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## Taking leisure seriously: Adolescents' pursuit of their most important and interesting leisure activities

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***Taking Leisure Seriously: Adolescents' Pursuit of their Most Important and Interesting Leisure Activities***

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**Abstract**

Whereas schools are the most common educational settings worldwide, learning and personal growth can take place in other contexts outside the school system. One of these significant contexts is leisure. Characterized by relative freedom, fewer social constraints than other life domains, self-determination and intrinsic motivation, leisure has been identified as a major context for youth development.

This paper presents a study on adolescents' choice and pursuit of their most important and interesting leisure activity. The Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM) was distributed to 832 senior secondary school students from 10 secondary schools of different academic banding and geographically distributed around Hong Kong. In completing the questionnaire, students were asked to nominate leisure activity that they regard as most important and interesting. Data analysis revealed the popularity of sports and performance and fine arts activities in such nominations. Reasons for participation were mainly psychological. There were gender and school differences in relation to the activity choice and its underlying reasons. Difference were also found between students' who scored high and those scoring low on the SLIM across gender, school banding, activity types, frequency and duration of activity participation, and reasons for activity choice. Results of the study revealed the existence of serious leisure among adolescents in Hong Kong and highlighted its potential for creating a lasting change in young people's development. Implications are drawn for leisure education in schools and for expanding the studies on adolescents' meaning making of their casual and serious leisure pursuits across different sociocultural settings.

Keywords: Adolescents, Serious Leisure, Secondary School, Education, Hong Kong

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## Introduction

Leisure has been recognized as a significant domain for adolescents' personal development (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Larson, 2000; Larson & Verma, 2003). The context of leisure is characterized by fewer constraints and more freedom of choice compared to other contexts. It also provides opportunities for experiences that facilitate self-definition, identity formation, fulfilment of the need for autonomy and exploration related to emerging adult years (Arnett, 2007; Kelly, 1983). These developmental needs could be facilitated especially when activity engagement is taken seriously by adolescents. The present study aims to investigate the existence of serious leisure in adolescents' choice and pursuit of their most important and interesting leisure activities.

The study is underpinned by the concept and construct of serious leisure which was developed by Stebbins (2007). Serious leisure is defined as: "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (Stebbins, 1992, p.3). The adjective "serious" represents qualities such as earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness. It signals the importance of the activity in participants' lives that eventually leads to self-fulfillment. Serious leisure is characterized by six distinctive qualities: perseverance, leisure career, knowledge and skills, durable benefits, unique ethos and identities (Stebbins, 1992). Perseverance refers to the need to endure in the activity, and leisure career implies that the activity may develop into a career in either leisure or work. Serious leisure participants need to make an effort to gain skill and knowledge and their leisure pursuit carry personal and social benefits. Serious leisure also leads to the development of a unique ethos around the activity and as a result of all the above qualities, participants tend to develop certain identities with their chosen pursuits.

Studies on "serious leisure" were conducted mainly among adults, including amateur and professional leisure participants and hobbyists (e.g. Elkington & Stebbins, 2014; Liu, Bradley & Burk, 2016; Kim, Dattilo & Heo, 2011; Gillespie, Leffler, & Lerner, 2002; Martin, Murray, O'Neill, MacCarthy & Gogue, 2014; Stebbins, 2001). These studies have demonstrated the presence of the six qualities of serious leisure across a range of activities, highlighting its contribution to participants' development. In contrast to the volume of studies on adult serious leisure participants, studies on adolescent serious leisure are scarce. These few studies have identified the characteristics of serious leisure among adolescents and young adults (Heo & Lee, 2007; Huang, Shin, & Huang, 2010; Spector, 2007) suggesting the contribution of serious leisure engagement to adolescents' personal-growth, development of coping skills and desire for lifelong learning. A recent phenomenological study on serious leisure among adolescents was conducted in Hong Kong by Siu (2013). The study revealed the impact that serious leisure pursuit has on the participants while providing them with opportunities to involve in goal-directed activities to acquire knowledge and skills, explore the self and form relationships with others within a context of effort and demand. Furthermore, adolescents also derived meaning from their serious leisure engagement which had positive impacts in their move into their young adulthood years. The present study aims to further contribute to the field of study on serious leisure among adolescents. It extends on this phenomenological study by conducting a large scale quantitative examination to explore more the phenomenon of

serious leisure as it is reflected in secondary school students' pursuit of their most important and interesting leisure activities.

In Hong Kong, students spend long hours in school and on homework and revision (Tam, 2009). At the same time their daily schedule is packed with extra-curricular activities and private supplementary tutoring (Bray & Lykins, 2012, P. X).. Empirical studies showed that the most popular reason for participating in leisure activities is "killing time" (Sivan, 2003, 2013), which relates to the phenomenon described in the local culture by the colloquial term "hea". So far studies on adolescents' leisure in Hong Kong have focused on activity type and satisfaction gained from activity participation (Sivan, 2000, 2011). While these studies portrayed the leisure participation profile of school students, they did not examine specific activities that adolescents regarded as most important and interesting and thus might have been taken seriously. The present study aims to explore the characteristics of these chosen activities and how serious leisure is manifested in their pursuit. The study has three research questions:

- (1) What are the leisure activities chosen by students as most interesting and important? Are there gender and school banding differences in this activity choice?
- 2) What are the reasons for students' activity choice and do those reasons differ across activities?
- 3) Are there differences between casual and serious leisure participants regarding their gender, school banding, activity types, frequency and duration of activity participation, and reasons for activity choice?

## **Methods**

### ***Sample***

The findings drew from 832 students attending Secondary 4 and Secondary 5 in 10 secondary schools. The 10 schools represented all three academic banding levels and all three main geographical regions of Hong Kong. The mean age of the sample was 16.85 years,  $SD = 0.93$ . There were 54% girls ( $n = 449$ ) and 46% boys ( $n = 383$ ). In terms of school banding, 405 were in Band 1 (48.7%), 149 in Band 2 (17.9%) and 278 in Band 3 (33.4%).

### ***Instrument***

Data were collected using a questionnaire administered to students on school premises during regular class periods. Necessary ethical clearance and schools' approval were obtained. Informed consent was sought from students before they completed the questionnaire to ensure voluntary participation.

The questionnaire consists of three sections. The first section comprises open-ended questions about students' most important and interesting leisure activity, reasons of choosing the activity, as well as participation profile. In the second section, the 18-item Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM) Short Form (Gould, Moore, McGuire & Stebbins, 2008, Gould et al., 2011) is used to assess level of serious engagement in the chosen activity. Each of the 18 items relates to a dimension based on the serious leisure concept. Respondents indicate the level of agreement on a 9-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The questionnaire was adapted to be used in Hong Kong by following the accepted procedures for adapting tests into multiple languages and culture (Hambleton, 2005). Cronbach's Alpha for this instrument was reported to be .90.

The final section covers questions on demographic characteristics including date of birth, educational background of parents and self-evaluation of academic performance.

## Results

Research Question 1: What are the leisure activities chosen by students as most interesting and important? Are there gender and school banding differences in this activity choice?

Students' chosen activities were classified into five major categories, namely sports, performance and fine arts, media-related, clubs and community work, and hobbies. The distribution of activity choice with respect to gender and academic banding is presented in Figure 1. The top three chosen activities are: sports, performance and fine arts, and media-related. A higher percentage of male students than female students chose sports as their most interesting and important leisure activity. A higher percentage of female students than male students chose performance and fine arts. Among boys, academic banding was associated with activity choice,  $\chi^2(8) = 33.20, p < .001$ . There was no significant association between academic banding and activity choice among girls,  $\chi^2(8) = 11.04, p > .05$ .

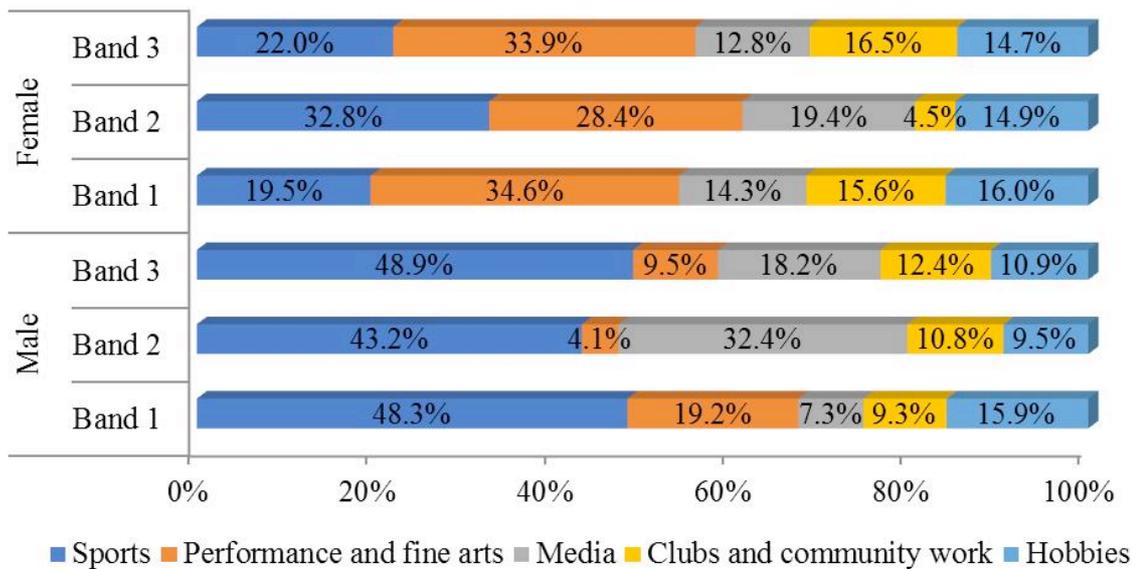


Figure 1: Distribution of chosen activities by school banding and gender (N = 832)

Research Question 2: What are the reasons for students' activity choice and do those reasons differ across activities?

We classified the reasons given by students to explain their activity choice into six major categories, namely psychological, social, learning, physical, spiritual, and money-related. Examples of reasons for each category are given in Table 1. Overall, the most popular reason was psychological (76.0%), followed by social (29%), learning (14.1%) and physical (11.2%) reasons. Spiritual and money-related reasons were hardly cited by the respondents.

Reason	Subcategory
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• enjoyment/relaxation/rescue from boredom</li> <li>• freedom/autonomy/self-actualization</li> <li>• competence</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• participation influenced by others</li> <li>• developing relationship</li> <li>• social interaction in the activity</li> <li>• giving to others</li> </ul>
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learning activity-related knowledge and skills</li> <li>• learning general knowledge and skills</li> </ul>
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• nature of the activity</li> <li>• benefits of the activity</li> </ul>
Spiritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• relating to belief and religion</li> </ul>
Money –related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• making money</li> </ul>

Table 1: Subcategories for reasons of activity choice.

The percentages of students citing reasons related to specific categories and with respect to specific activity choice are provided in Figure 2. While psychological reasons predominate across all activity categories, a substantial proportion of students choosing sports as the most interesting and important activity gave social and physical reasons. Students choosing hobbies favored learning reasons. The same is observed with students choosing clubs and community work while many of them also reported social reasons.

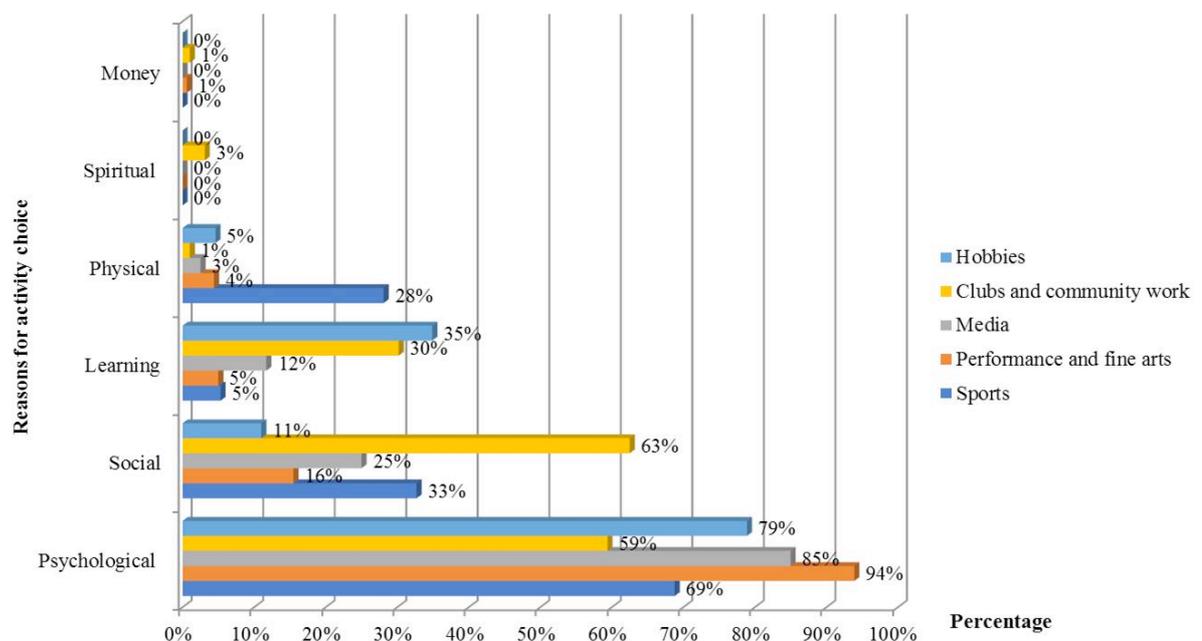


Figure 2: Reasons for students' activity choice (N=832)

In Table 2, we present the distribution of reasons for activity choice by gender. Our findings show that girls were more likely to report psychological reasons while boys reported more social and physical reasons.

Types of reasons	Gender	
	Male	Female
Physical	52 (13.6%)	41 (9.1%)
Psychological	279 (72.8%)	353 (78.6%)
Social	125 (32.6%)	116 (25.8%)
Spiritual	1 (0.3%)	2 (0.4%)
Money-related	2 (0.5%)	1 (0.2%)
Learning	48 (12.5%)	69 (15.4%)

Table 2: Frequency distribution of reasons for activity choice by gender (N = 832).

Research Question 3: Are there differences between casual and serious leisure participants regarding their gender, school banding, activity types, frequency and duration of activity participation, and reasons for activity choice?

To respond to this question, we divided the sample into three groups based on their reported SLIM scores. We then compared between the upper and the lower tertile groups ( $n = 267$  and  $285$ ), representing “serious” and “casual” leisure participants respectively, across gender, school banding, activity types, frequency and duration of participation and reasons for activity choice.

Table 3 presents the distribution of “serious” and “casual” leisure participants with respect to gender and academic banding. It can be seen that there were more casual leisure participants among girls than among boys. Among girls, academic banding was associated with leisure seriousness,  $\chi^2(2) = 8.63, p < .05$ . There were more casual leisure participants among girls from Band 1 schools than among girls from Band 2 and 3 schools. There was no association between school banding and leisure seriousness among boys,  $\chi^2(2) = .59, p > .05$ .

Gender	School Banding	% within Banding	
		Casual Leisure	Serious Leisure
Male	Band 1	55 (49.1%)	57 (50.9%)
	Band 2	25 (45.5%)	30 (54.5%)
	Band 3	39 (43.8%)	50 (56.2%)
Female	Band 1	100 (64.1%)	56 (35.9%)
	Band 2	22 (47.8%)	24 (52.2%)
	Band 3	44 (46.8%)	50 (53.2%)

Table 3: Casual and serious leisure participants by gender and school banding (N = 552).

The distribution of “serious” and “casual” leisure participants by activity type is presented in Table 4. We can see that there were more serious leisure participants among those students who chose performance & fine arts as their most important and interesting

activity than among students who chose hobbies and media activities,  $\chi^2(4) = 12.39$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Activity type	% within activity category	
	Casual leisure	Serious leisure
Sports	126 (47.9%)	137 (52.1%)
Performance and Fine Arts	68 (37.6%)	113 (62.4%)
Media	66 (55.0%)	54 (45.0%)
Clubs and Community Work	45 (46.9%)	51 (53.1%)
Hobbies	60 (55.0%)	49 (45.0%)

Table 4: Distribution of casual and serious leisure participants across the five categories of chosen leisure activity (N = 552).

The distribution of “serious” and “casual” leisure participants by the frequency of activity participation is presented in Table 5. It can be seen that serious leisure participants took part in their chosen leisure activity in a higher frequency than did casual leisure participants. More serious leisure than casual leisure participants got involved in their chosen activity once a week and once a day whereas, more casual leisure than serious leisure participants got involved in their chosen activity once or less than once a month,  $\chi^2(3) = 8.64$ ,  $p < .05$ .

	% within casual/serious leisure participation frequency			
	at least once a day	at least once a week	at least once a month	less than once a month
Casual leisure	65 (23.8%)	141 (51.6%)	36 (13.2%)	31 (11.4%)
Serious leisure	75 (28.7%)	148 (56.7%)	20 (7.7%)	18 (6.9%)

Table 5: Distribution of casual and serious leisure participants across participation frequency (N = 552).

Table 6 presents the distribution of “serious” and “casual” leisure participants by the duration of their activity participation. We can see that serious leisure participants took part in their chosen leisure in a longer duration than did casual leisure participants. More serious leisure than casual leisure participants engaged three hours or more in their chosen activity, while more casual leisure than serious leisure participants engaged less than three hours per week in their chosen activity,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.9$ ,  $p < .01$ .

	% within casual/serious leisure activity duration		
	less than 1 hour	1 to less than 3 hrs	3 hrs or more
Casual leisure	22 (8.3%)	165 (62.0%)	79 (29.7%)
Serious leisure	7 (2.9%)	136 (56.9%)	96 (40.2%)

Table 6. Distribution of casual and serious leisure participants across the activity duration (N = 552)

Table 7 presents the distribution of “serious” and “casual” leisure participants across the reasons they provided for their activity choice. We can see that a higher percentage of serious leisure participants than casual leisure participants cited psychological reasons for their activity choice. Also, a higher percentage of casual leisure participants than serious leisure participants stated learning reasons for their activity choice.

Reason for activity choice	Casual	Serious
Physical	34 (11.9%)	30 (11.2%)
Psychological	204 (71.6%)	219 (82.0%)
Social	77 (27.0%)	77 (28.8%)
Spiritual	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)
Money-related	2 (0.7%)	1 (0.4%)
Learning	50 (17.5%)	32 (12.0%)

Table 7: Reasons for activity choice among serious and casual leisure participants (N = 552).

## Conclusions

The present study shed light on the ways in which serious leisure is manifested in secondary school students’ choice and enactment of their most important and interesting leisure activities. It highlighted the types of students’ chosen activities, reasons for their choice and differences related to the level of seriousness of their engagement.

Students’ most common chosen activities were sports, performance and fine arts and media-related. Sports and performance and fine arts were identified as “transitional activities” that play an important role in adolescents’ development by providing a subjective experience of leisure in a context of effort and demand (Kleiber et al. 1986). Unlike activities which only provide spontaneous pleasure and enjoyment, sports and performance and fine arts activities entail discipline and require commitment which is part of adults’ activities (Kleiber et al. 1986).

The choice of sports as the most important and interesting activity is an encouraging finding in view of current leisure participation patterns of Hong Kong secondary school students. Previous studies (Sivan, 2000, 2013) have shown the dominance of sedentary and media-based activities with low popularity of active leisure participation. Our study indicated that the choice of sports activities was more popular among boys than girls while girls chose more performance art activities. This gender difference has been identified in previous studies both locally and internationally which revealed higher participation in sports among males (e.g. Sivan, 2013; McGinnis, Chun & McQuillan, 2003). These gender differences were attributed to different role expectations during adolescents and to benefits derived from participation where males tended to elicit personal achievement in sports while females search for more socializing opportunities and intrinsic motivation (Kleiber & Kirshrit, 1991; McGinnis, Chun & McQuillan, 2003).

Findings of the present study indicated that students’ choices of their most important and interesting leisure activity were predominantly driven by their psychological needs. They chose this activity for enjoyment and relaxation, for overcoming boredom as well as for

seeking their autonomy, self-actualization and enhancing their competence. Satisfaction of these needs is of an immense importance for adolescents' development. The importance attached to students' activity choice shows that their engagement in their serious leisure activity pursuit can potentially fulfil these needs. When examining the reasons for activity choice in relation to gender, it was found that girls were more likely to report psychological reasons while boys reported more social and physical ones. This finding could further explain the higher engagement of sports among boys as means for deriving physical and social benefits.

Further examination of activity choice in relation to school banding revealed differences in choice across different school banding. More Band 1 students chose performance and fine arts and hobbies than did students from Band 2 & 3 and there were more Band 2 & 3 students choosing media compared with those studying in Band 1. These differences could be related to the school's culture and contribution. Previous study on leisure education in Hong Kong secondary schools revealed the existence of several strategies that school used which affected students' leisure. These include enabling, facilitating and fostering ways such as giving talks on leisure use and offering extracurricular activities on one hand, and constraining strategies including overloading students with school work and emphasizing the need to use their leisure for study on the other (Sivan & Chan, 2012). It is likely that the choice of performance and fine arts and hobbies activities by students from the higher school banding represents a spill over from their school curriculum since they may have more facilitating and enabling factors to engage in these types of activities.

An examination of the leisure activity choice and pursuit across serious and casual leisure participants revealed differences regarding students' gender, school banding, activity types, frequency and duration of activity participation, and reasons for activity choice. There were more casual leisure participants among girls than among boys and the association between banding and the level of leisure seriousness was found to be significant only among girls. Furthermore, Band 1 school girls were more casual leisure participants than those from Band 2 & 3. Hong Kong education system is exam-oriented and students face heavy load and high demands from both teachers and parents (Tam, 2009). Engagement in casual rather than serious leisure activity may serve as a way to balance this load. One of the unique characteristic of serious leisure is its personal durable benefits which include: self-expression, enrichment, self-actualization, enhancement of self-esteem and self-gratification. Girls might have derived those benefits from other avenues such as academic study and school-based involvement. The higher participation in serious leisure among boys could be attributed to their ability to derive several physical and social needs mainly during their leisure engagement.

With regard to the activity choice, it was found that there were more serious leisure participants among students who chose performance and fine arts activities than among those who chose hobbies and media based activities. Performance and fine arts activities require effort, dedication and commitment and thus may lead to a more serious engagement. Studies on adults who undertook different performance and fine arts activities have identified the six characteristics of serious leisure while participants derived similar benefits from their engagement to those manifested in adolescents' leisure pursuit in the present study (Brown, 2007; Genoea & Liechtyb, 2016). Results of our study further showed that "serious" leisure participants took part in their chosen activity in a higher frequency and to a longer duration than did "casual" leisure participants. Time investment in their most important and interesting leisure activity which also satisfy their

needs is yet another indicator of the significance adolescents attributed to their serious leisure engagement.

Several practical and research applications can be drawn based on the finding of this study. For enhancing and supporting youth development, there is a need to recognize the role of leisure in adolescents' lives and its importance as a context for personal growth. One important channel for facilitating youth engagement in their leisure pursuit for satisfying their psychological needs is the process of leisure education of which schools play a major role (Sivan, 2008; Sivan & Stebbins, 2011). To ensure equity and provide equal opportunities to utilize leisure for personal growth, it is important that schools of all types and levels expose students to a wide range of activities, provide opportunities for their enactment and continue to facilitate students' involvement in serious leisure activities. The implementation of leisure education is timely and highly relevant to Hong Kong schools which have undergone massive reforms emphasizing whole person development and life wide learning (Sivan, 2016). The present study has contributed to the scarce research on serious leisure among adolescents' in general and specifically within the local context of Hong Kong. We recommend that more studies will be conducted using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine adolescents' meaning making of their casual and serious leisure pursuits across different sociocultural settings.

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