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Roles of travel and leisure in quality of life during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, our indoor and outdoor leisure activities have profoundly changed. However, research on the way people negotiate leisure motivations with constraints and the relationship between leisure and quality of life during the COVID-19 pandemic is scant. On the basis of in-depth interviews with 32 residents in South Korea in 2020, this study reveals that they proactively overcome leisure constraints; their leisure activities are not reduced but slightly modified (e.g. watching baseball games online vs. at a ballpark) or even increased (e.g. camping). When people articulate quality of life during the pandemic, work, health, and family are more salient themes than leisure and travel. Such finding is incongruent with previous research emphasising the importance of leisure and vacations in the quality of life. This study extends the model of leisure constraints negotiation to the context of a pandemic and advances our understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of the quality of life.

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Introduction

Since its outbreak in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has rapidly spread across the globe. This disease was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). The cumulative confirmed cases worldwide have reached 184 million, and the number of COVID-19 attributable deaths is slightly less than four million as of 8 July 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). COVID-19 has profoundly changed the way we live. To adapt to the changes, corporate and educational institutions have widely utilised video conferencing and online learning. Restaurant patrons use drive-through meals and curbside take-outs more frequently than ever before.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also changed the way we spend our leisure time. Many countries strictly limit or prohibit the use of indoor recreation, sports, and leisure facilities (Gössling et al., 2020). Group gatherings over meals are frowned upon, whereas solo activities prevail (Davies et al., 2020). Converging evidence suggests that participating in leisure activities enhances quality of life (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011; Dahan-Oliel et al., 2012; Dolnicar et al., 2012; McCabe & Johnson, 2013). Thus, assuming that restrictions on leisure activities undermine quality of life is reasonable. In this regard, recent studies demonstrate the dampening effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on

stress and quality of life (Li et al., 2020; Satici et al., 2020; Zhang & Ma, 2020). Contrary to this stream of literature, the present study proposes that leisure may not be as important during the pandemic.

However, research that demonstrates the relative importance of various types of leisure constraints and the multi-faceted nature of quality of life amid the COVID-19 pandemic is scant. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill this important gap by achieving the following objectives: to discuss (1) the relative salience of three types of leisure constraints – intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints – during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) how much such constraints restrict or ironically boost motivations for maintaining leisure activities, and (3) how loosely or closely leisure is associated with quality of life. The study draws upon the model of leisure constraints negotiation (Jackson et al., 1993) as a theoretical backdrop. Although this model has been widely applied in prior research (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Juan et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2017), how the three types of leisure constraints emerge in the process of leisure constraints negotiation during the pandemic remains largely unclear.

The present study used an exploratory qualitative method and conducted in-depth interviews with 32 residents in South Korea. The transcribed interview data and field notes were analysed to identify major themes. The study's findings enrich our understanding of the multidimensional nature of quality of life. On the basis of these findings, tourism operators and destination marketing organisations may need to leverage the concept of micro-escapes in designing tourism services. During the pandemic, people hesitate to make long-haul trips and prefer short vacations such as weekend getaways with hotel stay packages or day trips for hiking/camping (Stodolska, 2020). With the salient leisure constraints identified in the present study, public policymakers can design interventions for people to pursue their leisure activities during the pandemic.

Literature review

COVID-19

COVID-19 was first discovered in Wuhan, China, and was reported to the WHO on 31 December 2019 (World Health Organization, 2020). Since then, the epidemic has spread rapidly across the world, and 184 million confirmed cases and slightly less than four million deaths were reported as of 8 July 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). Owing to the virus's high mortality rate, WHO declared it a global emergency. Since its emergence, COVID-19 has been regarded as one of the most infectious, albeit not the most fatal, diseases in the last 100 years; it causes fever, cough, shortness of breath, and severe pain (Nobel et al., 2020).

In an attempt to contain COVID-19, epidemiological experts and government officials have implemented social-distancing and self-quarantine measures (Harper et al., 2020; Mattioli et al., 2020). Together with hand washing/sanitising and wearing face masks, these measures are known to reduce the rate of infections. Many countries implemented temporary lockdowns to limit exposure (Harper et al., 2020). Consequently, COVID-19 resulted in lost jobs and closed businesses (Zhang et al., 2020). Particularly, low-income workers suffered from mental health issues and economic hardship (Yamin, 2020). Li et al. (2020) reveal that strict regulations in mainland China lowered life satisfaction ratings. Health scientists in Turkey reported that fear of COVID-19 engendered depression, anxiety, stress, and low life satisfaction (Satici et al., 2020). More evidence points to growing frustration among people who postponed or even cancelled weddings (Haines & Berney, 2020), graduations (Crawford et al., 2020), and cultural events (Gajjar & Parmar, 2020).

Model of leisure constraints negotiation: motivations and three types of leisure constraints

Motivations are desires that drive individuals to engage in leisure activities or make travel decisions. By contrast, constraints hinder such activities or even reduce satisfaction with leisure activities (Jackson et al., 1993). Leisure constraints are categorised into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Jackson et al., 1993). Intrapersonal constraints denote the psychographic characteristics of individuals. Specifically, Williams and Fidgeon (2000) reveal that negative emotions, such as fear, discomfort, and uneasiness, are related to intrapersonal constraints to skiing. In addition, stress, religiosity, and low levels of perceived skills are intrapersonal constraints (Crawford et al., 1991).

Interpersonal constraints can impede engagement in leisure activities when an individual finds no company for leisure activities. For instance, working out at a fitness centre may not need company, whereas one needs another person to play Chess or Go. Playing Chess or Go (vs. working out at the gym) thus involves interpersonal constraints. Interpersonal constraints are related to motivations, particularly when motivations involve socialisation. For example, when planning to play golf with friends, difficulty in synchronising time with friends can undermine one's motivation to play golf (Huang & Hsu, 2009). Practicing swings at the driving range, however, may not involve socialisation motivations; thus, interpersonal constraints are not as salient.

Lastly, structural constraints can be insufficient time, family life-cycle stage, climate, financial burden, lack of information, and inaccessibility of location. Previous research shows that monetary and time constraints are most frequently mentioned (Kay & Jackson, 1991). Other studies suggest a lack of annual leave days and difficulty in obtaining travel documents as structural constraints (Huang & Hsu, 2009). Some constraints are specific to tourism destinations, such as language barriers, unfamiliarity with culture, and a lack of security (Chen et al., 2013; Hsu & Lam, 2003; Huang & Hsu, 2009; Lai et al., 2013).

Recent studies have enriched our understanding of the importance of the three types of constraints. In the context of wine tourism, Bonn et al. (2016) find that structural constraints (e.g. lack of time, money, and accessibility) and intrapersonal constraints (e.g. lack of interest and knowledge) are major factors affecting revisit intention. Xie and Ritchie (2019) report that intrapersonal constraints are the most influential factor affecting travel intention, whereas interpersonal and structural constraints have no significant effect on travel behaviours.

However, the prominence of the three types of constraints may differ during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the social distancing measures and government-mandated orders restricting group leisure activities (Du et al., 2020) and the heightened fear of transmitting or catching the virus, many people chose not to participate in group sports (Choi & Bum, 2020). In South Korea, for example, more than 50 students participated in fitness dancing classes at 12 different sports facilities in the city of Cheonan tested positive for COVID-19 as early as February 2020 (Jang et al., 2020). As a result, strict regulations were imposed on indoor recreational and group leisure facilities, including ping-pong club, group exercise, Zumba, aerobics, Taebo, and spinning (Yonhap News Agency, 2020). Similar to many countries, South Korea now faces the prospect of a second wave of infections. Many cities have prohibited or strictly regulated indoor recreation and sports, or closed leisure facilities until further notice. Furthermore, most adults prefer to spend their leisure time participating in home-based physical activities during the pandemic (Kaushal et al., 2020). Therefore, interpersonal constraints are unlikely to play an important role during the pandemic. Meanwhile, structural constraints are evident. Monetary constraints are particularly relevant to those who have lost their jobs or those whose salaries are cut due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Inaccessibility of location due to lockdown and difficulty in obtaining travel documents are prominent structural constraints during the pandemic. Lastly, the pandemic may heighten intrapersonal constraints, such as fear and anxiety about contracting the virus.

Leisure constraints do not necessarily engender non-participation or reduction in leisure activities (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Jackson et al., 1993; Tan, 2017). Tan (2017) reveals that, if a destination is domestic, nearby, and popular, the relationship between travel constraints and revisit intention can be positive. The author also shows a positive relationship between travel constraints and destination image. The leisure constraints negotiation model, proposed by Jackson et al. (1993), posits that individuals may engage in negotiation processes between their motivations and constraints and, as a result, three different patterns arise: (1) non-participation in leisure activities, (2) modification of leisure activities, and (3) continuance in leisure activities. Modification of leisure activities may involve reducing frequency/duration, altering the venue, or changing companions. Jackson et al. (1993) stress that the relative strength of motivations versus constraints influences how negotiations are manifested. When motivations are greater than constraints, individuals exhibit continuance in leisure activities (proactive response). When perceived constraints are greater than motivations, people may discontinue leisure activities (reactive response). When motivations and perceived constraints are comparable, reduction/alteration in leisure activities likely arises (Jackson et al., 1993).

Studies propose a discrete model of the three types of constraints whereby three constraints independently influence leisure participation (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). However, this discrete model may overlook the interrelationships between the three types of constraints (Chen et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 1993). A sequential, hierarchical relationship between the three types of constraints is also proposed such that intrapersonal constraints arise first, followed by interpersonal and structural constraints (Jackson et al., 1993; Crawford et al., 1991). This sequence implies the relative importance of intrapersonal constraints (vs. interpersonal and structural constraints). Jackson et al. (1993) further this sequential relationship by adding feedback loops among the three constraints. The present study draws upon this line of work to propose that the three leisure constraints are interrelated amid COVID-19. However, a hierarchical, sequential relationship among the three constraints may need to be recast such that interpersonal constraints are less salient than intrapersonal and structural constraints during COVID-19.

Implications of leisure in quality of life during the pandemic

Quality of life is broadly defined as pursuit of a physically/mentally healthy lifestyle (Iwasaki, 2007). Specifically, quality of life is a multi-dimensional construct and can be assessed with objective and subjective instruments (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011; Diener & Lucas, 2000). Quality of life is objectively assessed by professionals in terms of physical and psychological health and subjectively assessed by a person's subjective rating of life satisfaction, well-being, and happiness (Stebbins, 2015). Converging evidence suggests that leisure exerts a prominent effect on quality of life (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011; Uysal et al., 2020). Brajša-Žganec et al. (2011) demonstrate that engaging in family leisure activities and attending cultural events can enhance a sense of well-being. Neal et al. (2007) contend that spending time on leisure can increase life satisfaction. Thus, restrictions in leisure activities owing to limited access to indoor fitness and entertainment facilities during COVID-19 may decrease the quality of life. Supporting this notion, Zhang et al. (2020) show that individuals who exercise daily exhibit high levels of distress and low levels of life satisfaction amid COVID-19.

Many people, regardless of age, gender, occupation or ethnicity encounter leisure constraints. Thus, high levels of anxiety and psychological distress may arise. Notably, leisure is simply one of the dimensions that comprise the quality of life (Dann, 2012; Iwasaki, 2007; Stebbins, 2016). The present study assumes that people may have various ways of staying optimistic even if one's favourite leisure activity is highly restricted during the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite the wide application of the leisure constraints model in previous research (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Jackson et al., 1993; Kay & Jackson, 1991; Crawford et al., 1991), the unprecedented effect of the

COVID-19 pandemic on people's leisure and quality of life is largely unknown. Thus, the present study aims to examine how individuals navigate leisure constraints and negotiate their leisure motivations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

An exploratory qualitative method is deemed appropriate when researchers aim to understand an unknown phenomenon with in-depth analysis (Filimonau & Mika, 2019; Silverman, 2000). Participants were recruited by using convenience sampling. The two authors recruited participants from their professional and personal contacts in South Korea from mid-May to late June 2020. The two authors considered diversity in terms of gender, age, and occupation in recruiting participants (see Table 1 for demographics of participants). As a result, our participants ($n = 32$) vary in terms of age (from 25 to 66), occupation (ranging from university professors, car dealers, flight attendants, entrepreneurs, students, architects, to office employees), and providence of residence. Thirty participants were local residents and two were foreigners. This sample size is deemed adequate with reference to similar exploratory qualitative studies (e.g. Filimonau & Mika, 2019). During this data collection period, the country re-imposed restrictions on the use of public facilities, such as museums, exhibition centres, and parks, immediately after the second wave of the spread of COVID-19.

Thus, the two authors conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews either face-to-face or online. Face-to-face interviews were held in coffee shops or public parks. Alternatively, participants were offered an option of video/phone interviews when they were reluctant to meet in person. In summary, the authors conducted four video interviews, two phone interviews, and 26 face-to-

Table 1. Profile of participants.

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Occupation | Residence |
|------------|--------|-----|-----------------------|-----------|
| Ji-hyun | Female | 35 | Airline crew | Seoul |
| Dorothy | Female | 26 | Office-worker | Seoul |
| Chang-soo | Male | 40 | Office-worker | Se-jong |
| Yu-na | Female | 38 | Self-employed | Seoul |
| Young-eun | Female | 38 | College-professor | Seoul |
| Sun-hee | Female | 38 | Office-worker | Seoul |
| Woo-jin | Male | 39 | College-professor | Dae-gu |
| Su-hyun | Female | 49 | Airport-employee | Seoul |
| Min-seo | Female | 43 | Office worker/student | Seoul |
| Chae-won | Female | 58 | Office-worker | Kyung-gi |
| Yae-rin | Female | 29 | Self-employed | Kyung-gi |
| Ha-rin | Female | 27 | Airline-crew | Seoul |
| Ji-Ahn | Female | 25 | Student | Seoul |
| Young-joon | Male | 57 | Self-employed/student | Seoul |
| So-yul | Female | 36 | Freelancer | Se-jong |
| Bo-ra | Female | 45 | Office-worker | Seoul |
| Won-gi | Male | 57 | Self-employed | Kyung-gi |
| Myung-su | Male | 65 | Office-worker | Dae-gu |
| Jae-chul | Male | 37 | Teacher | Dae-gu |
| Deniz | Female | 26 | Office-worker | Dae-gu |
| Si-Ah | Female | 31 | Freelancer | Dae-gu |
| Ju-eun | Female | 39 | College-professor | Dae-gu |
| Kyung-hee | Female | 50 | Self-employed | Dae-gu |
| Gun-woo | Male | 60 | Architect | Dae-gu |
| Tae-yun | Male | 33 | Unemployed | Dae-gu |
| Ha-jin | Male | 33 | Office-worker/student | Su-won |
| Hee-sun | Female | 40 | College-professor | Dae-gu |
| Min-jun | Male | 34 | Unemployed | Seoul |
| Jun-su | Male | 66 | College-professor | Kyung-ju |
| Hyo-jin | Female | 39 | Office-worker | Ah-san |
| Si-yun | Male | 34 | Self-employed | Seoul |
| Su-ho | Male | 38 | Office-worker | Se-jong |

face interviews. To ensure consistency in conducting interviews, the two authors met before conducting interviews and agreed upon the interview protocol. At the beginning of the interview, participants were told that the interview is about people's daily lives amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and that there is no right or wrong answer. The interview protocol is designed to capture participants' travel and leisure activities before and during the pandemic. Participants elaborated on their quality of life before and during the pandemic. At the end of the interview, each participant received a gift card (10 USD). Each interview ranged from 26 minutes to 47 minutes.

We used thematic analysis to identify semantic (vs. latent) themes in the interview transcripts and field notes. Latent themes reflect the ideologies and assumptions underlying the semantic content of the data. Thus, researchers often go beyond what is said by participants to infer such underlying assumptions. To infer the underlying ideologies and assumptions, constructive epistemology theorises the sociocultural contexts that enable participants' experiences. However, we do not intend to infer the underlying assumptions of participants' remarks. We explicitly focus on what is said by participants. This study does not intend to propose sociocultural contexts in South Korea in relation to our participants' leisure and life quality during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study rather focuses on participants' life and leisure experiences themselves.

We closely followed Braun and Clarke (2006) in conducting thematic analysis. First, interview transcripts and field notes were read a couple of times to gain familiarity with the data. During this stage, a summary of each interview was written. Second, initial codes were identified. Third, the codes were organised to identify themes by reading back and forth between interview transcripts. Fourth, themes were revisited and trimmed. For instance, the theme of attitudes towards the government and opinions about the government's policy were not compelling in terms of frequency and link with the other four themes (Figure 1). As such, that theme was dropped. Thus, the final four themes show homogeneity within each theme and heterogeneity between themes (e.g. Braun &

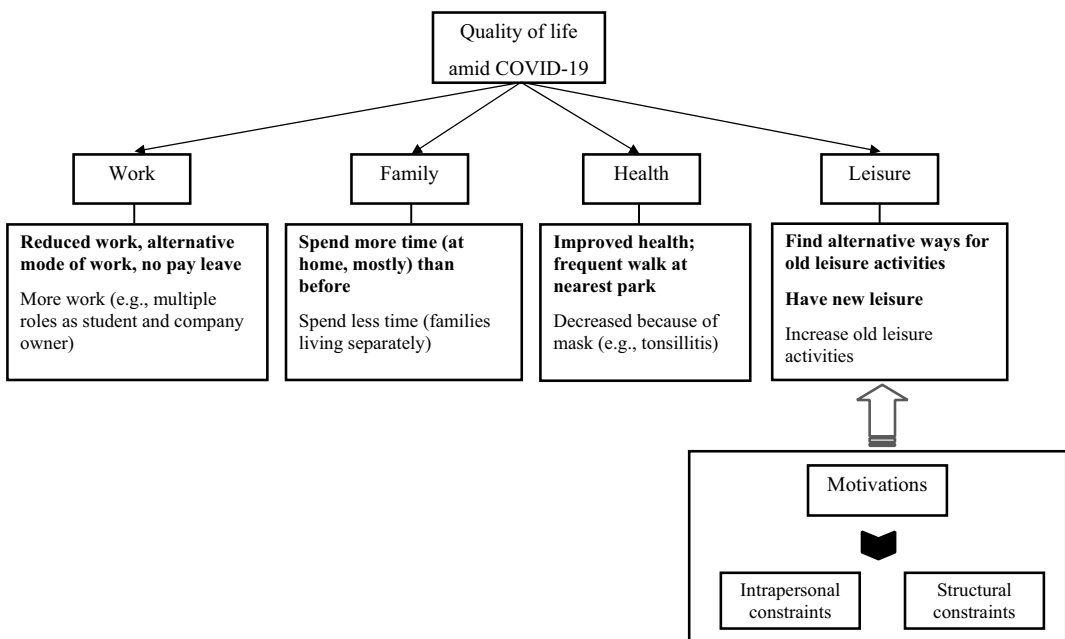


Figure 1. Four dimensions of quality of life during COVID-19. Note. Bold words indicate general tendencies and un-bold ones indicate anomalies. Note that the four dimensions are interrelated. The pointed arrow between leisure constraints and motivations indicates that motivations are stronger than intrapersonal and structural constraints. Interpersonal constraints are not included in the model, as it is not pertinent amid the pandemic.

Clarke, 2006). One of the authors analysed the entire data, and the other author was involved in discussions with him/her throughout the analysis. Upon agreement, the two authors developed the model (Figure 1) and wrote their findings.

Findings

COVID-19 and leisure and travel constraints

First, most participants did not decrease or stop their leisure activities. Specifically, three common behavioural patterns emerged from the interviews: during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants (a) increased their old leisure activities, (b) proactively found alternative ways of engaging in old leisure activities, and (c) found new leisure activities that replaced old leisure activities. Tae-yun used to work as a salesperson for a German automobile company. During the pandemic, he resigned as a salesperson and spent more time for his leisure and went camping. Given that camping usually takes place in secluded and non-crowded areas, it was relatively unaffected by COVID-19 restrictions. He loves being in nature and is passionate about camping:

I went camping once a week before [the COVID-19 pandemic]. Now, I go camping at least twice a week, even during weekdays. I purchased a four-wheeled vehicle just for camping. [With this new vehicle,] I can even go somewhere out of reach by a sedan. I went to Go-Chang this Saturday. People are extremely nice, and it's has an untouched environment. After only one swing of hoeing, I got so many shellfish in tideland. For 10 minutes [of hoeing], you can get a full bucket of shellfish. I made hand-pulled noodle soup with broth made out of those shellfish.

The second behavioural pattern is proactive responses to leisure constraints by finding alternative ways of doing old leisure activities. Our participants stated that perceptions of leisure constraints ironically enhanced their motivations for maintaining leisure activities. Young-eun, Ha-rin, and Hyo-jin used to exercise at a fitness centre. Given that COVID-19 resulted in temporary closures of indoor fitness and entertainment facilities, they exercised at home or parks near their residence. Su-hyun used to watch movies at cinemas and musicals at performance centres and go to museums and exhibitions. When all these facilities closed, she subscribed to IP TV to watch movies at home and purchased a nice set of speakers and headphones for live musical performances available online. Sun-hee stated that watching baseball games in ballparks was the joy of her life. When the government prohibited the audience from entering ballparks, she felt dismayed. Later, she used various devices to watch live games online at her office and her home.

I am so sad that I can't go to ballparks. It was a huge part of my leisure and now it's gone. (. . .) I am not very tech-savvy. But, when it comes to baseball, [I try to become tech-savvy]. I use the TV, cell phone, and desktop computer to watch live games. I watch the games everyday, except on Mondays. I have two monitors at work. After regular office hours, I use one monitor to watch games and the other to work [at the same time]. After the COVID-19 [outbreak], I have watched games at home as well while enjoying drinking beer alone.

Like Tae-yun whose passion is camping, Sun-hee loves watching baseball games. Owing to such passion, restrictions because of COVID-19 did not deter them from engaging in their favourite leisure activities. Although our participants were aware of constraints associated with locations of leisure activities (e.g. watch a baseball game at a ballpark and exercise at a fitness centre), their strong motivations for leisure led them to engage in proactive responses to such constraints.

In terms of the third behavioural pattern, the COVID-19 pandemic begets new leisure activities. Almost all participants stated that they stopped dining out and joining social gatherings outside. Instead, they cooked or ordered food for delivery more frequently than before. Woo-jin said that cooking became his new leisure activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. He brings the food he prepared to work during weekdays.

Cooking and preparing a lunchbox helps maintain my physical and mental health. [Before the COVID-19 outbreak] When doing grocery shopping, I used to pick food that is tasty yet unhealthy. Now, I eat more vegetables than before. I feel good because I have recently lost a bit of weight.

In a similar vein, Ha-rin, on unpaid leave, said that since the COVID-19 outbreak, she has started to cook more often. Whether they increased the frequency of old leisure activities, proactively pursued alternative ways of doing old leisure activities, or replaced old leisure activities with new ones, the vast majority of our participants exhibited persistent motivations for leisure.

In addition to leisure constraints, several participants expressed their concern about travelling overseas at the time of interview and stated that they do not intend to travel overseas for the rest of the year. They further stated that even if some foreign countries open their borders and lift self-quarantine orders, they would not travel overseas at all during the year of interview. However, the fact that they cannot travel overseas for a while does not seem to bother them very much, regardless of their frequency of travelling overseas in the past year. Some participants said that now might be a good time to discover less-known tourism destinations in South Korea and go on short trips. For instance, Dorothy, originally from Malaysia, works and lives in Seoul. Earlier this year, she initially planned to go to her home country for her friend's wedding and to visit Taiwan with her boyfriend for leisure. However, she cancelled such plans and, instead, enjoyed having a barbeque at an Airbnb in Seoul with her friends. Ji-hyun, who is on a 6-month unpaid leave from an airline company, did not often go on domestic travels before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, given that international travel is not possible at the moment, she would start looking for tourist attractions in South Korea. For some participants (Woo-jin and Deniz), however, overseas trips could not be replaced with domestic trips because their families live in another country.

The relationship between leisure/travel and quality of life

The relationship between leisure/travel and quality of life was not prominent and linear, but weak and complex. Our participants seemed to spend a substantial amount of time for work and/or their workload is taxing; thus, their leisure time was minimal. For instance, Hee-sun, a professor in college, took care of her two children by herself during weekdays as her husband lived in another city. At the same time, her tenure clock was ticking. Before COVID-19, she spent most of her time writing, teaching, commuting, and taking on other administrative roles in college. Now, she has extra time for walking and achieving work–life balance:

“Since the COVID-19 outbreak, my life has been better. Before the outbreak, I couldn't exercise at all. But, since three weeks ago, I have started walking around Sincheon. Yeah. walking . . . when it's dark outside. There are too many people walking there during the day. I go out for a walk around 11 pm. Then I enjoy my own company. I walk alone. Maybe it's too private [to say this], but I can't do more exercise than walking because I don't have enough time. I need to climb my career ladder.”

By contrast, participants whose quality of life has decreased since the COVID-19 outbreak mentioned problems that they encountered at work, rather than constraints in leisure activities. Problems associated with work/career were financial constraints due to reduced or no pay. Gun-woo, an architectural designer, found himself extremely stressed when his contracts were revoked. He said that the COVID-19 outbreak worsened the economy. Consequently, their clients, who once verbally agreed to sign a contract, called him to reverse their decision:

“We [he and his team] design school buildings, university campuses, research laboratories, and commercial and residential buildings. However, they all said ‘stop’ in the middle because the economy is bad. It is problematic that we didn't even conclude any contract during this period of time. But, what's more problematic is that we have started, but they stopped us in the middle. It's okay for them to stop. But it's not okay for us. That was the problem. That made me very stressed.”

Albeit unrelated to financial constraints, Deniz said that she has become more stressed at work since the COVID-19 outbreak. Her company had several branches in other countries, but employees in those branches stopped working amid the pandemic. The South Korean branch was in a better situation; thus, she and her colleagues became busier. Young-joon, who owned a company and studied at a graduate school at the same time, found himself even busier after COVID-19. His company could not afford to pay full-time employees, so he worked full-time. Consequently, he ended up spending much less time on his thesis. He was frustrated that the initial timeline for his thesis might not be realised.

In conclusion, work and career (vs. leisure) exert a more profound influence on people's quality of life. Across participants, work and leisure are separate activities. However, in some cases, work and leisure overlap. Si-yun, self-employed in e-commerce, expresses his passion for visiting producers in person and examining products himself before selling those products online. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, strict nationwide social distancing measures prevented him from meeting with producers face-to-face. He mainly sells fresh fruits and enjoys dining out in nice restaurants:

“My leisure is... what I enjoy the most is gastroventure (gastronomy + adventure)... with my wife. I have fun posting pictures from my gastroventure on Instagram and share them with others. But... after the COVID-19 pandemic, I couldn't do that anymore. The thing is, Instagram is integrated into my business, so I need to leverage it. But, I couldn't. I couldn't do gastroventure at all...”

In his case, the relationship between work and leisure is substantial. Other than work and leisure, quality of life results from maintaining physical health and spending quality time with family. Most participants emphasised their own and their family's health. Su-hyun, on unpaid leave from the airport information desk, stated that she was very concerned about her mom who suffered from chronic renal insufficiency. Her mom had had this disease even before the COVID-19 outbreak, so she often visited her mom at the hospital. Since the outbreak, visiting her mom at the hospital became tedious with several requirements such as ID check, temperature check, and entry card. Another participant, Min-seo, stated that her quality of life decreased because wearing a mask everyday worsened her tonsillitis.

Spending quality time with family was another crucial part of life. So-yul, a freelancer/graduate student, said that her salary has been reduced by 60% since the COVID-19 outbreak. However, her quality of life improved because she could now spend enough time with her family members. Her father happened to become ill when COVID-19 started to spread in her local community. Thus, she decided to take care of him and her mother at her place. Her husband worked from home to help her look after her children and her parents. She said that she could weather through this tough period with her family members:

“My salary has been reduced significantly since the COVID-19 outbreak. But now I have much more time to study and exercise. I took care of my parents and became very interested in my children's education. My affection for my husband became stronger. I feel rewarded when I cook for my family. My life quality has significantly enhanced since the outbreak.”

Changes in mindset: modesty and positivity

Finally, participants showed changes in their mindset. More than half of participants' career was negatively affected, but their quality of life did not change much or even improved. This finding may be because they became modest and positive. Harin was first annoyed that she had no spare money to enrol in a foreign language course nor to sign up for a fitness centre membership. However, at some point, she felt grateful for all the things that she took for granted before, gradually overcoming stress. Su-hyun even donated to the local COVID-19 support fund. Bora notes that the pace of her life slowed down during the COVID-19 pandemic. With this slow pace, she could reflect upon her past and deliberate on what is important in her life:

“(. . .) I am trying to be positive. When we are too busy in life, we inevitably miss some meaningful things. But now we are taking a break from such a busy life and finally can get to see those things we missed before. Those things can be our stepping stones for a brighter future. It’s like my eyes are finally open for sceneries that I didn’t get to appreciate before.”

Conclusion

Theoretical implications

Our findings demonstrate that when it comes to quality of life, maintaining physical health, spending quality time with family, having salary/work, and leisure were frequently mentioned, whereas vacations and tourism were occasionally mentioned. This result is consistent with previous work illustrating that quality of life is a multidimensional construct encompassing socialisation to economic situations (Dolnicar et al., 2012). Instead of asking participants to define quality of life, we asked them to evaluate their quality of life themselves. By doing so, participants freely came up with factors leading to quality of life. Salient and important factors were mentioned earlier, and participants became emotional or raised their voices when articulating such factors. Conversely, less important factors were not frequently mentioned, and participants did not elaborate much on such factors.

The present study crystalizes our understanding of the interrelationships among the dimensions of quality of life. Posting restaurant food pictures on social media was part of leisure and work for one of our participants, whereas for most of them, leisure and work domains were not as overlapped. Interviews from our participants allude to a negative relationship between work and family domains. Most of their work and salary significantly reduced, and some of them even resigned or lost their work. Consequently, they spent more time with their family. Leisurely walk near their residence became part of their daily routine, and they often accompanied their family except for those who lived alone or walk at night after their kids went to sleep. Similarly, Lau et al. (2006) demonstrate the positive effects of the SARS epidemic on the lives of residents in Hong Kong, such as increased levels of support from family and society and more time to exercise. In this regard, health and family can be compatible domains of quality of life.

Previous studies attested to the importance of leisure and vacations on quality of life (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011; Dolnicar et al., 2012; McCabe & Johnson, 2013). By contrast, this study shows that leisure and vacations are not as important to quality of life. Differences in findings between our study and previous research may be attributed to various factors. First, this study involves the COVID-19 pandemic. As for adaptive responses to this pandemic, people build a positive mindset that buffers negative emotions resulting from leisure constraints (e.g. closure of fitness centres and baseball parks). In addition to this positive mindset, most participants exhibited strong motivations for maintaining their leisure activities. Such strong motivations enable them to seek alternative ways of pursuing old leisure (e.g. watching a baseball game or musical performance at home instead of at a ballpark or a performance hall), find new leisure to replace the old one (e.g. cooking instead of dining out), or even increase the frequency of engaging in the old leisure activity (e.g. camping and walking). Congruent with Iwasaki and Schneider (2003), our findings demonstrate that people engage in problem-focused and emotion-focused coping in facing restrictions in leisure. Watching live baseball games via mass and social media instead of at ballparks, walking at the nearest park instead of going to a fitness centre, and cooking at home instead of dining at restaurants are examples of problem-focused coping strategies. Moreover, spending more time with family to build emotional bonds, having a positive mindset, and donating to the pandemic support fund are examples of emotion-focused coping. With salient motivations for leisure, most participants engaged in proactive (vs. reactive) responses to leisure constraints, not conceiving substantial differences in leisure activities before and after COVID-19. As such, leisure was less salient than work and family in articulating quality of life.

Differences between our findings and previous findings may also be attributed to study contexts. McCabe and Johnson (2013) ascertain the importance of holiday-taking in enhancing the quality of life among social tourists, defined as those who are disadvantaged in society. However, the present study illustrates the quality of life among the general population during the pandemic. Dolnicar et al. (2012) stress that leisure and vacations are different such that leisure activities arise in daily environments (e.g. reading books, exercising, watching movies), whereas vacations occur in non-daily environments (e.g. travelling). The present study shows that, although vacations during the pandemic involved geographical restrictions, most participants did not seem to mind such restrictions. Rather, they exhibited moderate to strong reluctance towards overseas travels and easily replaced overseas travel with domestic travel. In sum, leisure and vacation did not appear to be as compelling as work and family for quality of life during COVID-19.

The present study advances our understanding of the processes and outcomes of leisure constraints negotiation. Our findings are in line with Kay and Jackson's (1991) study such that only a small number of people do not participate in leisure activities as a result of leisure constraints negotiation. We even demonstrated several cases that are congruent with the findings of Shaw et al. (1991) in that leisure constraints are unrelated to leisure participation levels (e.g. camping, exercising). The model of leisure constraints negotiation has widely been applied in contexts that span from political conflicts (Juan et al., 2017) to nationalism (Chen et al., 2013). This study sheds light on this line of work by illustrating the unique manifestation of leisure constraints negotiation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Managerial implications

Our findings indicate that people are discreet in making overseas trips in the foreseeable future. This finding suggests that domestic tourism is likely to boom. The South Korean government made efforts to enhance domestic tourism by distributing national gift card vouchers and travel assistant vouchers (Salmon & Shin, 2020). Instead of popular local attractions, our participants showed strong preferences for remote and off-the-beaten-path attractions. This finding echoes the preferences of people in Norway for leisure and recreation activities in remote areas during the COVID-19 pandemic (Venter et al., 2020).

Moreover, our participants unanimously showed great reluctance for long-haul trips. This finding corroborates recent studies (e.g. Gajjar & Parmar, 2020; Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2020) that found that most people prefer to travel closer to home, spend time in nature, and embody a slow pace of life during lockdowns. As such, destination marketing organisations may leverage the concept of 'micro-getaway'. According to recent survey results from APAC Travel Trends (Skyscanner, 2020), micro-escapes are emerging travel trends. Sixteen percent (vs. 12%) of people booked for micro-escapes in 2020 (vs. 2019). Micro-escapes include hiking, camping trips, as well as weekend getaways. In addition to satisfying safety needs, micro-escapes are suitable for people undergoing financial constraints from unpaid leave or resignation during the pandemic. As such, hospitality and tourism operators may need to consider short-haul (vs. long-haul) travellers, including residents, as target customers during the pandemic. Specifically, InterContinental Seoul COEX has promoted its special half-day package to residents since August 2020. The package allows guests to stay in a room with free Wi-Fi during the day for up to nine hours and use other indoor facilities that include a fitness centre and swimming pool. Day use (vs. overnight stay) in the hotel context exemplifies micro-escapes.

Furthermore, the present study offers useful insights to managers in the hospitality and retail sectors. Although most participants did not dine at restaurants during the pandemic, a few of them noted that certain types of cuisine (e.g. hotpot) were more frowned upon. For each dining table, most Korean restaurants serve several small side dishes that include Kimchi and seasoned

vegetables that friends at the same table share. Amid COVID-19, such shared dishes and pots are discouraged. Thus, instead of serving side dishes for sharing, restaurant managers may need to use one tray for each customer.

Lastly, most participants proactively responded to leisure constraints that result from the COVID-19 pandemic. This result indicates people's perseverance in pursuing their leisure styles. Policymakers may consider a campaign that encourages residents to maintain their leisure activities or design programmes to help them find new leisure activities during the pandemic. A recent article in the Chicago Tribune noted that although most recreational/leisure businesses are struggling, the recreational vehicle (RV) industry is experiencing growing sales and rentals (Rackl, 2020). The statistics show that the demand for RV rentals in the US increased by 31% during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sales of outdoor sporting goods, such as kayaks, paddleboards, and camping gear also increased (Barrett, 2020). As such, campground operators, local communities, and the federal government should work together to maintain or expand existing outdoor leisure facilities (e.g. RV parks, tent sites, and picnic areas).

Along with outdoor leisure activities, online home training is an emerging leisure trend (Nyenhuis et al., 2020). Home-based training apps, such as Mirror, Zwift, iFit, and Nordic Track, might even replace leisure activities connecting friends, families, and distant players through online platforms (Nyenhuis et al., 2020). Local gym and fitness businesses should adopt the latest technology and find new leisure programmes to attract customers. They may offer online personal/group training sessions at a discounted price or lease equipment, such as rowing machines and stationary bikes with high-definition monitors and audio systems to entertain clients while they exercise.

Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations. Because this study is based on the South Korean context, the findings might not be generalised to other countries and cultures. A cross-national study that compares changes in leisure activities and quality of life during the pandemic would be worthwhile. Notably, Asian cultures are mostly collectivistic and have different socio-cultural characteristics and perspectives towards leisure activities and quality of life than Western countries. For future research, thoroughly addressing East Asian cultural characteristics to help readers better understand the complex social phenomena of South Korea would also be valuable. Note that one participant took less than 30 minutes for the interview, which is considered relatively short. Since all interviews were conducted during the second wave of COVID-19 in mid-2020 in South Korea, people's leisure and quality of life during the third and fourth waves of COVID-19 may merit further investigations. In this connection, longitudinal studies may be illuminating.

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