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Endless scrolling through social media and work boredom: a dynamic spillover of information overload

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Abstract

Purpose – Based on the premise that young adults, as knowledge workers, are overstimulated by a constant bombardment of information from digital channels like social media, this paper aims to explore how the information overload, largely redundant and noisy, extracts cognitive resources from the workers without providing meaningful interaction, resulting in an aversive state of boredom characterized by a desire to engage in any meaningful activity but an inability to do so, both in their private and organizational lives.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of the literature on boredom, focusing on the meaning and attention components (MAC) model of boredom is conducted to explain the phenomenon. This is followed by an exploration of information overload and the proposal of a dynamic spillover of boredom from the nonwork domains of workers to their organizational lives by integrating literature on work/life boundary spillover mechanisms.

Findings – The propositions suggest that overstimulation and boredom are carried into their organizations by the workers.

Research limitations/implications – The moderating effects of personality traits and organizational contexts like culture and digital infrastructure, which are outside the scope of this paper, can inform future research.

Practical implications – The perilous ramifications of this spillover on both workers and their organizations are discussed, along with strategies for how organizations can help workers find meaning and purpose in their workspaces to reduce their propensity for boredom.

Originality/value – This paper addresses and extends the limited research on the effects of information overload from social media on the organizational lives of knowledge workers.

Keywords Boredom, Information overload, Overstimulation, Spillover, Work/life boundary

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In today's hyperconnected world, an information overload pervades the lives of young adults entering the workspace as knowledge workers who acquire, interpret, analyze and apply information for a living (El-Farr, 2009). Social media and texting have made everyone available

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all the time, blurring the lines of leisure and labor (Törhönen, Hassan, Sjöblom, & Hamari, 2019). Most workers are leading a dual life – on social media and in the present temporal space. Knowledge workers, in their leisure, are being fed a constant stream of information in the form of digital content like tweets, news, 10-s reels, texts, pictures and polarized opinions through social media channels like Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Facebook and Snapchat. They are perennially in an information overload which is a cognitive state experienced by an individual when the volume, complexity and rapidity of incoming information – particularly through social media and other digital channels – exceeds their cognitive processing capacity. This state is characterized by an inability to effectively process, integrate or derive meaning from the information encountered, leading to overstimulation, mental fatigue and a reduced ability to engage in meaningful tasks (Eppler & Mengis, 2004). It looms around their cognitive environment like a phantom, keeping them updated and indirectly active in the infosphere – a metaphysical realm of information and communication – through notifications and alerts (Floridi, 2014).

While workers are continuously fed information, even more is extracted from them. The infosphere thrives on the quantity rather than the quality of engagement. As workers spend more time in the infosphere, it collects more data and becomes increasingly adept at engaging them (Hitlin & Rainie, 2019). This creates a feedback loop driven by the constant craving for stimulation and relatability. The infosphere customizes content to maximize relatability, generating gratification and dopamine, which perpetuates a quest for meaning. There is no end to the interaction with information in the infosphere; no final cathartic episode where all the information reconciles to create a crescendo of meaning and purpose because the nature of this information overload is twofold – redundant and noisy (Klapp, 1986).

Engagement with such information requires attention, dedication and time. Information overload or the consumption of information faster than it can generate meaning extracts significant cognitive resources from the workers which results in them being overstimulated which is a cognitive state experienced when their mental resources are overwhelmed by an excessive amount of sensory and informational input (Westgate & Wilson, 2018). The human mind struggles to process the constant influx of stimuli and information, resulting in a loss of meaning (Melinat, Kreuzkam, & Stamer, 2014).

A model of boredom theorized by Westgate & Wilson (2018), the meaning and attentional component (MAC) model of boredom, postulates that attention lapses and meaningless pursuits are key contributors to state boredom – the desire to engage in a meaningful activity but an inability to do so. This model uniquely classifies overstimulation as a dimension of state boredom which forms the basis for the arguments in this paper. Overstimulation arises from the interaction between the cognitive demands of a task and the mental resources available. When the cognitive demands exceed available resources, overstimulation occurs. Information overload invokes overstimulation in knowledge workers, degrading the process of meaning formation from infospheric data and creating a cognitive void that sustains state boredom.

This paper proposes multiple possible ways in which the overstimulation and state boredom generated in knowledge workers spill from their nonwork domains to their work domains which are connected by the agency of the workers. The spillover reduces the amount of cognitive involvement the worker can use in their organizational tasks, leaving them struggling to find meaning and experiencing attentional lapses.

Theoretical background

Theories of boredom

Existential theories of boredom. Boredom is a universal feeling experienced in different magnitudes in different situations. It has been described using many affective states like

ennui, depression, anxiety, pain, loneliness, alienation and meaninglessness by multiple philosophers, sociologists and physicians. Heidegger (1995) viewed boredom as fundamental emptiness and as disturbing, unpleasant and unbearable. He claimed that it involves a withdrawal from engaging in social activities, making the bored person question the existence of social beings. Kirkegaard (2005) described it as dispassionate, thriving on nothingness and dragging the bored person through a tumultuous experience of nonactivity. Sartre (1947) approached boredom existentially, suggesting it arises from people's struggle to create meaningful lives. He argues that while life has no presupposed meaning, individuals use their relational matrices to chalk out objective meanings for their lives, and boredom occurs when this task becomes overwhelming. The bored person relies on others to bring meaning to their life.

Modern theories of boredom. Unlike existential theories, modern theories of boredom focus on both the situational determinants and the experiential components of boredom. The theory that this paper uses to further the arguments for overstimulation in knowledge workers is built on the definition that "boredom is the aversive state of wanting, but being unable, to engage in a satisfying activity" (Eastwood, Frischen, Fenske, & Smilek, 2012, p. 482). This is known as state boredom which is defined to be a negative affective state that signals a desire for any engaging stimulus. The origin of state boredom can be largely grouped into three categories (Westgate & Wilson, 2018):

- (1) environmental factors that contribute to boredom through low stimulation, nonoptimal arousals and constrained choice;
- (2) attentional factors that contribute to boredom through the failure of attentional systems in successfully orientating the mind to focus on a task; and
- (3) functional factors that convey information about the lack of meaning in a task.

Insufficient environmental stimulation leading to boredom is found in classical theories of motivation and organizational systems that explore repetitive and monotonous tasks that require little thought and attention, especially in assembly line workers and laborers (Cox, 1980) and vigilance tasks performed by security personnel that require continuous attention but little thought and variety (Hunter & Eastwood, 2018). The boredom that results from attentional factors has two dimensions – understimulation and overstimulation (Westgate & Wilson, 2018). Either state arises from the interaction between the cognitive demands of a task and the mental resources available to perform the task. Overstimulation occurs when the cognitive demands are greater than the mental resources available, while understimulation occurs when the cognitive demands are lower than the mental resources available. In both cases, individuals struggle to efficiently compartmentalize, deploy and maintain their attention throughout the day. This paper uses the attentional component of boredom, specifically overstimulation through information overload, to support the proposition of boundary spillover extending the existing literature on workplace boredom which has focused primarily on monotonous tasks and unmet psychological needs at work (Fischer, 1993; Westgate & Wilson, 2018).

Unlike environmental theories, which emphasize situational factors, and attentional theories, which center on cognitive processes, functional theories of state boredom explore its underlying purpose. Boredom acts as a useful mechanism for determining whether an activity serves a meaningful goal or provides value to the individual involved (Bench & Lench, 2013).

Meaning and attentional components (MAC) model of boredom. Combining attentional and functional theories, boredom reveals two key aspects – whether the current task fosters

successful cognitive engagement (attentional component) and whether the task is congruent with current concerns and provides meaning (meaning component). Thus, boredom is experienced by individuals who lack either the ability or the willingness to engage with the current activity. This duality substantiates the consequences of living in an information overload. This paper extracts two categories from the attentional components of the original model – understimulation and overstimulation – while retaining both categories of the meaning component. Attentional failure arises from a disconnect between cognitive demands and mental resources, leading to either understimulation or overstimulation. In either state, if the task is not congruent with currently activated goals, meaningless boredom persists, resulting in a disconnection from both the social environment and the task at hand. According to the MAC model, the higher the congruency, the stronger the sense of meaning, and the lower the likelihood of experiencing boredom. The MAC model uniquely advances the literature on state boredom by theorizing that boredom can result not only from understimulation but also from overstimulation.

To summarize, state boredom arises when attention is directed toward stimuli that lack intrinsic engagement, with the intensity of boredom directly linked to the cognitive effort needed to maintain focus on those stimuli (Seib & Vodanovich, 1998).

Nature of information overload

There is information surrounding knowledge workers at all times. In their nonwork domain, the interaction with social media exposes them to an inordinate amount of information that is redundant and noisy. The rapidity and variability of social media content contribute to a unique cognitive load that differs from traditional forms of information overload. Unlike more stable and predictable sources of information, social media platforms are designed to deliver content at a rapid pace, often varying dramatically in style, tone and subject matter within very short timeframes (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). This constant stream of new, diverse and often disconnected information where news updates, personal posts, entertainment and advertisements are interspersed, fragments the user's attention, making it difficult to process, integrate and derive meaning from any single piece of content (Hollis & Was, 2016). A variety that does not follow an explicitly articulated paradigm by which users can appreciate the differences, becomes random, leaving them with immoderate information to process that does not align with any meaning-forming pattern.

Information that is not noisy exists on the other end of the spectrum – housing redundancy (Klapp, 1986). The information overload wears the cloak of banality by being insipid and repeating similar themes across social media channels for example #trending videos (Liang & Fu, 2017). There is duplication of information resulting from the homogenization of global information sources, for instance, mass media houses being bought by singular conglomerates. Redundant and noisy information is too loud in always trying to grab attention in their limited space for existence and too chattery with multiple sources using the same medium at the same time.

The MAC model of boredom postulates that attention lapses and meaningless pursuits are two fundamental contributors to state boredom. Information overload degrades the process of meaning formation from infospheric data, leading to overstimulation in knowledge workers, creating a cognitive void and sustained state boredom. This state boredom can be characterized as agitated boredom where the worker is motivated to engage in meaningful activities, but every attempt to do so is unsatisfactory (Malkovsky, Merrifield, Goldberg, & Danckert, 2012). The high volume of information seemingly offers many options for stimulation, but the lack of meaningful engagement makes the worker agitated and restless, expending more cognitive resources and energy in searching for meaningful information and

stimuli, but finding none. Over time, this overstimulation causes the worker to become desensitized to the stimuli and harbor state boredom, exacerbated by the mental fatigue and exhaustion that come from incessant scrolling and engaging with information overload.

Dynamic spillover of state boredom

Boundary approach

A major component of work/life spillover studies is the spillover theory which has been referenced under various labels: extension, generalization, familiarity, identity, isomorphism, congruence and continuation. The theory posits that, despite physical and temporal boundaries between work and nonwork, emotions and behavior in one sphere carry over to the other (Staines, 1980). Each individual exists within a life space – a psychological environment encompassing both work and nonwork – which influences their behavior (Rychlak, 1973). Within this life space, behaviors, emotions and experiences are organized, embodied, enacted and interpreted. The life space is divided into separate domains, distinguished by borders with varying levels of permeability and flexibility, determining the extent to which an individual engages in border-crossing behaviors. Crossing these borders leads to the integration of domains, setting the stage for emotional, behavioral and cognitive spillover.

Permeability of the border refers to how easily elements from one domain enter another. Social media and texting have blurred the lines between leisure and labor (Törhönen et al., 2019). As knowledge workers often use the same devices for both work and leisure, the artifacts delineating the domains of work and nonwork are disappearing, allowing workers to cross the increasingly permeable border more effortlessly. Ideas, insights, emotions and behavior flow easily between domains when the temporal border becomes flexible, especially when workers can choose their work hours and are not constrained by the physical location of work (Clark, 2000). The overstimulation and state boredom of knowledge workers, stemming from excessive consumption of meaningless information as a leisurely pursuit in their nonwork domains, spills into their work domains. The border separating these domains is becoming increasingly permeable, and more often than not, the devices used for constant scrolling are the same devices used to conduct business in workplaces, leading to the proposition:

- P1. The increasingly permeable and flexible boundary between work and nonwork, resulting from the use of similar artifacts in both spaces, allows overstimulation and state boredom to spill over from the nonwork domain of knowledge workers into their work domain.

Fixed sum of resources approach

Objective measures of involvement with work and leisure, such as time and energy, are effective indicators of the presence and nature of spillover. When a worker devotes more time and energy to one domain, fewer of those resources are available for the other (Clark, Nye, & Gecas, 1978). There is a fixed sum of resources available to a worker each day, with work and leisure acting as mutually exclusive alternatives vying for allocation. Scarce resources like time, energy and attention, if expended inordinately in a meaningless search for stimulation in the nonwork domain, leave workers with very little to contribute to their organizational tasks. Engaging with information overload and the resultant state boredom extracts significant resources from the workers. When these scarce resources are allocated excessively to one domain, the other is left with very little, reducing the ability of the worker

to engage with cognitively demanding tasks in their organizations and creating a spillover of state boredom. The workers lack the cognitive resources to engage with tasks that demand individual agency and sustained attention, thereby perpetuating the boredom, leading to the proposition:

- P2. A significantly large amount of scarce resources like time, energy and attention spent engaging with meaningless information in the nonwork domain of knowledge workers generates state boredom, leaving them with fewer cognitive resources for their organizational tasks, which further sustains the boredom.

Position–practice relations lens

The position–practice relations lens, which emerged from the structuration theory by Giddens (1984), theorizes that actions by individuals span across space and time, affecting all the realms they come in contact with. Individuals active in multiple spaces are affected by their actions in all of these spaces (Aristidou & Barrett, 2018). For example, an individual who engages in two spaces – Space 1, where they are spending time with their children at a park, and Space 2, where they are leading a cross-functional team meeting at work – will affect both spaces through their actions in either, despite the actions being distinctly different in each space. Even though no direct causal relationship exists between the spaces, they are linked by their spatial interconnectedness and agency of the individual, leading to the proposition:

- P3. The cognitive overstimulation and state boredom generated from information overload are carried by the knowledge workers from their nonwork domain to their organization by virtue of the domains being linked through the relational position and agency of the workers.

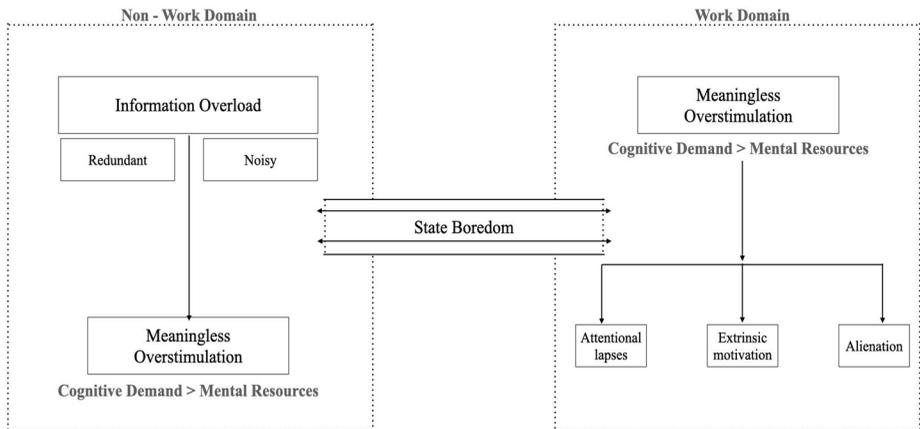
Discussion

The dynamic spillover of state boredom and its constituent elements that are discussed in this paper are represented in Figure 1.

Impact of the spillover

The boredom that spills from the nonwork to the work domain of knowledge workers can be characterized as apathetic state boredom, where the worker is unconcerned with their environment and feels no compulsion to change their state, leading to attentional lapses (Greenon, 1951). Agitated state boredom resulting from overstimulation crosses the increasingly permeable boundary between work and leisure, transforming into apathetic boredom where the worker struggles with cognitively demanding tasks due to insufficient mental resources.

The workers fail to perform tasks requiring agency and innovation, take longer on complex tasks, and exhibit reduced productivity. With only extrinsic motivation, they fail to derive meaning from their work, exacerbating their state boredom by accreting meaningless boredom. The worker becomes alienated from their labor, where they feel outside themselves in work and [feel] themselves outside of work (Barbalet, 1999). They do not initiate any improvements, fail to learn new skills, make more errors and exhibit job absenteeism (Kass, Vodanovich, & Callender, 2001). The organization suffers too from the spillover as cultural and social growth is stunted due to fewer voices challenging the normative rules of the workplace (van Hooff & van Hooff, 2017).



Source: Author's own work

Figure 1. Dynamic spillover of state boredom

Implications for theory. The propositions of this paper offer critical implications for theories related to social media use, information overload and boredom, particularly within the context of work–life dynamics. By integrating the MAC model of boredom with the concept of information overload, this paper advances the understanding of how excessive engagement with social media and other digital information sources can lead to cognitive overstimulation and a sustained state boredom, suggesting that traditional models of boredom must be expanded to account for the unique challenges posed by the digital age (Eastwood et al., 2012).

The concept of dynamic spillover from the nonwork to the work domain introduces a novel perspective on spillover theory. The permeability and flexibility of modern work–life boundaries, exacerbated by the use of the same digital devices across domains, suggest that the traditional separation between work and leisure is being increasingly blurred. This provides implications for the existing spillover theory focusing primarily on emotional and behavioral spillovers, to acknowledge the cognitive dimension as equally critical (Derks & Bakker, 2010).

The application of the fixed sum of resources approach within the context of information overload provides new insights into resource allocation theories. The proposition highlights the need to reconsider how digital consumption is managed within the daily routines of knowledge workers, as the overuse of social media can lead to diminished work performance and increased workplace boredom (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu, 2010). This approach calls upon existing resource allocation theories to incorporate digital consumption as a critical factor influencing cognitive resources. By integrating these dynamics, theories of resource allocation may need to evolve to better account for the fragmented and competing demands of attention in the digital age.

Implications for practice. To address the spillover of boredom, organizations must acknowledge rather than ignore the cognitive overstimulation of their workers. Drawing from the MAC model, the attentional factors that contribute to boredom can be balanced by making tasks meaningful which will motivate the workers to realign available cognitive resources and demands by optimizing attention.

Organizations need to prioritize generating meaning and purpose for knowledge workers by putting them front and center. Meaningful work is closely related to the concept of the self, which is the totality of a [person's] thoughts and feelings that have reference to themselves as an object (Rosenberg, 1979). An individual's values and beliefs are central to their self-concept and contribute largely to their perceived meaning of work. Organizations should involve the workers in the value-setting processes through which the culture of the organization and work teams are aligned. Workers should be seen as the node around which all work processes revolve, enabling them to visualize the chain of actions that transform their labor into the final product or service. This perspective will help them see themselves as effective stakeholders and engage with organizational tasks with a sense of accountability.

Limitations and directions for future research

This paper assumes that cognitive overstimulation and state boredom spill over from the nonwork to the work domains consistently for all knowledge workers. Individual differences such as personality traits and coping strategies, which were not explored, could moderate the impact. For example, individuals with high neuroticism might be more susceptible to overstimulation, while highly conscientious individuals might better manage the effects of information overload on their work performances, and those with higher mindfulness might be more resilient to the cognitive demands of social media scrolling. Job characteristics could also moderate the effects: jobs requiring creativity might benefit from boredom as a source of unprecedented inspiration, while routine and mechanized jobs might suffer from increased cognitive strain.

In addition, the paper generalizes its propositions to a broad organizational context. Organizational factors like culture, work policies and digital infrastructure could influence the spillover effects. For instance, a culture valuing constant availability might worsen cognitive overload, while well-integrated information channels might reduce digital clutter, and remote work could increase work/life boundary permeability.

Further research is needed to empirically validate the propositions in this paper and examine their applicability across different contexts and populations. Future research could use several approaches, including developing and validating a scale to assess work/life boundary permeability and flexibility, capturing real-time data on device usage and working hours through time-tracking applications or reflective journaling, assessing cognitive engagement in work tasks using performance metrics or self-report measures and conducting social network analysis to visualize connections between work and nonwork domains.

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