

**BOREDOM AMONG ROMANIAN CHILDREN DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. CORRELATIONAL STUDY BASED
ON DATA FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SURVEY
"CHILD WELL-BEING IN ROMANIA"**

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Abstract

Considered a 'silent emotion', boredom is not often seen as a topic worthy of study in terms of school problems faced by children. But is it really that quiet? We hear so often from students nowadays that they are bored, whether we are talking about school situations, time spent at home or even when they are in groups of friends. Based on a sample of over 1800 children in Romania during the pandemic period (2021), the present research was initiated by the interest to investigate boredom and its correlates among children. We conducted a secondary analysis of data collected through the international survey "Child well-being in Romania". The results of the present quantitative research indicated that boredom is significantly more common among 12-year-olds than among 10- and 11-year-olds and is more likely to be found among children who do not often engage in sports activities and those who frequently use social media. Also, contrary to our expectations, there seems to be no gender differences in boredom at this age. According to statistical analyses, children who experienced boredom during the pandemic also experienced feelings of sadness and stress (positive correlation). Several negative correlations emerged between boredom and others variables like: well-being, feelings of happiness, self-satisfaction and the idea of a positive future. The results of this study show that feelings of boredom certainly have to be considered in studies of children's problems.

Keywords: boredom, well-being, sadness, stress, future vision, pandemic

It is already known that during epidemics psychological stress and negative feelings are more intense among people and children. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception when it comes to such repercussions. Studies show that the pandemic period has generated significant changes in all

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spheres of children's lives, with particular implications for their emotional health (Brooks et al., 2020; Savahl et al., 2022; Topciu, 2022). One of the common emotions during the pandemic period, and with its increased frequency, compared to other periods, among children in many countries was boredom (Furlong et al., 2021). Although there have already been quite a few studies on the impact of the recent pandemic as regards to the emotional health and wellbeing of humans and children, however, the impact of boredom on children during the pandemic has been not much explored. In this context, we consider relevant to analyze boredom in students during the pandemic and how it correlates with certain affective states such as sadness, stress but also with general well-being, happiness and vision of the future.

Despite the fact that boredom is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common, especially among children, but also among adults, it has not been studied much (Bonchiş, 2022). Pekrun et al. (2010, p. 531) reasoned that boredom is neglected generally, not just in pandemic period, in educational studies because it is considered a "silent emotion", which, according to teachers, is not disruptive and from the perspective of clinical practice has no pathological relevance. Boredom is an emotional response to a situation that the individual perceives as insufficiently stimulating, characterized by a low level of arousal (Bonchiş, 2022). However, opinions on boredom are quite divided in the literature, boredom is seen as a common problem, perceived "as a fairly trivial and temporary discomfort that can be alleviated by a simple change in circumstances", or as "chronic and pervasive stressor with significant psychosocial consequences", being associated with "a range of psychological, social, and physical health difficulties" (Eastwood et al., 2021, p. 482), to which are added "academic, occupational and relational difficulties" (Doğası, 2021, p. 482).

Environmental theories explain boredom through the presence of insufficiently activating tasks, repetitive tasks or on the contrary, too difficult tasks (Bonchiş, 2022; Schwartze et al., 2021). On the other hand, there are theories that focus on individual characteristics, such as attentional theories that say that boredom occurs among those with an attentional deficit (Bonchiş, 2022).

Data from a study conducted on a sample of Italian teenagers (Biolcati, 2018) showed that both girls and boys with a high level of boredom tend to spend their leisure time using technology, are more likely to develop Internet and alcohol addictions, have fewer hobbies and are less involved in sports activities. A recent study of a sample of nearly 1,500 students shows a negative correlation between boredom and all aspects of health-related quality of life: physical and psychological well-being, relationship with parents, social well-being, social support and peers, school environment and autonomy (Schwartze et al., 2021). Other studies highlight that "boredom can motivate students to initiate positive coping behaviour;

boredom is linked more often to adverse mental health and academic outcomes" (Furlong et al., 2021, p. 42; Whelan et al., 2020), with negative influences, and it is necessary to be aware of it in order to intervene effectively when the situation requires it (Doğası, 2016). Boredom, can therefore be encountered in several forms, the predisposition, constancy, high intentionality of this emotion leads to the development of boredom as a trait, while the state of low activation felt in a particular situation insufficiently stimulating, outlines what we call, boredom as a state (Fahlman et al., 2013). While there are indeed studies that place boredom in a positive perspective, showing its positive effect in terms of stimulating reflection and creativity (Carol et al., 2010; Furlong et al., 2021; Whelan et al., 2020), most of the research draws attention to the negative effects of boredom (Biolcati, 2018; Hartoyo & Wijaya, 2022; Pekrun, et al., 2010; Schwartze et al., 2021).

In terms of age, boredom tends to be less common in adults than in children, and is most common in adolescents (Martz et al., 2018; Weybright et al., 2017). Results from a study of a national sample of U.S. adolescents highlight that different social contexts such as school, parents, peers, and extra-curricular activities influence their psychosocial functioning and are likely to contribute to boredom (Martz et al., 2016). Results from other studies show that boredom correlates negatively with meaning of life (Hartoyo & Wijaya, 2022).

Disengagement, decreased interest in participating in activities, decreased performance are just some of the problems caused by the changes in children's lives during the pandemic. Decreased interest in daily activities can lead to experiencing feelings of missing goals set to be achieved in the future. Also, the mattering dimension has a strong relationship value with the boredom variable. The greater the feeling of being important, valuable, the lower the boredom they will experience (Hartoyo & Wijaya, 2022, pp. 1498-1499). The pandemic period has also raised concerns about the future. In this regard, one of the solutions proposed by participants in a UK study was "staying connected and active" (The Children's Society, 2020, p. 20).

During the pandemic period feelings of sadness, loneliness, irritability and boredom have increased, leading to a decrease in children's engagement in activities, which are attributed to reduced opportunities to play, socialize and learn, with implications for their behaviour, emotional state and thus their general well-being (Borualogo & Casas, 2021; Al-Rahamneh et al., 2021; Buchanan et al., 2022). Another important issue due to unexpected and stressful changes during that period, which led to feelings of boredom and purposelessness, as well as limiting connections with peers and friends, was the increase in children's screen time (Maunula et al., 2021).

The pandemic period seems to have been felt differently by girls than boys in terms of emotional distress. Feelings of boredom as well as sadness and stress were more often reported by girls than boys. Frequently in the surveys, pupils claimed that these negative feelings were caused by the fact that when schools were closed, opportunities for physical socialisation and sporting activities were practically closed too (Borualogo & Casas, 2021).

Major changes in the organization of school work during the pandemic period due to school closures, restrictions on contact with classmates and friends created a number of problems/challenges that children, their parents, teachers and other stakeholders had to face. One of such important change during the pandemic period has been an increase in the prevalence of boredom among children in many countries (Furlong et al., 2021).

The overall objective of the study was to investigate children's feelings of boredom during the pandemic period and its correlates.

Starting from the established object we intend to test the following four hypotheses:

The feeling of boredom in the context of COVID-19 occurs more frequently among girls.

According to other studies (Martz et al., 2018; Weybright et al., 2017) we assume that boredom will be more pronounced among children who are closer to adolescence.

Children who reported feeling frequently bored in the last two weeks are the ones who will also report feeling some negative emotions, such as sadness or stress.

Boredom correlates negatively with cognitive well-being, with feelings of happiness, self-satisfaction and the idea of a positive future.

In order to test our hypotheses, we considered that the data collected through the "Child well-being in Romania" project, which already measured the selected variables of interest, provide a useful tool. In this sense, we have decided in favour of secondary data analysis as a research method. Based on the findings of other studies, we intend to test the correlation between boredom and other emotional states and to compare boredom in relation to gender and age.

Method

Participants

In the present study we used data collected (March-August 2021) within the „Child well-being in Romania” project, in the fourth wave of “Children’s worlds. The International Survey of Children's Well-Being” project (Children’s Worlds COVID-19 Supplement), a worldwide research

on children’s subjective well-being (ISCWeB), considered to be „the largest and most comprehensive global study on childhood from children’s perspectives” (Savahl et al., 2022, p. 6). Twenty countries participated in this study (Albania, Alegria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Romania, Russia, S Africa, S Correa, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, Wales). Based on the methodology of the study, the specialists in each country had the opportunity to design their own data collection strategy, respecting the ethical requirements, considering the socio-demographic characteristics and the functioning of the education system. In terms of sample, each country had to include at least 1000 children.

The present study included only the Romanian sample, so the responses of 1,877 children between 10 and 12 years old were analyzed, the average age being 11.03 years. Of the total Romanian participants, 911 were girls, 870 boys, and 96 did not provide a gender response. The characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1. As can be seen, the data covered relatively equal proportions of respondents in terms of gender and the three age categories included.

Table. 1. Description of the samples

Variable		N	%
Gender	Boy	870	46.4%
	Girl	911	48.5%
	Missing	96	5.1%
Age in years	10 years old	577	30.7%
	11 years old	681	36.3%
	12 years old	619	33%
TOTAL	100%	1877	TOTAL

Measures and procedure

For this study, we used secondary data analysis and as already mentioned, we used the database collected in 2021 through the project „Child Well-being in Romania”. The method used for data collection was questionnaire survey, the questionnaires were administered at school or online format (one class).

The questionnaires of the project „Child Well-being in Romania” include items grouped into four themes: current context, life during COVID, school and relationships, and how children feel about their lives, items related with different aspects of children’s life: the home and the people they live with, and situation at home during the pandemic, money and things they have, information and spending time during the pandemic, pandemic concerns, school and relationships, how they felt about life at that time. The

standardized scales used were: Children's Worlds Subjective Well-Being Scale (CW-SWBS), Children's Worlds Domain-Based Subjective Well-Being Scale (CW-DBSWBS), Children's Worlds Positive and Negative Affect Scale (CW-PANAS), Children's Worlds Psychological Well-Being Scale (CW-PWBS), Material Deprivation Scale and Fear of COVID Scale - Child Version (Savahl et al., , p. 9).

Considering the objectives of the study, the following variables were included in the analysis: boredom, subjective wellbeing, self-satisfaction, feelings of sadness, stress and happy present in the last 2 weeks and positive thinking about the future.

To measure *cognitive subjective well-being*, we used the standardised scale Children's Worlds Subjective Well-Being Scale (CW-SWBS), a scale that includes 6 items: *I enjoy my life, My life is going well, I have a good life, The things that happen in my life are excellent, I am happy with my life, I like my life*. In calculating the final score, according to the recommendations outlined in the Children's Worlds Wave 3: Guidance on using and analysing data sets (2020), based on other statistical calculations, we excluded the last item *I like my life*. The answer to each item was made on a 5-point Likert scale. Both in the present study and in other studies the scale has been shown to have good psychometric properties, in the current study Cronbach's Alpha was .927.

Boredom and was operationalized by answering on a scale from 0 to 10 the question *Last two weeks: How often feeling bored*, and *Last two weeks: How often feeling sad*.

Feeling happy, sad and stress were also operationalized by answering on a scale from 0 to 10 the question *Last two weeks: How often feeling bored*, and *Last two weeks: How often feeling sad*.

Feelings of *happiness, sadness, and stress* were also operationalized by responses on a scale of 0 to 10 regarding the frequency of presence of each emotion in the past 2 weeks.

Regarding variables *positive thinking about the future* and *self-satisfaction*, both were measured by answering on a scale of 0 to 10 in terms of agreement with the statement *I feel positive about my future* and *I like being the way I am*.

In terms of analysis, we chose correlation as the main method, for which we used IBM Statistics version 23.

Results and discussions

A first descriptive analysis (see Table 2) indicates an average level (M=4.28) of reported boredom. According to the 2022 Children's Worlds report (Savahl et al., 2022), an increase in the level of boredom experienced by children during the COVID period compared to previous periods has

been observed in most countries. In Romania, in the 2020 Children's Worlds report (Rees et al., 2020) we can see that for 10-year-olds children, the average boredom was 3.83.

Also, many children reported they felt sad (M=3.72) and stressed (M=3.45) during the last two weeks. According to the same report from 2022 (Savahl et al., 2022), the level of stress and anger was much higher during the COVID period compared to previous years. Even if stress and sadness were more present, according to previous data (Rees et al., 2020), Romanian children are among the happiest children, and these values are maintained in the report from the pandemic period. A high reported happiness (M=9.21) and wellbeing (M=47.33) scores can be observed and it seems that Romanian children between aged 10-12 are quite positive regarding the future (M=9.10). The results should be analyzed considering that desirability is quite high among the Romanians and it is possible that the high scores from well-being for example are due to this fact.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for boredom, subjective wellbeing, feelings of sadness, happiness, stressed, self-satisfaction and positive thinking about the future

Variable	N	M	SD	Range
Feeling Bored	1768	4.28	3.62	0-10
Subjective well being	1768	47.33	5.82	0-50
Feeling Sad	1738	3.72	3.06	0-10
Feeling Happy	1787	9.21	1.55	0-10
Feeling Stressed	1726	3.45	3.61	0-10
Self-satisfaction	579	9.13	1.72	0-10
Positive about the future	579	9.10	1.87	0-10

While we might think that those who spend more time on the internet and therefore on social media are less bored, it seems that social media is not a solution when it comes to fighting boredom. Analysing Table 3 and 4, it can be seen that feelings of boredom occur more frequently among children who use social media and vice versa, less frequently among those who engage in sports. These results are also supported by other previous studies (Borualogo & Casas, 2021; Martz, 2018). In order to have an overview of the phenomenon of boredom among children, although the main objective of the study is not to analyse the relationship between boredom and social media use or sports, we considered that it would be useful to present these relationships at least at a descriptive level. Of course,

to better understand the relationship between sport/social media and boredom, more complex analyses are needed.

Table 3. Feelings of boredom and frequency of using social media

Frequency uses of social media	Mean
Never	4.68
Less than once a week	5.34
Once or twice a week	5.05
Three or four days a week	4.82
Five or six days a week	5.84
Every day	5.58

Table 4. Feelings of boredom and frequency of doing sports exercise

Frequency uses of social media	Mean
Never	6.16
Less than once a week	6.15
Once or twice a week	5.70
Three or four days a week	4.93
Five or six days a week	5.46
Every day	5.02

Prior to the inferential statistical analyses, it was necessary to normalize the data, therefore in the following analyses normalized data are used, which allowed the use of parametric tests. A first comparative analysis was conducted in order to identify gender differences in boredom. Results indicates that there was no significant effect for gender in Romanian children, $t(1681) = -1.56$, $p = .118$, despite boys ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 3.20$) scoring less than girls ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 3.27$). For testing the hypothesis on gender differences, we used the t test. Contrary to our expectations, the results do not support our hypothesis. According to other studies (Borualogo & Casas, 2021; Savahl et al., 2022) girls reported higher rates of boredom during the COVID period, but in our sample these differences do not seem to occur. We consider that there are certain particularities of children in Romania, therefor previous studies indicate a specificity of Romania regarding gender differences as wel in well-being, contrary to the international literature (Bălțătescu, 2014). Explanations, besides cultural differences, may be related to studies that suggest that high-level boredom does not manifest itself differently in girls and boys, except in the way they behave (Biolcati, 2018). For example, boys and girls with high levels of boredom tend to develop digital addictions, with girls being prone to social media and boys to gaming addiction (Twenge & Martin, 2020).

The second hypothesis was tested in order to examine whether there are age differences in boredom. The results of ANOVA analyses can be seen in the Table 5.

Table 5. Means, standard deviations and one-way analyses of variance for boredom and age category (N=1768)

Measure	10 years		11 years		12 years		F (2,1765)	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Feeling bored	3.96	3.17	3.84	3.15	5.18	3.20	33.00	.001**

**p<.01

Multiple comparison analyses showed statistically significant differences ($p < .00$) between 12- and 10–11-year-old children in terms of boredom. Thus, we conclude that during the pandemic 12-year-old children were significantly more bored than 10- and 11-year-olds. No significant differences were recorded between 10- and 11-year-old children. Most studies (Biolcati et al., 2018; Martz et al., 2018; Weybright et al., 2017) are of the opinion that children experience higher rates of boredom during adolescence, so 12-year-olds students are the ones who are closer to adolescence and are starting to experience more and more the specifics of this age stage. This is explained by the fact that teenagers have not yet developed the capacity for self-regulation and organisation, although cognitive changes occur very suddenly. Adolescents lacking these capacities will find it difficult to manage their free time, although the need to have free time, particularly time spent with their peers, and to be seen well by them is considerable (Birle & Lazăr, 2022).

Table 6. Correlations between boredom and negative emotional states

		Feeling Sad	Feeling Stressed
Feeling bored	R	.436**	.410**
	Sig.	.001	.001
	N	1724	1714

**Pearson Correlation is significant at the .01 level, two-tailed

In Table 6 it can be observed that feelings of boredom correlate positively with sadness ($r = .436, p < .00$) and stress ($r = .410, p < .00$), therefore our hypothesis regarding the association of boredom with negative emotions is confirmed. The findings mirror the results of previous studies (Biolcati, 2018; Doğası, 2021; Hartoyo & Wijaya, 2022; Pekrun, et al., 2010; Schwartze et al., 2021) and indicate similar problems among children in Romania, especially during the pandemic period, where children who experienced boredom were often also sad, stressed and had fewer moments of happiness. A possible explanation for the association of boredom with negative emotions relates to the context and the level of task autonomy. Schwartze et al. (2021) emphasize that feelings of sadness and depression in

association with boredom occur when the level of task autonomy is very low, and feelings of frustration occur when the level of task autonomy is too high. Thus, task autonomy can be seen as a solution to alleviate boredom. Also, the context surrounding the boredom-inducing task can have an impact the relationship between boredom and arousal level. Feelings of sadness occur especially in contexts where the task or moment seems endless and they have nothing else to do and no important life goals. Given the context of the pandemic, in which the level of autonomy was much lower, and the context seemed to be never-ending, or at least it was not known how long the period would last, the feelings of sadness associated with boredom are well explained by the above-mentioned theory.

Table 7. Correlations between boredom and wellbeing, happiness, self-satisfaction and positive thinking about future

		Wellbeing	Positive Future	Self-Satisfaction	Feeling Happy
Feeling bored	R	-.254**	-.172**	-.177**	-.218**
	Sig.	.001	.001	.001	.001
	N	1724	572	572	1759

**Pearson Correlation is significant at the .01 level, two-tailed

As far as the last hypothesis is concerned (see Table 7), the data also support it: feeling of boredom correlates negatively with well-being ($r = -.254, p < .00$), feelings of happiness ($r = -.218, p < .00$), self-satisfaction ($r = -.254, p < .00$), and the idea of a positive future ($r = -.172, p < .00$). Similar to our results, Schwartz et al. (2021) draw attention to the fact that boredom can affect children's well-being and even health, and one of the solutions is, as explained above, an optimal level of autonomy. Teens who often experience feelings of boredom have a sense of emptiness, lack of life goals and a more passive involvement in their lives (Eastwood et al., 202; Hartoyo & Wijaya, 2022;). Lack of meaning in life is associated with high odds of developing chronic boredom among adolescent (Hartoyo & Wijaya, 2022). During the pandemic period, given the specifics of the period, children had many periods of staying at home, in isolation, unable to perform certain activities that would energize them and give them a sense of self satisfaction. We also saw that feelings of sadness in relation to boredom are common (Pekrun, et al., 2010; Schwartz et al., 2021). As such, the feelings of boredom that increased during the pandemic were accompanied by low levels of well-being and life satisfaction (Al-Rahamneh et al., 2021; Borualogo & Casas, 2021; Buchanan et al., 2022). As for the variable perception of the future, in a context such as the pandemic, with few social resources and few activities to build satisfaction with life, it is not surprising that young people who were bored did not see a positive future ahead.

Conclusion

The findings of our correlational study indicate that the effects of boredom during the pandemic are not negligible. The study started from the objective of studying boredom and its correlation during the pandemic period among children. Through the conducted analyses we tested 4 hypotheses, namely: hypothesis on gender differences, hypothesis on age differences, hypothesis on the correlation of boredom with certain negative emotions, as well as with happiness, well-being, self-satisfaction and positive perspective on the future.

The responses of 1,877 children aged 10 to 12 were considered. Three of the four hypotheses were confirmed, the only hypothesis that was not supported was the hypothesis related to gender differences in boredom. The data indicate that boredom is more intensely encountered among 12-year-olds compared to 10- and 11-year-olds. A positive correlation was observed between boredom and feelings of stress and anger. The last hypothesis was also confirmed and it was found that boredom correlated negatively with well-being, feelings of happiness, self-satisfaction or positive perspective on the future

We believe that the present research has important practical implications for raising awareness of the effect of boredom in students' lives, an effect that can be felt in many spheres of life, including emotional feelings, self-satisfaction, perceptions about the future, well-being or meaning of life.

The study has certain limitations including the fact that it was only a correlational study, and does not allow us to identify the causes of this phenomenon and therefore the explanations are less complex. Another limitation refers to the fact that the instruments used to operationalize variables were often based on a single item. Also, the results have to be analysed in terms of so-called personality traits and certain individual characteristics such as locus of control, extraversion, conscientiousness, attention, procreativity. Being only a correlational study, we believe that the present research could be a good starting point for more complex analyses of this phenomenon, which is so common among children and seems to be directly related to feelings of sadness, stress, perception of the future and well-being in general.

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