

Urban outdoor walking behaviour and walk-friendly environments: older adults' experiences of daytime walking in a pilot case study

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Highlights

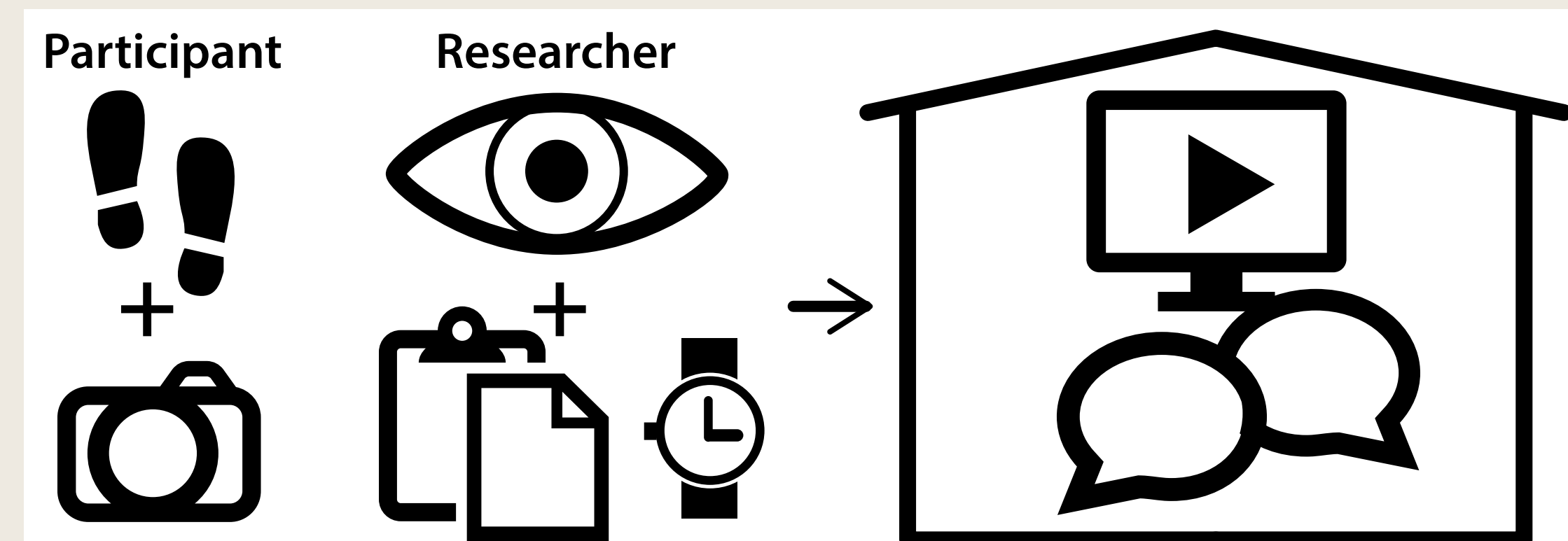
- Older adults' daytime urban walking involves experiential engagement with the environment beyond physical activity.
- Brief positive environmental encounters (urban outdoor glimmers) can elicit pleasure, memories, and improved mood.
- Experience-centred urban design may enrich older people's daytime walking, increase walkability and support well-being.

Background

- Previous research has identified many benefits of walking outdoors, e.g. improved health and pleasure.
- Little is known about older people's preferences, self-selected walks and the motivations behind their walking behaviours.
- As part of an ongoing pilot case study (Gerhardsson et al., 2026), we explore how older people experience their daytime outdoor walks.
- The results have implications for creating walk-friendly opportunities in urban environments.

Methods

- Sixteen volunteers aged 71–89 (mean 79) took a self-selected daytime outdoor walk, wearing a chest-mounted action camera to record the surroundings. (Fig 1, 2).
- The researchers observed participants' behaviour and environmental features while walking behind the participants. One researcher tracked the route and speed using a GPS smartwatch.
- During the subsequent interview, participants described their walk experience while watching the video on a tablet.
- Interviews were analysed thematically.



Results

The analysis resulted in three main themes reflecting participants' walking experiences:

- 1) Movement and stillness. While a few walked continuously, others appreciated walking and pausing, either for rest (catching one's breath or resting one's legs) or for pleasure (Fig 3).
- 2) Urban outdoor glimmers capture such pleasure, including positive moments (e.g. shimmering water, swans, waves) that elicit positive mood changes or evoke memories. (Fig 4).
- 3) Visual variation and diverse activities enriched the walk experience. (Fig 5).

Reference: Gerhardsson, K.M., Brogårdh, C., Tornberg, Å.B. et al. (2026). A municipality implemented behavioural intervention to improve quality of life among older adults: protocol for a mixed-methods pilot case study. *Pilot and Feasibility Studies*, 12(47), 1–13.

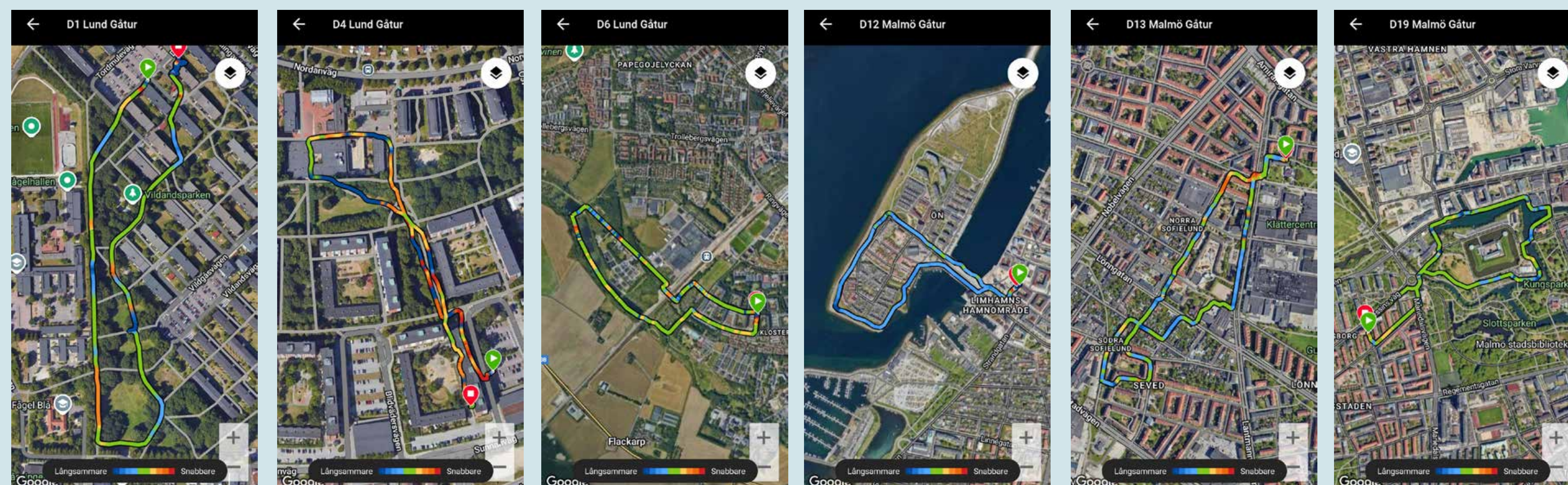


Figure 2. Screenshots from the mobile phone tracking app (paired with the researcher's GPS smartwatch) showing 6 out of 16 walks

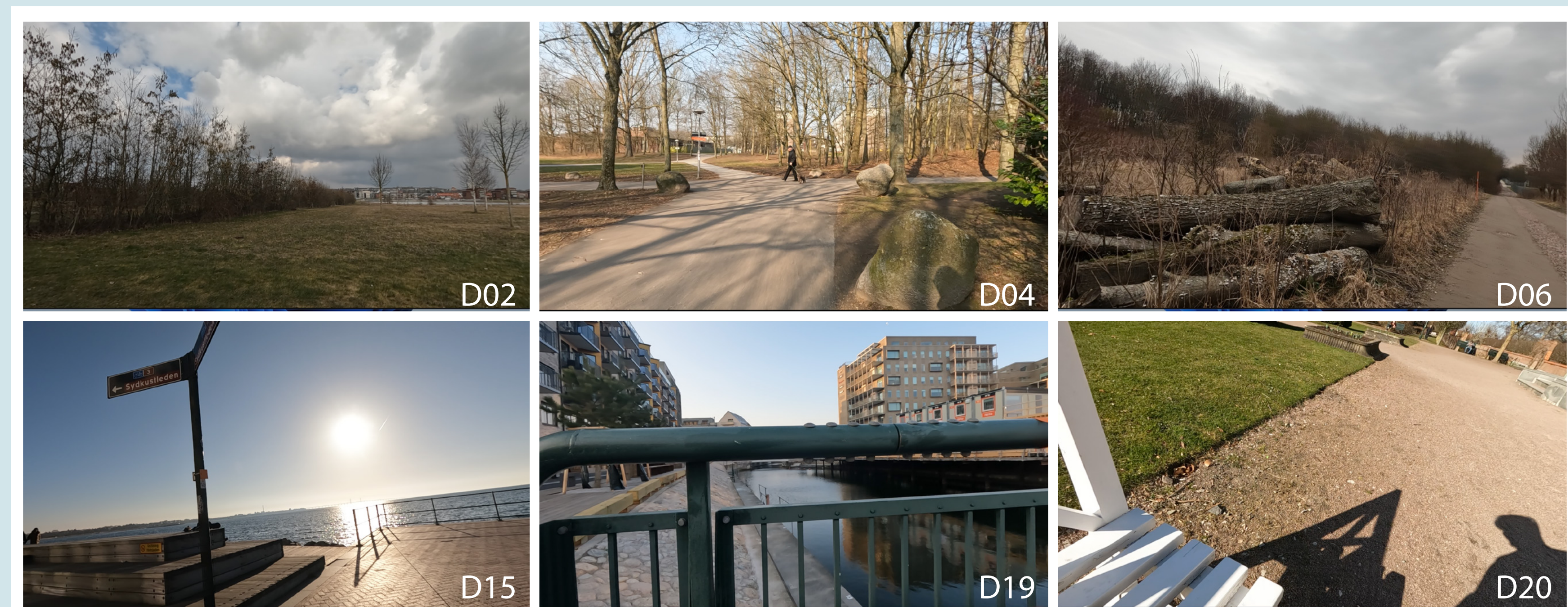


Figure 3. Movement and stillness. Examples of reasons for pausing drawn from participants accounts: to sit by the pond to watch birds (D02), sit on a boulders (D04), look at flowering catkin on a willow (D06), catch one's breath or rest one's legs (D07), enjoy the sun reflections in the water (D15), lean against a bridge railing to look at the water (D19), sit to rest one's back a little (D20).

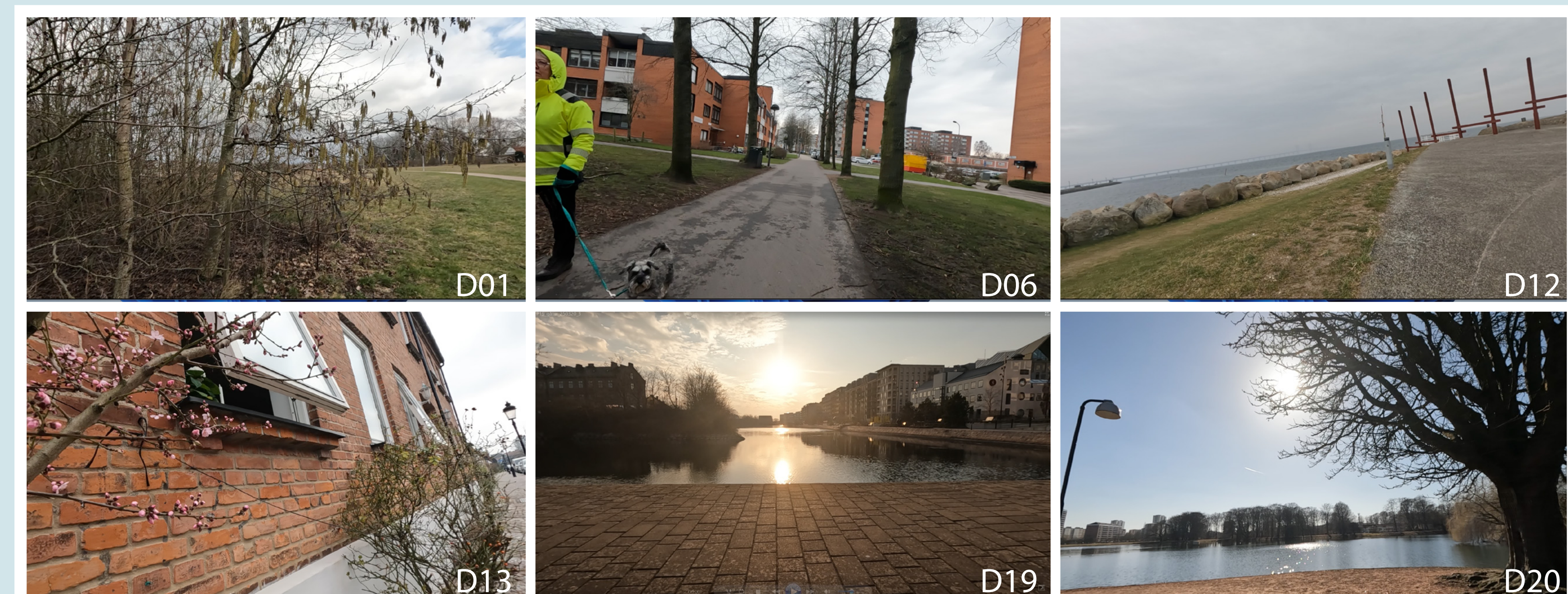


Figure 4. Urban outdoor glimmers. Examples from participants' accounts: XXXXXXXX



Figure 5. Theme 3: Visual variation and diverse activities. Examples from participants' accounts: XXXX

Figure 1 (below). Pre-testing the novel multi-method approach with a volunteer, who did not participate in the study

Note: While triggers are environmental stimuli causing stress reactions, glimmers are the opposite. Glimmers refer to small moments that activate the nervous system to feel safe and calm. Ref: Dana, D. (2018). *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy. Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation.* Norton Professional Books.

