

Qualitative Study on Leisure Career Interruptions: The Experience of Married Mothers in South Korea

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Abstract

Existing research on leisure constraints has primarily focused on short-term barriers that affect most leisure participants. However, leisure career interruption represents a more long-term, macro-level challenge, particularly for serious leisure participants seeking to develop a sustained leisure path. This study aims to conceptualize leisure career interruption by examining the experiences of South Korean mothers and exploring how they experience, interpret, and adapt to these interruptions. Using in-depth interviews with 11 South Korean mothers, thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), identified five key themes: (1) life stage transitions, (2) social pressure to prioritize family roles, (3) sociocultural gaslighting and psychological thresholds, (4) lack of spousal support and a sense of deprivation, and (5) adopting new leisure activities as a coping strategy. The findings reveal that entrenched gender roles, cultural expectations, and psychological barriers significantly hinder women's ability to sustain their leisure careers. Despite these challenges, participants expressed a strong desire to resume or adapt their leisure pursuits. By recognizing serious leisure as essential to personal fulfillment, this study underscores the need for structural and societal support to help women navigate and overcome barriers to maintaining a leisure career.

Key words

Serious leisure, leisure career, leisure career interruption, women's leisure

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Introduction

Women's career interruptions have gained the attention of many in both the media (CBS News, 2023) and academia (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Scholars have long recognized that women tend to experience fragmented and nonlinear career paths due to various factors, distinguishing their career interruptions from those of men (Bian & Wang, 2019). Gender role expectations significantly shape women's career decisions, with marital responsibilities, childbirth, and family concerns compared to men (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

In a similar vein, women's leisure careers—structured, long-term engagement in leisure activities with personal or professional significance—should also be understood as a distinct process. While professional careers provide financial security, identity, and intellectual challenge (Blair-Loy, 2009), leisure careers contribute to personal fulfillment, enrichment (Stebbins, 2004), and mental well-being, including happiness (Lee & Hwang, 2018). Despite its significance, leisure careers are often interrupted, particularly for women, due to life circumstances such as caregiving responsibilities and societal expectations. These interruptions can lead to a loss of personal fulfillment (Humanoo, 2023), reduced well-being (Pressman et al., 2009), and fewer opportunities for skill development and social engagement (Li et al., 2022).

While much research has examined the development of leisure careers (e.g., Bartram, 2001; Kane & Zink, 2004; Kim et al., 2015; Raisborough, 2007) little is known about leisure career interruption—the prolonged withdrawal from structured leisure engagement. Although women's access to leisure has increased, providing greater opportunities for leisure career development (Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Statistics Korea, 2024), sustaining a leisure career remains particularly challenging for married mothers. Their decisions about leisure participation often prioritize the needs of children, spouses, and other family members over their own, mirroring the constraints that shape their professional careers.

Existing research on leisure constraints helps explain why women may limit participation in leisure activities (Oh, 2014). However, these constraints typically refer to short-term obstacles that individuals can manage through adaptation. In contrast, leisure career interruption involves prolonged disengagement, driven by sociocultural, systemic, and individual factors (Stebbins, 1992). Scholars have critiqued the leisure constraints model, arguing that it does not fully capture the deeper and sustained challenges that prevent long-term leisure engagement (Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). Since a leisure career requires ongoing commitment and in-

vovement, interruptions may stem from more significant structural and personal barriers than those typically described by leisure constraints theory.

Therefore, this study explores how married South Korean mothers experience and navigate leisure career interruption within the context of household responsibilities and gender roles. By conceptualizing leisure career interruption as a distinct phenomenon shaped by caregiving expectations and social norms, this research highlights its impact on women's long-term leisure engagement. Ultimately, this study aims to provide insights into overcoming these interruptions and sustaining meaningful leisure participation.

Literature Review

Serious Leisure and Leisure Career

Stebbins (2007) defines serious leisure as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling for the participant to find a leisure career through acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (p. 11). Unlike casual leisure, which involves activities that are immediately pleasurable and require minimal commitment—such as watching television or socializing—serious leisure demands perseverance, skill development, and a long-term investment of time and effort (Stebbins, 1992, 2007; Gould et al., 2008). Examples of serious leisure include competitive sports, advanced-level music performance, and long-term artistic or scholarly engagement. While both types of leisure contribute to well-being, serious leisure fosters sustained personal growth and identity development, whereas casual leisure primarily serves as a form of relaxation.

Closely tied to serious leisure is the concept of leisure career, which refers to the progressive, long-term involvement in a leisure activity. Stebbins (2007) describes a leisure career as the trajectory individuals follow as they advance through different stages of participation, from initial engagement to deeper commitment, potentially leading to a professional or semi-professional role. This progression involves acquiring expertise, developing a personal connection to the activity, and gaining recognition within a particular leisure domain (Haworth & Lewis, 2005; Stebbins, 2015). Scholars have identified various stages of leisure career development, such as initiation, growth, establishment, and maintenance, though individual trajectories may vary based on personal circumstances, activity type, and cultural context (Bartram, 2001; Veal, 2017).

However, despite their commitment and investment, serious leisure participants—particularly women—often encounter significant disruptions in their leisure careers due to life transitions such as marriage and motherhood (Henderson et al., 1996; Shaw, 1994; Smith, 2023). The responsibilities of caregiving and household management can impose constraints on time, energy, and resources, leading to what can be termed leisure career interruption. This study seeks to examine how married South Korean mothers experience and navigate these interruptions, shedding light on the structural and personal barriers that hinder their long-term leisure engagement. By doing so, it aims to deepen the understanding of leisure career interruption and explore ways to support women in maintaining their serious leisure pursuits.

Leisure Career Interruption and Leisure Constraints

While prior research has largely focused on how leisure careers develop, fewer studies have examined how they are interrupted. Leisure career interruptions refer to disruptions in an individual's engagement in serious leisure activities, often due to external factors such as life transitions, work obligations, or societal expectations (Kim et al., 2015). These interruptions can be particularly pronounced for women, who historically have faced gendered barriers in sports and leisure activities (Deem, 1982; Henderson, 1994; Lamont et al., 2014; Rich et al., 2022). In patriarchal societies like South Korea, women frequently experience career interruptions—both in employment and leisure—following life events such as marriage and childbirth due to family caregiving expectations (Kim et al., 2015).

Leisure constraints, on the other hand, refer to the barriers that limit or hinder an individual's ability to participate in leisure activities, shaping both the frequency and quality of engagement. These constraints can emerge from psychological, social, or structural factors that prevent individuals from accessing or fully enjoying leisure. According to Crawford and Godbey (1987), leisure constraints can be categorized into three types: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. Intrapersonal constraints are psychological barriers, such as a lack of motivation, low self-efficacy, or perceived incompetence in a particular activity (Jackson, 2005). Interpersonal constraints involve social limitations, including family responsibilities, societal expectations, or a lack of support from spouses and peers (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993). Structural constraints, on the other hand, refer to external limitations such as financial restrictions, time scarcity, or limited access to recreational facilities (Crawford et al., 1991; Alexandris & Carroll, 1997).

While leisure constraints can restrict leisure participation at any stage of engagement, leisure career interruptions represent a more profound and long-term disruption, particularly for individuals engaged in serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007). Unlike temporary leisure constraints that can often be negotiated or adapted to (Jackson et al., 1993), leisure career interruptions involve prolonged withdrawal from an established leisure trajectory due to life transitions, systemic inequalities, or deeply embedded sociocultural norms (Kim et al., 2015). Scholars have argued that women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, often experience cumulative constraints that compound over time, making sustained leisure participation increasingly difficult (Shaw, 1994; Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). These constraints are not only shaped by individual choices but are also deeply influenced by patriarchal structures that define caregiving as women's primary role, limiting their autonomy in leisure engagement (Yerkes et al., 2020).

Understanding the distinction between leisure constraints and leisure career interruptions is essential for addressing gender disparities in leisure participation. While traditional constraint negotiation strategies (such as time management or social support) may alleviate short-term constraints, they may not be sufficient to overcome the systemic and cultural barriers that lead to long-term career interruptions in leisure (Henderson & Hickerson, 2007). This distinction highlights the need for policy interventions and structural changes to ensure more equitable access to leisure, particularly for women navigating multiple responsibilities at home and in society.

In short, leisure career interruptions are typically long-term and often linked to major life events, leading to a disruption or cessation of participation in serious leisure activities. In contrast, leisure constraints encompass a wider range of barriers that may or may not result in a full discontinuation of leisure activities. Understanding this distinction is crucial for addressing the challenges individuals face in maintaining their leisure careers and developing strategies to support sustained participation, particularly for women navigating multiple roles in family and society.

Leisure of Married Mothers in South Korea

In East Asia, Confucian ideology has historically shaped hierarchical relationships and traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's responsibility for household labor and childrearing. As a result, married mothers often prioritize caregiving over personal leisure, limiting their participation in leisure activities (Ho,

2022; Miller & Brown, 2005; Moon et al., 2005). South Korea, deeply influenced by Confucian values (Deuchler, 1992; Rozman, 2002), reflects these patterns, with statistical data showing that married mothers engage in significantly less leisure time than men (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2020).

Research suggests that this lack of leisure time can negatively impact family cohesion and well-being. For instance, Byun (2000) found that housework-related stress among South Korean mothers reduces family harmony. Additionally, the types of leisure activities women engage in shift over their life cycle, with younger mothers focusing on family-oriented leisure and older women participating more in physical activities (Pyo, 1997; Rapoport & Rapoport, 2019). However, even as their children grow older, women continue to experience constraints in personal leisure participation, often influenced by societal expectations and cultural norms (Yoon, 2008).

The literature also highlights the marginalization of married mothers in leisure participation due to childrearing responsibilities. Park et al. (2016) emphasized the need for policies that support mothers' leisure engagement and create a socio-cultural environment that values their participation. Despite its significance, research on South Korean mothers' leisure remains limited (Kim & Kwon, 2019; Ko et al., 2010). Most studies focus on activity types, time allocation, financial costs, and motivation (Ahn & Song, 2021), with little attention given to the challenges of sustaining a leisure career over time.

While research on work-family balance among married mothers is extensive, studies addressing work-leisure balance are scarce. Park et al. (2015) found that Korean married employees who achieved better work-leisure balance reported higher marital satisfaction. However, the role of personal leisure in married mothers' overall well-being remains understudied. Expanding this scope to include the challenges and interruptions they face in maintaining a leisure career is essential.

Given that leisure participation is linked to well-being and marital satisfaction (Miller & Brown, 2005), understanding leisure career interruption among South Korean mothers is crucial. Existing literature indicates that leisure constraints alone do not fully explain the complexity of this phenomenon, as leisure career interruption involves prolonged withdrawal influenced by multiple social and personal factors (Kim & Hong, 2020; Yerkes et al., 2020). Building on these insights, this study examines how South Korean mothers who have engaged in serious leisure experience interruptions in their leisure careers. Specifically, it explores the extent to which their leisure activities are disrupted, the underlying causes, and the broader implications of these interruptions in their lives.

Methods

To achieve the goals, the current study employed qualitative methods. Specifically, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used to explore South Korean mothers' experiences of leisure career interruptions. This approach is suitable for the study as it allows for the identification and interpretation of recurring themes within participants' narratives, providing insights into shared experiences and perspectives.

Interviewees and Research Context

Snowball and purposeful sampling methods were employed to recruit the interviewees (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Snowball sampling, in which existing participants identify and refer others who meet the study criteria, proved especially effective in reaching individuals with relevant experiences for this research. The purposeful sampling method was used to find married mothers who had experienced an interruption of their leisure careers. The researchers purposefully recruited married women who had developed and stopped leisure careers at any point in their lives, regardless of whether marriage was the cause of the interruption. The research participants were primarily selected based on their engagement in sports or physical activities during their leisure time. As part of the recruitment process, the researchers asked potential participants about their previous leisure experiences, including the duration and level of involvement, to determine their qualification for leisure career interruption. This approach ensured that participants understood the concept in relatable terms without assuming marriage as the sole factor. The initial interviewees were recruited using the researcher's personal and professional connections. Then, the initial interviewees provided contacts for further interviews.

In total, 11 women were interviewed. All had been heavily involved in physical activity as a serious leisure, to the point where it had developed into a leisure career, for at least 3 years in the past, based on Kim's study (2019), but either had experienced or were experiencing the discontinuance of their leisure career. The age of the interviewees ranged from 35 to 50 ($M = 42.09$), which can be identified as middle adulthood. All interviewees were married, had at least one child, and lived in an urban setting. The activities they had participated in varied, as shown in Table 1. The duration they were involved in the serious leisure activity ranged from 4–10 years. To protect the private information of the interviewees, Korean pseudonyms were created and used in the transcript throughout the analyses. The

demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Interviewee Profile

Name	Age	Occupation	Number of Children (age)	Leisure Career (duration in years)
Sori	39	homemaker	1 (3)	golf (4), snowboard (9)
Suji	48	after-school teacher	2 (17, 12)	squash (4), taekwondo (2)
Yunmi	45	freelancer	1 (4)	dance sports (5)
Jimin	50	employee	1 (13)	running, yoga, swimming (10), snowboard (5)
Suyeon	35	startup CEO	2 (4, 6)	tennis (10)
Kyungjin	43	professor	2	golf (4), swimming (10)
Jiyoung	38	researcher	1 (2)	yoga (10), Pilates (10)
Sujeong	46	homemaker	1 (14)	ski (10), inline skating (10)
Hyemie	36	homemaker	1 (5)	snowboard (10)
Jueun	40	instructor	2 (4, 7)	dance sport (8)
Saerom	43	PE instructor	1 (14)	tennis (10), badminton (new, 4)

Note. Most leisure careers in the table were those that had been interrupted, while “new” refers to a leisure activity that individuals restarted and developed into a career.

The researchers selected women in South Korea as participants because in this country, women and men have distinctive gender role expectations with regard to family and within society, according to a patriarchal tradition (Cho & Jang, 2021). Despite the dramatic economic development, westernization, and recent reformation of the patrilineal system, women and their roles continue to be undervalued due to the long Confucian tradition embedded in this society (Lee, 2016). Therefore, life experiences and family responsibilities are typically different for women and men, particularly during early and middle adulthood. For example, women are mainly responsible for childcare and housework, even for dual-earning couples. Over decades, women have gained access to leisure at a level somewhat close to men, but the quantity and quality of leisure have been deprived, compared with men (Kim & Hong, 2020).

Data Collection and Analyses

To collect data, in-depth interviews were conducted. These interviews allowed

participants to provide explanations and opinions on the topic and enabled the researchers to explore further a complex phenomenon that may often go unseen (Smith & Osborn, 2015). All interviews were conducted one-on-one, apart from one group setting with two participants, using semi-structured interview technique. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Korean.

The interviews started by asking the participants to share their overall experience of participation in any activities that could be considered serious leisure. The interviewees told stories of how they had become involved in the activity, developed a leisure career, and discontinued the activity. Probes were used to elicit discussion regarding the surrounding circumstances in which those experiences occurred and the participants' feelings. Then, they were asked how the experience has affected their lives. Next, the researchers asked them what a leisure career and its interruption meant to them. Lastly, they were asked how they would resume their leisure career if they wanted to.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and was conducted virtually via Zoom. With participants' permission, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), following an iterative coding process. Three researchers manually conducted multiple layers of coding, identifying patterns in how participants described their experiences of leisure career discontinuance. The initial codes and labels were developed based on recurring patterns in the data. These codes were then reviewed, compared, and refined through discussions among the researchers to generate the final themes. Throughout the coding process, member checks were conducted with participants to ensure accuracy and credibility.

To ensure the credibility of our analysis and minimize bias, we followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). An iterative approach was adopted, continuing interviews until we achieved sufficient richness. Given our homogeneous sample of eleven participants (i.e., Korean women in metropolitan areas with interrupted leisure careers), we were able to generate meaningful themes. To enhance validity, member reflections and peer debriefings (Creswell & Poth, 2017) were used. Three researchers conducted independent coding, followed by discussions to refine themes. Analyst triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) ensured confirmability by involving multiple peers in reviewing findings to identify potential biases and blind spots.

The research team brings diverse experiences with family structures and caregiving. While most researchers are married with children, one member is not. These perspectives enriched reflexive discussions on how researcher backgrounds

might influence data analysis. Shared experiences of parenthood provided insight into participants' challenges, but critical discussions ensured consideration of diverse family dynamics. Interview notes, team debriefings, and open discussions helped manage potential biases. Open-ended interview questions and an iterative coding process maintained focus on participants' narratives, ensuring findings were grounded in their accounts rather than pre-existing assumptions.

Findings

From the interview data, the researchers identified five themes regarding the South Korean married mothers' leisure career interruption phenomenon: changes due to women's life stage, social pressure on women's priorities, cultural gaslighting and psychological threshold, lack of spousal support and sense of deprivation, and adoption of a new leisure activity as a breakthrough strategy. These themes illustrate how the women experienced their leisure career interruption and how they interpreted the experience in their lives.

Changes Due to Women's Life Stages

According to all interviewees, leisure career interruption initially occurred because of marriage or pregnancy. They quit their leisure activities when they got married or started planning to have a child. Then, their leisure career interruption continued even after childbirth because of the burden of childcare until the child became old enough to go to daycare or kindergarten.

Three interviewees quit their leisure careers when they got married because it conflicted with their husband's interests. Sujeong said, "When I met my husband, I was around 30 and had skied all my life, but I couldn't continue because he did not ski at all. He thought it was dangerous, so he had no interest in it. He still thinks this." Other interviewees felt that more responsibilities as a wife were added on top of their other priorities. Hyemie mentioned, "The biggest reason is... I got busy with the wedding and meal prep, and my husband was very busy at that time."

Even if they continued their leisure career for some time after marriage, they gradually discontinued it because of housework and family plans. Saerom said, "After I got married, I had more and more work to do. Before marriage, I lived with mom...I could just go to work, and that was it. But later [after marriage], I had to cook and take care of all the housework." She added, "I got married, then

had two miscarriages, so I couldn't do anything physical." In general, women's discontinuance of a leisure career, particularly physical activities, appears to be inevitable because of the physiological demands on, and changes in, their bodies before and during the pregnancy. This seems to be the case even more so for Korean women, as the interviewees discussed the Korean social belief that pregnant women should reduce the intensity of physical activities or quit such activities altogether. Sori said:

I quit snowboarding right away because I got married late, at 34... So when I got married, I started thinking I needed to get pregnant right away. I continued golfing a little bit [after getting married] but I quit because I wanted to be super careful... because I wanted to get pregnant.

Many of them recalled that they had experienced postpartum depression to a certain extent and were eager to resume their leisure career so that they could relieve stress and have time to themselves. However, in reality, they were unable to do so as they had to recover physically from childbirth, breastfeed, and take care of a newborn baby. Hyemi explained her frustration with the change and the stress ensuing from childbirth, and her lack of leisure:

To be honest, my life pattern changed, and I had to stay home with the baby all the time. It was just so hard. Mentally hard. And my body changed [after childbirth] and... because I couldn't do it [leisure] anymore I got stressed... It was just a bad cycle.

The stress from the sudden life change, combined with the lack of their favorite leisure activity, made them feel deprived of their own personal life. Jimin said, "My life was all about being a mom at that time. My personal life wasn't there. I gave up my happiness and thought there is no life for me except being a mom." Other interviewees described the experience as mixed; they were happy to be with their baby, but it was a 'sad,' 'challenging,' or 'lonely' time as well.

Social Pressure on Women's Priorities

The interviewees confirmed that Korean women are expected to prioritize taking care of their family and housework over taking care of their own well-being. They are expected (even forced) to sacrifice their well-being and happiness for the sake of their family responsibilities as a wife or mother. Jiyoung explained that her top priorities were taking care of her baby and housework. The next priority was

her work, and the lowest priority was her well-being and leisure. Therefore, she was too careful/afraid to even tell her spouse and parents that she wanted to take care of herself. She stated:

For now, I'm conscious of wanting to do something for myself. It's not my priority now. I know I want to do it again, I really enjoy it, but it's not my priority in my current life. I can barely take care of the top priority, so I can't really do it now.

If they decide to pursue their own well-being, they are often criticized by their family, friends, or co-workers. Jiyoung explained, “Mom said, ‘You’re busy with work and don’t even have time to play with your kid, but you want to go and enjoy yourself.’ She meant I needed to spend more time with my kid if I had that kind of free time.”

The social pressure on married mothers’ priorities and the expectation of sacrifice results in feelings of guilt and anxiety when they want to pursue their own well-being and spend time resuming their leisure careers. The social perception of a married women who prioritize their own well-being is that of a selfish and ego-centric mother, particularly when they have a young child. This perception may be stronger for working mothers. Jiyoung said, “Both of us [her and her husband] have work to do and to him, I always look selfish.” Because of this perception, women may feel lonely, thinking that they are the only ones responsible for all the work at home. They do not expect their family to understand their desire to resume their leisure career. Jiyoung continued to explain her situation by saying, “I can’t enjoy peaceful yoga even for 30 minutes... feeling so guilty. It’s been okay somehow, but now my body doesn’t feel good. What is this? It’s so sad.” And, “I can’t explain every time. They won’t understand me.” Because of the expectations and burden placed on them, they felt alone and unable to resume their leisure career. Therefore, leisure career interruption tended to persist at least until their child became old enough to go to childcare or kindergarten.

Sociocultural Gaslighting and Psychological Threshold

The data showed that the interviewees experienced gaslighting to some extent. This experience led to the generation of a psychological threshold that prevented them from resuming their leisure career. Gaslighting refers to mental manipulation aimed at making victims feel insane, creating a surreal interpersonal environment (Sweet, 2019). Gaslighting is effective “when it is rooted in social in-

equalities, especially gender and sexuality (Sweet, 2019, p.852).” In light of this concept, in the current study, gaslighting can be regarded as an act of institutional abuse that is unwittingly inflicted on women by those with more power in the family (e.g., by men or the older generation), particularly in a country like South Korea, reinforcing household gender role expectations and putting the burden of childcare and housework on women. The characteristic of gaslighting is the manipulation of individual emotions, thoughts, and activities covertly, not in an explicitly coercive or threatening manner. In other words, victims of gaslighting often doubt their judgment as a result. According to theorists (Ruíz, 2020; Sweet, 2019), control using gaslighting can often be applied against women within disproportionate power relationships (e.g., mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships in Korean society).

The interviewees were well aware of the social pressure and expectations on them as wives and mothers. In addition, they understood that these gendered expectations were unfair and not good for their well-being but did not resist. Instead, they tried to legitimize the expectations and find a way to accept them, to avoid potential conflicts with their husband or other family members (e.g., their mother, mother-in-law). Consequently, instead of advocating for their well-being, they tended to comply with the mainstream gendered expectations. They thought that it was for their family and okay to give up their leisure career and well-being.

Some interviewees mentioned that their mothers or mother-in-laws expressed negative opinions on their leisure careers explicitly and implicitly. For example, Suyeon said, “Both moms [my mother and mother-in-law] keep saying I’m crazy. ‘You’re crazy to keep playing [tennis] every day.’” Because of the continuous pressure and expectations as to what they could or could not do as wives and mothers, they firmly believed that the sacrifice of their leisure was the optimal choice not only for their children but also for themselves. Although the reality is that the sacrifice is mainly for their children’s well-being, the gaslighting made them firmly believe that they could not continue their leisure career for themselves. Therefore, they took for granted that they should sacrifice their leisure for the sake of themselves, their children’s well-being, and their family’s peace. For example, Jueun explained the implicit pressure from her in-laws as follows:

My parents-in-law did not like me doing it at all and were worried about me. They are pretty old and conservative. They don’t really say it anymore, but I restrained myself from doing it. I quit for myself; I became careful of myself...

In consequence, the gaslighting seemed to create a psychological threshold (or “Moontuk” in Korean) in these women. In this context, the threshold in Korea can be understood as the sense of guilt, anxiety, self-consciousness, and discomfort that mothers may experience when they are apart from their children, particularly when pursuing their own leisure activities. According to the interviewees, this psychological threshold prevented them from resuming their leisure careers. They were conscious of what their spouse and family would say and had to be careful to avoid a potential conflict. Hyemie said, “My in-laws live close to the mountains, so my husband said I could go night skiing after I put the baby to sleep, but it’s so tiring...and I can’t say I will go by myself; I just can’t say that to them.”

The threshold can be described as an invisible door or screen the women have created because they had been told that they should sacrifice their favorite leisure activity and well-being for the sake of their children and family. They seemed to be afraid to step beyond that door because they thought it might have a negative effect on their child and break the peace in the family. Jimin recalled the way she rationalized her leisure career interruption as follows:

It was just so hard! So I kept telling myself... It’s all for my kid. It’s not just me having a hard time. All moms in the world go through this same thing. If I thought more of myself, I would get some help, but it would change my kid’s life quality. My decision would affect my kid’s life, right? So it got me thinking... “ah, this is the time I need to sacrifice for everyone’s happiness.”

Therefore, they had to endure the current challenges and the lack of leisure careers. Sujeong explained, “I have five more years to go. Then, I will spend all my time for myself. I’m just enduring this time and waiting [until the child grows].”

Another side effect of gaslighting is that individuals often blame themselves for career interruptions. For example, Jueun said she did have the time and could have continued her leisure career if she had been determined; however, she now felt lazy. “I know it was just an excuse,” although she was tired from all the housework.

Lack of Spousal Support and Sense of Deprivation

According to the interview data, the lack of support from their spouse was

evident. This is largely due to the imbalance within family relationships and mainstream gender expectations, which are different for women and men (Lee, 2016). The interviewees referenced the mainstream gender expectations prescribing that wives are supposed to take care of babies and young children as well as do the housework while husbands are just supposed to ‘help’ even if both work full-time. Given that Confucianism has historically pervaded Korean family structure and dynamics, there is still a general consensus that husbands are responsible for work external to the home and should be the main income source for their family, while wives are responsible for the housework (Lee, 2016). This belief has long been prevalent in Korean society and has contributed to the imbalance in family duties.

Because of the different role expectations for women and men in the traditional family, it seems that only women experience leisure career interruptions due to marriage and childrearing; men may not. Many of the interviewees stated that their husbands rarely support them enough with childcare or housework and, instead, continued their own leisure activities. Because their husbands could continue leisure careers while they could not, the interviewees called their circumstances “depressing” and “stressful”. Saerom mentioned, for example, “My husband kept doing it [leisure activity] regardless. Seeing him doing it made me feel so depressed!” Jimin taught her spouse golf. Then, “he would go golfing on weekends! By himself! Whether he stayed home or not, he didn’t help anyway. I just remember I was always taking care of the kid by myself.”

Thus, the women felt deprived of their leisure in comparison to their partners. Further, they felt that their well-being and happiness were ignored by their loved ones. Jueun found that, “He would go by himself. He really cares about himself. I sacrificed myself, but he doesn’t care even if I die... It’s obvious that I need to sacrifice for my kid. I don’t really do it to get something in return, but...”

Even if the spouse expressed verbal support for the woman’s leisure activity, they did not seem to provide realistic support, such as splitting the housework or childcare. For example, Suji explained:

My husband always said I should go out and do something, but he never said, “I will take care of the housework so that you can have time.” He was always supportive of my leisure time, though he didn’t really create the kind of circumstances that would allow it.

Based on their experience, the women considered that their spouse’s verbal support did not mean they would help and that verbal support alone was insufficient for them to pursue, resume, or start a leisure career.

Adoption of a New Leisure Activity as a Breakthrough Strategy

Most of the interviewees had a desire to start a new leisure activity as a breakthrough strategy to relieve the stress and depression they were experiencing due to gendered expectations and the burdens of taking care of a family. Because they had benefited from their previous leisure careers, they knew leisure activities, particularly physical activity, would help them break through the stress and burden in their lives. Therefore, they were eager to start a new leisure activity.

However, the prioritization of the family seemed to affect their choice of a new leisure activity. The interviewees were willing to change their previous leisure activity to one that would offer a flexible schedule so as not to interfere with their child's schedule or one that the entire family could enjoy. Certain interviewees (i.e., Sori, Jimin, Saerom, Jueun) had selected and had already started activities, such as swimming, yoga, badminton, or taekwondo, mostly as casual leisure, because these were programs offered in the community that they could join without scheduling conflicts. All interviewees mentioned they wanted to select a new leisure activity that they could enjoy with their husband and child(ren). Although this was not always the optimal choice for themselves, they thought it would be the best choice for the entire family. They were willing to, again, sacrifice their favorite form of leisure for their family. Jiyoung stated, "It's not 100% something I want to do. It's connected to many things, though. I need to consider my family and my work. Considering them, what is ideal? It's golf." In addition, their sense of guilt seemed to decrease when they changed their leisure activity to the one their husbands enjoyed. Hyemie explained, "I always wanted to golf but couldn't say it when he didn't play. Now that he enjoys it, I can also play without any guilt, so I do."

Most interviewees who had already started a new leisure activity used it to relieve stress and restart exercise as casual leisure. However, one interviewee, Saerom, was able to develop her new activity into a leisure career. She initially joined a badminton group to relieve the stress and burden of childcare by playing in the early morning before her child woke up. She continued to play and eventually became a certified instructor and referee. This affected her son who now plays badminton as an athlete. She now considers herself a full-time mother and part-time badminton instructor and referee.

In addition, it might be noteworthy that many interviewees (i.e., 8 of 11) selected golf as their new family leisure activity, whether they had started it as casual leisure or considered it a potential activity. They preferred this sport because they thought it could be enjoyed with their spouse. They perceived it as an activity that

would help their family bond. Hyemie agreed, saying, “You want different things in your life, so you may feel distanced [from the husband]. Everyone loves golf so we can do it together and discuss something at home. We’ll be able to spend more time together; I’d like that.”

Discussion

The current study explored how women’s leisure careers were interrupted and how they experienced the interruption, focusing on physical activity as leisure. From the qualitative data analyses, the researchers examined the dynamics surrounding the phenomenon of leisure career interruptions of women who are the main caregivers in the family. The findings indicate that multiple factors, such as women’s lifestyle and physiological changes due to marriage, pregnancy, and child-rearing, the stereotyped role of women as primary caregivers, women’s psychological threshold, and a lack of spousal support, discouraged the women from continuing their leisure career at the individual, family, and societal levels. In addition, all of the married mothers interviewed were eager to resume their previous leisure careers or start a new leisure activity as a breakthrough life transition. Some of them had to change their leisure activity to adapt to the changes in their lives and had already started a new leisure career.

The current study provides several significant academic contributions to the field of leisure studies, particularly concerning women’s experiences. First, this study introduces and defines the concept of leisure career interruption, which has not been covered in previous research. The findings highlight how leisure careers, like professional careers, can be fragmented and nonlinear due to various personal and socio-cultural factors, particularly for women. Second, the research emphasizes the unique challenges women face in maintaining a leisure career. It draws attention to the gender role expectations that significantly influence women’s leisure activities. This gender-specific analysis helps to better understand the societal and familial pressures that lead to the interruption of leisure careers for women. Third, this study provides insights into the cultural context of South Korea, where traditional patriarchal values still influence gender roles. In the Discussion, we address how these cultural norms affect women’s leisure participation and career interruptions, offering a culturally specific understanding of the issue. Fourth, based on the findings, we suggest practical strategies to mitigate leisure career interruptions, such as leisure education programs and the involvement of family members, particularly spouses, in supporting women’s leisure activities. These recommendations

aim to create a supportive environment that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges faced by women. Lastly, the research adds to the serious leisure perspective by providing empirical data on the progression and interruption of leisure careers. It differentiates between casual and serious leisure, showing how serious leisure requires more commitment and can be significantly impacted by interruptions. By addressing these aspects, the current study makes a substantial contribution to understanding the dynamics of women's leisure careers and the factors that lead to their interruption. It provides a nuanced view that combines theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence, enriching the discourse on gender, leisure, and career development.

Conceptualization of Leisure Career Interruption

The leisure career interruption explored in this study is a phenomenon that may not be fully understood by using the leisure constraint theory. While studies on constraint and constraint negotiation have presented various perspectives related to women's participation and dropout in leisure, most of these studies have attempted to interpret the phenomena of women's participation/non-participation in leisure using, primarily, the framework of Crawford et al. (1991)'s tripartite model (intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural constraints). However, it has been pointed out that these three viewpoints may be too restrictive, and it is difficult to understand leisure constraints accurately because their measurement can vary greatly depending on the type of leisure activity (Kyle & Jun, 2015). Researchers have stated that, in the case of structural constraints, the interpretation might be unclear with regard to measurement and analysis due to individual variables.

This study focused on women in South Korea who had established leisure careers but had quit them after marriage and pregnancy. It is argued that the interruption of leisure careers due to sociocultural factors and collectivist tendencies should be studied from a more integrated perspective. When reviewed conceptually, while leisure constraints may constitute personal, social, or structural obstacles to leisure-activity participation at the micro level, leisure career interruption can be distinguished as a case in which socio-cultural biases and prejudices constitute a fundamental obstacle to individuals' participation in leisure at a macro level. Therefore, in this study, the discontinuance of the participants' leisure careers due to marriage, childbirth, and childcare was not regarded as operating solely at the individual level, but as a socially and culturally engineered phenomenon amounting to a leisure career interruption.

Some findings may be aligned with the leisure constraints in the previous studies, such as the limited time availability due to family responsibilities and a sense of guilt due to gender norms and role expectations (Ho, 2022; Yerkes et al., 2020). However, the current study further identified gaslighting and psychological thresholds as socio-cultural and psychological factors that challenge maintaining leisure careers, particularly for Korean women. Moreover, this study provides the specific mechanism of how these factors interrelatedly affect these participants. Unlike previous studies (Henderson et al., 1995; Ito et al., 2020), the participants in this study did not actively negotiate their situation or family responsibilities to pursue their leisure careers nor use leisure careers as resistance when their leisure career interruption occurs. Instead, they rationalized the interruption as something they had to do as the primary caregiver in a household. When they restart their leisure career, they use a negotiation strategy by altering the leisure activity or choosing activities that accommodate a family-oriented lifestyle. Furthermore, they might not resist the leisure career interruption, possibly because they have been influenced by gaslighting from their family and society and feel pressured to conform to gender norms.

As the findings suggest that leisure career interruption is a distinctive phenomenon and is difficult to explain solely by leisure constraint theory, it is worth defining the phenomenon. Based on the findings, leisure career interruption can be defined as an individual having dropped out of serious leisure activity and discontinued a leisure career due to psychological, sociocultural, and life cycle factors after having participated in a particular leisure activity and having established a leisure career by gaining skills, knowledge, and experience. When a leisure career is discontinued, individuals have a desire to resume that career.

According to the findings, these women's leisure career interruptions are complex, multifaceted, and affected by multiple factors. The factors that initially contributed to leisure career interruption were found to be lifestyle and physiological changes due to women's life events, such as marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth. These life events and lifestyle changes have been identified as leisure barriers for women (Engberg et al., 2012) or as turning points resulting in the decline or discontinuity of leisure careers (Stebbins, 2001). However, for the Korean women in this study, the discontinuity is reinforced by sociocultural and psychological factors, such as the social pressure on and stereotyped role of women, which seem to produce a sense of guilt and a psychological threshold that women are afraid to go beyond to achieve their goals.

It was evident in this study that these factors did not affect the interruption in-

dependently but, rather, interrelatedly. Although the interviewees initially dropped out of their leisure careers because of their role changes as wives and mothers, other psychological and sociocultural factors prevented them from resuming their leisure careers (Kim et al., 2015). The stereotyped roles of wife and mother led the participants to feel pressured regarding their priorities and obligated to sacrifice their own time (Yerkes et al., 2020; Yoon, 2008). This constant pressure from both their spouses and families was due to cultural gaslighting and a lack of spousal support. All of these factors engendered a sense of guilt and deprivation and prevented the participants from overcoming the psychological threshold created in them with regard to resuming their leisure careers.

Multilevel Approach to the Psychological Threshold

Although leisure-activity participation is an extremely personal matter, the participants in this study were not able to cross the psychological threshold and resume such participation because they were not free from social expectations (Moon et al., 2005). This seems to be a problem stemming from cultural gaslighting (Sweet, 2019). The psychological issues experienced by women as the main caregivers are informed by societal expectations regarding the roles of wife and mother. It has been reported that Asian women have been making efforts to match their behavior with traditional social values culturally constructed for “women” (e.g., childrearing and housework) and that they feel a sense of guilt when they fail to meet these expectations. This type of negative psychological cycle does not only apply to Asian women but is, rather, universal. Western women also experience guilt when engaging in physical activity, worrying about not adhering to an ethic of care and living up to good mother ideals (Dixon, 2009; McGannon & Schinke, 2013). This study is distinctive in that it derived direct results on the psychological thresholds experienced by women arising from cultural and societal pressure.

Sociocultural gaslighting leading to a psychological threshold barrier for women with regard to a leisure career should not be considered a personal issue but a social issue. The issue of women’s professional career interruptions is perceived as a societal issue that leads to economic loss and thus requires governmental and social support to overcome it (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). In a similar vein, leisure interruptions should be considered as a serious societal issue that leads to loss of physical and mental well-being. Supportive political and social attention is required so that women can overcome this barrier to their well-being. While having a lei-

sure career can significantly improve women's quality of life, leisure career interruptions are not currently considered a serious social issue.

Gendered Barriers to Leisure Careers

The leisure career discontinuity experienced by married mothers in South Korea, particularly mothers, can be analyzed through the lens of feminist leisure scholarship, which highlights the intersection of gender roles, power structures, and resistance. Shaw (2001) conceptualizes leisure as a form of resistance, arguing that it has the potential to empower women both individually and collectively, even when acts of resistance are unintentional. However, in the case of South Korean mothers, traditional gender expectations often constrain their ability to engage in leisure. These obstacles, rather than leisure itself, dictate whether an activity serves as reproduction of gender norms or an act of resistance, as Du (2008) found in her study of Taiwanese women's folk-dance groups. Women who actively negotiate their participation and persist despite social pressures experience increased empowerment and leadership development, yet many South Korean mothers face systemic barriers that limit such opportunities.

Furthermore, Parry (2014) underscores the role of hope, transformative encounters, and activism in feminist leisure scholarship, which suggests that disrupting patriarchal structures requires both individual agency and broader social movements. However, Aitchison (2000) critiques how dominant leisure discourses often fail to represent marginalized voices, reinforcing the need for reflexive and inclusive approaches to understanding the leisure experiences of South Korean mothers. Given the intersectionality of oppression, as emphasized by Watson (2018), future research should explore how class, race, and economic status further shape these women's leisure career interruptions and opportunities. Addressing these disparities requires a shift in discourse, moving beyond postfeminist assumptions that gender equality has been achieved, and recognizing that the struggle for equitable leisure access remains ongoing.

Implications

This study offers two key practical implications: (1) developing educational programs for women and their spouses, and (2) promoting societal awareness through leisure campaigns.

First, many women expressed a vague hope of resuming or starting a leisure ca-

reer in the future but lacked concrete plans. They assumed they would naturally return to leisure once their child entered kindergarten or elementary school. To address this, educational programs should be provided to help women develop structured action plans with specific timeframes for (re)starting their leisure careers. Importantly, these programs should involve spouses, helping them recognize that their partners' leisure engagement contributes to the well-being of the entire family (Jun & Choi, 2013).

Second, sociocultural changes are necessary to reduce social pressures and psychological barriers that hinder women's leisure careers. Public leisure campaigns should emphasize the significance of leisure for women's well-being, particularly during life transitions such as marriage, childbirth, and parenting. These campaigns should challenge the perception that leisure is a luxury rather than a necessity and encourage shared family responsibilities (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018).

To achieve long-term change, gender role perceptions must evolve, and policies should support women in overcoming societal and familial pressures. Government institutions, such as the Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, should integrate these shifts into their strategies. Family counseling and couple-based education programs could help spouses redefine their roles, ensuring that childrearing and housework are seen as shared responsibilities rather than tasks that men "help with" (Jun & Choi, 2013). Including extended family members in these initiatives can also help reduce cultural gaslighting and the expectation that women must sacrifice their leisure.

Finally, improving access to quality childcare would enable mothers to (re)start leisure careers sooner after childbirth. While some recreational facilities offer childcare services, these are often limited in availability and quality. Expanding reliable childcare options would alleviate maternal guilt and logistical barriers, allowing women to prioritize their well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study focuses on South Korean women, some findings may apply to primary caregivers in other cultural contexts with strong gender expectations. However, cultural specificity remains a limitation, as different sociocultural norms shape leisure career interruptions. Future cross-cultural research could identify both universal and context-specific patterns.

This study examines leisure career interruption within household responsibilities, but broader structural and systemic gender inequalities—such as

workplace policies and societal expectations—also play a role. Future research should explore how these external factors further constrain women's leisure careers. The research participants' positionality as parents provided valuable insights but may have introduced biases in analyzing the data. While reflexivity was maintained, we acknowledge that our shared experience of parenthood may have shaped the way we identified and categorized themes. Future studies could benefit from diverse researcher backgrounds to enhance analytical depth. Additionally, all participants lived in urban areas, where leisure access and gender expectations may differ from rural settings. Exploring leisure career interruptions in rural contexts could offer valuable comparative insights.

While research has examined leisure experiences among single women (McKeown, 2015) and leisure during and after divorce (Hutchinson et al., 2007; Ridgway, 2024), further studies could investigate how leisure career interruptions manifest in these specific life transitions. This study primarily included participants in traditional marriages, limiting its scope. Future research should examine leisure career experiences in non-traditional family structures, including cohabiting relationships, LGBTQ+ families, and single mothers.

Finally, societal and familial gaslighting remains an overlooked barrier to women's leisure participation. Policy-focused studies should further investigate its impact and propose strategies to address it. Integrating insights from literature on patriarchal structures, domestic violence, and systemic oppression could provide a stronger foundation for actionable recommendations. While this study highlights leisure career interruptions, it does not discount the joy women may find in caregiving roles. Further research could explore how women balance these positive experiences with leisure challenges to develop a more nuanced perspective.

Conclusions

This study examined the phenomenon of leisure career interruption among married mothers in South Korea, highlighting the complex interplay of socio-cultural expectations, gender roles, and psychological factors that contribute to the discontinuation of serious leisure activities. Findings revealed that life stage transitions, caregiving responsibilities, and societal pressures create significant barriers, often reinforced by cultural gaslighting and a psychological threshold that discourages women from resuming their leisure careers. Despite these challenges, many participants expressed a strong desire to reclaim leisure in some form, often modifying their activities to align with family obligations. However, the persistence

of gendered expectations and a lack of spousal and structural support limited their ability to fully resume their previous leisure careers.

This study underscores the need to recognize leisure career interruption as a distinct and significant issue, shaped by broader structural inequalities that extend beyond individual choice. Addressing this issue requires a shift in societal attitudes toward women's leisure, greater recognition of its importance for well-being, and a reconsideration of how household and caregiving responsibilities are distributed. By acknowledging and addressing the systemic barriers that contribute to leisure career interruptions, there is potential to create a more equitable leisure landscape that enables women to sustain meaningful and fulfilling leisure careers.

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