THE TELEVISED MEDIA-COORDINATES OF BOREDOM

Claudiu SCHWARTZ
Assistant, PhD. Student,
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania
Edgar DEMETER
Assistant,PhD. Student,
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania

Abstract: Even with today's variety of engaging technologies, some teenagers are still faced with boredom. While it would be natural to assume random occurrences of the state in various contexts, it is being reported as a constant, somewhat generalized state of disengagement by some high-school-aged teenagers.

The investigation, fraction of a broader research project, conducted on 271 high-school students aged 16-18, indicates a circular causal relationship between boredom and certain televised media diet patterns.

Keywords: Media diet, Television, Boredom, Flow Theory.

General Considerations

According to Csíkszentmihályi's (1996) flow theory, the concept of "flow" represents one of the eight mental states that can occur during the learning process of an individual. Other mental states, in addition to flow, may include anxiety, apathy, arousal, boredom, control, relaxation, and worry, and they can result when the learning individual experiences a combination of skill and challenge levels of the task at hand in a non-optimal combination (Csíkszentmihályi, 1996).

Flow represents the most optimal state of mind for learning, because the skill and challenge levels of the task at hand are at their peak, thus creating an optimal cognitive environment for learning and intense concentration, where individuals can even experience losing track of time because of the involvement in the activity (Csíkszentmihályi, 2008).

Different combinations of skill and challenge levels can emerge and according to these combinations, different mental states can take form, for

example: when the skill level is very high and the challenge level is very low the individual can experience relaxation as a mental state, but if the skill level is very low and the challenge level proves to be very high, the individual may experience anxiety (Csíkszentmihályi, 2008).

Flow can be experienced while performing any kind of activity or task, but it is most likely to occur when the task or activity is performed for intrinsic purposes (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Passive activities like watching television do not evoke the flow experience, since the activity does not involve direct action, which is a key requirement for a flow state (Delle & Bassi, 2000; Csíkszentmihályi, 2008).

According to the literature, there are three conditions that have to be met in order to reach a flow state (Csíkszentmihályi et al., 2005):

- The learning individual must be involved in the activity or task with a clear set of goals and objectives, which can add direction and structure to the activity or task.

- The task or activity must provide clear and immediate feedback since it can help the learning individual negotiate any changing demands in order to adjust performance and maintain the flow state.

- The learning individual must have a good balance between perceived challenge and perceived skill.

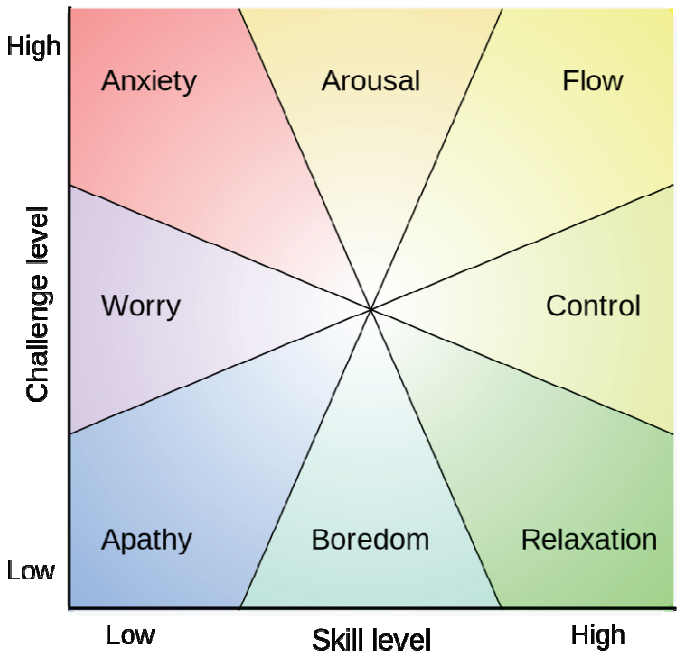

Figure 1 – Csíkszentmihályi's skill and challenge model (Csíkszentmihályi, 1998).

Media diet and television

The use of media and television by teenagers has powerful implications on their lives (Bernard-Bonnin et al., 1991). Prolonged implications in watching television were associated with several significant behavioral outcomes that include obesity and poor eating habits (Locard et al., 1992), decreased physical activity and physical fitness (Durant et al., 1994) impaired school performance (Gupta et al., 1994) and aggressive behavior (Gadow & Sprafkin, 1989).

Watching television is usually described as a passive and uninvolving, rather generally boring activity within the literature (Csikszentmihályi & Kubey, 1981). Paradoxically, people tend to watch television in order to cope with boredom, but soon enough this activity becomes boring itself (Marion et al., 2006).

The amount of time spent watching television is considerable given the fact that people living in the industrialized world devote an average of three hours per day to this activity (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and young people watch up to 25 hours of television per week (American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Communications, 1990).

Boredom

Despite the fact that western societies are presented with an unprecedented range of opportunities, individuals now appear to be more susceptible to boredom than ever before (Svendsen, 2005).

There are many definitions regarding the concept of boredom. Fisher (1993) describes boredom as "*an unpleasant, transient affective state in which the individual feels a pervasive lack of interest and difficulty concentrating on the current activity*". According to Csíkszentmihályi's (1998) skill and challenge model, boredom can be outlined when the challenge level is low and the skill level is mild. Trying to cope with boredom by engaging in passive activities like watching television (Marion et al., 2006) can lead to a generally boring experience (Csikszentmihályi & Kubey, 1981), further increasing the state.

Engaging in passive and monotonous activities may lead to chronic boredom which results from the individual's inability to use the appropriate coping mechanisms to escape them, giving perspective and meaning to life (McWelling, 2003). Chronic boredom can be associated with depression, and in children and adolescents, depression is not always characterized by sadness, but instead by irritability, boredom, or an inability to experience pleasure (Brent & Birmaher, 2002).

According to Csíkszentmihályi's (1998) skill and challenge model, if both skill and challenge levels are low, the result is apathy which is represented by loss of interest, lack of motivation, reduced spontaneity, less affection, reduced enthusiasm, and a disinterest towards new activities (Levy et al., 1998). Therefore

if an individual is frequently stuck in this state to the point of boredom becoming chronic, the risk of it transiting into apathy is very likely, since in this particular case, both skill and challenge are low.

Results

The present study reveals certain connections between preferred televised content types and boredom as a sustaining factor for the televised media intake activity, which leads to the following hypothesis: There is a circular causal relationship between televised media diet and boredom as reason for the respective media intake.

The study was conducted on a gender-wise and age-wise homogenous sample of 271 Romanian high-school teenagers aged 16-18.

We define *random televised media intake* as the intake of televised media that isn't aimed at satisfying a certain need, interest or passion, or for the purpose of relaxation, entertainment or staying informed; but rather as a means to pass the time.

Boredom within the present study's context is defined as a state which involves Csikszentmihalyi's notion of boredom, but is seemingly overextending to apathy on the same author's diagram of skill and challenge – which reflects the intrinsic argument of this paper.

At first glance, Figure 2 indicates that over 66% of random televised media intake is due to boredom, and only 33.33% due to other reasons like relaxation, entertainment, staying informed, education etc.

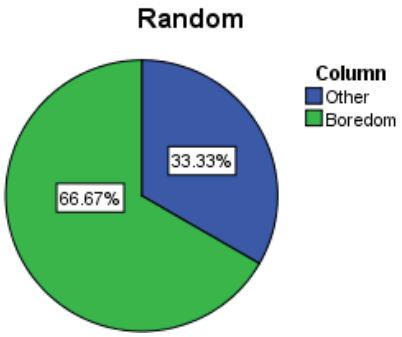

Figure 2 – Random televised media intake chart

Secondly, indicators in Table 1 reveal a consistency of this state across various media channels through positive, significant correlations of r=.284, p<.001 for internet platforms and r=.173, p<.01 for digital games; suggesting that media

consumed through both on-line platforms and digital games is a boredom-driven activity in the case of these particular participants.

Since no significant correlations were found linking boredom to certain types of media within the other two aforementioned channels, investigations were focused on televised media.

Table 1 – Boredom as a constant state across multiple media channels

Correlations

		Boredom TV	Boredom Platforms	Boredom Games
Boredom TV	Pearson Correlation	1	,284**	,173**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,004
	N	271	271	271

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Linear regression analysis indicates that boredom predicts the intake of random televised media, explaining 6.5% of the variance (R^2=.065 F(1,269)=18.567, p<.001), as shown in table 2. It was found that boredom significantly predicted random televised media intake (B=.25, p<.001) However, this analysis contains only half of the information needed for the assumption of causality in the sense that as boredom predicts random televised media intake, the latter can also – and implicitly does – predict the former.

Tabel 2. ANOVA

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,254[a]	,065	,061	,371

a. Predictors: (Constant), Boredom

b. Dependent Variable: Random

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2,550	1	2,550	18,567	,000[b]
	Residual	36,948	269	,137		
	Total	39,498	270			

Table 2 – Linear relationship between boredom and random televised media intake

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	,098	,029		3,381	,001	,041	,155
	Boredom	,198	,046	,254	4,309	,000	,108	,289

a. Dependent Variable: Random

Given the impossibility to isolate a causal, unidirectional relationship between boredom and random televised media intake – or vice-versa – due to the research design associated with the characteristics of involved variables, further qualitative investigation was required in order to clarify the findings, allowing for a reliable interpretation of the analysis.

The qualitative component of the study by means of interviews and focus-groups conducted on 38 participants from within the same sample, confirmed the existence of a circular causal relationship between the two variables.

The qualitative investigation identified boredom as the cause for randomized televised media diet, which in turn sustains – or for some cases – even deepens the state.

Boredom as a reason for starting a media intake activity soon turns into slight frustration since *nothing interesting is ever found on TV.* In hopes that something interesting might show up, media is consumed in small bits until – usually – commercial breaks disrupt the activity or the particular show ends. Since the activity wasn't initially interest or passion driven, the consumer has the tendency to quickly shuffle channels in search for something else.

While the presented televised media consumption behavior is standard and depicts an activity most of us have experienced, for these teenagers it became commonplace, generalized as the dominant televised media intake behavior.

Our qualitative analysis identified a pattern of response to a segment of the interviews:

What are you actually willing to find? For which, a consistent answer was: *I don't know…something interesting.*

And what would you consider interesting? Invariably answered: *I …don't know!*

From a flow-theory standpoint, the associations between boredom and random televised media intake corroborated with the answers received during interviews, indicates a lack of skill. And by skill in this context, we mean knowledge which can be synthetized into interest, passion or taste towards particular types of information.

Given the fact that the variety of televised channels and content this particular sample has access to can satisfy most interests, it would be safe to assume that lack of satisfactory content is not the problem here but rather the lack of knowledge with the potential to stimulate a need for information to be satisfied through media intake.

Conclusions and implications:

The conclusion drawn in this case was that while boredom does predict random televised media intake, the media consumed in such manner can only sustain this particular state, since the fractions and types of content being consumed in such manner cannot solidify a knowledgebase able of generating interest or passion towards a certain subject, which means that that random televised media intake generates and predicts boredom as well.

The resulting relationship is a vicious circle of low knowledge leading to aimless intake of televised media which in turn preserves the initial state of low knowledge in the search for *something*. Through repetition, the activity becomes behaviorally embedded, with a Skinner-box-like grip through its shuffling and searching components, making it a self-sufficient activity as soon as reason becomes purpose: *I mostly watch TV when I'm bored. And since watching TV bores me, I keep shuffling channels hoping to find something interesting.* In fact this particular teenager is merely trying to get rid of the bored state she's in, using this behavior as a coping mechanism.

What is alarming about this kind of behavior is that it fits into an apathetic model from a positive psychology perspective, falling under the low challenge – low skill quadrant of Csikszentmihalyi's diagram. And while some simplified interpretations of the diagram tend to disregard the apathy quadrant simply labeling it boredom, we cannot help emphasizing the importance of the differences between these two terms, given the fact that mental health implications of chronic apathy require no argumentation.

Since televised media is notoriously unengaging let alone challenging, it would be safe to attribute a low challenge state on the flow-theory diagram to the passive activity of shuffling through television content. Provided the analogy, it becomes clear that associating low skills and/or knowledge with televised media intake as a coping mechanism for boredom leads to apathy instead and even though teenagers just call it *boredom,* it is our duty as educators and psychologists to raise

awareness of the implications of seemingly harmless but ultimately downright dangerous televised media intake.

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