Mundane emotions: Losing yourself in boredom, time and technology

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Abstract
Marketing and consumer research has drawn attention to the positive and joyful emotional features of consumer tribes. However, research has little to say on boredom, an emotional state already prevalent in consumers' lives, yet exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic due to lockdown restrictions that prevented tribal consumption experiences. Informed by Heidegger's understanding of boredom as a fundamental mood tied to temporality, this research uses semi-structured interviews to identify two kinds of boredom – superficial and profound boredom – and their specific temporal dynamics. Superficial boredom is common and refers to a situational restlessness in which people desire distractions. In contrast, profound boredom refers to an existential discomfort in which people struggle with their sense of self, but ultimately can result in the discovery of tribal passions. We explain superficial boredom as a symptom of a dominant temporal regime that comprises *connectivity* and *acceleration*. Together these temporal logics fragment and compress time in ways that encourage mundane social media consumption that simply fills time. We also explain how profound boredom stems from an abundance of uninterrupted time spent in relative solitude. In extending Heidegger's theory of boredom to analyse contemporary boredom in an era where digital technology is ubiquitous, our research contributes to consumer research's understanding of mundane emotions and discusses what it means to be bored together.

Keywords
tribes, boredom, mundane emotions, technology, temporality, Heidegger, acceleration, connectivity, COVID-19

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Marketing and consumer researchers have explored numerous instances in which consumers gather around goods, brands, and activities, and experience shared emotions together (Arnould et al., 2021). Whether it is the religious-like rituals of football fans (Hill et al., 2022; Steadman et al., 2021) or teenagers 'losing it' at raves (Goulding et al., 2009), studies describe pleasurable rushes of shared emotion created when consumers consume together. The hedonic value created through shared emotional experiences is best captured within the concept of consumer tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002), which describe how consumers come together in ways that prompt 'shared experience, the same emotion, a common passion' (Cova, 2003: 76). These tribal emotions provide consumers with a release from a world in which individualisation reigns (Cova and Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013). Collective pleasures do not merely provide forms of escape that allow consumers to return rejuvenated to everyday life (Scott et al., 2017), they result in valued relationships with others (Goulding et al., 2002) and, through the pursuit of shared passions, provide opportunities for tribal entrepreneurship (Cova et al., 2007; Guercini and Cova, 2018; Mardon et al., 2018).

While by no means the most significant casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic, tribal gatherings were disrupted by social distancing measures aimed to reduce the spread of the illness. The pandemic provided opportunities to explore a topic central to this special issue – what happens when it is no longer possible for tribes to gather – since consumers were cut off from the tribes that sustain them. Music festivals and conventions were cancelled or postponed. Exercise took place in the home. Live sports were played in front of empty stands. Restrictions caused difficulties for consumers and firms alike, but they also provided opportunities for tribal innovations: artists started to live-stream performances (Vandenberg et al., 2021) and digitally connected at-home exercise equipment proliferated, allowing some tribes to gather virtually (Clark and Lupton, 2021).

For some, lockdown restrictions imposed a 'Groundhog Day'-like monotony. Life appeared on pause as restrictions denied even the possibility of spontaneity and tribal consumption experiences. The media coined phrases such as 'quarantine fatigue' (Harrison, 2021) and 'COVID-boredom' (Haladyn, 2021) to capture people's experience of time appearing to slow down, of being restless and unengaged. Surveys showed more than fifty percent of people felt worse off due to increasing levels of boredom (Barari et al., 2020; Department of Health, 2021). While media reports drew attention to the passions people developed while furloughed from work, this obscured how for many, additional caring responsibilities and remote work encroached on home life. With more time being spent at home and nowhere to go to escape it all, people turned to social media and streaming services at unprecedented rates (Ofcom, 2021). This resounding sense of tedium resulted in boredom becoming one of the predominant 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977) of the pandemic.

In this article, we coin the term 'mundane emotions' to draw attention to everyday routines and the distinctive emotions that flow from them (De Certeau 1988; Lefebvre 2004). For example, commuting, cleaning or cooking routines, for some, may provide precious moments of comfort and calm after the daily grind. These very same routines may leave others feeling empty and bemoaning the absence of spontaneity, excitement and joy in their lives. Mundane emotions not only speak to the way that 'routine can be experienced simultaneously as joyous and tedious, tender and frustrating' (Highmore 2004: 311), but also how despite endless streams of novel technologies and immersive experiences (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016; Kozinets et al., 2017), contemporary consumer culture has not vanquished various emotional expressions of malaise and indifference (Nixon 2013; Saren 2012). We argue that boredom is a particularly important mundane emotion to understand, since researchers treat boredom as a negative emotion that consumers seek to escape from through tribal gatherings (Caru and Cova 2003; Scott et al., 2017). By providing an explanation for how boredom arises, our study meets calls for researchers to explore 'how marketplace arrangements cultivate emotions' (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010: 872), and in doing so, helps

readdress the bias towards tribal emotions that are shared, dramatic and visible (Jantzen et al., 2012; Higgins and Hamilton, 2019; Shove, 2003) over emotions that are more mundane and humdrum.

To provide insight into this emotion, this study explores people's experiences of boredom during the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw on Martin Heidegger's (1995) conceptualisation of boredom and its ties to temporality to answer the question: how do different temporal dynamics structure consumers' experience of boredom? Our study reveals two types of boredom and explain how both are organised and sequenced by a dominant 'temporal regimes' (Torres, 2021) that structures consumers' daily activities. We show superficial boredom as a situational restlessness from which people desire distraction. This experience is structured by two temporal features: (1) 'always on' connectivity that fragments time and de-sequences the order of activity (Crary, 2013) and (2) acceleration that compresses time and speeds up activity (Rosa, 2013; Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019). We demonstrate the digital character of superficial boredom by highlighting a recursive loop whereby consumers oscillate between digitally mediated forms of distraction and moments of superficial boredom. We also draw attention to the links between profound boredom and consumer tribes. We explain how profound boredom refers to an existential discomfort in which consumers struggle with a sense of self. Despite profound boredom representing a crisis of meaning, it is a catalyst for consumers to discover new tribal passions (Cova and Cova, 2002), demonstrating this type of boredom's transformative potential.

We begin by outlining how marketing and consumer research explains boredom as a relatively 'modern' mental state, whose emergence is tied to the historical development of consumer culture. We then show that studies are dominated by the view that boredom forms a negative, individually experienced emotion. To provide a more balanced understanding of boredom as a more complex emotion, we then turn to philosophical accounts of boredom, specifically Martin Heidegger's (1995) existential phenomenological theorisation of boredom. In doing so, we explain how boredom can also bring about positive outcomes, and note how boredom is intimately related to time.

Boredom in consumer culture

Boredom typically refers to a mental state of weariness, restlessness and lack of interest in something to which one is subjected (O'Brien, 2014; Spacks, 1995). Waiting in a train station or an airport lounge, queueing in a supermarket, or as an adult, having to watch a children's cartoon film, may be situations that typically make us bored. To be bored by these situations means that we simultaneously lack the energy and interest in the situation at hand while also having the desire to escape and do something else instead (Anderson, 2004).

Boredom is not an emotion typically associated with market societies built around the 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and yet marketing and consumer research suggests that boredom is a 'modern' mental state symptomatic of an affluent consumer culture (Nixon and Gabriel, 2016; Saren, 2012). While boredom is never the explicit focus of these studies, research nevertheless draws attention to how boredom has developed alongside broader social and historical forces. Boredom is the price consumers pay for living in an increasingly individualised world in which notions of self-actualisation and self-reflexivity demand people continually find purpose, enjoyment and interest in the world around them (Belk, 1988; Cova, 2003; Maffesoli, 1995), simply an impossible task. As Spacks (1995: 23) puts it, 'as individual life is accorded more importance … the inner life comes to be seen as consequential, therefore its inadequacies invite attention. The concept of boredom serves as an all-purpose register of inadequacy'. But as much as individualisation places focus on the inadequacies of our 'inner lives', research points to how standardisation and spatial and temporal homogenisation also leaves consumers disinterested by

their routines and the general 'sameness' of contemporary life (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Scott et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2021; Rosa, 2013; Thompson, 1996) And finally, studies investigating the nature of the digital age (Kozinets, 2008) alert us to the potential that modern technology can 'displace established traditions and meaningful practices' (Belk et al., 2021: 39), reflecting literature that critiques modern screen-based technology as encouraging a passive relationship to culture (Hand, 2017; Svendsen, 2005; Turkle, 2015)

When marketing and consumer researchers explicitly study boredom, they assume that boredom is a negative, individually experienced emotion that consumers want to escape from. Consumer psychologists work on the assumption that boredom is the opposite of a 'flow state' (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004) and their studies inform managerial strategies in retail contexts to alleviate boredom through clever servicescape design (Baker and Cameron, 1996; Taylor, 1994; Tsai and Zhao, 2011). Boredom is treated similarly in qualitative consumer research. Boredom, as Caru and Cova (2003: 278) put it, is something to be 'feared' and escaped from. Heath and Nixon (2021) note that boredom is a negative feeling that motivates daydreaming. Belk et al. (2003) see boredom as the final mental state consumers are left in as their desires are finally realised. Scott et al. (2017) explain that tribal experiences constitute consumer's desperate attempts to 'escape boredom'.

But is boredom solely negative, bringing about nothing other than restlessness and the desire to escape? And is boredom something to be avoided, vanquished as if it has no positive outcome? Fortunately, boredom is often the wellspring of philosophers who have ruminated on the nature of boredom. As Gardiner notes (2012: 38), contrary to this dominant reading of boredom being an exclusively negative emotion, many philosophers have explained how boredom 'might occasionally harbour flashes of subversive insight and the seeds of transformation praxis'. Our attention now turns to explicating Heidegger's (1995) theorisation of boredom, and in doing so, explain how boredom can also bring about positive outcomes, and note how boredom is intimately related to time.

Heidegger on boredom

Heidegger's (1929/30) lectures on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* provide a remarkable phenomenological explication of different types of boredom. Heidegger describes two kinds of boredom – *superficial boredom* and *profound boredom.* Superficial boredom refers to the familiar state of *being bored by a situation*. To refer to the example of being bored waiting in a train station or an airport lounge, for Heidegger (1995) these situations leave us bored because we are simultaneously *held in limbo*, unable to progress our own interests, and *left empty* by our own lack of interest and the unavailability of meaningful alternatives and possibilities. In other words, we are held in limbo by a situation that restricts us from doing what we want to be doing, while simultaneously being left empty insofar as the situation does not satisfy us.

Heidegger (1995) explains *profound boredom* as a deep state of indifference towards oneself and to the world. Time appears completely absent in profound boredom; the temporal aspects of past, present and future combine to form a unified temporality and beings withdraw (Heidegger, 1995). As a result, profound boredom causes apathy towards one's past, present and future self. While superficial boredom is characterised by the will to escape, profound boredom sees people impervious to everything and everyone. Indifference prevents any kind of meaningful involvement in anything of interest – once again *we are left empty*. The corresponding absence of ongoing concerns or future projects means that profound boredom also *leaves us in limbo*.

Surprisingly, within this profound malaise, Heidegger (1995) recognises existential possibility. 'This boredom wishes to tell us something', writes Heidegger (1995: 135). Like Benjamin (1968:

91), who wrote that 'boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience', Heidegger saw that through profound boredom, we can see the world anew, question what makes life meaningful to us, and connect these interests to a meaningful past, present and future. As Gardiner (2014) states, through profound boredom, Heidegger alerts us to its potentially generative and 'utopian' qualities.

Boredom and Time Heidegger's work also attunes us to boredom's close relationship to time. As Heidegger (1995: 80) notes, boredom bears 'an almost obvious relation to time, a way in which we stand with respect to time, a feeling of time'. Heidegger's point isn't that time feels like it is slowing down when bored (Anderson, 2004). Rather, it relates to the more general observation that profound boredom was historically an experience reserved for those in the upper echelons of society since they had the privilege of free time in which to become bored (Svendson 2005). More recent writings about the modern character of boredom speculate on whether profound boredom is even possible in an era characterised by the increased pace of contemporary life, where the proliferation of digital technology provides countless numbers of distractions to stop consumers from being bored (Buchanan 2017; Gardiner 2014; Hand 2017).

As a result of the relation between boredom and time, we also situate our analysis within marketing and consumer research that explores temporality (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Robinson et al., 2021; Woermann and Rokka, 2015). Central to our analysis is the idea that time is a resource that individuals have, to which they can allocate specific activities (Festjens and Janiszewski, 2015; Robinson, et al., 2021). However, how consumers plan their lives, allocate activities to chunks of time, is determined by the temporal demands of work, family life, childcare, and public transport schedules, and so on (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Robinson, et al., 2021; Thompson, 1996). This research highlights how the length and sequence of daily tasks are never something people have choice over (Rosa, 2013), but are instead prescribed by 'temporal regimes', or the 'socio-historical forms by which time is materialised, organised and distributed' (Torres, 2021: 35). The concept 'temporal regimes' is useful for our analysis because it highlights the socio-political underpinnings of how time is regulated, much in line with recent research that has started to explain how consumers escape the 'subjugatory' (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Robinson et al., 2021) nature of a speeded-up society and its accelerated temporal regime (Rosa, 2013; Torres, 2021).

In light of Heidegger's conceptualisation of boredom, and considering boredom's relationship with temporality, our research is motivated by the question: how do different temporal dynamics structure consumers' experience of boredom? Such an investigation has been made possible owing to varying governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, which has created challenges for public health systems and global economies. The pandemic context presents two unique temporal situations. On the one hand, furlough schemes meant some consumers were supported financially while businesses were closed. With no work to complete, some consumers were left with more free time. On the other hand, to maintain economic activity people were asked to work from home and often had to juggle other tasks. As Kunisch et al. (2021: 1412) explains, the pandemic has seen 'reliable temporal patterns, boundaries, and routines dissolve into thin air, while new routines based on the digitalization of work experiences have flourished'. In doing so, clear 'top-down' prescriptions changed temporal planning and daily activity in ways that made visible how broader temporal regimes structure experiences of boredom. For these reasons the pandemic provides an ideal context to explore these concerns.

Methods

We aimed to examine consumer's experiences of boredom during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary source of data was interviews conducted with 15 people, with participants located in the Republic of Ireland and England. The sample comprised couples with and without children, and single households, who spent large periods of time at home during lockdown restrictions. All participants [see Table 1] were either placed on furlough schemes or asked to work from home, thus providing insight into changes into a range of changes in daily activity and routines. The ages of participants varied between 20 and 60, and participants were sourced through convenience and snowball sampling.

Adopting a phenomenological approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Thompson et al., 1989). Respondents were first asked to describe the emotions they felt during the pandemic. They were then invited to describe their daily activity at different time periods during the pandemic, and to reflect on their activities of the previous week, and to describe how they planned their day, in keeping with research that explores how consumers temporally organise their daily life (Southerton, 2006). Most interviews were conducted remotely using video conferencing software. A small number of interviews were face-to-face when government restrictions allowed. Interviews lasted between 40 and 100 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim. Interviews occurred across two years, 2020 and 2021, thus providing insight into how different government restrictions impacted their emotions and their daily activity. In total, we conducted 20 interviews. Of these 20, 5 were follow-up interviews. While only 5 of the 15 agreed to be interviewed again, these interviews were useful insofar as they allowed us to gain further insight into the changing character of our participant's daily activity as the pandemic continued and government restrictions evolved.

Author one and author two conducted an iterative textual analysis of the interview transcripts to first develop first-order categories grounded in our participants' experiences and meaning structures (Thompson et al., 1989). This initial phase of coding focused on identifying phenomenological

Table 1. Participant table.

Name	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Follow-up interview	New tribal passions
Jenny	19	F	UG	Student		
Paul	28	M	High School	Bar worker	X	Carpentry
Laura	29	F	UG	Freelance journalist		
Erica	35	F	PG	Psychiatrist		
Charlotte	31	F	PG	Translator	X	
Jamie	34	M	UG	Civil servant	X	
Mark	44	M	UG	Secondary School teacher	X	
Catherine	48	F	UG	Procurement executive		Baking
Richard	28	M	UG	Waiter		
Charlie	36	M	UG	Civil servant		Cooking
Darren	38	M	UG	Mature Student	X	Cycling
William	33	M	High School	Logistics		
Elizabeth	31	F	UG	Accountant		
John	60	M	High School	Painter and decorator		
Stephanie	43	F	High School	Marketing communications		Baking

experiences of boredom and how and when consumers became bored. This initial phase resulted in 35 first-order codes, among them were 'social media consumption', 'lack of fun', 'time', 'distraction' and 'restlessness'. Second-order themes were then developed by iteratively moving between our first-order categories, Heidegger's concepts of profound and superficial boredom, and literature around different types of temporal regimes (Crary, 2013; Rosa, 2013; Torres, 2021) and their impact on the planning and activity of daily life (Southerton, 2006). Through this iterative process we were able to abstract away from our participants phenomenological experiences to identify three temporal regimes as they related to experiences of boredom.

Findings

We structure our findings around phenomenological experiences of boredom and connect these to varying temporal regimes that shaped consumers' lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. We first describe superficial boredom, a situational restlessness in which consumers desire distractions. We then explain superficial boredom as a symptom of a dominant temporal regime that comprises *connectivity* (Crary, 2013) and *acceleration* (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Rosa, 2013). Together these temporal logics fragment and compress time in ways that encourage social media consumption that simply fills time with 'boring activity'. We then describe profound boredom, an existential discomfort in which participants struggle with a sense of self, but ultimately can result in the discovery of passions. We explain profound boredom stems from an abundance of uninterrupted time spent in relative solitude, and connect this to disruptions to the dominant temporal regime caused by government responses to COVID-19.

Superficial boredom

Experiencing superficial boredom. Participants readily described being bored at home during lockdown. Our participants' days were mostly filled with routine tasks like remote working and studying, caring for others, preparing meals, daily walks, watching television, social media consumption and occasional trips to the supermarket. As Jenny details, the monotony of this routine, when coupled with a lack of tribal gatherings to plan for, resulted in participants feeling restless and looking for distractions:

> "Lockdown was definitely boring. Every day was the exact same. I honestly think I was losing myself there for a while. I felt like I was in a constant state of nothing to do - no nights out, no one to see in person - and honestly, it was awful. … I tried to escape that feeling as much as humanly possible, searching for something to keep me busy, keep my mind off the reality of not having any actual plans, or anything to look forward to, no holidays, no festivals, nothing. … I missed that connection with strangers you really only get at festivals, where you feel like you're on the same page, even though you don't know each other's names. … Boredom sent me towards filling my spare time with social media, silly reality TV and aimless distractions to pass the time."

Jenny's description of her restlessness draws attention to an integral quality of superficial boredom. Heidegger (1995) explains that the most common experience of boredom relates to the feeling that a situation is preventing us from progressing our interests. Here, lockdown restrictions held Jenny *in limbo* (Heidegger, 1995) because they precluded typical consumption activities that sustain her, like the festivals Jenny notes (Bradford and Sherry, 2015). Indeed, Jenny describes the sense of yearning for tribal experiences when she laments the loss of 'the connection with strangers

… where you feel like you're on the same page' (see Goulding et al., 2009). Tribal gatherings are not only a source of shared pleasure and sociality (Cova, 2001), but they also mark out the passing of time (Cova and Cova, 2002). Without any such plans, nor anything to look forward to, participants described how they felt like, as Erica put it, 'life was put on hold' and to distract from this situation, spent more time on social media.

Mundane social media consumption

With lockdown restrictions holding consumers in limbo, our participants described turning to social media to pass free, non-work time. Social media provides consumers with hedonic stimulation, sources of desire, arousal and various moods that allow people to temporarily remove themselves from a situation and manage how they feel (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016; Kozinets et al., 2017). The accessibility and 'always on' nature of social media means it is always at hand to fill 'downtime', as Paul now describes:

> "I filled time by doom-scrolling, on Twitter especially. It was addictive at that time, but a waste of time, I know it, I know. Twitter is not an enjoyable place, it can be depressing, but at least you know there is always something new to read, new information about the pandemic, something that may be interesting, enraging; it's good for snooping around. I know it is time wasted, some days I was on socials for 7 hours in total - I could definitely do something more useful, meaningful, whatever - but it did pass the time."

Heidegger (1995) explains how boredom involves *being left empty*. Paul describes how social media promises an endless supply of novelty – a continuous stream of information, videos, stories and news (Kozinets et al., 2017) – which became an invaluable source of knowledge during the pandemic. However, Paul's remarks on how he ultimately regretted the time he spent 'wasted' on social media platforms reflects a common sentiment expressed by our participants, which was that their excessive social media consumption left them feeling empty, as they realised the opportunities they lost through 'doom scrolling'.

Social media consumption simultaneously provides a means of temporary escape from superficial boredom, yet nonetheless appears to exacerbate it, as participants describe 'mindlessly', 'needlessly', 'stupidly' checking Facebook, Instagram and Twitter repeatedly. Like Paul, Laura describes how her social media consumption left her regretful for the time she wasted: 'it's easy to get sucked into social media because you're bored and have some time to kill, but I always felt like I'd wasted my time, just mindlessly scrolling and updating my feeds'. Here, our participants describe being bored thanks to lockdown restrictions, but their digital consumption activity distracts them from it – but yet, ultimately leaves them bored. In this sense, our participants appear stuck in a recursive loop, continuously oscillating between fleeting moments of superficial boredom and digitally mediated forms of distraction.

The superficial boredom our informants describe as being a common feeling during the pandemic connects to the ways in which temporal regimes organises and sequences time. In the next two sections, we describe how superficial boredom is related to a dominant temporal regime that comprises *connectivity* (Crary, 2013) and *acceleration* (Rosa, 2013; Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019), which, taken together, fragments and compresses time in ways that de-sequence and speed up activity.

Connectivity: The fragmentation of time and de-sequencing of activity

Government responses to the pandemic did not only result in people being furloughed. With one eye on public health and the other on the economy, governments adopted a hybrid approach that enforced working from home (Walker et al., 2020). Such directives took advantage of the proliferation of various forms of 'always on', connected technologies – WiFi, tablets, laptops, and smartphones, and their related services – that promise greater flexibility and collaboration in work (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Such directives reconfigured relationships between substantive spheres of life (Crary, 2013) – between work, consumption, free time and domestic labour – in ways that ushered in an organisation and distribution of time that facilitated consumers' experiences of superficial boredom.

Connectivity brings a sense of interruption and distraction that fragments experiences of time into increasingly smaller units, and boundaries between categories of activity become less clearly defined (Hand, 2017). The fragmentation of time de-sequences the order in which activities are conducted, breaking down distinctions between time allocated for work and non-work activity. Participants described how a never-ending deluge of work and non-work based notifications de-sequences the typical order in which work and non-work activity occurs, impacting their ability to be absorbed within consumption activity. Even when time is allocated for the pursuit of shared passions (Cova and Cova, 2002), participants describe how it is nevertheless disrupted by short bursts of work activity and social media consumption. In the next extract, Charlotte describes how the connective quality of smartphones, while allowing her to be connected to friends, and her boyfriend to his work, also takes away from her ability to fully engage with films, leaving her and her boyfriend superficially bored:

> "We tried to watch a lot of films, which we really do love, but I won't say it left me feeling totally fulfilled. … I'm pretty bad at having my phone with me while watching a movie. My boyfriend doesn't really like it. But it's hard not to watch something with your phone beside you. A friend from Europe got in touch recently, out of the blue, and I'd have missed the opportunity to connect with her if I didn't have it with me. … I've explained to him it only takes a second to respond, and yes, I guess the conversation may take me away from whatever we're watching. But you don't want to be rude and ignore it despite them knowing you've seen their message, right? And he does it with work emails too, when it takes like two minutes or longer to reply?"

Charlotte's account of a failed attempt to watch a film with her partner sheds light on what it means to be bored together. Despite pursuing a passion together (Cova and Cova, 2002), Charlotte describes the distractions caused by devices that vie for her attention, highlighting how connectivity makes it difficult to focus on a single activity for a sustained period of time (Hand, 2017). The shared distractions Charlotte describes alters the couple's focus, such that it becomes difficult to be absorbed by the film. By being constantly distracted it becomes impossible for the couple to become an 'active' audience, one that collectively negotiates and critically reflects upon the meanings offered to it (Fiske, 1989). Indeed, Charlotte's account of being bored while watching a film reveals how boredom can spread within a group as one person symbolically 'exits' the shared activity, revealing their lack of commitment to the collective pursuit. As Husemann and Eckhardt (2019) note, the expectations that consumers must be constantly tethered to their smartphone contribute to the sense consumers feel of being overwhelmed by digital technology, manifest in 'digital detox' initiatives.

Acceleration: The compression of time and speeding up of activity

Acceleration typically refers to the speeding up of society, experienced through the rate of technological, political and cultural change, as well as the quickening of the pace of life that leaves people with the experience of being 'time pressured' (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Rosa, 2013). Acceleration is experienced as a sense of busyness and rush amidst compressed time, and the corresponding desire to escape these feelings.

As working from home lost its novelty and the economy started moving again, our participants explain how the number of daily tasks increased. In this extract, Jamie describes increases in the amount of simple work tasks left him exhausted and unable to do anything other than wind away the remaining hours of the day on social media:

> "My experience of the second lockdown felt very different from the first. I was a lot more hurried at work as we had to play catch-up on infrastructure projects that had slowed down earlier in the year. … One Zoom meeting after another, from 8.30am to 7pm, some days that would go on right into the evening. Non-stop at times. … Sitting in separate rooms in a small house in a dingy bit of East London, doing repetitive, low-level sort of administrative and auditing work, long hours, yeah, it's boring … And it's not like I can go down the pub to escape. I end up at home all night on social media."

Jamie's experiences of an accelerated day working from home results from the increased number of mundane, 'low-level' tasks he needed to complete in the typical working day. Despite his role in a governmental department, Jamie's work activity nevertheless involves adherence to strict protocols and auditing procedures, which leaves little room for creativity or autonomy (Costas and Karreman, 2016). The long hours, standardised nature of his work coupled with a lack of tribal escapes leaves Jamie feeling restless, and destined to update his social media feed all night, leaving him feeling bored.

The speeding up of activity also decreases the amount of downtime consumers have between discrete tasks, time subsequently filled with social media consumption. For those who juggled work and childcare, a lack of downtime between discrete activities was particularly pronounced, as Mark now describes:

> "We enjoyed the early stages of the lockdown. … But that honeymoon phase didn't last long. I had to start online teaching, which was a complete nightmare. Then Jake [one of Mark's children] started getting work sent home from school … I spent half the day trying to help with his work and the rest trying to upload work online and checking up on my own students. After a while, it was impossible, overwhelming. There was no time left in the day. The kids were sick of it. Day after day the same thing … Some days, I had no choice only to leave them watch their programmes on Netflix or Disney, we both don't feel great about it. We were as bored and worn as the kids. It was a bit of a blur, nothing really stood out. We spent most of our evenings binging shows on Netflix or in bed on social media before going to sleep."

Mark experiences time pressure as the combination of work and childcare becomes difficult to manage. Mark turns to digital technology for temporary distraction as he experiences time compression. As he describes, consumers become stuck in a recursive loop between boredom and distraction, that impedes opportunities for existential reflection. As we now show, this potential is exclusively the reserve of profound boredom.

Profound boredom

Experience of profound boredom. Participants described how at times during the pandemic, free time was in greater supply than ever. Our data reveals that profound boredom arose once they had an abundance of free time with few meaningful activities to fill it. Much like superficial boredom, experiences of profound boredom surface as a malaise stemming from monotony and disinterest in daily activities, as Catherine describes:

> I would say lockdown, at its worst, was like a dull Groundhog Day. Nothing exciting going on, day after day, lots of bad news. There were only so many times I could clean the flat with my flatmate, and my daily walk was not relaxing. It was boring, really boring. It's only when you have no work to do and time by yourself that you have to find meaningful things to fill time with. I honestly think I was losing myself there for a while. Like, how could I have so few things to do, like hobbies, or interests outside work? I felt quite depressed at a point, I think, I don't know. But I was in a pretty bad place, I felt like I was in a bit of funk with who I was as a person.

Catherine's extract illuminates the more intense sense of flatness and disinterest that some participants experienced during lockdown when they began to feel like there was *really* nothing to do. During this malaise Catherine realised she had few passionate interests (Cova and Cova, 2002) outside of work, which led her to ask questions about who she was. As Catherine intimates, it was the inactivity and solitude of these experiences that caused some to cascade deeper into boredom and to experience the intensity of its more profound effects (Heidegger, 1995). This absence of disruption and an increasing sense of solitude were common features for those who experienced profound boredom.

Consuming solitude

During bouts of profound boredom participants were *held in limbo* by an acute sense of their own exhausted potential, characterised by the feeling that there was simply nothing of significance for them to progress. In these moments, Heidegger (1995: 135) explains that we stand as 'an un-differentiated no one' without interests or concerns, a feeling Richard expresses:

> "I felt empty, an emptiness that was difficult to escape from. The longer I was bored, the worse I felt about myself. Like, who am I and what do I want to do with my life? [...] And I was bored a lot last year, especially as the first lockdown went on and on and there was not much work to be done and obviously you couldn't go outside. But one positive thing is that it made me take on new things to escape that empty feeling."

As Richard's account emphasises, profound boredom is experienced as an intense indifference to daily tasks and an inability to imagine meaningful ways of spending time, where consumers struggle with their sense of self. Crucially, in our participant's descriptions of profound boredom, social media consumption is absent. Within such situations, a sense of solitude emerged as they disconnected from the 'always on' connectivity of social media.

As much as profound boredom is unsettling, it can also result in existential reflection. As Richard explains, he was *left feeling empty* by a lack of potential to progress something meaningful in his life despite an abundance of time. Heidegger (1995) explains that it is the emptiness of these moments that reveals the possibility that things can be better. Paradoxically, the discomfort of being held in

limbo and being left empty energised some participants to question what they wanted from their limited time in the world (Heidegger, 1995).

Abundance of time and the discovery of passions

Experiences of profound boredom stem from an abundance of uninterrupted time spent in relative solitude. As such, the strictest of lockdown restrictions provided ideal conditions for consumers to experience profound boredom. In March 2020, the world economy ground to a halt as lockdown restrictions were imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19. These restrictions constituted an exceptional disruption to the dominant temporal regime: daily life was not exclusively organised around work. Instead, with many participants placed on furlough schemes, some participants such as Charlie had an *abundance of free time* available and experimented with new interests:

> "The initial lockdown was, I think, good overall. We're lucky we don't have children, I can't imagine how tiring that must have been. But yes, after we finished rescheduling the wedding and tidying the house, it became clear there's only so much time you can spend on social media or keeping up to speed with the news before you get bored. We had a bunch of recipe books lying around, some Ottolenghi ones, a Sicilian one, and both Charlotte and I had always said it'd actually be good to be alright at cooking, rather than scrambling around to make things and to be disappointed in the end. So, we spent free time cooking a lot I guess. … Now that we've moved house and we can have people over, we've had people over for dinner and it's been great, so yeah, something positive has come out of all of this."

The winding down of activities and the abundance of free time supported our participants experiences of profound boredom in three respects: (i) it allowed time to linger in the discomfort of boredom; (ii) it gave time for self-reflection; (iii) it afforded time to discover new passions. As the previous extract exemplifies, profound boredom motivated some to take up fulfilling hobbies. In Charlie's case, boredom energised a simple – but profound – chance to discover a passion for cooking.

Guercini and Cova (2018: 386) explain that 'passions foster the development of competencies, skills, and knowledge'. Cumulatively, during lockdowns, our participants explored plant propagation, learnt to bake bread, played musical instruments, cycled long distances and adopted new exercise regimes. Such opportunities to discover new passions stresses the generative potential of profound boredom (Heidegger, 1995), while also demonstrating how time – and having more of it – is deeply implicated in these experiences. Darren's interview further illustrates the connection between profound boredom, an abundance of time caused by quitting his job, and the discovery of passions:

> "Before Covid I was working in a call centre. To tell you the truth, I was sick to my teeth with it. It was the same thing every day and I was always under pressure. Things got worse during the pandemic when I had to start working from home. I was stuck in my bedroom and obviously not meeting any of my colleagues, the social side was completely gone. I was in a rut, completely stuck. I felt like I was going nowhere. … After months working from home, I jacked it in [quit]. Things weren't much better after I quit. I was really struggling. The days were too long and I had nothing to do. Something had to give, I was bored stiff. I decided to go back [cycling] training. I really got back into it again. It was great cycling with the lads, getting a buzz and feeling healthy. It was the first time in ages that I'd got a bit of joy from something. It gave me the lift I needed … I'm back in college now doing a course in recreation and sports management. If I get through it, I'd like to be a personal trainer and maybe even open up my own gym".

Pre-pandemic, Darren was disinterested with his managerial job in a call centre. During the pandemic, he worked from home and missed face-to-face sociality, which provided relief from the unfulfilling aspects of the role. Without this social element of work, he left his job. However, Darren was *left empty* in that he felt, in his words, 'completely stuck' in his life, where he 'had nothing to do' with the time he now had available. Heidegger (1995: 295) explains that in profound boredom the potential for 'authentic being-in-the-world' opens up as people have to face themselves in a 'moment of vision'. In simple terms, the revelation of profound boredom is the discovery of passions. For Darren, by rediscovering a passion of his cycling, he has made a 'fresh start' (see Price et al., 2018) and plans for a new career.

Common to our participants' experiences of profound boredom and the discovery of passions is how these passions are socially valued because they are deemed to be economically productive. Darren's passion for cycling is valued for its future entrepreneurial potential. Another participant, Stephanie, discovered a passion for baking after furlough left her 'deeply bored'. However, she turned this passion where she sells bread to neighbours into a 'side business'. On one hand, this reflects the entrepreneurial potential of tribes (Cova et al., 2007; Guercini and Cova, 2018; Mardon et al., 2018). On the other hand, it also reflects the 'subjectivation' (Genosko, 2012) or internalisation of a socio-economic system that treats non-work life as an untapped entrepreneurial opportunity, where passions are deemed valuable insofar as they provide resources for economic productivity.

Discussion

Beyond tribal emotions and towards investigations of mundane emotions

Research exploring consumer tribes describe pleasurable rushes of shared emotion created when consumers consume together (Cova and Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2009). The elicitation of a 'shared experience, the same emotion, a common passion' (Cova, 2003: 76) allow for consumers to temporarily escape the mundane reality of everyday life (Cova and Cova, 2002; Scott et al., 2017). Despite calls for research to explore 'how marketplace arrangements cultivate emotions' (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010: 872), marketing and consumer research has had little to say about the more mundane emotions that characterise the undramatic and ordinary (Jantzen et al., 2012; Higgins and Hamilton, 2019; Shove, 2003).

Our study therefore addresses the one-sidedness present within research that privileges the dramatic over the unglamourous, the extraordinary over the ordinary. We develop the concept of 'mundane emotions' to name the distinctive emotional rhythms that flow from everyday routines (De Certeau 1988; Lefebvre 2004). By illustrating the organisation of temporal regimes during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study reminds us that mundane routines are often imposed from above. Once habituated, routines can be carried out automatically without conscious thought or reflection (Tadajewski, 2019; Murphy et al., 2019). For this reason, they can sometimes feel like 'freedom, and at other times bondage and restraint' (Shove et al., 2009: 4). We may have little say over our mundane routines, but habits do allow us to be physically present doing what we need to do, while freeing us up to be elsewhere emotionally: daydreaming, problem solving or planning. As conscious acts, routines can have a grounding effect – there is a comfort and reassurance to be found in their predictability. At the same time, the prescriptive and taken for granted nature of routines can be constraining and leave us feeling like we are sleepwalking through a life that is beyond our control. It is the polarity, simultaneity, and pervasiveness of these feelings that makes mundane emotions

interesting and important. To examine these emotional aspects of the mundane, is to consider 'the effects and affects of this regular and regulated rhythmicity' (Highmore, 2004: 307).

The originality of our study lies in its investigation of one mundane emotion that characterises the everyday from which consumers apparently seek to escape: boredom. This study provides a counterpoint to literature that celebrates boredom as something that has been vanquished by a consumer culture that provides opportunities for self-actualising experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and devices that preclude consumers from ever being bored (Buchanan 2017). In this sense, our study builds on recent research that investigates similar mundane emotions and experiences such as daydreaming (Heath and Nixon 2021) and indifference (Nixon, 2013) that, while un-dramatic, are nevertheless emotional experiences that appear ubiquitous. We hope this research provides opportunities for researchers to explore other more socially complex emotions that saturate daily life, such as anxiety, contentedness and aching dissatisfaction.

Boredom in an age of distractions

Marketing and consumer research suggests that boredom is a 'modern' mental state symptomatic of an affluent consumer culture (Nixon and Gabriel, 2016; Saren, 2012). Studies suggest that boredom can be traced to historical forces of individualism (Belk, 1988; Cova 2003; Maffesoli, 1995), spatial and temporal homogenising processes (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Scott et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2021; Rosa 2013; Thompson, 1996), and the passive relationship to culture brought about by the digital age (Belk et al., 2021; Kozinets, 2008). When boredom does feature in studies, re-searchers assume boredom is a negative, individually experienced emotion. Boredom is the opposite of a 'flow state' (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004) that in retail settings must be mitigated against (Baker and Cameron, 1996), a motivation for daydreaming (Heath and Nixon 2021) or the dis-appointed mental state consumers are left in as their desires are finally realised (Belk et al., 2003). In short, boredom is treated as something to escape from (Caru and Cova, 2003; Scott et al., 2017).

In contrast, our research has implications for our understanding of boredom by demonstrating that boredom should not be thought of as simply a negative emotion. Our participant's experiences of profound boredom (Heidegger, 1995), while arising as existential discomfort in which they struggle with a sense of self, are nevertheless productive experiences. To experience profound boredom, consumers resist distractions and instead spend time in relative solitude. Through profound boredom, our participants discovered tribal passions around which they reoriented their lives (Cova and Cova, 2002), and sparked the desire for social connections. In other words, our study reveals a paradox in which the emptiness of profound boredom announces the possibility that things can be better. Profound boredom is not an emotional state to be resisted, to be mitigated against. Instead, our study shows how the profound variation of boredom harbours a 'utopian', self-transformative potential, launching people into new passions and unforeseen life trajectories (Gardiner, 2014). We therefore contribute to the understanding of 'fresh starts' (Price et al., 2018) by demonstrating how experiences of profound boredom can return meaning and direction to con-sumers' lives by connecting people with tribes and their entrepreneurial potential. While boredom may be 'one of the greatest tortures' (Fromm, 1963: 181), something to be 'feared' (Caru and Cova, 2003: 278) it can be freeing.

Our research tempers any expectations that profound boredom is likely the most common experience of boredom in the twentieth-first century. Our analysis explains how profound boredom emerged as an experience made possible under exceptional circumstances, where government responses to the pandemic relieved some people of work, granting the fortunate few with an abundance of time, time which required filling. In the main, however, our findings show that

superficial boredom (Heidegger, 1995) is a common experience, experienced as a situational restlessness in which consumers desire distractions. Our data also shows our participants turning to social media to escape their superficial boredom but in doing so, exacerbate their feelings of boredom. Indeed, a paradox appears here, where these 'quick-hits' of social media provide a remedy of being superficially bored (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016; Kozinets et al., 2017) but also use up time to overcome it. To put this otherwise, while the proliferation of screen-based technology allows consumers to distract themselves from being superficially bored, these distractions are nonetheless constitutive of boredom.

Our analysis therefore provides a contemporary update to Heidegger's (1995) existential phenomenological theory of boredom in an era where digital technology and distractions are in abundance. Our research shows how a dominant temporal regime (Torres, 2021) consisting of connectivity (Crary, 2013) and acceleration (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Rosa, 2013) eliminate the potential for solitude in contemporary culture, and thus profound boredom. Superficial boredom is the logical outcome of temporal connectivity and acceleration, and our research helps explain why consumers may seek solace and solitude from the digital world (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019).

Being bored together

Next, our findings provide insight into what it means to be bored together. Unlike emotions associated with tribes such as joy and excitement, which can be shared and strengthened in tribal settings (Goulding et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2022; Cova and Cova, 2001), marketing and consumer research assumes boredom is an emotion that afflicts individuals, not groups, and cannot be shared.

In contrast, our research reveals that boredom can be shared. To be sure, a common pattern in our data is that boredom arises as an individualised emotion, whose most profound effects are felt in conditions of solitude. Nevertheless, our findings present insight into what it may mean to be bored together as people pursue shared passions (Cova and Cova, 2001). We identified how superficial boredom can spread within a couple as one person's focus is distracted, revealing a lack of engagement and commitment to a collective pursuit. The role of technologies such as smartphones cannot be overlooked since they vie for consumers' attention (Buchanan, 2017; Crary, 2013) and thus are a constant source of distraction.

More positively, however, our research shows how profound boredom helps consumers discover new passions, which, when shared with others, can become a source of tribal entrepreneurship (Cova et al., 2007; Guercini and Cova, 2018; Mardon et al., 2018). The time-limited nature of our research does not allow us to follow-up how our participants' tribal passions evolved with others. We note, however, that tribes have historically formed out of a shared rejection of boredom. UK punk culture, for instance, was in part a political critique of the monotony of life under the Fordist settlement (Anderson, 2021). Punk's theatricality and energy provided a critical rejoinder to the era's monotony. In the present day, we suggest that boredom may also serve as a useful counterpoint and rallying call for tribes to reject the cultural expectation that people need to be readily available and always engaged.

Our research explains the different ways in which boredom was experienced for consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, this study sheds light on a distinctly 'modern' emotion that characterises consumer culture, but also constitutes the very mental state tribes allow temporary escape from. Further work is needed to better establish the role material conditions and class play in consumer's potential for experiences of boredom. While our research sampled participants from varying age, occupational and education backgrounds, future research should seek to provide

greater specificity over how experiences of boredom interrelate to different temporal regimes and class statuses.

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