



## The Significance of Boredom: A Literature Review

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**Abstract:** This article aims at providing concise but thorough presentation of the state of art in the emerging field of boredom studies evidencing the significance of boredom. The premise of the significance of boredom is to be expounded by documenting its widespread, social consequences, functions and positive outcomes. Boredom has been found prevalent irrespectively of age, gender, culture or social class. It affects all main spheres of human life – work, leisure, education, romantic relationships, and even religious life. It has also been evidenced that boredom has many significant consequences. It has been associated with, among others, risk-taking behaviours, overeating, impulse shopping, or (self-)destructive and violent behaviours. Yet, boredom may serve numerous significant functions as well. As an emotion, it is important for cognition, motivation and communication and has had evolutionary meaning for human beings. In society nowadays, it serves as a defensive mechanism against overload of stimuli, but somehow to the contrary is also found to be a basic mechanism animating current consumerism. Boredom is also conceived to be a catalyst for reflection, self-cognition, creativity, and as a consequence a rudimentary element of culture production and its advances.

**Keywords:** boredom, emotions, boredom studies, significance of boredom, interdisciplinary, functions of boredom.

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## 1. Introduction: Underestimation of Boredom

A sacramental saying, repeated over and over again in almost all publications on the subject, specifies that boredom is a widespread and fairly prevalent phenomenon, yet still not ubiquitous enough to become a fully normalised subject for scholarship in many disciplines. Although in some subdisciplines boredom has already long been a legitimate topic of investigation, yet, generally in the academic context, the subject itself seems to still be regarded as intriguing but slightly whimsical, “weird, crazy or unworthy of study” (Eastwood, quoted in Rhodes, 2015, p. 278). It is still being disregarded by many as a respectable and recognised subject of scientific endeavour (see more in Finkielstein, 2021, pp. 15–44). As Randy Malamud (2016) recollected: “When I told colleagues that I was travelling 5,000 miles to attend a conference on boredom, the first reaction was, inevitably, a sardonic chuckle.” The prevailing opinion on the idea of studying boredom is that it looks like a leisure activity for bored academics with no serious issues to reflect on. It is “a relatively minor irritation” (Conrad, 1997, p. 474), a “minor affect” (as opposed to the more clearly-defined “major affects” of hate, lust, etc.; Ngai, 2005, p. 8) a “mild psychic disturbance” that “can hardly be the purview of a rigorous social science concerned with altogether weightier issues, and the reassurance of dealing with such solid, measurable facts as income disparities or the rate of violent crime” (Gardiner, 2012, p. 38).

Moreover, boredom “like normality, is a taken-for-granted part of everyday life” (Misztal, 2016, p. 109; cf. Barbalet, 1999, p. 633), it “is generally paid scant and superficial attention, passed over lightly as transitory and insignificant” (Healy, 1984, p. 9) as most people “do not fully acknowledge or [...] are not fully conscious of what a grave affliction boredom is” (Fromm, 1986, p. 14). This includes many scholars as well; for instance, Reinhard Kuhn (1976), who in his erudite analysis of the notion of ennui in Western literature tradition totally dismissed everyday boredom as worthy of scientific attention. Boredom is still usually not considered a part of the basic curriculum of any discipline, as “there are no courses [on boredom] offered at the universities, apart from the fact that one is often bored during one’s studies” (Svendsen, 2005, p. 18) and the limited exceptions confirm that tendency rather than contradict it.

This article aims at evidencing the significance of boredom and providing researchers from various disciplines and academic journalists with argumentation that boredom matters and constitutes a phenomenon worth exploring. It seems to me that this may also be a good way to propagate and develop the idea of boredom studies (Gardiner and Haladyn, 2016). The premise of the significance of boredom is to be expounded by documenting its widespread, social consequences, functions and positive outcomes. There are of course limits to what is evidenced in this paper, yet, I chose to focus on advocating the thesis of the significance of boredom as so many automatically and without further reflection contend something opposite.

## 2. A Serious Issue

In contradiction to a general disregard to boredom, many authors, even prominent ones, have considered boredom to be a serious matter, “a central twenty-first-century problem” (Avramenko, 2004, p. 108), “a major social problem” (Klapp, 1986, p. 26), “an inherent part of the human being” (Ros Velasco, 2017, p. 184), one of the greatest miseries of humankind (Fromm, 2011; Nisbet, 1983) and “that part of hell which Dante forgot to describe in *La Divina*

*Commedia*” (Casanova, quoted in Bergler, 1945, p. 38) – a species of ‘psychic pain’ (Wallace, 2011). The science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov (1964) even predicted that in 2014 the “disease of boredom,” having “serious mental, emotional and sociological consequences,” will constitute one of the most severe sufferings haunting humankind. Boredom is positioned with such serious phenomena as ‘alienation,’ ‘anomie,’ ‘disenchantment’ and/or ‘depression’ (Irvine, 2001) and is believed to be the quality that makes us human (Kolakowski, 1999), thus constituting an inevitable part of human nature.

Boredom is also claimed to be significant because, as according to Walter Benjamin, who summarised Émile Tardieu’s (1913) book on the subject, “all human activity is shown to be a vain attempt to escape from boredom, but in which, at the same time, everything that was, is, and will be appears as the inexhaustible nourishment of that feeling” (2002, p. 102). Similar claims have been made by many well-known authors, inter alia by German philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Martin Heidegger; German-born American social psychologist, Erich Fromm; French philosopher, Claude Adrien Helvétius; French poet, Charles Baudelaire; French philosopher and novelist, Albert Camus; or American writer, David Foster Wallace; who all indicated in one way or another that “most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling” (Wallace, 2011, p. 85). In this vein, Schopenhauer suggested that boredom was the foundation of all religions – “[m]an creates for himself in his own image demons, gods, and saints; then to these must be incessantly offered sacrifices, prayers, temple decorations, vows and their fulfilment, pilgrimages, salutations, adornment of images and so on” (1969, p. 323; cf. Helvétius, 1810). Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (2000), American social psychologist, the creator of the theory of flow (optimal experience) explained that an understanding of boredom is of central importance to all “interested in enhancing the quality of life” (p. 444) because it is one of the main disturbances to a person’s well-being.

In general, people are believed to be led by imperative towards activity, and by a fear of boredom, which, as Bertrand Russell, British philosopher and mathematician, a Nobel prize laureate, claimed is “one of the great motive powers throughout the historical epoch” (1932, p. 57) and which effect “on a large scale in history is underestimated” (Inge, 1940, p. 386). Scrutinising the relevant literature suggests that many agree that boredom is an essential incentive for social change and (r)evolution, and, thus, for the historical process. As Tardieu (1913, pp. 195, 283) indicated, “the infinite evolution of societies, their progress and decay, express their eternal boredom” and “boredom, which is the sting that precipitates the race of this world, will never be blunted.” Boredom is credited with the rise and decline of civilisations, heresies, reformation, the rise of nationalism and radical political movements (e.g., the Nazis), and all kinds of revolutions, terrorism and wars (Inge, 1940; Kuhn, 1976; Kustermans and Ringmar, 2011; Laugesen, 2012; Maeland and Brunstad, 2009; Moravia, 1965; Tochilnikova, 2020).

### 3. Prevalence of Boredom

It has already become a boring platitude that boredom is “one of the most unexpectedly common of all human emotions” (Toohey, 2011, p. 1). There are frequent abstract claims of the vast proliferation of boredom in modern society (e.g., Klapp, 1986; Svendsen, 2005; Tardieu, 1913;

Toohy, 2011), and many people, including scholars and writers, have believed that it is an inevitable part of human life and condition, that it “is an inescapable fact like the illness that comes in its time” (Tardieu, 1913, p. 233). George Byron (2006) in his *Don Juan* even suggested that “Society is now one polish’d horde,/Form’d of two mighty tribes,/the Bores and Bored” (XLV, 94–95; cf. Kierkegaard, 1843). Although on the intuitional level such claims might be seen as correct, however, it is still essential to prove them, at least, partially based on the scientific literature. Alycia Chin et al. (2017) found that 63 per cent of the participants in a US-based sample (n=3,867) reported boredom at least once over the study period (7–10 days chosen randomly in a period of two years). Respondents answered a set of short questions, including one about their emotional state, every half-an-hour, via a custom-made iPhone app (participants without an iPhone were provided with one). Boredom was recorded in 2.8 per cent of all half-hour reports and was the seventh most frequently reported out of 17 emotional measures. Occasional occurrences of boredom were confirmed in this massive, although not representative, gender- and age-balanced national sample.

Another argument in favour of claims about the ubiquity of boredom is the fact that it is found among representatives of all social classes. Traditionally, boredom was conceived to be a characteristic of social elites, the leisure classes, for whom boredom was both a privilege and a sign of social position (Bernstein, 1975; Healy, 1984; Lepenies, 1992; Scitovsky, 1999; Tardieu, 1913; Van den Berg and O’Neill, 2017; Veblen, 2007). Kings (Kuhn, 1976; Pascal, 1910) and nobles, such as the French aristocracy in Versailles (Saint-Simon, 1902), or the Polish baronage (Tazbir, 1997), were bored. Some, like Virginia Woolf, even differentiated upper class boredom (*ennui, melancholia, spleen*) from the common boredom of the lower classes (quoted in Crangle, 2008, p. 217). The boredom of the non-privileged classes has a less noble tradition than that so eloquently described as the boredom of the wealthy (frequently written down by the victims themselves), yet many studies has already shown that boredom is an everyday experience of the working class (e.g., Davies, 1926; Grubb, 1975), unemployed (Jahoda et al., 2009), homeless (Marshall et al., 2019; O’Neill, 2014, 2017), refugees (Chan and Loveridge, 1987; Wagner and Finkielstein, 2021), and the citizens of marginalised poor countries (see the cases of Ethiopia [Mains, 2007], Egypt [Schielke, 2008]; Niger [Masquelier, 2013, 2019]; South Africa [Tournadre, 2020]; Georgia [Frederiksen, 2013, 2017]) or minorities (for example, the case of American native population [Jervis et al., 2003]). Representatives of all social strata are thus not immune to boredom, even if the particular reasons are not identical for all social classes.

Boredom also seems to be experienced independently of individual innate qualities. In many studies men are found to experience boredom more frequently, be more prone to boredom (e.g. Chin et al., 2017; Farmer and Sundberg, 1986; Vodanovich et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2014), and be more sensation-seeking (Zuckerman, 1979) than women, which is speculated to be an innate, evolutionary-based tendency, however, some studies found that girls are more severely exposed to boredom, due to greater social/cultural constraints, especially in their leisure time (Patterson et al., 2000; Wegner et al., 2006) but are less likely to admit to the feeling when asked. Many studies have not found any statistically significant correlation between boredom and gender, but all shows that boredom is reported by both sexes.

Boredom is also experienced irrespective of age. Children are bored due to all kinds of constraints (school regulations, parents' rules, bad weather, illness), or when lacking parental attention, and feeling lonely (Jackson, 1990; Kirova, 2004; Phillips, 1993). Teenagers are the quintessentially bored age group (de Chenne, 1998; Esman, 1979; Farnworth, 1998; Sundberg and Bisno, 1983), forging and seeking their identity, rebelling against adult regulations (e.g., via vandalism and/or delinquency), and they apply boredom as a selection mechanism of what is worth pursuing in their further life and what is not. Adults, although not usually perceived as a group at risk of boredom, are far from being immune to it, as, for instance, research into boredom at work may confirm. Boredom is also noted as a characteristic experience of middle-age crisis (Bernstein, 1975; Martin et al., 2006), when someone feels a sense of failure and disappointment with their life, mixed with the comfort, security and relative affluence that makes it predictable, monotonous and, for the most part, unchallenging. Chronic boredom that has long been latent is revealed and emerges into awareness, prompting, inter alia, adultery, divorce and remarriage. The feeling is also suggested as a characteristic of senility, especially in retirement (Hoeyberghs et al., 2018). People who are no longer actively engaged in work face "the problem of enforced downtime" (Mann, 2016), or boredom caused by one's addiction to work – this is why so many pensioners decide to work after retirement, launching 'encore careers.'

Boredom, despite starting its 'career' as a strictly European/Western concept, seems to become more and more globalised as the basic mechanisms responsible for its aetiology were popularised due to the processes of modernisation that have affected almost all parts of the globe. Generally, there is a scarcity of cross-cultural research on boredom, and almost all of them have been primarily focused on the differences in boredom proneness between students from different countries/cultures (Ng et al., 2015; Sundberg et al., 1991; Vodanovich and Watt, 1999; Vodanovich et al., 2011). Irrespective of particular correlational measurements, the notion of boredom was commonly recognised in all compared countries (USA, Australia, Canada, German, China and Lebanon). Most languages nowadays have, or have adapted, some expression(s) for boredom, as confirmed by the Wikipedia entry for 'boredom,' which exists in 55 languages so distant as Chinese, Yiddish, Indonesian, or Arabic, and in some anthropological data (Musharbash, 2007).

Boredom affects the main spheres of human life – work, leisure, education, romantic relationships and even religious life. One third of Britons admitted to being bored at work for most of the day (Development Dimensions International, 2004), boredom was declared by 50 per cent of those employed in the financial services sector (Mann, 2007), and 52 per cent of US employees in a national Gallup poll conceded that they were 'not engaged' and 18 per cent even 'actively disengaged' at work (Newport, 2013). Boredom was also found to be the second most commonly suppressed emotion at work (Mann, 1999). Another study has shown that almost one-third of surveyed employees spent approximately two hours daily pursuing private affairs at work because they were bored, which can be calculated in terms of lost benefits for employers and the economy (Malachowski, 2005). The outcome of workplace boredom is, therefore, so called 'empty labour' (Paulsen, 2015) – appropriating time that officially belongs to the employer by constantly engaging in non-work-related activities at work.



The literature on work characteristics and the emotional life of employees has identified boredom as a quality of some occupations. Traditionally, jobs such as factory workers (Davies, 1926; Grubb, 1975; Hill, 1975; Kerce, 1985; Nichols and Beynon, 1977; Thackray, 1981), clerks (Baker, 1992; Dyer-Smith and Wesson, 1995; Lee, 1986) and shop assistants (Fisher, 1987; Mann, 2012) were found to induce boredom. To that group we can also add call centre staff (Walker, 2009), employees in the catering sector (Tsai, 2016), and, loosely, nurses (Loukidou, 2008). All these jobs require low or moderate skill levels, have low recognition or rewards, and involve monotonous tasks or occasionally no activity while being constrained to stay in a particular location (behind the cash register, desk, assembly line, on the ward, etc.).

Another group of boring occupations is that associated with some kind of isolation from society. This includes such diverse jobs such as truck drivers (Drory, 1982; McBain, 1970), astronauts (Hancock, 2017; Volante et al., 2016) soldiers (Bartone, 2005; Maeland and Brunstad, 2009) and prison guards (Shamir and Drory, 1982). All these occupations involve being alienated from society and being a kind of ‘paid prisoner,’ locked in isolated units (prison, spacecraft, truck cockpit, military base in a foreign country).

Occupations associated with the possibility of danger, such as professional soldiers (Bartone, 2005; Fisher, 1987; Harris and Segal, 1985; Maeland and Brunstad, 2009), border patrol officers, operational intelligence agents (Hancock and Krueger, 2010), security guards (Kerce, 1985), security specialists (Charlton and Hertz, 1989), police officers (Anderson, 2015; Phillips, 2016; Van Maanen, 1974), firefighters (Watt, 2002), or airplane pilots (Graeber, 1989; Grose, 1988; O’Hanlon, 1981) may form another group of boring occupations. A common description in all these occupations is that they include long periods of underemployment and only brief moments when the use of high skills is necessary (emergency conditions). As Grose (1988) noted for airplane pilots, such jobs consist of “endless hours of tedious boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror” (p. 30), when alertness, rapid decision-making and high professional skills are essential in order to respond adequately. For the majority of time, these occupations lack activities that would be identified as ‘real work’ and consist of more mundane tasks, or simply waiting for the opportunity to make use of high-quality training. To this category, although bereft of major personal perils, may be added air traffic controllers (Langan-Fox et al., 2009; Thackray, 1981), unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV, drone) operators (Thompson et al., 2006) or any kind of controllers needed high skills in a case of emergency, which are underutilised for the majority of the time (Johansson, 1989). Similar group of occupations demonstrated to include significant levels of boredom involve highly-trained professionals with a lot of responsibility, such as train engineers (Haga, 1984), anaesthesiologists (Weinger, 1999), surgeons (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), therapists (Campagne, 2012; Wangh, 1979) and lawyers (Harper, 1987), who despite their high expertise are often compelled to deal with unchallenging cases that are far below their skill levels.

Boredom was also noted among creative workers such as orchestra musicians (Faulkner, 1973; Parasuraman and Purohit, 2000), whose actual job is incongruent with their education, which prepares them for solo performance and emphasises creativity, when they are compelled to play under the strict supervision of a conductor and are simply ‘anonymous cogs’ in the orchestra. Boredom was also observed among blues, jazz and classical musicians playing

commercial gigs, when, to respond to audience demand, they are compelled to perform a limited and repetitive repertoire numerous times (Grazian, 2003; Ryan, 2011). Robert Stebbins (1990, p. 116) observed “onstage boredom” (“auto pilot syndrome”) among Canadian stand-uppers, when they are compelled to perform the same set night after night doing a circuit. They are overwhelmed by the dullness of daily existence and performances appear to be a drudgery for them, no longer generating thrill and enthusiasm.

Apart from being ubiquitous at work, boredom also constitutes a significant leisure experience. Leisure boredom, defined as “the subjective perception that available leisure experiences are not sufficient to instrumentally satisfy needs for optimal arousal” (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger, 1990, p. 4) is no less frequent. According to the international research of the International Social Survey Programme (Haller et al., 2013; ISSP Research Group, 2009) people admitted to feeling bored when at leisure (very often/often/sometimes) in all 36 countries included in the study (the average amounted to 36%). Boredom is also a significant experience in long-term relationships (Harasymchuk and Fehr, 2010, 2012, 2013) and sexual life (Tunariu and Reavey, 2003). Even religious life seems to induce boredom in many followers (Raposa, 1985), especially those of ‘traditional’ religions, and the growth of “theatrical evangelism” (Klapp, 1986, p. 18) is a symptom of religious boredom.

Boredom is also noted as experienced in all kinds of venues and places; in the countryside (Schielke, 2008), metropolis (Aho, 2007; Simmel, 1950) and suburbs (Gamsby, 2012) alike, at the cinema (Misek, 2010; Rhym, 2012; Schaefer, 2003), art gallery (Sontag, 1967), museum (Sánchez-Vázquez, 2004), and classical ballet (Svendsen, 2016). Boredom is also frequently experienced in all kinds of total institutions: hospitals (field hospital [Svendsen, 2005]; hospital in convict settlement [Dostoevsky, quoted in Avramenko, 2004]; mental institutions [Binnema, 2004; Goffman, 1961; Steele et al., 2013], and rehabilitation centres [Bracke et al., 2006; Bracke and Verhaeghe, 2010]), monasteries (Tardieu, 1913; Wenzel, 1967), prisons (Shalev, 2008), youth confinements (Bengtsson, 2012), refugee camps (Wagner and Finkielsztein, 2021), and POW [prisoners-of-war] camps (Laugesen, 2012), and is noted in a variety of extreme life situations and circumstances, such as living under German occupation (Czocher, 2018) or in a Jewish ghetto during the Second World War (Korczak, 2003), fighting in a war (Kustermans and Ringmar, 2011; Maeland and Brunstad, 2009; Ware, 1986) or sickness and dying (Tolstoy, 1970).

The enormous popularity of that theme in fiction may serve as one more, indirect proof of the social prevalence and significance of boredom. The list of novels and plays that include boredom as a significant issue is both long and prestigious. In one way or another, bored are characters of inter alia Jane Austen (*Emma*), Samuel Becket (*Waiting for Godot*), Saul Bellow (*Humboldt’s Gift, Dangling Man*), Georges Bernanos (*The Diary of a Country Priest*), George Byron (*Don Juan*), Albert Camus (*The Plague, The Stranger*), René de Chateaubriand (*René*), Anton Chekhov (*Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard*), Benjamin Constant (*Adolphe*), Charles Dickens (*Bleak House*), Denis Diderot (*Candide*), Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Demons*), Gustave Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*The Sorrows of Young Werther, Faust*), Ivan Goncharov (*Oblomov*), Julien Gracq (*The Opposing Shore*), Michel Houellebecq (*The Elementary Particles*), Victor Hugo (*Les Misérables*), Joris-Carl Huysmans

(*Against Nature*), Henrik Ibsen (*Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll's House*), Mihail Lermontov (*A Hero of Our Times*), Thomas Mann (*The Magic Mountain*), Alberto Moravia (*Boredom*), Alfons de Musset (*The Confession of a Child of the Century*), Alexander Pushkin (*Eugene Onegin*), Jean-Paul Sartre (*Nausea*), Stendhal (*Red and Black*), Leo Tolstoy (*Anna Karenina*, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*), Ivan Turgenev (*Fathers and Sons*, *Rudin*, *Diary of a Superfluous Man*), David Foster Wallace (*The Pale King*) or Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*).

#### 4. Consequences of Boredom

Boredom also matters because it has been demonstrated to be the direct or indirect cause of many behaviours that are perceived as unproductive, destructive, dangerous and/or pathological. Human beings are believed to be a species particularly addicted to novelty and new stimuli/information, and boredom seems to be a mechanism that “motivates people to engage in any activity that seems meaningful to them” (Van Tilburg and Igou, 2012, p. 182) at the time. “Boredom is essentially a thwarted desire for events, not necessarily pleasant ones, but just occurrences such as will enable the victim of ennui to know one day from another” (Russell, 1932, p. 58). Many people merely kill/waste their time in order to stave off boredom, instead of making use of it (Fromm, 1986; Schopenhauer, 1969) – they “do timepass,” engage in activity that is “neither serious nor productive because it is merely intended to kill time and ward off potential boredom” (Fuller, 2011, p. 1) without adding any value or meaning to their lives (Beckelman, 1995; Klapp, 1986) and providing them with only momentary pleasure, a fast endorphin intake.

Boredom produces an almost irresistible need to escape the feeling, which can be positive/creative or destructive. The thesis that people are capable of doing all kinds of things just to alleviate their boredom is illustrated in a series of experiments on self-administered pain (Havermans et al., 2015; Nederkoorn et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2014). Participants were subjected to boring conditions (e.g., spending 6 to 15 minutes in a room with nothing to do but think, or watching one short fragment of a documentary over and over again for an hour), and lacking other options to engage, were prone to voluntarily self-administering electric shocks to themselves. The motivational power of the unpleasantness of boredom turned out to be so significant for some people that they even preferred negative stimuli to boredom – participants in boring conditions inflicted pain on themselves more frequently and with higher intensity than those in the control group (Havermans et al., 2015). No similar effect was found for sadness (Nederkoorn et al., 2016), suggesting that a tendency to self-inflict pain was not an answer to a general negative emotional experience, but to boredom specifically.

In the same vein, boredom was found to be associated with risk-taking behaviours and ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 2005). People looking for anything to alleviate the feeling engage in all kinds of activities that may have a negative impact on their well-being, life prospects or safety (Stebbins, 2003). Boredom proneness was found to be connected to internet sex addiction (Chaney and Blalock, 2006), hypersexual behaviour (Reid et al., 2011), reckless driving (Dahlen et al., 2005; Kass et al., 2010; Mann, 2012), drunk driving (Arnett, 1990), and drug and alcohol abuse (Iso-Ahola and Crowley, 1991; LePera, 2011). Bored people are more likely to experiment



with drugs, including alcohol (Krotava and Todman, 2014), which may lead to regular use (Corvinelli, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1978), and Paul Martin (2009) claimed even that Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin, who were both drug addicts, were among the many victims of boredom. Results of research by Alex Blaszczynsky and colleagues (1990) suggested that a substantive group of pathological gamblers are motivated by boredom (the rest by depression). Gambling is employed by many, similarly to drugs or alcohol, as a remedy for boredom (Martin, 2009; Mercer and Eastwood, 2010). In this capacity, Russian roulette, as a highly risky gambling game invented in the trenches of the Russo-Turkish war (1877–1878), is believed to be the result of “a combination of acute boredom and military inactivity, often aggravated by unreasonable consumption of vodka” (Maeland and Brunstad, 2009, p. 9).

Binge eating/overeating/polyphagia, i.e., eating more frequently and/or excessively than needed (found also in animals when bereft of stimuli [Wemelsfelder, 1985]) is another behaviour connected to boredom. Research into emotional eating, a change in the consumption of food in response to emotional stimuli, has shown that feeling bored increases the frequency and amount of food consumed (Havermans et al., 2015; Koball et al., 2012; Moynihan et al., 2015), and is associated with obesity (Abramson and Stinson, 1977). Shopping involves a similar tendency (Tymkiw, 2017) – bored individuals buy often unnecessary, random things, and engage in compulsive entertainment more frequently than individuals who are not bored (Martin, 2009). They also more frequently engage in impulse Internet shopping as a method for ‘clicking the boredom away’ (Sundström et al., 2019).

Boredom is thus a primary cause of many of human (self-)destructive behaviours (Fromm, 1973) and constitutes a significant social problem (Calhoun, 2011). As Søren Kierkegaard (1843) famously stated, ‘boredom is the root of all evil’ and as Joanna Petry-Mroczkowska (2004) observed “the list of consequences of boredom surprisingly coincides with the list of deadly sins” (p. 196). Bertrand Russell (1932) even claimed that “[b]oredom is therefore a vital problem for the moralist, since at least half the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of it” (p. 61) – for other half I would credit boredom itself. There is a vast literature connecting boredom with all kinds of misbehaviours and crimes – Jeff Ferrell (2004) even deliberated whether many crimes are “committed not against people or property as such, but against boredom” (p. 293). Boredom is found to result in drawing adolescents into religious practices that advocate violence (e.g., Satanism [Clark, 1994]), ignoring legal standards by police officers (Welsh, 1981), delinquency and vandalism (Bengtsson, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1978; Newberry and Duncan, 2001; Scitovsky, 1999), public violence and alcohol-related assaults (Homel et al., 1992) and murders. In the criminological literature the term ‘thrill killing’ suggests premeditated murder motivated by the sheer excitement of the act (Branković, 2015), and many murderers have admitted to killing out of boredom (Clemons, 2013; Vaneigem, 1994), as reflected in some literary characters, such as Lafcadio Wluiki (Andre Gide, *The Vatican Cellars*) or Meursault (Albert Camus, *The Stranger*).

Boredom is believed to be a significant motivational factor in all kinds of violent and destructive behaviours, such as massacres (see the case of the My Lai Massacre in Maeland and Brunstad [2009]), pogroms (Goebbels boasted at the time of the first Jewish pogroms that “at least the National Socialists were not boring,” [quoted in Adorno, 2006, p. 237]), terrorism

(Hanby, 2004; Tochilnikova, 2020), torture (Kustermans and Ringmar, 2011), wars (e.g., king of Epirus, Pyrrhus who launched his military campaigns out of boredom [see Kuhn, 1976; Toohey, 1988]), and riots and revolutions (see the case of (a) Fronde (1648–1653) [Lepenies, 1992]; (b) French Revolution [Burke, quoted in Mallory, 2003]; (c) the revolution of 1848 in France [de Lamartine, quoted in Healy, 1984; Klapp, 1986]; (d) the Paris riots of 1968 [Seeman, quoted in Klapp, 1986; Vaneigem, 1994], and (e) the London riot of 2011 [Mann, 2016]). Many such events are claimed to result from profound hopelessness and lack of agency, and a strong inclination to (re)gain a sense of control and power. Massacres, lynchings, torture or acts of terrorism are not usually performed by pathological sadists but just by powerless, frustrated, frequently bored (also chronically/existentially bored, see the state of the *Cafard* of American troops in Vietnam [Maeland and Brunstad, 2009]) people who have an opportunity to gain some power and fight their boredom back, distracting themselves from their boredom. George Steiner (1971) claimed even that chronic ennui has contributed to the ‘civilised barbarity’ of two world wars, the Nazi death camps, and the development and use of weapons of mass destruction. Boredom was also suggested to be a major factor in voting for charismatic and/or populist leaders, thus, in political radicalization nowadays (Tochilnikova, 2020).

Boredom was also found to be a risk factor in heart disease (Franzmeier, quoted in Brisset and Snow, 1993), to increase the likelihood of dying (Britton and Shipley, 2010) and to be “a key component of psychopathology and neurological disorders” (Goldberg et al., 2011, p. 662). Boredom, connected to lower levels of attention, makes people more vulnerable to performance decrease, which is believed to constitute a real life threat, for instance, for soldiers (Maeland and Brunstad, 2009). It also contributes to antipsychotic medication non-adherence – some schizophrenia patients have positive attitude towards some psychotic symptoms, such as delusional feelings of importance and power, hearing voices, and the experience of being another person, that provide them with substantial stimuli that is absent in a drug-induced reality (Branković, 2015). Boredom was also found to be a major obstacle in long-lasting romantic relationships and a contributor to relational problems and divorces (Harasymchuk and Fehr, 2010).

Boredom and boredom proneness were also found positively correlated to many negative affective states, such as anger and aggression (Mercer-Lynn et al., 2011, 2013; Rupp and Vodanovich, 1997; Van Tilburg et al., 2019), depression (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986; Goldberg et al., 2011; Malkovsky et al., 2012; Newell et al., 2012), anxiety (Fahlman et al., 2009, 2013; Newell et al., 2012), hostility (Dahlen et al., 2004), hostility towards outgroups (Van Tilburg and Igou, 2011), loneliness (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986), hopelessness (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986), alienation and poor interpersonal and social relationships (Tolor, 1989; Watt and Vodanovich, 1999), lower job and life satisfaction (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986; Kass et al., 2001), stress<sup>1</sup> (Hancock, 2017; Merrifield and Danckert, 2014), apathy (Bargdill, 2014; Goldberg

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<sup>1</sup> Boredom is a stress factor correlated with high cortisol levels. Stress constitutes an affective reaction for ‘unsolved’ emotion, i.e., the situation in which factors causing emotion are unmanageable and do not recede for a longer period of time. There are various kinds of stress, and one of these is boredom-stress, the stress associated with prolonged inactivity, lack of engagement.

et al., 2011), retreatism (understood as a state of psychic passivity [Misztal, 2016]), fatigue (Loukidou, 2008; Mann, 2016), and frustration (Baker et al., 2010; Hill and Perkins, 1985).

## 5. Functions of Boredom

The significance of boredom lies in the fact that it serves various functions that used to be, and still are, beneficial for human beings. Boredom, as an emotion, serves specific functions, which are (1) cognition, (2) motivation, and (3) communication (Nesse, 1990).

Emotions constitute a mechanism signalling significance, i.e., that something important is happening from the point of view of individual well-being or the tasks carried out by someone. They therefore provide information about one's ambience and attitude towards it. Emotions indicate the status of goal achievement, and boredom, as a negative emotion, informs that the realisation of a person's interests is threatened or hindered (Ekman and Davidson, 1994). It thus constitutes an 'internal alarm' (Elpidorou, 2015) that alerts/informs/signals/registers that the situation at hand is not satisfactory, beneficial or meaningful.

Emotions motivate someone to take action in order to fulfil their goals or avoid negative outcomes (Bench and Lench, 2013), and thus control and direct behaviour, goal choice, motivational priorities or energy and attention allocation (Lewis et al., 2008; cf. Stets and Turner, 2006). Emotions are usually raised in situations requiring adaptation, and are a basic mechanism for modulating and selecting actions, helping establish new goals, explore alternatives, seek a change or trigger the motivation to switch goals (Macklem, 2015). Boredom, therefore, is indicated to form a motivating/energising force, a catalyst for action that 'pushes' one to seek for activity that seems meaningful or interesting, to engage in challenge-seeking behaviour, and "may enable a stalled self to get moving, to once again experience the flow and momentum of life" (Brisset and Snow, 1993, p. 243; see also Beckelman, 1995; Belton and Priyadarshini, 2007; Bench and Lench, 2013; Berlyne, 1960; Mann, 2007; Moran, 2003; Van Tilburg and Igou, 2011). In that capacity, boredom is a defence against meaninglessness (Barbalet, 1999; Van Tilburg and Igou, 2012). Andreas Elpidorou (2017b) even compared the function of boredom to that served by pain – although the sensation of pain is unpleasant, it signals the presence of harm and motivates one to change one's behaviour, and protects a person. Analogically, boredom both monitors and regulates behaviour (see a regulatory theory of boredom in Elpidorou, 2017a), keeping someone in tune with their interests, and preventing them from wasting time (Johnsen, 2016).

Emotions also serve communication functions, informing other people about someone's attitudes, interests, values and/or beliefs. Boredom is interpreted as the communication of an intention of withdrawal from a situation/interaction and/or lack of interest in it. It may also serve as an excuse or justification for non-involvement, and mask laziness or insufficient cognitive abilities (Mann and Cadman, 2014). Boredom may be a demonstration of disagreement, resistance against values, beliefs or actions of others. As Reed Larson and Maryse Richards (1991) suggested, boredom at school "might be understood less as a spontaneous psychological state and more as the expression of a value or a posture that students adopt toward schoolwork and school authority" (p. 422). Boredom is also expressed as a passive form of protest against

social order, in the case of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century women (Pease, 2012), and a demonstration against capitalistic work division and values on the part of the nineteenth-century *flâneurs* (Benjamin, 2002). It may serve also as a pose of superiority – some people pose as bored in order to demonstrate their alleged pre-potency (Petry-Mroczkowska, 2004; Raposa, 1999), implying that they already know everything, they have already seen all kinds of ‘wonders’ of the world and that nothing can raise their interest no longer. For others, such as members of the leisure classes, it constitutes “a status-maintaining device” (Klapp, 1986, p. 26), a part of the role they play in social spectacle (Veblen, 2007).

Emotions are also believed to be

specialized modes of operation shaped by natural selection to adjust the physiological, psychological, and behavioural parameters of the organism in ways that increase its capacity and tendency to respond adaptively to the threats and opportunities characteristic of specific kinds of situations (Nesse, 1990, p. 268),

and thereby to have an evolutionary function. Boredom was beneficial for our evolutionary ancestors, at least in a few ways: (1) it prevented energy loss on things that were repetitive, predictable and monotonous, thus, not posing a threat (Bornstein, 1989; Heron, 1956; Todman, 2003), and thereby promoted the conservation of energy needed to compete for scarce resources (cf. Hsee et al., 2010, who found that people, despite having an aversion to idleness, tend to need justification for their busy-ness); (2) it has promoted learning, discovery and exploration ‘preventing animals from becoming behaviourally inflexible in the face of likely environmental changes’ (Burn, 2017; cf. Lin and Westgate, 2022), it motivates some animals to experiment with new sources of food, play with new materials, change territories, learn new skills – “those who had to fight boredom ended up knowing more about their environment and having more skills than those who were satisfied with simple tasks” (Davies and Fortney, 2012, p. 139), therefore, it has promoted self-regulation processes, which might increase adaptability to a changing environment (Elpidorou, 2017a). In other words, “boredom ‘punishes’ behavior lacking in meaning or optimal attentional engagement, encouraging people to disengage from those behaviors in the present, and making such behavior less likely in the future” (Lin and Westgate, 2022, p. 13); (3) it has deepened one’s perception (Lomas, 2017; Raposa, 1999) and enabled quick switches of attention between events, increasing the chances for locating both the sources of nourishment and danger (Mann, 2016); (4) it has been a mild form of disgust (Miller, 1997) and analogically “[i]f disgust protects humans from infection, boredom may protect them from ‘infectious’ social situations: those that are confined, predictable, too samey for one’s sanity” (Toohey, 2011, p. 17; see more in Finkielsztein, 2016).

In today’s information, entertainment, consumer, achievement society, boredom may constitute an anaesthetic response to overload of stimuli/information/opportunities. It is conceived as a form of adaptation strategy to the realities of an over-stimulating environment, “a self-protection mechanism against an overabundance of redundant stimuli” (Biceaga, 2006, p. 153), “a barrier against noise” (Klapp, 1986, p. 9). For instance, in the excessively stimulating urban environment, which exhausts one’s nervous system to its extreme by enforcing the state of ‘hyper attention’ (Han, 2015), boredom is a defensive mechanism protecting one’s sanity by

distancing them from the excess of stimuli (in this capacity, it resembles the concept of *blasé* coined by Georg Simmel [1950]).

The function of boredom that can also be founded in the relevant literature is its role as a spiritus movens of capitalism. “[B]oredom has to be incessantly conjured in order to push people into constant action and, above all, consumption” (Peeren, 2019, p. 105). The culture industry, as Theodor Adorno (2001) portrayed it, or boredom industry as I would call it (Finkielsztein, 2022, in press), is an endless spiral of passing from entertainment to boredom and backwards to the next entertainment without sense of satisfaction. Boredom becomes “a resented and feared bugbear of the consumer society,” because well-trained members of such a society cannot stand “the absence or even temporary interruption of the perpetual flow of attention-drawing, exciting novelties” (Bauman, 2007, p. 130). Nowadays, people are meticulously socialized to being addicted to novelty and constant stimulation. In consequence, they can hardly put up with routines and repetitions. They “experience this lack of tolerance as the uncomfortable feeling of boredom, and it is the motivation to reduce this ennui that leads [them] in a never-ending quest for stimulation” (Mann, 2016, p. xii).

Boredom may also serve several other functions. It acts as a defence/protection against, or disguise for less acceptable and more difficult emotions, such as rage, anger, anxiety, fear, concern or depression (Beckelman, 1995; Maynard, 2002; Marrant, 1984). Evangelia Loukidou (2008) found among nurses in a hospital ward for the mentally ill that being bored served as a protective measure against the fear of insanity – nurses distanced themselves from patients, did not engage with them emotionally, and ended up feeling bored. Boredom may be a distancing mechanism that prevents depression – when one is bored they are simultaneously detached from the source of depression and restless to find new meanings (Bargdill, 2014).

Experiencing boredom is also the most efficient way to learn how to cope with the feeling. Some kinds of boredom can be beneficial for future success; for instance, it is believed that a student’s academic boredom “prepares its victims for the greater boredom to come” (Healy, 1984, p. 9) in workplaces (Finkielsztein, 2013; Jablonka, 2013; Tardieu, 1913). Boredom is a significant element of the hidden curriculum (the unofficial, informal, implicit and often unintended rules, routines, and regulations students learn during their education [Jackson, 1990]). As Jack Common stated in 1951, “we learn reading and boredom, writing and boredom, arithmetic and boredom, and so on, depending on the program, then we can, with great certainty, take care of the most boring occupation, and we will endure it anyway” (quoted in Meighan, 1993, pp. 80–81).

Boredom is also reflected in power relationships, and is a tool for controlling society. The power to enforce boredom in others epitomises the higher social position – teachers subject their students to boredom during classes, doctors impose boredom on patients who have to wait for an appointment, courts sentenced offenders to the punishment of boredom (prison), parents punish their children with various kinds of limitations and constraints of freedom of action (e.g., grounding), governments set a curfew limiting a citizen’s opportunities for leisure activities or terrorise society, so people are afraid to leave their homes.



Boredom also allows people to perceive things as interesting – if boredom did not exist, everything would appear indistinguishable, bearing no particular meaning for individuals. The comparison with something conceived as boring enables people to find meaning and differentiate what interests them (Kolakowski, 1999).

## 6. Positive Outcomes

Apart from serving many vital functions, boredom may result in outcomes that are generally perceived as positive. One such product of this feeling may be reflection and self-cognition (Bizior-Dombrowska, 2016; Brodsky, 1995; Darden and Marks, 1999; Gehring, 1997). Boredom gives people a chance to be contemplative, to “develop a critical awareness of those activities which are ordinarily too banal or repetitive to merit attention” (Moran, 2003, p. 75). Boredom also constitutes an encounter with oneself, and is believed to enhance the identity forging process (Cioran, 1995; de Chateaubriand, 2010; Johnsen, 2011; Markowski, 1999), and this is why it is suggested to be of essential significance for children (Phillips, 1993) – in boredom one is able to reflect on oneself, get to know what they like/dislike, who they are, and to which end/future/goal they aspire.

At times, boredom is also associated with creativity (stimulus independent thoughts [Takeuchi et al., 2012]), or counter-factual imagination (Chylińska, 2017; see also Brisset and Snow, 1993; Gabelman, 2010; Gasper and Middlewood, 2014; Sandywell, 2016; Toohey, 2011). Boredom is perceived as “the pathway to enlightenment” (Keen, quoted in Brisset and Snow, 1993, p. 243), “the mystical feeling which drives the philosopher from abstract thinking to intuition” (Marx, 1976, p. 398), “the mother of all invention,” “the mother of the Muses” (Goethe, quoted in Kuhn, 1976, p. 184), and “a critical resource that pushes us to seek the unfamiliar” (de Vries, 2015, p. 170). Some authors claim that boredom is associated with an extensive type of attention (scattered, non-focused on one thing [Kolańczyk, 2011]), which enables creative processes by enhancing remote associations (Chylińska, 2016), and as the state that can activate the default mode network (Raichle et al., 2001; Zomorodi, 2017), in which the brain is not occupied by external stimuli and remains active, which is also claimed to be beneficial for creativity. All these things are believed to contribute to serendipity – the accidental discovery of an important solution by a theoretically prepared mind (Merton, 1968), an example of which may be Archimedes’ ‘eureka’ moment. Boredom was found to increase creativity in tasks requiring serial responses – in the research of Daniel Schubert (1977) participants who thought about solving a task for 60 minutes invented more solutions that were more creative than those who worked in three 20-minute sets separated by 20-minute breaks. Those who worked continuously after 20 minutes became bored with their earlier answers and invented new ones, while those who worked in batches after each break returned to what they had finished, reworking their previous answers. Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman (2014) suggested that being bored can lead to enhanced creativity in terms of quantity, but not quality – bored participants listed more uses for two polystyrene cups than participants in a control group, yet the answers were not significantly more creative. In total, the connection between boredom and creativity is far from being proved, yet, it is suggested that within some limits boredom at times might boost some individuals’ creativity (primarily those who are already creative, Ros Velasco, 2022).

As American anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936) suggested, “[i]t seems probable that the human capacity for being bored, rather than man’s social or natural needs, lies at the root of man’s cultural advance” (p. 90; cf. Nisbet, 1983). Indeed, data derived from both scientific literature and auto-biographical material suggests that many of the most active culture producers (artists) experienced boredom and were even motivated by it to write, paint or compose (Spacks, 1995). Artists admitted to create out of boredom include, among others, French writers George Sand (Bizior-Dombrowska, 2016), Voltaire, Alfred de Musset and Stendhal (Kuhn, 1976); Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz (Sienkiewicz, 1999); Italian writer Alberto Moravia (Ejder, 2005); the English poet George Byron (Gabelman, 2010); the English scholar and author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton (2009); the French painter, Eugène Delacroix (Śniedziwski, 2011); many avant-garde artists (e.g. Dadaists [Haladyn, 2015; Jawłowska, 1975]), and comics writers (Schneider, 2012). Boredom was, in its metaphysical, existential sense, conceived by many artists as an indispensable and inevitable part of all creative work. Friedrich Nietzsche even stated that “[f]or the thinker and for all inventive spirits, boredom is that disagreeable “lull” of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds; he has to endure it, must await its effect on him” (2001, p. 57). In that sense, boredom is a philosophical phenomenon par excellence – it may be even suggested that philosophy was founded out of boredom. It constitutes a powerful tool enabling the human being to leave the Platonian cave, i.e., the world of illusions, imitations, falsity and inauthenticity; it is ‘the moment of vision,’ in which we are able to see the truth of our existence, our *Dasein* (‘being-in-the-world’ [Heidegger, 1995]). In boredom, when one is not occupied by anything or oneself, one encounters/becomes aware of nihilism and acquires more accurate perspective on human life. One realises that the existence is meaningless and finite – non-existence (death) becomes obvious as an alternative to *Dasein*.

## 7. Conclusions

As proven by extensive literature, boredom is far from being insignificant, minor affective state. It has been found prevalent irrespectively of age, gender, culture or social class. Boredom affects all main spheres of human life – work, leisure, education, romantic relationships, sex life, even religious life. It has also been evidenced that boredom has many significant consequences. It has been associated with, among others, risk-taking behaviours, overeating, impulse shopping, (self-)destructive and violent behaviours including criminal and delinquent activities, relational problems and divorces. Boredom has also been found to be a corelative of many negative affective states. Yet, boredom may serve numerous significant functions as well. As an emotion, it is important for cognition, motivation and communication. In that capacity, boredom is indicated to form a motivating/energising force, a catalyst for action that ‘pushes’ one to seek for activity that seems meaningful or interesting, to engage in challenge-seeking behaviour. It has also had evolutionary meaning for human beings. In today’s society, it serves as a defensive mechanism against overload of stimuli, but somehow to the contrary is also found to be a basic mechanism animating current consumerism. Boredom is also conceived to be a catalyst for reflection, self-cognition, creativity, and as a consequence a rudimental element of culture production and its advances. All arguments gathered in this article was meant to evidence the

significance of boredom and prove that it is a worth researching phenomenon. If, as material gathered here seems to suggest, boredom is an inevitable part of human life and condition, and “an inescapable fact like the illness that comes in its time” (Tardieu, 1913, p. 233), we, as researchers, should pay more attention to it, to enhance positive outcomes and limited negative consequences of that emotional state.

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