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Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Leisure among the Youth of Spain

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed the lives of millions, including young people, who are in a vital stage during which leisure has had a preponderant role in their lifestyles, characterized by the search for experiences outside the family environment and forms of leisure dependent on friendships as a source for well-being (physical, cognitive, social, and emotional). This article explores how leisure becomes a form of negotiation among social needs, normative demands, and a particular crisis. It analyzes the transformations of leisure of young Spanish university students during confinement and the new normality. The sample is made up of 1066 young undergraduate university students between 17 and 25 years old residing in Spain. The quantitative findings revealed that (1) young people now value their leisure more than before the pandemic; (2) young people have transformed their leisure time and feel that their leisure has not been the same and will not be the same again; (3) the pandemic has especially affected their routines, relationships with friends, and psychological well-being; (4) they perceive that society has treated young people unfairly in relation to their leisure. The findings show the need to develop leisure policies and programs that address the short- and medium-term effects and transformations caused by COVID-19 on youth leisure.

Keywords: leisure; youth; COVID-19; transformations; social relationships

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1. Introduction

1.1. Leisure and Youth Development

In recent decades, leisure has become a priority in the lives of young people [1] (p. 227). Leisure is probably the social institution most closely associated with the world of youth.

In the field of youth development, leisure is recognized as a phenomenon that provides opportunities for self-realization and is defined as specific activities, (free) environments or time—such as social activities or sports—or specific cognitions, emotions, or experiences (for example, flow) that provide such opportunities [2]. Developmental science defines leisure as what young people do during their free time, which in turn considerably impacts their development [3]. However, not all leisure is developmental. Structured leisure (for example, monitored programs) is more effective in promoting youth development than unstructured leisure (for example, going out with friends), as it supposes a greater challenge, autonomy, and initiative [4]. Thus, it is widely recognized that leisure is a unique developmental context that offers, during adolescence and youth, an environment with opportunities to express oneself, demonstrate competencies, and connect with others [5]. These are the most crucial and sensitive stages towards maturity; it is not only a rapid period of physical changes but also an important stage in personal, cognitive, and social development [6] (p. 289). During such times, people explore their potential, play various social roles, forms of personal identity, accept and reject habits, values and beliefs, socializing and building a lifestyle that, to a greater or lesser extent, they will adopt for the rest of their lives [7–9].

Numerous investigations have highlighted the value of leisure for the young community [10–12]. These are evaluated as beneficial due to the opportunities for socialization and interaction among peers. Namely, the contexts of leisure offer an opportunity for experimentation based on various social roles, the identification of individual preferences, the exchange of experiences, the collaborative response to various situations, and the development of feelings of friendship [13]. This period of life is particularly appropriate for discovering new interests and affirming personal values and other social ideals [14]. Caldwel and Smith [15] suggest that participating in leisure activities helps young people develop skills and their autonomy, based on positive social interactions. Positive feelings, as well as personal control of actions, encourage the expansion of an individual's personality.

1.2. Times of the Pandemic: Effects and Transformations of Leisure in Young People

The COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented global event, has caused major disruptions in the lives of millions of people. As the population around the world has adjusted to the situation, young people have been at the center of much news and criticism. Millions of young people had to stay at home due to the closure of schools and universities, and adults were forced to consider alternative structures to support the needs of young people. Physical distancing and other restrictions imposed by national and local governments around the world to contain the spread of the virus have almost certainly had a significant impact on young people and adolescents [16,17], as various studies published since March 2020 have shown, since they are more sensitive to interaction with their peers and social stimuli than adults, and indirectly due to increased stress in many families [18]. For youth, leisure is an essential asset and its interruption during the pandemic could have a great impact on their development.

Ultimately, the pandemic is a unique and important historical event, which has immediate and lasting effects on the ecological systems of all who experience it. Although digital technologies have partially compensated for limitations in social relationships, physical distancing may have had a disproportionate effect in an age group for whom interaction with peers is a vital means of development [19]. In addition, confinement has modified habits and routines, with a possible medium and long-term impact on the lifestyle and well-being of young people [20–22], which in turn seems to have an impact on their mental health [23]. According to several experts, these psychological problems will increase worldwide as a consequence of the pandemic [24,25]; some have even affirmed that the impact caused by COVID-19 on psychological health will be as significant as its impact on physical health, especially in vulnerable populations [26,27].

During this time, studies have been published in relation to changes in leisure and physical activity during confinement and its relationship with changes in mental and physical health, finding that people associate the increase in sedentary behaviors during leisure with worse physical health, mental health, and vitality. Other studies have shown that numerous young people decided to isolate themselves completely during confinement, which raised concerns about their mental health [28]. Consequently, ensuring sufficient levels of physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviors are vital in helping people cope with the stress caused by the pandemic, which also helps to improve their perception of their own health [29].

During the pandemic, the ecological systems of young people have been in a state of turmoil, with changes in routines and habits associated with daily life, interruptions in the flow of information and communication patterns between environments, and intense and abrupt changes in rules and regulations [30]. Leisure choices made in stressful circumstances can reveal a great deal about coping strategies and ways of reacting to radical change and self-actualization [31–33]. In addition, the pandemic has paradoxically affected leisure for young people. Opportunities for outdoor and face-to-face leisure have been restricted, despite the attempt to adapt many after-school programs to the digital environment, and yet such restrictions may have granted young people more free time than ever [28].

Such "forced leisure", a concept that refers to situations in which free time is gained due to the absence of work opportunities and not to freedom of choice [28], could help explain the role of leisure both to contain stressful situations [32,34] as well as to give meaning and purpose to periods of social deprivation and anxiety [35,36]. In fact, confinement and social distancing have created a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it has imposed limits on freedom, and on the other, it has offered more time for leisure.

The pandemic has raised the question of how to maintain developmental forms of leisure for youth in times of crisis. The main issue during the first phase of the pandemic, during confinement, was that for many young people, all the new free time on their hands was transformed into leisure time [37], which blurs its meaning in developmental science. Furthermore, the distinction between unstructured and structured leisure is especially important at the present time, since the increase in available leisure time for young people has been met with a simultaneous decrease in their ability to participate in structured and community leisure [37,38]. Various studies [23,39–45] have already shown that young people activated various coping strategies in response to the situation, with potentially significant effects on their lifestyles and well-being.

A clear and evident impact can be seen in how children and young people practiced less physical activity and spent less time outdoors and more time performing sedentary activities (such as leisure time in front of screens). In addition, they slept more during confinement. Several strategies made it possible to mitigate the effects of confinement on the movement and play of children and young people. Additionally, the adoption of new hobbies also helped moderate the effects of COVID-19 [39]. However, along the same lines, other research has shown that the majority of adolescents did not use the internet to play online, as was expected during the period of confinement; on the contrary, young people used the internet to learn, read, and talk to other people [40].

Some studies have focused on collecting data on outdoor leisure patterns during, before, and after COVID-19. One of their findings was the reduction in the number of days that people engaged in outdoor leisure activities, determined by the frequency of previous practice and the size of the living quarters. This reduction was conditioned by external factors, that is, by the recommendations on social distancing, the closure of recreational areas, and internal ones, such as not being exposed to COVID-19 [41]. Likewise, people in general and youth especially have adapted to the new context by varying the types of leisure practice. Young people are able to perceive and identify how COVID-19 has affected their lifestyles during confinement regarding their biological needs (nutrition, hygiene), duties (study, work), and free time (sports and entertainment). Thus, they have paid more attention to hygiene, having more time to watch movies, read books, and take care of their pets during confinement [42], and reducing their participation in activities related to travel and social contact, and in turn, favor activities in nature and the outdoors [43]. Many young people have also preferred passive leisure activities, happy to be able to enjoy online activities for longer during the first weeks of confinement [44]. However, such adaptations and transformations of lifestyles are perceived by most people as transitory, while awaiting to resume their activities when the epidemiological situation has improved [23,45].

Leisure during this time has become the object of negotiation among social needs, regulatory requirements, and the present crisis [46]. Aware of the varied impact that the pandemic could have on young people depending on age, previous experiences of key life events, family composition, and the context of residence, this research revolves around this negotiation process [47].

1.3. Objective and Hypothesis

As has been shown, the literature on leisure and youth recognizes the value of the leisure experience for young people [10–12], the relevance of leisure during this stage of life as a space for personal, cognitive, and social development [3,5,6,15], self-realization and autonomy [4], and socialization [5,7–9,13,15], highlighting this period of life as particularly appropriate for discovering new interests and affirming personal values and other social

ideals [14]. For this reason, we consider it essential to know the effects of COVID-19 on the leisure lifestyles of young people. To date, there is still little research that provides data on the effects of COVID-19 on the leisure lifestyles of the general population, and especially of young people.

The objective of this study was to explore the results of a quantitative study conducted on a large group of young university students in Spain, focused on the feelings, opinions, and transformations of the leisure of young people during and after confinement.

In order to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on young people's leisure activities, this study proposes the following hypotheses.

H1. *Young people now value their leisure time more than they did before the pandemic.*

In recent decades, leisure has risen as a priority value in society, occupying priority time and space in young people's lives [1] as a space for personal, cognitive, and social development [3,5,6,15]. The question is whether this is still the case or whether its value has increased among young people, that is, do young people value their leisure time more now than before?

H2. *Young people have had to adapt their leisure time.*

As recent research data published on leisure and COVID-19 [16–47] have shown, people have been forced to modify their leisure lifestyles and adapt them to the new situation. However, in the case of young people, the following questions need to be answered: what transformations/adaptations have they had to make in their leisure lifestyles? How has their leisure changed?

H3. *Young people believe that their leisure time has never been the same and will never be the same again.*

Assuming that young people's leisure time has changed since the beginning of the pandemic, we would like to know what they think about these changes, and if they consider these changes reversible or permanent.

H4. *COVID-19 has affected young people's routines, peer group relations, and psychological well-being.*

Some of the published research on leisure and COVID-19 has begun to show how the pandemic has changed habits and routines [20–22] and the disproportionate effect on an age group for whom peer group interaction is a vital means of development [19], with a possible medium- and long-term impact on young people's lifestyles and well-being [23–27]. Therefore, we would like to know their opinion and answers to the following question: do you feel that the pandemic has affected aspects of your life such as routines, relationships with friends, and your psychological well-being?

H5. *Young people perceive that society has treated them unfairly in relation to their leisure time.*

This period of the pandemic has not been free of social conflicts, physical distance, and other restrictions that have directly affected young people's leisure time and have almost certainly had a significant impact on the group [16,17], so we want to answer the question of how do they value the treatment received by society in relation to their leisure time?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

An online survey was carried out among young university graduates residing in Spain. The researchers contacted the participants through their universities.

This work is part of a larger study that contemplated the entire cohort of young university degree students residing in Spain. The study population was defined from the statistical data published annually by the Ministry of Universities of the Government of Spain. The total number of people enrolled in Spanish universities during the 2019–2020

academic year was 1,633,358, and the vast majority (80%) were undergraduate students. The data show a population size of 1,306,686 undergraduate students in Spanish universities, of which 55.6% were women.

Setting an absolute error of 3%, a confidence level of 95%, and considering the hypothesis $p = q = 0.5$, the sample size was estimated to be 1066 students. With an experimental mortality of 2.3%, the final sample size was 1042 students. An essential requirement to be a part of the sample was that young university graduates had to declare that they were participating in the research voluntarily and anonymously, that they had received information on the objectives and procedures of the study as well as the type of participation, and that they were aware that they could stop participating at any time, if they wanted to.

The sample obtained consisted of 23.7% men and 76.3% women; in terms of age, 64.1% were between 17 and 20 years old, 28.2% were between 21 and 24 years old, and 7.7% were 25 years or older.

2.2. Instruments

The absence of a valid and reliable instrument to collect the relevant information for this study led to the elaboration of an ad-hoc questionnaire structured in four sections in order to collect the data—usual residence and residence during confinement; feelings during and after confinement; leisure before and during confinement, and currently; opinion on leisure, youth, and COVID-19.

This questionnaire was constructed by the research team on Leisure and Human Development of the Institute of Leisure Studies of the University of Deusto, and was also contrasted by 10 researchers on leisure studies from different universities collaborating with the research group.

The variables recorded for this study correspond to three of the sections. They are defined below:

- Feelings during and after confinement: This section was made up of two Likert scales. The first registered the intensity (from 1 to 7) with which they experienced certain feelings during and after confinement at the time they answered the questionnaire (between January and June 2021). The feelings listed were anxiety, fear, worry, irritability, loneliness, boredom, frustration, anger, and sadness. The second scale recorded how much they agreed (from 1 to 4) with two statements related to the impact of COVID-19 on different aspects of their life (routines, relationships with friends, and psychological well-being).
- Leisure before and during confinement, and currently: This section included four variables related to how leisure was adapted during confinement. The first was the dichotomous variation of how they practiced (or not) leisure during confinement. The second was categorical, using multiple responses that recorded such variations (more time/frequency, less time/frequency, different company, virtual adaptation, others). The third was again dichotomous, in relation to the perception that their leisure now is different to how it was before confinement, using a Likert scale that recorded how much they agreed (from 1 to 4) with eight statements related to their current leisure.
- Opinions on leisure, youth, and COVID-19. This section recorded, through a Likert scale, the degrees of agreement (from 1 to 4) of young people with statements related to the leisure, youth, and COVID-19 trinomial.

In addition to the variables presented and analyzed in this article, the questionnaire included other sections–a section on residence and computer equipment during confinement, and another section in which, based on a typology of leisure activities, respondents were asked to detail which of these they practiced before confinement, during confinement (physically and/or virtually), and after confinement.

2.3. Procedure

Google Form was used to administer the questionnaire. A link that led to it was shared with undergraduate students from different universities throughout Spain by professors, contacts, and research collaborators of the Leisure Studies Institute of the University of Deusto.

Before beginning the questionnaire, students had to declare that they were informed about the confidentiality of the answers and their guarantee, as well as about the protection of their rights and guarantees as participants.

The Ethics Committee of the University, to which the researchers belong, approved this procedure on 21 January 2021. Thus, from an ethical point of view, the research is adequate in everything related to the protection and avoidance of risks to participants and respect for autonomy. Likewise, it conforms to the methodological, ethical, and legal principles that this type of research should have. No risks of any kind for the participants were observed, and adequate measures were established to offer sufficient ethical guarantees during its development. The project, therefore, takes into account the regulation on personal data protection (EU 2016/679) approved by the Commission and the EU Council in April 2016 in relation to an informed consent procedure, access to personal data, the use of data for the public interest, and the responsibilities of the researchers responsible for the project.

2.4. Analysis

Using the statistical program SPSS 26.0, the data analysis was carried out in two phases. First, a descriptive study was carried out—through the statistic of frequency and means—that allowed for identifying the position of the young people before the variables included in the research, given that they had not been applied previously due to the nature of the questions, about binomial leisure and COVID-19. In the second phase, an inferential analysis was carried out to determine whether there were differences in the transformations of leisure and in the opinions on binomial leisure and COVID-19 in relation to gender. First, the *p*-value of Levene's statistic, which refers to the homogeneity of variances, was calculated; these independent variables that showed a normal distribution were subjected to Student's parametric t-test for independent samples; in the case of the independent variables that did not show a normal distribution, the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test was applied.

Cohen's *d* was also calculated as a measure of effect size. The significance level established for this study was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

3.1. Feelings of Youth during and after Confinement

Young people lived in confinement with concern (4.9), developing feelings of frustration (4.8) and sadness (4.6). They also felt boredom (4.5), irritability and anger to the same extent (4.4), and even anxiety (4.2). The intensity of these feelings decreased months after confinement, but some of them were still significantly present (>3.5), such as worry, frustration, anxiety, anger, irritability, and sadness (Figure 1).

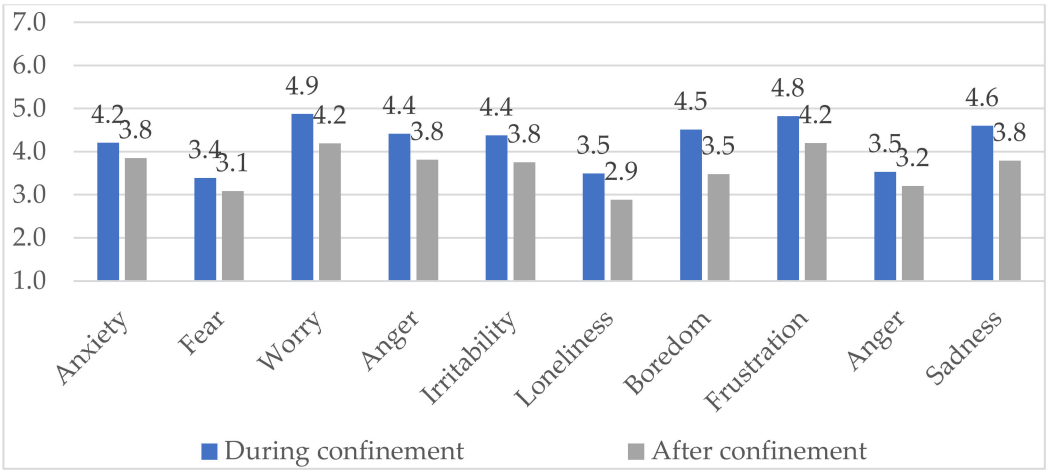

Figure 1. Average value of the intensity (1–7) of feelings experienced by young people during and after confinement.

Regarding gender, women (Figure 2b) claimed to have experienced these feelings both during and after confinement with greater intensity than men (Figure 2a). During confinement, the feelings experienced with the greatest intensity (>4) by men (Figure 2a) were frustration, boredom, and worry. Women experienced these same feelings, although with greater intensity, in addition to sadness, irritability, anger, and anxiety. The intensity of the following feelings decreased months after confinement in both groups, but remained at significant levels, especially in the case of women (>4) (Figure 2b): frustration, anxiety, worry, and sadness. In the case of men, this average was observed for the feelings of frustration, boredom, anger, and worry (Figure 2a).

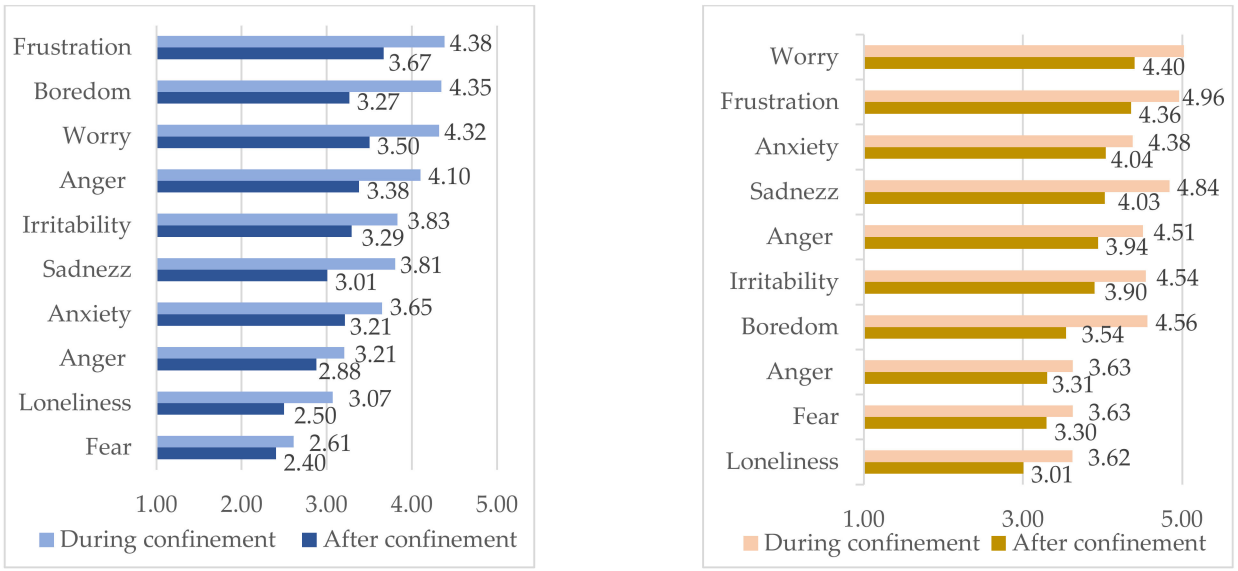

Figure 2. Average value of the intensity (1–7) of feelings experienced by young people during and after confinement: (**a**) men; (**b**) women.

Both young men and women believe that the pandemic has especially affected their routines and relationships with their friends. However, women, more than men, believe that it has somehow affected their psychological well-being (Figure 3).

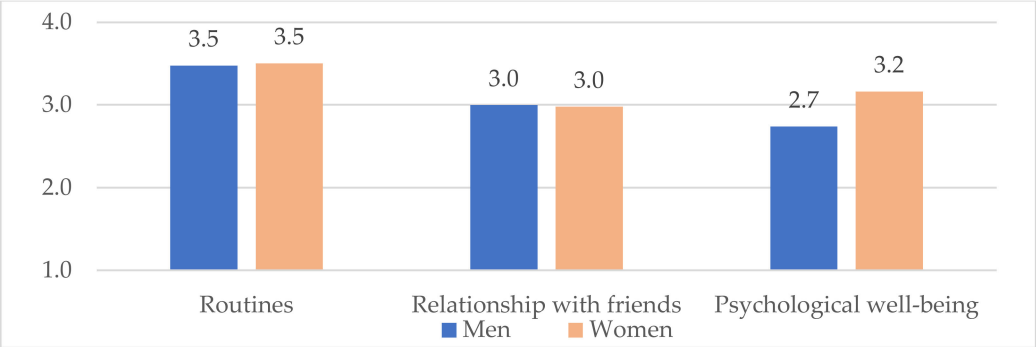

Figure 3. Average value of the perceptions of how COVID-19 has affected men and women (1–4).

3.2. Transformations of Youth's Leisure

3.2.1. During Confinement

A total of 93% of young people say that they had to vary their leisure lifestyle during confinement. In the case of women, this percentage rose to 94.3%, which is why a higher percentage of men (11.3%) than women (5.7%) affirmed that their leisure time did not change during confinement (Table 1).

Table 1. Variations of leisure during confinement.

		Yes	No
Gender	Men	88.7%	11.3%
	Women	94.3%	5.7%
Total		93.0%	7.0%

Of the total number of young people who claim to have modified their leisure time during confinement, 62.9% incorporated virtual adaptations to their leisure practices, this being the most widespread type of transformation during that time. A total of 36.6% of young people affirmed that they had less time or practiced their leisure activities less frequently compared to 28.9% who affirmed the opposite—that is to say that they had greater availability of time. Finally, 19.2% of young people maintained the leisure activities that they had been practicing before confinement, but the company with which they developed these had to vary (Figure 4).

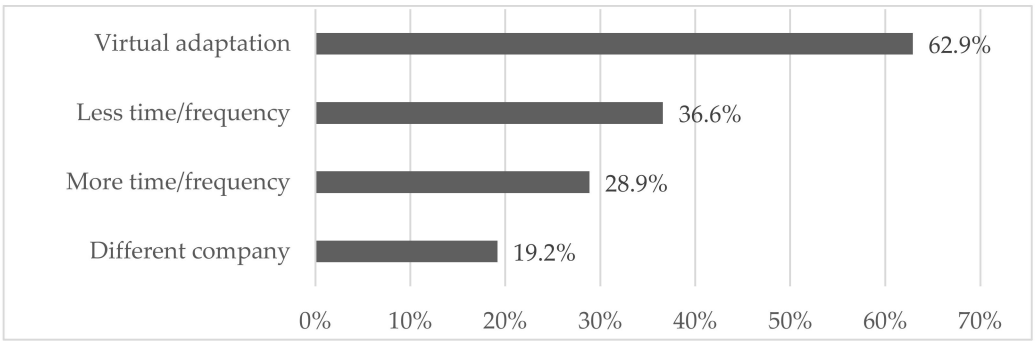

Figure 4. Types of adaptations of leisure during confinement.

Taking gender into consideration, virtual adaptation was the most widespread in both women (67%) and men, although in a lower percentage for the latter (49.4%). On the contrary, the rest of the transformations in leisure were more widespread among men than among women (Figure 5).

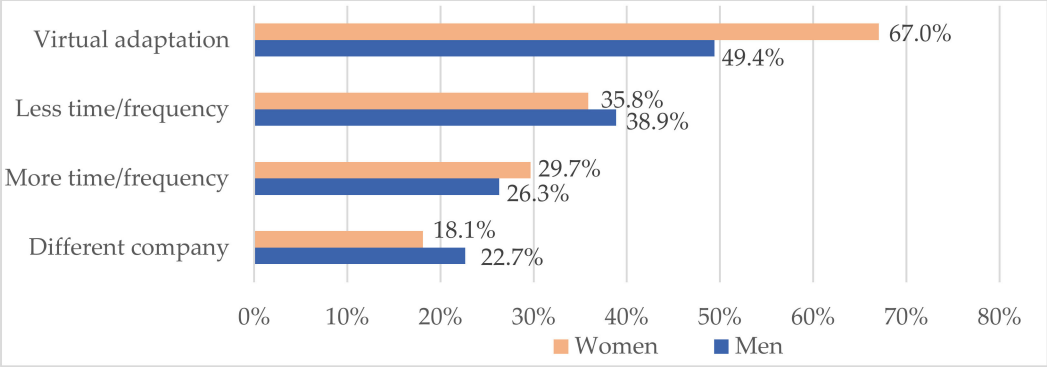

Figure 5. Types of adaptations of leisure during confinement by gender.

3.2.2. Consolidated Transformations after Confinement

After these transformations and adaptations that young people had to carry out during confinement, 91% thought that their leisure time is different now in comparison to before confinement. Again, in the case of women, 93% affirmed that their leisure has varied, compared to 84.6% of men (Figure 6).

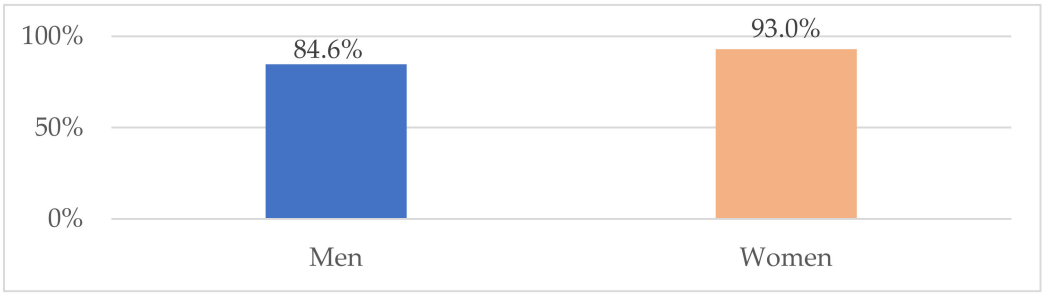

Figure 6. Perception of leisure transformations by gender.

Among the youth who affirmed that their leisure has not returned to the way it was before, Figure 7 shows the average results obtained in relation to the level of agreement with statements about the variations in their current leisure. They especially agreed (> 2.5) that they have varied their leisure—the way of practicing leisure activities, and in equal amounts, exploring fewer and more activities, including new activities. It is highlighted that the youth did not agree that they have more free time for leisure (Figure 7).

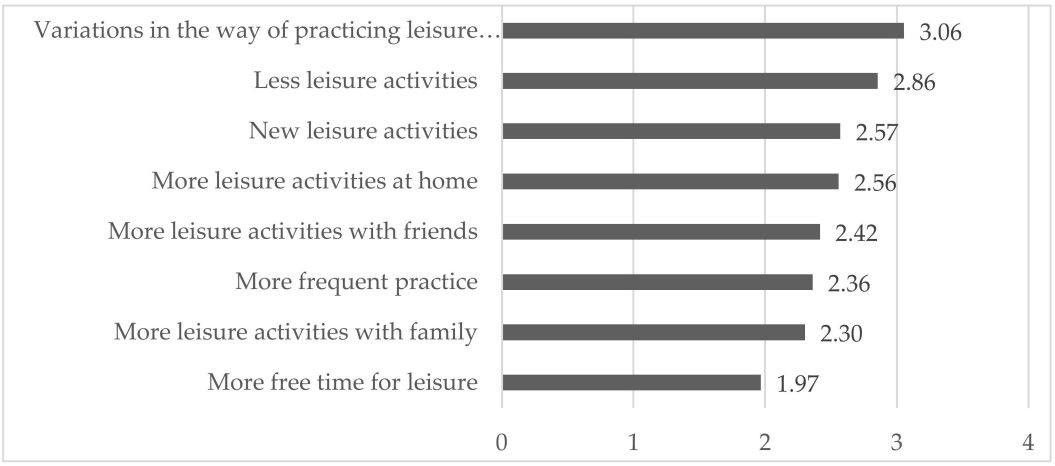

Figure 7. Perception (1–4) of the type of transformations of leisure.

Analyzing this variable by gender, certain differences are observed. Men especially agreed (>2.5) that they have varied their leisure time in the way of practicing it by practicing fewer activities. In the case of women, in addition to these opinions, they also agreed that they now practice new leisure activities and more activities at home (Figure 8).

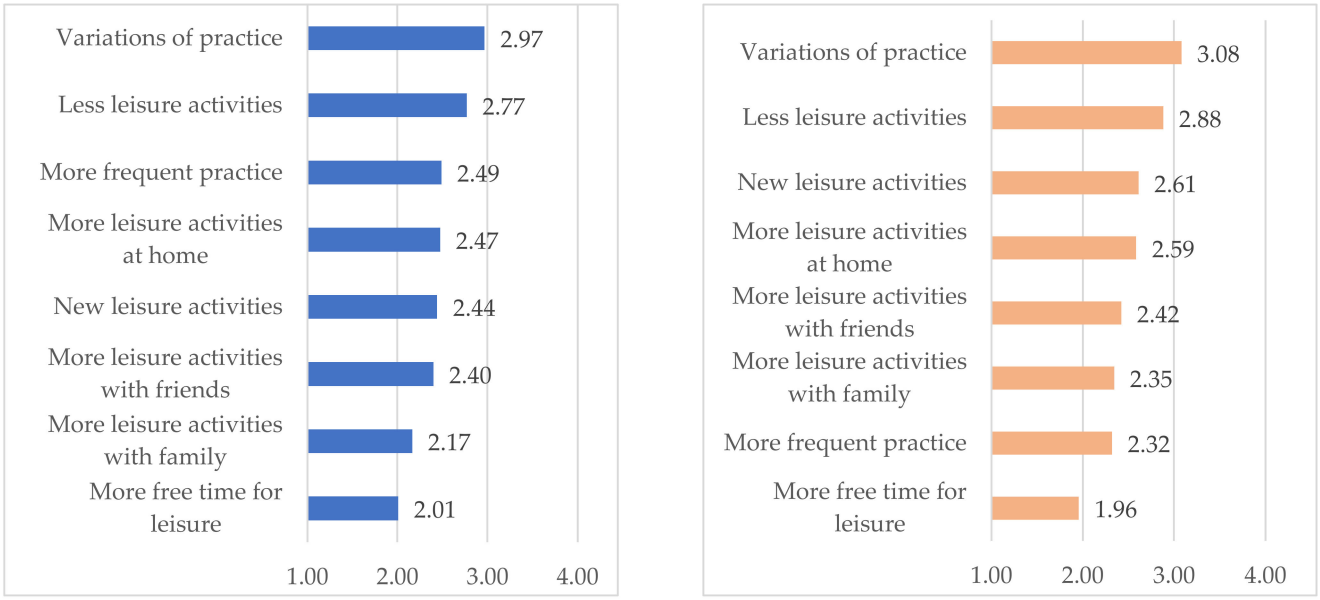

Figure 8. Perception (1–4) of the types of transformations of leisure: (**a**) men; (**b**) women.

The inferential analysis shows that the transformations in leisure practices do not differ between men and women except for the increase in the frequency of practice, where the difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.010$), and the variation in the mode of practice ($p = 0.037$), the effect size being small in both cases (Table 2).

Table 2. Student's *t*-test for independent samples summary: transformations in leisure considering gender.

	Levene's Test		***t*-Test for Equality of Means**			**Effect Size**	
	F	***p*** [1]	***t***	***df***	***p***	$\bar{x}$	***d*** [2]
Fewer leisure activities	1.580	0.209	−1.527	1040	0.127	Men = 2.77 ± 1.028 Woman = 2.88 ± 1.007	−0.1081
More free time for leisure	0.051	0.822	0.847	1040	0.397	Men = 2.01 ± 0.865 Woman = 1.96 ± 0.838	0.0587
More frequent practice	0.775	0.379	2.579	1039	0.010	Men = 2.49 ± 0.919 Woman = 2.32 ± 0.900	0.1869
Variations of practice	2.459	0.117	−2.093	1039	0.037	Men = 2.97 ± 0.743 Woman = 3.08 ± 0.762	−0.1461
More leisure activities at home	0.426	0.514	−1.697	1039	0.090	Men = 2.47 ± 0 919 Woman = 2.59 ± 0.902	−0.1317
More leisure activities with friends	1.182	0.277	−0.297	1039	0.766	Men = 2.40 ± 0.949 Woman= 2.42 ± 0.983	−0.0207

[1] Levene's test: $p > 0.05$ in all cases, then equality of variances is assumed. [2] Confidence interval: 95%.

The Mann–Whitney U test applied to the independent variables that did not show a normal distribution allows us to conclude that the transformations in leisure practices differ between men and women in the case of the incorporation of new practices into their leisure lifestyles ($p = 0.012$), the effect size being small, as well as in the practice of more

leisure activities with the family ($p = 0.005$); in the latter case, the effect size is of medium magnitude (d-value between 0.2 and 0.5) (Table 3).

Table 3. Mann–Whitney U Test summary: transformations in leisure considering gender.

	Levene's Test		Mann–Whitney U Test	Effect Size	
	F	p [1]	p [2]	$\bar{x}$	D [3]
New leisure activities	4.604	0.032	0.012	Men = 2.44 ± 0.922 Woman = 2.61 ± 0.866	−0.1900
More leisure activities with family	10.955	0.001	0.005	Men = 2.17 ± 0.846 Woman = 2.35 ± 0.912	−0.2046

[1] Levene's test: $p > 0.05$ in all cases then equality of variances is not assumed. [2] The significance level is 0.050. [3] Confidence interval: 95%.

3.3. Thoughts of Youth on Leisure and COVID-19

Young people affirmed in a very generalized way that they value their leisure more now than before the pandemic (3.39/4), they give it more importance in their lives, and a significant group feels that their leisure will never be the same as before the pandemic (2.69/4). They also agreed that they have had to give up some of their leisure practices due to the pandemic (3.21/4), and, for some, society does not offer alternatives in the field of leisure (2.98/4). Finally, it should be noted that, in general, young people agreed that society has treated them unfairly in relation to COVID-19 infections during their leisure time (2.98/4) (Figure 9).

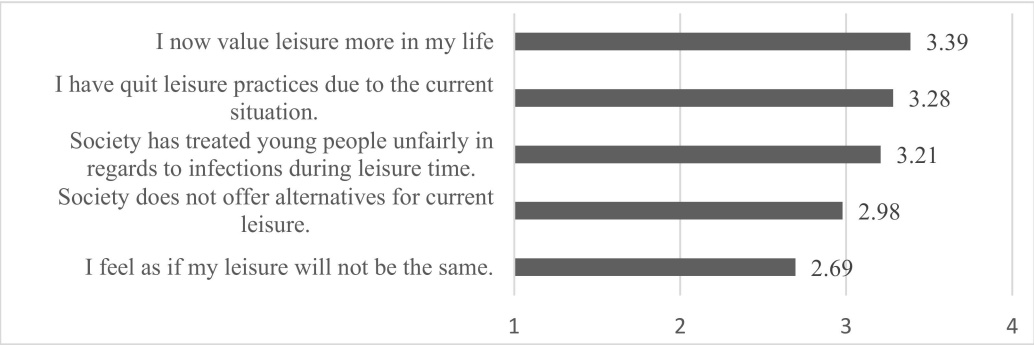

Figure 9. Opinions (1–4) of youth on leisure and COVID-19.

Although all scores are above 2.3, some differences are observed between the opinions of men and women. Women agreed more with all the following statements: they feel that their leisure will not be the same as before the pandemic (+0.42), they now value their leisure more than before the pandemic (+0.34), they believe society does not offer them alternatives in the field of leisure (+0.23), society has treated them unfairly in relation to COVID-19 infections during their leisure time (+0.23), and they have had to give up some of their leisure practices due to the pandemic (+0.18) (Figure 10).

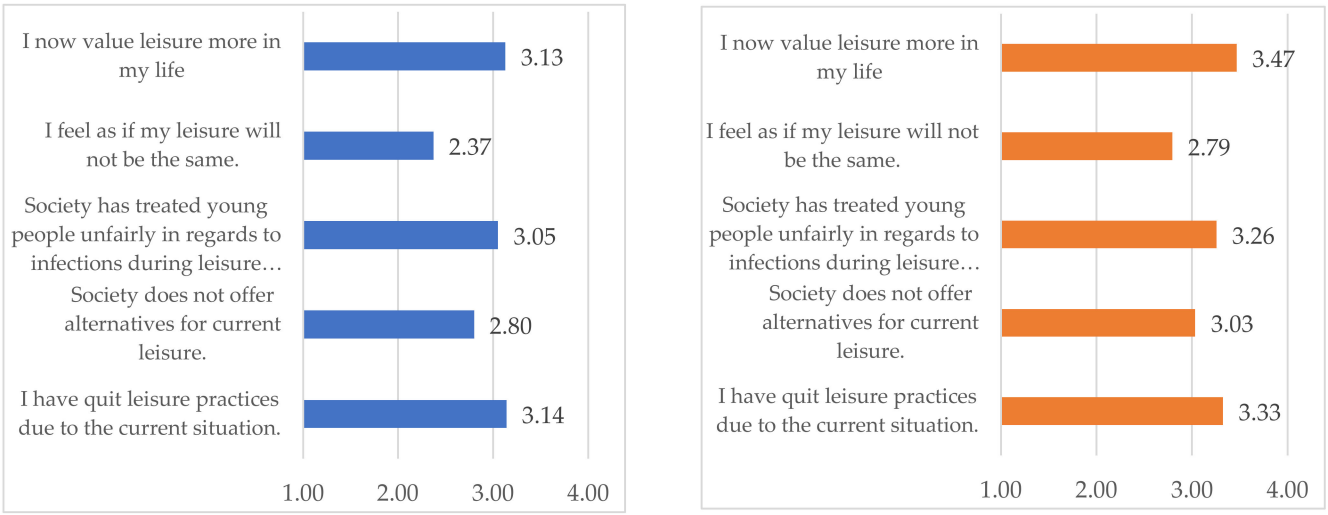

Figure 10. Opinions (1–4) of youth on leisure and COVID-19: (**a**) men; (**b**) women.

The results of the inferential analysis to analyze possible gender differences show significant differences in all opinions on leisure and COVID-19, as follows: leisure will never be the same again, giving up leisure practices, society does not offer alternatives to leisure, and unfair treatment of young people by society. For all opinions, the effect size is of medium magnitude (*d*-value between 0.2 and 0.5) (Table 4).

Table 4. Student's t-test for independent sample summary: opinions on leisure and COVID-19, considering gender.

	Levene's Test		***t*-Test for Equality of Means**			**Effect Size**		
	F	***p*** [1]	***t***	***df***	***p***	$\bar{x}$	***d***	***r***
Quitting leisure practices	0.987	0.321	−2.767	1037	0.006	Men = 3.14 ± 0.948 Woman = 3.33 ± 0.893	−0.2063	−0.1026
Society does not offer alternatives for current leisure	0.048	0.826	−3.544	1036	0.000	Men = 2.80 ± 0.877 Woman = 3.03 ± 0.907	−0.2578	−0.1278
Unfair treatment of society towards young people regarding infections during leisure time	0.189	0.664	−3.230	1033	0.001	Men = 3.05 ± 0.902 Woman = 3.26 ± 0.853	−0.2392	−0.1187
Leisure will not be the same	5.269	0.022	−5.884	1027	0.000	Men = 2.79 ± 0.963 Woman = 3.13 ± 0.918	−0.3614	−0.1778

[1] Levene's test: $p > 0.05$ in all cases then equality of variances is not assumed.

The independent variable "more importance of leisure now" did not show a normal distribution in the Levene's test, so possible differences were analyzed through the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test. The results also showed significant differences in relation to gender, and the effect size is of medium magnitude ($d = 0.4024$).

4. Discussion

This study focused on the interruption and transformation of leisure of young people during the pandemic. If leisure is recognized as an essential asset in the lives of young people, this can have a great impact on the development of this group, since physical distancing and other restrictions, maintained or introduced intermittently from March 2020

until today (December 2021), and apparently to be continued for some time more, have almost certainly had a significant impact on young people [16,17], given that they are more sensitive to interaction with their peers and social stimuli. Physical distancing could have had a disproportionate effect on an age group for which interaction with their peer group is a vital means of development [19]. Therefore, it is relevant to analyze their opinions, feelings developed, and the transformations introduced in their leisure practices to be able to develop strategies from the community and try to restore quality leisure activities, which, ultimately, contribute to youth development.

This discussion is structured with the intention of answering the questions and hypotheses raised at the beginning of the study.

1. Do young people value their leisure more now than before?

The first hypothesis that this study aimed to prove states that young people now value their leisure more than before the pandemic. This hypothesis arises from the recognition of leisure as an area for the development of the group that offers them opportunities to express themselves, demonstrate skills, and connect with others [5]. During youth, people explore their potential, play various social roles and forms of personal identity, and accept and reject habits, values, and beliefs, socializing and building their leisure lifestyle [7–9]. Thus, leisure has been gaining importance in recent decades as one of the vital aspects most valued by young people themselves [48], so the total or partial renunciation of their leisure lifestyle should have an effect on its assessment.

In light of the results, this hypothesis has been corroborated, given that the data show that young people affirmed in a very general way that they value their leisure more now than before the pandemic, giving it greater importance in their lives.

2. What transformations/adaptations did young people have to make in their leisure lifestyles? How has it varied? Are such transformations reversible or permanent?

These questions were answered through Hypotheses 2 and 3.

The second hypothesis of this research was that young people had to adapt their leisure due to the pandemic.

The results obtained show that youth have varied their leisure in terms of the way they practice it and that they have introduced new activities in their leisure lifestyles. This study has also shown that during the first phase, during confinement, young people were forced to incorporate virtual adaptations to their leisure practices, this being the most widespread type of transformation during that time. It is also relevant that they maintained leisure activities that they had been practicing before confinement, although they had to vary the company with which they developed them.

Therefore, the hypothesis has been corroborated, which coincides with the results obtained in previous studies, which have shown that children and young people practiced less physical activity and spent less time outdoors and more time in sedentary activities [39–44].

The third hypothesis suggested that young people believe that their leisure has not and will not be the same again. This was widely demonstrated based on the results since the vast majority believed that their leisure is different now than before confinement, and a significant group felt that their leisure will not be the same as it was before the pandemic.

This contradicts the results of some published research that has shown how adaptations and transformations of leisure lifestyles were perceived by most people as transitory, waiting to resume their activities when the epidemiological situation has improved [23,45].

3. Do you feel that the pandemic has affected aspects of your life such as routines, relationships with friends, and your psychological well-being? How do you value the treatment received by society in relation to your leisure?

These questions were answered through Hypotheses 4 and 5.

The results obtained also corroborate the fourth hypothesis; young people believe that the pandemic has especially affected their routines and relationships with their friends, and—although to a lesser extent—their psychological well-being, which is along the lines of studies that have been published since March 2020 [16–20].

The last hypothesis pursued in this study affirms that young people believe that society has treated them unfairly in relation to their leisure and COVID-19 infections, as confirmed based on the analysis of the results obtained. However, in addition, they show that young people are fully aware that they have had to give up some of their leisure practices due to the pandemic but that society has not offered them alternatives, as restrictions on leisure prevail.

4. Is gender a determining factor in coping with the effect of the pandemic on your leisure lifestyle?

Despite having identified different answers according to gender, it is not possible to affirm that this factor is determining. In terms of the transformations of leisure, virtual adaptation has been more present among women than among men, but this data must be interpreted in a context in which the virtual/online space was more present in the leisure of men than women before the pandemic. Thus, more women than men stated that their leisure has varied. These results are in line with other studies that have affirmed that digital technologies have partially compensated for limitations in social relationships [19,40]. In addition, women believed—more than men—that the pandemic has somehow affected their psychological well-being. Another aspect to highlight in terms of gender differences is that men have varied the way they practice their leisure to a greater extent and have decreased the variety of activities. The only aspect that did show that gender is a determining factor is regarding the practice of new activities and sharing more leisure with family, which is much more preponderant in women than in men.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to a greater availability of data that allows for interpreting the impact of an unprecedented event in the modern era that has affected and will continue to affect all of humanity, and leisure is one of the aspects of people's lives that has been affected by the pandemic. Therefore, an important contribution of this work is the identification of adaptations and transformations of leisure practices, specifically offering us greater insight into what these adaptations have been and the intensity of penetration in this population group. Likewise, in a situation such as the one experienced worldwide, the emergence of negative emotions was evident, but the findings show which emotions have predominated, how they have evolved during and after confinement, the intensity of these emotions, as well as gender differences. Finally, this study has allowed us to know the opinion of young people in relation to binomial leisure and COVID-19, as well as their perceptions regarding their treatment and understanding received by the rest of society.

In short, the results obtained show the need to develop leisure policies and programs that address the short- and medium-term effects and transformations caused by COVID-19 on youth leisure. Young people's perceptions of the lack of alternatives to their leisure time reveal the need to develop leisure education programs that help adolescents and young people to introduce wider repertoires of activities into their leisure lifestyles. Likewise, there is an unquestionable need to monitor the negative feelings that have arisen after COVID-19, as well as the effects on young people's mental health.

Although it is true that the results of this study are limited to the sample—that is, young university students in Spain—the replicability of the work can allow for an easy extension to other geographical contexts and other groups, being aware that the impact of the pandemic on people can vary, depending on age, previous experiences of key life events, family composition, and the context of residence. It is evident that the pandemic has modified habits and routines, with a possible medium and long-term impact on the lifestyle and well-being of young people [20–22] and the rest of the population, which presents itself as a field of research to be explored over the next few years.

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