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The Issue of Virtual Leisure in the Digital Culture of the 21st Century

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Abstract. Virtual leisure is a phenomenon of 21st-century digital culture that transcends the boundaries of everyday life and the multiplicity of communications. The diversity of its forms and types increasingly attracts contemporary man. In this situation, it is important to determine the degree of influence of virtual leisure on individual's life attitudes. The present article identifies factors behind the active development of virtual leisure, including: (1) dominant mass culture in society, which is aimed at satisfying the needs of an "average" person; (2) consumer model of social existence with the priority of the material over the spiritual; (3) development of digital technologies encompassing all spheres of human activity, including leisure. Virtual leisure has contradictory characteristics. The article identifies positive factors of its influence on value attitudes. Thus, an increase in the volume of virtual leisure gives rise to new interests and needs, i.e., entails a change in value orientations. The intersection of real and virtual worlds in the form of digital leisure expands the possibilities for transforming human meanings and lifestyles. Virtual forms of leisure practices help to construct the individual's "I." The changing spatial-temporal circumstances of virtual leisure remove social and other differences between individuals. The negativity of virtual leisure is associated with its role as a means of manipulating people's thinking and behaviour. Representing a function of virtual leisure, consciousness management is manifested in the unification and integration of a person into a certain social group, orientation towards a certain standard of behaviour, propaganda of a consumer attitude and dominance of hedonistic values. The contradictory nature of the effect of virtual leisure on the individual's value system requires serious culturological analysis.

Keywords: virtual leisure, leisure activities, digital culture, value orientations, technicalisation of consciousness

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Проблема виртуального досуга в цифровой культуре XXI века

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Аннотация. Виртуальный досуг — это феномен цифровой культуры XXI века, который преодолевает границы повседневности и множественность коммуникаций. Разнообразие его форм и видов всё больше привлекает современного человека. В этой ситуации важно определить степень влияния виртуального досуга на жизненные установки личности. Автор статьи обозначает факторы активного развития виртуального досуга, среди которых: 1) доминирующая в обществе массовая культура, нацеленная на удовлетворение запросов «усреднённого» человека; 2) потребительская модель существования общества, ориентирующая на приоритет материального над духовным; 3) развитие цифровых технологий, захватывающих все сферы жизнедеятельности человека, в том числе и досуг. Виртуальный досуг имеет противоречивые характеристики. В статье выявляются позитивные факторы его влияния на ценностные установки. Так, увеличение объёма виртуального досуга обусловливает появление новых интересов и потребностей, то есть влечёт изменение ценностных ориентиров. Пересечение реального и виртуального миров в формах цифрового досуга расширяет возможности трансформации смыслов и образа жизни человека. Виртуальные формы досуговых практик помогают конструировать «я» личности. Изменяются пространственно-временные обстоятельства виртуального досуга, снимаются социальные и иные различия между индивидами. Негативная оценка виртуального досуга связана с его ролью как средства манипуляции мышлением и поведением людей. Управление сознанием как функция виртуального досуга проявляется в унификации и интеграции человека в определённую социальную группу, в ориентации на определённый стандарт поведения, в пропаганде потребительской установки, в доминировании гедонистических ценностей. Противоречивый характер влияния виртуального досуга на ценностную систему индивида требует серьёзного культурологического осмысления.

Ключевые слова: виртуальный досуг, досуговая деятельность, цифровая культура, ценностные ориентиры, технизация сознания

Introduction

In the culture of the 21st century, new virtual forms of leisure emerge. These include various types of computer games, social networks, social media, virtual travel, online courses, etc. A person's preference to spend free time in virtual reality instead of the real world is reflected in their value orientations and goals. Moreover, the nature of leisure not only influences the person's value system and moral attitudes in the public consciousness, but also indirectly affects the content and state of other spheres of society: education, art, science, etc. What is the level of influence of virtual leisure on a person and his existence? Is there a technicalisation of human consciousness? Isn't man becoming alienated from society and his essence? The attitude towards virtual leisure is contradictory, and questions about the essence of this phenomenon of contemporary culture have an anthropological dimension:

they require a thorough culturological analysis.

The present article aims to substantiate the influence of virtual leisure on human value systems in the era of digitalisation.

The following objectives are set: (1) to identify the factors in the development of virtual practices; (2) to examine the basis for the positive influence of virtual leisure on individual's value orientation; (3) to demonstrate that virtual leisure, as a technology for manipulating consciousness, shapes a person's value system.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of leisure has been discussed in the scientific community since the end of the 20th century. The positive effect of the growth of leisure practices has been noted by a number of philosophers. Michel de Certeau reflected on the influence of the diversity and availability of leisure on the growth of consumer demands in the information society. [1] Manuel Castells believed that virtual forms of leisure offer more options for personal self-identification.[1] Michel Foucault viewed leisure as a form of protest against the control of power and compulsory participation in the work activities of society. In his opinion, various leisure activities open up the possibility of self-development for the individual. A person is transformed from a subject of consumption in leisure activities into a subject of creation. Foucault understood this process as "self-concern," a "self-forming effort" that "requires the individual to act on himself, to observe, experience, improve and transform himself." [2, p. 71]

Foucault's reflection on the development of culture at the end of the 20th century included the trends in changing ideas about the human life world. Indeed, in the 21st century, "self-concern," the world of one's everyday life becomes one of the main guidelines for the individual. What place does virtual leisure occupy in creating a comfortable world for people? Does this form of leisure preserve the possibility for "self-creation" or does it turn out to be a "disciplinary practice," a technology for manipulating the consciousness of the individual and society?

The phenomenon of virtual leisure in the scientific space is being studied by foreign and domestic authors. Joffre Dumazedier considers "leisure" as "the totality of activities that a person can indulge in of his own free will in order to rest, amuse himself, develop his knowledge or education, <...> being free from the fulfilment of professional, family and civic duties." [3, p. 84] From the point of view of Dmitry Nekrasov, Elena Cherdymova and V.S. Cherdymova, the concepts of "leisure" and "free time" most often turn out to be synonyms and mean time opposite to work and aimed at rest: this is "a zone of active communication that satisfies the need for contacts." [4, p. 302] This view is close to the position of Nikolai Yaroshenko, who considers the concepts of "entertainment industry" and "leisure industry" to be synonymous, since the main motivation for a person to turn to these practices is to receive pleasure. [5, p. 112] The author discusses the problem of a person's hedonistic dependence in choosing the content of his free time. Elena Salganova, Lyudmila Belova and Natalia Gafner define the leisure time of young people in the media space as time for entertainment: "getting momentary pleasure becomes the basis for leisure activities." [6, p. 70]

Virtual leisure has not received a clear scientific definition due to the fact that

[1] M. Castells, A. Alekseeva. An interview. Manuel Castells: Our life is a hybrid of virtual and physical space. URL: https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/intervyu-kastels-nasha-zhizn-gibrid-virtualnogo-i-fizicheskogo-prostranstva (accessed: 29.01.2026).

the Internet space is constantly creating new leisure practices: its types, forms and variations. In the broadest sense, "virtuality" is understood as a second reality, a computer-created audiovisual environment that lies beyond the physical and social world. [7, p. 71] Therefore, virtual leisure can be considered as free time spent in virtual reality. Since this space is a product of computer technologies, the term "digital leisure" is often used in scientific literature as a synonym for "virtual leisure." [8, p. 59]

The characteristics of virtual leisure and its special status in consumer society were examined in the work of Ekaterina Surova and Natalia Butonova. According to the authors, "the values of everyday experience become dominant in consumer society, and the cozy world of the individual and his immediate circle is created by virtual practices in the digital society." [9, p. 59] In addition, the culture of virtual leisure is assessed as a means of individual self-identification, since personal priorities are determined in the choice of form and content of spending free time. [Ibid.]

A number of authors note the diversity of forms of virtual leisure practices: online visits to cultural institutions and mass entertainment, online travel, eSports, amateur activities, etc. [10; 11] Forms of virtual leisure include services, blogs, portals, websites, forums, social networks, photo and video sharing, video hosting, video broadcasts (streams), online cinemas, interactive museums, various games and other leisure practices; moreover, their number is only growing. [12] The authors evaluate the positive and negative aspects of virtual leisure activities.

In a scientific aspect, the influence of virtual leisure on an individual's value system was considered indirectly. Thus, the role of social networks in the formation of value orientations for young people was analysed in [13]; the problem of the effect caused by virtual space on the consciousness and lifestyle of young people was studied in. [14] Philosophers and sociologists reflect on the significance of information and communication technologies in the process of deformation of value aspirations. [15] Andrey Popovkin and Galina Popovkina highlight "basic life meanings and values that will certainly be affected by the processes of 'digitalisation'." [8, p. 57] Nevertheless, a lack of published special studies on the problem of the connection between virtual leisure and individual value orientations makes the consideration of the influence of virtual leisure on a person's worldview of a novel nature.

Factors in the Development of Virtual Leisure

The post-industrial society is called "informational" due to the qualitative leap in information processing. In the 21st century, digital technologies are accelerating this process. Structural changes are taking place in production and in the social sphere. Improvements in information technology influence the dynamics of social development. As a result, the quality of human life undergoes a transformation. At the end of the 20th century, Karl Jaspers wrote the following about this: "…the structure of interaction and the life of people in all its dimensions and ramifications depends on the nature of labour and its division." [16, p. 119] With the reduction in the share of physical labour, the problem of "free time" and leisure activities becomes more pressing. The expanding leisure sector increases the number of people working in this industry. Forms and types of virtual leisure become especially popular.

In the postmodern era, mass culture offers people a variety of information and communication practices and entertainment content to spend their free time in accordance with their values. Among the reasons for

the growing interest in virtual leisure and its preference over real life, let us highlight the following:

1) The constant improvement of technical means and the expansion of the Internet provide for the creation of all kinds of virtual worlds. Therefore, many types and forms of leisure activities are transferred to virtual reality.

2) The speed and interactivity of the Internet and media space in disseminating information induce people to transcend the boundaries of everyday life, time and space.

3) Contemporary forms of virtual leisure have the potential for multiple communications, which enables broad virtual interaction with other individuals.

4) The range of forms and means of digital leisure can be used for the realisation of human needs and requests that are impossible in reality.

In the 21st century, mass culture in a consumer society has created new prospects for leisure based on the development of digital technologies. Let us note the following main factors that determine the constant increase in the volume and forms of leisure:

1) Mass culture. Being targeted at the "average" person, it dominates society and offers a growing variety of types and forms of virtual leisure without high demands and deep knowledge.

2) Consumer model of social existence. A distinctive feature of virtual leisure is its close connection with the nature of consumption in the 21st century. A person strives to possess things and improve the material means of his life; the motives of his activity acquire an economic dimension. The spiritual component of the consumer person is being displaced by material values.

3) Digital technologies. The constantly updated range of goods and services of digital technologies influences the process of consciousness technicalisation. All spheres of human life are computerised, all life activities are connected with the Internet as a socio-cultural environment of everyday life, where an individual learns, works, rests, etc. The rapid dynamics of digital existence leaves the individual little time to reflect on existence. People have no time to process a massive amount of information, which is perhaps why they prefer virtual leisure with its entertaining content.[2]

Thus, the choice of virtual leisure forms is associated with value orientations. A person prefers something that corresponds to his interests, tasks and goals. However, a feedback loop also exists. In turn, forms of virtual leisure determine the moral aspirations of the individual and shape the values of contemporary consumer society.

Factors of the Positive Influence of Virtual Leisure on the Value Orientation of the Individual

Digital technologies influence human consciousness, as well as change the motives of their behaviour, types of activities, and lifestyle. Let us define the grounds for the formation of a new human value system, conditioned by dynamically developing forms of virtual leisure.

Firstly, in the post-industrial world, people have more free time, and virtual leisure becomes a significant part of their lives.

[2] According to Mediascope, in 2024 people spent on average about four and a half hours a day watching videos, communicating and searching for information on the Internet; young people spend seven hours on the Internet. See: *Russians spend 4.5 hours a day online: According to Mediascope, the internet has permanently defeated television.* URL: https://hi-tech.mail.ru/news/125764-rossiyane-provodyat-v-internete-po-45-chasa-v-den/ (accessed: 29.01.2026).

The nature and content of leisure time changes, and the social circle expands. The greater amount of leisure time entails more new interests and needs to emerge, that is, value orientations to develop.

Secondly, in the existence of images and symbols offered by virtual leisure, a person feels as if he is in the real world. Virtual and real existence intersects, and cyberspace is perceived as an extension of the physical world. Gilles Deleuze considered the virtual to be a certain part of the real. "For Deleuze, the virtual has the reality of a task to be accomplished or a problem to be solved." [17, p. 175] Virtuality appears as a logical reconstruction of reality, generated by the latter, and, as a subjective reflection of being, generates a new virtual reality of the next level. Castells also considered reality to be a "hybrid of virtual and physical space."[3] Virtual space does not replace reality; rather, the two spaces coexist. Taking root in the consciousness of the Internet user, the values of virtual culture change the consciousness and behaviour of a person.

Virtual reality and hence its forms of leisure are constantly initiating changes in human lifestyles. Without leaving the real world, an individual draws information from the virtual space, focuses on it, transforms and reorganises his way of life. According to Vladimir Komarov, "a high level of Internet connectivity acts as a mechanism for the formation of personal qualities, knowledge and skills." [18, p. 144] In the digital space, both private and public, production and leisure spheres of communications are becoming increasingly intertwined. In contemporary internet culture, leisure is integrated with everyday practice. Virtual worlds and communities are being created. Other forms of communication reconstructing its content appear; new concepts, judgments and meanings are introduced. During virtual practices, motives, goals and interests constantly change. The rules followed by a person in virtual leisure are transferred into his daily activities, into the system of connections and contacts with other people. Virtual leisure influences lifestyle and shapes new life priorities.

Thirdly, in digital projections of leisure practices, the "I" of individuality is constructed. Virtual leisure removes the everyday and real-life limitations. The social space of virtual leisure helps individuals realise freedom of choice, demonstrate independence and make decisions.

In connection with the prospect of realising the creative efforts of an individual in virtual practices, some researchers consider the concept of "online identity." [4, p. 304] Here, the experience of being in a virtual digital environment is meant. What is unthinkable in the real world is possible in the virtual one. The digital environment offers an alternative reality with limitless possibilities, where individuals can simulate various options for their actions.

Thus, virtual leisure ceases to be just entertainment: it becomes one of the main areas of human activity. In the process of realising human freedom and aspirations, virtual leisure shapes his value systems, helping with communication and self-identification.

Fourthly, the processes of globalisation and digitalisation are closely linked, and this connection ensures the effective overcoming of national, historical, social, gender, and other boundaries. Thus, the way of spending leisure time traditionally demonstrated the social status of an individual, his solvency (travel, holidays, sports, etc.). Due to different economic conditions, leisure became a marker of social differentiation. In the 21st century, digital space

[3] M. Castells, A. Alekseeva. Op. cit.

erases social boundaries in virtual forms of leisure [9, p. 55]; it becomes universal.

Representatives of all social groups spend a significant portion of their time online: communicating, relaxing, shopping, working, etc. The spatial-temporal circumstances of virtual leisure are changing; social and other differences between individuals are being removed. Due to broad communication capabilities, it unites and organises people: social relations, which are determined by rules, norms and attitudes, are formed between individuals. Globalisation processes increase their influence on value orientations through virtual communities. In the digital leisure space, a person feels like part of a global media platform, a citizen of the world.

Thus, virtual leisure creates the basis for changing value orientation by blurring differences in communicative practices and helping people adapt to new conditions.

Virtual Leisure as a Technology for Manipulating Consciousness

Thinkers at the end of the 20th century warned that the development of information and computer technology will increase the influence on personal and social consciousness. Alvin Toffler and Harold Adams Innis came up with the idea of media culture as the fourth branch of government. Jean Baudrillard defined the virtual environment as "simulacra" of physical reality, "copies of copies" that transform existence according to a specific purpose. [19, p. 7]

According to Herbert Marcuse, total domination over the individual in post-industrial society is intensified through the imposition of false repressive needs on him. He becomes an object of suggestion and turns into a person of "one-dimensional culture," "one-dimensional thinking." In a society of "total unfreedom" he has the "happy consciousness" that this is the order of things. [20, p. 274] What is the role of virtual leisure in personality development in the context of Marcuse's theory of the "one-dimensional man"? A person, unlike an animal, experiences needs not only vital inputs, but also those that define his anthropological essence: aesthetic, scientific, spiritual, etc. Does virtual leisure offer a multidimensional experience — high goals, moral aspirations — or is it limited to the "comfortable comfort" of everyday life? What is the main life goal promoted by virtual leisure: "to be" or "to have"?

The phenomenon of virtual leisure is that the mass consumer spends a significant part of his or her life in a reality different from everyday life. The problem lies in the contradictory impact of virtual leisure on a person.

On the one hand, virtual practices have a universal and widespread character. They are accessible to everyone without age, ideological, status, hierarchical or other restrictions. All participants in virtual leisure are free from social control. On the other hand, virtual leisure when manifested in a consumer society becomes a means of manipulating the individual's consciousness to form a certain value system and model of behaviour. As a derivative of computer technology, virtual leisure has its own specific producing programmer who actively colonises the human life world by creating a network environment. In accordance with the demands of the Network author, the individual detached from reality can inadequately evaluate it and agree with the deconstruction of traditional concepts, the substitution of the original with a simulacrum of secondary reality.

What is the relationship between these two aspects of leisure activity and how does this ambivalence influence person's value orientations? On the one hand, the criterion of progress is manifested as the increase in the amount of free time due to the reduction of work. However, on the other hand, what becomes the character of liberated time?

There are positive and negative aspects to the socio-cultural phenomenon of virtual leisure. The total computerisation of human and social activity offers certain rules for their interaction with computer technologies. The 21st century sets a massive digitalisation of leisure. In virtual worlds, a real man becomes an online person; he communicates, lives and experiences, watches and listens, visits and travels outside of real space and time.

Humanity exists in the reality of an increasingly digital process that developes in all spheres of individual and social life. Virtual leisure also progresses to become an active part of people's daily lives. This aspect of human life and activity cannot be unambiguously assessed, since we are within this process. After identifying the positive influence of virtual leisure on the formation of a person's value system, negative aspects of this process should be noted:

1) Virtual leisure promotes the integration of a person into a certain social group. The mass culture of the 21st century is characterised by an increasing tendency to manage the processes of virtual practice formation. They become more and more unified. Online communities, chats, bots, online travel and event attendance, etc., shape a person's behavioural strategy and fit them into the typical lifestyle of a consumer society. Technologies of consciousness manipulation are actively involved in the organisation of leisure activities. [9, p. 56] Digital space is manageable.

2) In the space of virtual leisure, a pragmatic focus and utilitarian component prevail. Digital platforms and networks create algorithms and programs for managing information flows. As a result, the priority and demand for the consumer becomes what is useful, rather than the search for a meaningful choice. As a result of leisure virtualisation, a de-individualised and standard personality is formed.

Forms of virtual leisure in a consumer society increasingly become a sphere of commerce; they orient people toward a non-creative, consumer mindset. Despite the diversity of virtual practices, they all offer a certain stereotype, a fashionable trend. Market economics and marketing satisfy the demands of mass culture consumers, while forms of creative leisure remain in low demand. Everyday human activity and leisure are so closely intertwined that they become consumer products. According to the French philosopher Guy Debord, in the culture of the contemporary society of the spectacle, or spectacular society, all the results of human activity are transformed into commodities: "The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has already succeeded in achieving complete capture of social life. The relationship to the commodity becomes not only visible, but the only thing we see now: the world we see is its world." [21, p. 34]

3) Virtual leisure mainly satisfies the primitive demands of a mass audience and offers a utilitarian pattern of behaviour. While the Internet facilitates the realisation of the human ego, the development of all levels of his worldview is gradually becoming an instrument of global control, propaganda and the enslavement of personal and political freedoms. Nowadays, the culture of digital leisure represents one of the means of people's control.

By influencing value systems and behavioural patterns, virtual leisure helps manage individuals and society. The promotion of fashionable appearance and prestigious lifestyle is implemented in various cyberspace environments, including forms of virtual leisure. The universal algorithm of actions offered by digital leisure can rid a person of accumulated value experience, depriving them of individuality and freedom of choice.

A large proportion of virtual leisure activities involve the consumption of low-quality content

— *brainrot*.[4] Such content is oriented towards values that reduce cognitive functions and weaken concentration (videos, clips, online posts and other internet products). The term of "brainrot" is thus used to define the level of fatigue and mental stagnation after viewing a large volume of material that does not expand a person's worldview and carries no intellectual, cognitive information. Brainrot can have a destructive effect on a person's mental health, as well as undermine a cultural system based on traditional values.

In virtual leisure, a large amount of content is represented by informational "garbage." The perception of such useless materials requires no analytical efforts: they gradually displace intellectual material from the subject's area of attention. It turns easier to look at a meme or a picture than to strain your memory and turn on associative images. The individual prefers meaningless rewriting (rewritten or generated texts) and turns into a thoughtless consumer of information with a reduced level of intelligence.

According to Karl Jaspers' forecast, digital leisure will become a significant part of a person's everyday life; however, "this private life itself becomes empty, mechanised and transforms leisure and pleasure into a type of work." [22, p. 138]

4) The hedonistic function prevails in virtual leisure. Fu Lisha believes that individuals in a mass culture society are guided by consumer aspirations, preferring entertainment over creative activities in their free time. The hedonistic focus of leisure is due to the fact that virtual practices aimed at obtaining pleasure require no physical exertion or real participation in any actions, but provide emotional and psychological relief. As a result, virtual leisure for a person becomes preferable to real social communication and activity. [23, p. 615] Since people spend a significant amount of time in virtual space, socially significant values are relegated to the background after individualistic values.

Thus, the ambivalent nature of virtual leisure defines the problem of its study as both relevant and heuristic, as well as requiring serious culturological analysis.

Conclusion

Thus, virtual leisure has a serious impact on the content and nature of various spheres of social life. As a phenomenon of digital society, it expresses the dynamics in the development of culture. The significant role of virtual leisure in the 21st century was determined by three factors: (1) the mass culture of postmodern society has shaped the individual's orientation toward entertaining leisure content; (2) the consumerist model of social existence has promoted material values as a priority over spiritual ones; (3) the development of digital technologies has expanded the range of virtual leisure forms and increased their influence on human value orientations.

Due to its contradictory characteristics, virtual leisure has both positive and negative effects on the individual's value system. A positive result of a person's turn to virtual leisure is the emergence of new interests and needs, the interweaving of various spheres of communication and associated lifestyle changes. The alternative reality of virtual leisure helps to construct the individual's "I" and shape its value systems.

The negative significance of virtual leisure is that it becomes a means of manipulating the individual's consciousness and forms a certain behavioural strategy of a person. The entertainment content offered by digital leisure with its consumer focus dominant over

[4] Brainrot: what it is and how it works? URL: https://www.unisender.com/ru/glossary/chto-takoe-breinrot/ (accessed: 29.01.2026).

the creative one discourages the development of critical, analytical thinking.

The progress of digital technology is irreversible, and its spiritual challenges will also manifest themselves in virtual leisure, which will expand its audience. The development of digital technologies is gaining momentum, and the possibilities of virtual worlds are increasing, offering new forms of leisure. Augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR) blur the boundaries between real and digital space.[5]

How to use leisure time and what it should be filled with depends entirely on the individual. Will it be entertainment-focused or aimed at the creative process? The uncertainty of the future forces us to acknowledge that the substantial purpose of leisure is the comprehensive development of the individual. In this context, digital culture raises the question of a certain level of self-restraint for individuals, who are called upon to exercise moderation in their use of technological innovations, including virtual leisure content.

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