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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

Bonsai in the Time of COVID: The Miniature, the Social and the Solitary

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Abstract

The study sought to find out to what extent engagement with *serious leisure*, in this case bonsai growing, can help people deal with challenging times, such as a global pandemic. In particular, it was concerned with how bonsai enthusiasts use their hobbies to manage uncertainty and stress during the lockdown and how they have shared their lived experiences via social media. The researcher employed a user-generated content analysis approach to address the research questions and explored a collection of comments from a sample of the most visited bonsai videos posted on YouTube during the first nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The *serious leisure perspective* has been used as a theoretical framework to conceptualise the data based on the qualities that differentiate *serious leisure* from *casual leisure*. The findings showed that engagement in this hobby helps bonsai enthusiasts to develop social connectedness and cope with their stress caused by the pandemic.

Keywords

Serious Leisure; Wellbeing; Social Engagement; Bonsai Growing; COVID-19 Pandemic

*The glory of gardening: hands in the dirt, head in the sun, heart with nature.
To nurture a garden is to feed not just the body, but the soul. Alfred Austin*

Introduction

Positive impacts of leisure engagement on people's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing have been widely reported in the leisure studies literature (e.g. [Kuykendall et al. 2015](#); [Mansfield et al. 2020](#); [Tian et al. 2020](#)). Among various kinds of leisure involvements, serious leisure has a unique position because of its durable personal and social benefits. Robert Stebbins coined this term in 1982 to differentiate it from unserious or casual leisure. According to his definition, serious leisure includes amateurism, hobbyist pursuits, and career volunteering. The notion of seriousness in this term comes from a combination of six qualities: perseverance and commitment, the potentiality to turn into a career, significant personal effort based on specific knowledge, durable personal and social benefits, unique ethos within a social world and developing new identities associated with the chosen activity ([Stebbins, 1982](#)).

As [Figure 1](#) below shows, serious leisure includes three main categories including amateurism, volunteering and hobbies. Each category has its sub-categories. For example, hobbyists might engage in various activities such as collecting (e.g. coin collecting, antiques, philately), making and tinkering (e.g. tapestry, quilting, origami), activity participation (e.g. fundraising, dancing, community activism), sports and games (e.g. squash, hiking, fishing) or liberal arts pursuits (e.g. art history, astronomy, pub quiz). Engagement in any of these activities need long term commitment and acquiring new knowledge or skills.

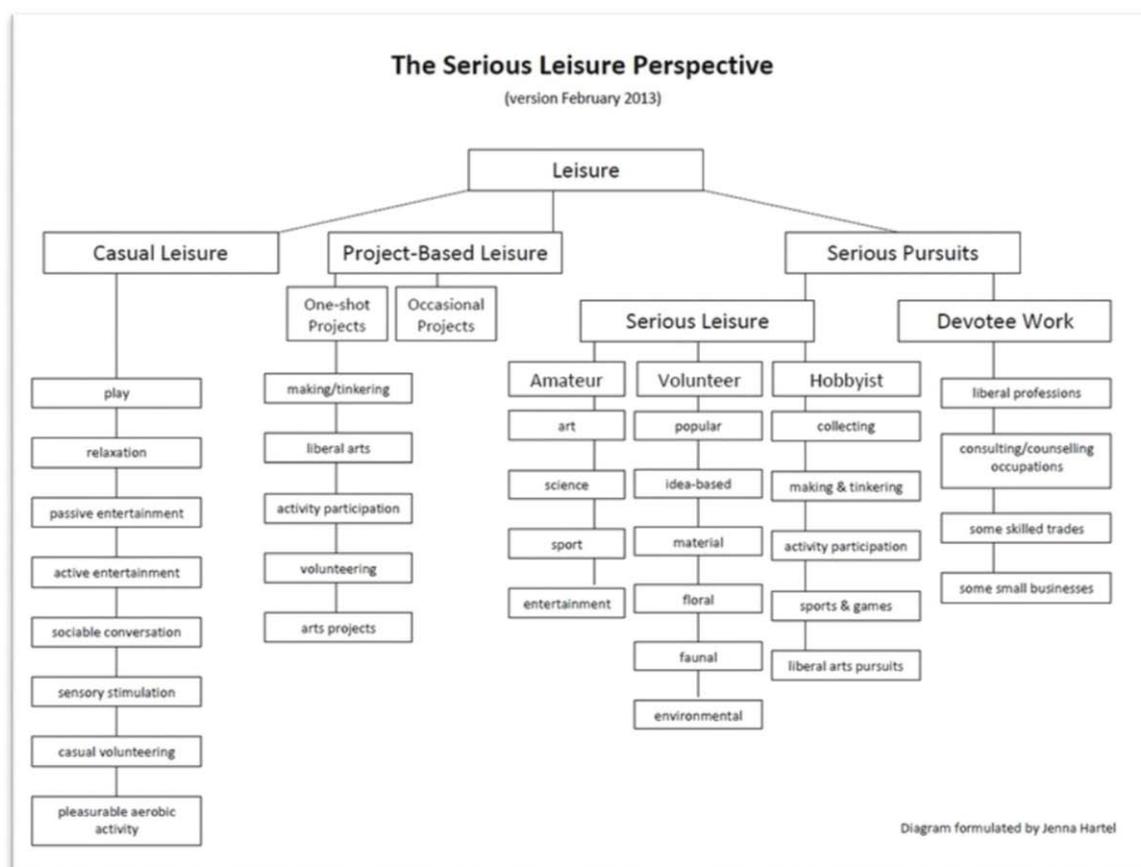


Figure 1. The Serious Leisure Perspective developed by [Hartel \(2013\)](#) based on the work of Robert A. Stebbins. Retrieved from the Serious Leisure Perspective website: www.seriousleisure.net

During the past four decades, research shows that engagement in serious leisure brings several benefits for the participants, such as self-actualisation and social engagement ([Siegenthaler and O'Dell 2003](#); [Gould et al. 2011](#); [Kim et al. 2016](#); [Mansourian 2021](#)). However, it is not always easy and straightforward, and numerous contextual elements can potentially hinder leisure engagement. For example, since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, many group activities have faced limitations. Since then, experts in leisure studies have discussed several links between the leisure sector and the pandemic ([Anderson 2020](#); [De Miranda 2020](#); [Ling 2020](#); [Son et al. 2020](#); [van Leeuwen et al. 2020](#); [Giles and Oncescu 2020](#); [Young 2020](#), [Kaushal and Srivastava 2021](#)).

This paper explores bonsai growing, as an example of serious leisure, during the COVID-19 outbreak to find out to what extent engagement with a hobby can help people deal with challenging times. The paper adopted the *serious leisure perspective* as its theoretical framework to conceptualise the findings.

Bonsai growing as a popular hobby

Bonsai is a Japanese term meaning the art and practice of growing trees in pots or small containers to resonate natural scenery in miniature size (Stevens, Curl and Wilson 2015). Bonsai is a Japanese version of the original Chinese art called “penjing” or “penzai” ([Zhao 2012](#)). The word “bonsai” includes two parts. “Bon” means a shallow container such as a pot or tray, and “sai” means planting. Therefore, in a simple definition, “bonsai” is a tree planted in a shallow container. However, not every potted plant is a bonsai! Bonsai combines sophisticated horticultural techniques, traditional artistic skills and philosophical principles to create, shape and preserve a wide range of trees to represent an ideal form of nature with aesthetic features ([Warren 2014](#)).

While some tropical trees can be grown indoors, most popular bonsai trees are grown outdoors. They require judicious watering, trimming, feeding, and root pruning ([Cochrane 2006](#)). Bonsai growing requires special skills beyond gardening. From around the ninth century, it had become a “chic” horticultural hobby by the Edo period (1603–1868) in Japan. This hobby was introduced to the West later and received more attention from western societies by the latter half of the 1930s ([Suga 2019](#)).

Nowadays, bonsai is a popular hobby worldwide because it has various aspects ranging from gardening to meditation and mindfulness. It embraces creativity, leisure, and art within one activity, positively impacting physical and mental health and well-being ([Hermann and Edwards 2021](#)). In general, bonsai is a multi-faceted pastime and provides people with a rich fascination and source of meaning in life. [Warren \(2014 p. 9\)](#) highlights this characteristic of bonsai growing and writes:

From a Western perspective, bonsai falls between many cracks. It is neither purely art, nor horticulture; neither craft nor science. Bonsai requires an open mind and the adaptation of all these aspects in order to create beauty and meaning.

This practice is a form of serious leisure because it requires perseverance and commitment and can turn into a career. It also needs significant personal effort and potentially can produce durable personal and social benefits for the participants ([Stebbins 1982](#)). As a hobby, bonsai also creates valuable opportunities to boost social engagement. That is why bonsai enthusiasts have local, regional and national communities and share their skills and experiences with like-minded people via various channels such as social media, exhibitions and workshops. During the COVID-19 time, like everyone else, bonsai communities had to cancel their public events. However, they used virtual platforms, such as YouTube, to stay in touch and keep sharing information. YouTube is popular because it is a multimedia platform and provides tutorial videos and people can learn new skills by watching videos.

Literature review

The inevitable impacts of the COVID-19 on the leisure sector have already appeared in the leisure studies discourse (e.g. [Anderson 2020](#); [Young 2020](#)). [Ling \(2020\)](#) reports that leisure sports became one of the most important lifestyles of ordinary people during the pandemic, and home leisure sports products were selling well. People paid more attention to leisure sports, and it reminded the wider society of the fitness value, entertainment value, and social interaction value in people's lives.

[Van Leeuwen et al. \(2020\)](#) found out that as people spent more leisure time at home during the lockdown period, the psychological impact was visible, such as stress, anxiety, and confusion. The most significant pressure was felt by people personally affected by the virus or with family members who needed hospitalisation due to the disease. At the same time, lockdown periods increased social media-related leisure activities such as gaming. Moreover, since many leisure facilities were closed, self-organised outdoor leisure activities like running and cycling became more popular.

[Anderson \(2020\)](#) observed people's leisure behaviours during the first six months of the pandemic across the United States. He concluded that leisure needs can be mapped onto four domains of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects, with spirituality included as an aspect of wellbeing. In terms of the physical element, people worked more in their gardens and enjoyed some leisure actions done individually or with small groups like running, cycling and birdwatching. Also, some people did more house cleaning or home improvement projects. In terms of the cognitive dimension, people realised they needed much more than just watching the media news to occupy their minds. Therefore, they spent more time on casual leisure at home, such as reading, crossword puzzles, learning new languages, attending online courses, and sharing food recipes. In particular, the individuals who did not have other home-based commitments, such as those who were not required to home-school their children, had more free time for their leisure activities.

Regarding the social aspects, the more time people spent at home isolated from family and friends, the more they realised how important it was to maintain social connections. They connected through phone, social media, and other communications platforms. Some discovered new forms of communications. For example, neighbours kept a physical distance while talking over the fence or across the street. From the emotional point of view, anxiety, uncertainty and depression increased.

[Young \(2020\)](#) observed changes and challenges of leisure activities during the outbreak in South Africa. She reports the pandemic forced almost everyone to revisit how they live, work and play. People changed and adapted their leisure pursuits to fit the situation and used technology more frequently to stay in touch and pursue leisure activities. People spent much more time at home than ever before. Simultaneously, the lack of physical activity affected their physical and mental wellbeing. Leisure and entertainment activities that did not require social contact showed success ([van Leeuwen et al. 2020](#)).

Though it is still too early to evaluate the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on people's leisure activities, it is evident that the patterns of many leisure activities have drastically changed. The restrictions limited most group leisure activities and pushed many people toward more indoor and personal hobbies such as bonsai growing.

Bonsai is a trendy hobby globally. The volume of information about this hobby is enormous and exists in multiple formats (e.g. books, magazines, handbooks, websites, tutorial videos, and podcasts). Nonetheless, the research on bonsai, as a form of serious leisure, is still limited. However, we do not know whether this is the case only in the English language literature, or whether it is limited generally.

However, as bonsai is a type of serious leisure, the existing knowledge about similar activities is relevant. Furthermore, some evidence-based articles support the benefits of bonsai from other perspectives. For example, [Ochiai et al. \(2017\)](#) reported that visual stimulation with bonsai trees in a group of male patients with spinal cord injury reduced their pain and increased their sense of comfort, and relaxation. Their

findings support the hypothesis that engagement in bonsai growing can potentially improve health and reduce mental stress.

Similarly, [Park and Mattson \(2009\)](#) stated that viewing plants during the recovery period positively impacted surgical patients' health outcomes. The patients in rooms with plants had more positive physiologic responses, evidenced by lower blood pressure and lower pain and anxiety ratings. Their findings confirmed the therapeutic value of plants as a non-invasive and inexpensive complementary treatment. Using bonsai as a kind of mindfulness practice has also appeared in the literature (e.g. [Toll and Orabone 2016](#)). Furthermore, some bonsai enthusiasts shared their experiences about how bonsai growing helped them to be successful in other aspects of life. For example, [Baum \(2018, p. 256\)](#) reports:

It is not easy to raise and care for a bonsai plant, just as it is not easy to start, grow, and maintain a medical practice. If we can successfully nurture a bonsai plant—and it is not easy—then we can also manage to care for and nurture a medical practice. The endeavours are similar in many ways. (p. 256)

Nevertheless, the literature review revealed there is little research about bonsai as a hobby. However, regarding its popularity, there is a need for some research about bonsai hobbyists' lived experiences to find out more about their motivations, stories, and achievements.

Research questions

The current study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: To what extent does engagement with serious leisure activities (in this case, bonsai growing) help people deal with the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ2: How do serious leisure participants (in this case, bonsai growers) use their hobby as a coping strategy to deal with uncertainty and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ3: How do serious leisure participants (in this case, bonsai growers) typically share their lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic via social media (in this case, YouTube)?

Research method

This study is based on a sample of user-generated content posted by bonsai enthusiasts in response to the most visited bonsai YouTube videos posted during the first nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic (between March and December 2020). The user-generated content is a popular data collection tool in different research areas such as tourism, hospitality and marketing ([Lu and Stepchenkova 2015](#); [Narangjavana Kaosiri et al. 2019](#); [Huete-Alcocer 2017](#); [Arora and Lata 2020](#)). It is also known as User-created Content or Electronic Word of Mouth and includes all forms of feedback and comments created by social media users in reaction to the online materials in these platforms. Therefore, users' comments on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube are examples of this kind of data.

Scholars in a range of research areas employ user-generated content as a convenient and robust data collection tool to explore an echo of people's lived experiences, everyday practices, and social engagement in specific contexts. However, like any other tools, it has its strengths and weaknesses. It is a reliable tool to collect a massive volume of authentic data as users post their feedback freely. As they can remain anonymous, their comments usually represent their real feeling and perception. Moreover, other users can use this information for various purposes. For example, it is a supporting information source for tourists to plan their travel and make travelling decisions. This user-generated content is also a source of data for instant and reliable information ([Narangjavana Kaosiri et al. 2019](#)).

Nonetheless, while most scholars confirm the trustworthiness of user-generated content as a credible data collection tool, some are still sceptical about its credibility. They believe it relies on several contextual factors, such as sender-receiver relationship, channel variety and presentation of content, opportunities for information solicitation, message retention capabilities, and content provider motivation. Therefore, we need to be more cautious when using this kind of evidence ([Tham et al. 2013](#); [Zeng and Gerritsen 2014](#)). Another challenge is creating reliable links with everyday practices, lived experience, and social engagement. By acknowledging these limitations, the current study avoids any over claiming in the findings.

To identify the most visited videos in this context, the researcher searched YouTube with a combination of keywords such as “bonsai AND lockdown”, “bonsai AND COVID”, “bonsai growing AND pandemic” and “indoor bonsai”. After removing non-English results, which were not many, he selected a sample of ten most visited and most commented videos. The researcher focused on the top ten sites in each search because the number of visits shows the videos’ popularity, and there were more comments for analysis. The total number of comments in the final sample was 1687 comments posted under the most visited videos.

In the next stage, he mapped the data onto *serious leisure perspective* to determine the extent to which these theoretical frameworks can help us identify concepts in the dataset. [Table 1](#) provides some details about the number of views, comments, likes and dislikes reaction to the selected videos. As the table shows, 459K viewers visited the most popular video, and the least popular video in the sample received 10K visits, which is still considerable. The paper does not provide the titles and links of the selected videos to keep the commenters’ identity confidential, a requirement of ethical research.

The collected data has been analysed through a content analysis method, which is an embedded part of data collection and analysis in studies using user-generated content. Some studies employ a quantitative approach to measure various variables or test their hypotheses (e.g. [Christodoulides et al. 2012](#)). In contrast, some adopt a qualitative approach to gain a deep understanding of a little understood issue (e.g. [Chutikulrunsee 2020](#)). Further, some studies use both quantitative and qualitative data to depict a more comprehensive picture of the topic under investigation (e.g. [Chatterjee 2019](#)).

The researcher analysed the 1687 comments. Single-word comments, such as excellent, awesome, brilliant were removed from the sample, as were, emojis and irrelevant reactions, so that the investigation was based on meaningful comments with enough text to analyse, ranging from phrases and clauses to complete sentences and even paragraphs . A descriptive level of quantitative analysis identified the range of views, likes and comments, as shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. The number of views, likes, dislikes and comments on the selected YouTube videos

	Min.	Max.	Sum
Number of views	10K	193K	459K
Number of likes	0.3K	4.7K	14K
Number of dislikes	12	58	0.2K
Number of comments	18	412	1687

Findings

The commenters were from everywhere around the world, although mainly from countries in North America and Europe. They were mostly from countries where English is widely spoken as the first or second language, probably because the study’s videos were limited to English. Some of them knew each other due to participation in bonsai-related events or clubs’ membership as they referred to their shared experiences.

However, the majority of the commenters appeared to be total strangers to one another, having a shared interest of bonsai connected them as a virtual community. They had a chance to discuss their hobbies via the YouTube platform, enhancing social engagement via this virtual space.

We've been in lockdown with our choices – good and bad ..., I'm feeling better now than I was 3–4 months ago. A lot of that started with identifying that new routine, that new reason to put on pants in the morning and get moving. Bonsai has helped in this no doubt but has been one of the rebuilding blocks in the overall puzzle here. Don't give up guys and gals.

If it wasn't for the lockdown, I may not have started learning bonsai. I just got the stuff for doing some cuttings (bring on the lockdown) I have around 6 weeks to pass!

Most of the comments show that bonsai enthusiasts have found this hobby delightful, calming, joyful, fulfilling, rewarding, stress-relieving, and immersive. The findings show engagement in this hobby develops a form of social identity for people.

For me, I think there are three main components: The hobby, including things like technique, tools, maintenance, and so on. The artistic creativity and appreciation of natural aesthetics and growing things. And lastly, feeling connected with nature on an individual level, being dependent on it, and being dependent on you – not so much forcing it through self-indulgence as realising and accepting it, which is peaceful.

Others focus on “process and practice” of bonsai growing and less about the “product”.

Apart from the end result, the process is also an interesting one, the journey is never short and to get a good tree, at least 5–10 years are required if you are training them young. Each season, you see your trees develop and evolve in each season, there are the joys and struggles (i.e. waiting for your tree to leaf out or the slight fear that your tree may not survive the winter somehow) and that is part of the process which makes it interesting.

The key findings are presented in three parts. The first part provides examples of comments that show bonsai enthusiasts' motivations to spend time on this hobby. The second part offers what confirms bonsai growing is a form of *serious leisure*. The third part includes various reactions of the bonsai enthusiasts to the pandemic, reflected in their comments.

Motivations of bonsai growers

A qualitative content analysis of the comments shows people have various motivations for spending time on this hobby ranging from pure pleasure and relaxation to miniaturising the trees and recreating a natural image. However, exploring the comments show that since the beginning of the lockdown there has been a visible emphasis how bonsai helps the participants to exercise mindfulness and creativity. Some comments and provided specific details about the viewer's motivation. The excerpts below are just a few examples of the extensive number in the data:

Love of trees, seeing things grow, stealing of time (making trees look like they have been growing for hundreds of years), for beauty and peace, relationship (the tree needs us and gives back), the artwork, pure enjoyment, also it helps me with growing normal plants.

The awe and wonder of nature captured in a single tree, to contemplate the life of that tree and how you participate in sharing life with a living gift of our world amazes me.

In a world which has become increasingly frantic and demanding instant gratification bonsai offer the exact opposite. They require patience, thoughtfulness, creativity and learning – always more learning.

Some comments indicate that bonsai growers see bonsai as a representation of nature in their house and they enjoy this connection with nature through engagement in this hobby:

I see bonsai as a representation of nature and when you have a bonsai tree, you are trying to recreate a natural image in nature whether it is a strong mighty old tree or a persistent tree struggling to survive, it makes the creator feel more in tune with nature as you can create environments that seem so natural and you can actually feel like that you are in that zone but yet you are still in a synthetic environment. This is the beauty of it that allows us to connect with the natural world without having to be there physically.

Motivations for involvement in leisure activities are diverse and the social benefits derived vary ([Shupe and Gagné, 2016](#)). This study similarly confirms that we need to study motivations considering the contextual and fluid nature of factors that encourage people to be involved in leisure activities.

Bonsai growing as a form of serious leisure

The researcher mapped the data against the *serious leisure perspective* to identify the extent to which the sample of comments matches this conceptual framework. He found extensive evidence to match the six criteria of *serious leisure* including perseverance and commitment, the potentiality to turn into a career, significant personal effort, durable personal and social benefits and unique ethos within a social world, and personal and social identity ([Stebbins, 1982](#)). The compatibility between the collected data and the conceptual framework confirms that bonsai growing is a form of serious leisure, bringing with it, therefore, the outcomes associated with serious leisure. The following sections provide more details with examples of the comments and how these characteristics are significant in a period of lockdown.

PERSEVERANCE AND COMMITMENT

Success in the bonsai hobby needs patience and commitment. Bonsai trees can live for hundreds of years and can be lifelong companions or even a legacy for the next generations. Bonsai trees grow slowly, and as a result of that, a successful bonsai grower needs to be very persistent and patient. It is a long-term goal and requires years of dedication. Some comments explicitly declare that bonsai is an excellent chance to learn how to be more patient, something that everyone needs to learn during a lockdown.

Bonsai is the best hobby that can make you really happy, I love my olive trees, and I feel well when I look at them, I have lost tons of trees, but I don't give up ... after all these years I gained patience, and I appreciate the results.

I grow bonsai for more than 30 years I buy a book about Bonsai and starting to grow it. Creativity is one of the main points. To do something from seed or from seedling to grow a big tree is fascinat[ing]. I try to do bonsai from a little seedling or from a seed. Patience is very important. This helps me in my business, bonsai teaches me that things can go better, and this needs time, perseverance, and view in the future.

I retired last year and moved to ... in our new garage I discovered some empty bonsai pots, which intrigued me and led me to research bonsai. That is how I found your videos which were very helpful in not only being instructive and inspiring but helped me through the stress of the pandemic. ... I was even planning to travel to your nursery to get some first-hand advice in a workshop, but due to Covid have had to postpone those plans.

POTENTIALITY TO TURN INTO A CAREER

There is a global market for bonsai, and anyone who enjoys this hobby can continue her/his passion as a fulltime career. Most professional bonsai growers usually began their career as a hobby first, and after a while, they turn it into a career. During the pandemic, when many people lost their job and looked for a career shift, bonsai growing as a job was an option for some bonsai enthusiasts.

It's an amalgam of horticulture and art! It is fascinating and gives me immense pleasure! I am 23, and I ask myself where do you see yourself in next 15–20 years, in your late 40s? The answer always is having a garden with lots of bonsai trees, I want these as a part of my family.

Short answer absolutely. I started by gathering the most interesting saplings from around the yard in April when my job went remote. After my job was eliminated in November, I'm planning to get more creative and do more training now that my plants are established.

SIGNIFICANT PERSONAL EFFORT

Bonsai growing is not an easy task. It requires persistence and personal effort. As a result of all the steps to create a bonsai tree, bonsai's ornamental value is usually more than ordinary potted plants. During the lockdown, when people had to stay home and engage in fewer activities, spending time on bonsai trees helped them stay active, because these tiny trees need constant attention, pruning, trimming, watering, potting, repotting and so on. Moreover, while some hobbies are often temporary activities, bonsai growing imposed a different timeframe. It requires a very long-term commitment, which is more like a discipline, a routine, or a responsibility to some other living entity, like pet ownership.

What I like about bonsai is that when you look at the plant, you can see how much effort and thought went into making it. At the same time, you know that you don't see all of it, because a lot of perfectly formed branches may have been cut off just to make the tree better. All my trees are quite young and not far off on that journey, however, it is always nice to see bits that you have put effort into making and shaping.

My living room is like a greenhouse. Sorry, no money for heating up to 25 C and better for my health. So, my delicate bonsais are hold like pets – they get outdoor sunshine and when there is no freezing, they enjoy also night trips outside.

Personally, I cope well with Covid-19 lockdown by having built a largely self-sufficient life, both externally and internally, physically, mentally and spiritually. I think you cope very well with life not only because of your genetic makeup but also because of your largely self-sufficient life. It is not easy but is worth it.

DURABLE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

The findings confirm that bonsai growers enjoy various personal and social benefits from this hobby. For example, it connects people to nature. Residents of large cities who do not have easy access to nature need bonsai to bring a green element to their home. Taking care of a bonsai tree is a good practice of caregiving and can potentially boost subject wellbeing. People who do not have enough space for a garden can enjoy having a bonsai tree in a small apartment and at the same time enjoy the benefits of connecting with nature through these tiny trees.

Discovering bonsai over the past year has been such a fantastic milestone in my life. I've been fortunate enough that staying at home (due to COVID) and finding this amazing new art happened at the same time.

It's an expression of creativity, you are growing a sculpture, a living, breathing sculpture and you have to learn to work with it, not against. You have to learn a lot about nature, seasons, the individual needs of the plants. It connects you with nature in a way that one season plants can't. ... It fascinates me to have plants which can live easily twice my age. They grow with you. I have a little oak, and the seed took from the Gravestone of my grandfather. ... This oak could see the grandkids of my niece if we don't kill it by mistake.

They not only enjoy their trees but also enjoy appreciating the plants of others. Sharing the results of their effort can be a source of inspiration for members of the community.

Inspiring! Love your work and am so appreciative of your continued sharing of such in-depth knowledge for this craft.

I'm totally flashed every time I see what you do to such nursery material. Amazing and inspiring! Truly amazing what you can do.

When family and friends see my bonsai garden I am always asked if I sell my trees, I always say no. It's an escape for me that is priceless. Seeing my little trees waking up after a cold winter and pines developing candles, the feeding, the watering, repotting, absolutely a beautiful place full of excitement.

THE UNIQUE ETHOS WITHIN A SOCIAL WORLD

Bonsai is a combination of horticulture, philosophy and art. Therefore, it is like a 'living art', and the product is an 'artistic statement'. Successful bonsai growers are also proud of their trees and want to show the results of their efforts to others. That is why there are several bonsai exhibitions around the world each year. Most of these exhibitions went online during the pandemic, and people share their stories from home.

I see Bonsai as a metaphor of life. When I see a Bonsai tree, I see the twisted trunks, dead branch, or trimmed branches as the journey through the life of the tree. Our lives also have twists, turns, deaths. I see an old bonsai tree as a symbol of strength, hardship, beauty, and survival.

Bonsai to me is receiving the care that nature gives us, and I try to give back that same nurturing that nature provides us in a way it's like having a child that you care for and watch it grow strong and healthy alongside me! Lol but the older I get, the more broken I become but, the older the trees get, the stronger they become!! It's so exciting in spring to see the new growth coming and to watch this living part of the world expand and thrive.

The journey and the end result combined allows the creator to experience something that is truly different to anything else and that is what makes it so unique as not only does it allow us to express ourselves through this piece of work, it also reflects what nature has provided for us and combining those two elements creates an environment which is truly unique and it allows both the creator and the view to relate and zone into and experience it for all its glory.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

There is a strong link between identity development and leisure engagement. People develop and affirm their personal and social identities in various ways, including selecting and participating in leisure activities. On the other hand, there is a social consensus regarding the identity images connected with a leisure activity ([Haggard & Williams 1992](#); [Liu et al. 2021](#)). Any long-term association with a special hobby or volunteer activity that requires learning specific skills and new knowledge has an inevitable impact on the participant's identity. In the context of this study, the findings reveal that engagement in bonsai growing needs patience

and passion at the same time, and a combination of both contribute to developing a form of a new identity for the bonsai growers.

As I get 'in the zone' tending to my trees daily I find myself becoming more aware of the little things, more mindful in the rest of my life, but it is also my happy place and provides a sense of grounding that has been missing from my life.

For me, bonsai is so important because it's a company in the long journey of life. Not just styling trees, it's taking care of them every day, trying to raise them at the best I can. In the same way I could do with a pet or, why not, a son; I suffer if they die, I am happy if I see them healthy or aesthetically improved. Trees are silent old friends, always there for helping to relax and spending good time with, to love and admire. Maybe for someone it could be stupid, but I don't hide that practicing bonsai helped me in a hard and long period of my life.

I watched this video a couple of times because like most people I've been struggling with Covid. In this dark hell we're all currently in, one of the bright spots, at least for me has been bonsai. It's affected me so much that there is a difference in me even my wife notices and I've been trying to figure out what this is. To make sense of it because it's actually one of the few good traits I've been showing during this period.

Bonsai benefits during the pandemic

The findings showed bonsai clubs reacted to the pandemic in very similar ways. Most of them moved their workshops and exhibitions to the digital platform and uploaded their videos to various social media such as YouTube. The findings also revealed most of the viewers, who left comments, found the videos useful. Many comments confirm the viewers adopted bonsai as a coping strategy to deal with the stress caused by the pandemic:

Our club had to cancel our 2-3 May 2020 Exhibition due to the lockdowns caused by COVID-19. As a club, we have come up with a way for our members to show their trees and give a little talk about their bonsai on display. They will share a bit of history and general information about their trees. This is part 8 of hopefully many videos to come, and we hope our members plan to share videos of their trees.

The videos are so valuable to calm and inspire during this madness. You are an essential service, in my opinion.

Bonsai growing can be like a coping strategy for bonsai enthusiasts. The findings show engaging with this hobby helped them to find new sources of purpose and passion.

Your bonsai videos helping me to calm down and getting over the day, but this conversation in particular helped me to get a little bit more focused and feeling a little bit better. I would really love to hear more from you like this.

The best thing I can think of for me is regardless of your desired end result or level of experience, Bonsai gives us all some form of purpose. We live in this era of chaotic nothingness. We're all been forced more or less to turn inwards and close off the outside world, stop interacting with friends. How can most people find the purpose to keep moving if you haven't needed to wear pants in 6 months? Sometimes, you just need a spark to get out of bed. Bonsai, for me, is one of those sparks.

I see that it helps the mind to slow down and observe what is right in front of it, right now. It also helps give a visceral experience of the passage of time. There's some Zen and Taoism in there.

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 outbreak imposed immense adversity on the personal, social and economic aspect of life across the world. Nevertheless, some bonsai enthusiasts seized this opportunity of having more free time at home to continue bonsai growing during the lockdown.

I started making trees again for the first time in ten years at the start of COVID. I'm a potter by trade and sometimes it's difficult to work precisely and creatively when I have anxiety about the political and global climate. Just going out and watering and observing my small collection of trees each morning has been a huge boon for me.

The findings also demonstrate bonsai enthusiasts used this hobby to manage their stress during a stressful time like the COVID-19 outbreak. Many comments in the collected data confirm people found this hobby very useful to reduce the level of their stress during this challenging time.

Bonsai has definitely helped me deal with stress and other demons, not just through lock down but with life in general.

Working on my trees and just watching them is my way of meditation during these stressful times. As I am sure, you are aware we have double the stress here with COVID and the recent election, although one of the stressors may slowly be resolving itself. But yes, getting away from it all and losing myself in my trees is such a relief.

Bonsai helps me deal with stress but also depression and anxiety. It's a powerful passion that can really keep you calm, make you appreciate nature and allow you to express some creativity.

According to the comments, some people joined bonsai clubs because of their friends' recommendations.

Great video! I personally became interested after seeing Mr. Miyagi shaping bonsai in the Karate Kid movies when I was a kid myself. I forgot about it for more than 30 years until friends suggested to join a bonsai workshop together. I got hooked again since I discovered for me it's the perfect way to express creativity and to create a never-ending piece of art.

My interest in bonsai started with a gift from a friend who could no longer care for a trident maple. Bonsai is horticulture, creativity, and discipline combined and refined into living art.

The findings revealed that bonsai enthusiasts look at bonsai growing either as a process of engagement with a hobby or as a product of a hobby. Those how to enjoy the process and are not concerned about the product want the practice more. Primarily, in the course of lockdown they have found it very enjoyable:

I feel the most important aspect is immersing yourself in the art and nurturing rather than just having a masterpiece. I felt the need to connect again with bonsai during the lockdown when you couldn't go and walk through vast landscapes but could visualise this by looking and losing yourself in the miniature.

I had a Eureka moment and realised what I needed was a hobby that parallels life. Nurture, impermanence, success, failure, focus, attention, patience, creativity and everything in between. Nothing is stagnant and permanent. Bonsai is a great example of that.

Some of the commenters were excited and felt fortunate that they can learn this hobby and can communicate with like-minded people via this platform because of the Internet:

I got (back) into bonsai as a way to reconnect with my Dad 5 years after he passed. He taught me as he learned when I was young. Still a beginner and less than a year studying and practicing again (after 20 years without) I am excited and so fortunate that Internet exists for us to learn this exotic and growing rapidly in popularity art form.

Discussion

Based on the findings, the results show engagement with serious leisure activities - in this case, growing bonsai - has helped people deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The remarkable capacity of serious leisure to link people in the crisis time is one of the key themes identified in this study. People from different parts of the world created a “virtual hub” around bonsai. They had a shared interest to talk about and communicate with each other. Without this hobby, it was almost impossible to gather this group of people and encourage them to speak to one another and share their experience and knowledge. The findings also indicate benefits of bonsai are not limited just to the bonsai enthusiasts who grow them. A wide range of people who are somehow related to this hobby also enjoy the process and products. For example, bonsai supporters who are not directly involved in producing the trees enjoy learning about this hobby’s history and observing these amazing creatures.

The findings revealed that serious leisure participants, in this case bonsai growers, actively used their hobby as a coping strategy to deal with uncertainty and stress during the outbreak. The findings also address the third research question of how serious leisure participants typically share their lived experiences of the pandemic via social media. They usually form communities of interests and share their knowledge and lived experiences. This is one of the outcomes of serious leisure that can create a community of interests and provide people with durable personal and social rewards.

There is a meaningful connection between social engagement created through serious leisure engagement, and the overall wellbeing of the leisure participants. Social links influence health in part through health behaviour, and impact health habits, at various life stages ([Umberson and Karas Montez 2010](#); [Umberson, et al. 2010](#)), and serious leisure provides a context for creating and boosting these social links. Moreover, comparing this finding with the leisure studies literature shows that people involved in other leisure activities had a similar experience. For instance, [Young \(2020\)](#) observed that people shared fitness tips over social media during the pandemic, using fitness apps, or participating in online fitness classes.

This study also showed how a solitary pursuit helped people confront the solitude of lockdown; and how that engagement with a miniature world acted as a surrogate for the real world that people could not engage in under lockdown. Notably, this form of engagement seemed more important for vulnerable people like the elderly. For instance, [Son et al. \(2020\)](#) report staying healthy during the pandemic is significant for older adults due to their susceptibility to the disease. Current literature about ageing frequently revealed that social isolation and loneliness are among the main challenges, impacting social and emotional wellbeing and physical health of the elderly ([Brooke and Jackson, 2020](#)). [Hebblethwaite, et al. \(2020\)](#) report that older adults’ social isolation has been a critical public health issue before the pandemic. The current crisis has deteriorated the situation. Although the study did not set out to consider the age of participants, it is clear from the comments that many have been engaged in bonsai growing for years or even decades, and therefore are probably older adults.

The findings of this study confirm the value of shared leisure experiences and the importance of this particular hobby in creating significant opportunities for social connectedness.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that engagement with bonsai growing as a form of serious leisure can help people deal with challenging times like the recent pandemic and lockdown. The findings also revealed that bonsai growers typically share their lived experiences via social media (in this case, YouTube) and learn from each other. The six quality of serious leisure play more significant roles during this challenging time: they provide the hobbyist with durable benefits when they need it more than ever; they help them stay more active

when it was not possible to leave home; and to stay connected with other like-minded people when it was impossible to meet them in person.

Nevertheless, this paper's findings are based on a limited dataset from the social media platform, and the findings cannot be generalised. We need further qualitative studies to understand the social world in bonsai growing and some quantitative measures in broader scales would be useful in validating some initial findings. Nonetheless, the results based on this relatively small dataset can inform future studies to investigate bonsai growers' activities from different perspectives. Accordingly, the paper calls for further research in this context. Qualitative studies with rigorous methods such as ethnography or phenomenology will help to understand bonsai growers' motivations and lived experiences, shedding further light on the ways in which this form of serious leisure may minimise the effects of externally imposed stressors.

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