



## The ups and downs of older adults' leisure during the pandemic

Wonock Chung, M. Rebecca Genoe, Pattara Tavilsup, Samara Stearns & Toni Liechty

To cite this article: Wonock Chung, M. Rebecca Genoe, Pattara Tavilsup, Samara Stearns & Toni Liechty (2021): The ups and downs of older adults' leisure during the pandemic, World Leisure Journal, DOI: [10.1080/16078055.2021.1958051](https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2021.1958051)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2021.1958051>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 30 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 106



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# The ups and downs of older adults' leisure during the pandemic

Wonock Chung <sup>a</sup>, M. Rebecca Genoe <sup>b</sup>, Pattara Tavilsup<sup>b</sup>, Samara Stearns<sup>b</sup> and Toni Liechty<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, USA; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies, University of Regina, Regina, Canada

## ABSTRACT

Leisure in the daily lives of older adults plays an important role in aging well. However, the practice of social distancing and stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic has severely hindered leisure involvement. We knew little about how the reduction in leisure participation during the pandemic affected older adults' leisure lifestyles. The purpose of the study was to explore how older adults adapted in times when their leisure opportunities were constrained. Data were collected through a multi-author blog. Participants ( $n = 28$ ) were invited to create posts, share photos, and comment on the posts of others. Data were analyzed thematically. The findings demonstrated that older adults gradually adapted to the pandemic in a manner that closely aligned with the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model. The article discusses how the SOC model could be applied in the context of external adversity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 January 2021  
Accepted 29 June 2021

## KEYWORDS

Aging; COVID-19; leisure; Selective Optimization with compensation; older adults

## Introduction and background

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed serious threats to health and well-being of older adults (Shahid et al., 2020). Adults aged 60 years or older are at increased risk for severe complications and account for approximately 9 out of 10 deaths from COVID-19 in the United States and Canada (CDC, 2020; PHAC, 2021). Furthermore, the global pandemic has been a source of increased stress and anxiety for older adults (Whitehead & Torossian, 2021). The need for leisure as a means to cope with stress and isolation has never been greater (Son et al., 2020). However, social distancing and stay-at-home orders hindered older adults' continued leisure participation, which may exacerbate social isolation (Meisner et al., 2020). Krendl and Perry's (2021) exploration of social isolation during pandemic restrictions suggested that, although well-being remained stable or increased compared to previous years, older adults experienced higher levels of depression and loneliness during the pandemic. Furthermore, there may be reduced engagement in healthy behaviours due to lack of opportunity, accompanied by an increase in sedentary

**CONTACT** Wonock Chung  wonockc2@illinois.edu  Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois 61820, USA

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

behaviour (Meisner et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). Finally, many older adults report being worried about their health, along with the social and financial consequences of the pandemic, which is associated with lower levels of well-being (Kivi et al., 2021).

Leisure provides opportunities for positive social interaction, and social support fostered through leisure engagement contributes to older adults' well-being (Broughton et al., 2017; Chang, 2017; Choi et al., 2018). Similarly, leisure engagement facilitates aging well and can provide a meaningful source of coping with chronic health conditions, mental health concerns, and negative life events (Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Nimrod et al., 2012). Nevertheless, leisure and social life have undergone a profound transformation with the restrictions to leisure-related travel and public gatherings (Stodolska, 2020). In Canada, where this study took place, pandemic restrictions led to closure of many businesses and recreation venues (e.g. gymnasiums, community leisure programmes, libraries, restaurants). As a result, lack of access to leisure opportunities may have serious implications for well-being among older adults, although this could be maintained in the home through virtual leisure services (Son et al., 2020).

Despite many challenges, some have suggested that the pandemic has also brought families and communities together and afforded time to speculate and discover meaning in simple pleasures (Glock, 2020). Older adults have reported finding joy and comfort by maintaining valued relationships, online interaction, and increased engagement in hobbies (Whitehead & Torossian, 2021). Furthermore, preliminary data suggest that older adults may be coping with the COVID-19 pandemic better than their younger counterparts (Klaiber et al., 2021). Indeed, Whitehead and Torossian (2021) reported having different life experiences led to various ways of coping among older adults. Several months after the initial outbreak, people began referring to "the new normal," suggesting some level of adjustment to the changing circumstances. However, we know little about how the pandemic has affected older adults' lifestyles and how, if at all, leisure has helped them cope with the pandemic. Therefore, this study aims to explore baby boomers' (born between 1946 and 1965) adaption in times when their leisure opportunities may be impacted. Baby boomers are the focus of the current article, which is part of a larger study exploring retirement transitions among baby boomers.

### ***Theoretical framework: selective optimization with compensation (SOC)***

Numerous theories and models exist to explain *how* older adults achieve well-being in later life. One such model is the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model, which offers a conceptualization of aging well that is not outcome dependent. Rather, it focuses on older adults' abilities to adjust to declines and losses with their remaining capacities and resources (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Strawbridge et al., 2002). For instance, the SOC model suggests that an individual's selection of personal goals that match or optimize their available resources leads to positive adaptation to later life challenges (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996). Thus, the SOC framework describes how older adults use their available resources to maintain engagement in valued life activities through selection, optimization, and compensation (Baltes & Lang, 1997).

According to Baltes (1997), the SOC model is based on three assumptions: (a) individuals should focus on particularly meaningful goals as resources are finite throughout the lifespan; (b) human development is a process of gains and losses in which the same

action and behaviour can serve multiple purposes; and (c) reactive and proactive behaviours of individuals influence the direction and level of their development by shaping the internal and external environment. Thus, the three processes of the SOC model (i.e. selection, optimization, and compensation) attempt to explain adaptation through the process of gains and losses.

Selection is conceptualized as an individual's choice and prioritization of some goals and activities over others, constraining the range of alternative options (Moghimi et al., 2019). Through the selection process, lower priority activities are abandoned, and meaningful activities continue to be pursued. Selection includes elective selection and loss-based selection. Elective selection is voluntary, in which individuals develop a goal hierarchy based on importance, urgency, or preference (Moghimi et al., 2019). Loss-based selection results from a loss in external or internal resources, which entails adaptation to new circumstances and reorganization of the individual's goal hierarchy. Optimization denotes the acquisition, application, and refinement of relevant means to achieve selected goals (Freund & Baltes, 2002). It encompasses the allocation of time, effort, or attention to achieve selected goals and an individual's persistence and perseverance in goal pursuits even in difficult times. Compensation occurs when an individual uses an alternative approach to pursue goals when their usual means is no longer available (Freund & Baltes, 2002). It often entails the use of external help such as technological aids or instrumental social support (Moghimi et al., 2019).

For the last decade, the SOC model has been utilized in various studies on older adults. Many focused on the challenges of the aging process, such as declining health conditions and chronic illnesses (e.g. Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Son & Janke, 2015), while others applied the model in the context of the work environment (e.g. Demerouti et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2012). Lately, scholars have focused on individuals' application of SOC strategies in adopting technology (e.g. Lifshitz et al., 2018; Nimrod, 2020). However, to our knowledge, no previous studies have explicitly explored how older adults adapt to externally driven challenges. Thus, we attempt to broaden the applicability of the SOC model by applying it in the context of external adversity, in this case, the pandemic.

## Methods

The findings of this study come from an ongoing longitudinal qualitative study that began in January 2020 to explore leisure and the transition to retirement among Canadian baby boomers (i.e. those born between 1946 and 1965). Baby boomers are the focus of the larger study because their retirement experiences differ from previous generations (See Genoe et al., 2016). Data were collected through a multi-author blog in which participants were invited to post and interact with others by commenting on each other's posts. A multi-author blog enables all members of a group to post to the blog and comment on each other's posts rather than a single author posting on a blog and several others commenting on the person's posts. Thus, it facilitates interactive communication (Hearst & Dumais, 2009; Nardi et al., 2004 as cited in Genoe et al., 2016).

## Participants

Participants were recruited in several ways. First, emails were sent to social clubs for retirees across Canada inviting members to participate in the study. Second, participants were

recruited through online classified advertisements posted across Canada seeking study participants. Third, recruitment posters were posted around the second author's university and other community locations (e.g. libraries, community centres). Potential participants contacted the second author for more information and those who were interested were provided with an informed consent form. Once the signed informed consent form was received, participants were provided with accounts on the blog. Inclusion criteria included: (a) must be born between 1946 and 1965; (b) must have access to and be willing to use the internet and a device for blogging; and (c) must be able to write in English.

Twenty-eight people participated in the blog over the course of the year, including 16 men and 12 women. Income ranged from less than \$30,000 to more than \$1,00,000 per year. Most participants were married or living with a partner ( $n = 20$ ). Five participants were divorced, one was widowed, and two were never married. Eleven participants were retired and no longer working, six participants were still working, and 11 participants were retired and working part-time. Most participants identified as Caucasian ( $n = 23$ ). Twenty-eight participants were divided into three groups for blogging sessions to keep the size of each group manageable.

### **Data collection**

For the purpose of the ongoing longitudinal qualitative study, a secure blog was initially created using wordpress.org to collect data from participants regarding their leisure engagement and retirement experience. Only the research team and participants had access to the blog and participants were required to log on using their username and password. Once logged on, they were directed to a participant consent form that contained information about the project. Only the participants who agreed to the consent form were then directed to a web page where they can freely create posts, share photos, comment on the posts of others, or view blog posts, guiding questions, consent form, and the contact information of the research team. Participants were divided into three groups and each group was asked to post for four, 2-week sessions at various times over the course of a year (see [Table 1](#) for a timeline). Three groups were separated, and each group participated in their sessions at different times; therefore, participants from one group did not interact with those in another group.

However, when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020, participants began to blog about how COVID-19 interrupted their leisure participation and retirement plans with little prompting from the research team. After reviewing the blog posts from earlier sessions (Group 3 Session 1 and Group 1 Session 2) when the pandemic was declared, the research team decided to ask additional questions to have participants further reflect on their experiences with leisure during the pandemic. Examples of additional questions read, "Please tell us about your experiences with the current

**Table 1.** Timeline of Data Collection

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
Group 1	01/20/20 – 02/01/20	04/20/20 – 05/02/20	07/13/20 – 07/25/20	11/09/20 – 11/21/20
Group 2	02/17/20 – 02/29/20	05/11/20 – 05/23/20	08/10/20 – 08/22/20	10/19/20 – 10/31/20
Group 3	03/16/20 – 03/28/20	06/15/20 – 06/27/20	09/14/20 – 09/26/20	12/07/20 – 12/19/20

pandemic. Has the need to stay at home changed your leisure experiences or the activities that you do?”, “What are some challenges you have faced in the pandemic?”, “What moments of joy have you experienced?”, “Are there leisure pursuits that are closed down in your area that you miss having access to?”, “Are you trying any new activities instead?”, “How, if at all, is your leisure helping you manage the ups and downs of the pandemic?” These questions were posed at the beginning of each blogging session with a new post written by one of the researchers. Participants often discussed their leisure and retirement experiences in relation to the pandemic thereafter. Throughout the data collection process, the research team closely monitored the blog by logging on every two to three hours between 8 am and 10 pm to read posts and comments that had been added during the time frame.

### **Data analysis**

Although data collection took place throughout 2020, only the blog posts from seven sessions (between March 16 to September 26) were analysed since the research team had to submit an abstract with preliminary findings in September to declare interest in submitting an article for the special issue. Between March and September, 28 active participants posted 159 posts and 333 comments on the blog (see [Table 2](#) for the breakdown of the number of posts and comments by group and session).

Blog posts and their associated comments were copied and pasted into a word document upon the conclusion of each blogging session. Each author read and re-read all blog posts to gain overall familiarity. Then, each author individually open-coded the first two sessions and met online to discuss codes. Any discrepancies in coding or interpretation of the data were discussed until all research team members agreed. Then, again, each author open-coded the remaining sessions and discussed the emerging coding framework and consolidated codes into larger categories until all blog posts, comments, and notes were represented. Data analysis was not initially undertaken with a specific theory in mind, but relevance of the SOC model became apparent through discussion as the data analysis progressed. Therefore, the coding framework was applied to three processes of the SOC model to describe how older adults were adapting during the first six months of the pandemic. The research team utilized notetaking during data collection and memo writing during data analysis to improve trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013).

### **Findings**

The findings indicated that participants made choices that maximized their resources to achieve well-being in the context of adversity. Beginning with participants’ initial reactions to the pandemic and the challenges that arose, this section will describe how

**Table 2.** Blog Posts, Comments, and Active Participants Per Session

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		
	Session 2	Session 3	Session 2	Session 3	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
Posts	22	21	36	24	13	24	19
Comments	75	101	48	31	6	25	47
Active Participants	12	12	10	6	6	5	6

they managed challenges while gradually adjusting to changing circumstances using the SOC strategies.

### ***The early days of the pandemic***

Participants described the early days of the pandemic as strange, surreal, and unimaginable. Philip remarked, "... less traffic on the roadways and very few individuals in grocery stores. These are very strange times ... I will certainly remember my last year (of full-time employment)." Participants addressed the uniqueness of the pandemic from community, societal and historical perspectives. Joseph's comment reflected surprise at the scope of its impact:

This damn virus certainly has been a shock! When news first came out, I thought the outbreak would turn out similar to SARS in 2003 or the "avian flu" ... I thought it would have no effect on the daily life of a person in the back-woods ... I was wrong.

Dramatic changes occurred at work for those still employed. Maggie, who worked at an assisted living facility, stated:

my job description has changed drastically from driving bus for residents' medical appointments, taking residents shopping and on outings and running errands to staying in and helping keep the residents' mental health up ... there is a lot of fear of the disease getting in the building.

The pandemic also meant unexpected changes in participants' plans for travel and family visits. Several described experiences similar to Jacob's: "We've cancelled a scheduled cruise in late April and one in September. No idea when we'll be able to cruise again." Similarly, Lillian returned home early from vacation:

We arrived in Palm Springs, California at the beginning of March and had plans to return home ... after the May long weekend ... by the time we arrived ... the (yoga/Tai Chi) classes had been suspended for health and safety reasons ... we ended up coming home on Mar 23.

Participants also described the cancellation of their social activities within their communities:

The [social club] of which I am currently president has canceled its meetings ... Car club activities and car shows have been canceled ... the regional Science Fair, at which I would have been a judge, has been canceled. (Jacob)

Overall, participants described the early days of the pandemic as surreal, with dramatic changes occurring in the working environment and the cancellation of plans and activities.

### ***The challenges of the pandemic***

Data suggested that the pandemic caused challenges derived from social distancing and stay-at-home orders. Jacob remarked, "Globally, we've been faced with the undeniable task of significantly changing our lifestyle, due to the Covid-19 pandemic." The pandemic created uncertainty for many and soon developed into fear, anxiety, and concern:

The real challenge from this "New Abnormal" is the fear I now feel resulting from the uncertain future we face ... It was difficult for me to accept, but feeling that I could be infected or



worse yet, infect someone else, forced me to admit to myself that for the first time in life, I was afraid of the future ... (Ian)

Participants' fear was not limited to contracting the virus themselves. Some felt responsible for protecting those who are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Fear, anxiety, and pandemic restrictions limited engagement in social leisure opportunities, specifically. For example, Alexander wrote, "I just know that I will be hesitant to go to a restaurant or bar in the near future ... Public gatherings in confined spaces will be frightening for a while."

After a few months of the pandemic, participants' fear and anxiety turned into a longing for the days when things were "normal." For example, Kevin mentioned:

While I was not out with friends all the time (before the pandemic), I do find the lack of shall we say "passive social contact" where you say hello and talk about the weather, getting out for dinner and that kind of thing, impacted me more than I expected.

Pamela commented, "One of the biggest challenges I am struggling with is not being able to see my adult children in person ... although we are in constant contact, it is not the same as in person."

Participants reported being unable to engage in their usual events and leisure activities. For example, Linda said, "Our Calgary Stampede was cancelled and that one really hit me hard ... I'm wondering what will there be to do ... ." Beyond the desire for specific activities, constraints to leisure participation impacted participants' sense of routine, freedom, and social connection. Kevin described his struggles:

I have found structure for my wife and I has been a bit of a challenge. We had a structure which worked for us. With the restrictions because of the pandemic our structure is messed up. Not only do we have to learn new ways of doing things but we also have to build a new structure for ourselves.

Jacob commented, "the desire for FREEDOM to do whatever you want to do have never loomed larger. I'm selfishly hoping that I can return to golfing and kayaking soon ... ." Furthermore, Ian described how his leisure experience is no longer the same:

I have not let this uncertainty stop me from being active and going out into the world, but it has changed the emotional experience of the activities ... after our 14-day self isolation period, we stepped outside and resumed our outdoor activities, but instead of feeling joy and kinship when we met someone on the walking path, we would quickly step off the path and distance ourselves as much as we could ... the whole experience is somewhat unsettling.

Challenges of the pandemic emerged as participants were unable to freely engage in the leisure activities of their choice. They lost a sense of structure and the social engagements they had previously enjoyed.

### **Selection**

Participants often stated the importance of staying busy during lock-down as their primary goal. Kenneth mentioned, "staying busy in a positive, purposeful way will be important." Rose wrote, "it's as though we need to do SOMETHING right now to



make the days past faster.” However, lock-down orders limited participants’ access to places where they used to engage in leisure, which eventually led to loss-based selection. Kevin, who had previously attended a gym, wrote, “Thank goodness the weather has warmed up, making running and cycling outside more of a realistic option ... I am doing some pull ups, decline push ups, bench stepping and some banding in the park after my runs.” Similarly, Maggie selected different leisure activities:

Group sports went out the window early. I was playing volleyball twice a week. As with the new way of life we have now, exercise becomes home bound. For me, when I am at home, it is walking and doing more weight workouts.

As participants encountered constraints to their typical leisure activities, they increasingly focused on what they were still able to do while following pandemic guidelines. Joseph, who was previously involved in many social activities, stated, “So I keep busy in my workshop ... I have overhauled the steering and suspension of my 4-wheel motor-bike, and most afternoons I spend an hour or so outside ... in the garden.” Rose added:

I’ve been reading everyone else’s blog posts and it sounds like we’re all in the same boat here. Favourite activities/trips have been cancelled or postponed. But everyone’s been “making do,” and it seems that most are finding ways to be active: walks, home gyms, exercise videos, yoga and so forth.

Participants were required to choose alternative activities to maintain their primary goal since those they previously enjoyed had to be curtailed due to the pandemic.

### **Optimization**

With facilities remaining closed and social distancing practices in place, participants strived to optimize their available resources to maintain benefits they used to gain from leisure pursuits. For example, Kevin, who could no longer go to the fitness centre, developed home-workout programmes:

I have also included some workouts from a program that was developed by the Royal Canadian Air Force in the 1950s for pilots and air crews to keep up their fitness. This program was designed with the idea that there would not be equipment and limited room ... I am finding I am really quite enjoying my new program.

Similarly, Mary mentioned:

Like a lot of other people, I decided to use some of the money I would have spent traveling this year to do some yard improvements ... I also washed the whole outside of my log house ... Sure looks nice and gave me quite a sense of accomplishment!

In addition to spending time doing yard work or home improvements, participants used their time to hone and broaden leisure skills and knowledge:

My photography and quilting hobbies have kept me very busy ... Physical activity, eating well and keeping my mind active are my top priorities these days ... Getting out for a vigorous walk, making better food choices and advancing my hobbies knowledge has become more important than ever. (Linda)

While some participants sought to optimize leisure to stay busy and tolerate the restrictions, others viewed their free time as an opportunity to increase or revamp valued

activities. Russell wrote, “... it (the pandemic) has been a time for me to look into doing some painting, and to arrange some new tunes for the musical group that I play with.” Mike articulated, “I took advantage of some of the leisure activities that opened up from libraries and universities, such as taking an online course from Yale and listening to a lot of audiobooks on my walks.” Thus, participants gradually realized these stressful times could be better managed by doing activities they did not previously have time for or developing leisure-related knowledge and skills.

After a couple of months of the pandemic, participants also described how they were conscious of avoiding sedentary leisure activities. Kenneth said, “We have made it a practice to not turn on the tv until after 7 pm and at least an hour of music usually easy dancing music.” Katherine also commented, “Being mindful of how very important our emotional and physical health is these days, we’re taking care to eat well, exercise and keep busy ... We’re very lucky to be in a situation that we feel we have choices, but so many do not.” Knowing that they had limited resources due to pandemic restrictions, participants optimized what they had to continue to lead their life in a satisfying direction and make healthy choices, even in difficult times.

### **Compensation**

Pandemic restrictions made it difficult to engage in social activities, yet participants developed new ways to do so. For example, Mike mentioned:

... all my social groups and activities were cancelled. So that led to some of them taking a new format ... I am on the board of a non-profit, so of course we just started to meet on Zoom ... I also joined a Zoom reader’s group and a bible study group, which are things I have found quite enjoyable and are leading to new relationships.

Ed also discussed online social activities: “As I write this, some friends are doing a free online concert ... they’ve been putting on free Facebook streams for a few weeks now, sometimes 3–4 per week.” Video chat technologies (e.g.) Zoom, Skype, and Facetime facilitated social activities. Mary articulated:

The biggest thing that has happened for me has been learning to use Zoom [with my social group] ... We do music together on Monday and visit places on Wednesday (virtually). We even rode the mules down the Grand Canyon one week! The other 2 days I lead them in a fitness class (since I’m an instructor).

In addition to adapting through technology, some participants compensated for the closing of leisure facilities by acquiring the means to participate at home or outdoors. For example, Kevin, who desperately missed going to the gym, articulated, “Early in the Covid 19 outbreak, my gym shut down. I found that hard and ended up outfitting my own little gym in my garage.”

Overall, participants seemed to have adapted to the pandemic. Maggie described her experiences across the pandemic, saying:

Looking back over the last several weeks, since the pandemic started, I feel like we have adapted well. The beginning was very fear based ... It was bizarre and unusual, like living through an apocalyptic movie ... Now, after several weeks, I feel like the majority of people have adapted well. We may not like our new normal and miss things we used to be able to do, but we have gotten into new routines.

However, they were concerned and frustrated about the ongoing challenges. Jacob mentioned:

We've all adapted to our surroundings and COVID-19 protocols since March and over the spring and summer. It's great to be outdoors for recreational activities, home improvements etc ... As we head into the fall and winter, it once again presents challenges of being limited to what activities we can participate in outdoors.

In general, while participants lost opportunities for social engagement due to the pandemic, they compensated for pandemic-related loss with new ways of doing leisure activities.

## Discussion

For the last decade, empirical studies utilizing the SOC model have mainly focused on the aging process and older adults' use of leisure-based selection, optimization, and compensation in the context of declining health conditions (i.e. internal challenges; Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Hutchinson & Warner, 2014; Nimrod, 2020; Son & Janke, 2015). This study is unique in that the SOC model was applied in the pandemic context (i.e. external adversity), attempting to broaden its applicability in various contexts. Overall, the SOC model highlighted strategies participants used to overcome challenges and continue valued activities during the pandemic.

### *The challenges of the pandemic*

In the early phase of the pandemic, pandemic restrictions brought about changes in participants' plans for retirement, trips, and family visits. Furthermore, most social activities were cancelled or restricted. These pandemic-related leisure constraints were particularly concerning as they also meant social isolation, which may contribute to numerous detrimental health conditions among older adults (Nicholson, 2012). Previous research suggests that leisure can contribute to older adults adapting to age-related changes (e.g. retirement, widowhood, chronic conditions; Broughton et al., 2017; Genoe et al., 2019; Janke et al., 2008). For example, Broughton et al. (2017) articulated how regular coffee gatherings among retirees served as an emotional outlet that enhanced their sense of belonging by promoting social engagement and connectedness. Likewise, it is well documented that leisure engagement contributes to physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being for older adults (Gibson & Singleton, 2012). Despite our concern, however, participants used SOC strategies to manage pandemic-related leisure constraints in their unique ways.

### *Selection*

Participants were resilient enough to reorganize and achieve their personal goals (i.e. staying busy and active), though their leisure selections were primarily loss-based due to pandemic restrictions. Moghimi et al. (2019) stated that "loss-based selection entails the adaptation of standards to new circumstances, reorganization of one's goal hierarchy, and searching for new goals that are attainable despite the experience of loss" (p. 85). Previous research suggests that elective-based selection, rather than loss-based selection, leads

to higher levels of health and well-being (Hutchinson & Warner, 2014; Janke et al., 2009). For example, loss-based selection often occurs within the context of chronic illness in later life, whereupon leisure pursuits are given up to accommodate changes in physical capacity (Genoe & Zimmer, 2017). In contrast, in this study, selection was not a result of age-related changes, nor was it a result of chronic conditions, however, participants acted even in limited ways that enabled them to experience a sense of satisfaction that they were doing what they could to maximize available resources during challenging circumstances.

### **Optimization**

Optimization involves perseverance in goal pursuits, even in challenging times (Freund & Baltes, 2002). Efforts are then focused on goals deemed most meaningful, such as maintaining independence among older adults with chronic illness (Genoe & Zimmer, 2017). Optimization occurs when older adults draw on their resources to accommodate losses (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996). Likewise, in this study, participants used available resources to achieve selected goals during this period. For example, when fitness centres were closed, participants developed home-workout programmes or engaged in physical activity outdoors when it was safe to do so. Unique to this study is that participants considered the pandemic period as a time for: (1) activities they were not able to do as much before the pandemic; (2) refining and honing leisure skills and broadening knowledge; or (3) trying new activities. Participants anticipated that the pandemic, unlike deteriorating health conditions, will end, sooner or later. Interestingly, participants were alert to avoid spending too much time on sedentary leisure as the pandemic continued. They were doing whatever they could (e.g. daily walks, reading more, developing new hobbies) to stay healthy both mentally and physically. Enhanced consciousness for health behaviour among participants could be due, in part, to acceptance of the pandemic as what they described as “the new normal.”

### **Compensation**

Compensation occurs when adaptations are made to maintain engagement in leisure (Lang et al., 2002), such as drawing on assistive technology or instrumental support from others (Kleiber & Genoe, 2012). For our participants, what could not be replaced was the social aspect of participants’ pre-pandemic leisure. In other words, older adults were unable to enjoy face-to-face, in-person interaction that often occurs during leisure due to pandemic restrictions. As such, compensation was used to accommodate these losses. In particular, participants reported that social interactions were now occurring online in order to compensate for the loss of in-person connection. For example, they engaged in online social activities such as a reader’s group, bible study, choir, and group fitness class. Participants took an alternative approach to achieve their selected goals, expressing joy in learning to use technology. This finding aligns with Nimrod’s (2020) suggestion that information and communication technology may facilitate adjustment to pandemic restrictions and enhance older adult’s subjective well-being. However, for some participants, online interaction was different from face-to-face interaction, and they reported missing in-person conversations. Nevertheless, technology was a resource that supported existing personal and social resources.

### ***Theoretical and practical implications***

Findings yielded both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the SOC model explained how leisure and technology both contribute to managing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of leisure and technology in a time of crisis in which socializing is limited provides evidence for their significance. This may explain how some older adults benefit from its use and adapt well in adverse situations more than others.

Leisure service professionals may draw on the SOC processes to support older adults' leisure engagement during challenging times. Practitioners can support older adults to identify meaningful leisure opportunities that may be selected when other options are no longer feasible due to external influences. They can also support older adults to identify internal and external resources that may be useful for optimizing goal attainment (Janssen, 2004; Kleiber & Linde, 2014; Provencher et al., 2018). Finally, professionals can provide leisure education to assist older adults to compensate for losses through technology use, particularly since, this study demonstrated that web-based video technology facilitated adjustment and enhanced subjective well-being among study participants (Nimrod, 2020).

Unfortunately, older adults have been identified as a group that has lower use rates of computers and the internet (Hetzner et al., 2014). Development and delivery of interventions to increase technology use among older adults could help to capitalize on this opportunity (Genoe et al., 2018). As Son et al. (2020) recommended, "professionals also might consider offering technology education classes and/or facilitate connections to government and nonprofit agencies who provide these services" (p. 290). Such practice will help older adults maximize existing personal and social resources.

### ***Limitations and directions for future research***

Out of 28 study participants, most identified as Caucasian ( $n = 23$ ). Future research should include a more racially diverse sample of older adults. Study participants were also a group of older adults who might be more proficient in the use of modern technology than average older adults. Thus, future research should further include older adults with less experience using online means to engage with others and provide similar or increased computer literacy support for participants. The current findings highlight the potential for expanding the application of the SOC model in the context of external adversities. Future research should continue such an endeavour.

### ***Conclusion***

The findings demonstrated that older adults successfully adapted to the pandemic utilizing SOC strategies. Specifically, participants in this study demonstrated their ability to make adequate choices, refine their skillsets and knowledge, and acquire new ways to maintain their well-being if necessary. This study contributes to existing literature by applying the SOC model in the context of external adversity derived from the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, findings suggest older adults' use of technology to connect with others and participation in leisure online presents an opportunity for a

new way of facilitating social engagement, especially for those who have limited access to places outside their homes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC) [Grant #: 435-2019-0303].

## ORCID

Wonock Chung  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7909-8084>

M. Rebecca Genoe  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2094-1732>

## References

- Baltes, P. B. (1997). On the incomplete architecture of human ontogeny: Selection, optimization, and compensation as foundation of developmental theory. *American Psychologist*, 52(4), 366–380.
- Baltes, P., & Baltes, M. (1990). Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation. In P. Baltes, & M. Baltes (Eds.), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences* (pp. 1–34). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511665684.003>
- Baltes, M., & Carstensen, L. (1996). The process of successful aging. *Ageing and Society*, 16(4), 397–422. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X00003603>
- Baltes, M. M., & Lang, F. R. (1997). Everyday functioning and successful aging: The impact of resources. *Psychology and Aging*, 12(3), 433–443. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0882-7974.12.3.433>
- Broughton, K. A., Payne, L., & Liechty, T. (2017). An exploration of older men's social lives and well-being in the context of a coffee group. *Leisure Sciences*, 39(3), 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2016.1178200>
- CDC. (2020, Dec 13). *Older adults: At greater risk of requiring hospitalization or dying if diagnosed with COVID-19*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>
- Chang, L. C. (2017). Relationships of providing and receiving leisure social support to stress in older adults. *Leisure Studies*, 36(4), 519–529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2016.1195432>
- Choi, W., Liechty, T., Naar, J. J., West, S., Wong, J. D., & Son, J. (2018). “We’re a family and that gives me joy”: Exploring interpersonal relationships in older women’s softball using socio-emotional selectivity theory. *Leisure Sciences*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2018.1499056>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., & Leiter, M. (2014). Burnout and job performance: The moderating role of selection, optimization, and compensation strategies. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 19(1), 96–107. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035062>
- Freund, A. M., & Baltes, P. B. (2002). Life-management strategies of selection, optimization and compensation: Measurement by self-report and construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(4), 642–662. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.4.642>



- Genoe, M. R., Kulczycki, C., Marston, H., Freeman, S., Musselwhite, C., & Rutherford, H. (2018). E-leisure and older adults: Findings from an international exploratory study. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 52(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.18666/trj-2018-v52-i1-8417>
- Genoe, M. R., Liechty, T., & Marston, H. R. (2019). Leisure innovation and the transition to retirement. *Leisure Sciences*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2019.1597791>
- Genoe, M. R., Liechty, T., Marston, H. R., & Sutherland, V. (2016). Blogging into retirement: Using qualitative, online research methods to explore leisure among baby boomers. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 48(1), 15–34. <https://doi.org/10.18666/jlr-2016-v48-i1-6257>
- Genoe, M. R., & Zimmer, C. (2017). Breathing easier? The contradictory experience of leisure among people living with COPD. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 41(2), 138–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924788.2017.1306382>
- Gibson, H. J., & Singleton, J. F. (2012). *Leisure and aging: Theory and practice*. Human Kinetics.
- Glock, A. (2020, Mar 29). *Now I finally understand what my grandparents knew*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/28/opinions/coronavirus-grandparents-glock/index.html>
- Hearst, M., & Dumais, S. (2009). Blogging together: An examination of group blogs. *Proceedings of the Third International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 3(1), 226–229. <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/13976>
- Hetzner, S., Tenckhoff-Eckhardt, A., Slysach, A., & Held, P. (2014). Promoting digital literacy for seniors, the aptitude of tablet-pcs. *eLearning Papers*, 38, 1–12.
- Hutchinson, S. L., & Nimrod, G. (2012). Leisure as a resource for successful aging by older adults with chronic health conditions. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 74(1), 41–65. <https://doi.org/10.2190/ag.74.1.c>
- Hutchinson, S. L., & Warner, G. (2014). Older adults use of SOC strategies for leisure participation following an acute health event: Implications for recreation service delivery. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 32(1), 80–95. <https://js.sagamorepub.com/jpra/article/view/3006>
- Janke, M. C., Nimrod, G., & Kleiber, D. A. (2008). Reduction in leisure activity and well-being during the transition to widowhood. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 20(1–2), 83–98. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j074v20n01\\_07](https://doi.org/10.1300/j074v20n01_07)
- Janke, M. C., Son, J. S., & Payne, L. L. (2009). Self-regulation and adaptation of leisure activities among adults with arthritis. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 33(2), 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924780902947058>
- Janssen, M. (2004). The effects of leisure education on quality of life in older adults. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 38(3), 275–288.
- Kivi, M., Hansson, I., & Bjälkebring, P. (2021). Up and about: Older adults' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic in a Swedish longitudinal study. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 76(2), e4–e9. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa084>
- Klaiber, P., Wen, J. H., DeLongis, A., & Sin, N. L. (2021). The ups and downs of daily life during COVID-19: Age differences in affect, stress, and positive events. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 76(2), e30–e37. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa096>
- Kleiber, D., & Genoe, M. R. (2012). The relevance of leisure in theories of aging. In H. Gibson, & J. Singleton (Eds.), *Leisure and aging: Theory and practice* (pp. 43–65). Human Kinetics.
- Kleiber, D. A., & Linde, B. D. (2014). The case for leisure education in preparation for the retirement transition. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 32(1), 110–127.
- Krendl, A. C., & Perry, B. L. (2021). The impact of sheltering in place during the COVID-19 pandemic on older adults' social and mental well-being. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 76(2), e53–e58. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa110>
- Lang, F. R., Reichmann, M., & Baltes, M. M. (2002). Adapting to aging losses: Do resources facilitate strategies of selection, compensation, and optimization in everyday functioning? *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 57(6), P501–P509. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/57.6.p501>
- Lifshitz, R., Nimrod, G., & Bachner, Y. G. (2018). Internet use and well-being in later life: A functional approach. *Aging & Mental Health*, 22(1), 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2016.1232370>



- Meisner, B. A., Boscart, V., Gaudreau, P., Stolee, P., Ebert, P., Heyer, M., Kadowaki, L., Kelly, C., Levasseur, M., Massie, A. S., Menec, V., Middleton, L., Taucar, L. S., Thornton, W. L., Tong, C., van den Hoonaard, D. K., & Wilson, K. (2020). Interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches needed to determine impact of COVID-19 on older adults and aging: CAG/ACG and CJA/RCV joint statement. *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue Canadienne du Vieillissement*, 39(3), 333–343. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0714980820000203>
- Moghimi, D., Scheibe, S., & Freund, A. M. (2019). The model of selection, optimization, compensation. In B. B. Baltes, C. W. Rudolph, & H. Zacher (Eds.), *Work across the lifespan* (pp. 81–110). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-812756-8.00004-9>
- Nardi, B. A., Schiano, D. J., & Gumbrecht, M. (2004, November). Blogging as social activity, or, would you let 900 million people read your diary. *Proceedings of the 2004 ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work*, 6, 222–231. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1031607.1031643>
- Nicholson, N. R. (2012). A review of social isolation: An important but underassessed condition in older adults. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 33(2–3), 137–152. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-012-0271-2>
- Nimrod, G. (2020). Aging well in the digital age: Technology in processes of selective optimization with compensation. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 75(9), 2008–2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbz111>
- Nimrod, G., Kleiber, D. A., & Berdychevsky, L. (2012). Leisure in coping with depression. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 44(4), 419–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2012.11950272>
- PHAC. (2021, Jan 18). *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Prevention and risks*. Public Health Agency of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html>
- Provencher, V., Carbonneau, H., Levasseur, M., Poulin, V., Filiatrault, J., Giroux, D., & Filion-Trudeau, M. (2018). Exploring the impact of a new intervention to increase participation of frail older adults in meaningful leisure activities. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 42(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924788.2017.1376176>
- Schmitt, A., Zacher, H., & Frese, M. (2012). The buffering effect of selection, optimization, and compensation strategy use on the relationship between problem solving demands and occupational well-being: A daily diary study. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 17(2), 139–149. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027054>
- Shahid, Z., Kalayanamitra, B. S., McClafferty, B., Kepko, D., Ramgobin, D., Patel, D. O., Aggarwal, C. S., Vunnam, R., Sahu, N., Bhatt, D., Jones, K., Golamari, R., & Jain, R. (2020). COVID-19 and older adults: What we know. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 68(5), 926–929. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.16472>
- Son, J. S., & Janke, M. C. (2015). Contributions of leisure-based selective optimization with compensation and leisure activity expenditure to the health of adults with arthritis. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 47(1), 34–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2015.11950350>
- Son, J. S., Nimrod, G., West, S. T., Janke, M. C., Liechty, T., & Naar, J. J. (2020). Promoting older adults' physical activity and social well-being during COVID-19. *Leisure Sciences*, 43(1–2), 287–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1774015>
- Stodolska, M. (2020). #Quarantinechallenge2k20: Leisure in the time of the pandemic. *Leisure Sciences*, 43(1–2), 232–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1774007>
- Strawbridge, W. J., Wallhagen, M. I., & Cohen, R. D. (2002). Successful aging and well-being: Self-rated compared with Rowe and Kahn. *The Gerontologist*, 42(6), 727–733. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/42.6.727>
- Whitehead, B. R., & Torossian, E. (2021). Older adults' experience of the COVID-19 pandemic: A mixed-methods analysis of stresses and joys. *The Gerontologist*, 61(1), 36–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa126>