

Adult play and playfulness: A qualitative exploration of its meanings and importance

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how individuals flourish is critical to understanding adaptation to daily life stressors or the stress of major global and historical life events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The present qualitative study explored the meaning and functions of play and playfulness in the lives of adults. A total of 837 adult participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.52$, $SD = 6.28$) provided detailed answers to the question “*What does it mean to you to be playful?*” Using thematic analyses, five main themes emerged: A Positive Outlook, Activities, Relationships, Humor, and Experiencing Life. From these themes we propose that adult play and playfulness are ways of experiencing life that are often motivated by the experience of positive emotions, humor, and engagement in activities that promote relationships and that relate to positive mental health outcomes. Our findings show the integral role that being playful provides in adults’ lives and provide guideposts for future research on play and playfulness as essential strengths that enable individuals to thrive and make meaning and emotional connections with others in their lives.

Play and playfulness are a vital part of the human experience. Thoughtful discourse on play and playfulness has its roots in ancient history. Past philosophers and scholars across many fields have postulated theories about play and playfulness, its purpose, and meaning for individuals, culture, community, and well-being. Scholars have studied the evolutionary, developmental, neurobiological, psychosocial, sociocultural, and educational functions of play. Most research on play and playfulness has focused on early development in children and young animals (Fagen, 1982; Johnson, et al., 2005). As children grow and develop and transition into adulthood, the significance of playfulness is less well understood (Brauer et al., 2021; Proyer, 2014).

What is Adult Playfulness?

A growing body of literature on adult play and playfulness supports the conceptualization of adult playfulness as a personal resource and personality trait (Barnett, 2007; Brauer et al., 2021; Proyer, 2012b; 2017; Shen et al., 2017) that confers positive benefits for the individuals who possess them. One of the most widely cited conceptions of playfulness is that it is “the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment” (Barnett, 2007, p. 955; See also Proyer, 2017). Barnett (2007) arrived at this conception through research on focus groups of undergraduate students who first described characteristics of highly playful and non-playful people. Fifteen qualities were found to uniquely describe a playful individual, resulting in four component qualities: gregarious, uninhibited, comedic, and dynamic. Barnett’s research shows that individuals who have a heightened predisposition to be playful are typically funny, humorous, spontaneous, unpredictable, impulsive, active, energetic, adventurous, sociable, outgoing, cheerful, and happy, and are likely to manifest playful behavior by joking, teasing, clowning, and acting silly (Barnett, 2007). Another qualitative study by Guitard et al. (2005) led to a conceptual definition of playfulness in adulthood as an internal predisposition characterized by creativity, curiosity, pleasure, sense of humor, and spontaneity. More recent research on adult playfulness as a personal resource identifies the four factors of the OLIW model: other-directed, lighthearted, intellectual, and whimsical (Proyer, 2017).

Both qualitative and quantitative studies have helped to generate conceptions of adult play and playfulness and there are now a number of scales to quantitatively measure the construct. However, Shen (Shen, 2020; Shen et al., 2021; Shen & Yarnal, 2010) has argued that the prevailing trait approach often amalgamates the characteristics of personal attributes and play behaviors and correlates of play to form a sort of “catch-all” conception of playfulness. According to Shen et al. (2021), this approach has led to a ‘gallimaufry’ of conceptualizations of adult play and playfulness, a lack of conceptual clarity, and presents challenges in landing on clear interpretations of the role and significance of play and playfulness within and among individuals.

Despite the growing body of theoretical and empirical scholarship on adult play and playfulness over the last several years, still, it remains an understudied area (Proyer, 2014, 2017), and little is known about how adults themselves conceptualize play and playfulness in their own lives (Proyer, 2014; Proyer & Wagner, 2015; Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015). In a qualitative study, Proyer (2014) explored the *functions* of play in adults’ lives. Seven themes emerged: well-being, humor and laughter, mastery orientation, creativity, relationships, coping strategies, and coping with situations. More recently as part of their systematic, multidisciplinary qualitative review Masek and Stenros (2021) attempt to resolve ambiguity about the conceptualization of playfulness and arrive at several informative conclusions. First, in a linguistic vein, the term playfulness is synonymous with

playful but not play. Play and playfulness should be conceptualized as two related but distinct phenomena (Proyer, 2017, p. 3). These authors suggest that playfulness should be defined by how it operates as opposed to what it is (Masek & Stenros, 2021). To that end they suggest six themes that represent different forms of conceptualizing playful engagement that include: focused, openness, framing, non-consequential, non-real reality, and unconventional. The first three themes are thought to relate to how playfulness represents different methods of seeking engagement within contexts, and the second three themes relate to the contexts that may promote playfulness (Masek & Stenros, 2021).

Glynn and Webster (1992) suggested that adults' playfulness exists on multiple levels: as characteristics of individuals to interpersonal interactions to social systems. They articulate playfulness as "a predisposition to define and engage in activities in a nonserious or fanciful manner to increase enjoyment" (p. 83). Despite the plethora of conceptions and measurements of playfulness in adults, less is known about how this characteristic manifests in playful behaviors.

What is Play in Adults?

Existing definitions of play in adults have been equally varied. Whereas the activities associated with play in adult non-human primates have been extensively studied, play in human adults has not. Research shows that play is often social and common in immature non-human primates (Cordoni et al., 2022; Heintz et al., 2017). In research on play in adults it has been referred to as activity that is enjoyable (Ablon, 2001; Casado-Kehoe et al., 2007; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Lauer & Lauer, 2002; Terr, 1999), intrinsically-motivated (Betcher, 1981; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), spontaneous (Betcher, 1981), involves a focus on the process of the activity rather than end-goals related to the activity, requires a suspension of self-consciousness (Casado- Kehoe et al., 2007), and involves a non-serious approach (Betcher, 1981; Terr, 1999; Van Fleet & Feeney, 2015). Huizinga (1955) states that the compelling energy driving play may be the desire for "fun," but is much more than that (p. 134). As Huizinga has said "all play means something" (1955, p. 1).

The Current Study

Despite the burgeoning research on play and playfulness in adulthood, still little is known about the meaning of play in the lives of adults. The current study aimed to provide a contemporary qualitative analysis of adults' beliefs about the importance of play and playfulness as well as the role of play as a potential meaning-making opportunity for enhancing their lives and relationships. Our goal was to collect qualitative data and use Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2015; Nowell et al., 2017) to understand how adults conceptualize and describe the role of play in their own lives in order to draw some conclusions about the meaning and function of play for adults today. The overarching goal is to provide a foundation from which to create future psychoeducational interventions to ignite and encourage people to recognize the value of play in daily life and to take action to play more to improve mental and physical health outcomes.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were 837 English-speaking adults ($M = 23.52$, $SD = 6.28$). Our sample was predominantly female (88.05%). Self-reported race/ethnicity fell into the following demographics: African American/Black (13.52%), Asian American/Pacific Islander (1.33%), Asian (1.21%), Biracial/multiracial (1.70%), Hispanic/Latino (67.36%), Middle Eastern/Arab (0.73%), Native American/Native Alaskan (0.12%), White/European American (8.40%), and other (5.6%). Although the most recent United States census shows that 18.5% of the population reports Hispanic as their racial/ethnic background (US Census Bureau, 2022), this study was conducted at the largest US Hispanic-serving university in the nation. Therefore, the largely Hispanic student body is representative of the population in which this research took place. Socioeconomic status was measured on a Likert-type scale that ranged from an annual household income of less than \$4,000 to a high of over \$150,000 or more. The most frequently self-reported annual income categories were \$20,000-\$34,000 and \$35,000-\$49,000. This annual income is lower than the US Department of Household and Labor statistics national median family income for 2021 which was \$79,000 (Richardson, 2021).

Measures

Open-ended questions on play and playfulness

All participants answered a series of demographic questions (i.e., age, gender identification, household income, self-reported ethnic/racial background, general and comparative health, and medical conditions). They were then asked: *“What does it mean to you to be playful? In general, what is your definition of play and playfulness? Please provide in as much detail as possible what your definition of play and playfulness are.”* They were able to write as much or as little as they chose to. There were several other open-ended questions pertaining to play and playfulness but those were not analyzed or included in the present analyses.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through SONA systems, an online research scheduling and tracking system at a large public urban university in the southern United States. Additionally, participants were recruited through social media platforms where flyers were posted. All recruitment channels provided inclusion/exclusion criteria required for participation. Inclusion criteria were: (a) age 18 years old or older; and (b) competence in reading and writing in English. Participants who did not meet these criteria were excluded from participation in the prescreening questions in SONA systems and within the survey itself. After providing informed consent, participants were administered the scales as part of a larger study on the mental and physical health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was administered fully online through Qualtrics survey software. Participants recruited through the University were awarded research credit for participation. This study had IRB approval.

Data analytic approach

Thematic Analysis (TA) was chosen as it allows for the organic emergence of themes that are important to the description of the experience of play and playfulness in adulthood. The outgrowth of TA is to highlight the most salient constellations of meanings that exist within a qualitative dataset (Joffe, 2012). We anticipated that the constellations would cover the affective, cognitive, functional, and symbolic dimensions of adult play and playfulness. These constellations will give rise to specific themes. Thematic analysis allows researchers to systematically identify, organize, and develop greater insights into the pattern of meanings (themes) across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). Themes are patterns of meaning that are observed in the data, and that manifest in highly subjective content. These themes allow researchers to discover naturalistically occurring themes (inductive themes) that arise or emerge organically from the data. Specifically, we used deductive thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2015; Nowell et al., 2017) which is ideal for qualitative research due to its simple structure and methods (Howitt, 2010). As Langdridge (2004) points out, the coding process makes it easy to see emerging patterns in the collected data, which in turn makes it easier to establish the emergence of central themes for further analysis.

Thematic analysis consists of several stages. The first stage involved familiarization with the data. During this phase, a team of six research assistants read each answer to the target question from between 20 to 40 participants' data. Based on this first reading, each research assistant individually generated a list of descriptive words that represented ideas found across multiple transcripts. Following Braun and Clarke (2015) those descriptive words were then analyzed to determine commonalities in tone, theme, expression, content, and then combined into themes that were given a categorical code with a description of the theme and its manifestations, illustrated with several individual quotations as examples of the theme. Those thematic categories comprised the initial coding manual. The coding manual had 20 separate codes.

In the second phase, coders were trained on the coding manual and how to read and thematically analyze the content of the written answers to the target question. When a participant did not respond to the question they were eliminated from the analyses. The remaining 837 lines of data were examined. Each of these lines of data was coded separately and independently by two trained coders – primary coders. Primary coders generated between one and three categorical codes for each answer. Codes were recorded in the order of precedence or fit in describing the answer. Each of the 837 lines of data was then considered by a master coder who read the written answers and the two primary coders' categorical codes and assigned the final codes and ordered them in terms of salience/importance. When there were discrepancies, they were discussed in lab meetings with the coders and principal investigators analyzing and working toward consensus on the final codes. Frequencies of the codes were examined across all the data.

In the next stage, thematic refinement was achieved by analyzing the frequencies of codes across the dataset, the categories and their descriptors from the coding manual, and an examination of individual lines of data. When there were several descriptive categories that were similar, related, or shared common attributes and thus could be condensed into a more molar theme, they were combined. These molar themes were further examined by the research team and new more descriptive themes were generated. The frequencies of these molar themes were examined across the dataset.

Results

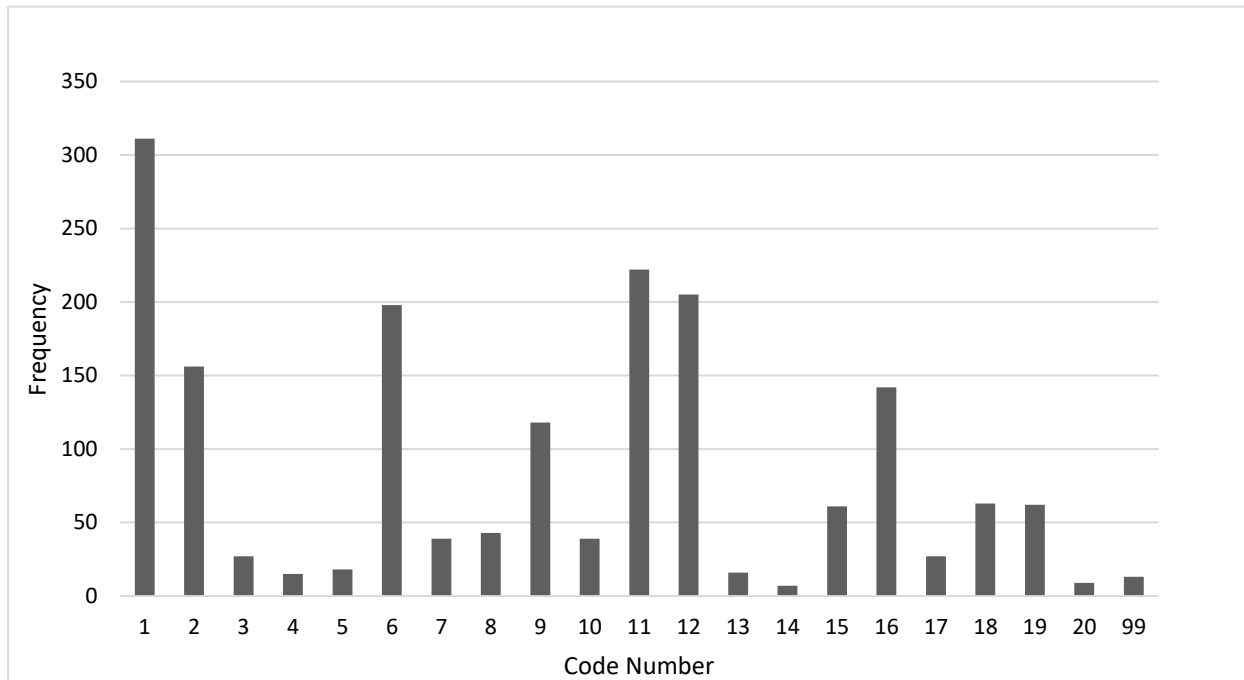
Table 1 displays the 20 codes that were used to thematically analyze the data at the primary coding stage, along with the frequencies of each code.

Table 1

Frequencies Across Thematic Codes

No.	Codes	Frequency
1	Positive Emotions	311
2	Way of Experiencing Life	156
3	Creativity	27
4	Mental Health	15
5	Social Norms/Others' View	18
6	Relationships	198
7	Self-Expression	39
8	Quality of Life/Positive Well-Being	43
9	Personality	118
10	Stress Relief/Way of Coping with Stress	39
11	Organized Activities/Hobbies/Sports	222
12	Humor/Laughter	205
13	Origin or Development of Play	16
14	Rituals/Habits/Methods	7
15	Willingness/Motivation to Play	61
16	Lack of Seriousness/Silliness	142
17	Intimacy	27
18	Childlike/Childish/As a Child	63
19	Feeling/Mood/Cognitive State	62
20	Altruistic	9
99	Coding Not Available	13

Figure 1
Frequency Across 20 Thematic Codes



As Table 1 and Figure 1 show, 37% of participants' answers to the question "What does it mean to you to be playful? In general, what is your definition of play and playfulness?" fall into the theme of positive emotions. Nearly 27% of the sample described playfulness as an organized activity, hobby, or sports. Humor and laughter were how 14% of our participants described playfulness, and nearly 24% also defined playfulness in terms of personal relationships. Other categories that emerged more frequently were playfulness as ways of experiencing life (19%), as a lack of seriousness or silliness (17%), and as an aspect of one's personality (14%). The least common categories that emerged were playfulness defined in terms of rituals, habits, or specific methods of play and playfulness as an altruistic tendency. The category of coding not available (i.e., #99) was used when the participant attempted to answer the question but the answer did not clearly express an idea or definition that could be coded.

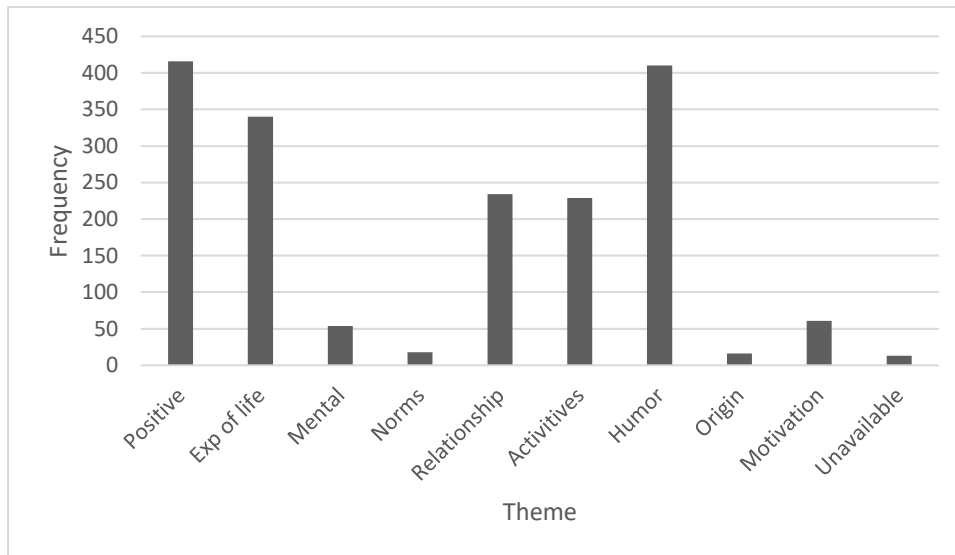
At the secondary coding stage, the 20 codes just presented were examined for thematic overlap. When categories appeared to be expressing similar, over-arching, or related ideas, respondents' answers were more closely examined. When the thematic overlap was confirmed the categories were combined into a molar or meta-theme. This allowed for us to hone in on more global themes that could be used to summarize more generally what play meant to the adults who participated in our study.

Table 2 and Figure 2 display these molar themes.

Table 2
Frequencies of Meta-theme Codes

No.	Codes	Frequency
1	Positive Emotions	416
2	Experience of Life	340
3	Mental Health	54
4	Social Norms	18
5	Relationships	234
6	Activities	229
7	Humor/laughter	410
8	Origin or Development of Play	16
9	Motivation to Play	61
99	Coding Not Available	13

Figure 2
Frequencies of Meta-theme Codes



At the secondary coding phase, 50% of the responses articulated playfulness as positive emotions, 49% as humor/laughter, 41% as a way of experiencing life, 27% as something associated with particular activities, and 18% as related to relationships. Although those categories prevailed from the primary to the secondary coding, several new categories emerged when primary categories were combined into meta-themes. Specifically, playfulness as a way of managing stress, dealing with negative emotions, or as a mental health coping strategy became more salient. Ways of defining playfulness as a motivation or goal also emerged, as did categories and responses that concerned the origin or development of playfulness.

The outcome of the secondary analyses was that we arrived at five molar themes that best capture how our participants think about, make meaning of, and experience play and playfulness. Those molar or meta-themes are: 1) positive outlook/emotions; 2) humor/laughter/silliness; 3) ways of experiencing life; 4) an aspect of

relationships; and 5) an activity associated with being playful.

One of the most valuable aspects of this qualitative analysis of the meaning of play in the lives of adults is derived from the way they described play in their own words. For example, the most frequent category across both coding phases was the articulation of play as a *positive outlook or reflecting positive emotions*. In the words of one participant, "To be playful means to be happy and full of energy. We are playful when we feel happy, playfulness is to see the light or bright side of life, to joke with other people, and not to take things too seriously in life, keeping a positive state of mind". Another person stated that "Being playful to me means maintaining a positive outlook on life and being open to trying new and different things. Being playful can also be having fun and expressing amusement". These quotes clearly exude the meaning of a positive outlook in one's life. Not only do they each incorporate the word "positive", but they also support positivity with examples.

Playfulness as a *way of experiencing life* is clearly captured in the following quotes.

"Stepping into an energy of playfulness, curiosity, and joy. Then anything can become play. Play is more about doing. Playfulness is more about being". Another person said, "Play is when I am in a flow state". And, for this person:

Playfulness is a lifestyle. It's a way of living and handling all situations. It involves approaching circumstances and tasks with a light spirit, finding the joy and fun, and turning them into a game if need be. It's invoking our inner child, the young self, that is innocent, joyful, magical.

In this instance, we've identified three quotes that exhibit playfulness as "a way of experiencing life" as a molar theme. They each describe a way of being which expresses, in our view, the "experiencing life" theme identified in the responses.

Playfulness as a *form of humor*, a way of being silly, and creating opportunities for laughter is illustrated in the following quotes. "To me to be playful, is to have fun, tell jokes, laugh, play games. Someone with a playful personality will be constantly laughing, joking, and goofing around". Whereas another person said, "Being playful means to joyfully and jokingly interact with self and others in an amusing way. My definition of play is to humorously entertain self or with others". While the second example specifies "humorously," the first quote incorporates aspects of humor including the telling of jokes and the response that this generates: laughter. The second example also acknowledges that humor can entertain oneself or others. This may convey the social and interactive nature of playfulness in relationship to oneself as well as with others.

Quotes that illustrate playfulness explicitly within *relationships* or interpersonal contexts are represented in this person's definition: "Play means to be able to join with one or more people who are your friends and make leisure time a fun game or moment". Here we can see the overlap with the category or theme of humor and

creating a light-hearted, silly situation that prompts laughter. The next quote explicitly discusses the role of playfulness within relationships: “Being playful is an attitude and approach in how a person engages with others, develops relationships, and maintains them. The attitude of playfulness is something that is modeled at an early age and in a way taught. Throughout an individual's life, they are given opportunities to cultivate this attitude”. In these two examples, while only one specifies “relationships” the initial example clearly depicts a relationship, whether with “self” or “others.” Both sets of relationships are important in understanding the role of play in adults’ lives.

The molar theme of activities was seen in quotes such as this one: “Play, to have fun enjoying activities that bring you joy”. Similarly, this person also states activities as a way to manifest playfulness: “To engage in lighthearted/fun/enjoyable activities, whatever that may mean for the individual”. These quotes specify “activities” and moreover, enjoying or enjoyable activities, a reinforcer to the concept in that not only activities, but enjoyable activities are what bring meaning to the experience of play and playfulness for these individuals.

As mentioned earlier, this data was collected during the first nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020 – February 2021. Although we did not explicitly analyze the data with respect to the pandemic, it may have impacted how people expressed what play means to them. This quote is an example:

I’m now rediscovering writing, reading fantasy books and have pledged to get back into improv and music once they start up again post COVID-19. I set up 2 small places to play at home. One is where I make my podcast, which I find fun, and the other is a crafty space with a window...Music is hardest to figure out how to get back to. I miss the flow feeling. But I’m an oboe player and singer. I need others to play with. Easier said than done.

In this quote the impact of the pandemic is both directly discussed and alluded to as well.

Discussion

In this qualitative study we explored what playfulness in adulthood is, how it is defined, and its meaning and importance to adults’ lives. Our findings demonstrate the varied ways in which adults think about playfulness within the unique contexts of their own personalities, relationships, and lives. Playfulness is encapsulated in emotions, and is highly related to feeling a positive outlook toward life and the experience of positive emotions. Playfulness is also a way that people manage stress, negative emotions “to let off steam”, and a way of coping with threats to their mental health. These findings highlight the important role that playfulness may play in the regulation of emotion (Gordon, 2014). As Yarnal and Qian (2011) suggest, “playful regulation” may be a form of emotion regulation. Playfulness has been found to elevate positive emotions and to help individuals to discover new coping strategies (Clifford et al., 2022; Proyer & Ruch, 2011). Playfulness has also been linked to emotional growth (Elder et al., 2003; Fredrickson, 1998; Moen, 2002; Yarnal & Qian, 2011). Our

findings demonstrate that in participants' own words and their own way of thinking about playfulness, it is meaningful and related to positive emotional outcomes. As Yarnal and Qian (2011) suggest playfulness may serve an important role for adults because people who frequently experience positive emotions build beneficial emotional resources and may become more resilient in the face of life's hardships (see also Cohn et al., 2009). Research also shows that specific emotions such as joy, contentment, interest, and love are particularly beneficial for positive emotional health and that positive emotions can be increased (Fredrickson et al., 2008; Seldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004; Yarnal & Qian, 2011). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, we suggest that an individual who perceives the experience and meaning of playfulness as being beneficial for generating a positive outlook or as a resource to assuage negative emotions, might be a person for whom playfulness and emotional health are intertwined. In a study of playfulness during the COVID-19 pandemic, Clifford et al. (2022) showed that individuals who were higher in playfulness showed greater self-efficacy for managing the perceived stress associated with the pandemic, and that in turn related to more optimal coping strategies. Other research shows that playful people have higher emotional intelligence (Holmes & Hart, 2022). It might also be suggested that within the context of psychoeducational and therapeutic contexts, helping less playful people learn how to play may be useful as a way to increase positive emotions and psychological well-being (Proyer et al., 2020; Yarnal & Qian, 2011).

Our findings also show that for a large number of adults in this study, goofing around, being silly, joking, and laughing are intrinsic to being a playful person, and being playful in these ways relates to the positive impact of playfulness on personal relationships. Our findings can be interpreted in light of Staempfli's (2007) and Barnett's (2007) findings that show that this form of playfulness is not only personally gratifying but provides opportunities to interact in positive and meaningful ways with others (see also Yarnal & Qian, 2011). There has been a good deal of research that has examined the role of playfulness in adult relationships, as a form of attachment (Mount, 2005), as a corollary to well-functioning romantic relationship (Proyer et al., 2018, 2019), a means of sexual pleasure (Brauer et al., 2022), and as a driver of relationship satisfaction (Brauer et al., 2022; Farley et al., 2020). In fact, Hannush (2021) states that "playfulness, humor, and laughter are corollaries of the capacity to love" (p. 375).

One of the unique contributions of this study is the emergence of playfulness as a way of experiencing life. One person said playfulness "means finding the playful side to things that happen in everyday life." Another said playfulness is "not overthinking, just being present in the moment." There were many other instances when participants described playfulness as a means to experience life to the fullest. According to Proyer (2014), individuals see a wide range of functions for playfulness in their daily lives. More specifically, Proyer was focused on the adaptive value of playfulness. He asked participants to think about different contexts such as

leisure time, work, interactions with work colleagues, romantic partners, and friends, and to answer the question “I use my playfulness for...” Findings from that study showed that the perceived functions of playfulness fell into seven broad categories: well-being, humor and laughter, mastery orientation, creativity, relationships, and two types of coping. Our findings are similar to Proyer’s (2014), in that the category of well-being relates to our category of positive emotions/outlook, and the category of mastery is similar to our theme of motivations for playfulness. The category of relationships was similar in both studies, as was the category of humor and laughter. Proyer’s category of coping strategies and coping with situations parallels our theme of mental health which included all references to play as a way to manage, adjust to, offset, cope with, or distance from negative emotions. Consistent with Proyer’s study our findings also relate to a recent study that showed that playfulness had a direct effect on coping with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic (Clifford et al., 2022). In his study, Proyer found that the most frequently cited function of playfulness was humor/laughter. In our study, the theme of humor/laughter was the second most frequently articulated definition of playfulness.

Despite some of the conceptual overlap among our categories, differences are also apparent. The main differences are the categories of creativity and mastery in the Proyer study, and the themes of ways of experiencing life and the origins or development of play in ours. We would argue that when people are left to their own devices to generate their own unique meanings of playfulness in their lives, they are more likely to generate existential and personally relevant content representative of the theme of “ways of experiencing life.” Research has shown that playfulness is associated with intrinsic motivation and life goals (Amabile et al., 1994; Proyer, 2012a, 2014) and we believe that our findings demonstrate how the intrinsic and existential meaning of playfulness becomes integrated into a way of experiencing life.

The themes that emerged in our qualitative study of adults’ definitions of playfulness converge with the results of a study that showed that adult playfulness was robustly related to positive emotions, engagement with others, relationships, activities with others, and finding meaning in one’s life (Farley et al., 2020), all of which are indices of psychological well-being. Thus, the self-reported conceptualizations of play in the lives of adults in our sample shine light on important aspects of well-being and the positive things that give meaning to life.

In summary, this qualitative study of adult playfulness used thematic analysis to reveal five molar themes: a positive outlook, activities, relationships, humor/laughter, and ways of experiencing life. When combined, these themes led to a contemporary definition of playfulness for adults: specifically, adult play and playfulness are ways of experiencing life that are often motivated by the experience of positive emotions, humor, and engagement in activities that promote relationships and are related to positive mental health outcomes.

In this study, we chose to focus on what is playfulness in adulthood and how it brings meaning and importance to adults’ lives. There are several limitations that bear mentioning. First, qualitative thematic

analysis is inherently subjective and deductive. As a consequence, there may be other ways of interpreting the written descriptions that participants provided to answer the question “*What does it mean to you to be playful?*” For example, individual answers included content related to concepts such as spirituality, energy, sexuality, bullying or making fun of, and other fascinating interpretations of the meaning of play. But because these ideas were not represented by more than a single or few individuals, they did not meet our criteria to become thematic categories. For example, one person stated, “For me, play is like sleep, apparently purposeless but vitally important – spiritual – where my brain goes to sort itself out.”

Another limitation relates to our sample, which was largely female, younger adults, and Hispanic. While this represents our student body, it makes it difficult to generalize from these findings to a more diverse population of adults. A final limitation has to do with the fact that the opportunities for play have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, many people who participated may have defined play differently from when they were able to move freely in the world without worrying about social distancing, facial coverings, and being in public and populated spaces. There is research that shows how the pandemic has influenced how adults play, and demonstrates evidence for greater use of digital platforms and less engagement in physical activity (Parker et al., 2021). It is likely that more research on play in the pandemic is coming and will shed light on how adaptable playful people are.

Understanding how adults, in their own words, think about the meaning of play and playfulness has been a fascinating exploration that will contribute to future research in the field. Several important lines of research became apparent as we immersed ourselves in this data. First, the importance of play and playfulness as psychological resources related to resilience in the context of chronic illness. There is some research that examines the impact of humor for adult cancer patients (Román-Oyola et al., 2022; Tanay et al., 2012) and some research that looks at play for children coping with cancer (see Sposito et al., 2015 for review). But little is known about the role of adult playfulness in other health contexts. Our findings shed light upon the meaning that play and playfulness can have and the ways that being playful can help people cope (Clifford et al., 2022). However, more evidence-based research is needed to inform the development of supportive therapeutic interventions that facilitate play to encourage positive emotions and coping. Additionally, psychological research on adult play and playfulness is growing, and scholars around the globe are looking at play within the context of different languages, cultures, and countries. However, as Shen et al. (2021) indicate, with this new global interest in play and playfulness comes a need for culturally-sensitive approaches that shed light on the meanings and functions of play within different cultural contexts. It is our hope that the findings from this qualitative study will generate future research on adult play and playfulness.

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