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THE TRANSFORMATION OF ADOLESCENT LEISURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE AND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE EXPERIENCE

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Summary. This article examines transformations in adolescents' leisure time under the conditions of the digitalization of everyday life and seeks to capture changes in the structure of leisure activities, activity preferences, forms of social participation, and the developmental opportunities and risks associated with online and offline environments. The discussion is grounded in the assumption that leisure time during adolescence is not merely a space for rest, but a significant domain of socialization, identity formation, emotional regulation, and the adoption of a lifestyle. Digitalization is fundamentally reshaping this domain, as the online environment is no longer merely a supplement to leisure time, but has become an integral part of it. The article draws on a school-based cross-sectional survey conducted among 397 adolescents in the Ústí nad Labem Region. Unlike approaches that analyze adolescents' digital behavior primarily in terms of excessive use or clinical risk, it focuses on the transformation of the leisure domain itself as an ambivalent phenomenon that simultaneously creates new developmental opportunities and new developmental risks. The findings suggest that digitalization alters not only the content of leisure time, but also its social, regulatory, and identity-forming functions, while online and offline environments cannot be interpreted as two separate worlds, but rather as mutually permeable dimensions of adolescents' everyday experience. The pedagogical and preventive contribution of the article lies in its argument that, rather than unequivocally defining digital leisure as a problem, it is more productive to understand the function it serves and to support a balanced structure of adolescents' leisure time.

Keywords: adolescence, leisure time, digitalization, online and offline environments, social participation, hybrid experience, developmental opportunities, developmental risks, leisure education.

1. Introduction

Leisure time during adolescence constitutes one of the most significant domains of everyday experience, contributing to psychosocial development, relational bonds, value orientations, and ways of coping with stress. It is not residual time left over after school and family obligations have been fulfilled, but a sphere of relative autonomy in which adolescents enter peer networks, experiment with roles, develop their interests, and gradually consolidate patterns of time use that may become part of their future lifestyle. Leisure time should therefore be understood as an important framework for socialization and development, rather than as a neutral temporal category devoid of deeper pedagogical and psychological significance (Hamřík, 2022; Kraus, 2008).

Contemporary adolescence unfolds under conditions that are fundamentally changing the very nature of leisure time. Digital technologies permeate communication, entertainment, education, self-presentation, and the organization of everyday activities, becoming an integral part of adolescents' ordinary functioning. The online environment can no longer be understood merely as an external tool or a separate domain existing alongside real life. In adolescents' everyday experience, it merges with the offline dimension, complements and expands it, and in some situations partly replaces it. Digital technologies may similarly be interpreted as part of a broader pedagogical and psychological environment in which their mere presence is not decisive, but rather the way they are integrated into relationships, learning, communication,

and adolescents' everyday experience (Šimek, 2026c). In an intergenerational comparison, Reinhardt et al. (2024) demonstrate that this shift is not merely quantitative, in the sense that adolescents simply spend more time online, but qualitative. The organization of leisure time, its social content, and the psychological functions performed by particular activities are changing. Drawing on data from the pandemic period, Budayová and Pavliková (2022) further show that the digitalization of the leisure domain was accelerated by external circumstances and introduced qualitatively new forms of social interaction that cannot simply be replaced retrospectively by pre-pandemic patterns.

In both public and academic discourse, the digitalization of adolescents' leisure time is too often reduced to questions of risk, the amount of time spent online, or concerns about the weakening of direct interpersonal interaction. Such a narrow conception is inadequate. The digitalization of leisure time creates not only new risks, but also new opportunities for participation, the development of social relationships, access to information, creativity, and community engagement. The tension between developmental potential and possible developmental losses is one of the central issues in contemporary understandings of adolescence and leisure education (Šmahel, 2016; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). In her analysis of the psychosocial determinants of adolescent behavior, Šrobárová (2021) notes that this tension is also evident in the school environment, where teachers and counseling professionals increasingly lack a shared analytical framework that would enable them to distinguish between developmentally functional and developmentally risky forms of digital engagement. Schools can play a crucial role precisely when they do not assess adolescents' digital leisure solely through a restrictive lens, but situate it within the broader context of school climate, relational safety, social-emotional learning, and mental health support (Šimek, 2025c).

The aim of this article is to analyze transformations in adolescents' leisure time in the digital age, to demonstrate that online and offline environments form mutually permeable dimensions of everyday experience, and to show that digitalization changes not only the content of leisure time, but also its social, regulatory, and identity-forming functions. The research problem is formulated as the question of how the structure of adolescents' leisure time is changing under conditions of digitalization and what consequences these transformations have for activity preferences, social participation, and developmental opportunities and risks. The principal objective is not to portray the internet exclusively as a risk factor, but to offer a more analytically balanced interpretation of the leisure domain as an ambivalent sphere of development and potential harm.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Leisure Time as a Developmentally Significant Domain of Adolescence

During adolescence, leisure time represents a distinctive domain of functioning in which the need for autonomy, the need for relational belonging, identity exploration, and the regulation of internal tension intersect (Vágnerová & Lisá, 2021; Thorová, 2015). Unlike compulsory activities organized by schools or families, leisure time affords adolescents a relatively greater degree of choice and, consequently, space for self-expression and experimentation with different forms of behavior. This freedom is precisely what makes leisure time exceptionally important from a developmental perspective. Adolescents do not merely fill time within it, but actively structure their experience, develop their relationship with the world, and consolidate value-based and behavioral preferences that may persist into adulthood.

Leisure activities cannot, however, be treated as a homogeneous category. A distinction can be made between structured, organized, and more enduringly established activities, such as sports, artistic, or educational activities, and less structured, spontaneous, and situationally variable pursuits. In the Czech context, Patočková et al. (2022) note that only 25% of adolescents regularly attend an organized extracurricular activity, while the decline in structured activities is substantially reflected in the growth of unorganized leisure time, part of which is filled by digital activities. Structured activities may foster self-organization, perseverance, a sense of competence, and integration into a group, whereas less structured activities offer greater flexibility and spontaneity, but also greater exposure to chaotic or risky patterns of time use. At the same time, developmentally supportive structuring of leisure time must be distinguished from excessive organization by adults, since excessive parental projection may

lead to the child's psychophysical overload and weaken spontaneous leisure experiences grounded in relationships (Šimek, 2026b).

Adolescence is a period in which leisure time acquires particular developmental significance in relation to the peer group. Contact with peers is not only a source of support and belonging, but also a setting for social comparison, identity differentiation, and the internalization of norms. Seltzer (2009) describes the peer arena as a key developmental context of adolescence. Young people need contact with many different peer groups within which they compare their own views, values, and patterns of behavior and gradually achieve psychosocial maturation. Digitalization extends this arena into the online environment, thereby changing the conditions under which peer participation occurs, but not its developmental function. In this sense, digital communication is not merely technologically mediated contact, but also an environment in which the social skills, empathy, interpersonal sensitivity, and relational learning of children and adolescents are being newly shaped (Šimek, 2025a).

The functional framework of leisure time, derived from Dumazedier's conception (as cited in Hamřík, 2022), distinguishes the restorative, recreational, and developmental dimensions of leisure activities. Their interconnection makes it possible to identify analytically situations in which these functions come into tension, such as when entertainment shifts into a compulsive mode, passive content consumption replaces the development of competencies, or the immediate availability of online stimulation displaces forms of rest that require sustained patience. In this context, Matějka (2025) notes that one of the most pronounced consequences of digitally saturated leisure time is the gradual erosion of the capacity for sustained work and frustration tolerance, with these effects also becoming evident in adolescents' school performance and placing new demands on educational institutions.

2.2 The Digitalization of Leisure Time and the Transformation of Its Functions

Digital technologies have introduced a fundamental transformation into the leisure domain that extends far beyond the addition of new types of activities. Far more profound is the transformation of the function of leisure time itself. The online environment intensifies the supply of stimuli, increases the availability of entertainment and communication, expands the range of possible social contacts, and simultaneously weakens traditional boundaries between time devoted to rest, self-presentation, socialization, and content consumption. An activity that would once have been regarded as mere entertainment may now simultaneously serve the functions of social interaction, identity formation, self-education, and the regulation of distressing experiences. This multifunctionality of digital activities explains why adolescents' online leisure cannot be assessed solely according to the form of an activity. It is necessary to consider whether the activity expands the individual's social, cognitive, and emotional repertoire or, conversely, narrows it and replaces other developmentally important experiences (Šimek, 2025a; Šimek, 2026c).

The transformation of leisure time in the digital age is therefore more profound than a mere technological innovation. The online environment allows leisure activities to be both individual and social at the same time. An adolescent may be physically alone while remaining intensely engaged in communication, sharing, or a group activity at the relational level. This weakens the traditional distinction between time spent alone and time spent with others, as well as between private activity and public participation. Such hybridity is characteristic of digital leisure and explains why simple dichotomies, such as alone versus with peers, online versus offline, or passive versus active, cannot reliably capture the actual structure of adolescents' leisure engagement.

Digitalization also changes the rhythm of leisure time. Traditional forms of time use were tied to a particular place and time and to the availability of other people. By contrast, the digital environment provides continuous access to content, contacts, and stimulation. Such availability expands adolescents' possibilities, but may simultaneously weaken the experience of boredom, transitional pauses, and other forms of unoccupied time that once had their own developmental significance in more traditional forms of adolescence. Temporary inactivity, limited access to social feedback, and unavoidable waiting were part of a process through which independence, intrinsic motivation, and frustration tolerance developed. In her analysis of school climate and students' emotional functioning, Budayová (2020) notes that diminishing frustration tolerance and difficulties with delayed gratification are among the changes in adolescents'

psychosocial functioning most frequently reported by teachers, while digitally saturated leisure time is identified as one contributing factor.

2.3 Online and Offline Environments as Mutually Permeable Dimensions

One of the most serious analytical errors in interpreting digital leisure is the assumption that online and offline environments constitute two entirely separate worlds. Adolescents' experience repeatedly contradicts this assumption. Relationships begin offline and continue online, online communication organizes offline meetings, and the digital environment expands shared interests while also shaping school, peer, and family interactions. In this context, Subrahmanyam and Šmahel (2011) emphasize that the key analytical task is not to ask how much time adolescents spend online or offline, but how these two dimensions condition one another and what this means for their psychosocial development.

The transformation of leisure time therefore does not consist in a simple movement from one environment to another, but in a reconstruction of the relationship between these two dimensions. Some activities remain predominantly offline, yet are supported, shared, or organized online. Others take place primarily online, but carry strong relational or identity-forming significance that extends beyond the screen. In a recent study based on a representative sample of adolescents, Wanka et al. (2025) demonstrate that the quality of leisure activities, understood in terms of meaningfulness, relational embeddedness, and competency development, is a stronger predictor of psychological well-being than the mere classification of activities as online or offline. This finding is crucial for preventive and educational practice. The decisive factor is not the medium, but the function. A functional perspective is also important because problematic manifestations in the school environment cannot be understood in isolation from the broader social, family, digital, and institutional contexts in which students' behavior is formed and stabilized (Šimek, 2025b).

In her analysis of the psychosocial determinants of adolescent behavior in the school environment, Šrobárová (2021) observes that teachers and counseling professionals still lack adequate tools for capturing the hybrid nature of adolescents' contemporary leisure environment, and that this analytical gap complicates targeted preventive work. The school environment, which has traditionally used the online-offline dichotomy as a means of assessing behavioral risk, requires a more functional framework capable of determining whether an adolescent's digital participation expands or, conversely, narrows their everyday experience.

2.4 Developmental Opportunities and Risks of Digital Leisure

A balanced perspective on adolescents' leisure time in the digital age must encompass both developmental opportunities and risks without being reduced a priori to either pole. The online environment may provide adolescents with new forms of social participation, access to information, opportunities to establish interest-based communities beyond what is locally available, space for creativity, and the possibility of seeking support when their offline social network is insufficient. The digital environment may hold particular developmental potential for adolescents who feel less secure in immediate social contact, as well as for those whose interests are not readily shared within their local environment (Šmahel, 2016; Valkenburg et al., 2006).

At the same time, the risk dimension cannot be overlooked. Digitalized leisure may contribute to fragmented attention, excessive orientation toward immediate stimulation, weakened offline participation, intensified social comparison, and the displacement of activities of particular developmental importance, especially physical activities, non-instrumental contact with others, and pursuits requiring sustained concentration and patience (Kolařík et al., 2022; Suchá et al., 2024). The risks associated with digital leisure, however, do not arise from the mere presence of technology, but from the overall function it assumes within an adolescent's lifestyle. The decisive issue is whether the online environment broadens the repertoire of experience and participation or begins to displace other developmentally significant components of everyday experience and assumes compensatory functions that would otherwise be fulfilled by the offline environment. The risk dimension of digital leisure should therefore be understood biopsychosocially, since the adverse effects of social media may affect psychological well-being, sleep, bodily functioning, relationship quality, information load, and adolescents' ability to maintain a balanced rhythm of life (Šimek, 2026a). Specific risks of the digital environment also include the normalization of shaming,

which connects the online public sphere, peer relationships, the school environment, and patterns of family communication, and may therefore substantially affect adolescents' social safety and psychological resilience (Šimek & Vochozka, 2026).

3. Methodology

The empirical component of the article draws on a school-based cross-sectional survey conducted from February 18 to March 1, 2026, among adolescents attending different types of schools in the Ústí nad Labem Region. The research sample comprised 397 respondents, including 167 girls and 230 boys, drawn from lower-secondary schools, secondary vocational schools, and grammar schools. Convenience sampling was used, which substantially limits the generalizability of the findings to the wider population, while nevertheless making it possible to capture the specific configuration of leisure activities and digital behavior within the sample analyzed.

The present article constitutes the third part of a multi-study research project. In contrast to the first study, which focused on statistical testing of the relationships between excessive internet use and selected variables, and the second study, which analyzed the functional delineation of the boundary between normative and risky digital behavior, this third study pursues a distinct scientific objective. It addresses the transformation of the leisure domain itself as the central analytical problem, with empirical data serving to illustrate and support the theoretical argument rather than to repeat the statistical analyses conducted in the preceding studies. The data are not used to test new hypotheses, but to enrich the interpretive framework through a descriptive and functional characterization of the leisure patterns observed in the analyzed sample. The third study therefore works primarily with the descriptive and interpretive function of the data rather than with an inferential objective, thereby distinguishing itself analytically from both preceding manuscripts within the multi-study research project.

The questionnaire survey examined variables relating to the structure of leisure time, the degree of digital engagement, preferences for online activities, motivations for engaging in them, and selected contextual factors, including the social context of leisure time, parental mediation, and the subjective experience of psychological well-being. The findings were synthesized through descriptive and functional analysis in order to identify patterns of leisure engagement and their developmental implications.

4. Results

The descriptive characteristics of the sample revealed substantial variability in both the degree of digital engagement and the forms taken by leisure activities. The analyzed sample cannot be reduced to a population characterized predominantly by problematic digital behavior. The clinically relevant threshold for excessive internet use, corresponding to a mean EIU Scale score of 2.6 points, was not reached by any respondent, while the mean score for the sample was $M = 1.13$ ($SD = 0.52$). Digital leisure in this sample must therefore be analyzed as a continuum. The population examined is one in which the digital environment has become an ordinary component of everyday experience and where the key research question concerns not pathology, but the transformation of the function of the leisure domain.

In terms of the structure of online leisure activities, the most prevalent activities in the sample were playing online games with friends (33% of respondents), chatting and messaging with friends (30%), and browsing social media (26%). Only 8% of respondents used the internet for educational purposes during their leisure time, while 10% created their own content. The activity pattern thus shows a clear predominance of passive content consumption over active participation or creative engagement. Gender differentiation is pronounced and analytically relevant. Social media were browsed by 44% of girls but only 13% of boys, whereas 47% of boys played online games with friends, compared with only 14% of girls. From the perspective of developmental risks and opportunities, this differentiation is more consequential than the overall volume of online exposure, since individual forms of digital engagement perform different functions and involve varying degrees of risk potential.

The offline leisure domain displayed concerning characteristics in terms of its degree of structure and the availability of alternatives. Only 2% of respondents reported physical activity or sport as their first response to boredom, whereas 29% of adolescents first reached for a phone or computer when bored. As

many as 74% of respondents indicated that they used the internet at least occasionally to escape unpleasant emotional states, and more than half would hypothetically prefer offline activities, yet in practice did not find such activities sufficiently attractive or accessible. These data support the interpretation that the digitalization of the leisure domain is not primarily a value preference among adolescents, but a structural response to the inadequate provision and accessibility of appealing offline alternatives.

No statistically significant difference was found in the structure of social engagement during leisure time between adolescents who spent their leisure predominantly alone and those who spent it with peers. The result does not in itself indicate the absence of a relationship. On the contrary, it supports the analytical argument concerning the hybrid nature of the contemporary peer arena. The traditional dichotomy between solitude and peer presence may no longer be sufficiently sensitive in the digital age, because physical solitude does not imply relational isolation and physical co-presence in a group does not imply intensive interpersonal contact. An adolescent spending time physically alone may be deeply engaged in an online peer network, while time spent in a group may be heavily mediated through individual screens, with minimal direct interaction.

Taken together, the available data reveal three interconnected empirical points that form the basis of the argument concerning the transformation of the function of the leisure domain. First, passive forms of online time use, particularly browsing social media and consuming video content, markedly predominate in the analyzed sample over active participation, creative activity, or educational uses of the internet. Second, physical and sports activities are virtually invisible to adolescents as alternatives to digital engagement in situations of boredom, with only 2% of respondents identifying them as their first response. Third, the internet serves more than half of the adolescents as a strategy for escaping unpleasant emotional states, suggesting that the digital leisure domain is assuming regulatory functions that would otherwise be fulfilled by the offline environment. The interconnection of these three points provides the empirical basis for the analytical argument developed in the discussion.

5. Discussion

Transformations in adolescents' leisure time in the digital age cannot be reduced to a simple transfer of activities from offline to online environments. The findings support a more complex interpretation. Digitalization is changing the structure of leisure time itself, its rhythm, its social organization, and its psychological functions. It is precisely for this reason that distinctions between time spent alone and with others, or between online and offline activity as two separate spheres, are no longer sufficient.

From an educational perspective, the key finding is that the offline leisure domain of the analyzed sample displays a structural deficit, reflected in the limited representation of physical activities, low participation in organized interest-based pursuits, and a pronounced tendency to use digital escape as a coping strategy. Based on an analysis of students' social and emotional functioning, Budayová (2020) demonstrates that this deficit in the quality and availability of offline alternatives constitutes one of the most significant contextual factors increasing the attractiveness of the digital environment as a substitute arena for meeting developmental needs. The problem, therefore, does not lie in technology itself, but in the environment in which adolescents seek to have their needs met. Schools can serve as compensatory and stabilizing environments when they create conditions for meaningful participation, relational belonging, trust, and safe experiences of human contact, complementing the digital environment with high-quality offline experiences rather than seeking to displace it through restrictive measures (Šimek, 2025c).

One of the most important conclusions is that the online environment cannot automatically be understood either as a mere supplement or as an inherently risky space. In many cases, it extends social participation, serves as a tool for organizing relationships, facilitates the sharing of interests, and forms part of identity. This is particularly true for adolescents whose offline peer networks are limited for various reasons, or whose interests receive insufficient recognition in their local environment. In this context, Matějka (2025) emphasizes that the educational assessment of adolescents' digital behavior must be based on an understanding of its function rather than on the mere measurement of its intensity, since functionally integrated digital activities may be just as developmentally beneficial as offline activities.

At the same time, an analytically rigorous account must acknowledge the risk dimension. The data show that passive content consumption predominates over active participation and creative activity. Kolařík et al. (2022) note that passive forms of digital engagement, particularly browsing social media without interaction or watching videos without a creative or educational purpose, show the weakest association with developmental benefits and the strongest association with reduced offline social activity. In the Czech context, Dvořáková and Chomynová (2022) further document an increase in problematic social media use among girls and problematic gaming among boys, particularly after 2020, while the gender differentiation in forms of digital engagement identified in the analyzed sample confirms this trend.

The hybrid nature of the contemporary peer arena, as described by Seltzer (2009), has direct implications for educational practice. Teachers and counseling professionals who assess adolescents' leisure engagement solely according to whether they spend time physically alone or in a group are relying on an instrument that has lost its analytical sensitivity. In this context, Šrobárová (2021) emphasizes that schools need to modernize their approach to the assessment of leisure patterns and incorporate into preventive work frameworks capable of capturing the function, motivation, and quality of leisure activities rather than merely their formal classification.

The third study within the multi-study research project differs from the two preceding texts in precisely this respect. Its primary concern is neither the internet as a pathology nor, in a narrower sense, the boundary between normative and risky behavior, but the transformation of the leisure domain itself as a research and educational problem. This gives the study a scope extending beyond the conventional psychopathological framework. The question is not merely whether adolescents use the internet more or less, but how the conditions of their socialization are changing, what new forms of participation are becoming available, and which traditional developmental experiences may, by contrast, be weakened. The response to this transformation cannot consist solely of restriction, but must involve targeted support for the quality of the leisure domain as a whole.

6. Limitations of the Study

Interpretation of the findings is limited by the cross-sectional design and the use of a convenience sample drawn from a single region, which precludes generalization to the wider population. A further limitation is that the structure of leisure time was captured through relatively broad categorical variables that cannot fully reflect the subjective value, motivational function, and experienced quality of individual activities. Opportunities for a more detailed distinction between different types of online activities and their differentiated psychosocial significance are likewise limited. Finally, questionnaire-based data collection is susceptible to subjective response bias, particularly in questions involving value preferences and self-assessment of emotional states. These limitations also define an agenda for future research employing more refined instruments and longitudinal designs.

7. Conclusion

Adolescents' leisure time is undergoing a fundamental transformation in the digital age, affecting not only the content of activities, but also their social, regulatory, and identity-forming functions. The online environment has become an integral part of adolescents' everyday experience and cannot be interpreted as an external supplement to real life. The transformation of leisure time in the digital age is ambivalent. It creates new opportunities for participation, communication, sharing, and development, while at the same time potentially weakening developmentally important experiences associated with direct contact, physical activity, patience, and less intensely stimulating forms of leisure.

The analytically central finding is that online and offline environments cannot be understood as two separate worlds, but as mutually permeable dimensions of everyday experience, while the traditional dichotomies used to capture them in research are losing their analytical sensitivity. What determines the developmental benefit or risk of a particular leisure activity is not whether it takes place online or offline, but the function it performs in the adolescent's life. The relevant question is whether it fosters development, provides meaningful social contact, and enables self-realization, or whether it compensates for deficits in the offline domain and consolidates escapist patterns of time use.

The educational and preventive significance of this finding lies in the recognition that adolescents' digital leisure should not be treated unilaterally as a problem and addressed through restrictions. A more meaningful approach is to understand its function, support a balanced structure of the leisure domain, and distinguish sensitively between forms of digital participation that foster adolescents' development and those that progressively narrow their everyday experience. Budayová (2020) shows that the quality of the offline environment, particularly the school climate and the availability of relational resources, is among the strongest protective factors reducing the likelihood that the online environment will assume compensatory functions. Šrobárová (2021) further emphasizes that preventive and educational work must incorporate an understanding of the hybrid nature of the contemporary peer arena in order to provide adolescents with a relevant framework for navigating their own leisure environment. Finally, Matějka (2025) notes that the educational response to digitally saturated leisure time must include work on motivation and delayed gratification as key regulatory competencies whose development represents both a challenge and an opportunity in the digital age. The practical implications of these findings point toward systemic support for schools as environments that, alongside their educational function, deliberately promote relational safety, preventive work, psychosocial support, and coordinated care for adolescents' mental health (Šimek & Slavík, 2026).

Future research should develop this area through a more refined operationalization of leisure activities that encompasses their function and subjective quality, through longitudinal designs capable of tracing the developmental trajectories of leisure patterns during adolescence, and through a deeper analysis of the hybrid nature of online-offline participation as a prerequisite for understanding the contemporary psychosocial development of adolescents.

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