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'Sauna Is My Nest!': Sense of Community Among Korean Middle-Aged Women Enjoying Sauna Bathing

Mina Woo^a , Incheol Jang^a , Milae Lee^b and Toni Liechty^b 

^aUniversity of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN; ^bUniversity of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL

ABSTRACT

Leisure provides a space to build a sense of community (SOC), which can motivate middle-aged women's leisure engagement. A popular social leisure activity for Korean middle-aged women is sauna bathing. Despite the unique cultural and social features, research on the topic is limited. Thus, this study explored sauna experiences of Korean middle-aged women using SOC theory. Fifteen Korean women aged 40 to 65 completed interviews, which were analyzed thematically. Findings suggested the sauna became a place where women developed SOC. Participants felt a sense of membership and influenced other members through boundaries and sharing food. Participants' needs, including enjoyment and socializing, were fulfilled. Lastly, participants shared emotional connections by participating in members' personal events and enjoying different leisure activities together. This study expands the literature on leisure among middle-aged women in a non-Western context and contributes to the expansion of SOC theory by providing insights into a unique leisure context.

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Korean; leisure; middle-aged women; sauna; sense of community

Midlife is called the golden days, particularly for women (Denmark & Klara, 2007; Hall, 2007). In this life stage, women experience freedom from worrying about pregnancy, decreasing children's dependence, and increasing financial resources (Chrisler, 2007; Denmark & Klara, 2007), so they can expand engagement in diverse leisure activities (Hall, 2007). Indeed, research suggests that recent generations of middle-aged women enjoy diverse leisure activities, such as team sports, dance, hiking, and scuba diving (Choi et al., 2022; Hall, 2007), which lead to expanded social relationships and enhanced quality of life and well-being (Gregory & Dimmock, 2019; Liechty et al., 2019). However, leisure research about leisure of middle-aged women has disproportionately been conducted among North American samples leaving gaps in the literature related to diverse cultural contexts.

Although midlife offers opportunities for middle-aged women to enjoy diverse leisure activities, many Korean middle-aged women tend to hesitate to engage in leisure because of Confucianism patriarchal family system, which underlines strict gender roles and responsibilities within the family after marriage and creates a social perception that women should stay at home and take care of their families (Jung, 2022; Sung, 2003; Yun & Jang, 2013). In addition, most leisure activities in South Korea are mainly centered for men, not women (Park & Cho, 2020). To minimize conflicts

regarding leisure participation, Korean middle-aged women tend to prioritize flexible schedules that accommodate their responsibilities, low cost, and opportunities to expand social relationships (Choi, 2008; Kim & Lee, 2016; Lee, 2023).

One unique leisure activity that Korean middle-aged women choose is sauna bathing. In Korea, widespread mokyoktangs (i.e. public baths) are equipped with sauna rooms and are available 24/7. They offer gender-segregated spaces with affordable fees that cover access not only to the mokyoktang and sauna, but also to additional amenities such as gyms and snack counters (Kang, 2020; Richmond et al. 2024). Given that sauna bathing meets their key preferences for leisure choices, it has become a popular leisure activity among Korean middle-aged women (Kang, 2020; Kim, 2010). They enjoy sauna bathing not only for relaxing but also as a social activity, often sharing food and beverages while connecting with others in the sauna rooms (Kang, 2020; Kim, 2010). Particularly in the sauna rooms, where participants are nude, women feel a sense of equality with one another, as nudity diminishes visible indicators of social or financial status (Kim, 2010). This environment fosters a sense of intimacy and emotional safety, which makes it easier for women to make new friends (Kim, 2010). Research suggests that middle-aged women highly value expanding social relationships and feeling a sense of belonging in their leisure activities (Litchfield & Dionigi, 2012; Son et al., 2010), yet there is limited research on how this aligns with community-building in leisure for this demographic. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of sauna participation among Korean middle-aged women through the lens of Sense of Community (SOC) theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Literature review and theoretical framework

Middle-aged women and leisure

Women experience many social transitions during midlife, including empty nest syndrome (Hall, 2007). Empty nest syndrome tends to provide increased free time and reduced responsibilities for women, but some who have devoted themselves to the family feel a loss of their job as a mother and experience depression (Denmark & Klara, 2007). In addition, caregiving roles for aging parents or grandchildren tend to be societally expected, particularly for middle-aged women (Amirkhanyan & Wolf, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2016). Indeed, many women serve as primary caregivers to family members, which provides not only pleasure and satisfaction (Kulik, 2007) but also stress, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Musil et al., 2009). Additionally, retirement or unemployment can allow women to enrich their lives by having extended free time and preparing for later life; yet, it can also make them feel a loss of identity, difficulties handling unobligated time, and concern about financial status (Kleiber & Linde, 2014; Liechty et al., 2017).

Middle-aged women enjoy diverse leisure activities to adjust to their life transitions. In particular, women tend to engage in leisure activities where they can socialize with other women of their age (Choi et al., 2022; Yarnal et al., 2011). For instance, Moe (2014) explored women in mid and later life who participated in belly dancing. It was found that the women experienced joy, enhanced self-confidence, and valued social support from other women. Beyond physically active leisure activities, middle-aged

women often participate in social leisure clubs to meet relational needs (Son et al., 2010). Scholars have explored women who participated in the Red Hat Society and found they experienced a sense of belonging and gained social capital through social support and sisterhood, by participating in the same leisure activities and sharing their concerns in this life stage (Stalp et al., 2009; Yarnal et al., 2011). Through their leisure participation, they can expand narrowed social networks, enjoy free time, experience a cohesive community, and even review their lives through having discourse with other women about similarities and resistance to traditional feminine identities (Choi et al., 2022; Green, 1998).

Korean middle-aged women

Although Korean middle-aged women undergo social transitions like those in other cultures, their experiences in this life stage and leisure engagement are differently shaped by the Confucianism patriarchal system (Yun & Jang, 2013). This system strictly forces women to take overall domestic roles, including as a wife, mother, and daughter in law after the marriage (Sung, 2003). Within the cultural context, Korean women are expected to sacrifice to conform to societal customs and expectations; otherwise, they tend to be labeled as a threat to society (Jo, 2023). For instance, many Korean women quit their careers, which results in narrowed social relationships and weakened social standing (Lee, 2025). Furthermore, women's work is generally not being respected since it is regarded as invisible labor within the family (Sung, 2003; Yun & Jang, 2013). Given the context, many Korean women tend to be passive in choosing and/or engaging in leisure activities (Park & Cho, 2020).

Entering midlife, many Korean women have more free time since caregiving roles as a mother lessen through children's increasing independence. However, children's independence often leaves many Korean women feeling anxiety as they associate this change with a loss of their maternal identity, which has been central over several decades (Heo & Tae, 2014; Park, 2022). In addition, narrowed social relationships causes women to struggle to receive emotional support from their family and society (Yun & Jang, 2013). As such, Korean middle-aged women value expanding their social relationships and feeling a sense of belonging when choosing leisure activities (Um, 2006). For instance, research showed that while Korean middle-aged women participated in leisure activities such as playing games, dancing, and tennis, they made friends and experienced a sense of belonging with others (Kim & Lee, 2016; Lee, 2014; Yun & Jang, 2013). Despite the benefits of leisure engagement, many Korean middle-aged women still experience constraints, such as a lack of time due to house chores and limited budget, which make them reluctant to actively participate in diverse leisure activities (Choi, 2008; Heo & Tae, 2014; Park, 2022; Shin, 2002; Yun & Jang, 2013).

Sauna bathing as leisure

Sauna bathing has been regarded as a culturally relevant leisure activity where people can relax and socialize with friends or family members (Kim, 2010; Valtakari, 1988). In particular, sauna bathing is a traditional and culturally relevant leisure activity in Finland (Heinonen et al., 2005; Valtakari, 1988). As a part of the daily routine, Finnish

people enjoy sauna bathing after work or sport in the evening, which allows them to relax and develop intimacy and solidarity with others (Edelsward, 1991; Heinonen et al., 2005). Compared to Finnish saunas, Japanese saunas are typically located in facilities that offer additional amenities, such as restaurants, public baths, and massage parlors (*A Truly Japanese Evolution of the Sauna*, n.d). Within these saunas, Japanese people enjoy sauna bathing and other leisure activities while engaging in friendly conversations with family and friends (Pantzar & Harju, 2024).

Similarly, sauna bathing has been a culturally representative leisure activity among Koreans (Kang, 2020; Kim, 2010). As a ritual on Sundays, most families go to their local mogyoktang, a public bathhouse serving both hygienic and social functions (DK Travel, 2023, Kim, 2010). Within mogyoktang, which includes gender segregated spaces, people engage in bathing, scrubbing, and sauna bathing as a leisure activity (Richmond et al., 2024). Over time, the mogyoktang was equipped with additional amenities, such as snack counters and gyms, leading to the rise of jjimjilbang, large and multi-purpose sauna facilities with several heated rooms and communal areas (Richmond et al., 2024). Unlike Finnish or Japanese saunas, which primarily focus on personal relaxation, Korean saunas emphasize group socialization (The Ministry of Gender Equality & Family, 2015). As a result, saunas in Korea have become popular leisure spaces for people of all ages, providing a space where families, friends, and individuals can relax, socialize, and unwind (Chun, 2024; Kim & Kang, 2021).

Sauna bathing is particularly appealing to middle-aged women, who often have limited access to affordable leisure spaces during weekday daytime hours (Kang, 2020; Kim, 2010). Within the sauna, middle-aged women enjoy sauna bathing, socializing with other women, and sharing meals while being naked and relaxed, facilitated by the affordable price and accessible hours (Kang, 2020). For instance, Kim (2010) explored conversations that Korean middle-aged women had in the sauna and found that the sauna is a place where participants not only enjoyed sauna bathing but also had social gatherings. In the sauna, participants shared their personal experiences regarding midlife and empathized with each other. These experiences motivated them to continue to go to the sauna and have daily gatherings. The study suggested that sauna gatherings fulfilled social needs and fostered a sense of belonging, which aligns with the components of SOC theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). However, despite these insights, there is little research to explore how Korean middle-aged women develop and experience SOC in saunas.

Sense of community (SOC)

McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined SOC as ‘a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together’ (McMillan, 1976, as cited in McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). SOC theory has four components: (1) membership, (2) influence, (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (4) shared emotional connection.

The first component, membership, describes a feeling that individuals belong to a group or a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Membership includes several attributes, including emotional safety, a sense of belonging, and boundaries (McMillan

& Chavis, 1986). The more members feel boundaries between themselves and non-members, the more they experience being protected by the boundaries, which provides a sense of safety and a high level of membership (McMillan, 2011). Influence, the second component, is that individuals have the power to influence the community they belong to, and the community also controls or influences each member simultaneously (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). They described influence as ‘sense of mattering’, in that each member matters to the community for their cohesiveness, and the community matters to members for the purpose of consensual validation. This sense of mattering can be strengthened when the community and individuals have voluntary associations. Integration and fulfillment of needs, the third component, means ‘for any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members’ (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 12). When members have similar values, needs, and goals, the community meets their needs and provides strong rewards, such as success, competencies, and status, which brings people together (McMillan, 2011). Lastly, shared emotion refers to ‘the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences’ (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Shared emotion values not only the amount of interaction but also the quality of interaction within the community (McMillan, 2011).

Scholars have applied SOC theory to a variety of populations and leisure settings (e.g. Lizzo & Liechty, 2022; Woo et al., 2025). For instance, Breunig et al. (2010) explored SOC among college students who participated in an outdoor leisure program (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As the participants engaged in group-oriented activities in remote wilderness, they overcame trip challenges with mutual goals, which enhanced their overall SOC despite limited time together. In addition to a short-term leisure program, Dionigi and Lyons (2010) found that older adults experienced a different level of SOC (e.g. micro, personal, and social) in multiple communities (e.g. exercise environment, research organization, a group of active older adults, society) as they increased engagement in an exercise program. Liechty et al. (2019) found that the development of SOC contributed to long-term participation in a leisure-time physical activity program among older adults by applying SOC theory. On the other hand, some scholars have focused on particular leisure communities regarding SOC (Lizzo & Liechty, 2022; Son et al., 2010). For instance, Tong (2020) examined older Japanese women who participated in karaoke classrooms and found that they experienced connections with other women by sharing musical interests and building bonds with them. Through karaoke class, they felt a sense of belonging with other women of similar age and strengthened not only social relationships but also their own identity that they had lost under the highly patriarchal social system.

Overall, leisure is a space where individuals can feel social relatedness and build social relationships. In this regard, research supports the potential value of leisure spaces to foster SOC and its benefits, but limited research has focused on middle-aged women’s leisure and SOC in diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and meanings of sauna participation among Korean middle-aged women based on McMillan and Chavis (1986) SOC theory. Specifically, this study included the following research questions: (1) In what ways do Korean

middle-aged women interact with other women during sauna participation? (2) What is the role of sauna participation in Korean middle-aged women's experiences of SOC?

Methods

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the Institutional Review Board at the first author's university (IRB #22037). We approached the study from a constructivism paradigm to explore realities constructed through individuals' experiences, interactions, and backgrounds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This lens was appropriate because it assumes that knowledge can be co-constructed jointly between researchers and participants (Guba, 1990) and facilitated the exploration of 'subjective meanings...formed through interaction with others...and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives' (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 24). With the constructivism paradigm, we used a case study design to provide an 'intensive holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon' (Merriam, 2009, p. 10). This approach facilitated an investigation of sauna bathing experiences among Korean middle-aged women within its real-world context of an existing social group, allowing for understanding of complex systems and interactions.

Positionality

I, the primary author, was born and raised in Korea. Ever since I can remember, it was a Sunday ritual for my mother, my sister, and I to go to mokyoktang, enjoy sauna bathing, and scrub our bodies. Many of my friends, as they grew older, started to avoid going to mokyoktang, especially the sauna because of feeling awkward about nudity and the heat, but I always loved it. I enjoyed the relaxed feeling from the warmth and humidity, and the sauna was a place where my mother's friends gathered. For over a decade, my mother went to the sauna every morning, spending time with other women who called each other 'sisters'. This made the sauna a special place for me, where I not only enjoyed the experience but also watched my mother and her friends share drinks, food, and stories about life. Despite the sauna room's small size, many middle-aged women would come together to relax, enjoy sauna bathing, chat about their families, and support each other. Observing this phenomenon over the years led me to question why these women love going to the sauna and how they interact with each other in the sauna. My personal experiences with sauna bathing inspired my research and helped me connect with participants, build rapport, and gain deeper insights into their experiences. My personal experiences were beneficial in conducting the study and also posed a potential risk for me to resonate more strongly with participants' experiences that were similar to my own. Thus, perspectives of the other research team members were valuable, particularly in conceptualizing the study and analyzing the data (as will be described more later in this section). The other authors include one Korean man, one Korean woman, and one American woman of differing ages and with varying levels of experience with sauna bathing.

Participants and sampling

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. The primary author contacted the key informant who had visited a sauna in Gumi, South Korea, regularly

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Name	Age (years)	Sauna Participation (years)	Marital status	Education	Occupation
Yumi	55	12	Married	HSD	Housewife
Jihyeon	60	40	Divorced	HSD	Self-employed
Sumi	65	30	Married	MSD	Self-employed
Jiwoo	54	10	Married	HSD	Housewife
Subin	54	30	Married	HSD	Self-employed
Jeongmin	63	10	Married	HSD	Housewife
Dami	53	15	Married	HSD	Housewife
Minji	49	3	Married	HSD	Self-employed
Taejin	47	10	Married	HSD	Self-employed
Sujeong	50	5	Not Married	HSD	Part time
Hyeonji	46	5	Married	HSD	Housewife
Yujeong	47	11	Married	HSD	Housewife
Mijin	56	6	Married	HSD	Housewife
Yejin	60	17	Married	HSD	Housewife
Sojin	53	15	Married	HSD	Housewife

Notes: Pseudonyms are used. Abbreviations for education level: MSD Middle school diploma; HSD High school diploma.

over 10 years. The primary author explained the purpose of the study and the inclusion criteria for participants to the key informant. The inclusion criteria for participants were: 1) women aged 40 to 65 to gain insights from those in midlife (Goh & Chang, 2020; Lachman, 2004; Park et al., 2021), and 2) who have visited the sauna at least three times a week over a year to ensure enough regular attendance for the shared time needed for community building (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Within these criteria, participants were purposively recruited to include diversity of age and years of sauna experience, in order to represent a range of perspectives. The primary researcher asked the key informant to introduce the research to potential participants with a recruitment text. Participants interested in the study reached out to the primary author *via* phone to schedule an interview.

Prior to each interview, the primary author explained informed consent. Once the participants agreed to the informed consent, the interviews proceeded. After the primary author completed each interview, participants were asked to refer other potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Following the criteria above, a total of 15 participants were recruited and interviewed until data saturation was completed. As shown in Table 1, the participants' ages ranged from 46 to 65. The duration participants had visited the sauna varied from three years to 40 years. Three participants had been going to the sauna for less than five years, four had been visiting for six to 10 years, five had been visiting from 11 to 20 years, and three had been visiting for more than 20 years. Most of them spent one to three hours in the sauna per visit. Regarding marital status, most participants were married, one participant was divorced, and one was single. Education levels ranged from middle school to high school. Nine participants were housewives, five participants worked full-time, and one worked part-time. As a reward for the interview, the primary researcher offered lunch to each participant. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for privacy.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used with each participant in their chosen location which included restaurants or a coffee shop in Gumi, South Korea. Interviews lasted from 45 to 75 min. The primary researcher interviewed all participants based on a

semi-structured interview guide including questions such as: 1) When you hear the word sauna, what comes to your mind?, 2) Why do you keep going to the sauna?, and 3) How would you describe your friendship in the sauna? All interviews were conducted in Korean and audio recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the primary researcher, who is a native Korean speaker and fluent in English. Once the transcripts were translated, two researchers who were native Korean speakers and fluent in English checked the accuracy of the transcript.

Data analysis

We adopted thematic analysis and followed the suggested steps to analyze patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, three researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading the transcripts. After immersing ourselves in the data, we generated initial codes based on open coding and a priori coding by using prefigured codes from SOC theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) while also being open to codes not covered by the existing theory. The researchers then had several meetings to discuss and compare codes and search for themes based on the discussion. Once researchers created themes based on the codes, they reviewed and defined the themes. Lastly, the themes were organized and reported to answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, peer debriefing was conducted in this study. An expert reviewed and checked the findings and interpretations, which ensured transferability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Additionally, member checks were conducted to correct any potential misinterpretations in data analysis and to ensure credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were provided with a summary of the findings and asked to review and confirm whether their perspectives were articulately represented. Finally, the primary author engaged in reflexive journaling to acknowledge her position and its role in the study. This, combined with the collaborative approach to data analysis helped to ensure participants' voices were evenly represented.

Findings and discussion

Sauna is My nest: Membership

Women in this study described strong closeness toward the community that enjoyed the sauna together. Participants described a sense of relatedness to the community through boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging, and common language which are elements for sense of membership in SOC theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When participants were asked when they felt belonging to the community, many cited boundaries to differentiate themselves as insiders compared to strangers even though the sauna was open to the public. Subin mentioned,

Nobody takes care of a person if she comes once or twice. Since she is a stranger, I don't know when she came to the sauna. And when we drink Bacchus [energy drink], we don't share it with her because we don't know her.

As Subin mentioned, the boundary was shaped based on time (e.g. how long they have seen each other in the sauna) and how many interactions they have had. In addition to the boundary, the nature of the sauna, where everyone should be naked, promoted a strong affinity with each other regardless of age. Sojin described that she could become close to other women of different ages because of being in the sauna, saying, 'We see our naked bodies and know each other very closely. There is nothing we hide from each other. We show anything regardless of our age. If we met in society, we should have hidden some things. But we don't here.'

With the boundary and trust within the sauna, participants felt emotional safety toward members, so they could talk freely about diverse topics from daily life to even family issues. Hyeonji shared, 'We talked about yesterday's event, drama stories, and sometimes my husband's stories. While I laugh and talk with them for an hour, I feel better. [I think we do] promote friendship the most.' Sojin added, 'We are sauna friends. It is not friends at school or in society. Well, as we are naked in the sauna, we talk about everything from complaints or compliments about one's spouse, children, and other family issues.' Hyeonji summarized by saying, 'Sauna is my nest.' She explained that this meant that the sauna is where she felt the most comfortable as she would at home.

Once participants experienced more emotional safety within the socially understood boundary, they felt a stronger sense of belonging to the sauna community. Particularly, participants felt a sense of identification/relatedness to the community when other members noticed whether or not they came to the sauna. Yumi mentioned,

I felt I belong to the community ... Once I took a week off. [They asked] why didn't you come? Were you sick? If you don't know someone, I don't really care if they come or not. However, if you are a person who is always in the sauna, they worry about you that much ... It's like a family. They are not my family, but they worry when a member is sick. So, I can say that I belong to the community.

Similarly other participants mentioned that members who noted their absence made them feel a sense of belonging to the community and sparked positive emotions toward members, which led them to keep going to the sauna. The sense of belonging remained no matter despite potential challenges. Some participants got Covid-19 in the sauna through a few infected members and went to self-quarantine. Although this could have led to negative interactions among the group (e.g. blaming those who transmitted Covid-19), members kept taking care of each other, which in turn, enhanced the sense of belonging among participants. Yejin shared,

I was in self-quarantine for two weeks because someone got Covid-19. Everyone who went to the sauna went into self-quarantine. We just kept contacting each other. We got help via phone and it comforted me. Since we got Covid-19 together, I said, 'Hey you sleep well?' and she said, 'Yes, how about you?' I've done this a lot, and many sauna members brought side dishes that they made to me.

In addition, participants mentioned that saving food or seats also made them feel a sense of belonging to the community. Subin felt that she belonged to the community

when members saved food (e.g. energy drinks, coffee) for her, even if she was late. Dami added, ‘My seat is the warmest place. Members usually offered me a seat even if someone else was sitting down there. They say like, ‘Oh, it’s your seat, right?’ and move to another seat. This shows their consideration’. As members remembered who had not received food or offered preferred seats to each other, they felt that others cared about them.

Highlighting the shared sense of belonging, participants referred to the community using the term ‘Alsamo’, which means a group of people who enjoy sauna naked. Yejin remembered they rented a bus and put the name Alsamo on it when they traveled. Additionally, participants used common language. Subin mentioned, ‘When you leave, [we say] ‘see you tomorrow’. This greeting is not ‘let’s meet somewhere tomorrow’ but ‘let’s meet at the sauna [at this time]’. We always say hello like that. It’s a ritual in this community’. Sharing the community’s name and language enhanced the feeling that they were connected within the community.

The findings suggested that participants felt a sense of relatedness to other members within the boundary, which enhanced emotional safety and a sense of belonging to the sauna community. These findings provide insights for SOC theory and relevant literature. McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed boundaries as a necessary element to classify insiders and outsiders of the community and promote emotional safety and membership. While past studies suggested playing sports on the same team or engaging in the same physical activity played an important role in building boundaries (Choi et al., 2022; Liechty et al., 2019; Son et al., 2010), this study showed a boundary was built based on unique requirements rather than only a common activity. This might be because the sauna is a public space where patrons can enjoy sauna bathing. In the sauna, participants created boundaries to divide members of their social group from nonmembers based on time and trust built through interactions, which corresponds to a ‘regular’ from the perspective of third place (Oldenburg, 1999). According to Oldenburg (1999), a third place is mainly composed of regulars, and newcomers can become regulars by building trust and spending time. Likewise, participants in the current study divided regulars into members and newcomers into nonmembers. This finding supports SOC theory in that boundaries based on physical places still play a role in building a community within the context of leisure (McMillan, 2011).

In addition to the boundary, the characteristics of the sauna promoted community building. Everyone has to be naked to enjoy sauna bathing. As participants met people in the same condition, they felt reduced obstacles (e.g. age, occupations) to meeting and making friends. This finding corresponds to the ‘neutral ground’ of third place in that people can freely meet and be close to each other regardless of individual backgrounds (Oldenburg, 1999). Participants were of equal status; enjoying sauna bathing and being naked, they did not feel reluctant to talk to women of different ages and even felt enhanced intimacy, which might be difficult in a different context because of the social practice that respects older people (Yoon, 2004). Woo et al. (2025) suggested that an atmosphere, including gender, skills, and age, enhanced a sense of belonging among roller derby players. The current finding adds a nuance that contextual features which minimize the impacts of backgrounds or social status can foster an inclusive atmosphere where people can be open and feel a sense of belonging.

Checking attendance enhanced the sense of belonging to the sauna community and, in return, became a reason why participants kept going to the sauna. This finding supports that a sense of belonging to the community boosts ongoing engagement in leisure, sport, and physical activity, which can be important for fostering long-term engagement in leisure activities that promote well-being (Liechty et al., 2019). Additionally, as participants used certain language or lingo to greet and name the community, they enhanced affinity and memories within the community. This finding supports previous research that sharing common symbols promotes building camaraderie by remembering historical events and specializing members (Lizzo & Liechty, 2022; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Woo et al., 2025)

If I give something to them, they pay back: Influence

The findings showed that not only the community but also participants influence each other by sharing life tips, food, and recipes. When they were asked about the benefits of the sauna community, some described they received diverse wisdom from other members. One common topic was aging and health. Yumi shared that she gained advice for how to handle menopause from older members, saying,

I'm going through menopause. I didn't know what menopause was in the first place, but my sisters [sauna members] told me that I would sweat a lot during menopause. Since my body has been changing, I realized this is menopause because I've heard of it and I learned about it. So, I know what will come...

The information about menopause from friends who had been through it helped her adjust to the changes. Participants shared information about various aspects of aging and health that influenced other members. Yumi mentioned that she used to have health issues (e.g. frequent fever, cold) because of menopause. After she learned from other members about a certain nutritional supplement (e.g. propolis) that helped relieve the symptoms, she took it regularly. Once she found that it worked for her, she shared it with others to help those who would suffer menopause symptoms later.

In addition, when participants got stressed about children rearing or life stages challenges, they received advice from older members. Hyeonji shared her experience of receiving advice from older members regarding life challenges, saying,

Some people care for me so much because I am younger than them. They are like aunts ... I have a lot of work to do when I get home. I have to clean the house and prepare lunch for the kids. It's hard. When I said this stuff to them, they told me many helpful tips and about their experiences.

Regarding life tips, some participants shared they received help by hearing tips from older members about things that might be difficult to ask others about, such as how to prepare for children's weddings and parents' funerals.

Furthermore, members engaged in sharing and acts of service to make others feel supported. Subin shared, 'If someone goes through a hard time, I buy her lunch. If they go on a trip abroad, I give them some money to enjoy a safe trip. People like normal neighbors usually don't do this'. Jihyeon added she felt good even when she went through hard times because sauna members positively influenced her. Not only life tips but also recipes were shared among members. Jiwoo said,

Since we're all mothers, I can pick up on things like how you prepare food and what ingredients you use. For example, when making jang-ajji [pickled vegetables], we share it saying like, 'I do it this way', and someone would say, 'If you do it this way, it tastes even better.'

Members also shared homemade food, which made other participants thankful. Hyeonji mentioned, 'If they made kimchi, they gave me some, which may not be a big deal to others. However, it's a big deal to me because I am not good at cooking. When things like this happen, I'm always thankful'. The positive influence that a member shared food with others resulted in another influence from the receivers who bought a meal to express their gratitude. Dami added that when one shared food or something else, the receiver always reciprocated, saying,

If members say they need doenjang (soybean paste), I say, 'I have it at home I'll bring some and give it to you' ... I'll just give it to them because I like them ... When I knit a scrubber, I gave it to a member. And she who received it wouldn't stay still. She'd ask, 'What do you want me to do for you? If not, I will buy you lunch or something else.'

Additionally, when a member undertook a new life venture, other members supported her. Yumi mentioned, 'A member we know runs her business at a clothing store. Whenever I need clothes, I go there and buy some there. Once I buy clothes, she buys me lunch because she is thankful'. The bidirectional influence between members and the community persisted based on the members' continuous efforts that developed into group norms (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

SOC literature (McMillan, 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986) states that members are attracted to a group that allows members to influence other members and the group. The findings of this study showed that participants had enough opportunities to influence others through interactions, which supports the influence factor of SOC theory (McMillan, 2011). Scholars (e.g. Dionigi & Lyons, 2010; Woo et al., 2025) have stated that the community needs and asks for its members' commitment, and some members commit their time, energy, and knowledge by taking on roles and responsibilities. However, the current findings showed that participants voluntarily committed to supporting other members of the community and the group (e.g. giving advice, supporting each other), although the community did not ask for its members' commitment. In addition to personal investment, participants showed that there are certain ways to support each other within the community (e.g. buying lunch for a member who had a hard time). Like findings from other leisure contexts, the current study suggests that saunas provide a valuable social space for women to exchange information and experiences related to life stage stress and transitions (Choi et al., 2022; Liechty et al., 2017). Participants did not state that the community has norms that members must follow but that members influenced behaviors which evolved the community norms that members conform to (McMillan (2011).

Sauna is the place where We can enjoy sauna and meet other women: Fulfillment of needs

The sauna community fulfilled participants' needs, such as enjoying sauna bathing and hanging out or meeting other women of their ages. Many participants said they enjoyed cleaning their bodies or enjoyed the sauna to relieve fatigue, feel refreshed, and meet

other people. The sauna community enabled participants to meet those needs in their free time. Subin mentioned, ‘Sauna is for fatigue recovery. Also, it’s like the feeling of meeting good people ... when I hear the word ‘sauna,’ I feel like [it’s a place where] I recover from fatigue and can meet someone’. Since many participants worked for their own businesses and as housewives, it was hard for them to schedule a time to meet each other outside of the sauna. Subin explained,

We can’t meet [outside frequently]. I can’t meet Sumi unless I come here. But everyone is here [at the sauna] in the morning. I didn’t make an appointment, but everyone was here, and we could say hello and eat delicious food together. That’s why it is good.

In the morning, when participants are free from housework, and before business starts, participants tend to enhance friendships and enjoy the sauna together. Yumi also added, ‘People our age don’t have a place to go ... There’s nothing to do after having lunch together. But we can work out, meet people we know, and have conversations with them [at the sauna]. So, I feel less stressed’. The sauna provided a place where Korean middle-aged women could socialize with other women, expand their leisure activities (e.g. working out, having a bath), and relieve stress. Participants added that as they met people at the sauna, they were consoled or less lonely. Subin cited,

When I am depressed, I go to the sauna or meet the sauna team members. [When I meet them] I say, ‘Hey, I feel blue, so buy me a drink’. They don’t ask me anything else and say like, ‘Oh, yeah. Do you? I’ll make you feel better’. It helps me a lot. If friends say like ‘I feel blue today. Buy me a bottle of Bacchus (Energy drink)’. I would say ‘really?’ and buy it without asking for any reason.

She shared her feelings freely, and others sympathized with her, which gave her emotional support and built a strong bond. Sojin added,

I seldom talk to others when I go to work or am alone. However, when I go there [the sauna], I can hear some information and talk about my stuff. Doing so lets me let off steam, so I enjoy it. Moreover, my friends are there.

Like Sojin, several participants mentioned that they felt loneliness because of a lack of interaction with family members and other women of their age. However, as they went to the sauna where women of their age gathered, they could interact with others and felt less lonely. Additionally, some participants described learning new information or wisdom of life from others. The information varies from business, recipes, and family occasions.

The current findings indicated participants fulfilled their needs, including enjoying sauna bathing and socializing with other women in the sauna, which supports fulfillment of needs of SOC theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The sauna enabled women to meet those needs because it served as a third place (Oldenburg, 1999). Since the sauna was located within walking distance and accessible at any time, participants could enjoy sauna bathing at their convenience by releasing them from their responsibilities at work or home (Oldenburg, 1999). This feature appealed to Korean middle-aged women because cost and time were important requirements for them to choose leisure (Choi, 2008; Im & Choe, 2004; Kang, 2020). In this regard, sauna bathing was affordable and accessible for their schedules, which seemed to satisfy the participant’s needs (Lee, 2023).

The sauna allowed women to socialize with others by sharing their common interest in sauna bathing, which supports social space and common interest from SOC in sport theory (Warner et al., 2013; Warner & Dixon, 2011) and extends it to a leisure space that does not require a specific skill, which could appeal to a wider range of community members. Participants expressed gratitude for their friends in the sauna and the emotional support that they had from the community. This finding corresponds to literature highlighting that women in mid and later life prioritize building friendships and expanding social relationships through leisure activities (Choi et al., 2022; Liechty et al., 2021; Son et al., 2010). Regarding older women's friendship, Son et al. (2010) proposed that women in mid and later life felt sisterhood and enhanced social capital through participating in leisure activities. Likewise, women in this study also described sisterhood which not only met their needs, such as having someone to talk to or relieving stress, but also became reasons to continue sauna bathing, which in turn enhanced SOC (McMillan, 2011).

We are sikgu!: shared emotional connection

Participants described shared and built emotional connections through interaction or time together, spiritual bonds, and historical events. Participants had visited a sauna from at least three years to 40 years. Yumi added that 'We meet and spend time together regardless of weekdays or weekends.' As participants spent much time together, they interacted with each other in diverse ways. One of the ways they interacted and built shared emotional connections was by sharing food. Korean middle-aged women bring many things to eat to the sauna and share with others (Kang, 2020). Indeed, participants brought and shared diverse foods, from coffee to rice cakes, at the sauna. Subin cited,

We can share coffee and drink together ... when it was someone's birthday, we can share rice cakes together. In the new season, we brought and shared watermelon. If there was an event at home, we could eat something special. If a member's son or grandson goes on a picnic, she brings gimbap and we eat it together.

While they shared food in the sauna, they called each other sikgu, meaning 'someone who shares rice or meals together (Choi, 2015, p. 145)' in Korea. Sharing food usually happens in a family, so if anyone shares food, it indicates 'inviting others and being invited by others as a family member' (Choi, 2015, p. 145). Therefore, sharing food indicates not only a culinary activity, but also means that members regard others as a kind of family. Additionally, sharing food became a catalyst for conversation. Yumi described, 'We share coffee in the sauna. We ordered a few bottles of sauna coffee, shared it with our tumblers, and talked about what we did yesterday, what we ate ... we talk like this and play like that.'

As they spent more time and shared the food in the sauna, they perceived the members as a family or team. Mijin mentioned, 'We instantly bonded like a family. We are sikgu. We call us skigu ... we've all gotten along so well. The sauna team has formed a natural bond'. Many participants described it as their second family. Also, some participants referred to 'the sauna team' and shared that they experienced great

teamwork and rapport with each other. Within the family or team, participants felt joy. Subin shared,

I woke up this morning with the first thought: I'm going to see my sisters and friends today. I am excited about that ... I always meet someone when I go to the sauna. There are friends there, so it's the joy of meeting everyone unintentionally.

Even though they had nothing special planned, anticipation of meeting friends at the sauna gave her joy and excitement to start the day. This was extended toward the outside of the sauna. Mijin stated that she was pleased whenever she saw members outside and wanted to see them again even after the facility had been temporarily closed amid the pandemic. When they were asked what they had missed the most during the temporary closure of the sauna, participants answered that they had missed people or sauna members the most.

The strong bond built in the sauna was enhanced by engaging in diverse historical events together. One such event was going on a trip together once or twice a year. As they planned and went on a trip, they made memories together. Mijin recalled, 'We arranged everything, such as renting a bus. Then, we called our team Alsamo. We've been to a few of those trips'. Sumi added, 'We rented a bus and went to Odeo (Island) and other places. We had traveled together many times. The best time, I think, was the trip to Odeo'.

Within the sauna community, participants formed small groups based on personalities, common interests, or jobs and had gye-moim. Gye-moim is 'a rotating credit association where members pool their money through fixed monthly contributions (Moon, 2020, p. 71)'. The collected money is spent either by members receiving the full amount of money in turns, for traveling somewhere together, or on celebrating special events. Some participants who ran businesses had gye-moim together and helped each other. Specifically, Subin added,

We celebrate birthdays together and take care of family events. We get together once a month, eat delicious food together, and go out to play. That's all. Everyone who runs a business has hard times. I had gye-moims like that, where everyone paid and gave it to one person first. Let's suppose you pay \$200 or \$300 per person. The total will be like \$3,000. Then people get the money, in turn, to shop ingredients or products for their business.

Participants received financial help and enhanced their leisure activities through gye-moim. Yejin shared that she went on a trip to Jeju Island and Hong Kong with members who had the same gye-moim, using the collected money to enjoy the trips.

Each member's family events were also important events to the sauna community. Whether the family event was a funeral of aging parents or a wedding ceremony for children, they participated in it together to console or celebrate. Subin mentioned,

When my children have a big accident or celebration, all of us tend to go and comfort each other. It's such a close bond. Unlike my neighbors, the people I've seen at the sauna put each other first because we're all part of the same sauna team. That's why we have such good teamwork.

Mijin added that almost all the sauna team members attended her family events. Even if the pandemic restricted it to only family members as attendees in family events, participants sent money for condolences or gifts to the sauna members, which seemed to contribute to a strong bond with each other.

One element of the shared emotional connection is that members should share time (McMillan, 2011). The findings showed that participants built SOC through time spent together in and outside the sauna, which is similar to previous studies' findings (Choi et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2025). Scholars (Breunig et al., 2010; Woo et al., 2025) have also stated that historical events are needed to make people feel emotionally connected beyond sharing time together. Participants actively tried to create opportunities to make historical events (e.g. annual trips) that gave participants positive shared experiences. Additionally, participants shared historical events by attending other members' important life events (e.g. weddings, funerals, etc.). Attending or celebrating members' life events has also been found in previous SOC literature (Lizzo & Liechty, 2022; Woo et al., 2025). Along with historical events, shared emotional connection could be enhanced when participants experienced crises together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which was supported by the findings of this study. Specifically, participants experienced the pandemic and the temporary closure of the sauna, which provided an opportunity to take care of each other, appreciate each other, and enhance their emotional connection.

Conclusion

This study has important theoretical implications. First, the current findings reflected the four components of SOC theory: 1) membership, 2) influence, 3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and 4) shared emotional connection, which supports and contributes to SOC theory (McMillan, 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Although the influence of location on developing SOC is diminishing (such as through the rise of digital communities), this study resists this trend by highlighting the value of the place (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As saunas are a common gathering place for many Korean middle-aged women, they offer opportunities to enjoy sauna bathing and build SOC, which expands understanding of SOC theory and third place (Oldenburg, 1999). Interestingly, the unique features of the sauna, including the gender-separated context, enhanced emotional safety and openness to socialize with other women regardless of age or background, which contributed to building a sense of membership in the sauna community (Green, 1998; McMillan, 2011). In addition, influence was evident in the findings through sharing food, life tips, and helping other members. Further, participants' needs were fulfilled by enjoying the sauna because they could afford it and as they socialized with others without requiring separate appointments. This finding share insights into the unique constraints and facilitators of a leisure activity valued by many Korean middle-aged women (Son et al., 2024). Lastly, this study showed participants shared emotional connections through not only annual trips but also attending member's life events, which in turn strengthened SOC among members.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study contributed to expanding SOC theory, third place, and leisure literature by exploring Korean middle-aged women's popular leisure. However, there are

limitations and further research is needed. We found many Korean middle-aged women enjoyed sauna bathing for leisure as an accessible space that met their needs. However, popular leisure can be different based on national and cultural backgrounds. Future research needs to explore diverse types of leisure among this population to enhance understanding of middle-aged women and their leisure. In addition, this study found Korean middle-aged women built SOC within the sauna while enjoying sauna bathing. However, the sauna bathing experiences can vary based on the participant's cultural, national, and age backgrounds. Thus, future research needs to explore sauna bathing experiences among diverse demographic samples. Also, participants in this study shared positive aspects of sauna bathing and SOC. This might be because most participants have enjoyed sauna bathing for several years. It is important to include diverse experiences and perspectives to understand the phenomenon deeply. Therefore, future research should include participants who have dropped out or those who do not attend regularly enough to fall within the community boundary to explore negative experiences.

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ORCID

Mina Woo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1183-9966>

Incheol Jang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5326-8551>

Toni Liechty  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0191-3648>

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