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Psychosocial Engagement in Crisis: Role of Stress, Social Support and Meaning in Activity Choices During Lockdown

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Abstract

The COVID-19 lockdown changed people's lives suddenly and completely, forcing them to stay indoors and adjust to a new way of living. This study unfolds interesting facts about psychosocial engagement in medical crisis by exploring their leisure activity choices and the psychosocial factors influencing them—specifically, perceived stress, social support, and meaning in life. Research was conducted during the first phase of lockdown covering a total of 304 people across India, highlighted people's experiences within home restriction on the leisure activities and their relationship with other psychosocial domains through an online web-based survey. Common leisure activities included social media use (62.2%), cleaning the house (52.3%), communicating with friends and family (55.3%), and learning new skills (54.6%). Factor analysis identified three categories of leisure engagement: fun and social activities, learning and skill development, and self-care. Regression results indicated that perceived stress and social support significantly predicted engagement in fun and social activities, while sense of meaning in life was a significant predictor of both self-care and skill development. The study highlights the role of leisure as a coping mechanism during collective crises, illustrating how individuals recalibrate their behaviors in response to psychological needs and social contexts. The study helps to understand the dynamic nature of psychosocial engagement with respect to the gravity of stress, perceived social support, and meaning in life, facilitating navigation through rough phases of the collective natural adversity within defined safe spaces like home.

Keywords: COVID-19 Lockdown, Daily Activities, Leisure, Stress, Meaning In Life, Social Support.

Introduction

Novel Corona Virus Disease (NCOVID-19) outbreak began in Wuhan, China, and rapidly evolved into a pandemic on 11th March 2020 (1). The pandemic profoundly disturbed human lives in every aspect, be it physical, psychological, social, economic and political. The first case of the disease in India was reported on 30th January 2020, by 20th March 2020, highest number of cases were in the city of Mumbai, resulting in announcement of lock-down in major cities in state of Maharashtra. On 25th March, a nationwide lockdown was declared by the Government of India to contain the spread. The only known method to prevent the spread of this virus was social distancing, leading to a complete lockdown in the country, a period of enforced social and physical isolation, during which movement outside the home was limited, workplaces and educational institutions were closed, and daily social contact was drastically reduced, while only critical services remained open to the public (1). This unprecedented confinement created widespread stress and many felt trapped within their own houses as they struggled with high uncertainty, isolation and abrupt lifestyle changes, whereas to some it was a period of redefining their life goals, self-care, family reunion and time to rest (2–4).

According to general strain theory, negative experiences related to stress are critical determinants of problematic behaviors (5). While the outbreak itself was a substantial threat to health and safety, the lockdown restrictions left individuals grappling with how to occupy their time with the new restrictions. Thus, social media became a popular platform for coping with this collective uncertainty, with viral challenges and humorous content like such as counting comb teeth, rice grains (6). Along with this, there was also a surge of overwhelming number of webinars and online courses (7). People were trying to find out ways to deal with this sudden change by engaging in various types of activities. These

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varied responses certainly underscore the importance of person-environment interactions, highlighting individual differences in their susceptibility to various environmental factors. During the pandemic, a significant public safety threat, these influences were even stronger. Different theorists have tried to answer why people differ on how they deal with stressful situations in life.

During stressful situations people often adopt either problem focused coping strategies like gathering information, problem solving, decision making, action taking, or emotion focused coping strategies like ruminating, clarifying, seeking social support and validation, etc., while some people may use a combination of the two (2). In contexts where control over external circumstances is limited, leisure can function as a coping mechanism that regulates emotions, sustains motivation, and preserves well-being. Thus, leisure engagement provides an important window into how individuals psychologically negotiate stressful environments. Not only the dominant coping mechanisms, but some important needs like autonomy, competence and relatedness also motivate human behavior, which often encourage people to pursue hobbies, activities and engagements that fulfil one or more of these needs during restricted situations like the lockdown (3). Apart from this, people who are driven by a very strong sense of meaning in life, often avoid solely engaging in distraction and invest their energy into constructive and growth-oriented pursuits when they experience stressful situations that are out of control (4).

Existing research on activities during lockdown due to NCOVID-19 offers valuable insights on how these restrictions significantly influenced people's daily lives. One such study was conducted in Italy, suggesting that children's unhealthy lifestyles were on surge during this period contributing to significant weight gain (8). Home confinement led to marked changes in sleep-wake patterns, inactive lifestyle, excessive use of digital media, leading to high level of depression, anxiety and stress (9). As this large-scale lockdown was a novel concept globally, examining how people spent their time offers crucial insight into ways of coping with the lockdown and COVID (Corona Virus Disease) stress. The nature of activities one chooses to engage into, are key reflections of one's coping strategies. Patterson & and Coleman also observed that leisure activities and experiences are important coping mechanisms that help us to alleviate from day-to-day stress (10). They categorized leisure into three types: fun and escape, serious active and lastly, rest and support. Considering the diversity in leisure preferences, it becomes interesting to see why people prefer the activities they do, particularly during the periods of restriction offers a new lens to human behavior. The unanticipated lifestyle changes imposed by the pandemic brought significant disturbances in people's lives worldwide leading to heightened levels of perceived stress, isolation, economic instability and misinformation, etc. (11). Major sources of stress included concerns about family's health, closure of schools and colleges, loss of social connect, changes in routine, crowded homes, domestic violence, and increased domestic responsibilities (12). Such stressful situations increased risks of adoption of maladaptive ways of coping with the stress during the restrictions of pandemic. Another study observed that perceived stress was associated with coping strategies like seeking social support, avoidance, turning to religion, etc., the study also suggested higher stress during pandemic was associated with factors like female gender, low income, and excessive exposure to media and unreliable informational resources (13).

In face of such critical situation, individuals not only seek ways of coping with immediate stressors but also engage into deeper reflection of their values, priorities and overall sense of purpose. Thus, it is crucial to see the influence of meaning in life on interpretation and adoption to such challenging situations (14). A meaningful life is crucial in order to make a person cope better with difficult life situations (15). Meaningfulness in life can act as a protective shield against the negative effects of stressful life situations. A presence of meaning in life helps a person to view a stressful situation as challenging, and worthy of investment (16). It is observed that religious coping in low control situations is associated with higher meaning in life (15, 17–20). Having a meaning in life plays a crucial role in determining the ways in which someone deals with a situation with little control, like Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The two dimensions of Meaning of Life: search for meaning and presence of meaning may

influence coping behaviors differently. While presence of meaning acts as a moderator in during stressful situations, role of search for meaning is not yet clear.

Another important variable that is extensively studied in low control or crisis situations, is social support. Like meaning in life, social support too, plays a crucial role in dealing with crisis situations. Various researches have observed perceived social support as an important predictor of healthy ways of coping during critical situations of life (21, 22). The policies for dealing with COVID-19 have extensively focused upon enhancing social support (1, 11, 12).

Considering the overall situation during lockdown, it becomes interesting to investigate how people cope up with this challenging situation. The present research focuses upon understanding people's engagement in daily activities as their expressions of coping with the first wave of COVID-19 lockdown in India. Specifically, it explores role of meaning of life, perceived social support and perceived stress in predicting activity engagement. Understanding of the people's activity engagement could provide important insight into how people manage uncertain and low control situations by maintaining their wellbeing. The present study was designed to explore behavioral and psychosocial adaptations during the first wave of the COVID-19 lockdown in India. The study seeks to identify the most common activities performed during this period and classify these activities into meaningful categories of leisure engagement. Further, it investigates how perceived stress, perceived social support, and meaning in life—both presence and search—predict participation in these categories. Through this inquiry, the study aims to provide a conceptual understanding of how psychological resources shape behavioral responses and support well-being in low-control crisis situations.

Methodology

A cross-sectional self-report online survey was conducted to examine the nature of leisure activities during first COVID-19 lockdown in India and explore their relationship with perceived stress, perceived social support and meaning of life. Due to the national restrictions on mobility and closure during the COVID 19 lockdown, traditional methods of participant recruitments were unfeasible. Additionally, the survey did not rely on a well-defined sampling frame (23). A total of 304 participants reported to the online survey posted during 25th April to 1st May 2020 on various social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. All responses captured participants' real-time experiences while they were living under the first nationwide COVID-19 lockdown declared in India during this period. During this period, mobility was heavily restricted, workplaces and educational institutions were shut, and only essential services such as healthcare, groceries, and utilities remained operational. As all respondents were actively experiencing this phase when they completed the survey, no additional definition of "lockdown" was required within the questionnaire. Importantly, the study focuses exclusively on this initial period of strict confinement and does not include subsequent lockdown waves or phased relaxations. The survey was targeted towards individuals experiencing stringent conditions of first COVID-19 lockdown in India, thus, deliberately timed during 25th April to 1st May 2020 to capture responses after participants had settled into lockdown routines but before policy changes introduced relaxation measures that might confound activity engagement (24, 25).

Initially we adopted purposive sampling to identify the suitable participants, followed by snowball sampling snowball sampling was applied later by encouraging the participants to share the google form link within their social networks. Prior research supports use of non-probability sampling methods using online surveys through platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook for cost and time effectiveness, wider reach, higher response rate, time efficiency and ease of data management (26-29)

The google forms prepared for data collection allowed us an efficient participant recruitment, anonymity, and real time data monitoring while capturing time sensitive data under constrained conditions (28). An electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants in the beginning of survey, which included clear instruction of confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and right to withdraw which ensured the ethical considerations of online survey as per APA guidelines (30).

The eligible participants were adults above the age of 20 yrs with basic understanding of English. This ensured greater autonomy and minimal influence of authorities over leisure choices of the participants. Only those who provided their informed consent by clicking the agree button of the google form could proceed with the survey. The google form was configured to not proceed forms that did not select "agree to give consent" and not consider incomplete submissions for final synthesis. Individuals who were actively diagnosed with COVID-19 at the time of the survey, those under quarantine or having serious ill family members or recent bereavement were excluded to minimize potential deviations in data due to extraordinary stressors.

Leisure activities of participants were assessed using an 18-item structured questionnaire designed for this study which included various activities people perform during free time (eg. Cooking, cleaning, exercise/yoga, social media use, watching news, playing indoor games, learning new skills, office/study etc). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = never, 5 = Most of the time). Face validity was established by three domain experts.

Apart from this, Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS-10), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) were used for data collection (31-35). All scales have demonstrated good internal consistency reliability, test-retest reliability and construct validity (32, 36, 37).

Finally, data analysis was performed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques with the help of MS Excel and SPSS Software for Windows (IBM Corp) to manage, code and analyze the data (38). To examine the patterns of activities during lockdown, responses collected on a 5-point Likert scale were recoded into three levels of engagement in an activity (0-1: low, 2-3: medium, 4-5: high) (39). The underlying dimensions of activity engagement were further identified using an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with promax rotation (40). The kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were used to assess sampling adequacy and suitability of data for factor analyisis. Factors were retained based on Kaiser's criterion (eigenvalues >1) and a minimum factor loading threshold of 0.35 (41). Stepwise multiple regression was conducted to identify predictors of three activity engagement domains (42).

Results

This section presents the findings of the study in four parts. Demographic characteristics of the sample, patterns of activity engagement during the COVID-19 lockdown, factor analysis of daily activities, and, predictors of activity engagement.

The study sample included 304 participants, primarily young, educated and urban with most aged between 20–39 years (90.78%) and holding at least a graduate degree. The demographic profile of sample is summarized in Table 1.

Participants reported varied levels of engagement in 18 activities during the initial COVID-19 lockdown. Health-conscious behaviors were dominant like higher healthy eating (71.7%) and low substance use was lowest (3%), indicating a shift toward health-conscious behaviors. Popular activities frequency is shown in Figure 1 and percentage of popular activities is shown in figure 2. The complete distribution of activity engagement is presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample (N = 304)

Characteristics	**n (%)**
Total	304
Gender	
Female	188 (61.84%)
Male	116 (38.16%)
Other	0 (0.00%)
Highest Education	
≤ Graduation	156 (51.32%)
≥ Post Graduation	148 (48.68%)
Family Type	
Joint family	123 (40.46%)

Characteristics	n (%)
Nuclear family	183 (60.20%)
Having children at home	96 (31.58%)
Having elderly at home	71 (23.36%)
Occupation	
Working	182 (59.87%)
Student	113 (37.17%)
Unemployed	9 (2.96%)
Age	
20–29	195 (64.14%)
30–39	81 (26.64%)
40–49	15 (4.93%)
50–59	9 (2.96%)
60–69	4 (1.31%)

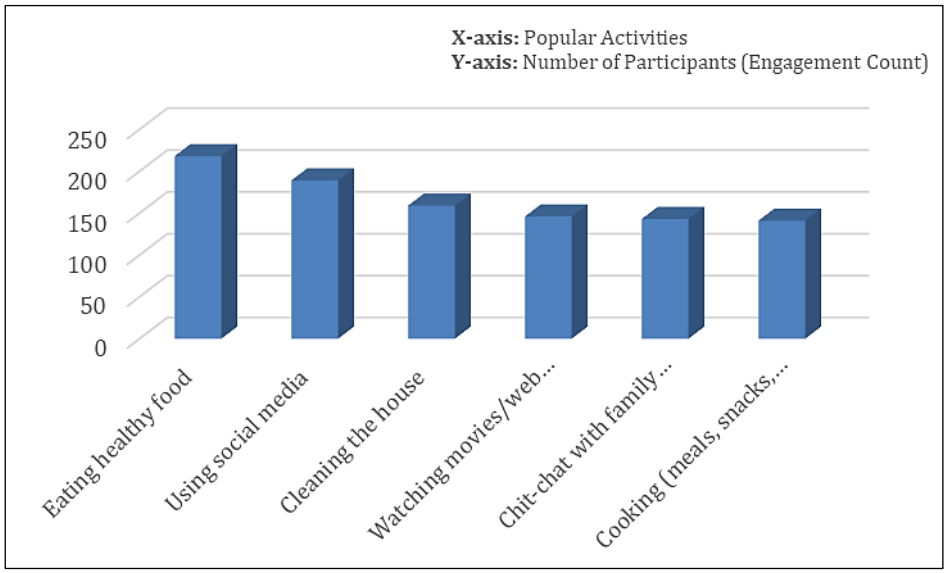

Figure 1: Count of Engagement in Popular Activities

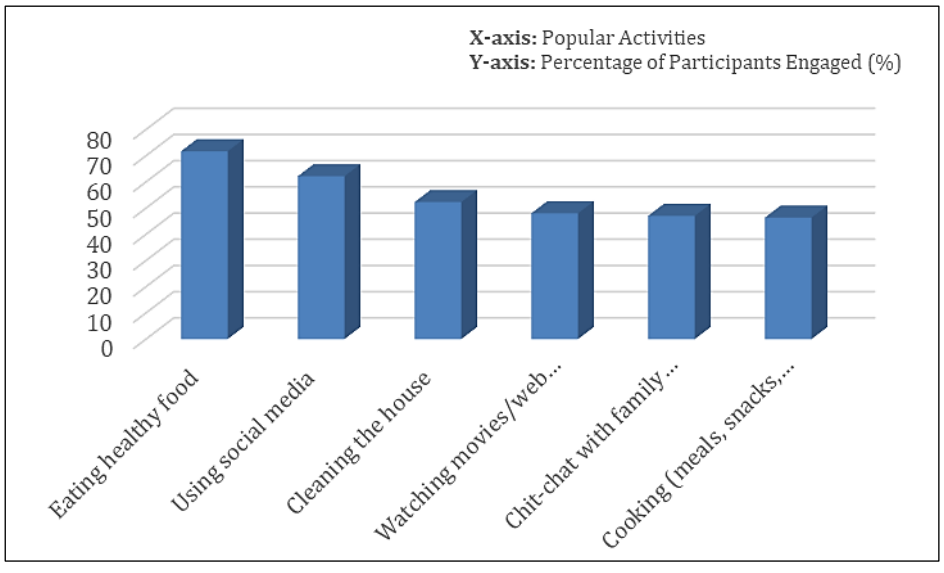

Figure 2: Percent of Engagement in Popular Activities

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Engagement in Activities During Lockdown (N = 304)

Activity	High n (%)	Medium n (%)	Low n (%)
Cooking (meals, snacks, etc.)	141 (46.4%)	116 (38.2%)	47 (15.5%)
Cleaning the house	159 (52.3%)	117 (38.5%)	28 (9.2%)
Physical exercise/yoga	127 (41.8%)	104 (34.2%)	73 (24.0%)
Physical grooming of self	102 (33.6%)	139 (45.7%)	63 (20.7%)
Prayers/meditation	121 (39.8%)	91 (29.9%)	92 (30.3%)
Eating healthy food	218 (71.7%)	75 (24.7%)	11 (3.6%)
Eating unhealthy food	24 (7.9%)	123 (40.5%)	157 (51.6%)
Using social media	189 (62.2%)	108 (35.5%)	7 (2.3%)
Watching movies/web series/TV serials	146 (48.0%)	125 (41.1%)	33 (10.9%)
Playing video games	33 (10.9%)	62 (20.4%)	209 (68.8%)
Consuming alcohol, smoking, or other drugs	3 (1.0%)	21 (6.9%)	280 (92.1%)
Listening to music	114 (37.5%)	156 (51.3%)	34 (11.2%)
Playing board/card/indoor games	59 (19.4%)	116 (38.2%)	129 (42.4%)
Chit-chat with family members	143 (47.0%)	146 (48.0%)	15 (4.9%)
Talking to friends/family via phone/calls	112 (36.8%)	168 (55.3%)	24 (7.9%)
Investing time in hobbies and interests	105 (34.5%)	143 (47.0%)	56 (18.4%)
Learning new skills	84 (27.6%)	166 (54.6%)	54 (17.8%)
Reading books	58 (19.1%)	141 (46.4%)	105 (34.5%)
Watching informational videos	109 (35.9%)	158 (52.0%)	37 (12.2%)
Watching news	96 (31.6%)	157 (51.6%)	51 (16.8%)

An exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring method using promax rotation revealed three dimensions of activity engagement: Enjoyment and socialization, skills enhancement, and lastly, self-care. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.74, suggesting reasonable factorability and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi 2$ (171) = 1132.683, $p < 0.01$), suggesting adequate correlation structure for factor analysis. The factor loadings with a cut-off point 0.35 and Kaiser's criteria of Eigen value greater than 1.00 yielded 3 factors for the present study (Table 3).

- **Enjoyment and Socialization** included activities such as using social media, communicating with family/friends, watching entertainment content, and casual interactions.
- **Skills Enhancement** encompassed activities like reading, learning new skills, and engaging in hobbies.
- **Self-Care** involved health-focused practices such as healthy eating, physical exercise, meditation, and grooming.

This categorization mirrors established frameworks in activity-based psychological research (10).

As shown in Table 4, descriptive analyses indicated age and gender variations in engagement patterns and psychosocial outcomes. Younger participants, especially females, reported higher perceived stress and activity levels, whereas older participants demonstrated stronger presence of meaning and self-care practices.

Table 3: Factor Loadings and Communalities from Principal Axis Factoring with Promax Rotation for Activities During Lockdown (N=304)

	Factor loading		
	Enjoyment and socialization	**Skills enhancement**	**Self-care**
Physical exercise/ yoga			0.550
Physical grooming of self			0.479
Prayers/ meditation			0.484
Eating healthy food			0.564
Using social media	0.580		
Watching movies, web series, TV serials, etc	0.515		
Playing video games			
Consuming alcohol, smoking or other drugs			
Listening to music	0.464		
Playing board games/ cards or other indoor games	0.412		
Chit-chat with family members	0.618		
Talking to my friends and family over phone call/video call/messaging	0.618		
Investing time in my hobbies and interests		0.731	0.353
Learning new skills		0.678	
Reading books		0.526	
Watching informational videos		0.425	
Sleeping (apart from daily 8 Hrs sleep)	0.376		
Watching news	0.452		
Eigenvalues	3.62	2.41	1.53
% of total variance	19.067	12.707	8.066
Total variance			39.840

Note: Factor loadings <0.35 are suppressed.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of activities by Age Group and Gender (N = 304)

Age (Gender)	**Soc.**	**Sk.E.**	**SC**	**PS**	**PSS**	**PM**	**SM**	**ML**
20–29								
Female	22.4 (5.21)	10.7 (3.91)	12.0 (3.97)	19.6 (6.72)	62.5 (12.4)	25.6 (6.30)	25.6 (6.49)	51.1 (8.32)
Male	22.4 (5.20)	11.1 (3.84)	11.6 (4.21)	16.3 (7.45)	63.3 (12.6)	26.3 (6.60)	25.4 (6.67)	51.7 (9.28)
30–39								
Female	21.1 (5.04)	9.40 (3.69)	12.2 (4.10)	15.6 (5.19)	64.8 (18.1)	26.5 (5.36)	26.1 (5.77)	52.6 (6.33)
Male	19.5 (6.19)	10.7 (4.01)	12.1 (3.77)	14.5 (6.07)	66.6 (13.2)	27.7 (4.82)	23.8 (6.19)	51.5 (8.27)
40–49								
Female	18.3 (6.18)	10.5 (4.74)	13.5 (3.92)	12.9 (4.25)	67.7 (18.7)	30.5 (4.22)	25.0 (8.46)	55.5 (10.9)
Male	18.0 (6.52)	10.2 (4.15)	14.4 (4.34)	17.0 (6.44)	66.2 (8.67)	29.2 (1.92)	27.4 (3.97)	56.6 (5.77)
50–59								

Female	20.0 (7.44)	9.25 (4.27)	8.50 (2.38)	16.0 (3.74)	65.3 (10.8)	26.5 (7.33)	25.5 (6.35)	52.0 (13.0)
Male	17.6 (5.13)	11.0 (3.16)	13.6 (3.29)	13.2 (4.27)	63.8 (10.3)	31.0 (2.74)	16.6 (7.23)	47.6 (8.56)
60–69								
Female	19.0 (0.00)	10.5 (3.54)	18.5 (0.71)	11.0 (7.07)	67.5 (14.8)	24.5 (13.4)	25.0 (8.49)	49.5 (21.9)
Male	22.0 (2.83)	11.0 (2.83)	19.5 (0.71)	14.5 (12.0)	74.0 (14.1)	32.0 (4.24)	23.5 (2.12)	55.5 (2.12)

Note: Soc.: Socialization; Sk.E.: Skills Enhancement; SC: Self-Care, PS: Perceived Stress; PSS: Perceived Social Support; PM: Presence of Meaning; SM: Search for Meaning; and ML: Meaning in Life.

Table 5 presents the results of stepwise multiple regression analyses that identified key predictors of activity engagement:

- Enjoyment and Socialization: Perceived stress emerged as a significant predictor in the first step ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < .01$). Incorporating perceived social support in the second step enhanced the model, with both variables contributing significantly ($\beta = 0.26$ and $\beta = 0.22$, respectively, $p < .01$), and an additional 4.2% of variance explained ($\Delta R^2 = 0.042$). The final model accounted for 3.8% of the variance in enjoyment and socialization activities ($R^2 = 0.038$, $F(2, 301) = 13.01$, $p < 0.01$).
- Skills Enhancement: In the first step, presence of meaning significantly predicted engagement in skills enhancement activities ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$). Adding search for meaning in the second step improved the model, with both predictors remaining significant ($\beta = 0.24$ and $\beta = 0.14$, respectively, $p < 0.01$), accounting for an additional 2.1% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.021$). The final model explained 5.4% of the variance in skills enhancement activities ($R^2 = 0.054$, $F(2, 301) = 12.26$, $p < 0.01$).
- Self-Care: Presence of meaning was a significant predictor in the initial step ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.01$). Adding perceived stress in the second step improved the model, with presence of meaning ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived stress ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.01$) both contributing significantly. This addition explained an extra 2.1% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.021$), with the final model accounting for 5.4% of the variance in self-care activities ($R^2 = 0.054$, $F(2, 301) = 14.06$, $p < 0.01$).

These findings suggest that engagement in meaningful and health promoting activities during lockdown was partly shaped by their psychological orientation and perceived emotional and social resources.

Table 5: Stepwise regression for Predicting activities during lockdown (skills-enhancement, leisure and socialization, & self-care)

Dependent variable	Step	Predictor variable	B	SE B	B	ΔR^2	VIF
Enjoyment and Socialization	1	(constant)	18.8	0.84			
		Perceived stress	0.156	0.045	0.19**		1.000
	2	(constant)	12.215	1.957		0.042	
		Perceived stress	0.212	0.047	0.26**		1.117
		Perceived social support	0.088	0.024	0.22**		1.117
R^2	0.038						
F	13.014**						
Skills enhancement	1	(constant)	6.609	0.977			
		Presence of meaning	0.15	0.036	0.23**		1.000
	2	(constant)	4.184	1.339		0.021	
		Presence of meaning	0.158	0.036	0.24**		1.008

		Search of meaning	0.087	0.033	0.14**		1.008
R^2	0.054						
F	12.257**						
Self-care	1	(constant)	7.584	1.014			
		Presence of meaning	0.171	0.037	0.26**		1.000
	2	(constant)	10.128	1.405		0.021	
		Presence of meaning	0.134	0.04	0.2**		1.149
		Perceived stress	-0.091	0.035	-0.15**		1.149
R^2	0.054						
F	14.057**						

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE B = standard error of B; β = standardized coefficient; ΔR^2 = change in R-squared; VIF = variance inflation factor; $p < 0.05$. $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and subsequent lockdowns had profoundly disturbed people's daily activities (13, 14, 43). This study examined leisure activities of people amidst the first wave of lockdowns- a period characterized with marked uncertainty and it further explores predictors of people's involvement in these leisure activities. For this enquiry, we surveyed people's participation in leisure activities during the first wave of pandemic to ensure that we can identify how they spend time under maximum uncertainty that first wave lockdown had to offer.

During the lockdown, people focused more on health focused activities, possibly because globally, fear of illness was high during this time. Lack of availability of house help and restrictions of mobility encouraged people to do housework themselves and fulfil their socialization needs via digital platforms. Further, the factor analysis revealed three distinct categories of leisure activities during lockdown: enjoyment and socialization, skills enhancement, and lastly, self-care. According to Lee & Tipoe, leisure during pandemic has similar categories which included, mass media consumption, subsistence, social, hobbies, physical exercise and volunteering (43). These findings show that in tough times, people choose leisure activities based on their emotions, daily needs, and available support system. Existing literature has focused highly stressful and uncertain phase of life. Leisure activities are closely associated with reduced anxiety and depression (44).

Activities like social media use, entertainment content consumption, family interactions were most common forms of leisure during lockdown these activities were loaded in the first factor-enjoyment and socialization with 19.07% of variance. This highlights upon the crucial role played by digital platform in maintaining social connections and emotional well-being during isolation of the lockdown and fulfilling people's need of socialization during the pandemic (45). Though this was a very good substitute for in-person interaction during this phase, its ability to compensate for real face to face interactions remains questionable. Substantial research has discussed about social media addiction during pandemic; further research needs to explore if this has led to sustained problematic media consumption after the pandemic. Also, digital well-being initiatives are recommended to be initiated by health ministries, and organizations working in healthcare sectors so that there is no excessive reliance on digital platforms for socialization activities. This can be a very important step in prevention of stress, addiction and misinformation due to excessive digital use.

Our second factor of skills enhancements activities included activities like learning, reading, watching informational videos, and third factor of self-care comprised of exercise, healthy eating, meditation, and grooming. Both of these reflecting a shift toward self-improvement and adaptive engagement. The unstructured time during pandemic was viewed as an opportunity for personal growth, while self-care behaviors served as protective strategies of optimizing health and resilience. Both self-care and skills enhancement activities are adaptive strategies that help people sustain through stressful situations, demonstrating that meaning acts as a protective, future-oriented mechanism encouraging

constructive adaptation during crises. However, research shows these activities are unevenly distributed among demographics (43). Employed individuals, homemakers, and caregivers have reduced leisure time due to additional responsibilities. Thus, it is essential to discover leisure patterns within structural inequalities, where these benefits are not equally accessible.

The second part of our work explores predictors of participation in leisure activities. For this purpose, we explored the influence of psychological factors viz., perceived social support, perceived stress, and meaning of life (presence of meaning and search of meaning) in this paper. The effects of predictor variables were moderate but significant.

Firstly, it was observed that perceived stress and perceived social support predict activities of enjoyment and socialization. People who experience more social support are likely to engage in social activities through which they can connect with their people especially during stressful situations. Reis et al., observed that shared fun yields more positive affect than solitary fun, emphasizing the inherently social nature of enjoyment (46). Also, when proactive strategies to deal with stress are difficult to use, people engage in avoidant and escaping coping strategies as a distraction from their negative feelings (14). In this context, avoidance and escape can come through the activities of enjoyment and socialization. Moreover, people with high social support are likely to seek connections while those with lacking it often tend to withdrawal and isolation from people during stressful life conditions (22). Interestingly, meaning of life did not predict activities of enjoyment and socialization, possibly because these are more about present pleasures rather than long term purpose. Though these activities aid to live through a crisis situation, they may lack lasting value if not converted into meaningful pursuits (45). Several studies suggest that leisure activities enhance well-being, but the poor get poorer perspective warns about engaging in short term relief gives birth to newer problems (44, 45, 47). During the pandemic, organizations like WHO and UNICEF too, were focusing more on genuine psychosocial support to people. For social connections to promote positive outcomes, these need to be positively engaging and meaningful, pro-social activities help build such connections and could support well-being by facilitating positive behavior changes (45). In today's era of social media, building genuine and meaningful social relationships and balancing perceived and received social support is very crucial.

The second factor, skills-enhancement are predicted by presence of meaning and search of meaning, indicating that individuals who perceive their lives as meaningful or are actively seeking meaning are more likely to engage in intellectually stimulating and growth-oriented pursuits, reflecting a constructive approach of dealing with uncertainties. This is supported by previous findings suggesting meaning in life promotes foal directed behaviors and self-improvement (48). It is interesting to see that neither perceived stress nor perceived social support could predict skills enhancement. One possible reason being lack of energy and motivation when under stress. Also, those with higher social support are likely to prefer social leisure over these pursuits. Engagement in skills enhancement is thus, more of an existentially motivated rather than a stress response or social pursuit.

Lastly, self-care is predicted by presence of meaning and perceived stress. Past research has proven that people who engage in spiritual and religious behaviors have deeper sense of meaning of life (49, 50). People who experience presence of meaning in their life are likely to involve into productive and essential activities like self-care. A greater sense of meaning in life is associated with high self-regulatory behaviors and more involvement in health behaviors (51). Due to the global pandemic, health and well-being was at priority as a way of keeping them safe from illness, and health behaviors acted as a coping mechanism to stress during pandemic (52). However, search for meaning did not predict self-care activities, possibly because people who are in search for a meaning direct their energy towards enhancing their skills and are more future oriented and goal directed rather than self-care unless its framed with their broader purpose.

Limitations

The study covered mostly urban digitally literate population who experienced lockdown within home without any death or dire infection causalities, excluding the people in institutional quarantines. Findings could be applied only to first phase when inconvenience was mostly lockdown

related. Also, it excludes the period when people started experiencing more sever effects of COVID with upsurge in death rate.

Implications

The present study offers valuable insights into understanding how individuals engage in leisure activities during crises, and role of social support, stress and meaning of life in these activities. Behavioral changes during crisis are often driven by both personal and social motivations (45). In light of this, we emphasize upon need to integrate social support and meaning focused strategies in mental health interventions across educational, public health and community policies. Mental health practitioners shall encourage balanced leisure plans that combine social enjoyment with skill building and self-care while also promoting guided digital well-being practices to avoid overreliance on escapist or passive coping. Furthermore, incorporating meaning-focused counseling can strengthen purposeful engagement, especially relevant during conditions that resemble lockdown-like crises—such as war, economic instability, or large-scale health emergencies—where unpredictability limits autonomy and heightens psychological vulnerability.

As a community, efforts to enhance genuine support system and an approach towards focusing on meaning of life shall be enhanced, so that people are better able to deal with adverse situations. Such approach aligns with the broader goals of promoting psychological well-being and collective social health.

For policymakers, these findings underscore the importance of designing crisis-responsive public health strategies that facilitate constructive and meaningful engagement during periods of restricted mobility. Future policies should prioritize the creation of accessible community platforms—both online and offline—that encourage skill-building opportunities, self-care routines, and socially supportive interactions. Investment in safe and equitable digital infrastructure, community-led learning initiatives, and health-promoting leisure programs can help citizens remain psychologically resilient when movement and autonomy are limited. Such measures are particularly crucial during lockdown-like crises—whether due to war, economic instability, or widespread health emergencies—where uncertainty heightens stress and feelings of loss of control. By integrating meaning-oriented and socially supportive approaches into public health planning, governments can promote not only crisis survival but also psychological growth and societal well-being.

Conclusion

This study highlights how people engaged in leisure activities during the first COVID-19 lockdown to cope with stress and uncertainty, influenced by stress, social support and meaning in life. Findings showed that leisure served as an important coping mechanism in restricted environments, taking three distinct forms: enjoyment and socialization, skills enhancement, and self-care. Enjoyment/socialization was linked to social support, indicating that people relied on emotional comfort and digital connections to manage isolation. While skills enhancement and self-care were driven by a sense of meaning in life, suggesting that a sense of purpose facilitated constructive and growth-oriented coping. Leisure served both emotional relief and personal growth functions during the crisis, thus, indicating that leisure cannot be viewed as a recreation. The study offers implications for practitioners and policymakers by emphasizing the need to promote meaningful, skill-oriented, and health-focused leisure opportunities during future lockdown-like conditions such as health emergencies, war-like disruptions, or economic instability. Overall, meaning of life and social support acts as a protective factor that motivates people for leisure activities that support both well-being and personal growth, even during collective uncertainties.

Abbreviations

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019, ML: Meaning in Life, MLQ: Meaning in Life Questionnaire, MSPSS: Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, NCOVID-19: Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019, PM: Presence of Meaning, SM: Search for Meaning, PS: Perceived Stress, PSS: Perceived Social Support, PSS-10: Perceived Stress Scale, SC: Self-Care, Sk.E.: Skills Enhancement, Soc.: Socialization.

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Author Contributions

All the authors have contributed substantially to the research and preparation of this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare no financial or personal relationships that could have inappropriately influenced this research.

Ethics Approval

Approval was taken from all the respondents before execution of the study.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors declare no use of artificial intelligence for writing the manuscript.

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