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Media-Saturated and Morally Contested Teenage Lives: No Space or Time for Nonmedia Moments (and for Being Bored)?

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This article examines how Norwegian teenagers morally assess their media use and how media experiences operate as a means of escaping boredom. Based on qualitative interviews with 24 adolescents, the analysis delineates 3 distinct types of media experiences: ambient, which are morally uncontentious and enrich mundane situations; attentive, which are considered morally "good" because they demand focus, foster insight, and cultivate virtues; and atomized; depicted with moral ambivalence, offering quick escapes, but sometimes leading to feelings of emptiness. This study contributes to understanding the difficulty of resisting instant gratification from omnipresent media when bored and argues that, despite their moral complexities, media remain crucial for a flourishing life.

Keywords: attention, boredom, capabilities, media, media experience, media morality, social media, youth

For teens in the Global North, the media-saturated reality—composed of smartphones, platforms, and conventional media—is largely taken for granted. Youth, like older generations, may feel ambivalent about social media and smartphones (Agai, 2022; Jansson et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2023; Weinstein, 2018; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020), but for most teens, media, including "old" media (like TV, films, music, books, and video games), remain a ubiquitous element of daily life (Hasebrink & Paus-Hasebrink, 2022). This study examines societal concerns about how the omnipresence of screens and media leaves little room for being bored as a constructive state of being (see, e.g., Paul, 2019; Risnes, 2024). Herein lies the idea that digital devices and social media represent troublesome ways of passing time. Such discourses tie in with values and norms surrounding media use: Media inevitably invoke moral questions about "good" and "bad" media use (Jansson et al., 2025; Owens, 2025; Syvertsen, 2017).

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The constant presence of media in people's lives calls for holistic research into how different media are configured into daily life. Numerous studies have examined related phenomena, such as media multitasking, focusing on its negative effects on cognitive functioning and academic performance (van der Schuur et al., 2020; Wiradhany & Koerts, 2021). While engaging in two or more types of media simultaneously illustrates contemporary media practices, how media partly constitute the rhythms of daily life also encompasses other media experiences (Harro-Loit & Kõuts-Klemm, 2022). More specifically, this study follows a cross-media approach to explore audience practices across the range of media they habitually use (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017), whether these encompass legacy media, streaming media, or social media. I focus on content formats typically considered part of media entertainment, such as TV shows, music, films, novels, video games, podcasts, and social media content. While boundaries between journalism and entertainment are fuzzy, entertainment formats are especially popular among youth, for whom entertainment plays a role in fostering public connection (Sundet, 2026). I explore how various media experiences are perceived and whether they are considered constructive or problematic ways of spending time.

To address these issues, I explore how teens reflect on their media-saturated lives. Grounded in qualitative interviews with 24 Norwegian adolescents (aged 15–19), I address two connected questions. First, what moral evaluations are discernible in how teens discuss their media use and experiences? The aim of this question is twofold: to unpack forms of media experiences that are typical of a media-saturated teen life and to inquire whether there are variations in how teens conceive of them as "good" or "bad."

Moral assessments of media experiences encompass ideas about their "worthwhileness," including the extent to which they represent morally sound ways of alleviating boredom. Tying in with discourses about teens being (too) quick to turn to their digital devices and social media when bored, I ask: How do different types of media experiences operate as a means of escaping boredom? Passing time and alleviating boredom are common motives for using social media (Camerini et al., 2023; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020), as well as for watching television (Rubin, 1981; Rubin, 1983; Shao, 2024) and listening to music (Belcher & Haridakis, 2013; Randall & Rickard, 2017). My aim, however, is not to identify boredom as a motive for media use, but to analyze how different media practices relate to managing and transforming boredom. To do so, I apply a functional theory of boredom, which understands boredom as an operative emotion that informs us of an unpleasant situation and pushes us to reestablish contentment (Bench & Lench, 2019; Danckert et al., 2018; Elpidorou, 2018).

I first review research relevant to understanding the meanings and moral appraisals of media before introducing core ideas in a functional theory of boredom. The analysis delineates three types of media experiences: Ambient media experiences appear morally uncontentious and enrich mundane or boring situations. Attentive media experiences are portrayed as morally good because they demand focus and cultivate virtue. Finally, atomized media experiences are depicted as morally ambivalent, offering quick escapes from boredom, but sometimes leading to feelings of emptiness. My contribution is twofold. First, conceiving of boredom as an operative emotion explains the difficulty in resisting instant gratification from omnipresent media. Second, despite their moral complexities, I argue that media remain crucial for a flourishing life.

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The Meanings and Moral Appraisals of Omnipresent Media

With an emphasis on media experiences, this article explores "the interwoven and multidimensional social life worlds in which audiences engage with media and technologies" (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019, p. 187). This includes examining how media are perceived as worthwhile and meaningful and, conversely, how they can evoke feelings of unease and agony. Such considerations of the manifold roles and perceptions of media are present in cross-media research, with Boczkowski (2021) and Ytre-Arne (2023) being especially relevant scholars. While their work is not limited to young people's media experiences, their studies of the meanings and ritual significance people attach to screens, social media, news, and media entertainment offer nuanced insights. Boczkowski (2021), for example, portrays how social media are experienced as both empowering and disempowering and how watching television and listening to music possess an ambient character, accompanying people while they engage in other activities.

Such considerations connect to the history of audience research in studying people's moral assessments of media, for example, related to a perceived moral hierarchy of TV programs (Alasuutari, 1992; Scarborough & McCoy, 2016), the various ways people self-evaluate their TV habits (Hagen, 2000; Morley, 2005), and moral distress about "appropriate" use of smartphones (Jansson et al., 2025). Bengtsson's (2012) large-scale qualitative inquiry into media use and everyday life in Sweden and Finland, with empirical material gathered from 1997 to 2005, is especially relevant. Bengtsson notes that cultural hierarchies change slowly, referencing how participants make moral distinctions between reading books (good) and watching television (bad), echoing findings from the early 1960s. However, since 2005, people's everyday media lives have evolved, with screens and smartphones becoming morally contested aspects of the digital mundane (Jansson et al., 2025).

In *Media and Morality*, Silverstone (2007) argued for the need to regulate the media because of their societal role, our dependence on their capacity to re-present the world, and our ability to be and act in it. His arguments dovetail with Nussbaum's (2006, 2011) and Sen's (1999) Capabilities Approach, a framework for theorizing social justice that asks what substantial freedoms or opportunities a society should make possible so that each citizen can flourish. The approach distinguishes between capabilities (real opportunities) and functionings (active realization of opportunities), insisting that justice concerns the former: People should have options, including the freedom not to exercise them. Although neither Nussbaum nor Sen writes extensively about the role of media, their approach offers much to media research, for example, by providing a flexible moral framework for addressing media justice (Couldry, 2019) and foregrounding how media enable people to flourish (Hesmondhalgh, 2017). To illustrate, listening to music can activate "senses, imagination, and thought," which is one of the capabilities Nussbaum (2011) identifies as central to flourishing (p. 33).

If capabilities name the space of opportunities that justice should secure, then everyday moral evaluations of media can be read as first-person assessments of whether particular media practices help or hinder the realization of one or more capabilities. The Capabilities Approach cautions against imposing "some other person's comprehensive view of the good" (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 340). Instead, it acknowledges reasonable pluralism: In a world where a core set of principles exists, we all make different choices and must respect the choices others make to lead lives that they have reason to value (Nussbaum, 2006, p.

184; Sen, 1999, pp. 85–86). Thus, in addressing the moral evaluations that emerge in how teens discuss various media, I study how they perceive their own media practices and experiences as "good" and "bad," along with the reflections behind those evaluations. It is not my role to render moral verdicts on their reflections. However, the analysis can offer a foundation for a normative critique of institutions responsible for promoting human capabilities. These include multinational companies, which have a responsibility to promote capabilities in the regions where they operate (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 317).

Well-being, in the sense of flourishing (the very outcome the capabilities approach seeks to secure), may serve as a standard against which media practices are morally assessed. Attending to teens' situated judgments treats teens' own standards of flourishing as indicative of what media enable or disable. Analytically, these vernacular moral evaluations may reflect different ethical frameworks. This is not to say that I expect teens to identify as virtue ethicists or consequentialists, but rather that ways of making moral evaluations of media use and experiences activate different ethical frameworks.

An exposition of moral theories is outside the scope of this article, but I will briefly outline some core principles based on the distinction between moral evaluations grounded in outcomes (consequentialism), character (virtue ethics), and or the action itself (deontological ethics). If consequentialism posits that an act is morally right if it maximizes good consequences (Nussbaum, 2011), then accounts of how certain media experiences lead to positive outcomes, such as pleasure or insight, or negative ones, like a deteriorating ability to concentrate, reflect a consequentialist logic. However, insight and "ability to concentrate" could also be seen as virtues—character traits that enable appropriate responses to situations (Curzer, 2023, p. 42). Referring to how a media activity reflects or shapes one's character can thus be understood within a virtue-ethics approach. Finally, deontology emphasizes a sense of duty about media consumption, asserting that moral rules delineate right from wrong (Curzer, 2023). For example, rules limiting "screen time" could be interpreted as deontologically motivated. As I show next, moral assessments also inform ideas about "right" and "wrong" ways of responding to boredom.

A Functional Theory of Boredom

Screens and social media may seem like constantly available ways to escape boredom, but today's teens are not necessarily less bored than before. A multicohort study of U.S. teens using survey data from 2008 to 2017 found that boredom increased annually, leading the authors to speculate that increased use of digital and social media partly explains this trend (Weybright et al., 2020). Teens browse social media for entertainment and amusement, but they do not dismiss how its use can also be experienced as a waste of time or boring (Weinstein, 2018).

To understand the use of media to alleviate boredom—even if it may be ineffective in escaping ennui and reestablishing a sense of meaningfulness—we must examine what boredom compels us to do. A functional theory of boredom is therefore useful because it conceptualizes boredom as an operative emotion that signals an unpleasant situation and motivates us to pursue more meaningful or satisfactory alternatives (Elpidorou, 2018). Boredom is thus a call to remedy an unpleasant emotional condition characterized by dissatisfaction and lack of interest.

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Eastwood et al. (2012) defined boredom as a cognitive state characterized by failure to engage attention, awareness of this lack of engagement, and the attribution of its cause to the environment—for example, finding a task boring or feeling that there is nothing to do (p. 484). Hence, being bored is a state that most people occasionally experience. A functional theory of boredom posits that boredom is a common emotional state with a purpose: It prompts the pursuit of an alternative experience (Bench & Lench, 2019; Danckert et al., 2018; Elpidorou, 2018, 2023).

If we return to the truism that humans, especially children and youth, need time to be bored, this belief rests on what the bored mind compels us to do: take time off, reconnect with our surroundings, play, or be creative. The value of boredom lies not in the experience itself, but in what it motivates us to do. However, boredom is not "a creativity boosting force," and there is little evidence that it, per se, enhances creativity (Danckert et al., 2018, p. 111). Moreover, boredom may drive people toward negative experiences in an attempt to break monotony (Bench & Lench, 2019). Research suggests that boredom might be especially salient for youth, potentially explaining problematic behaviors like alcohol and drug use (Caldwell et al., 1999; Weybright et al., 2020). Boredom only signals that the current situation is unsatisfactory; it does not tell a bored person what to do (Elpidorou, 2023).

Not all boring situations should be avoided, and sometimes we need to resist boredom's "call" for change (Elpidorou, 2018, p. 473). For example, teens should endure doing their homework, and adults cannot always choose the easy way out of work tasks or chores. Escaping boredom thus involves two forms of action: replacing the current situation with a new object of engagement or re-evaluating one's current situation to find a more meaningful way to cope with it (Elpidorou, 2023). Part of the societal worries about the omnipresence of screens concerns how these devices distract and lure children and youth away from the task at hand: Screens are considered disastrous for teens' ability to cope with necessary, but boring situations. Such concerns are acknowledged by teens themselves. Weinstein and James (2022), for example, offer nuanced perspectives on why and how smartphones matter for teens, but also how they struggle to resist technologies designed to pull and keep their attention.

To summarize, a functional theory of boredom conceptualizes boredom as a common emotion equipping us to reestablish contentment or meaningfulness. Boredom is not valuable per se, and people may find positive or negative ways to counter it. Against this backdrop, screens and digital media are often considered detrimental ways to escape boredom. More precisely, the argument that the media-saturated lives of teens leave little room for boredom as a meaningful and constructive state hinges on three moral premises. First, it posits that the media experiences teens fill their free time with are not meaningful and constructive (e.g., scrolling feeds is meaningless). Second, teens are too quick to fill potentially boring moments with media experiences, pushing out more meaningful activities (e.g., spending time offline with friends). Third, ever-present media experiences diminish the ability to cope with tedious yet necessary situations (e.g., homework).

Method and Data

To explore young people's perceptions of various media experiences as constructive or problematic ways of spending time, I draw on an interview study of 24 teens aged 15–19.[2] Participants were interviewed in 2022 and were recruited by contacting teachers in Oslo and Bergen (see Table 1 for an overview of the anonymized participants). The interviews were conducted during the participants' leisure time, lasted between 70 and 90 minutes, and took place online (Zoom) or face-to-face, according to the participants' preferences. They received a gift card of NOK 400 (about USD $40) for participating. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo for coding and analysis.

Table 1. Overview of Anonymized Study Participants.

Pseudonym (gender, age)	Demographic of parents
Julie (f15)	Norwegian parents: economic upper-middle/professional middle class
Emma (f15)	Norwegian parents: economic and professional upper-middle class
Ida (f15)	Norwegian parents: economic upper-middle class
Nora (f15)	Norwegian parents: cultural elite/economic upper-middle class
Jonas (m15)	Norwegian parents: professional upper-middle class
Alexander (m16)	Norwegian parents: cultural and professional upper-middle class
Magnus (m16)	Norwegian/Icelandic parents: economic upper-middle class
Frida (f16)	Norwegian parents: skilled and partly skilled workers
Bella (f16)	Norwegian parents (divorced): professional upper middle class
Olivia (f16)	Norwegian mom, African dad: cultural lower middle/partly skilled worker
Sofia (f16)	Norwegian parents: cultural lower middle class
Alma (f16)	Norwegian parents: professional lower-middle and upper-middle class
Maja (f16)	Norwegian parents: skilled and partly skilled workers
Daw (f17)	Norwegian/Thai parents. Lives with dad: professional lower-middle class
Ingrid (f17)	Norwegian parents: professional upper-middle class
Anna (f17)	Norwegian parents: cultural lower-middle class and skilled worker
Leni (f17)	German parents: professional elite

[2] Participants received written information about the study and gave written, informed consent to participate. The study was assessed by The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number 305821) with the conclusion that the processing of personal data is lawful (legal basis: (1) Consent (GDPR art. 6 nr 1a) and (2) Explicit consent (GDPR art. 9 nr. 2a).

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Maria (f17)	Filipino/Norwegian parents. Lives with mom: partly skilled worker
Ada (f17)	Norwegian parents (divorced): professional elite
Jakob (m17)	Norwegian parents: professional upper-middle class
Emil (m17)	Norwegian parents: professional elite and upper-middle class
Aatif (m17)	Tanzanian parents: cultural lower-middle and partly skilled worker
Arman (m18)	Iranian parents (Kurds): professional lower-middle and partly skilled worker
Salman (m19)	Somali parents: Partly skilled workers

Note. Class background of parents approximated from what participants knew about the education and profession of their parents (based on Hansen et al., 2009).

The study was designed to explore cross-media entertainment experiences and elicit teens' perspectives on how they combine and move between different types of media. Although "media entertainment" is an elusive concept, this study focuses on youth-relevant media (Hasebrink & Paus-Hasebrink, 2022) that have been central to previous studies on the moral distinctions audiences make (see, e.g., Bengtsson, 2012; Jansson et al., 2025; Morley, 2005). Each interview started with a card-sorting exercise (see Figure 1), in which participants ranked various types of media and content based on their importance as entertainment. The prompt aimed to have participants articulate why different media matter and explore their meanings in daily life. "Entertainment" was not defined beyond how the cards themselves exemplified forms of media entertainment. This approach to exploring cross-media practices is similar to how Peters et al. (2022) explored news repertoires among young adult Danes. The resulting media repertoires of the participants are analyzed elsewhere (Lüders, 2025), but how participants rank different media is also relevant to the present analysis.

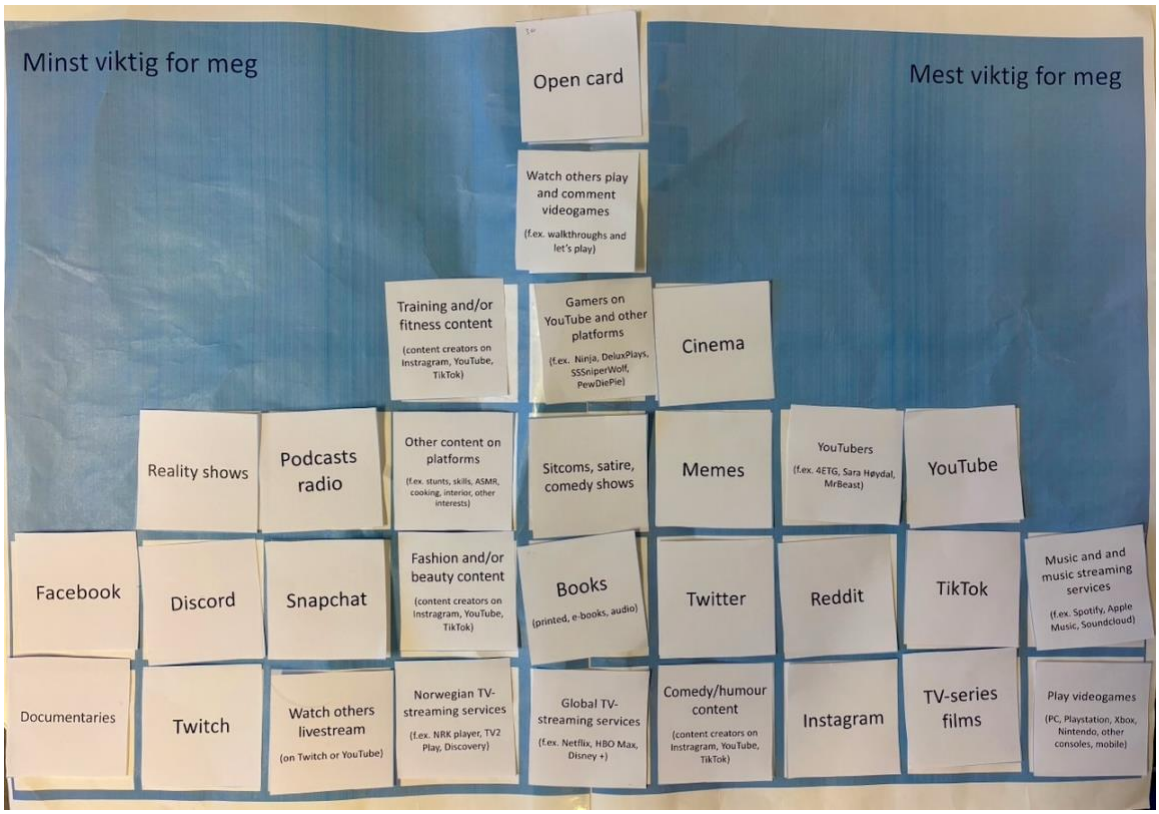

Figure 1. Example of how Magnus sorted the cards (translated from Norwegian to English). Cards sorted under column 1 (left) are least important, and cards sorted under column 9 (right) are most important as entertainment.

For cards that were ranked high, participants were asked several probing questions. For example, they were asked why these were important to them, what types of content they valued, and what roles these media and platforms played in their daily lives. Once the cards were ranked, participants were asked additional questions, following up on central topics specific to each participant.

Analytical Approach and Findings

In rereading the transcribed interviews, I noticed how often participants talked about what different media "do" in daily life and how media add value to otherwise mundane situations. Their narratives were further characterized by varying appraisals related to three distinct types of media experiences. These patterns compelled me to code the interviews according to three broad themes: ambient, attentive, and atomized. Reflections about moral evaluations and how media use relates to boredom connect to these media experiences. In the analysis, I first attend to ambient media experiences, referring to the modulated use of certain media alongside other activities or media. Second, I turn to attentive media experiences, which typically involve long-form stories or narratives that demand a level of focus or concentration. Third,

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atomized media experiences comprise interactions with smartphones and bits of content that are ideal for in-between (sometimes boring) situations.

Ambient Media Experiences

Ambient media experiences refer to how media are added as aesthetic layers to everyday situations and activities, often to offer companionship or to reflect on or affect a mood or vibe. Crucially, these experiences are transformative: The addition of media functions as an encompassing ambience that oscillates between being the experiential centerpiece and a backdrop. They are instances of media multitasking, commonly discussed, for example, in terms of how they interfere with teens' ability to focus on cognitive tasks (Wiradhany & Koerts, 2021). Addressing them as ambient media experiences, however, allows for a subtler conception of media as an encompassing atmosphere. Boczkowski (2021) likewise notes that some media possess ambient qualities. His notion of ambient media refers to how they can be enjoyed while doing something else, provide companionship and counter silence, and create a sense of being surrounded by media. What I add is an elaboration of ambient media in relation to moral evaluations and ideas of boredom.

Participants portrayed how music or other audio can turn a (sometimes) boring situation (doing homework, reading, walking the dog, sitting on the bus) into a more meaningful or pleasurable experience. For most participants, listening to music is important, partly because it is easily compatible with other activities. When explaining its significance, participants highlighted how they surrounded themselves with it.

> I guess I could've managed without music, it's just. If I'm going out, it just feels like, it's become this ingrained habit. I have to listen to something all the time. Also, when I work out. . . . Music is kind of, it's important. Not important, it just, entertains me when I'm out walking or something. (Aatif)

> I listen to music a lot. If I'm doing schoolwork, falling asleep, on the metro, when I'm out walking. . . . Like, I rarely sit down to just listen to music, it doesn't happen. But it's very often in the background. (Jonas)

Depictions like those of Aatif and Jonas, where music becomes a background soundscape, appear among nearly all participants, reflecting a common motive in research on music listening (Lonsdale & North, 2011; Randall & Rickard, 2017). Yet, labeling listening to music or other audio as "background" or "secondary" media experiences does not capture the dynamic ways listening interweaves with life. "Background" places listening as less central when it, in fact, still matters as an aesthetic experience. Thus, situational or mood-based ways of listening to music do not necessarily entail a utilitarian devaluation of what music means (see also Hesmondhalgh et al., 2024). For example, Ida explained how "it's boring to just stand there and cook. If I have music on, I can sing, and I love to sing." The position of music might "practically" be secondary to cooking, but the experience of listening and singing along signals a level of engagement that background or secondary does not capture. Likewise, the purpose for Maria might be to travel from one place to another, but the listening experience she portrays is far from passive:

> Sometimes, like, I'm on the bus and I just, like, listen to a playlist, a playlist for an hour straight, and just enjoy life. So, it's a way for me to relax. Just listening to music continuously, it's like, you get to disconnect from everything else.

For some, podcasts complement music, but only in situations suitable for listening to conversations. Ada depicted how she used to listen to music, "and that's nice, but it also feels good to think about ideas instead of my own stuff all the time." Alma relatedly explained how she has started to listen to podcasts more often: "If I'm bored, I listen to it at home while doing other things. I like to get a new perspective on stuff, and it's fun to listen to how others understand a topic." What sets music apart from other media is how many consider it an appropriate ambience for cognitive tasks. In these activities, music adopts a background role. Bella, who listens to music "almost all the time," portrayed how music for her has become a means for concentrating:

> I like this artist who has these calm songs that I can listen to while, or I'm very fond of reading books, and I usually listen to kind of slow music while reading. I need to have something in my ears to concentrate. Like, I need to have music when I do schoolwork.

How Bella considers some music fit for reading or doing homework resembles research on how people modulate multitasking behavior or how it encompasses cognitively complementary media and activities (Baumgartner & Wiradhany, 2022; Ralph et al., 2020). The same reasoning—but with an opposite outcome—occurs when Emil depicts how, "I would've listened to music while doing homework if I didn't lose focus. But music makes me lose my focus, so I can't do that."

To some extent, the prevalence of ambient media experiences signals how nonmedia moments represent boredom or, for some participants, how the solitude that silence bestows is experienced as uncomfortable. Bella referred to how she often has a YouTube video on in the background while doing other things: "it kind of becomes this supplement or it can be background noise to avoid complete silence. To listen to someone talking if I'm all alone." Daw likewise noted,

> I use it [YouTube] more like, or often I just want to have a background audio. Sometimes. If I can't endure the silence. I like to have it in the background, while I do something else. If it's schoolwork, or if I'm painting, if I'm reading, or I don't know, just sit and watch out of the window.

Ambient media experiences, however, are not contingent on being alone, as the long history of using music to create the right atmosphere for social gatherings testifies (DeNora, 2000). Similarly, watching films or TV together remains a valued media experience, and in certain situations, "what's on" becomes more a background ambience to being together (see also Morley, 2005). Magnus, for instance, talked about "popcorn films" that "you can watch when you're with friends. Almost like a background film."

In its 1930 yearbook, the BBC offered advice to audiences about good radio listening behaviors: "Listen as carefully at home as you do in a theatre or concert hall. You can't get the best out of a programme if your mind is wandering, or if you are playing bridge or reading. Give it your full attention" (The British

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Broadcasting Corporation, 1930, p. 61). Contrary to the BBC, participants (and likely most radio listeners in 1930) considered ambient media experiences to be morally uncontentious. Yet, as the next part illustrates, they align with the idea that being fully engaged is something special.

Attentive Media Experiences

Attentive media experiences demand effort and immersion, and participants expressed how they appreciated these experiences because they required something from them. These experiences are especially connected to reading books, gaming, watching TV shows and films, and for some, watching long-form YouTube videos. This is not to say that these media forms always or by default instigate attention and immersion: Depending on the situation and complexity, TV shows, films, and YouTube videos oscillate between facilitating immersion and ambience. Moreover, attentive media experiences are not fully contingent on engaging with one media form at a time: Above, I referred to how Bella listens to calm music while reading books. It could be that Bella finds reading (which she loves) as a singular activity "too boring" and that she has lost (or never developed) an ability to "focus," or it could be that, for Bella, listening to music does not negatively interfere with immersing herself in what she is reading.

Reading books is an archetypal attentive media experience (see also Bengtsson, 2012). Seven participants (all girls) ranked reading books as their most or second most important form of media entertainment. While others dismissed reading as uninteresting (and boring), many occasional readers portrayed it in ways similar to those of avid readers. Consider how book-lover Leni and occasional reader Frida talked about reading:

> I think the main thing is that you can imagine it yourself. Instead of having it placed for you, you get much more peace from it. You don't have to worry about what others think about it. You can just sit alone and read. (Leni)

> A little more peace. Yes . . . peace both for the eyes and the soul. If you feel like just getting away from social media, it's nice to just be able to read a book. (Frida)

Many participants emphasized aspects like those highlighted by Leni and Frida. Reading provides peace and shelter; you enter a "kind of bubble" (Alma), you "have to create everything yourself" (Bella), and "imagine things myself" (Daw). Such aspects are enmeshed in the discourse of reading as "good for the brain" (Alma), "good for me" (Ada), and "good for the mind" (Magnus). Reading books is therefore perceived as a morally righteous activity.

Where reflections about the value and virtue of reading books were largely unconnected to distinctions of quality (reading is perceived as "good" regardless of what books you read), reflections about TV shows and films, to a larger extent, included considerations of quality. This was especially the case with Magnus, who made connections between intricacy and attention for music, video games, YouTube videos, and TV series and films. Concerning the latter, he explained how,

> Some films are great to watch because they are well-made, some films can make you sit and think for a while. *Shutter Island*, for example. It was recommended to me by someone in my class. And I watched it and sat there for half an hour just thinking, what the hell happened? I watched it again a week later with some friends, and we talked about it afterward. Because it has a dramatic plot twist towards the end.

Jakob similarly noted, "I like it when it's a bit complicated, like in *Stranger Things,* there's a lot from season one that matters later on, so it's important to pay attention." Emil explained that he liked films and series with an unpredictable plot and narrative, adding, "Now that I've watched so many films and series, I kind of notice things like, is there a good script where the actors can bring out their characters?" Others talked about going into an "obsessed mode" when watching a show they liked (Daw) or the sense of comfort that comes from immersing oneself in fictional universes (Ida, Bella). Portrayals like these illustrate how being fully engaged with what unfolds in a narrative results in higher levels of appreciation (Lüders, 2022).

These media experiences are meaningful because they demand something from audiences. By the same token, they become challenging and sometimes too challenging. When Arman talked about *Top Boy* (Bennett, 2011–2023) and *Vikings* (Hirst, 2013–2020), two series he had recently liked, he referred to how he struggled to endure the slower segments of *Top Boy,* and while *Vikings* was good, "it was very long." The media experience itself risks becoming boring: It fails to engage and sparks off a need to restore a sense of contentment (Bench & Lench, 2019; Danckert et al., 2018; Elpidorou, 2023). Being able to focus is emphasized as a virtue, and yet, there are numerous ways to evade slow-paced parts of a story:

> I like to watch with others, because I tend to fast-forward a lot. I often find it boring, so I fast-forward to the fun parts, and it's rare that I manage to watch an entire movie or series without fast-forwarding. So, it's nice to watch with others because it kind of forces me to watch everything. (Bella)

What Bella here seems to signal is how there is value to be reaped from tolerating slow segments—though when she is not with others, she escapes the boring parts instead of finding a way to cope with them in a more meaningful way (Elpidorou, 2023). Attentive media experiences are constantly on the verge of breaking or slipping into other types of media experiences: "I need to focus on what I'm watching. Or I can use the phone during boring scenes, but other than that, I focus one 100% on the show" (Aatif). Rather than understanding these situations as examples of simultaneously engaging in two types of media (van der Schuur et al., 2020), what Aatif here engages in is a sequence—his attention moves from what occurs on the primary screen to the bits of content that occur on the small screen before regaining focus on the primary screen.

Atomized Media Experiences

Atomized media experiences connect to smartphones and are more typical for TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram—in other words, platforms that host short-form content—compared with YouTube (not counting YouTube Shorts) and long-form screen productions. They involve brief, disconnected bits of

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content and sociability, though they might turn into lengthier periods of content consumption. Their atomized character implies that they encompass separate bits suitable for filling in-between moments (see also Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022; Harro-Loit & Kõuts-Klemm, 2022). Such disparate, shorter pieces of content and sociability serve as a default escape from boredom. In this part, I explore why platforms play a central role in alleviating boredom and how atomized media experiences are portrayed in ways that highlight moral ambiguity.

When asked why they turned to social media platforms and entertainment, references to being bored were common. Ada explained how she often finds herself on TikTok when bored:

> It's kind of an automatic thing. So, like, I try not to be on TikTok so much when I'm with people. More when I'm alone and stuff. It can happen that if I'm with a friend and we're bored, we watch TikTok together. But I try to avoid TikTok if I'm in a social setting. So mostly when I'm alone and bored.

Others likewise mentioned how they habitually pick up their phones and go to TikTok, Instagram, or Snapchat when they "have nothing to do." There, they would find content tailored to fit their preferences. The allure of these media experiences derives from attributes like short, sweet, variety, and accessibility; that is, traits ideally suited for otherwise idle moments:

> TikTok is on the phone, right, so it's so easily available. It's like Netflix or watching a series, just that it's even more accessible. . . To watch a series, there's no point watching two minutes and then turn off and watch two minutes later. But with TikTok, you can watch this one video. If I'm waiting for my friend because we walk together to school, I might go into TikTok. Or on the bus to training. Or during school-breaks, or when I'm lying on my bed, I'm on TikTok all the time, a bit too much at times. But there's so much there and so varied. (Ida)

Like Ida, Jonas emphasized the combination of short videos and various content when he explained why he liked TikTok. However, he added an instrumental and purpose-driven motive for turning to the platform:

> [TikTok has] short entertaining videos. And a lot that gets published. So, there's a great variety of content. If I want to do a training-exercise, I search TikTok to see how to do it correctly. And if I'm cooking something and need inspiration, I search TikTok. Because, often with cooking-videos or training-videos, it's quick because the videos are short. It's a lower bar than watching a full YouTube-video. You can see many videos to see if everyone does it similarly, and it doesn't take too long.

Both Ida and Jonas compared TikTok with other media. Ida compared it with watching series, which she loves doing. Jonas compared TikTok to full-length YouTube videos. In the card-ranking exercise, Jonas ranked both TikTok and YouTube as most important. It is not that TikTok is superior to watching series or long-form YouTube videos. Instead, Ida and Jonas highlight how atomized media experiences play a different role than what they seek from long-form videos and narratives. TikTok is especially prevalent in the interview

material, but others similarly foregrounded the combination of "low bar," short videos, and variety for content on Instagram Reels, Snapchat, and YouTube Shorts.

Atomized media experiences should hence not be brushed off as meaningless (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022). However, compared with ambient and attentive media experiences, participants were more ambivalent about atomized media experiences, echoing research about the complex feelings and relations youth have with digital devices and social media (Jansson et al., 2025; Weinstein & James, 2022). Sofia grasped how reliant she was on Snapchat when her phone broke down, and she had to use "an outdated iPhone 4 or something" as a replacement phone,

> and I couldn't get into Snapchat. I had never thought about it because I didn't think Snapchat was that important to me. But when I was there with the phone without Snapchat, it was like . . . whenever I lay down in bed or went somewhere, I couldn't just pull out my phone and go on Snapchat, and that made me feel very empty. It sounds so silly when I say it, but that's just how it felt, like a lot was missing.

Sofia implicitly portrayed how she habitually turned to her phone, only to realize that Snapchat was out of reach, reflecting a slight unease with acknowledging the prominent place of the app in her life. Olivia similarly hedged her love for TikTok: "It's become this habit, unfortunately, I go on TikTok all the time. And that's because there's always something new there, things I've never seen before, so it's exciting." Others shared how scrolling feeds or sending snaps were only marginally better than being bored. Maria referred to how she used Snapchat for staying in touch with people she would otherwise never talk to and watching stories, both from friends and on "random channels": "I find it boring, but when I'm already bored, it becomes a bit more entertaining. Even though I feel like I don't want to watch this, there's absolutely nothing else to do, so I watch it." And while she mostly enjoyed TikTok, "sometimes there are videos that make your brain feel like it's turning to mush. You have nothing else to do, so you just scroll past them to find the good videos."

Such sentiments illustrate how atomized media experiences occupy a somewhat conflicted space: They represent an always-available default promise for filling idle time with enjoyable, motivating, exciting, or sociable bits of content. However, for some, the habitual drive to pick up their phones can also result in a sense of meaninglessness and wasted time.

Concluding Discussion

My aim has been to explore the moral evaluations in teenage portrayals of media experiences and, closely related, how these experiences relate to boredom. Whereas the morality of media and boredom are far from novel concerns, these issues have intensified with smartphones and social media. By examining teenagers' perspectives, this study shows how different moral frameworks operate just beneath the surface in their accounts.

Ambient media experiences appear morally uncontentious. Participants value ambient media for their positive consequences, making otherwise mundane or boring situations more meaningful or

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pleasurable, providing company to avoid silence, and aiding concentration. The opportunity to add media as a layer to everyday situations reflects how nonmedia moments indicate a state of boredom. The absence of moral contention itself serves as an implicit deontological stance, and unlike the BBC's 1930 instruction to avoid multitasking, there is no perceived "wrong" in using media this way.

Attentive media experiences are portrayed as morally "good". Participants highlight how this is derived from beneficial consequences like insight, mental well-being, and creative engagement. They highlight how attentive media experiences help cultivate virtues like focus, patience, and intellectual curiosity. There are also indications of deontological ethics in their narratives, for example, in their framing of reading as a morally righteous activity.

Finally, atomized media experiences are depicted in morally ambivalent ways. On the one hand, participants acknowledge positive outcomes like quick entertainment, variety, and practical information. Scrolling social media feeds exemplifies how these experiences comprise disparate pieces tailored to a wandering mind, often serving as a default escape from boredom. On the other hand, some articulate negative consequences like feeling empty, wasting time, and making their "brain feel like it's turning to mush" (Maria). The habit of pulling out one's phone when bored reflects a lack of intentionality. Participants express implicit social rules about being present, adhering to a perceived "right" way to behave in social situations.

The study suggests that the ambivalence of atomized media experiences, a distinctive historical novelty, slightly shifts otherwise slow-to-change cultural hierarchies (Bengtsson, 2012) by elevating previously morally contested media practices (like watching television and gaming). Yet the primary value of this article lies beyond this categorization. While distinguishing between ambient, attentive, and atomized media experiences largely validates previous research (Bengtsson, 2012; Boczkowski, 2021), my core contribution is twofold: First, understanding boredom as an operative emotion that drives us to reestablish a sense of contentment (Bench & Lench, 2019; Danckert et al., 2018; Elpidorou, 2018, 2023) foregrounds why it is so difficult to resist the instant gratification promised by ever-present media. Boredom is a well-known motive for media use (see, e.g., Randall & Rickard, 2017; Rubin, 1983; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020), but a thorough conceptualization of how boredom operates helps explain the mechanisms at work and why it can be so demanding to choose other ways out of boredom than easily accessible media. The question remains whether screens and media are detrimental ways of coping with boredom. This, evidently, is also a moral question.

Second, against a societal discourse concerned with claims that screens and social media are ruining younger generations, I argue that media, including social media, remain important for a flourishing life. Participants' depictions of how ambient, attentive, and atomized media experiences enrich their lives speak to some of the capabilities Nussbaum (2011) highlights as essential to pursuing a good life (pp. 33–34): imagination, senses, engagement with works of one's own choosing, pleasurable experiences, and the ability to play, laugh, and enjoy recreational activities. The connection between media and capabilities is most straightforward for media that demand attention, with book reading as the classical example. In closing, I emphasize ambient and atomized media experiences, since these are not routinely considered to contribute much to a flourishing life.

My conceptualization of ambient media experiences foregrounds how media modulate situations without devaluing their aesthetic and affective significance as "mere background" or "secondary." In practice, ambience offers companionship, mood attunement, and even cognitive scaffolding, making otherwise tedious moments meaningful. These are ways of enacting imagination, the senses, pleasure, play, and recreation. Atomized media experiences also matter for flourishing. Their low bar and variety afford quick access to culture, practical know-how, and sociability between times. Teens sometimes experience emptiness or compulsion here, but they also find microlearning, shared moments, and light entertainment. Many of these recreational activities can legitimately count as unproductive leisure. However, a flourishing life is not one where all parts of everyday life consist of mental, intellectual, and physical toils. As Owens (2025) concludes, engaging in time-wasting leisure pursuits can be interpreted as a form of resistance, "challenging self-optimisation as a dominant requirement for human social life" (p. 14).

By exploring teenagers' situated perceptions of the worthwhileness of media experiences, including if and how different media are perceived as morally sound ways of alleviating boredom, this study highlights the connections between boredom, moral evaluations of media experiences, and well-being. My emphasis has been on understanding the practices and perspectives of the participants, treating these as indicators of how media enable and disable human flourishing. This subject-centered approach is normative in the sense that people's experiences provide an empirical basis for holding media and platforms morally responsible for what they enable people to do and be. In practical terms, this study indicates that teenagers can articulate both the positive and troubling aspects of their media-saturated lives. It follows that concerns about youth and (screen) media should be accompanied by a willingness to listen to how young people describe their media experiences. After all, having a say in matters that govern one's life is a key capability. For youth, this is not a future privilege, but a present entitlement to be realized in age-appropriate ways (Nussbaum, 2006). Taking young people's perspectives seriously is therefore both good practice and a requirement of justice.

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