



Social representations of pleasure in gambling among young adults: Between *homo ludens* and *homo economicus*

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Abstract

Pleasure is one of the main reasons many young adults are interested in gambling. While several studies have highlighted the relationship between gambling and pleasure and how it is most related to motivation to gamble, very few have explored the meaning of pleasure in the gambler's experience. The purpose of this paper is to understand the meaning of pleasure in the relationship between young adults and gambling by studying the social representations of this concept. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 young adults aged 18 to 30 who had been gambling in the past year. An analysis of the representations in light of the social, economic, and political contexts within which the relationship to gambling is constructed leads us to suggest an analysis of the relationship to pleasure with gambling as (1) an expression of neoliberalism's values and principles, and (2) a ludic experience on the margins of neoliberal ideology. More broadly, these relationships to pleasure are part of two conceptions of the human being: *homo economicus* and *homo ludens*, or a hybrid of the two. The findings are discussed in light of these representations of pleasure, which appear to be exploited by the gambling industry to serve its financial interests.

Keywords

pleasure, gambling, consumption, social representations, qualitative research

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Introduction

In 2023, the gambling industry's revenues were estimated at US\$540.3 billion worldwide (The Business Research Company, 2024). Revenues generated from taxation systems, state-owned companies, etc., contribute to the financial health of states where gambling is legal. However, studies have shown that the financial and social costs (healthcare, welfare benefits, criminal justice, etc.) of legalised gambling could outweigh the strictly economic benefits (Bhattacharjee et al., 2023; Fiedler, 2018). Despite its contribution to the public finances, this industry is the source of significant harm to individuals and societies. Not everyone is equal when it comes to the risk of experiencing harm. In this regard, young adults appear to experience more harms related to their gambling habits than the general adult population (Nowak, 2018). In the context of a neoliberal consumer society in which gambling is commercialized as a product symbolically associated with pleasure (Barmaki, 2010; Reith, 2004, 2007) and where young adults are among the populations most targeted by these marketing strategies, this is cause for concern (McGrane et al., 2023).

To date, little has been done to understand the experience of pleasure provided by gambling, as well as its meaning and role for young adults, contrasting with the plethora of harm-related studies (Edgerton et al., 2015; Scholes-Balog et al., 2016). Understanding the experience and perception of pleasure associated with gambling could lead to tailored harm reduction strategies for this population, specifically in terms of gambling marketing. As such, this study focuses on the experience of pleasure, and more specifically on the social representations of pleasure among young adult gamblers.

Pleasure in gambling or the product of a neoliberal consumer society

The relationship to gambling has evolved over time to become described in recent decades as a "pleasurable commodity" (Race, 2009: 67) within a neoliberal consumer society itself oriented towards the pursuit of pleasure (Kingma, 1997): "In such societies, the expansion of consumerism elevates the principles of choice, leisure and pleasure to organizing features of modern life" (Reith, 2013: 724). It is through this kind of relationship to consumption that gambling symbolically becomes "a direct way of converting money into a pleasurable experience. Gambling games have won legitimacy in, and have become part of, consumer culture" (Kingma, 1997: 173). Furthermore, in jurisdictions such as Canada where the gambling offering is managed by state-owned companies, gambling has even become a "state-mediated pleasure," i.e., a pleasure whose commercialization benefits the state (Cormack and Cosgrave, 2021). The relationship to gambling as an object of consumption is thus part of a consumer ethic that values pleasure through risk-taking, hedonism, instant gratification, and living in the moment (Reith, 2007). Just as the sovereign neoliberal consumer, the gambler-consumer is seen as autonomous, free-willed, rational, and responsible for their own well-being and future (Reith, 2007).

The gambling industry has expanded rapidly since the end of the 20th century. The gambler-consumer is exposed to a commercial offering whose discourse, widely disseminated, is shaped by the injunctions of a neoliberal consumer society where pleasure is symbolically associated with wealth, power, success (Barmaki, 2010), hedonism (Reith, 2004; Barmaki, 2010), competition (Bedford, 2021; Nicoll, 2022; Young, 2010), risk-

taking (Bedford, 2021; Young, 2010), and instant gratification (Cosgrave and Klassen, 2001; Reith, 2004). Yet, studies show that young adults are particularly receptive to this type of discourse (McGrane et al., 2023; Wardle et al., 2022), which generally ignores the potential risks and harms associated with this activity (Parke et al., 2015), even portraying it in an extremely positive image.

Gambling, pleasure, and young adults

Similar to their relationship to substance use, the adoption of gambling behaviour in young adults is being more studied from the perspective of the propensity for exploration, risk-taking, and thrill-seeking from a developmental perspective (Edgerton et al., 2015; Scholes-Balog et al., 2016). Similarly, the notion of pleasure in the field of gambling is often investigated empirically through the individualizing prism of motivation (Flack and Stevens, 2018). To this end, Brown and Juhlin (2018) remind us that the definition of pleasure is too often reduced to a “mental event that varies only in intensity and is the opposite of pain. [...] It reduces pleasure to an event in the brain—a mental experience that has a concurrent physical event in the brain” (p. 49). However, pleasure is culturally and socially situated: “Pleasure in its richest form, then, is something embedded in and produced by the rich cultural and social world we find ourselves in” (Brown and Juhlin, 2018: 54). This tendency towards a one-dimensional, psychologizing conception of pleasure in the field of gambling limits the exploration of its diversity (Brown and Juhlin, 2018) and restricts in-depth understanding of its experience, particularly with regard to the wider environment in which it is constructed and manifested. The experience of pleasure must also be examined in the social, economic, political, and historical contexts in which it is situated (Savard et al., 2022). This means taking into account the structural variables outlined above in shaping the association between pleasure and gambling in light of a neoliberal consumer society. Although, a few studies have documented how the concept of pleasure echoes the political, economic, cultural, and social contexts in which it is embedded (Nicoll, 2019; Reith, 2013), these are more in the realm of theoretical reflection, leaving the subjective experience of pleasure in a peripheral position.

This study looks at how the discourses conveyed within a neoliberal consumer society contribute to shaping the experience of pleasure among young adult gamblers. How do these discourses contribute to the construction of meaning in the gambling experience? To answer these questions, this study aims to explore young adults’ social representations of the concept of pleasure in their relationship to gambling. Their accounts help to empirically anchor the hitherto largely theoretical reflections surrounding the concept of pleasure in gambling.

Theoretical framework: The theory of social representations

A social representation is an organized, dynamic, and evolving set of information, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs shared by members of a group of actors who share a common social position on a specific object. It is constructed within a social, economic, political, and ideological context and is rooted in the cultural and normative referents of this social group, in this case, young adults engaging in gambling (Moliner and Guimelli,

2015; Moscovici, 1961). It is therefore a system of meanings constructed at the intersection of interactions between individuals as well as with institutions, and the discourses conveyed through words, messages, and images disseminated in the social space (Jodelet, 1989). For example, the construction of young adults' social representations of pleasure in gambling is likely partly influenced by the discourses surrounding pleasure in gambling driven by gambling operators through strategies such as advertising. Likewise, the ideas about pleasure conveyed within a neoliberal consumer society are also likely to shape the construction of these young adults' social representations of pleasure. Social representations are manifestations of how individuals integrate and negotiate values and ideals within their social group, but also within society more broadly. Once internalized within a network of meanings by individuals, these social representations become guides for decision-making and action (Moliner and Guimelli, 2015). By mobilizing the concept of social representation, this study aims to document the way in which pleasure echoes the discourses conveyed within the contexts in which the relationship of young adults to gambling is constructed and becomes meaningful.

Methodology

Protocol and research material

This study is based on a qualitative design. It is part of a research program focusing on gambling among young adults. The convenience sampling consists of 30 young adults aged 18 to 30 who have participated in gambling activities in the year preceding the research interview. They were recruited through the electronic mailing lists of three universities ($n = 17$) and colleges ($n = 8$), and by direct solicitation in a casino ($n = 5$). In the first case, individuals could respond to a recruitment email to express their interest in participating in the study and book an appointment. In the second case, interested individuals had the option of leaving their email or telephone contact details to members of the research team in order to be contacted. They also had the option of keeping a pamphlet presenting key information about the study and contact details for participation. The project was approved by the research ethics committees of Université Laval and the two participating colleges.

The individual interviews took place between mid-April and early July 2019. They were conducted by the principal investigator and members of her research team trained in social work, criminology, and sociology. Each interview began with a presentation of the study objectives and signing of the consent form. The interview, lasting around 2.5 hours, was then divided into two parts: a spontaneous evocation exercise and a life story interview. Each part of the interview pertains to a specific research objective. The findings presented in this paper are based on the interview material collected during the spontaneous evocation exercise. This exercise consists of asking participants to spontaneously name words or expressions that come to mind when the interviewer says an inducing word, in this case "pleasure". Combined with qualitative interviews, spontaneous evocation is a recognized method for accessing the semantic universe of social representations and their content (Abric, 2003). Therefore, at the beginning of each interview, each participant was asked to answer the following question: Thinking about the world of

gambling, what are the first three words that come to mind when I say the word “pleasure”? Each word or expression was then discussed in detail to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of the words or expressions identified by the participant, as well as their links with the concept of pleasure. Although this part of the interview explored the social representations of four concepts, the results presented here concern only the concept of pleasure.

Analysis strategies

Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The material was then coded using NVivo 12, and a thematic content analysis (Paillé and Muchielli, 2016) was conducted to identify units of meaning using an inductive approach that allowed the thematic categories associated with the concept of pleasure identified by the participants to emerge. The analysis was carried out by two research assistants and the principal investigator. Meetings were held monthly to ensure consistency of approach and consensus around the code book. The analysis respects the participants’ semantic universe, i.e., taking into account the words and expressions evoked, their meaning for the participants, and the way they associated them with the concept of pleasure. In so doing, it is possible for a word to be conceptually associated with a concept other than the one it suggests at first glance.

Analysis

Participants

The sample consisted of 30 young adults who had gambled in the year preceding the interview, most of whom identified as male (Table 1). The mean age of the sample is 21.5 (min = 18; max = 26).

The majority of participants are engaged in three or more different gambling activities in the past year (Table 2). Although the lottery attracts a large number of participants, it does not appear to be the main gambling activity in terms of frequency, nor the one to which most participants refer during the interview. Only one participant exclusively played the lottery. A majority of participants reported gambling both online and offline (n = 18), 11 declared gambling offline exclusively and one participant mentioned gambling online exclusively.

Social representations of pleasure

The findings are organized according to the four categories that emerged in the content analysis related to the social representations of pleasure. Table 3 presents the categories and subcategories, where applicable, as well as the set of words and expressions evoked to refer to each of them. Four major categories have been determined: (1) *pleasure through gain*, (2) *pleasure as a shared experience*, (3) *pleasure as affect*, and (4) *the centrality of pleasure in play*.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants.

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender identity		
Man	24	80.0
Woman	5	16.7
Other	1	3.3
Civil/marital status		
Free union	4	13.3
Married	2	6.7
Single	24	80.0
Living situation		
With parents	16	53.3
With roommate(s)	6	20.0
With spouse	3	10.0
With spouse and children	1	3.3
Alone	4	13.3
Level of education completed		
University	11	36.7
CEGEP (college)	11	36.7
Partial CEGEP studies	1	3.3
High school	7	23.3
Source of income		
Part-time work	16	53.3
Full-time work	7	23.3
Seasonal work	2	6.7
Loans and scholarships	2	6.7
Other	3	10.0
Perception of financial situation		
Very comfortable financially	5	16.7
Financially comfortable	13	43.3
Sufficient income to meet needs	10	33.3
Not financially comfortable	2	6.7

The analysis of the social representations of pleasure held by young adult who gamble led us to propose an interpretation of the relationship to pleasure in gambling among young adults as (1) *an expression of neoliberalism's values and principles*, and (2) *a ludic experience on the margins of neoliberal ideology*. These two axes of analysis will be addressed using the four categories of social representations of pleasure outlined above. Two of these categories are specific to a particular axis: *pleasure through gain*, which is specific to the neoliberal values and principles, and *pleasure as a shared experience*, which is specific to the ludic experience on the margins of neoliberalism. The other two categories, *pleasure as affect* and the *centrality of pleasure in play*, are associated with both axes, but in distinct ways. Figure 1 shows the organization of the categories of social representations according to the two axes of analysis.

Table 2. Participants gambling activities.

	<i>n</i>	%
Gambling activities		
Lottery and scratch tickets	22	73.3
Casino games (e.g., roulette)	20	66.7
Bingo	6	20
Card games (poker, blackjack)	19	63.3
Horse racing, dog racing, etc.	3	10
Day trading	2	6.7
Slot machines and VLTs	11	36.7
Games of skill	3	10
Sports betting	19	63.3
Dice	0	0
Other	1	3.3

Pleasure in gambling as an expression of neoliberalism’s values and principles

Following the example of several studies that analyze the relationship to gambling through the prism of neoliberalism (Reith, 2018; Cosgrave and Klassen, 2001; Raymen and Smith, 2020; Young, 2010), the analyses show that the social representations of pleasure held by the participants appear to be strongly rooted in neoliberalism’s values and principles.

Thus, at the end of the analyses, three categories associated to the social representations of pleasure in gambling highlight the way in which pleasure is an expression of neoliberalism’s values and principles, namely *pleasure through gain*, *pleasure through excitement and instantaneity*, and *pleasure as an objective to keep in mind*.

Pleasure through gain

The category of the social representations of pleasure most frequently mentioned by participants was the concept of pleasure associated with winning (n = 27). This category brings together conceptions of pleasure centred around winning, whether or not monetary gains are involved. Thus, the pleasure of winning can be broken down into three sub-categories: *financial gains*, *winning in itself*, and *pride and power*.

Financial gain was mentioned by the majority of participants as a source of pleasure in gambling, through words or expressions such as *money*, *fast money*, or *profit*. This finding testifies to the fact that the social representations associated with pleasure in gambling are strongly rooted in neoliberal values. Many participants explained that their pleasure comes from being able to use and spend the money they earn from gambling:

“I’ll give you an example, let’s say last time I went to Montreal, the first night I made \$100, so the next day I treated myself to a sweater, you know? [...] You know, it’s the little things that make you tell yourself, well, you know, with \$50, I can eat out at the restaurant; that’s what’s cool.”

Table 3. Words and expressions evoked linked to the categories associated with social representations of pleasure.

Categories	Sub-categories	Words or expressions
Pleasure through gain (n = 27)	Financial gains (n = 24)	Money, making money, win, win money, winnings, gamble, profit, profit-win, winning, hope, dreaming, easy money, fast money
	Winning in itself (n = 4) Pride and power (n = 5)	Win, win an improbable bet, winnings Pride, winning, power, reward
Pleasure as a shared experience (n = 21)	Interpersonal experience (n = 19)	Playing in person with friends, friends (family), friends, social circle, coaching, company, discussing, training, euphoria, being among friends, interaction, playing with family, memorable, offer, share, share the moment, shared, pleasure in playing, gathering, social, outings with family and friends, memories, play with family, the place
Pleasure as affect (n = 14)	Winning as a group (n = 2)	Euphoria, winning with your friends
	Pleasure through excitement and instantaneity (n = 10)	Adrenaline, euphoric effect (pleasure), enthusiasm (suspense), excitement, sensation-adrenaline, stressful, spontaneity, suspense, joy (positive emotions), gain
The centrality of pleasure in play (n = 7)	Pleasure as an interlude in daily life (n = 5)	Relaxation, scratching (stimulation), joyful, hobby
	Pleasure as an objective to keep in mind (n = 2)	Main, temporary
	Pleasure as an inherent characteristic of play (n = 5)	Luck, stimulation, play, games

(Simon, male, 20, sports betting, casino slot machines, lottery and scratch tickets, bingo, horse racing, casino games).

These accounts explicitly demonstrate the link between pleasure and consumption, where money is essentially the means to access the consumption of various products. As [Barmaki \(2010\)](#) points out, modern Western society, guided by neoliberal capitalism, puts forward a conception of the “good life” that values wealth, power, and success. Therefore, it is not surprising that participants mention the importance of financial gain in their conception of pleasure. However, we must highlight a distinction in the relationship between pleasure and financial gain put forward by the participants. In fact, many participants say little or nothing about the instrumental role of money. For many, like Joël, the very notion of profit is a source of pleasure:

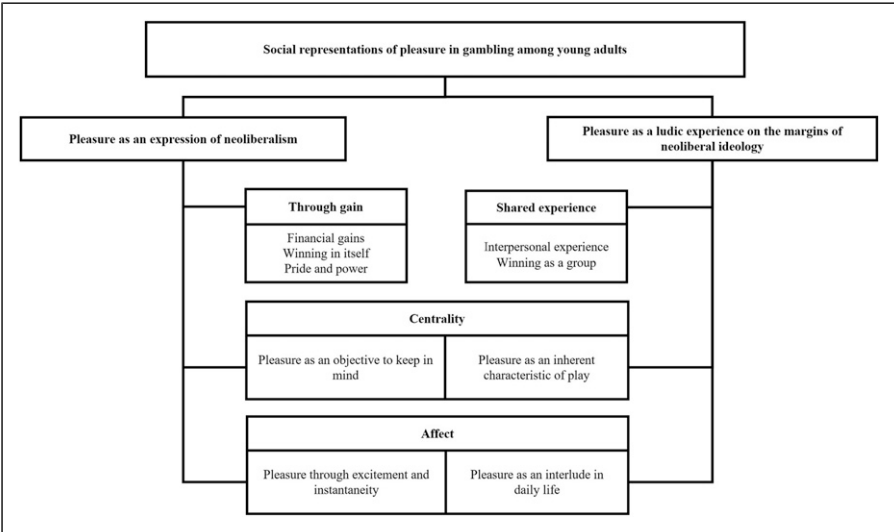


Figure 1. Social representations of pleasure in gambling among young adults.

“So that’s it, the profit you make will bring you more pleasure. [...] And above all, money is the cornerstone of the casino, because it’s pretty much the only thing involved. If you make money, you’ll have fun; if you don’t, you’ll have less fun.” (Joël, male, 19, casino games, sports betting).

Thus, the emphasis here is not on the amount won, but rather on the possibility of making a profit through winning, i.e. “making more money than you originally invested,” “regardless of the amount won”. In this sense, financial gain is an end in itself for these gamblers. This is in line with the idea that in a neoliberal consumer society, money does not only serve an instrumental or utilitarian role, but also has a symbolic function (Cosgrave and Klassen, 2001).

Beyond this distinction between the symbolic and instrumental functions of money, several participants approach pleasure from the angle of the ability to make money easily and quickly thanks to gambling:

“It’s money you don’t have to sweat to earn. It’s like it falls from the sky. [...] Finally, the pleasure is really that easy money.” (Julien, male, 24, poker, games of skill, lottery and scratch tickets, bingo, horse or dog racing, sports betting).

The pleasure associated with earning instant and effortless money fits in with what some have described as an erosion of the Protestant work ethic values characterizing the transition from traditional capitalism to *consumer capitalism* resulting from the neoliberal turn in Western societies (Barmaki, 2010; Cosgrave and Klassen, 2001; Reith, 2004). We have thus moved from a society valuing work, effort (Cosgrave and Klassen, 2001) and self-control, to one oriented towards hedonism and instant gratification (Cosgrave & and Klassen, 2001; Reith, 2004; Barmaki, 2010). The representation of pleasure through gain

in gambling thus reflects a desire for immediate wealth and instantaneous improvement of living conditions, as advocated by the neoliberal capitalist society (Cosgrave and Klassen, 2001).

For some participants, the pleasure through gain is also based on the instantaneous and exciting access to the neoliberal dream of wealth, power, and success that gambling provides. It also refers to the hope of winning, and to the notion of dreams in the conception of pleasure of some of the participants.

“You know you’re dreaming... but it’s different at the same time, because you think it’s just that little feeling you had before, but now you’re like, ‘Okay, it’s going to be nice, you know you’re going to...’ I don’t know; sometimes they make draws for millions, you know, when you get a scratch ticket, a ‘thousand dollars a week for life’.” (Simon, male, 20, sports betting, casino slot machines, lottery and scratch tickets, bingo, horse racing, casino games).

Representations of pleasure through gain, however, go beyond the pecuniary perspective for many participants, for whom pleasure comes from the very principle of winning, specifically through competitiveness. This subcategory, *winning in itself*, was evoked by words such as *win*, *win an unlikely bet*, or *winnings*.

“Well, the only way to have fun is to win. It’s rare that you’re happy to finish second, third, or fourth when gambling. In my opinion, you always play to win... You know, your goal is really to finish first, and when you finish first, I’d say that’s when you experience that pleasure.” (Xavier, male, 21, poker, sports betting, lottery and scratch tickets).

This representation of pleasure associated with winning and competitiveness embodies the celebration of competition as put forward by neoliberal society (Nicoll, 2022; Scimecca, 2015). It illustrates how, in a capitalist society, gambling may constitute for some people an opportunity to demonstrate their individual abilities through the act of winning. This representation of pleasure demonstrates, in part, how gambling can be seen as linked to the neoliberal orientations of competition and risk-taking (Bedford, 2021).

Finally, many participants associate the pleasure they derive from winning with the feelings of *pride and power* resulting from winning. These feelings of pride may be associated with financial gain, or the simple fact of winning:

“Power is a bit like confidence. When you lose, you tell yourself, ‘Can I stop?’ But then you also think: ‘I can do this, I’m going to win this many games, and then I’m going to get this, this, and that.’ Then it’s not like you’re buying anything, but you don’t feel superior, but you feel good for a moment when you tell yourself that if you win, everything is going to be all right.” (Jérôme, male, 22, sports betting, casino games).

As shown by these accounts, pleasure here is more specifically associated with the positive emotions participants feel about themselves when they win. In other words, pleasure is derived from the positive effect on self-esteem that arises from winning. However, the positive emotions experienced by gamblers go beyond the prospect of winning. The next section will discuss and illustrate how, for many participants, pleasure

is part of the positive emotions they experience while gambling, regardless of whether they win or lose.

Pleasure through excitement and instantaneity

Less than half the participants discussed the notion of pleasure in gambling in terms of the positive emotions and feelings gambling provides them. Two main types of affects emerged from the analyses, i.e., instantaneous emotions and situated emotions. The latter category will be discussed in greater detail in the second axe of analysis.

Social representations of pleasure as an affect associated with instant emotions were evoked through words such as *adrenaline*, *excitement*, and *suspense*. They refer to positive emotions of a certain intensity and relatively short duration that are experienced while gambling, as described by Martin:

“No matter the size of the bet or anything else, it’s that bit of suspense, stress and adrenaline; when the cards fall or the game is over and you think, well, where am I now? Win or lose, in the end, the adrenaline rush is what gives you that boost and keeps you going for so long and so many times.” (Martin, male, 21, lottery and scratch tickets, casino slot machines, poker, casino games).

This excerpt illustrates how the positive sensations associated with pleasure gambling provides arise partly from the uncertainty inherent in gambling, and the combination of chance and risk intimately intertwined with neoliberalism. Indeed, as [Bedford \(2021\)](#) points out, gambling is often seen as the manifestation of neoliberal values, such as individual risk-taking and competition. [Young \(2010\)](#) suggests that the individual risk-taking embodied in gambling has gradually come to be valued and associated with pleasure by the neoliberal state. In this context, the fact that the young people in the sample associate risk with pleasure is understandable.

The instantaneous character of pleasure in gambling evoked by participants is also in line with this spirit of instant gratification as valued and advocated by modern neoliberal societies ([Cosgrave and Klassen, 2001](#); [Reith, 2007](#)). These societies value not only hedonism, but an individual and immediate hedonism ([Raymen and Smith, 2020](#)). Philippe’s experience is revealing in this respect:

“So, you really get (snaps fingers), it’s spontaneous, it comes... (snaps fingers) instantaneously. Then, you know, for me, the pleasure is when you win a bet because you didn’t expect to win. It’s spontaneous, it comes suddenly (snaps fingers), and it gives you a boost of energy. That’s what I consider to be pleasure in gambling.” (Philippe, male, 21, sports betting, casino games, poker).

Reith highlights an interesting paradox about pleasure in modern neoliberal society: on the one hand, it encourages this form of hedonism through individual indulgence in pleasure, and on the other, it advocates self-control and restraint (2007). This prescription of restraint and control was also mentioned by participants as one of the categories of social representations associated with pleasure in gambling.

Pleasure as an objective to keep in mind

The final category of participants' social representations of pleasure concerns its centrality in gambling, and, more specifically within this axe of analysis, as an objective not to be overlooked.

The social representation of pleasure as an objective to keep in mind refers to this idea of self-control and restraint evoked by [Reith \(2007\)](#); the gambler must demonstrate self-control in their experience of gambling. In this sense, pleasure must remain the central objective of gambling. This facet of social representations of pleasure refers to a more normative content of individual responsibility echoing both neoliberal society and the responsible gambling approach. For example, Paul argues that pleasure should remain the main objective, and that if the gambler seems to be experiencing harms, gambling should be stopped:

"This has to be the main objective, [for gambling] to remain a pleasure. [...] And as soon as it becomes too stressful, too anxious, or you are too afraid of losing money, or you have lost too much money and it becomes a financial, social, or legal problem, or it creates an addiction, I think you have to stop" (Paul, male, 24, video lottery terminals, lottery and scratch tickets, sports betting, casino games).

Bruno for its part explains that the pleasure of gambling is momentary, so moderation is essential:

"The pleasure will be in the moment, but it's not the best long-term solution. [...] But, you know, you've got to use moderation here." (Bruno, male, 21, poker, lottery and scratch tickets, casino games).

Such a statement fits in very well with the responsible gambling approach, which advocates the idea that "a game must remain a game" and illustrates how the responsibility to gamble "responsibly and moderately" is incumbent on each individual gambler. This social representation of pleasure is reminiscent of our recent work on social representations of responsibility in gambling among young adults: pleasure in gambling is everyone's responsibility ([Savard et al., 2022](#)). This social representation of pleasure thus echoes the individual responsibility for risk management ([Young, 2010](#)) and the valorization of the principle of individual choice and abandonment in the pleasures of consumption, while avoiding loss of control ([Reith, 2018](#)).

This first analysis highlighted the influence of neoliberalism on the participants' conception of pleasure. The second section of our analysis will show how young gamblers' experience of pleasure also occurs on the margins of the values advocated by neoliberalism.

Pleasure in gambling as a ludic experience on the margins of neoliberal ideology

The social representations of pleasure held by young adults are not only rooted in neoliberalism. They are also strongly rooted in the ludic experience of gambling, on the

margins of the neoliberal values. More specifically, the analyses of the social representations of pleasure in gambling highlight how the latter stems from fundamental characteristics of the act of playing as defined by Huizinga in the seminal work on Play and culture. These refer firstly to the *pleasure associated with the social and shared character of play*, secondly to *pleasure in play as an interlude in our daily lives*, and thirdly to *pleasure as an inherent characteristic of Play*¹ (Huizinga, 1950).

Pleasure as a social and shared experience

Pleasure as a shared experience is the aspect of social representations associated with pleasure that was most evoked by participants (38 words). A large proportion of the sample first referred to pleasure in gambling as associated with an interpersonal space using words such as *sharing, friends, family, gathering, or social circle*.

“I think there’s a group effect, having fun going with friends and then, when we go to Montreal, [...] we know there’s one night we’re all going to the Casino together [...] we know we’re going there just to have fun. There’s also the fact that it’s all the guys together, we’re going to the casino as a group, so it’s going to be fun.” (Antoine, male, 20, casino games, lottery and scratch tickets, bingo, day trading, sports betting, casino slot machines, poker).

Some participants even mention that the shared character of pleasure in gambling is more important than the pleasure associated with financial gain:

“Because, for me, that’s not the main reason why I like going to the casino. It’s not really about winning the jackpot and all that. It’s really about having an outing with friends. And then, at the same time, if you win some money, then great.” (Geneviève, female, 21, casino slot machines, lottery and scratch tickets).

The importance of the shared pleasure in the gambling experience is not surprising, given the fundamentally social character of Play (Huizinga, 1950). For some participants, the shared character of pleasure is so important that they cannot imagine gambling alone:

“Well, I would say ‘*company*’, because I think the reason most people go [to the casino] is because they want to have a good time with friends. You know, except for people who are retired and go alone, it’s rare to see someone go to the casino on their own unless they have a real addiction problem.” (Louis, male, 19, sports betting, poker, casino games).

For other participants, the shared character of pleasure even lies in the opportunity to create memories of pleasant times spent with friends and family through gambling. Pleasure therefore comes from recalling the shared experience:

“Because it creates a lot of memories, you know, fun times, I mean, those are often the moments I think we remember the most. You can remember that you had a lot of fun at that moment, even if you lost, so it’s a nice memory. [...] because when you go there surrounded by friends, you are

creating good memories with them” (Catherine, female, 22, casino slot machines, bingo, lottery and scratch tickets).

For these young adult gamblers, pleasure is not about what gambling allows them to obtain or achieve, such as wealth or a better life prescribed by a neoliberal society. Rather, pleasure is found in the shared experience and the relationship with others. These results echo the work of Bedford (2021), who points out that although gambling can be seen as a reflection of the individual values associated with capitalism and neoliberalism, the analysis of the relationship with gambling cannot overlook the social character of this activity and must go beyond a simple individualistic reading. This aspect of the experience of pleasure is particularly important when analyzing the relationship of young adults with gambling. From a risk management perspective, young adults who partake in gambling may be considered a “vulnerable population” in the context of an activity that is considered “risky”. Although, for almost all the participants in this sample, this activity is more in line with a relationship to pleasure, the essence of which lies in sharing. This shared aspect is what seems to make the experience of pleasure in gambling meaningful to participants. These findings are reminiscent of other studies conducted with young adults who engage in activities considered risky, such as substance use. It highlights that sharing an experience with peers contributes significantly to the pleasure derived from it, starting from a recreational and socialization perspective (Bedford, 2021; Hunt et al., 2007). This facet of social representations of pleasure in gambling among young adults is therefore on the margins of neoliberal individualism and the values cherished by this ideology, which, as illustrated above, modulate the relationship to pleasure and its social representations in gambling among this population.

Pleasure as an interlude in daily life

For some participants, the social representations of pleasure with gambling reside in the downtime it allows, i.e., an interstice in daily life marked by relaxation, escapism, and escape through play (Huizinga, 1950). This type of affect, in opposition to the excitement elicited by gambling addressed above, is rooted in the daily lives of the participants. Pleasure is associated with a need to which gambling responds, from relaxation to the momentary relief of preoccupations. This subcategory of social representations of pleasure as an affect has been evoked using words such as *relaxation*, *joyful*, and *hobby*.

“During the bleaker times in our lives. Of course, there are ups and downs in life. It’s normal, we all go through this. At least, I think so. It erases those moments. Then it [gambling] makes us think: ‘Well, everything is fine.’ Despite, for instance, the transition from teenager to adult, it’s still, even when you turn 21, it’s still pretty hard to perceive.” (Bruno, male, 21, poker, lottery and scratch tickets, casino games).

While social representations of pleasure as an affect from a neoliberal perspective refer more to excitement and immediacy, some participants expressed how this pleasure is rooted in their daily lives and how it is emotionally situated in their everyday concerns and needs.

Pleasure as an inherent characteristic of play

The final facet of the social representations of pleasure held by young adults, which is at odds with a conception of pleasure rooted in neoliberalism, refers to pleasure as an intrinsic characteristic of Play: “the fun of playing” (Huizinga, 1950: 3). The experience of pleasure here stems from the ludic character of the activity, from the very nature of what constitutes Play; its essence. This aspect of social representations of pleasure in gambling was evoked with words such as *play*, *games*, or *stimulation*. Therefore, gambling games, with their respective characteristics, are associated with the pleasure of playing:

“Poker is interesting. I’ve been playing poker since I was maybe 15 years old. So for me, it’s just fun. There’s also a bit of strategy in there too. Yes, it’s all chance, but you also have a bit of strategy in knowing what the odds are that your card will be drawn. Then, what the odds are that the other player will have such and such hand.” (Guillaume, male, 27, casino slot machines, poker).

Whereas, from a neoliberal perspective, pleasure is represented as an objective to be upheld by an autonomous gambler who must maintain control over their gambling habits, here the centrality of pleasure lies in the object itself and pertains to the ludic nature of the activity and the gambler’s interest in it.

Pleasure in gambling among young adults: At the intersection of homo economicus and homo ludens

The analysis reveals how young adults’ social representations of pleasure intersect with two conceptions of the relationship to pleasure in gambling: on the one hand, a conception of the relationship to pleasure in gambling centred around the injunctions of neoliberalism, and on the other hand, a conception of pleasure on the margins of this ideology and rather rooted in its ludic nature. In the following section, we propose a reading which shows how these representations lie at the intersection of conceptions of human as *homo economicus* (Foucault, 2004) and *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1950).

The social representations of pleasure in gambling as an expression of neoliberalism’s values and principles are part of a vision of the human being as *homo economicus*. As an actor in a neoliberal consumer society, *homo economicus* is not simply a passive “consumer,” but also, through this consumption, a “producer” of something, namely of their own satisfaction and well-being (Foucault, 2004), and therefore pleasure. *Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur of oneself (Foucault, 2004). “That individual is also rational, free to make their own choices, responsible for their decisions, and well-being, while being able to systematically adapt to changes in the variables of the *milieu*. [...] This is how this individual becomes eminently governable” (Foucault, 2004: 274). Governable, since it is on the basis of the injunctions of neoliberal ideology that this individual will base the rationality of their decision-making, with the aim of “producing” their own well-being. Governable, as they govern themselves based on the neoliberal imperatives of a consumer society focused on risk-taking, hedonism, instant gratification, and the present moment (Reith, 2007). The social representations of pleasure in gambling, which focus on

gain, instant gratification, and “controlled” pleasure, can thus be understood as the result of actions undertaken by this *homo economicus* in a perspective of producing their own well-being within a neoliberal consumer society.

Social representations of pleasure from a ludic perspective on the margins of neoliberal ideology are more in line with a conception of the human being as *homo ludens*, or “Man the Player” (Huizinga, 1950). Unlike *homo economicus*, for whom pleasure in gambling is part of an entrepreneurial logic of “production” of one’s own well-being in line with the dominant ideology, *homo ludens* partakes in Play from a perspective in which it constitutes an end in itself, where Play is a construct with its own social function and an integral part of culture. The gambler gambles to play, and playing, by its very nature, is fun. Play is not a secondary function here, as is the case when playing generates well-being through the achievement of neoliberal ideals. The results show that, for many participants, enjoyment of gambling stems from the ludic aspect of the game and the sharing of this experience with others, rather than simply the lure of financial gain. This suggests that gambling is not only perceived as an opportunity for gain, but also as spaces for pleasure and socialization, in line with the *homo ludens* perspective. In this spirit, Huizinga (1950) proposes a conception of Play as a voluntary activity in which the player engages in complete freedom, outside the constraints of daily life, and as part of an experience of sharing with others. The social representations of pleasure in gambling, which revolve around the concepts of shared experience, a pause from daily life, and pleasure as an inherent characteristic of Play, are therefore perfectly in line with this conception of *homo ludens*.

Although the analysis highlights a certain duality between two visions of the human being, the participants’ comments also show how these two conceptions of the relationship to pleasure are not mutually exclusive. As illustrated in Figure 2, these two visions appear to be part of the same continuum at the center of which they meet and intersect.

One of the central elements in the relationship between pleasure and gambling is the nature of the affects associated with it. Indeed, while the excitement, suspense, and tension associated with pleasure in play are perfectly in line with the injunctions of a neoliberal consumer society geared towards hedonism, the present moment, and risk-taking, Huizinga reminds us that this element of tension is also central to the experience of Play from a ludic perspective; “tension means uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide the issue

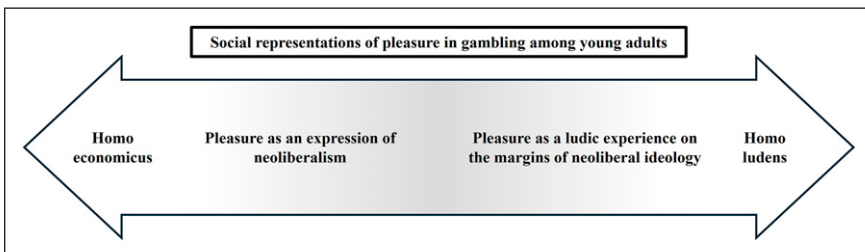


Figure 2. Social representations of pleasure in gambling among young adults: between *homo economicus* and *homo ludens*.

and so end it. The player wants something to ‘go,’ to ‘come off’; the player wants to ‘succeed.’ [...] all want to achieve something difficult, to succeed, to end a tension. Play is tense. [...] In gambling and athletics, it is at its height” (1950; p. 10–11). Xavier’s comments illustrate how this relationship to pleasure through the feeling of tension and adrenaline when gambling comes from both perspectives:

“Quite often when you’re in a situation where you’re going to win... that’s when it starts, let’s say you’re stressed or you know, you’re all primed up, and that’s where it comes in. It’s like while you’re winning or even a little before when you’re about to bet big amounts or stuff like that, that’s when it gets you.” (Xavier, male, 21, poker, sports betting, lottery and scratch tickets).

This meeting of *homo economicus* and *homo ludens* is also illustrated by Louis’ comments on how the experience of pleasure in gambling is not simply associated with winning, but more particularly with sharing this winning experience with friends:

“I’d say it’s the company that’s going to be more memorable because if you win, but you’re alone, you’re going to be happy, but it’s not going to be the same as if you win and all your friends were there to witness it.” (Louis, male, 19, sports betting, poker, casino games).

Therefore, it appears that the experience of pleasure associated with the desire to win, which at first glance seems to be more in line with neoliberal ideology, can concomitantly be part of a ludic perspective of Play, notably through the socially shared character of the pleasure associated with winning. The intersection of neoliberal and ludic perspectives is also revealed in the competitive aspect associated with pleasure:

“Pride first, because I played for the pleasure of playing, and not for the money directly. I used to play a lot with friends, and it was a bit of a challenge to see who could make the best predictions, and such, so there was a lot of pride in teasing each other over various predictions, etc.” (Léo, male, 23, sports betting, casino slot machines).

The experience of pleasure here is at the intersection of a sense of personal pride and open camaraderie within a friendly competition. It illustrates how the experience of pleasure in a competitive context takes on a different meaning, depending on whether it is rooted in a neoliberal or ludic perspective.

The construction of young adults’ social representations of pleasure in gambling, beyond a simple juxtaposition, would therefore lie at the intersection of neoliberal and ludic discourses pertaining to pleasure in gambling. The participants’ comments are more indicative of a blurring of the boundaries between the duality of *homo economicus* and *homo ludens*, and rather reflect a fusion between the two, as Aaron Brown (2006) already pointed out in his work on stock markets. The categories used to define young adults’ social representations of pleasure in gambling are therefore malleable, referring sometimes to *homo economicus*, sometimes to *homo ludens*, or even to a hybrid form of the two.

Conclusion

This study's findings highlight two perspectives in which social representations of pleasure in gambling are rooted in the social, political, economical, and historical contexts in which they are embedded: pleasure in gambling as an expression of the principles of neoliberal ideology, and pleasure as a ludic experience on the margins of this neoliberal ideology. These conceptions of pleasure also echo two classic archetypes of the human being: *homo economicus* and *homo ludens*.

On the one hand, our analysis highlights how the values and principles of a neoliberal consumer society—such as hedonism, wealth, success, risk-taking, and valuing the present moment—have been internalized by young adults, becoming the backdrop to the very meaning of pleasure in gambling. On the other hand, our analysis highlights a conception of pleasure that is on the margins of the values associated with a neoliberal consumer society, centred around gambling's social character and ludic essence. While distinct, our analysis shows how those conceptions meet and intertwine in young adults' experience of pleasure, testifying to a hybridization between *homo economicus* and *homo ludens*. However, we hypothesize that this cohabitation is only in appearance, and that the injunctions of neoliberal consumer society, notably through the commercialization of gambling, have infiltrated the ludic representations of pleasure in gambling; *homo ludens* is *homo economicus*, and the gambling industry has mastered its instrumentalization.

Indeed, the social representations of pleasure in gambling, revolving around notions of gain, excitement, immediacy, competition, and socialization, reflect how the neoliberal state in general, and the gambling industry in particular, participate in the construction, relay, and maintenance of these social representations of pleasure, for their respective greatest benefit. In the Quebec context, where gambling is marketed by a state-owned company, this is the very essence of state mediated pleasure (Cormack and Cosgrave, 2021). As Read (2009: 29) reminds us: "Neoliberalism operates on interests, desires, and aspirations rather than through rights and obligations; [...] it acts on the conditions of actions." This is precisely what our findings reveal: The association between pleasure and neoliberal consumer ideology is a demonstration of how the latter can penetrate individual subjectivities and shape the contours of what the experience of pleasure should correspond to.

These representations of pleasure in gambling, imbued with discourse elements of neoliberal consumer society that has infiltrated the subjectivities of young adults, are also highly instrumentalized by the gambling industry, which markets this "pleasurable commodity" (Race, 2009: 67) through advertising strategies aimed specifically at this population. This is particularly true of "lifestyle gambling" advertising (Raymen and Smith, 2020), which emphasizes both the socially shared character of the gambling experience, and the values associated with neoliberal consumer society. In this context, gambling becomes "a vital attachment to these wider circuits of consumption that is part of the valorised and glamorised 'Ladbroke's Life' of youthful exuberance, silliness, and adventure with friends" (Raymen and Smith, 2020: 388). In a context where young people are targeted by gambling advertising (McGrane et al., 2023), and young adults more specifically are said to experience more harm and problems related to gambling than the general adult population (Nowak, 2018), this endeavour of constructing, maintaining, and

instrumentalizing social representations of pleasure by the gambling industry raises concerns.

Finally, by documenting young adults' social representations of pleasure in gambling, this paper adds to the debate on the lack of regulation of gambling commercialization practices in Quebec and elsewhere in the world; such lack might generate harms. The findings also highlight that gambling practices are not simply individual practices, but are part of a social, economic, and political context that shapes them; the experience of pleasure is one example. That said, it is a reminder that, just like the experience of pleasure, responsibility for the harms associated with gambling is multifaceted: among others, the state and the industry that benefit from gambling must assume their share of responsibility, notably in terms of commercialization.

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Ethical considerations

The project was approved by the research ethics committees of Université Laval as well as those of the two participating colleges in Québec City: Université Laval (Comité d'éthique de la recherche): 2018-307/14-03-2019. Cégep de Limoilou (Attestation conformité éthique): 1819_07/01-05-2019. Cégep de Sainte-Foy: certification received 18-06-2019 (no certificate number).

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Given the qualitative nature of the study, data are not available to the public in accordance with the University Research Ethic Committee to preserve the privacy of participants.

Note

1. When the word “Play” is capitalized, it refers to the concept of play in its globality, not just gambling.

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