlife (from 40 to 59 years old)

In the midlife age phase, the Thematic Area of Tourism appeared in more interviews. Additionally, a new Thematic Area that had not been mentioned by anyone in previous phases (Volunteering) appeared in five interviews as a leisure experience, and three of them talked as a preferred leisure experience. This interviewee, for example, mention his volunteering job as gratifying:

"Look, I took a course, and I used to visit the hospital, with terminal patients, with HIV. So, this was a job I did almost every day. Visiting them was very gratifying." (I10, 71 years old).

One interviewee shows another side of volunteering, more as an obligation:

"Yeah, because, you know, we get into things and dive headfirst. There's no way out. [...] The commitments to the church, they weigh more and more. Over time, we become slower, more sluggish, with less desire." (I12, 69 years old).

While family and friends continue to be the predominant sources of companionship during this period, the mention of preferred activities becomes more sporadic. In this midlife phase, OLTAs do not emerge as significant leisure preferences among the interviewees.

3.1.5 Old Age (60 years or older)

In Old Age, OLTAs, such as the UNATI Program and others, appear in interviewed' responses.

When considering the leisure experiences mentioned preferred in Old Age, the Sport and Physical Activity Thematic Area stands out (5), followed by LM (2) and Tourism (3). Sociability (2), Volunteering (1), and Hobby, Play, and Game (1) follow. The Culture (0) Thematic Area does not even appear.

This suggests that, for a significant portion of the interviewees, leisure experiences related to the Sport and Physical Activity, besides being more present in their daily lives, are also the most meaningful. The Sociability Thematic Area, although very frequent, is the preferred experience for only one of the interviewees.

In Old Age, the main barriers to preferred leisure experiences are health-related, whether physical or mental. Domestic and work-related obligations are reported less frequently; however, caregiving responsibilities (spouses, children, and grandchildren) prevail, particularly in the accounts of female interviewees, once again highlighting a gender difference.

3.2 The quantity and diversity of leisure experiences in Old Age

When asked about all their leisure experiences after the age of 60, the interviewees mentioned between 1 and 7 activities, with a variability of Thematic Area between 1 and 4, with two Thematic Area being the most frequent response. The table below (Table 1) presents which leisure experiences were the most cited and in which Thematic Area they fall.

Table 1 - Leisure experiences and most cited Thematic Area in Old Age.

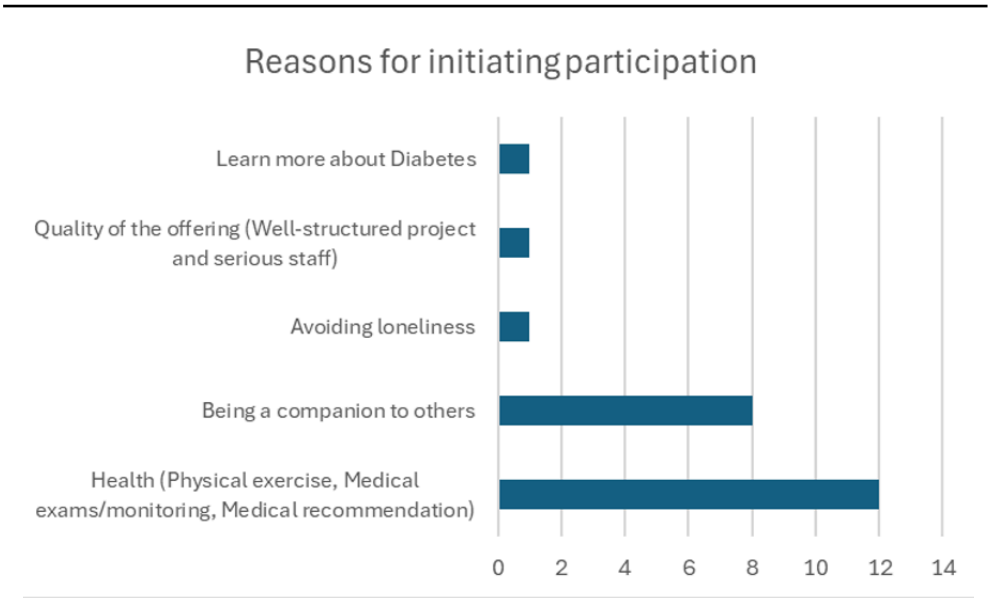
| Leisure Experiences | Thematic Area | Quantity |
|---|---|---|
| Engaging in exercise (walking, running, hiking, gym, UNATI) | Sport and Physical Activity | 13 |
| Gathering with family/friends | Sociability | 6 |
| Volunteer work | Volunteering | 5 |
| Crafts (crocheting, knitting, embroidery, sewing) | Hobby, Play, and Game | 5 |
| Leaving home (shopping, cinema, church, etc.) | Sociability | 5 |
| Watching TV | Media Leisure | 4 |
| Traveling | Tourism | 4 |
| Cooking | Hobby, Play, and Game | 1 |
| Using the cellphone | Media Leisure | 1 |
| Reading | Culture | 1 |
| Fishing | Hobby, Play, and Game | 1 |

Source: Own elaboration.

### 3.3 UNATI: Functional Leisure or VEL?

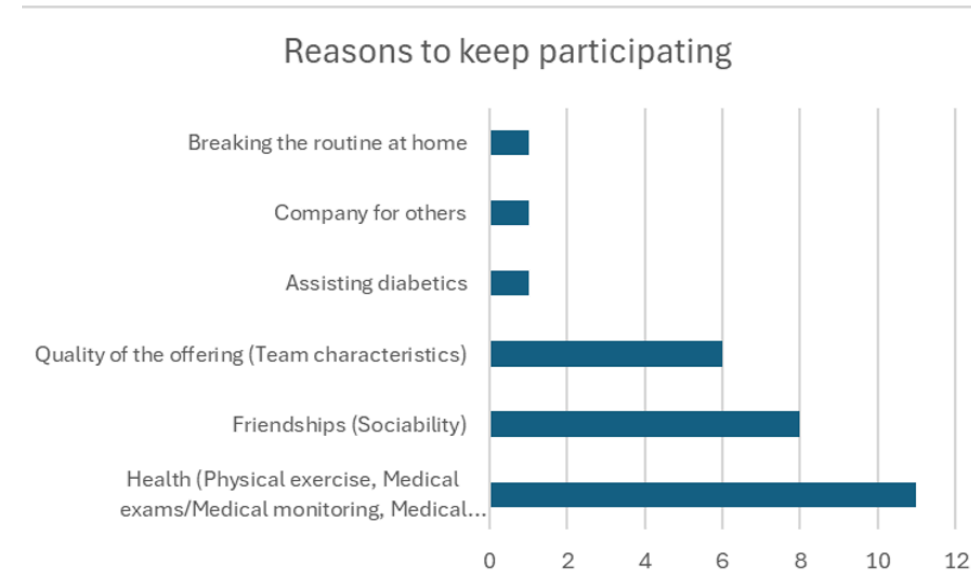
When asked about their perceptions of participation in the UNATI program, most interviewees (80%) described it as a leisure experience, while two considered it partially leisure-related and one perceived it mainly as an obligation. Although this result indicates that the program is broadly recognized as part of participants' leisure time, a closer examination of the motivations for participation reveals important nuances regarding the type of leisure experienced.

Graph 1 - Reasons for initiating participation




Source: Own elaboration.

Graph 2 - Reasons to keep participating




Source: Own elaboration.

As illustrated in Graph 1 and 2, the most frequently mentioned reasons for joining and continuing participation in UNATI were related to health (e.g., physical exercise, medical recommendation, prevention of illness) and sociability (e.g., avoiding loneliness, being in the company of others). These motivations suggest that, for most participants, engagement in the program is primarily associated with instrumental and functional outcomes, rather than with the pursuit of leisure experiences perceived as intrinsically meaningful or transformative.

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that only one interviewee explicitly attributed a vital and existential significance to participation in UNATI, describing it as indispensable to her life. When asked about potential barriers that could prevent her continued participation, she stated emphatically: “Only if I die, then I won’t come.” (I2, 74 years old). While this account illustrates the potential of university programs for older adults to foster VEL, it represents an exception rather than the dominant pattern observed among them.

Barriers to participate further support this interpretation. Health limitations were the most frequently cited obstacles, followed by caregiving responsibilities and travel. Notably, caregiving was mentioned exclusively by female interviewees, reflecting persistent gendered patterns of care that continue to shape leisure opportunities in later life.

Taken together, the quantitative indicators and qualitative narratives suggest that, although UNATI is widely perceived as a leisure experience, it is predominantly experienced as functional leisure, oriented toward health maintenance and social contact, rather than as VEL. These findings highlight both the relevance of such programs for promoting well-being in old age and the need for Leisure Education strategies that may enhance the experiential depth and subjective value of participation.

## 4 Discussion

The objective of the study was to analyse the leisure experiences of a group of elderly individuals, spanning from their childhood to old age. The specific objectives included identifying the most significant leisure experiences in each life stage along with their characteristics, assessing the quantity and diversity of leisure experiences after the age of 60, and understanding how they perceive their participation in a UNATI program in the present day.

The leisure experiences demonstrated by this cohort over their lifetimes appear to adhere to a pattern that has been previously investigated. The findings align with those identified by Maciel et al. (2023) concerned Spanish seniors, who recalled that their childhood were characterized by spontaneous and physically active leisure-time activities.

The leisure experiences of the Brazilian interviewees during adolescence also coincide with the data found by Maciel et al. (2023) in Spain, particularly regarding the decreased amount of available time for Leisure-time activities during this phase compared to childhood. This reduction is attributed to domestic, rural, and/or work-related obligations, shifting from daily engagements (in childhood) to only weekends (during adolescence). Therefore, in our study, we corroborate the findings suggested by Monteagudo et al. (2012) and Maciel et al. (2023) that, with age, there are variations in levels of participation in terms of frequency, even in activities considered sedentary.

In terms of the type of leisure experience, there are also changes, transitioning from unsystematic active play in childhood to an emphasis on sociability with sedentary behavior starting from adolescence. This pattern is also observed among Spanish authors (Maciel et al., 2023).

In the 21st century, the initial stage of adulthood is often defined by activities such as dating, spending time with friends, engaging in cinema, music, and television. In contrast, in earlier times when marriages took place at an earlier age, this phase was characterized by the establishment of families and children. Pylro et al. (2005) also investigate leisure experiences in adulthood. They analysed the leisure experiences of over 200 contemporary Brazilian adults. When comparing these results with the accounts of the interviewed seniors regarding their memories of leisure in early adulthood, some differences are noticed. Among the factors hindering the practice of recreational activities nowadays, according to Pylro et al. (2005), work, study, and fatigue stand out. This comes in contrast to the responses from the interviewees, which addresses as the main barriers domestic and family obligations.

There is no mention of OLTAs in the second phase of adulthood. This differs from the Spanish reality. In this country, family changes (older children) and improvements in employment conditions (financial stability), for instance, bring about changes in the leisure-time activities of the Spanish interviewees (Maciel et al., 2023). They begin to engage more in OLTAs, such as gym classes, dance, or swimming (either as a continuation of previous leisure experiences or experimenting with new ones).

In this regard, Maciel et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of a well-established leisure infrastructure in Spain, particularly through Sports Complexes, Libraries, Cultural Centers, Museums, Theaters, among others, offering leisure programs for all audiences. This reflects the impacts of a public policy committed to democratizing access to leisure experiences for everyone.

Furthermore, Maciel et al. (2023) identified that individuals who did not have systematic experiences in physical activities throughout their lives tend to maintain a sedentary profile and have less diversity in leisure experiences in old age. This result aligns with the findings of Yoesting et al. (1978), who state that leisure habits in adulthood reflect childhood practices. "If a person is highly active in outdoor recreation as a youth,

there is a good likelihood of active adult participation, but there is no guarantee that the same activities will be participated in at both times" (1978, p. 225). In our study, although participants did not report systematic physical activities as their preferred leisure experiences across the lifespan, most recalled highly active leisure experiences during childhood, even when these were spontaneous or unsystematic. Such early experiences may have contributed to this group's later predisposition to engage in active and systematic physical activities, including participation in the UNATI Program.

Leisure researchers state that the primary concern is not in the activity itself, but the meaning attributed to it, when leisure is not merely satisfying but acquires a vital and transcendental significance (Cuenca Cabeza, 2014; Cuenca Amigo et al., 2014; Cuenca Cabeza, 2024). In our study, only one of the interviewees indicated considering her participation in UNATI as VEL, attributing to it a vital sense. The majority perceive their participation in a functional manner, mainly related to health and sociability, and not as a VEL.

Barriers to participation in UNATI related to caregiving responsibilities are exclusively mentioned by female interviewees, which corroborates with the results found by Pylro et al. (2005) and Bonalume et al. (2018) in the Brazilian context. According to Bonalume et al. (2018, p. 5), "despite all the progress made in discussions related to women's entry into the workforce, the subsequent need for greater sharing of tasks in the home environment and childcare does not seem to be a reality."

When analyzing the amount of leisure experiences and the diversity of their Thematic Area in Old Age, we identified that Brazilian seniors reported fewer leisure experiences during their free time in Old Age compared to Spanish seniors (Cuenca Amigo et al., 2014), for example.

Regarding their preferences, given that all interviewees were enrolled in a Physical Education course within UNATI, Sport and Physical Activity would be expected to be the most frequently cited Thematic Area. Volunteering, although mentioned five times, was reported by only four interviewees. A preference among Brazilian older adults for physical activities is also documented by Ferreira (2017), who identified walking and water aerobics as the most frequently cited activities.

Culture is the least mentioned Thematic Area. Only one elderly woman mentioned reading as a leisure experience in Old Age. Like our study, in the research conducted in Brazil by Mayor et al. (2017), manual, intellectual, and artistic activities were less cited as leisure experiences that people would like to have in their free time. Dumazedier (1980) suggests that cultural interests in leisure are the most sensitive to socioeconomic factors. According to Mayor et al. (2017), this is due to the lack of access of Brazilians to cultural goods and education.

Our interviewees, unlike the Spanish elderly in the Basque Country (Cuenca Amigo et al., 2014), did not mention leisure experiences such as going to museums, exhibitions, or cultural performances, listening to music, dancing, singing, engaging in theatre, painting, participating in courses, among others. These leisure activities are expected to be part of free time during the Old Age, as seen in the Spanish case.

The amount and variety of leisure-time activities mentioned by the Brazilians interviewees, when compared to the Spain context and literature, is very low (Cuenca Amigo et al., 2014). That can be attributed to the lack of well-established leisure infrastructure and public policies in culture, sports, and leisure. The creation of these policies can contribute to an environment conducive to participation in a variety of cultural and leisure activities, providing broader and more diversified access to these experiences for the elderly population. In the Brazilian context, limitations in public policies may impact the availability and accessibility of diverse leisure activities for the elderly.

Caballo Villar et al. (2017) emphasizes that, despite the importance of all leisure experiences, the mentioned Thematic Area above are more complex and require Leisure Education, which is not always accessible to individuals living in less privileged socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Therefore, these

authors consider Leisure Education as an essential process that should accompany us throughout life, from childhood and youth, to ensure equality of opportunities and resources in accessing quality leisure. Moreover, it should not be limited to the development of individual capacities but rather to an action capable of changing collective habits. To achieve this, coordinated efforts are required from the public sector, the third sector, entrepreneurs, educational institutions, and media. Only in this way will it be possible to overcome barriers hindering access to leisure and make it an effective right for all individuals.

Leisure is a right of all Brazilians, guaranteed by Article 6 of the Federal Constitution. According to Dattilo (2017), having the right to leisure means having the right to leisure opportunities and Leisure Education. In Brazil, researchers like Bramante (1997) have corroborated this statement, advocating for Leisure Education as a right of the Brazilian people for over 20 years. However, Fukushima et al. (2021) and Carneiro et al. (2024) carried out systematic reviews about LEP applied around the world and did not identify the exploration of this theme by Brazilian researchers. It is worth noting, however, that LEP should be implemented in the country, both for the elderly and for other age groups. These programs could serve as a means for change; however, this is not yet a reality in Brazil.

Besides having leisure guaranteed in our Constitution, for over twenty years health professionals and researchers such like Bramante (1997) have advocated for Leisure Education as a right of the Brazilian people beyond the paper. According to Dattilo (2017), having the right to leisure means having opportunities as well as Leisure Education. Research on systematic reviews about LEP all over the world show a lack of this exploration by Brazilian researchers. Fukushima et al. (2021) and Carneiro et al. (2024) show the need of further research on that serving not just as a mean for individual wellbeing but also collective community change.

## 5 Final considerations

This study aimed to analyse the leisure experiences of a group of seniors. The specific objectives included identifying the characteristics of the most significant leisure experiences in each life stage. Additionally, the study aimed to assess the quantity and diversity of leisure experiences after the age of 60, as well as understanding how they perceive their participation in a UNATI Program in the present days.

In childhood, the interviewees' preferred activities were a daily occurrence. However, as life progressed through various cycles, the most gratifying leisure experiences became more sporadic, happening perhaps once a month, twice a year, or occasionally. While the most frequently mentioned places during childhood were one's own home or the street, in adolescence there is a shift with additional environments like church or club. Nevertheless, with family formation during the initial phase of adulthood in Brazil, the home regained prominence among the interviewees. During this stage, preferred leisure experiences predominantly occurred within the familial setting.

These results align with recent research conducted in Spain. We also corroborate with what has been identified by different previous studies, which indicate that with age, the content of leisure practices shifts towards lower-intensity activities with scarce physical activity. We conclude that throughout life, the preferences for leisure experiences among the interviewed seniors change, not only in the activities themselves but even in terms of Thematic Area. The indicated preferred leisure experiences are practices that do not characterize what Cuenca Cabeza (2013; 2014; 2024) conceptualizes as VEL.

However, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, at least for those seniors who participate in programs like UNATI, for example. In the interviewed sample, despite Sport and Physical Activity generally not being present in the second phase of their adult lives, they reappear in Old Age through participation in this

program. Therefore, in this phase, even those who had not engaged in systematic active activities as adults now do so through UNATI.

The results of this research indicate the importance of providing Brazilian seniors with leisure experiences related to all Thematic Area, especially Sport and Physical Activity, which generate a high level of satisfaction for them. Furthermore, research shows that it is fundamental to increase public policies related to cultural leisure, as these are the least mentioned, both in frequency and preference. Ultimately, if there are no opportunities to engage in a certain range of activities, it is impossible for them to consider them meaningful.

Regarding their participation in the UNATI Program nowadays, it is observed that most of them consider it a leisure experience but emphasize its functional nature, generally related to the improvement and/or maintenance of their physical and/or mental health. Sociability and the program's quality, along with health considerations, were the main reasons for them to continue participating. These results are in line with Ferreira (2017) who interviewed elderly and identified that their senses and meanings of leisure, are pretty much related to health.

Our results have significant implications in the field of public health by indicating that the absence, throughout the entire 20th century in Brazil, of serious and lasting public leisure policies, including Leisure Education, may reflect today in the limited quantity and diversity of leisure experiences that seniors have, as well as in how they perceive their participation in UNATI, not as VEL, but in a functional manner.

We conclude that it is necessary to intervene not only in old age but also in earlier phases. Considering that what limits a significant portion of leisure experiences in the first and/or second phase of adulthood in Brazil is family commitments, while what sustains them is a sense of friendship and connection, as well as health, we recommend expanding the leisure offerings across all Thematic Area but within the same physical space, encompassing activities for all age groups. This measure should be accompanied by the provision of LEP to "educate people so that they evolve in their leisure choices" (Silva et al., 2021).

The absence of LEP in the Brazilian context represents a significant gap, especially considering the importance attributed to more complex and culturally enriching activities.

The results underscore the lack of equal opportunities in accessing leisure, particularly for the elderly in less privileged socioeconomic contexts. The implementation of LEP should not be seen solely as an individual responsibility but as a collective action that requires collaboration between the public sector, third-sector organizations, entrepreneurs, educational institutions, and the media.

Therefore, it is imperative for Brazil to progress in creating and implementing public policies that promote Leisure Education throughout life. This will not only provide a wide range of enriching experiences for the elderly but also contribute to building a fairer and more equitable society in terms of access to leisure and culture.

Future research should investigate the implementation and outcomes of Leisure Education Programs with older adults from different regions of Brazil, considering the country's cultural, social, and socioeconomic diversity. Such studies may contribute to a broader understanding of how different contexts shape leisure experiences and the potential effects of Leisure Education on physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

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