

Article

The Effects of Leisure Life Satisfaction on Subjective Wellbeing under the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Mediating Role of Stress Relief

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Abstract: Under the continuous spread of COVID-19 infection, individuals are finding their own ways to manage their stress and subjective wellbeing. The main objective of this research is to test the role of leisure life satisfaction on one's subjective wellbeing in the era of COVID-19 as mediated by stress relief. Individuals' satisfaction with leisure life is hypothesized to both directly and indirectly affect their subjective wellbeing as mediated by relieved stress. The positive impact of stress relief on one's subjective wellbeing is hypothesized to be moderated by the perceived seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from a large-scale social survey in South Korea ($N = 40,085$) were used to test the hypotheses and the results confirmed them. Theoretical and managerial implications that stress the importance of the strategic management of one's leisure life are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19; leisure life satisfaction; stress relief; subjective wellbeing



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1. Introduction

Life consists of multiple domains including the work and family domains [1–3], and the satisfaction in each domain can affect the overall quality of life [4–6]. Among various domains in life, several scholars have been exploring the leisure domain—the domain of life which is related to the discretionary use of time—and its significant effects on life satisfaction or subjective wellbeing [7]. With the increasing level of stress received in other domains of life such as work stress [8], financial stress [9], or family stress [10], individuals seek to enhance their experiences in those domains where they can replenish their energy. The definition of leisure entails involving oneself in activities that are freely chosen [11] to spend non-obligated time [12]; satisfaction in the leisure domain is becoming more important to secure individuals' psychological wellbeing as individuals have become more stressed over the last 20 years [13].

Satisfaction with serious leisure [14] and leisure activities at the later stages of life [15] or at the earlier stages of life [16] is found to have a positive relationship with life satisfaction or wellbeing. Scholars examined how leisure life satisfaction can increase subjective wellbeing [17] and have proposed various explanations for why leisure life satisfaction could enhance subjective wellbeing [18]. Sirgy and his colleagues proposed that leisure increases wellbeing because it can provide several benefits such as meeting sensory needs, safety needs, and mastery needs [19]. Csikszentmihalyi [20] highlighted the effect of flow experiences on life satisfaction and that leisure activities often provide individuals opportunities to engage themselves in serious, deeply demanding effort which transports them to a flow state. Some scholars argue that leisure activities often involve interactions with others and thereby fulfill social needs [21]. Others have also argued for the benefits of the activities themselves, that engaging in activities could make people feel alive and productive [22]. Newman et al. [23] systematically summarized the benefits of leisure

engagement and activities, known as the DRAMMA model, based on the need satisfaction approach. They stated that individuals could fulfill their needs for detachment-recovery (DR), autonomy (A), meaning (M), mastery (M), and affiliation (A) via engaging in leisure activities while reducing negative emotions from stress.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where stressors not only exist in the usual domains of life but can also emerge from unusual environmental and social factors [24], the role of recovery may play a more significant role in increasing subjective wellbeing in comparison to the pre-COVID-19 era. Individuals are forced to socially and physically distance themselves from others and are experiencing a greater restriction in their routine behaviors and activities. In this constrained situation, individuals are faced with more stressors and may even experience higher levels of stress from the usual set of stressors. For instance, according to the Stress in America survey 2021 [24], under the pandemic, individuals are experiencing more stress even when they are making basic daily decisions such as what to wear or what to eat. Therefore, engaging in leisure activities and relieving stress while fully engaging in them has become more critical in the midst of the pandemic, as individuals are constantly challenged with multiple stressors. Thus, the mediating role of stress relief (recovery) suggested by the DRAMMA model is more significant under the era of COVID-19. Hence, in this study, we examine the mediating role of stress relief on the relationship between leisure life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing and if the positive effect of stress relief on subjective wellbeing is more significant when the perceived seriousness of COVID-19 is higher. In addition to the DRAMMA model [23,25], we introduce the job demands-resource theory [26,27] and other occupational health literature to explain the significance of stress relief in the context of leisure life satisfaction and wellbeing. We bring in the hierarchical leisure constraints theory [28–30] to clarify how the perceived seriousness of COVID-19 could moderate the relationship between stress relief and subjective wellbeing.

The remainder of the discussion proceeds as follows. First, we review past literature on the leisure experience and its overall contribution to subjective wellbeing. Second, grounded in the literature on the mechanisms of stress and stress relief, we develop a model to demonstrate the mediating role of stress relief in the relationship between leisure life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. Third, we report the results of a major survey involving South Korean participants engaging in various leisure activities under the pandemic. Finally, we discuss theoretical and managerial implications of the study's findings and suggest new research streams.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Leisure Life Satisfaction and Subjective Wellbeing

Satisfaction with the leisure life domain, one of an individual's various life sub-domains, positively affects their subjective wellbeing via a bottom-up spillover process [31]. A person spends the time remaining after fulfilling obligatory duties and tasks on leisure. Leisure activities are non-obligatory, discretionary activities chosen by individuals which lead to intrinsic positive feelings of enjoyment, autonomy, and motivation [32]. In addition to these benefits that emerge from the innate nature of leisure, scholars have proposed the need-fulfillment mechanism through which leisure life satisfaction could positively contribute to one's subjective wellbeing. That is, individuals' social needs [21], efficacy needs [33], and sensation seeking needs are fulfilled through leisure, and this state of fulfillment could lead to wellbeing. The DRAMMA model, one of the bottom-up theories of wellbeing, summarizes these needs as needs for detachment-recovery from obligatory tasks, autonomy needs, mastery needs, meaningfulness needs, and affiliation needs. Based on the abundant literature on how leisure life satisfaction leads to subjective wellbeing [17,31], we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Leisure life satisfaction positively affects individuals' subjective wellbeing.*

2.2. Stress Relief as a Mediating Mechanism

Our premise on the positive function of leisure life satisfaction on one's subjective wellbeing is closely related to its stress relief function. In their research, Shin and You [34] identified a possible effect of leisure life satisfaction on decreasing the level of stress. Mindfulness scholars and practitioners have also noted that engaging in mindful, inner-quality activities can increase wellbeing and at the same time relieve pain and reduce stress [35,36]. Individuals living in the 21st century are experiencing a higher level of stress than those living in the 1990s; specifically, "adults in the 2010s reported experiencing stressors on 2% more days than in the 1990s" (p. 511), and the stressors were perceived to be more threatening to their future plans [13]. Thus, the role of leisure is becoming more important for those living in today's stressful world. Engaging in leisure activities could further reduce the stress level by providing energy and a positive mood [37]; this positive energy and mood could prevent individuals from experiencing a decrease in their wellbeing.

Furthermore, stress triggered by engaging in obligatory tasks such as job stress has been known to decrease psychological wellbeing, especially when individuals lack resources to compensate for the drained energy [26,38]. With the rising number of stressors caused by obligations and responsibilities, leisure activities play a significant role in increasing psychological resources such as self-efficacy and positive affect [39], protecting individuals from being burnt out by effectively taking time off from work. Detaching from work during the weekend positively affects job performance and other work behaviors [40,41] and off-work activities positively affect the following week's work behaviors [41,42]. Engaging in leisure activities provides individuals with a chance to spend time away from obligatory tasks and responsibilities (e.g., job, childrearing responsibilities) and to recover their mental baseline or psychological resources [40,41]. Summing up the results from these studies in the organizational and occupational psychology literature as well as from the leisure studies, we could expect leisure life satisfaction to help individuals cope with negative experiences of stress (hindrance stressors) as it facilitates resource replenishment. Borrowing from the ideas on how replenished resources positively influence wellbeing, we propose that stress relief is the key factor that links leisure life satisfaction to life satisfaction. This positive relationship between leisure activities and wellbeing suggests the importance of stress relief as a mediating mechanism.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Stress relief mediates the positive relationship between leisure life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing.*

2.3. COVID-19 as a Contextual Moderator Affecting the Relationship between Stress Relief and Subjective Wellbeing

Individuals are experiencing a higher level of stress under the COVID-19 era [24] and are faced with unexpected constraints in their everyday activities [43]. Social distancing guidelines are forbidding individuals from maintaining their usual interpersonal interactions and gatherings, far more limited access to public spaces is cutting down the range of opportunities and settings that individuals can utilize in their daily lives, and the augmented level of perceived uncertainty in life decreases individuals' sense of control or autonomy. Overall, COVID-19 offers a social context that lowers down individuals' life satisfaction in comparison to the pre-pandemic era [44].

The hierarchical leisure constraints model [28–30] proposes that constraints in leisure engagement and activities could decrease subjective wellbeing because individuals feel less confident about their ability to pursue interests, have fewer people with whom they can engage in leisure activities, and lack local opportunities or financial resources to pursue leisure. In the COVID-19 situation, individuals are faced with a narrower pool of leisure activities and leisure partners, and thus are experiencing various leisure constraints [45–47]. The high level of stress experienced under the pandemic [48] in turn is likely to increase the importance of relieving stress via leisure. The role of stress relief would be more significant

and relevant when COVID-19 is perceived to be more serious. Because leisure participation is strictly restricted under COVID-19, the stress relief experienced through leisure life satisfaction would be more valued and appreciated. In sum, the positive relationship between stress relief and subjective wellbeing induced by leisure life satisfaction becomes stronger under COVID-19, especially when people perceive the condition of the infectious disease to be more severe. Thus, we hypothesize the below:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *The perceived seriousness of COVID-19 moderates the relationship between stress relief and subjective wellbeing such that the relationship is more positive when the perceived seriousness of COVID-19 is high rather than low.*

In sum, and as shown the Figure 1, individuals' subjective wellbeing is hypothesized to be influenced by their leisure life satisfaction as mediated by stress relief. The effect of stress relief on subjective wellbeing is likely to be moderated by the perceived seriousness of COVID-19. That is, the more one perceives COVID-19 to be serious, the stronger the impact stress relief has on one's subjective wellbeing.

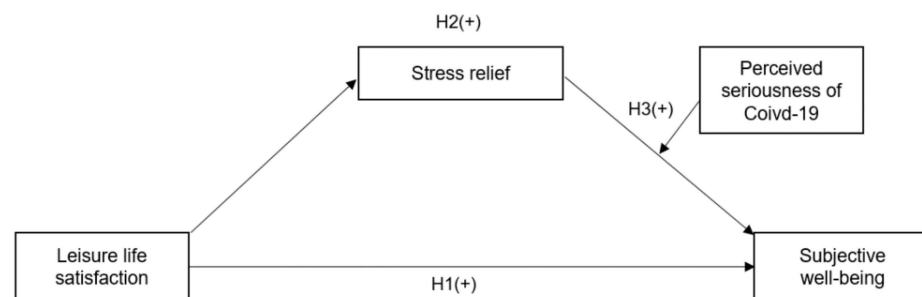


Figure 1. Research model.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

Our conceptual model was tested using public data collected via a large-scale social survey (Seoul survey, <http://data.seoul.go.kr/dataList/OA-15564/F/1/datasetView.do>; accessed on 8 June 2021) administered to a representative sample of residents from Seoul, South Korea from 14 September to 31 October 2020. In order to use stratified cluster sampling, Seoul was first stratified into its 25 districts and then further stratified into 425 administrative divisions. Lastly, each division was stratified based on typical housing types. Out of 89,347 clusters, 4000 clusters were finally selected, reflecting the size of each district. Well-trained survey moderators visited sample households to conduct home-visit, face-to-face surveys. Only a marginal number of respondents who had difficulties in meeting moderators in person due to COVID-19-related concerns conducted the survey online under the supervision of the moderators or research investigators. A total of 40,085 valid responses without missing values were used in the analysis and the demographic profile of respondents shows that there was a great deal of variability in terms of age, gender, marital status, education, and occupation (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 40,085).

Age		Marital Status		Employment	
10s	5.0 %	Married (living together)	68.5%	Administrative	5.2%
20s	16.2%	Married (living apart)	0.4%	Professionals	8.3%
30s	17.7%	Single	23.4%	Office workers	27.9%
40s	18.0%	Divorced	2.8%	Service providers	10.9%
50s	18.0%	Widowed	4.9%	Sales representatives	8.1%
60s or more	25.1%			Students	7.6%
Gender		Education		Housewives	17.3%
Female	48.0 %	Elementary school	2.4	Not employed	6.5%
Male	52.0 %	Middle school	4.5	Etc.	8%
		High school	25.2		
		College	13.5		
		University	47.5		
		Graduate school	6.8		

3.2. Constructs and Measures

Leisure experiences and leisure life satisfaction. Respondents were first asked about major leisure activities they participate in during weekdays as well as weekends (“What kind of leisure activities do you usually engage in during weekdays/weekends?”), and then were asked whether they are satisfied with their leisure life overall. The leisure life satisfaction measure is essentially one item: “How satisfied are you with your leisure life?” and the response was captured on a 5-point Likert scale varying from “Extremely dissatisfied (1)” to “Extremely satisfied (5)” and is consistent with Yu et al. (2021)’s leisure life satisfaction measure [49].

Perceived stress relief. Respondents were asked about their overall stress level and its sources. The general experience of stress was captured by a single-item measurement (“How much stress did you feel in your daily life for the past two weeks?”) and responses were captured using a 5-point Likert scale: “Not at all (1) to “Very much (5)”. This is in line with Elo et al. (2003) where the use of single-item measure of stress symptoms was validated in relation with employees’ mental health and wellbeing [50]. The scores were then reverse coded.

Perceived seriousness of infectious disease. The perceived seriousness of infectious disease was measured by a single item: “How serious do you think of infectious disease (COVID-19, SARS, cholera, MERS, among others) in our society?” and the response was captured on a 5-point Likert scale from “Not at all serious (1)” to “Very serious (5).” As newly detected cases for other types of infectious disease are almost non-existent in South Korea, this measurement item seems to successfully measure citizens’ perceived seriousness of COVID-19.

Subjective wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.833) was measured by a composite of five items capturing health satisfaction (“How satisfied are you with your health?”), financial satisfaction (“How satisfied are you with your financial status?”), social life (“How satisfied are you with your relationships with friends and relatives?”), family life (“How satisfied are you with your family life?”) and work life (“How satisfied are you with your work or school?”). Eleven-point Likert-type scales from “Extremely unsatisfied (1)” to “Extremely satisfied (10)” were used to capture the responses, which were then transformed into 5-point scales.

3.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics related to the respondents' sources of stress and leisure activity participation were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 to see how people cope with their daily stresses given COVID-19 restrictions. Then, moderated mediation analysis was used to test the hypothetical relationships using the PROCESS Macro for Model 14, the moderated mediation model [51] (Version 3.5).

4. Results

The results section reports findings related to the preliminary analyses followed by hypotheses testing.

4.1. Preliminary Analyses

We first conducted some preliminary descriptive analyses on major sources of stress (see Figure 2). On average, survey respondents felt stress the most due to their financial status (primary (the most important) source of stress: 23.2%, secondary (the second most important) source of stress: 19.7%), followed by health-related issues (primary source of stress: 18.9%, secondary source of stress: 11.9%), relationships at work (primary source of stress: 18.5%, secondary source of stress: 17.1%), and overwhelming work loads (primary source of stress: 17.2%, secondary source of stress: 19.3%). COVID-19 infection was also an important source of stress among citizens of Seoul (primary source of stress: 1.4%, secondary source of stress: 0.8%).

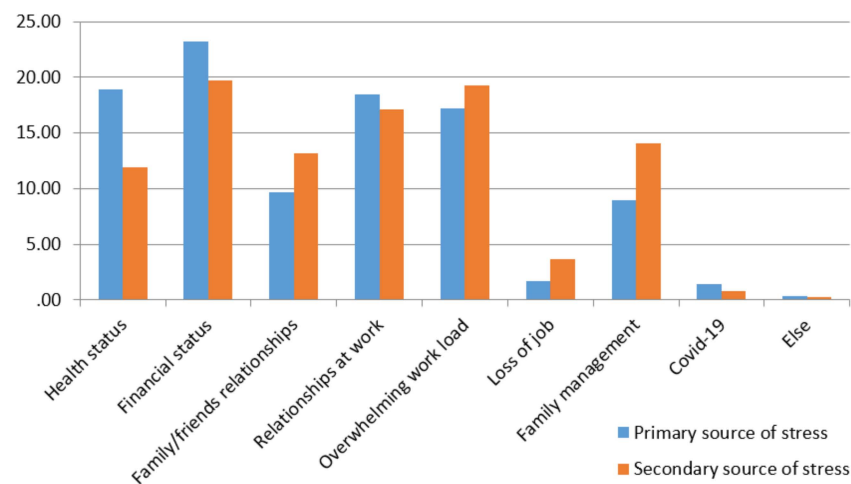


Figure 2. Major sources of stress.

We then conducted another descriptive analysis on the types of leisure activities respondents are frequently engaged in during weekdays and weekends. Figure 3 shows that respondents most frequently engage in watching TV, PC, or mobile (primary activity (the first priority): 61.9%, secondary activity (the second priority): 16.1%), followed by playing computer games (primary activity: 9.7%, secondary activity: 28.6%), and working out (primary activity: 7.4%, secondary activity: 11.7%) during weekdays. Figure 4 shows that respondents most frequently engage in watching TV, PC, or mobile (primary activity: 32.8%, secondary activity: 16.5%) followed by leisure traveling (primary activity: 16.5%, secondary activity: 21.3%), and working out (primary activity: 11.1%, secondary activity: 11.6%) during weekends. These results collectively demonstrate that survey participants do engage in passive forms of leisure activity given COVID-19 pandemic situations.

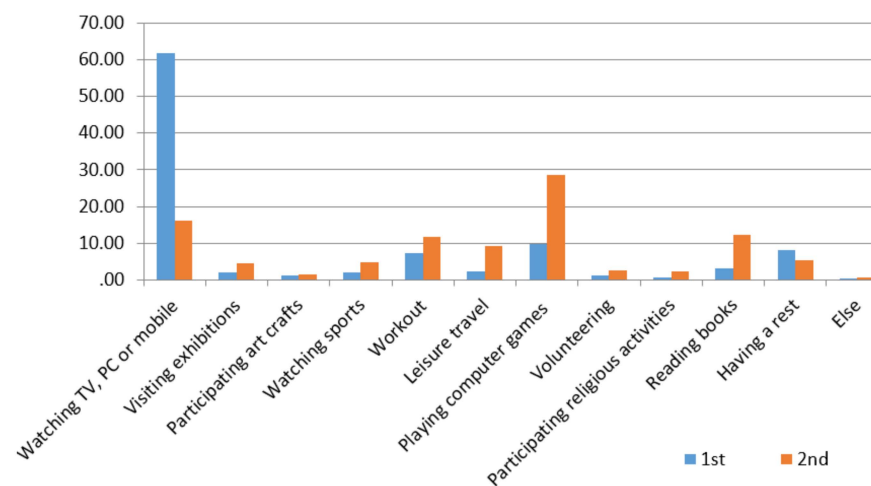


Figure 3. Major leisure activities during weekdays.

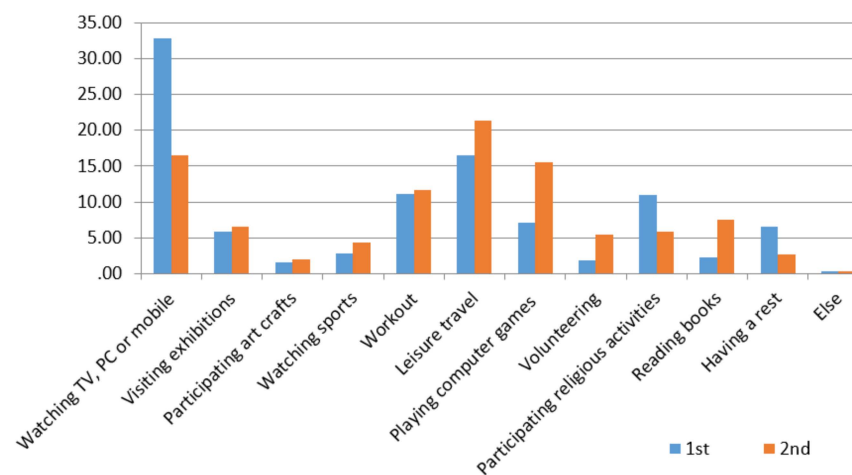


Figure 4. Major leisure activities during weekends.

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and the reliability of the key variables along with the correlations among them. The reliability value for the subjective wellbeing measure was above 0.80, and correlations were as expected.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
Leisure life satisfaction	3.14	0.79	-			
Stress relief	2.69	0.91	0.115 **	-		
Subjective wellbeing	3.31	0.74	0.222 **	0.268 **	-	
Perceived seriousness of COVID-19	4.16	0.87	-0.040 **	-0.120 **	0.012 *	-

Note. $N = 40,085$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

4.2. Hypotheses Testing

We tested the hypotheses using the PROCESS Macro for Model 14, the moderated mediation model [51] (Version 3.5). Results based on 5000 bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence interval after controlling for respondents' gender, age, and the number of green spaces near their resident areas largely supported our model.

H1 posits that leisure life satisfaction has a direct positive impact on citizens' subjective wellbeing. The results indicate that citizens' leisure life satisfaction has a positive

predictive impact on their subjective wellbeing (standardized coefficient = 0.175 ($t = 38.701$), $CI = [0.166, 0.184]$), supporting H1.

H2 states that leisure life satisfaction positively affects wellbeing via citizens' stress relief. The results indicate that citizens' leisure life satisfaction has a positive predictive impact on their stress relief (standardized coefficient = 0.154 ($t = 26.889$), $CI = [0.143, 0.165]$), and that stress relief has a positive predictive influence on citizens' subjective wellbeing (standardized coefficient = 0.159 ($t = 8.676$), $CI = [0.123, 0.195]$), supporting H2.

H3 states that the relationship between stress relief and subjective wellbeing is positively moderated by the perceived seriousness of COVID-19. The results show that the moderation was significant (standardized coefficient = 0.010 ($t = 3.116$), $CI = [0.005, 0.021]$), supporting H3. Additional simple slope test results ($DV =$ subjective wellbeing, $IV =$ stress relief, Moderator = perceived seriousness of COVID-19) consistently demonstrated that the interaction effect was significant (β Stress relief = 0.187, $p < 0.01$; β Perceived seriousness of COVID-19 = -0.018 , n.s.; β Stress relief \times Perceived seriousness of COVID-19 = 0.115 ($p < 0.01$) (Figure 5).

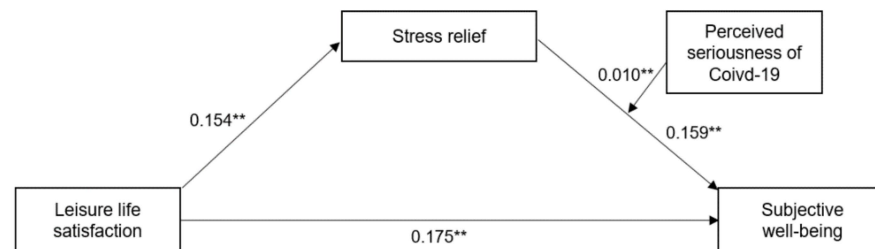


Figure 5. Hypotheses testing results. Note. ** $p < 0.01$.

5. Discussion and Implication

The primary goal of this study was to demonstrate the role of leisure life satisfaction on one's overall subjective wellbeing under the context of COVID-19. H1 on the positive relationship between leisure life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing was supported; H2 on the mediating role of stress relief on the positive relationship between leisure life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing was supported; and H3 positing the moderating role of the perceived seriousness of COVID-19 on the relationship between stress relief and subjective wellbeing was also supported. In sum, the positive function of leisure life satisfaction on subjective wellbeing is mediated by perceived stress relief, and the positive impact of stress relief on subjective wellbeing intensifies when COVID-19 is perceived to be more serious.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the leisure and wellbeing literature, and to resource theory in a number of ways. First, given the limited number of studies that empirically test the DRAMMA model [23,25], this study's results explicitly showed the mediating mechanism of stress relief on leisure life satisfaction and one's overall life evaluation relationship. Although various leisure activity-related need dimensions are not specified in this study, to our knowledge, there is no research that explicitly shows the mediating role of stress relief under the context of COVID-19.

Additionally, the findings from the current study contribute to the literature on how the pandemic is affecting individuals' quality of life [52]. We learned from the data that the constraints experienced under the strict social distancing guidelines implemented by the Korean government [53] prevent citizens from engaging in regular leisure activities. Thus, individuals are faced with challenges in fulfilling their various needs through leisure. Furthermore, individuals experience a higher level of stress under the pandemic [54] and are becoming more appreciative of the possible stress relief triggered by leisure life satisfaction. Under this constraining environment, the role of stress relief is perceived to be more significant and thus has a stronger positive effect on subjective wellbeing.

Furthermore, our study proposes that stress relief could be considered as a type of psychological resource that can enhance individuals' wellbeing. Extant literature has proposed that leisure activities could increase various personal resources such as self-efficacy and resilience [55], and our study proposes stress relief as another type of resource, triggered by leisure, which could enhance individuals' wellbeing. Organizational and occupational health scholars have posited that the stress received during the workweek could be relieved when individuals engage in leisure activities over the weekend [40,41]. Leisure engagement and activities provide psychological resources and these additional resources could help individuals cope with stress at work. For instance, Woon et al. found that individuals were less likely to feel depressed under the pandemic when they were able to manage their stress level via stress-reducing humor activities with their loved ones [56]. The results from this study also highlight that not just leisure activities themselves but the satisfaction with one's leisure life could enhance subjective wellbeing via stress relief. Leisure life satisfaction could enhance positive emotions and provide additional resources, and these added values could allow individuals to better cope with stress, leading to a higher subjective wellbeing [57,58].

Specific to the context of the pandemic, we introduced the perceived seriousness of COVID-19 as a moderator affecting the relationship between stress relief and subjective wellbeing. The results on how the positive effect of stress relief on subjective wellbeing was stronger for those with a higher perceived seriousness of COVID-19 contribute to the literature on hierarchical leisure constraints [29]. When individuals perceive the pandemic situation to be more serious and severe, they are likely to experience more restrictions in their leisure [48] and thus have a stronger yearning for relieving stress and achieving a higher subjective wellbeing. Additionally, our study extends the existing studies on the positive relationship between psychological distress and the perceived fear of COVID-19 [59] by suggesting the stronger impact of stress relief on wellbeing for those who have a higher perceived seriousness of the COVID-19 situation.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Our findings have important implications for public policy officials. To reiterate, the findings of this study suggest the importance of a satisfactory leisure life on one's stress management and subjective wellbeing. Therefore, public policy makers need to periodically monitor individuals' quality of leisure life (e.g., types of leisure activities, time spent on each leisure activity, and overall satisfaction with one's leisure activities) and its possible spillover effect to their life satisfaction overall, especially under high-stress situations. Doing so should contribute to enhancing citizens' mental health and subjective wellbeing.

The study findings also suggest that the more people perceive COVID-19 as serious, the stronger the stress relieving function of leisure life satisfaction is to one's subjective wellbeing. Therefore, public policy makers need to understand citizens' overall stress level so that they can implement policies in a timely manner. They need to pay extra attention to the low socioeconomic status group as they are more likely to have even less chances to engage in rewarding leisure activities.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to this study. First, despite potential differences between the types of leisure activities (e.g., passive activities such as watching movies or surfing the internet vs. active ones such as having leisure travel), this study did not distinguish between them. Future research should take the nature of the activity into account to find out the optimal choice of leisure activities given different situations.

Second, some of the constructs in this study were captured using a single-item measure (e.g., leisure life satisfaction, perceived seriousness of COVID-19). Although these measures have been validated in past research (e.g., [60]), future research should employ multiple-item measures and tests for consistency among the items to ensure greater construct reliability.

Third, despite its large sample size, survey participants in this study were limited to the residents of Seoul. Given differences from other cities of varying sizes and importantly rural areas of South Korea, future research could use a dataset collected nationwide to ensure the generalizability of the findings.

6. Conclusions

This study investigated how leisure life satisfaction contributes to one's subjective wellbeing given stress under the COVID-19 pandemic. With the data collected from a large-scale social survey ($N = 40,085$), we tested the positive relationship between leisure life satisfaction and wellbeing, the mediating role of stress relief on the aforementioned positive relationship, and the moderating effects of the perceived seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic between stress relief and subjective wellbeing; and all three hypotheses were supported. We hope that this study will stimulate future research that sheds more light on the role of leisure engagement on one's resilient daily functioning and subjective overall wellbeing.

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