THE EXPRESSIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF WORKPLACE BOREDOM: A STUDY ON SOCIAL MEDIA LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The study explores how people express and represent their workplace boredom on one of the major social media websites, Instagram. With regard to this, four popular hashtags, alluding to workplace boredom, were thoroughly searched for their content (e.g., 531 thousand plus posts), and eight themes were identified for the analysis based on the most common expressions and representations of workplace boredom by the people on Instagram. Thus, the study implies the power of social media used by the people to vigorously express and represent one of the ostensible adverse realities of their workplaces, boredom, which they may not be able to voice otherwise. Moreover, as the study has been conducted in the year 2021, it may be significant with regard to the pandemic which led millions of people to bring their work or offices at homes. Thus, such a change in the context of work (e.g., work-from-home) may have affected the people’s expressions and representations of workplace boredom. Similarly, the self-expressions and self-representations of boredom at work by the people may attract the contemporary researchers to construct more prevalent definitions of workplace boredom in their future studies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term boredom has originated from the term bore. The clear etymology of the term bore is considered to be unknown (Bruss, 2012). However, according to Spacks (1996) and Goodstein (2005), the term boredom is a modern invention which can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Particularly, during the eighteenth century, in order to “bore” a hole on the surface, one would use a hand-cracked drill slowly and repeatedly. It was due to the slow, repetitive, dull and tiresome movements and motions entailed by the people in the process of drilling to bore a hole on the surface, the term bore became a prevalent slang in that epoch. People begun to use it for representing their feelings of ennui (a French term - refers to spiritual malaise or disaffection), Langeweile (a German term - refers to repetitive, empty or meaningless time) (Goodstein, 2005) and listlessness (Bruss, 2012) in different situations. Consequently, the term boredom came into existence in popular culture around the globe.

Boredom is often described as a negative and dissatisfying emotional state (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Geiwitz, 1966; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; O’Hanlon, 1981) of employees at the workplace which can lead to undesirable consequences for the organizations. As such, boredom has noteworthy deleterious consequences for organizations in the form of job dissatisfaction, performance decrements, accidents and employee turnover (Fisher, 1998). In addition, it can increase adverse events, errors, and cost at the workplace, work distraction, stress and disillusion, and, last but not least, feelings of underemployed and overworked (Cleary et al., 2016) among the employees. Therefore, Fisher (1993) emphasized on studying the causes of boredom. More importantly, however, a shortcoming of boredom research in work environments is the manner in which the construct has been assessed (Kass et al., 2001).

On the one hand, in the current context of the workplaces, employees generally appear to use social media as a cure for the boredom they experience at their work. But on the other, social media usage by the employees at the
workplace seems to be the cause of their boredom in terms of finding their work less interesting or attractive as compared to their use of social media. Moreover, as the advent of social media has revolutionized the ways people express themselves, social media is frequently being used by them as a medium through which they express and represent their boredom. Therefore, it is a good idea to study people’s representation of boredom at workplace through social media.

Given that, the current research explores how workplace boredom is represented through social media literature? In particular, how people represent workplace boredom on one of the biggest social media platforms, Instagram? Instagram has been rapidly growing since its inception in 2010 (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). However, there is limited academic research regarding this social media platform (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). As photos and videos sharing social media and networking website, Instagram provides abundant opportunities for self-representation to the people (Yang et al., 2018). And with the use of hashtags, their content can be accessible to a greater audience (Lup et al., 2015), not merely their followers. In fact, in 2007, “when Chris Messina made a tweet suggesting the use of # to organize content, he could not have predicted how the movement of adding the hash symbol before a word, a sequence of characters, or an emoji would become an everyday social practice inside and outside of web platforms” (Omena et al., 2020, para. 1).

Hence, the study implies the power of social media used by the employees to dynamically express and represent one of the ostensible adverse realities they experience at their work, boredom, which they may not be able to represent otherwise. Moreover, the recognition of different ways people represent their workplace boredom through social media will enhance our understanding of the context of modern-day boredom at the work. This understanding may particularly be important in the current times of pandemic which has caused a dramatic change in the landscape of work around the world as millions of people brought their work or offices at homes. Therefore, such a change in the context of work (e.g., work-from-home) may have affected the people’s expressions and representations of workplace boredom. In view of this, the study may not only further attract the attention of contemporary authors, theorists and researchers to construct more prevalent definitions of boredom, especially workplace boredom, but also, assist them in the assessment of workplace boredom of the modern employees.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to the eighteenth century, there may have been something, similar to boredom, known, experienced, described and represented by the people (Spacks, 1996; Goodstein, 2005). More precisely, human beings have been experiencing boredom for centuries, if not a millennia (Talbot, 2020). Nevertheless, it may not have been the same boredom as what we know of today (Bruss, 2012) and what we may potentially know in the future. Time has been rapidly changing and so as the people’s expressions and representations of boredom. Hence, it appears that the term boredom will constantly be evolving and transitioning with regard to its label, meaning, description, expression and representation. Previous research suggests that such evolution and transition may possibly be happening since antiquity. For example, O’Brien (2014) related boredom to Aristotle’s (1941) notion of the quality of something. “As such, it comes in degrees: one can be more or less bored than someone else, or than oneself on a different occasion; one can be bored more, or less, by one thing than by another; one can feel greater or lesser boredom toward the very same thing at different times” (O’Brien, 2014: 238).

Moreover, boredom often suggests negative connotation as it is considered to be a noticeable source of several psychosocial problems. Thus, boredom may seem to be an ordinary problem causing somewhat trivial and momentary uneasiness that may be dismissed by a slight change in the circumstances (Eastwood et al., 2012), empirical evidence supports that boredom is associated to many psychosocial predicaments. In particular, depression and anxiety (Goldberg et al., 2011; LePera, 2011; Sommers & Vodanovich, 2000), alcohol and drug misuse (LePera, 2011), gambling addiction (Mercer & Eastwood, 2010), catastrophic mistakes in performance (Eastwood et al., 2012) due to mental disquiet, etc. are frequently linked to boredom by a number of contemporary researchers. In view of that, it is not surprising that boredom is often linked to mortality, through a common expression “bored to death” (Bloomfield & Kennedy, 2006; Britton & Shipley, 2010; Maltzberger, 2000), in the popular literature and culture around the globe. Therefore, according to Eastwood et al. (2012), it would be deluding to interpret boredom as merely a trivial problem and associating it to benign situations.

According to Kass et al. (2001), even though the preponderance of the work on boredom has considered it to be a transient condition, it can be experienced by the people as a state or a trait. With regard to this, many researchers have considered the distinction between transient and perpetual natures of boredom in their studies, such as responsive and chronic boredom (Bernstein, 1975), boredom and boredom proneness (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; 2010), normal
and pathological boredom (Fenichel, 1951), agitated and apathetic boredom (Greenson, 1953), and, last but not least, boredom as a state and a trait (Kass et al., 2001).

Alternatively, according to O’Brien (2014: 238-239), boredom is “a volitional state, one having something to do with will and desire. To be bored by something is to want (i) not to have to deal with it, attend to it, listen to it, etc., but rather (ii) to do something, maybe anything, else instead”. This definition suggests that “boredom is anything but boring” (Koerth-Baker, 2016: 146) as the activities one performs out of boredom are what one finds to be interesting. This also proposes boredom as a paradoxical concept. Nevertheless, in the current times, the term boredom is implicated in all sorts of situations, events, people, behaviors and things. For example, from traumatic brain injury to learning ability, boredom has developed to be an extremely interesting field of study to the scientists (Koerth-Baker, 2016). Similarly, the repetitive nature of job related activities performed by the employees at work attracts the attention of organizational behavior researchers, particularly in connection with boredom and boredom susceptibility. It is believed that people with high degree of boredom susceptibility dislike repetition and routine tasks at work. In other words, they show intolerance towards monotonous tasks at work. As such, Zuckerman et al., (1978: 140) defined boredom susceptibility as an “aversion to repetition, routine, and dull people, and restlessness when things are unchanging”.

Moreover, in the workplace context, boredom can also be defined as “an unpleasant, transient affective state in which the individual feels a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity ... [and] feels that it takes conscious effort to maintain or return attention to that activity” (Fisher, 1993: 396). Clearly, the persistence of such feelings can have the potential to make the individual inactive and unhappy (Mann & Robinson, 2009) at their work. Consequently, this may lead to employee engagement issues at the workplace. For example, Cleary et al. (2016) argued that the employees who experience workplace boredom are less likely to engage with or focus on their work activities. Similarly, other researchers suggested that the employees with a higher tendency to be bored are unable to perform well on vigilance tasks than those with a lower tendency to be bored (Sawin & Scerbo, 1995). This leads us back to ponder about the association between boredom and Aristotle’s (1941) notion of quality, specifically workplace boredom and quality. Research suggests that when employees experience chronic boredom, they are more likely to avoid their work, leave their jobs, experience accidents at work, excessively consume alcohol and drugs at work, and even misbehave at their work by engaging in counterproductive work behaviors, such as cheating or stealing (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). Clearly, all these behaviors affect the quality of work and organizational performance.

Furthermore, according to van Hooff & van Hooff (2014), boredom is an emotion that may occur repeatedly at the workplaces with unfavorable outcomes for the employees and organizations alike. One of the unfavorable outcomes for the organizations is the switching of employees from their real work activities to the activities they find to be interesting at the workplace. And such interesting activities may not necessarily be the work activities at all. For example, employees often find ways to stretch real tasks due to workplace boredom and fill the working hours with the activities which attract their interests more than the real work, such as checking social media platforms, attending unnecessary meetings, doing personal tasks (Featherstone, 2019), and so forth. In particular, employees practice cyberloafing to escape from work (Askew et al., 2014) as a coping mechanism to deal with workplace boredom (Pindek et al., 2018). Cyberloafing means spending work hours using the internet for non-work related activities as access to the internet has stretched through the use of laptops, tablets, smart phones, and other electronic devices at the workplaces (Lim, 2002). Cyberloafing is often assumed as an undesirable behavior because distracted workforce is generally considered to bring productivity deficits, and so organizations often limit access to selected websites and social media networks or develop strict policies for internet usage at the workplaces in order to avoid such employees’ behavior (Stokel-Walker, 2020).

However, some researchers have begun to question this assumption (Andel et al., 2019) in support of the idea that cyberloafing does not negatively impact employees’ job performance (Mercado et al., 2017) and organizational productivity. Other researchers have gone even further and argued that cyberloafing may possibly lead to positive outcomes for the employees, such as uplifting employees’ moods (Lim & Chen, 2012) and improving employees’ engagement (Syrek et al., 2018). Similarly, Pindek et al. (2018) argued that short digital breaks to browse social media platforms can actually be beneficial for employees at the workplaces. Indubitably, social media has rapidly become an imperative part of the digital transformation that is taking place across almost every industry these days (Ganis & Marimekala, 2014). It has forced companies to alter their business models and adjust to the new market realities (Lund, 2020), such as the intensification of work-from-home undertakings by the employees due to Covid-19. According to an estimate, the global net spending of companies on digital transformation will be increased to more than two trillion dollar by the year 2022, as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic (Lund, 2020). Therefore, digital transformation has...
become very crucial for organizations today, particularly with regard to providing the means to facilitate communication (Ganis & Marimekala, 2014) and work activities among all stakeholders.

And, it doesn’t end here, thanks to the ever-growing digital world, for example, Stockdale & Coyne’s (2020) study indicates that people are increasingly using social networking websites to alleviate boredom. In addition, boredom is consistently self-reported by the people in situations where behavioral opportunities are constrained and little variations in stimulation are available (Berlyne, 1960; Meagher, 2018). The digital era has transformed the ways of self-reporting the experiences of boredom. Hence, it may not be wrong to say that employees not only binge on social media platforms to alleviate their workplace boredom, but also, they use them as a mode of expressing and representing that boredom to the masses in general.

3. METHODOLOGY

Instagram is one of the world’s leading social media platforms with more than a billion monthly active users (MAUs). Most Instagram users are 13-34 years old, and they are equally likely to be males and females (Kemp, 2020, as cited in Peterka-Bonetta et al., 2021). It is mainly used for sharing wide range of content, such as photos, videos and stories. In the current study, we thoroughly searched four popular hashtags related to workplace boredom on Instagram to identify the content regarding workplace boredom so as to determine how people express and represent workplace boredom in this digital age. The table below shows the four selected Instagram hashtags for the study, and the number of posts associated to them, which have been thoroughly searched in the year 2021 (e.g., pandemic times) for their content, expressing and representations of workplace boredom by the people.

| Table 1: Four Instagram hashtags and the number of their associated posts |
|---|---|
| 1 | #boredatwork 525000 plus posts (Five hundred and twenty five thousand plus posts) |
| 2 | #boredomatwork 5000 plus posts (Five thousand plus posts) |
| 3 | #boredatworkagain 500 plus posts (Five hundred posts) |
| 4 | #workplaceboredom 500 plus posts (Five hundred plus posts) |

Therefore, through the analysis of these four workplace boredom related hashtags (e.g., 531 thousand plus accessible posts on the Instagram related to workplace boredom), eight themes have been recognized in the study. The recognition process of the eight themes involved the identification of the most commonly shared workplace boredom expressions and representations (e.g., in the form of shared Instagram posts), by the people, among the 531 thousand plus accessible posts related to the four selected hashtags about workplace boredom.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The table below shows the eight recognized themes based on the most commonly shared workplace boredom expressions and representations, in the form of shared Instagram posts, by the people, among the 531 thousand plus accessible posts related to the four selected hashtags about workplace boredom.

| Table 2: Eight recognized themes based on the most commonly shared workplace boredom expressions and representations by the people in the form of their shared Instagram posts |
|---|---|
| Theme 1 | Memes |
| Theme 2 | Snapchat Filters |
| Theme 3 | Tiktok Videos |
| Theme 4 | Live Commentaries and Gaming |
| Theme 5 | Photographs and Videos of Displaying One’s Creative Side |
| Theme 6 | Selfies |
| Theme 7 | Pictures of Actual and Potential Online Purchases |
| Theme 8 | Photographs of Desired Holiday Destinations and Previous Vacations |

Therefore, the expressions and representations of workplace boredom found through the analysis of these eight themes are as follows (and so forth) by the people through which they expressed and represented their workplace boredom.

4.1 Theme 1: Memes

One of the most frequent representations of workplace boredom is seen through meme sharing over Instagram. Even though memes were conceptualized long before the digital era, the unique features of the Internet turned their diffusion into a highly visible and ubiquitous routine (Shifman, 2013). The term was first coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to describe gene-like infectious units of culture that spread from one person to another (Shifman, 2013). Hence, meme is basically an eye catching, entertaining and comical image, GIF or video with witty phrase that
becomes viral over internet because people can relate to it in the popular culture. A common trend seen among those people who shared meme was that they were making fun of their bosses, colleagues, work and work culture in lighthearted fashion to pass time. The memes did not appear to have any intention of hurting anyone’s feelings or to complain about their work.

4.2 Theme 2: Snapchat Filters

Several people posted pictures and videos of themselves using Snapchat filters on Instagram. Snapchat itself is a trending social media platform. It allows users to share content, such as images, videos and text, for a specified amount of time, with other users, before it becomes permanently inaccessible (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). People can link Snapchat to their Instagram profiles in order to share same content on both platforms at the same time. Some commonly used Snapchat filters while people experienced boredom at work were flower garland, dog with tongue hanging out, face swap with coworkers, halo and baby faces.

4.3 Theme 3: Tiktok Videos

Tiktok is another social media platform that people frequently link to their Instagram accounts. The platform is made for short-form videos of usually 15 to 60 seconds in length which are often accompanied with short clips of frenetic visual effects and music (Haigney, 2020). However, the length of the videos can be longer if they are not principally recorded on the Tiktok app itself, but uploaded on the platform after being recorded on a different medium. It is the first major social media app which initiated beyond the purview of Silicon Valley under a Chinese ownership in 2016 and soon became the most downloaded app of the year in 2020 (Galer, 2020). The app is currently available in 40 different languages. It is ideal for people with splintered attention span which suddenly plunges them into extreme boredom (Haigney, 2020), especially during the pandemic and their work-from-home ventures. Several Tiktok videos were shared by people on Instagram during work hours to relieve their boredom. Mainly, the videos included people performing comedy sketches, dancing and lip syncing.

4.4 Theme 4: Live Commentaries and Gaming

People also shared videos of themselves watching TV serials and sharing live commentaries to their Instagram stories. Moreover, playing online games at work was another characteristic of people who were trying to kill time at work. According to Dizik (2016), many people use gaming at work to find relief from stressful moments throughout a working day and to cope with boring roles at work through engaging games that give them virtual confidence boost and control which they may not accomplish through their routinely mundane work life. Hence, people were observed to share their level up scores on Instagram as a way of showing off their expertise in gaming while being bored at work. Nevertheless, conventionally, Instagram for gamers is more concentrated on community updates and user-generated content, such as cosplay photography and fan art (Barnhart, 2020).

4.5 Theme 5: Photographs and Videos of Displaying One’s Creative Side

Many people shared their creativity, born out of boredom at work, and posted pictures and videos of their doodles, illustrations and drawings on their Instagram feed. This practice shows that when people are bored they like to rejuvenate their minds by pursuing productive activities they enjoy. Hence, workplace boredom can be overcome by doing things of one’s own interest as a break from work. However, such breaks shouldn’t be overexerted that they influence the actual work negatively rather than giving it a positive boost.

4.6 Theme 6: Selfies

A vast number of selfies were shared on Instagram with hashtags alluding to workplace boredom as a way of self-representation. However, “for all its zeitgeisty appeal, the selfie is in fact a niche phenomenon in the larger context of Instagram genres” as of approximately 40 billion photos posted on Instagram in 2019, only 0.7% were selfies (Caliandro & Graham, 2020, para. 1). Therefore, self-representation on Instagram should not be merely understood in the strict sense of selfies, but it should also be understood as photographs of the users taken by other people which the users decide to publish on their Instagram accounts (Caldeira et al., 2018) as such photographs are also visual form of self-representation because of their choice to share them (Rettberg, 2014). Similarly, people share images of things they love on Instagram, like photographs of their family members, pets, vacations and meals (Caldeira et al., 2018) as a way of indirect self-representation of their personality (Enli & Thumim, 2012, p. 15). Therefore, people taking selfies at work and posting them on Instagram or posting their work related photographs on Instagram (taken by themselves or other people) with workplace boredom hashtags are some of the ways they self-represent their personalities.

However, despite the widespread popularity of selfies (Caldeira et al., 2018), they are considered as narcissistic in a simplistic understanding of the word that despises such self-representations as devices used for attention seeking and blatant self-promotion (Tifentale & Manovich 2015). This overwhelmingly negative view of the selfie
phenomenon also leads to an overall attack on and vilification of the selfie-takers, a gendered category that mainly consists of young women (Burns, 2015). No wonder, selfies are also gendered by being more feminine (Burns, 2015). Interestingly, in our study, majority of the people who shared selfies on Instagram with workplace boredom hashtags appeared to be women as well. However, there is no such study that claims that women face boredom more than men. Instead, this may mean that women are more expressive than men in general while men may not be comfortable with sharing their selfies in fear of being stereotyped as someone who demonstrates non-serious behavior at workplace.

4.7 Theme 7: Pictures of Actual and Potential Online Purchases

People also shared pictures of their online purchases on Instagram stories, sometimes even asking people to help them decide what to buy through a vote using Instagram poll feature. Studies on boredom and shopping indicate that shopping can be an activity performed by people in order to avoid boredom (Faber et al., 1995; Mano, 1999). New information technology tools (e.g., social media) are enabling customers to gain their fashion inspirations online (e.g., through Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and so forth) with audio and visual displays (Sundström et al., 2016). Hence, recent studies also indicate that boredom stimulates online purchasing behaviors of people, particularly, impulse buying behavior (Hjelm-Lidholm et al., 2017; Sundström et al., 2019). Similarly, this behavior was also quite apparent in people’s expressions and representations of workplace boredom on Instagram.

4.8 Theme 8: Photographs of Desired Holiday Destinations and Previous Vacations

People shared pictures of their desired destinations on Instagram they would like to vacation at or had already vacationed at in the past, illustrating their lack of engagement with current work activities and a desire to escape workplace environment. This behavior also showed that people plan their holidays during their work hours to pass time. Moreover, people also shared nostalgic images with friends and family to reminisce about past holidays and events.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The study explores people’s expressions and representations of workplace boredom on one of the major social media websites, Instagram. In this regard, four common hashtags related to workplace boredom (e.g., 531 thousand plus accessible posts on the Instagram related to the four workplace boredom related hashtags) have been examined which led to the recognition of eight frequent ways exercised by the people to express and represent their boredom at work through Instagram posts. These eight ways are organized under eight themes for the purpose of writing the findings and analysis of the study. They are: memes, Snapchat filters, Tiktok videos, live commentaries and gaming, photographs and videos of displaying one’s creative side, selfies, pictures of actual and potential online purchases, and, last but not least, photographs of desired holiday destinations and previous vacations.

Hence, the study implies the power of social media used by the employees in this techno-frenzy eon to dynamically express and represent their boredom at work and their simultaneous use of this power to overcome it as well. So all the bosses out there, do you want to know if your employees are bored? Check their social media pages. However, be aware, boredom may not be an adverse reality or hindrance in employees’ way to achieve their work outcomes. Instead, it may be a therapeutic way to bounce back to work more effectively than ever before. And social media provides various opportunities for it. One may call it, a social media therapy.

However, it is very tricky to understand the reality of workplace boredom, especially during the current times of pandemic. Many people have shifted from their favorable workplace environments to not so favorable work-from-home environments. Similarly, many people have become quite adaptive to their work-from-home environments, but many miss their real offices and cannot wait to be back at them. Thus, it may be gathered that one may not be bored with the work itself but the work space. These two are not the same, and so it is important to understand and differentiate between the two when defining workplace boredom.

Additionally, our study found that women appeared to be using more workplace boredom related hashtags on Instagram which were examined for this research. However, there is no significant evidence which claims that women are more bored at work than men. In fact, the term boredom cannot be gendered. Hence, women’s self-reflection of boredom on social media more than men does not make them more prone to boredom than men but may simply mean that they are more expressive than men. Whatever the case may be, social media platforms are the reality of today’s time, massively used by both men and women for social networking and self-reflection throughout the day, especially during coronavirus pandemic. For example, according to Statista Research Department (2021), there is a significant increase in the average time spent by the USA citizens daily on the social media in the year 2020 of pandemic. The similar trend is expected by the people in the rest of the world. Among them, some may openly reveal themselves while others may selectively uncover themselves and create their desired characteristics or identities (e.g., opinions,
personality traits, emotions, and so forth) (Vogel et al., 2014) through social media (e.g., Instagram posts, Facebook, Twitter, and so forth).

Finally, the recognition of different ways people represent their workplace boredom through social media will enhance our understanding of the context of modern-day boredom at work and its prevalent virtual reflection by people. This understanding may particularly be important in the current times of pandemic which has changed the overall context of work (e.g., work-from-home), and, as a result, may have affected the people’s expressions and representations of workplace boredom. In view of this, the study may not only further attract the attention of contemporary authors, theorists and researchers to conceptualize and construct more prevalent definitions of workplace boredom, but also, assist them in the assessment of workplace boredom of the modern employees (e.g., based on their expressions and representations of workplace boredom on the social media).

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