

Changes in Out-of-Home Recreation Attitudes under the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Recreation directly affects the factors that create personality. It can evoke feelings of well-being, and satisfaction related to positive identity, growth, creativity, balanced competition, character, mental capacity, individual dignity, physical condition, socialization, and coping attitude. All these characteristics are correlated to one degree or another with public health and welfare. The article aims to study, present, and analyze the changes in out-of-home recreational activities of Bulgarian citizens under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following methods were applied: desk study of the content of specialized literary sources; analysis of reports and official documents of national organizations; process monitoring; formal and informal interviews with specialists; and expert analysis. The primary empirical data for the article were collected through a questionnaire survey. As a result, people's attitudes towards recreational activities were surveyed, with and without restrictions, and the key changes were studied and systematized. The analysis focuses on changes in recreational activities in the following areas: (i) time used for out-of-home recreation during the COVID-19-related restrictions and after they were lifted; (ii) the change in the types of recreational activities practiced after the restrictions and motivation for that were lifted

Keywords: Recreation Attitudes, COVID-19 Pandemic, Mental and Physical Health.

1 Introduction

As a health prophylactic activity, recreation prevents some risk factors for diseases and their consequences, as well as better health and quality of life. Recreation directly affects the factors that create personality. It can evoke feelings of well-being, and satisfaction related to positive identity, growth, creativity, balanced competition, character, mental capacity, individual dignity, physical condition, socialization, and coping attitude. All these characteristics are correlated to one degree or another with public health and welfare.

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The term 'recreation' is of Latin origin and means 'restoration of health'. In recent years, one of the biggest public health challenges has been COVID-19. The World Health Organization declared a global COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020, having previously declared a public health emergency on January 30, 2020, which was prompted by international concern over the disease. Many countries declared a state of emergency and/or an epidemic emergency due to the alarming increase in the number of cases. The COVID-19-related restrictions have significantly changed daily life and modulated human health and well-being. Recreational activities, as one of the tools of public health during the pandemic period, took place primarily in the home. After the restrictions were lifted, the usual recreational behavior underwent certain changes.

The dictionary of foreign words in the Bulgarian language explains the word recreation as 'restoration of strength' [1]. The historical approach to defining recreation also includes defining it as an activity that restores human working capacity, an approach with several limitations. Another more reliable approach is to define recreation as a type of activity characterized by being optional and socially acceptable. Some theories emphasize the values, outcomes, and utility of recreation. A good approach to the study of recreation is related to the satisfaction of internal needs, in response to the desire for a certain pleasure that is beneficial to the individual and society and is carried out during leisure time [2] [3]. It can take place inside or outside the home, be an active or passive activity, indoors or outdoors, etc.

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As a health prophylactic activity, it prevents risk factors for diseases and their consequences, better health, and quality of life. Recreational activities are important for the formation of a healthy lifestyle harmoniously connected with the living environment [4].

The specialized literature also states that recreation directly influences the factors that create personality. It can evoke feelings of well-being, and satisfaction relating to positive identity, growth, creativity, balanced competition, character, mental capacity, individual dignity, physical condition, socialization, and coping attitude. All these characteristics are correlated to one degree or another with public health. Even Heraclitus pointed out that the greatest medicine is the medicine that teaches people not to need it. In this sense, recreation creates a prerequisite for good public health, through caring for the harmony of the individual, as a unity of mind and body.

At the same time, recreational activities have the potential to mitigate some of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis [5] [6]. In this connection, the usefulness of knowledge about people's attitudes regarding recreation is brought to the foreground, which determines the motivation for the present study.

The restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic have changed the frequency and type of recreational activities of citizens, and these changes also have an impact on attitudes toward future recreation [7] [8]. In this regard, the aim of the article is to study, present, and analyze the changes in out-of-home recreational activities of citizens under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this aim, a survey of people's attitudes towards recreational activities, in the absence of restrictions, is carried out, and the key changes are studied and systematized. Within the scope of the main aim is also a discussion of the possibilities of mitigating the pandemic's negative impacts through recreational activities.

2. Materials

The following methods were applied: desk study of the content of specialized literary sources; analysis of reports and official documents of governmental and non-governmental organizations; process monitoring; formal and informal interviews with specialists; and expert analysis. The primary empirical data for the article were collected through a survey compiled using Google Forms. The researchers set adults as a criterion for the sample. They asked respondents who met the criteria to fill out the survey. Databases of the authors of previous studies, as well as the power of social networks, were used to distribute the survey.

The survey was based on questions validated in the scientific literature and adapted for this study. Respondents self-assessed each variable of each activity construct during the COVID-19 pandemic and/or at the time when there were no social distancing restrictions. The survey also included several demographic variables: gender; age; education; settlement; and employment. The data were collected in March - April 2023, and before that, a test survey was done to smooth out the wording in the survey.

The information from the received surveys was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods, and tabular and graphic methods were used to present it.

3. Discussion and Results

During a pandemic, the main measure to maintain public health is quarantine. This forced isolation causes negative effects such as boredom, hopelessness, depression, and unhappiness. Some studies find that the implemented public health measures aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19 can have negative impacts on mental health.

Recreation, in turn, has the potential to aid recovery as it leads to improved cardiovascular and respiratory health, improved immunity, and a lower risk of mortality. Access to green spaces, gardens, as well as physical and other outdoor activities are also associated with health, lower levels of stress and anxiety, and overall higher levels of well-being [9].

The study focuses on identifying and analyzing the changes in recreational activities in the following areas: (i) time used for out-of-home recreation during the COVID-19 restrictions and after they were lifted; (ii) the change in the types of recreational activities practiced, after the restrictions and motivations for doing so were lifted; (iii) most frequently practiced outdoor activities after the restrictions were lifted; (iv) changed behavior after the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

368 completed valid survey cards were received and processed. The distribution of respondents by demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by demographic criteria

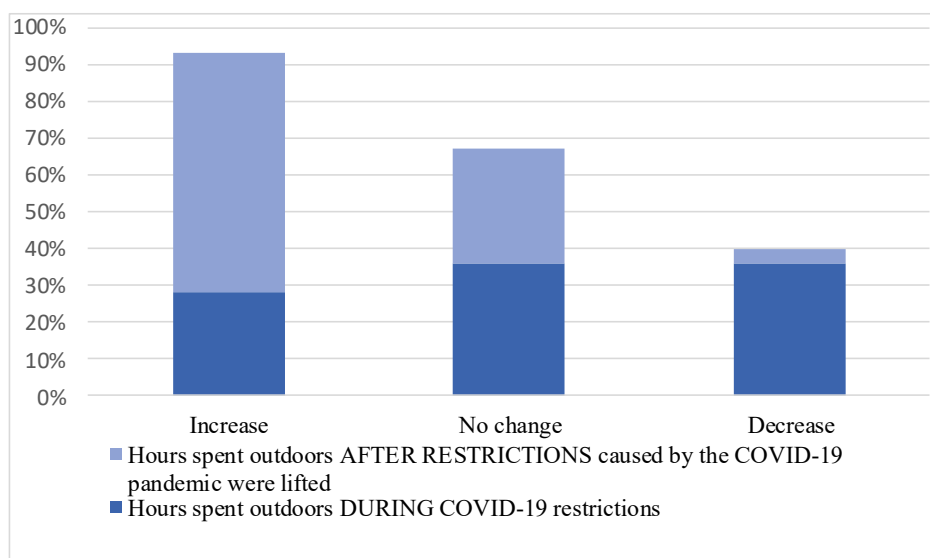
Variable		Number (N)	%
Gender	Male	106	28.8
	Female	262	71.2
Age (years)	18-24	30	8.2
	25-34	93	25.3
	35-44	86	23.4
	45-54	102	27.7

	55-64	48	13.0
	65+	9	2.4
Settlement	Village	27	7.3
	Town	341	92.7
Education	Primary education	7	1.9
	Secondary education	57	15.5
	Higher education	304	82.6
Employment	Employed	298	80.9
	Unemployed	18	4.8
	Students	43	11.8
	Retired	9	2.5

Source: Authors

3.1 Changes in total outdoor recreation time

The results of the survey showed that the majority of respondents reduced the time they spent outdoors during the declared state of emergency and emergency epidemiological situation (Graph. 1).



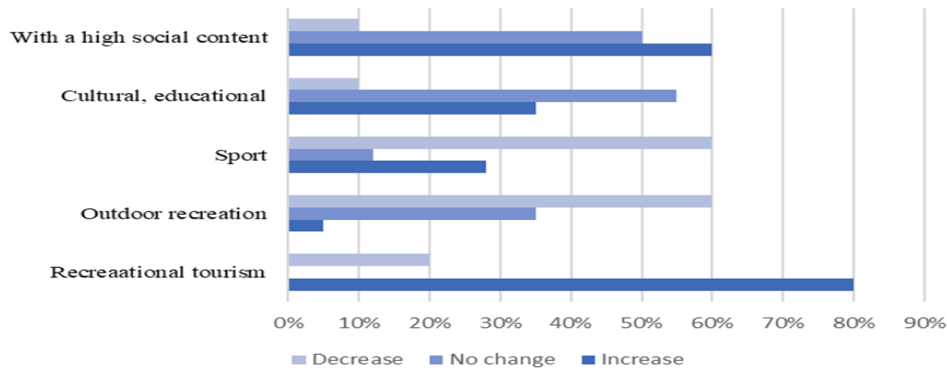
Graph 1: Change in outdoor recreation time due to COVID-19

Source: Authors

The declines in participation in outdoor activities during the pandemic can be explained by factors such as park restrictions and closures; lack of motivation due to a busy mind, etc. There is a noticeable change in the time spent outdoors after the lifting of the restrictions. Over 70% of respondents indicated that they had increased their hours of outdoor recreation. This fact is a consequence of an accumulated need for recreation that was not met during the pandemic. The results show that people’s abilities to adapt to pandemic conditions vary widely. During the restrictions, 35% had no change in outdoor recreation hours, 34% had a decrease, and 31% had an increase.

3.2 Changes in recreational activities by type after the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted

For the study, it is of interest which types of recreation register the greatest change after lifting the COVID-19-related restrictions.



Graph 2. Change in recreational activities by type after the end of COVID-19 restrictions

Source: Authors

The study found that the largest increase was in outdoor recreation (day trips, walks, picnics, pleasure driving, etc.), followed by recreation with high social content (events, entertainment, dining, and entertainment, visiting relatives and friends). More than half of respondents indicated that they had increased their outdoor recreation.

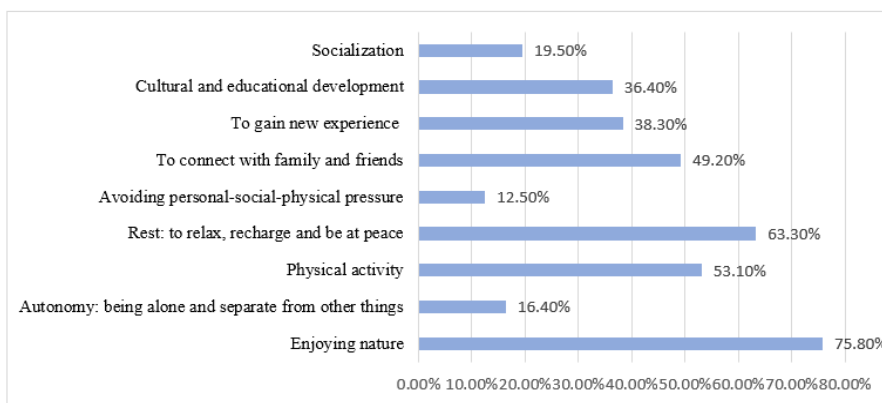
The scientific literature emphasizes that outdoor recreation is as important to community resilience and mental health as social connections and social relationships. Even contemplating landscapes from home – a view from the window to a natural environment leads to lower levels of stress. The literature highlights the importance of demographic factors on mental health: women report higher levels of anxiety and depression than men, and younger people have more anxiety than older people [10].

Table 2. Types of outdoor recreation – ranking by the number of respondents who indicated an increase in practicing the activity after the lifting of restrictions

Rank		%
1.	Spending time with family or other people	57.6
2.	Walking	50.8
3.	Observing nature	41.6
4.	Hiking	41.0
5.	Educational activities	38.0
6.	Special events, festivals	37.2
7.	Sports, exercising	37.2
8.	Cultural and spiritual activities	31.5
9.	Playing with children	29.9
10.	Other	5.9
11.	Walking a pet	4.6

Source: Authors

It is also of interest what the specific motivation of people for practicing outdoor recreation is. Enjoying nature stands out among the answers of the respondents – more than 80% of the respondents indicated it (Graph.3). Another more widely accepted motivation is rest: relaxing, recharging and being at peace, as well as physical activity and connecting with family and friends.



Graph 3. Motivation for practicing recreational activities

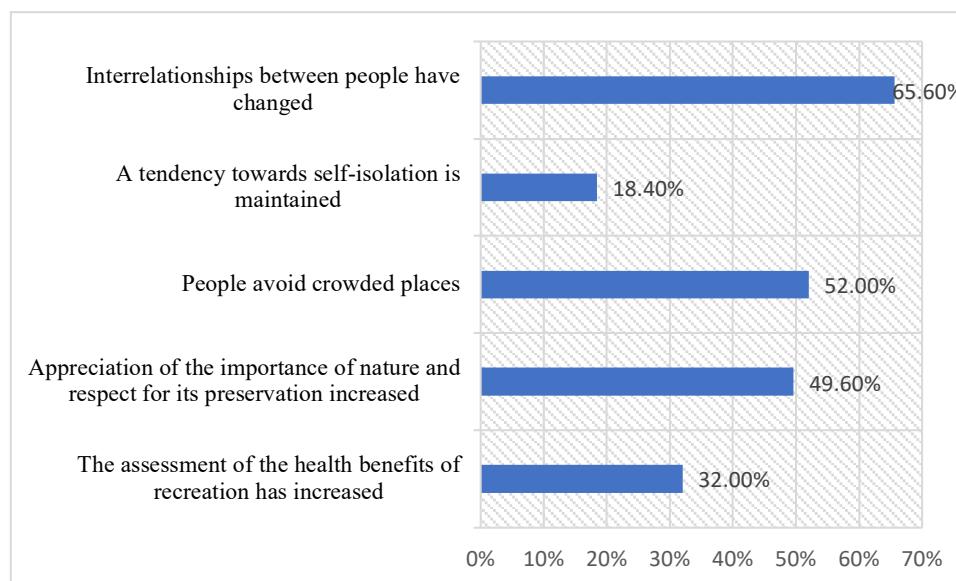
Source: Authors

Survey data show that the pandemic period has brought to the fore people’s need and desire to connect with nature, recharge, and achieve unity of mind and body. This is determined by two reasons – the first is pushing and is related to the need to change the everyday urban environment, and the second is pulling and is related to the favorable opportunities that the natural environment provides for recreation. The recreational power of nature is mainly caused by the qualities of air, climate, atmosphere, etc. [11].

3.3 Changes in recreational behavior after the restrictions were lifted

The attempts to value the concept of a fulfilling life lead to selecting the factors that determine it and calculating a fulfilling life index. Two of the total seven factors in this index are health and recreation (Progres Konsult 2023). The latest study (in 2023) related to the calculation of the index brings to the fore the following for a full existence: financial means; social environment and relationships with people; goals, confidence, and satisfaction; and health.

In the present authors’ study, the surveyed persons had the opportunity to confirm or not certain opinions regarding the changed behavior of people, affecting their way of recreation (Graph. 4).



Graph 4. Changed behavior after the lifting of restrictions caused by COVID-19

Source: Authors

Going deeper into the analysis is related to what changes in behavior have occurred as a result of the pandemic. Respondents consider that one of the most significant changes as a result of the pandemic are the changed connections and relationships between people; avoiding crowded places and respect for nature and its preservation. A favorable finding is that no tendency to self-isolation persists.

Conclusion

The results of the analysis provide grounds for the conclusion that there is an accumulated need for outdoor recreation as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. There is also a significant change regarding recreation with high social content. Dominant motives are contact with nature, recharging, and relationships with family and other people.

This study highlights the potential to strengthen resilience in times of crisis by emphasizing the importance and providing recreation opportunities, particularly outdoors and close to nature. The findings show that proactive actions to increase participation in recreational activities can help build resilience before global crises and mitigate their aftermath. In particular, providing access to safe recreation areas through infrastructure development and appropriate management policy can be a crucial step towards helping people cope with change during global disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as supporting the subsequent recovery

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