
Play Guilt Experiences Among College Students A Grounded Theory Investigation

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Using a grounded theory method, the authors explore the phenomenon of adult play guilt, or the negative emotions associated with the perception of being unproductive while engaging in play. They interviewed twenty-four emerging adult undergraduate students about feeling guilty when contemplating or engaging in play. The authors found that participants often experienced guilt as an internal voice urging them to do something other than playing, especially when their academic workloads were heavy. Guilt struck at different times (before, during, and after play) and could prevent play, or cut it short, or reduce its pleasure. Participants felt less guilt when they conceptualized their play as productive, or beneficial, or as a reward for hard work. The authors conclude with suggestions to improve the understanding of adult play and its import for healthy and fulfilling lives. **Key words:** adult play, emerging adults, college students, play and guilt, productivity, well-being

ALTHOUGH MOST RESEARCH on human play understandably focuses on its crucial role during childhood, it is nevertheless an important feature in all the developmental stages of life. A small but growing body of research underscores the value and importance of play for adults (Shen and Masek 2024). However limited, the early findings of such research have linked play and playfulness to various aspects of adult well-being, including positive emotion (Lee et al. 2022; Maynard et al. 2020), cognitive benefits (Zelinski and Reyes 2009), stress reduction and coping (DesCamp and Thomas 1993; Ocobock et al. 2020; Van Vleet et al. 2019), physical health (Proyer et al. 2018; Shah et al. 2017), and relationship quality (Baxter 1992).

For a variety of reasons, however, many adults find it challenging to incorporate play sufficiently into their lives. Adults often have significant demands on their time (e.g., higher education, employment, parenting, elder care, household chores) that can leave relatively little freedom or physical energy for engag-

ing in play (Schor 1992). Some, particularly those at lower levels of socioeconomic status (SES), may have limited access to play spaces (Shores et al. 2007). Commonly, negative emotional states can also prevent play. For example, work-related stress has been linked with difficulty in psychologically detaching from work, which can hinder engagement in leisure activities (Sonnentag 2012), and decreased gratification from engaging in activities that previously brought pleasure is understood as a major symptom of clinical depression (Beck and Alford 2009).

Another emotional experience that may act as a barrier to play among adults is the guilt surrounding it. For example, if individuals feel they should not engage in play because other responsibilities seem more pressing, or if they worry about being seen as unproductive, they may choose not to spend time playing, play less, not enjoy their play, or not derive its full benefits. Very little research exists on this experience of play guilt, but related recent works suggest that some adults do experience such guilt for engaging in leisure activities (Koo 2023) and have difficulty separating them from their adult responsibilities (Wang et al. 2025). In this article, we develop our understanding of play guilt through a qualitative investigation of the phenomenon among emerging adults enrolled in college. By probing the play guilt experience at a time and place in which increasing autonomy and increasing responsibility meet, we aim to illuminate relationships and patterns—concerning, for example, workload, timing, and type of play—and help guide future research on this understudied topic.

Guilt and Play

Most psychologists define guilt as an emotion caused by the violation of a moral norm (Carni et al. 2013; Tilghman-Osborne et al. 2010). For example, Tilghman-Osborne and his associates state that guilt is caused by “one’s action or inactions involving real or imagined moral transgressions” (536). While these transgressions—such as neglecting a friend in need—are often social in nature, they can also focus on behavior that is perceived to fall short of standards or expectations, such as not working hard enough (Tracy and Robins 2006). The particular cultural and societal norms present in an individual’s environment deeply influence which actions that individual deems transgressions (Carni et al. 2013). Regardless of the type of violation, feelings of guilt become associated with self-reproach and often result in intentions to behave differently in the future.

Play has many potential benefits, and we typically see it as a voluntary act

one engages in for the enjoyment or satisfaction it produces. Several reasons, however, explain why some might experience guilt concerning their play, such as injuring another player while engaged in a sport, choosing to play alone instead of with friends, or spending too much money on a hobby. The existing limited research, however, has focused on one particular form of guilt related to an individual's play or leisure, namely, engaging in play instead of doing something considered productive (Koo 2023; Panek 2014; Reinecke et al. 2014), even sometimes as a form of procrastination (Pestana et al. 2020; Steel 2007). Much of this research has focused on internet and social media use (Myrick 2015; Panek 2014).

Strong cultural norms and expectations around productivity and hard work, which some call the Protestant work ethic (Ghorpade et al. 2006), can promote feelings that time spent playing is unproductive, frivolous, or indulgent. Deterding (2018), in his study of embarrassment with play, summarizes the bind in which adults may commonly find themselves when playing: "The social meanings of play—unruly, pleasure-driven, free, and unproductive—disconfirm the valued social identity of being a self-regulated, norm-abiding, and productive adult" (273). Findings from recent leisure studies research suggest that holding a view of leisure time as unproductive or wasteful (Tonietto et al. 2021) or experiencing guilt for engaging in leisure (Koo 2023) can reduce the enjoyment one derives from it.

For the purposes of the current investigation, we define "play guilt" as an emotional state characterized by negative thoughts and feelings about engaging in play activities instead of doing something deemed more productive. Because playing may often conflict with societal pressures to be—or to appear—highly productive, the players may experience such play as a transgression, which makes them feel guilty. Understanding when and how—and under what situations—this play guilt emerges, as well as the consequences of feeling such guilt, constitutes a primary goal of our study.

Note that we label this experience as a form of guilt rather than the related emotion of shame because the latter tends to be more distressing and painful than guilt, and shame creates worries about being exposed and a desire to hide from social judgment (Carnì et al. 2013). We believe that, although feeling we should be productive rather than engaging in play may be unpleasant, we rarely experience this feeling as severely as we tend to experience shame. Consistent with this, in a recent study about the play lives of emerging adults during the COVID-19 lockdown, participants themselves occasionally described, without prompting, feelings of guilt about their play, but they never used the term shame (Maynard et al. 2022).

Play Guilt Among Emerging Adults

Emerging adulthood, the period between ages eighteen and twenty-nine, is a transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood marked by identity exploration, regular change, increasing autonomy, and imagined future possibilities (Arnett 2024). Play is an important domain in which emerging adults explore their identities and make their own decisions about how and with whom they spend their time (Maynard et al. 2022). However, daily life for college students is also marked by increasing academic demands, social pressures, and—owing to greater freedom—blurred lines between personal and academic time. These features potentially engender feelings of guilt surrounding play. For example, students engage in social comparison to judge how they are faring in their courses and how much studying they should do (Pulford et al. 2018). When comparing themselves to high achievers, they may conclude that they are not productive enough, which may in turn affect how they feel about playing. In addition, the ubiquitous presence of smartphones and other technology can create “continuous partial attention” (Shanmugasundaram and Tamilarasu 2023), with students constantly dividing their focus between tasks, incoming messages, and diversions (such as social media and mobile games) that can exacerbate tensions between schoolwork and play. In addition, emerging adults—unlike individuals in later stages of adulthood—are still close in time to their childhood and adolescence, when play was a regular feature of life and more widely encouraged by others. We need more research to understand how individuals in this transitional phase of life handle these changes in their play lives.

The Current Study

In the present study, we explore the novel construct of play guilt among emerging adults—how it feels; when and where it manifests; and how it affects thoughts, emotions, and play behaviors. Given the lack of existing qualitative research on this phenomenon, we used semistructured interviews to learn about our participants’ experiences in their own words and then employed a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2024) to identify the central themes and relationships associated with play guilt. This approach involves an iterative process of data collection and analysis that allows these themes to emerge directly from a close reading of the participants’ responses. As a result of this

analytical process, we aim to illuminate the contours and varieties of the play guilt experience for this population.

Method

Recruitment and Participants

The participants were full-time undergraduate students majoring in psychology or taking a psychology course at a midsized public university in New York state. They responded to a study announcement seeking individuals who had ever felt “guilty for engaging in play or thinking about playing” at least occasionally during the previous two months. Those who participated received credit toward a major requirement for research experience or extra credit for a course. We interviewed thirty candidates. Five we excluded from analyses because we found their interview responses shallow. Another we excluded who was not an emerging adult.

Of the twenty-four remaining participants, nineteen (76 percent) were female, and the remaining five were male. Participants ranged from eighteen to twenty-six years old ($M = 20.33$), and fifteen (58 percent), or slightly more than half, self-reported as Caucasian. Seventeen (71 percent) of the participants were psychology majors, with only four in other majors and three undeclared. Fifteen (63 percent), or roughly two-thirds of the participants, were employed, and these individuals worked an average of 12.5 hours a week.

The Interview

We used semistructured interviews to learn about participants’ experiences with play guilt. We created a semistructured interview guide intended to reveal participants’ experiences with play guilt. Prior to data collection, we conducted seven pilot interviews to develop further the interview guide and to increase our facility in conducting the interviews. The interviews began with demographic questions (i.e., ages, preferred pronouns, majors, minors, and student and employment statuses), followed by suggestions about what play might include, including several examples (“playing games and sports, pursuing a hobby, playing with a pet, dancing, or just approaching everyday activities with a playful attitude”) and a broad guideline for defining it (“If you’re participating in any kind of engaging activity mostly for the sheer enjoyment of it, either by yourself or with others,

it's probably play"). Our conceptualization of play as engagement in activities for the enjoyment they bring, rather than for some other purpose or benefit, is consistent with a number of definitions of play (Blanche et al. 2024; Kumar et al. 2022; Van Vleet and Feeney 2015), though other play scholars have focused on more specific features (Eberle 2014) or have used more narrow operational definitions of play (Ho 2022).

The main questions focused on the type of play participants engaged in, when and under what circumstances play guilt typically manifested itself, how such play guilt felt, how the play guilt influenced (or did not influence) their play, when play guilt began in their lives, and when play was free from guilt for them. Consistent with a semistructured approach, we generally followed the direction and flow of the conversation, choosing the order of the questions accordingly and following up with spontaneous probes to maintain rapport and fully explore the participants' most salient and impactful experiences. Given the potentially unpleasant nature of the play guilt topic, we concluded interviews with a positive prompt by asking the participants to recall and describe one of their favorite play memories.

We conducted the interview with each participant in a quiet, spacious laboratory environment. We used a microphone attached to a laptop running transcription software (Otter.ai) to record and create initial interview transcriptions. Five research team members, including the authors, were involved in the interviewing process. After each interview, the interviewer listened to the entire recording to make the necessary corrections to the transcription and wrote a reflection shortly afterward to note any relevant observations or insights from the interview.

Data Analysis

As we mentioned, we applied grounded theory to guide the process of data collection and analysis. Grounded theory is a qualitative approach that views data collection as a collaborative process between researchers and participants. Researchers are expected to learn from participants as data collection and analysis continues, acknowledge their own subjectivity, and challenge their assumptions. The iterative process of reading, coding, and comparing the data produces an emergent understanding of the phenomenon under study.

We began with pairs of research team members coding a small subset of interviews and comparing their codes to ensure acceptable consistency across coders. We then divided the twenty-four interviews among us to apply initial codes individually by summarizing line-by-line excerpts. We followed by applying

focused codes that refined initial codes into more abstract concepts we could apply across segments of texts and interviews. A different researcher from the one who conducted that interview served as the initial coder for each interview, and this researcher was in turn different from the one who applied the focused codes. Thus we ensured that all researchers became very familiar with the full dataset and integrated all the researchers' perspectives with each participant's data.

We employed two strategies to raise codes into categories and make comparisons among pieces of data, codes, and categories. First, once we completed focused coding, we created a set of tables containing categories and their related codes for ease of cross-referencing and merging overlapping codes. Second, we engaged in memo writing to reflect on the data and our deepening analysis of it. We used the memo writing after we tentatively completed data collection alongside a full rereading of all transcripts. This allowed us to continue to make connections and to check earlier assumptions. This process, in addition to regular discussions of our insights from these activities, resulted in a determination that we had reached the point of saturation and did not need to schedule more interviews. We then began writing the themes and categories. As Charmaz (2024) notes, in grounded theory, writing is a continuation of the analytic process.

Results

Participants were free to discuss any experiences or themes involving play guilt. Because most described their play guilt as tied to concerns about being productive, we have limited our focus in this article to these experiences. However, several participants discussed other forms of play-related guilt and negative emotions worthy of future study including embarrassment from engaging in child-like play, worries about the impact of their play on their relationships with others, and guilt about play-related spending.

We describe the participants' experiences with guilt about playing instead of engaging in what they considered more productive pursuits, especially—but not exclusively—schoolwork. First, we consider how play guilt struck the participants, the factors that affected the extent of the guilt they tended to experience, and when the guilt tended to strike. Second, we summarize the participants' beliefs about when and where they first began to experience play guilt. Third, we explore the various mental and behavioral approaches the participants used to reduce these feelings of guilt. We conclude by exploring the nuanced feelings

the participants shared about the presence of play guilt in their lives. We use quotes from the participants to illustrate these themes and refer to each participant by number within brackets. In quoting participants, we have made small alterations for clarity and coherence, most notably removing repeated words and filler words (e.g., “like” and “um”) common in casual speech.

The Play Guilt Experience

Most participants described play guilt as an internal mental voice urging them to be more productive, reminding them of pending tasks, or questioning whether play is a worthwhile use of their time. Many participants, independently but similarly, described this as a voice, a thought, or an internal monologue or debate in “the back of the mind” (or head). Several identified the feeling as a “nagging” one (e.g., “It’s like a little nagging thing in my head. I could hear myself, like ‘Oh you, put it down [their phone] and pick a book up, or your computer to study!’” [8]) or as a pesky itch (“I’ll just be doing something leisurely, engaging in play, but then I’ll feel like I shouldn’t be doing this. Like there’s that itch in the back of my mind” [12]). A few participants noted unpleasant physical sensations in their stomach that accompanied this guilt (e.g., “It’s a very harsh feeling. I feel tight in my stomach, like I need to get up and do something.” [4]; “For me, I just get a pit in my stomach” [22]).

Next, we discuss two factors that affect the strength of play guilt—academic workload and social comparison.

Academic Workload

Not surprisingly, many participants noted that play guilt more often occurred when they had pressing academic tasks (e.g., assignments to complete, papers to write, examinations to study for): “If I have assignments that I know [are] due, even if they’re due in a few days, I’m like, ‘I need to get that done.’ It makes me feel like I should be doing my assignments... it’s constant.” (6). This relationship was especially clear with higher-stakes assignments: “If it’s a final or something and I’m engaging in play rather than work, that’s definitely a bigger weight.” (17). Participant 8 describes how play guilt rose and fell with the amount of schoolwork over the course of a semester: “When the semester first started, I didn’t have that heavy of a workload. So it was easier for me [to play], but then as assignments started to pile up, and exams started to come, I was like, ‘Okay,

I probably should focus more on this instead of beating the *New York Times's* mini [crossword].”

As we noted, participants often felt less play guilt when there was a lull in the number of academic tasks requiring attention. For some, this may be in part because they less often used playing as a means of procrastination when their workload was light (e.g., “If I don’t have anything else to do . . . then I don’t really feel so guilty about [playing] than if I’m using it to avoid doing other activities” [1]) than during busier times (e.g., “If I have a paper, I’ll try to find anything else to do that’ll be something that is distracting and is grabbing my attention. . . . That’s when I would feel bad about it” [7]).

Social Comparison

Participants reported comparing themselves to other college students to judge their own balance between work and play. Observing (or imagining) productivity in other students tended to produce play guilt. The following participants worried that other students might be working harder or longer than they are, and they felt unproductive as a result: “Sometimes I feel like I’m the one out of place, not doing what I’m supposed to, like what [others are] doing. ‘Cause in my head, they’re using their time better than me, so I feel like I’m wasting my time” (4). Another added: “If I’ve been giving myself a break with what other people might not consider having done enough, even if I feel mentally exhausted, even if no one knows about it, just the thought [leads to] feeling unmotivated or feeling unaccomplished or like a bad student” (15).

Naturally, different students invest different levels of effort and time into their studies, and participants’ choices of comparison—such as a friend group or an imagined average student—affected their sense of their own efforts: “I think if I had more friends that slacked off, I would probably be more lenient with myself. I would probably participate in more play. But I do have a lot of friends that go to Ivy League schools that I don’t get to see too often. When I do hear what they accomplished, I’m like, ‘I have to get back into what I want to do’” (17). Or, as another said: “I’m the only one [in my friend group] without a job. . . . They have a job and they’re going to school, and they have their hobbies, and I just go to school and have my hobbies. . . . And it made me feel like I should have been more productive, like I should have tried harder to get a job” (5).

On the other hand, participants noted that when they saw their peers not working, including those with whom they were playing, they experienced less play guilt (e.g., “I feel less guilty about [playing] around other people, because

I'm not the only one not being productive" [9]; "If I was doing any of those [play activities] with a friend, I would feel less guilty about it, because they're also not doing anything" [18]).

Timing and Impact

After learning about participants' preferred play activities and the nature of the guilt they experienced, we asked them to discuss when the feeling struck and what impact it had on their play. The variety of their responses was striking, with no signature pattern of experience emerging. Most of them—nineteen (or 76 percent)—described feelings of guilt while actively playing (which we termed "concurrent guilt"), while nearly half—twelve (or 48 percent)—described guilt that occurred before the play they were contemplating (which we dubbed "anticipatory guilt"), and nearly half—eleven (or 44 percent)—discussed guilt that they experienced after the play ended (which we labelled "retrospective guilt"). A majority of participants reported feeling play guilt at more than one of these times and in various combinations. Next, we discuss the timing of participants' guilt and its effects. Figure 1 presents key quotes illustrating these themes.

Anticipatory Guilt

Participants described anticipatory guilt as arising when they contemplated play in the near future. Often, this guilt involved an internal debate about whether to play or to prioritize academic (or other) responsibilities. Anticipatory guilt led some participants to forego play entirely or to engage in it for shorter periods to reduce feelings of guilt.

Concurrent Guilt

Guilt often struck at some point while the participants were engaged in play, reflecting an ongoing internal tension between the desire to play and the pull of responsibilities. This guilt tended to intensify the longer they played, particularly after about an hour, while they often saw shorter sessions as more acceptable. As a result, participants frequently experienced diminished enjoyment of the play and sometimes decided to end their play prematurely.

Retrospective Guilt

Finally, some participants described feelings of guilt that emerged after their play

was over. This manifested in several ways, such as scolding themselves for not spending their time differently, general feelings of nonproductivity, or feeling the weight of responsibilities still requiring their attention. However, several participants made the point that they felt no guilt following the play activity, either because it was in the past (“Afterwards, I’m like, ‘Well, what’s done is done.’ You can’t really do anything about it” [14]), or because they recognized the benefits play provided (“Afterwards, I’m like, ‘Okay, this is actually worth my time.’ You know, I was able to relax and do something I like” [19]).

Perceived Origins of Play Guilt

Play is virtually ubiquitous in childhood, and almost no child feels guilty about playing *per se*. Among our participants, play guilt emerged when the individuals became aware of increasing expectations concerning them. Specifically, most participants framed their play guilt as the product of a pressure to be productive. Not surprisingly, then, most participants marked the onset of play guilt as occurring in adolescence or emerging adulthood, when these pressures became more salient. They attributed this onset to either increasing academic expectations as they reached higher grades or to broader familial norms concerning work, school, and play.

Academic Responsibilities

Many participants recalled the beginnings of play guilt as closely associated with growing academic responsibility. For some, this coincided with a recognition that their current efforts and academic performance in high school would influence their future opportunities in college and beyond. As one noted, “I started to realize, ‘Okay, my GPA is 2 something,’ and we started to talk about college, the [impact] that it can actually have and it’s not actually cool or funny to have a low GPA” (2). Another said, “That’s when I started to realize I’m getting older and I guess I have to prepare for college and do other things I want” (9).

For others, the onset of play guilt related more to an increase in responsibility and stress at the time. Some participants described experiencing play guilt when they realized that they had less time to play because of these responsibilities. As a result of a decreasing free time, some participants felt they had to prioritize these responsibilities over play (e.g., “I started to feel more of the need to do responsibilities and stuff like that instead of just playing” [1]; “It’s like

Label	Description	Participant Examples
Anticipatory Guilt	Guilt occurring when deciding whether to engage in play.	"Do you really want to play a video game? You have so much laundry to do, you should really start your laundry when you get back, and then maybe play your game. But finals are coming up, maybe we should look at what your assignments are." [20]
<i>Internal Debate</i>	Weighing whether play is a responsible choice.	"It's a[n] internal debate about whether I should actually watch the movie when I'm trying to decide what to watch, and I'm like, "Should I even be doing this?" Like, "Should I be doing homework, reading a textbook instead?" [5]
<i>Avoidance</i>	Choosing not to engage in play due to guilt or fear of future guilt.	"There will be times when I'll feel too guilty to engage in play... I'll be worried that I'll end up feeling guilty. So I'll just choose not to." [12]
<i>Limiting Play</i>	Reducing time spent playing to avoid guilt and responsibilities.	"Sometimes I'll work past 9 PM and then watch a shorter movie, or if my friends want to hang out, I'll only go get food with them and then go back to my dorm instead of hanging out." [5]
Concurrent Guilt	Guilt occurring while engaged in play.	"I'll be doing something that I usually enjoy, but then, I can't shake the idea that this is somehow wrong. I might not enjoy it as much as I normally would." [14]
<i>Internal Voice</i>	Persistent mental reminders of responsibilities during play.	"Almost anytime I'm trying to do something fun, it's just always in the back of my head where it's like, 'I have a million things that I should be doing right now.'" [6]
<i>Intensification</i>	Guilt intensifying with the length of play sessions.	If I keep it short, to like 30 [minutes], no more than an hour, then there's not as much guilt. It's kind of like, I'll just give myself a little break. But if it goes more than that, the longer it is, the more guilt that [is] associated to it. [20]
<i>Drained Enjoyment</i>	Reduced pleasure from play due to guilt.	"When I realize it and the guilt starts, I start to not like what I'm doing as much at the moment. Like, I want to stop because the guilt is getting worse." [4]
<i>Cutting Play Short</i>	Stopping play early because of guilt.	"I'll probably keep going for a little bit, but [the guilt] definitely would cut it short at some point." [18]
Retrospective Guilt	Guilt that emerged after play was over.	"A friend and I will meet up to study and we'll end up talking the whole time or engaging in other activities. And I'll leave that encounter feeling guilty, like I should have known I wasn't gonna do my work because we were just going to end up talking the whole time." [21]
<i>Regret</i>	Remorse for having played.	"I feel like I should have not spent as much time doing that." [9]
<i>Lingering Tasks</i>	Awareness of pressing responsibilities after play.	"The fun's over, now I have to deal with [my schoolwork]." [2]

Figure 1. Timing and consequences of play guilt

school and work full time so I'm trying to find the balance. I've never had to juggle both before. . . . Now I'm doing both, and . . . everything is harder" [8]).

Most participants who first noticed play guilt alongside increasing school responsibilities did so during high school or college. However, others recalled an earlier age for the onset—during middle school ("Probably middle school, about the time where I was like twelve, thirteen, when I started to get more serious about my responsibilities and what is expected of me" [11]; "Maybe eighth grade, ninth grade-ish . . . yeah, especially when grades became very important" [14]) or even earlier ("In elementary school, when I was starting to actually get homework . . . I would just want to play, and I tried to, but then I still got this feeling in the back of my mind that I just can't shake" [12]).

Familial Norms

Other participants reported play guilt as deriving primarily from family messaging. These participants did not tie play guilt to a specific age or time but instead described it as centering around strongly held values at home about the importance of hard work and education.

I also come from a family where work is the number one priority that shows your success over anything else. You need to be successful monetarily and support everyone else. And the only way to do that is by being successful in academia first (17).

I was brought up in a household that was very, very work oriented and to this day is still very much like "Why are you doing that, when you could be doing this?" So I feel like that's just kind of been implemented into me (6).

My parents are very focused on school. I don't want to say push that on my brothers and I, it wasn't like they forced us to constantly be doing work. It's more that they valued it. So they wanted us to value it as well, and I really internalized that (5).

In sum, whether the result of growing academic responsibilities or of broader values within the family unit, participants were nearly unanimous in describing play guilt as something that came from without rather than from within—that is, from external experiences, structures, and messages.

Navigating Productivity and Play

The central problem with engaging in play, according to many participants, was that it took up valuable time that could have been better spent on what they considered more productive activities such as schoolwork. As we mentioned, the voices in their heads often suggested that they were wasting time by playing. This occurred most often in the context of social media use (e.g., “After I finish going on TikTok or something, there’s really no by-product other than I wasted an hour” [17]; “[Engaging with social media] just feels like I’m wasting my life” [13]). Participants commonly considered video game play as similarly unproductive, but they expressed some interesting nuances depending on the context and content of that play, which we describe.

In contrast, many participants reported that they felt less guilt around play they could conceive of as productive, beneficial, or earned. Whether consciously or not, they employed an inventive workaround for the tension between the desire for play and the need to be (or feel) industrious (e.g., “It’s almost like, although it’s enjoyable and it’s purely for fun, I can almost view as if it was work. As if it was something like being productive” [24]).

Productive Play

Some forms of play, such as creating art, literally resulted in a product, a tangible object that the participant could point to as a result: “Definitely going on my phone [results in more guilt], because there’s really nothing else that I’m producing out of it. At least with painting, I’m creating something. I’m stimulating myself and then also I have a by-product of that” (17). Another added, “At least with art, I can justify [it], I’m creating something and engaging in a more creative activity. And that’s something to show for it. Whereas [playing] games is just purely enjoyment. There’s no real accomplishments [*sic*] per se to show for it” (24).

However, the object need not be physical to induce feelings of productivity. Several participants noted feeling less guilt when playing video games that involved creating, building, or bringing about visible changes in the game world as compared to games that did not include these elements.

Two participants discussed the game *Animal Crossing* in this way. As one said, “You give yourself little goals to accomplish, and that feels more engaging than doing something that is impermanent, like games where, once you lose the game, it just kind of restarts. And you don’t really accomplish anything. It’s just kind of something to fill the time” (15).

The other noted, “*Animal Crossing* definitely has less guilt [than *Call of Duty*]. Because it’s a game that you have this feeling of reward if that makes any sense, like you’re doing like hard work in the game. Like, you paid off a debt, you make an area look prettier, or something like that. That is a feeling of accomplishment” (20).

Beneficial Play

Participants also diminished the play guilt they felt by deeming the play good for them in some way. Such play took several general forms—namely, physical exercise, social engagement, skill development, cognitive challenge, and self-care. One summarized the perceived value of engaging in play that is simultaneously beneficial in one way or another.

[I’ll feel less guilty] if I can get something else out of that time as well. Sometimes that means being social. Sometimes if it’s a form of exercise, even if I’m doing it by myself, it’s like, “Well, I’m also getting this other thing out of it that I then don’t have to do later.” Like there’s this sort of added benefit, either developing skill, getting exercise, or being social, which kind of feels like I haven’t wasted my time. Where maybe some activities, where I do something a little bit mindless or don’t see as much benefit in it in other ways, I might feel a little more guilty about that (7).

Two others contrasted an activity they viewed as beneficial with playing video games. One said, “It’s a little bit easier for me to get a workout in than it is to play video games. . . . I think it’s because I feel like I am being more productive, you know, I am benefiting from it in a way that’s very visible to me” (11). The other added, “Doing something creative or a puzzle comes with less guilt because it feels more soothing, and it feels like more of something that would help with anxiety. But if I’m playing a video game, it’s pretty stimulating, so is it really helping with anything? Because my mind’s still going” (14).

Participants often saw some of their play as not only enjoyable but as a long-term investment in themselves that would pay off down the road. This included exercise, as we noted, but also reading for pleasure (“Reading, no matter what you read, is a good thing because you’re building up your language comprehension, you’re building up your vocabulary. . . . I still feel less guilty about that because of the benefits” [5]; “If I was reading, I don’t really think I would feel guilty about that, because I’m enriching my brain in some way” [8]), and voluntarily learning

new skills (“Probably the least amount of guilt [is with learning shorthand, which they identified as a form of play for them] because... I will view it as an investment of my time, because it’s something that, once I do start getting good with it, I can implement it into school. I’m gonna be in school for a couple more years at least, so it’s something I know overall kind of helps me” [24]).

Finally, participants tended to see social play as beneficial and feel less guilt when playing with others as compared to solo play (“I know that community is important. And I love hanging out with my friends, I enjoy it a lot. So I don’t feel as guilty about it as I do with movies, which is usually a solo activity for me” [5]). This comes in part from fulfilling a fundamental need to be social while also engaging in play (“I find that I’m probably less guilty when doing that sort of [social] stuff because it involves other people. I’m kind of killing two birds with one stone: I get to hang out with my friends, and I also get to have fun doing this thing” [7]). In addition, some participants noticed that when they play with friends, the voice in their head seemed less present (“I feel more able to enjoy myself around other people, whereas when I’m by myself there’s more internal monologue” [15]; “When I’m around other people, I’m constantly talking to people so I’m not really thinking about [being productive] as much as I would if I’m by myself” [9]).

Earning Play

Many participants ascribed feelings of guilt concerning their play (or the lack of them) to an assessment of whether they felt they had earned the play by working first (e.g., “I kind of view play as something that I guess is a rewarding experience, and I don’t deserve it unless I’ve done what I have to do” [11]). For example, some felt free to enjoy play without feeling guilty about it at the end of a day with busy school or work schedules (“If it’s a Thursday, which are my busiest days, I’m like, ‘Oh, it’s okay that I’m engaging in this play because I had three classes and I had work at five o’clock and I had all these other things” [21]). Other times, earning play meant voluntarily spending time on school tasks or knocking something significant off their to-do list: “I think the moments where my play is least associated to guilt is when there’s been a big accomplishment. It’s like I finished the semester, got good grades, everything wrapped up, and there’s nothing more for me to do right now. So now I get a nice reward to just spend time playing and engaging in stuff” (24). And sometimes they associated playing first before completing pressing work with more guilt (“I will engage in play anyway and feel guilty for it, even though I know I’d have

more enjoyment if my work was done, because then it would feel like ‘Oh, you’ve earned this’” [15]).

For many participants, then, a work first, play later approach to structuring their activities resulted in feelings of accomplishment and protected against play guilt. As a result, some participants actively used play as a reward to be claimed after being productive in their course work or elsewhere (“I always like to [do] everything I have to tend to first, and then do what I want later. Then I’m not guilty if I’ve already done everything I have to do for the day” [4]; “[I’ll] study for two hours and then I’ll treat myself to *New York Times* games or playing with my dog” [8]). One participant said her self-imposed play reward system allowed her to build more play into her life and yet experience less guilt when playing: “I think a step that I’ve taken is looking at it ‘reward style.’ It’s helped me because prior to taking those steps, I’d be so focused on ‘you could have been more productive’ that I leaned into the guilt a lot. But when I started looking at it as reward style, it did help because [before] I would be like, ‘There’s no space in your life, in your schedule, for playing,’ and that’s not sustainable” (21).

Views About Play and Guilt

We conclude by describing how participants view the role of play and play guilt in their lives. Participants tended to report mixed rather than purely negative feelings about the guilt they felt concerning their play. This surprised us, not only because they consistently described the guilt experience as negative but also because of their positive attitudes toward most play. In addition to the specific benefits we have noted they felt, participants saw play’s value as a break or an escape from life’s responsibilities, its ability to alleviate stress and anxiety, and its crucial role in overall well-being.

I definitely value it a lot. I think it’s very important, because with school and work and stuff, there is a lot of stress and a lot of responsibility to build up a lot, and play—art or video games—is definitely a great way to ease the mind and take some of that stress off (24).

[Play]’s definitely important, or you probably lose your mind because you’d be too wrapped up in the other stuff, productive stuff that can really put a toll on you mentally, physically. So it’s good to have those

times where you're kind of mentally checked out from those [things], whether it's work, school, being a mom . . . just letting go of those things and engaging in whatever (2).

I don't think that everyone can be doing things all the time, and it's probably good to not do that . . . just doing things I enjoy, it makes me feel good. I feel like if I didn't have that in my day, it would be a lot worse (18).

Nevertheless, they acknowledged that play guilt has functional value as a motivating force and as a way to prevent them from playing too much and shirking their responsibilities.

[Play guilt is] natural and normal, and you should feel it, and if you didn't, it would probably be bad, I guess. Because then you would engage too much in the play activities as opposed to what is more beneficial or more productive (2).

In a way I kind of view it as a positive thing because it does push me to spend less time in play and more time in other activities that I think are just important for me personally. When there's more feelings with guilt, I do spend less time with video games or art (24).

Still, participants noted that the self-regulatory benefits are often accompanied by emotional distress.

I feel like [play guilt] also has like a negative effect. Like I don't have to talk to myself like that. . . . I feel like a part of it is good. But there's probably healthier ways to go about being attentive to your work and stuff like that (4).

I do think some amount of guilt is healthy. And I think it does help me stay on task. But at the same time, I have issues with anxiety. So I tend to kind of make the guilt a bigger issue than it has to be and it becomes just a big problem sometimes (11).

In short, our participants simultaneously recognized the importance of

play in their lives and the functional yet complicated role that guilt has in keeping them from falling behind in their schoolwork and other responsibilities.

Discussion

The current study contributes to the literature on adult play and strengthens the limited research about guilt associated with leisure. A significant majority of our participants connected the experience of play guilt to concerns about productivity, though a few of them described other forms of guilt (e.g., those associated with child-like play and play that affected social relationships). Most participants described play guilt as emerging initially from growing academic expectations, although some described the influence of values surrounding work and play in their families. This guilt often manifested as a nagging or distressing voice in the back of their minds. The timing of play guilt varied widely, from anticipatory guilt that occurred before play began and could prevent play entirely, to concurrent guilt that could reduce enjoyment or cut play short, to retrospective guilt after finishing play. In terms of contextual factors, play guilt tended to be more prevalent or extreme when participants had greater academic (or other) responsibilities, when they perceived that their peers were working harder than they were, or when they engaged in solo rather than social play. On the other hand, participants managed to relieve or avoid guilt when the play in which they engaged was framed as beneficial, productive, or earned.

Overall, our findings suggest that, among emerging adults attending college, worries about being sufficiently productive can result in feelings of guilt concerning play. Similar findings have been recently reported with respect to rest and leisure more broadly (Koo 2023; Wang et al. 2025). One challenge for college students is that many of their academic responsibilities—studying, writing papers, working on projects, or preparing for exams—must be completed during unstructured time. Our participants frequently noted that play guilt was more prevalent when there were more academic demands on this time (such as during finals). But even at less busy times, they had regular schoolwork they could be doing instead of engaging in play. This may make play guilt especially salient for an emerging adult in college as compared to other times and situations, such as the clearer boundaries between work and non-work after graduation, and when they find jobs with set hours, for example. Future research is needed about the relative prevalence and significance of play guilt across the many phases of adulthood.

In addition to being a direct and unpleasant emotional experience, play guilt also has the potential to prevent play or to sap pleasure from playing. Our participants' relationship with play guilt was nuanced. They acknowledged that it was helpful insofar as it kept them from shirking their academic work, but they also noted its harmful effects (e.g., reducing play quantity or quality, decreasing well-being). Incidentally, this experience of play guilt as simultaneously adaptive and maladaptive mirrors some theorizing about the emotion of guilt more broadly (Tilghman-Osborne et al. 2010). Furthermore, the effects of guilt on play described by our participants are consistent with past research linking other negative mental states—such as stress or negative affect—to decreased play fulfillment in adults. Because engaging in play has been associated with positive physical, psychological, and social outcomes, productivity-related guilt should be considered a potential barrier to play that may have negative consequences for an individual. Thus, we encourage future investigation into how it originates, the contextual factors that affect when and how it is experienced, and its effects on play behavior and emotional states.

Our results suggest that our choice of play activity may affect the degree to which we experience guilt. For example, activities that had physical benefits (e.g., sports and exercise), promoted skill development (e.g., playing an instrument), provided mental engagement or challenge (e.g., reading) or resulted in a tangible product (e.g., painting) seemed less likely to be associated with guilt by our participants. They also noted that solo activities tended to induce guilt more than those undertaken with friends or others. This may be in part because social play satisfies our basic human need to belong (Vella et al. 2019). Indeed, being deprived of social play can be emotionally painful (Maynard et al. 2022).

However, play guilt may be less about the social context of the play (note that the play activities we mentioned above are frequently pursued alone) and more about whether it feels like a good use of time. Our participants who noted repeatedly spending time on social or traditional media and playing video games were in particular prone to feeling guilty, and this is consistent with other research findings. Wood and his associates (Wood et al. 2007) found that nearly all video game players experienced time loss at least occasionally while playing, and this experience was sometimes accompanied by guilt or at least the sense they could have done other things with their time. Koo (2023) asked university students to identify the leisure activities they felt the most guilty about as a waste of time; the most commonly reported activities involved being on social media and watching video content (whether watching television, using streaming ser-

vices, or visiting social media sites like YouTube and TikTok). Such activities may be more likely to induce feelings of guilt for several reasons. They are often (but not always) relatively passive, and their consumption or engagement with them can often continue for longer than originally planned (Ytre-Arne et al. 2020).

Together, the results from our study and others suggest potential strategies for reducing or preventing play guilt, including consciously choosing play activities that feel fulfilling and beneficial, building healthy habits around passive media consumption (e.g., setting time limits), and reminding ourselves of the importance of play to the well-lived life. There are many challenges to employing such strategies. For example, passive entertainment is easier to fit into a busy day and does not require scheduling with others, but more active pursuits may feel beyond our capacity when we are tired or stressed. Given this, one valuable avenue for future research involves the development and evaluation of interventions promoting healthy play habits that help adults find enough rewarding play in their lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our sample, while appropriate to the goals of the current investigation, was limited in several ways. First, our focus on college students' experiences was useful because emerging adults in college are in a significant transitional phase of life marked by both new opportunities for growth and exploration but also increasing responsibilities and demands on their time. However, other adults (either noncollege young adults or older adults) are likely to have unique sets of challenges regarding the role of play in their broader lives (such as responsibilities at work, home ownership, and the care of children, parents, or others). Although recent research supports the notion that adults of various ages experience productivity-related guilt for leisure more generally (Koo 2023), we do not yet have a clear view of the landscape of play for many adults—its contours, joys, and structural and emotional challenges—and future research on play guilt in these other populations would deepen our understanding of the varieties of the adult play experience.

Second, in our recruitment materials, we explicitly sought participants who experienced play guilt at least occasionally in the recent past precisely to explore these experiences. It is possible that some college students do not experience much if any play guilt. We encourage future research investigating both the baseline prevalence of play guilt in this and other populations as well as dispo-

sitional and situational factors that predict whether or how severely some experience guilt in their play lives. For example, findings from the current study suggest that personality (such as tendencies toward anxiousness) or a home environment that prioritizes hard work may promote feelings of play guilt during emerging adulthood.

Third, we drew our sample from a mid-sized public university in the northeastern United States, and our participants' experiences with play guilt may be distinct from those in different academic settings or cultures. For example, individualistic cultures are thought to be associated with lower levels of guilt related to family and communities (de Groot et al. 2021). Other research has uncovered cultural differences in orientation toward work and productivity (Furnham et al. 1993; Woehr et al. 2007) as well as play engagement (Pang and Proyer 2018). Thus, the nature of play guilt may vary culturally based on the relative value of various human endeavors for those cultures.

Fourth, in describing their play lives and experiences with guilt, our participants primarily focused on concrete forms of play (e.g., playing games, engaging in creative activities, consuming media) rather than more subtle ways of incorporating play into daily activities and interactions, such as engaging in verbal banter with friends or adding a playful element to a household chore. When prompted to discuss the types of play in which they engage, the participants understandably focused on specific play-centric endeavors. As a result, our findings do not provide much insight into the relationship between a playful approach to daily activities and interactions and the experience of play guilt. Because injecting playfulness into our day takes little time, it may provide some of play's benefits, such as well-being and satisfying friendships (Proyer et al. 2021), without prompting concerns about being insufficiently productive. Future research should explore the potential benefits and limitations of such playful actions.

Finally, there are many ways for adults to play and many reasons for choosing to engage in that play—to fulfill an intrinsic desire, to relax, or to develop and maintain social relationships. One's motivation for playing may steer a player toward certain activities, and both intention and action may affect the positive or negative outcomes that result. And it is even possible that some play simultaneously provides benefits and causes complications. For example, media consumption and casual games, because of their ubiquity and capacity for immersion, may often provide us a way to alleviate stress and escape from work and other responsibilities. Such detachment has been shown to be important to

prevent rumination and support well-being (Sonnentag 2012; Sonnentag and Wiegmann 2024). However, our findings suggested that participants in the current study commonly experienced guilt when engaging in these kinds of activities, because they were often unable to reframe them as productive or beneficial. Additionally, it is worth investigating whether being intentional in our decisions about what to play, for how long, and for what purpose—that is, a kind of mindfulness around play—is by itself sufficient to tap play’s potential benefits while protecting against negative emotions such as guilt. Research approaches such as daily diary studies could test such possible linkages between play intentions, actions, and outcomes.

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