

Social media may prevent users from reaping the creative rewards of profound boredom

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People who turn to social media to escape from superficial boredom are unwittingly preventing themselves from progressing to a state of profound boredom, which may open the door to more creative and

meaningful activity, a new study of the COVID pandemic shows.

Researchers from the University of Bath School of Management and Trinity College, Dublin, identified that the pandemic, furlough, and enforced solitude provided many people with the rare opportunity to experience the two levels of [boredom](#)—"superficial" and "profound"—identified first by German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Superficial boredom—the most common state of boredom—can be defined as a feeling of restlessness familiar to us all, of being bored in a situation such as waiting for a train where we seek temporary distractions from [everyday life](#) and in which [social media](#) and [mobile devices](#) play a significant role.

Profound boredom stems from an abundance of uninterrupted time spent in relative solitude, which can lead to indifference, apathy, and people questioning their sense of self and their existence—but which Heidegger said could also pave the way to more creative thinking and activity.

The research examined the experiences of boredom during the pandemic of people either placed on furlough schemes or asked to work from home.

"The problem we observed was that social media can alleviate superficial boredom but that distraction sucks up time and energy, and may prevent people progressing to a state of profound boredom, where they might discover new passions," said Dr. Timothy Hill, co-author of the study "Mundane emotions: losing yourself in boredom, time and technology."

"This research has given us a window to understand how the 'always-on,' 24/7 culture and devices that promise an abundance of information and entertainment may be fixing our superficial boredom but are actually

preventing us from finding more meaningful things. Those who engage in 'digital detoxes' may well be on the right path," he said.

Dr. Hill noted that profound boredom was only made possible for so many people because of the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, where governments relieved some people of work temporarily, granting "a fortunate few" with an abundance of paid spare time, which required filling.

"Profound boredom may sound like an overwhelmingly negative concept but, in fact, it can be intensely positive if people are given the chance for undistracted thinking and development. We must recognize that the pandemic was a tragic, destructive, consuming experience for thousands of less fortunate people, but we are all familiar with the stories of those in lockdown who found new hobbies, careers or directions in life," Dr. Hill said.

Dr. Hill said the researchers were intrigued to see the pandemic survey results appeared to bear out the thinking of Heidegger, who described the two kinds of boredom in his 1929/30 lectures and highlighted the existential possibility offered by the profound variant.

Dr. Hill said the research sampled 15 participants of varying age, occupational and education backgrounds in England and the Republic of Ireland, who had been put on furlough or asked to work from home. He said the survey was relatively limited and that it also would be valuable to examine, for example, the role that material conditions and social class played in people's experience of boredom.

"We think these initial findings will resonate with so many people's experiences of the pandemic and their use of social media to alleviate boredom, and we would like to see this research taken further," he said.

The paper is published in the journal *Marketing Theory*.

More information: Stephen Murphy et al, Mundane emotions: Losing yourself in boredom, time and technology, *Marketing Theory* (2022).

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