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Conversations About Boring Topics Are More Interesting Than We Think

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Conversations enhance social connection and well-being, but the kinds of conversations that come to mind when thinking of these benefits are ones about interesting topics. Everyday life, however, does not spare people from conversations about boring topics. We examine the extent to which people's expectations of conversations about boring topics are calibrated with their actual experiences. Nine preregistered experiments (five in the main text, four in the Supplemental Material; total $N = 1{,}800$) reveal that participants consistently underestimated how enjoyable and interesting conversations about boring topics were. Expectations were relatively more calibrated for conversations about interesting topics. This pattern held across virtual and in-person settings, conversations with friends and strangers, and self-generated and experimenter-assigned topics. This occurs partly due to the relative ease of assessing the static elements of conversations and the difficulty of assessing their dynamic elements. The topic is a static element that is easy to assess prior to a conversation, and so people overweight it in their forecasts. The level of engagement conversations command—the need to respond, listen, and pay attention to another person—makes them enjoyable, but is harder to assess because it dynamically emerges only once a conversation begins. Expectations about enjoyment guide decisions to enter conversations, suggesting that miscalibration between predicted and actual enjoyment can lead people to avoid conversations they would, in fact, enjoy.

Keywords: conversations, boredom, enjoyment, social connection, well-being

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000521.supp

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One of the most profound sources of enjoyment people experience is conversing with each other (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; House et al., 1988; Ren et al., 2022). What naturally comes to mind when thinking about enjoyable conversations are ones in which both parties are interested in discussing the topic. However, everyday life does not spare people from conversations about topics they find boring. Boredom is an aversive experience (Chin et al., 2017; Eastwood et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2014), and indeed, boring topics seem like uninspiring fodder for enjoyable conversations.

However, a closer look reveals that conversations about seemingly boring topics can be surprisingly enjoyable for those involved. People can find themselves unexpectedly absorbed in casual exchanges about daily routines, small annoyances, or trivial observations, conversations that, in hindsight, may feel more interesting than anticipated. Popular culture also captures this phenomenon: The dialogue between Jules and Vincent in the 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* about how a "Quarter Pounder with Cheese" becomes a "Royale with Cheese" in France (Tarantino, 1994) and the conversations "about nothing" in *Seinfeld* (Seinfeld & David, 1989–1998) illustrate how ordinary topics can become unexpectedly captivating once the conversation gets underway.

We suggest that these anecdotes represent a wider phenomenon. Although talking about boring topics may be less enjoyable than talking about interesting topics, we hypothesize that people will systematically underestimate the degree of enjoyment and connection they experience during conversations about boring topics. In contrast, we suggest that people will be better calibrated in predicting their enjoyment from conversations about interesting topics.

We theorize that this result will occur in part because conversations have dynamic and static components. Static components refer to stable elements that are known in advance of the conversation. Dynamic components are elements that unfold or markedly change during the conversation itself. When making forecasts, it is relatively easier for people to rely on static components because those tend to remain constant. The topic is one such static element.

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People can assess their level of interest in a given topic and so rely on this judgment when assessing how interesting and enjoyable a conversation about that topic would be.

In contrast, it is more difficult to appreciate dynamic elements that unfold in real time as partners exchange ideas, coordinate attention, respond to each other, and coconstruct meaning (Koudenburg et al., 2017; Louwerse et al., 2012; Richardson et al., 2007). For this reason, the dynamic components of conversations may constrain people's ability to predict how enjoyable and interesting they would be. One such dynamic element is the high level of engagement that conversations cause, even when they are about boring topics. Talking to another person is typically gripping and attention-grabbing, which in turn leads to enjoyment. However, recognizing this before having a conversation is difficult because the feeling of engagement emerges only after the conversation starts. We suggest that the inherent difficulty of anticipating a dynamic element, such as engagement, leads people to focus on a static element, such as the topic, when assessing the hedonic benefits of a conversation. We suggest that this will produce a directional bias: People will expect conversations about boring topics to be less enjoyable and interesting than they experience.

This matters because forecasts of enjoyment and interest drive decisions of whether and with whom to converse. When expectations hinge primarily on static cues like the topic, people may avoid conversations that would, in fact, prove both enjoyable and interesting. Such avoidance can lead to repeated missed opportunities for connection (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

Evaluating Conversations Based on Their Topics

Existing research consistently finds that social connection enhances well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dunbar et al., 1997; Gunaydin et al., 2021; Herrmann et al., 2007; Lieberman, 2013; Myers & Diener, 1995; Sun et al., 2020). Conversely, a lack of social connection detracts from mental health and leads to unhappiness (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; House et al., 1988). The kinds of behaviors that promote social connection, such as sharing details about one's own life or helping others, also promote enjoyment and happiness (Boothby & Bohns, 2021; Dunn et al., 2007; Mogilner et al., 2012). Social connection is commonly instantiated through conversations, and research supports that being a part of conversations with others increases well-being (Ren et al., 2022).

Yet, some conversations seem far off from these rosy descriptions. People frequently find themselves having to endure discussions about topics they perceive as boring, or they face the decision of whether to take part in such conversations at all. Boredom is a psychologically aversive state in which it is difficult to sustain attention or derive meaning (Chin et al., 2017; Danckert & Elpidorou, 2023; Eastwood et al., 2012; Loewenstein, 1994; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Westgate & Wilson, 2018). It is commonly associated with situations that lack novelty or interest (Bench & Lench, 2013; Chan et al., 2018; Erturk et al., 2022).

We suggest that people perceive conversations to be interesting or boring largely due to their topic. To test this point, we conducted a preliminary study ($N = 102$; see the Supplemental Materials for full details of Experiment S1). Participants were asked to describe what they believe makes a conversation either interesting or boring. Topic emerged as the most frequently mentioned factor in both cases, with 51.96% of participants citing it. Participants offered comments such as "[t]he topic does not interest me at all, it is a boring topic that is what makes something boring or interesting to me" and "[a]n interesting conversation usually touches on topics I am interested in, are about myself, or are with someone I care about." These illustrative responses suggest that the topic plays a central role in what people believe makes a conversation interesting or boring.

However, we hypothesize that people's reliance on topic as a forecasting cue leads to systematic miscalibration. When judging future enjoyment and interest, people rely on the topic in part because it is a static attribute, readily known before a conversation starts. Existing research suggests that in general people tend to rely on simple attributes as a basis for judgment (Hsee & Zhang, 2010; Kahneman & Frederick, 2004). Accordingly, when making hedonic forecasts about future emotional states, people tend to focus on easily identifiable attributes (Gilbert et al., 1998; Van Boven et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2000). In the case of conversations, the perceived boringness of the topic is a relatively simple attribute, as it is static and readily accessible. Consequently, we suggest that people will tend to rely on it to assess future conversations.

Experiencing Conversations Based on Engagement

We suggest that topics may not influence enjoyment from conversations as much as people believe. Rather, we suggest that the intrapersonal effects of conversations—what happens psychologically to those who participate in conversations—are at least equally important. Specifically, we suggest that conversations are inherently engaging. Drawing on the attentional component of the Meaning and Attentional Components model of boredom (Westgate & Wilson, 2018), engagement can be understood as the sustained allocation of cognitive resources to a task. Conversations capture attention and stimulate the mind through behaviors such as asking questions (Hart et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2017), sharing and hearing about personal experiences (N. L. Collins & Miller, 1994; Rimé, 2009), and expressing and responding to emotions (Bradley et al., 2024; Klein, 2019; Yu et al., 2021). Conversations also activate mental and emotional processes like empathy (Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Rimé et al., 2020), curiosity (Kashdan et al., 2004, 2020; Loewenstein, 1994), and learning (Atir et al., 2022). These processes and behaviors are often engrossing, involve high arousal, and fully occupy the mind and senses, resulting in high levels of engagement. Importantly, this engagement occurs whether the initial topic is interesting or boring. Conversing with another person about any topic requires people to devote attention and respond in real time.

The high engagement that conversations command is difficult to predict because it emerges after a conversation starts. Whereas the topic is a static attribute that can be assessed before a conversation, engagement is a dynamic attribute that results from a combination of behaviors, reactions, thoughts, and emotions. Similar to visceral and emotional states (Loewenstein, 2005; Ruttan & Nordgren, 2015; Van Boven et al., 2013), the feeling of psychological engagement that occurs during a conversation may be difficult to appreciate outside of it.

This analysis suggests that people will base forecasts of the hedonic effects of conversations on the topic rather than on the degree of engagement they experience during the conversation. Therefore, people may miss that conversing with another person is inherently absorbing and engrossing, regardless of whether the topic is interesting or not. This will, in turn, lead people to underestimate

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the interest and enjoyment that result from conversing about boring topics. A boring topic will lead to pessimistic predictions about how enjoyable and interesting a conversation about it would be. However, the actual experience will be determined by the experience of engagement, which will render the conversation more enjoyable and interesting than people predict.

When the topic is interesting, we suggest that the same process will play out, but miscalibration will be less likely. People will still focus on the topic when forecasting enjoyment and interest, whereas their actual experience will be determined by high levels of engagement. However, because of the intuitive belief that talking about interesting topics is enjoyable, people will be less likely to underestimate their enjoyment from conversations about interesting topics.

Contributions to Existing Research

If supported, we suggest that these hypotheses will make two main contributions. First, this research advances theory by introducing a static–dynamic framework that helps explain why people systematically underestimate how much they will enjoy social interactions. Prior work has shown that people underestimate how positive social interactions are (Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Kardas, Schroeder, & O'Brien, 2022; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014; Zhao & Epley, 2022) and has explored this pattern across a wide range of contexts, including conversation depth, awkwardness, relational closeness, and communication modality (Hart et al., 2021; Kardas, Kumar, & Epley, 2022; Kardas, Schroeder, & O'Brien, 2022; Kumar & Epley, 2022). The present framework integrates these patterns within a broad psychological account: People make forecasts primarily based on static features that are easy to assess before an interaction (e.g., topic) while experiencing conversations based on dynamic processes (e.g., engagement) that emerge only through real-time participation. By distinguishing between these two dimensions, the present research offers a theoretical framework for why expectations of social interactions differ from, and often underestimate, experiences.

Second, this research expands understanding of the hedonic benefits of social interactions by demonstrating that even conversations about boring topics can produce enjoyment. Whereas prior research has emphasized positive outcomes from interesting or self-relevant topics (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Boothby et al., 2014; Dungan & Epley, 2024; Dunn et al., 2008; Epley et al., 2022; Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Kardas, Schroeder, & O'Brien, 2022), the present hypothesis suggests that the capacity for conversation to generate enjoyment extends beyond its content. This, in turn, would suggest that conversations about interesting topics are not solely responsible for the hedonic benefits of social interactions, and conversations about boring topics have hedonic benefits as well. Moreover, misunderstanding the hedonic benefits of conversations about boring topics means that people would avoid conversations that they would, in fact, enjoy.

Overview of Experiments

We conducted a series of five preregistered laboratory and field experiments to test our hypotheses. In Experiment 1 (AsPredicted No. 143572), we examined to what extent strangers who were paired based on their interest in a topic—one person was highly interested, whereas the other considered it boring—expected to enjoy their conversations and subsequently to what extent they actually enjoyed them. Experiment 2 (AsPredicted No. 149243) broadened our inquiry to conversations in which both participants found the topic boring. In Experiment 3 (AsPredicted No. 161082), we conducted a field study and investigated whether the effect persisted among friends and in situations where one conversation partner knew that the other person considered the topic to be boring.

Finally, in Experiment 4 (AsPredicted No. 166902 and No. 173136) and Experiment 5 (AsPredicted No. 211987), we tested the mechanism of engagement. In Experiment 4, participants were randomly assigned to either partake in a live conversation, read a transcript of that conversation, or watch a video recording of it. This manipulation varied the level of engagement by varying the active involvement in the conversation while holding its content constant. In Experiment 5, we manipulated whether pairs of participants were required to stay on a fixed topic or allowed to let the topic evolve naturally. This design tested the engagement mechanism through mediation while also testing whether either the unexpectedly positive construal of the topic or the natural evolution of topics during conversation could also help explain the prediction–experience gap.

Transparency and Openness

This research complies with the American Psychological Association ethical standards, and the institutional review boards at INSEAD and the University of Michigan approved this research. We preregistered all experiments, and we report our methods and measures in each experiment, including sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and measures. All research materials, data, analysis code (in R), and additional online material are available at https://osf.io/n9xm8/?view_only=157fce5759f447a4bb2966c2ae82462d (Trinh et al., 2026).

Experiment 1: Conversations in Which One Person Finds the Topic Boring

This experiment compares people's predictions to their actual experiences of conversations about boring versus interesting topics. Participants first indicated their level of interest in a list of conversation topics and were paired such that the chosen topic was interesting to one person and boring to the other. Each pair predicted their enjoyment from the conversation and then reported their actual enjoyment after the conversation. This study was preregistered; see https://aspredicted.org/cqd5-72wf.pdf.

Method

Participants

As preregistered, we recruited 100 participants from a university lab in France (78% female; 90% French; M_{age} = 25.72 years, SD_{age} = 4.50).

Procedure

This experiment used a 2 (topic: boring vs. interesting) × 2 (timing: predicted vs. actual[1]) mixed design. Participants were

[1] For all of our experiments, we use "predicted" versus "actual" ratings for our dependent variables. However, for the measure of desire to have another conversation, the comparison is more accurately described as "before" versus "after" the conversation.

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recruited in pairs. At the beginning of the study, before the conversation, they rated their interest in 10 topics on a scale from 1 (*not interested at all*) to 3 (*very interested*). The 10 topics were sports/sporting events/sports teams, movies, social media/social media trends, artificial intelligence, music, travel, history, sustainability/environmental protection, books/reading, and exercise/fitness classes.

Each participant was then randomly assigned to either the boring or interesting topic condition. The conversation topic was chosen to be very interesting to one participant (rated "3"; interesting condition) and not at all interesting to the other (rated "1"; boring condition). If multiple topics met these criteria, one was randomly selected. For the 1–2 or 2–3 pairings (11 dyads), the participant with the lower interest rating was categorized in the boring condition, while the one with the higher rating was categorized in the interesting condition.

Before starting the conversation, participants first learned about the topic they would be discussing. After this, they rated whether they believed the upcoming conversation would be interesting, whether they believed they would enjoy it, and whether they believed they would want to have another conversation with the other participant about the same topic in the future (all scales: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Participants then partook in a free-flowing conversation about the selected topic. Conversations were limited to 5 min, and they were conducted face-to-face via Zoom breakout rooms. After the conversation ended at the 5-min time limit, participants evaluated their actual experiences by rating whether the conversation was interesting, whether they enjoyed it, and whether they wanted to have another conversation with the other participant about the same topic in the future (all scales: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Finally, we included an optional open-ended question for participants to provide any comments about the conversation and demographic questions. All materials were translated into French, the primary language of the participants.

Results

Per our preregistered analytical plan, we used mixed-design analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to examine the effects of topic (between-subjects factor), timing (within-subjects factor), and their interaction on the dependent variables. We conducted follow-up *t* tests to explore the simple effects. We also conducted mixed-effects models, which we include in the Supplemental Material. Figure 1 presents the results.

Interest

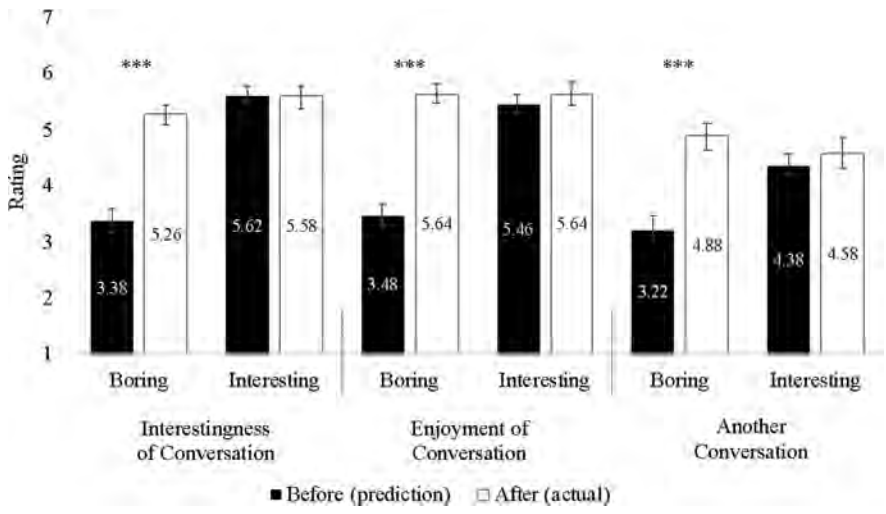
There was a main effect for topic, $F(1, 194) = 47.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$; a main effect for timing, $F(1, 194) = 7.46$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$; and an interaction, $F(1, 194) = 26.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$. Participants underestimated how interesting conversations about boring topics were, *paired* $t(49) = -10.32$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−2.25, −1.51], $d = -1.46$. In contrast, participants' predictions about their interest level of conversations about interesting topics were relatively well-calibrated, *paired* $t(49) = 0.20$, $p = .839$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.35, 0.43], $d = 0.03$.

Enjoyment

There was a main effect for topic, $F(1, 194) = 27.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$; a main effect for timing, $F(1, 194) = 8.34$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$; and an interaction, $F(1, 194) = 27.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$. Participants underestimated how enjoyable conversations about boring topics were, *paired* $t(49) = -9.73$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−2.61, −1.71], $d = -1.38$. However, participants' predictions about the enjoyment of conversations about interesting topics were relatively well-calibrated, *paired* $t(49) = -0.93$, $p = .356$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.56, 0.21], $d = -0.13$.

Figure 1

Level of Interest, Enjoyment, and Desire to Have Another Conversation for Boring Versus Interesting Topics in Experiment 1



Note. Error bars represent ±1 standard errors.
*** $p < .001$.

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Desire to Have Another Conversation

There was no main effect for topic, $F(1, 194) = 3.16$, $p = .077$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, and no main effect for timing, $F(1, 194) = 1.87$, $p = .173$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$, but there was a significant interaction, $F(1, 194) = 9.54$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. Participants underestimated how much they would want to have another conversation about boring topics, *paired* $t(49) = -6.64$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−2.16, −1.16], $d = -0.94$. However, their predictions about their willingness to have another conversation about interesting topics were relatively well-calibrated, *paired* $t(49) = -0.80$, $p = .429$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.70, 0.30], $d = -0.11$.

Discussion

These results provide initial evidence that participants underestimated the hedonic benefits and social connection from conversations about topics they initially perceived as boring. In contrast, for interesting topics, participants' predictions about their enjoyment and interest were relatively well-calibrated.

Experiment 2: Conversations in Which Both People Find the Topic Boring

Experiment 2 explored whether the effects depend on the presence of a conversation partner who found the topic interesting. It is possible that conversations about boring topics are more enjoyable than people think only when at least one participant finds the topic interesting and kindles the interest of the other. If both parties find the topic boring, it is possible that the actual experience will be less enjoyable and thus in accordance with people's predictions. To test this, we included both boring–boring pairings and boring–interesting pairings, allowing us to compare whether the presence of a conversation partner with an interest in the topic influences the results. This study was preregistered; see https://aspredicted.org/dhrz-2v3k.pdf.

Method

Participants

We preregistered 200 participants (100 dyads) and recruited 202 from a university lab in France. We excluded two incomplete responses and five mismatched pairs. We had a final sample of 190 participants (75.79% female; 83.16% French; $M_{age} = 26.11$ years, $SD_{age} = 4.85$).

Procedure

This experiment used a 2 (conversation match: boring–boring pairing vs. interesting–boring pairing) × 2 (topic: boring vs. interesting) × 2 (timing: predicted vs. actual) mixed design. Participants were recruited in pairs and first ranked their interest in 10 conversational topics, following the same procedure as in Experiment 1. Based on these rankings, they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the boring–boring condition, both participants rated the assigned topic as boring, whereas in the interesting–boring condition, one participant rated the topic as interesting while the other rated it as boring. To ensure clear distinctions between conditions, pairs in which both participants gave midrange ratings, that is, 2-2 (four pairs)[2] or 3-3 pairings (one pair), were excluded from the main analyses, though including them does not significantly alter the results (see the Supplemental Materials).

Before the conversation, participants were informed of their assigned topic and rated their predictions for how interesting and enjoyable the conversation would be, as well as their desire to have a future conversation on the same topic. These questions and scales were identical to those used in Experiment 1. Participants then partook in a 5-min free-flowing conversation via Zoom about the assigned topic. After, they evaluated their actual experiences using the same measures and had the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback before completing demographic questions. Like Experiment 1, all materials were translated into French.

Results

Per our preregistered analytical plan, we used mixed-design ANOVAs to examine the effects of conversation match, topic, and timing on the dependent variables. The conversation match and topic were between-subjects factors, and timing was a within-subject factor. We conducted follow-up *t* tests to explore the simple effects. We also conducted mixed-effects models, which we include in the Supplemental Material.

For brevity, Figure 2 provides a visual representation as well as the means for each condition. We report ANOVA results in Table 1. We report below in detail the key hypothesis tests.

Interest

For boring–boring pairings, participants underestimated how interesting conversations about boring topics were, *paired* $t(93) = -8.69$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−1.92, −1.21], $d = -1.06$. Similarly, for boring–interesting pairings, participants also underestimated how interesting conversations about boring topics were, *paired* $t(47) = -7.72$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−2.76, −1.62], $d = -1.58$. However, participants' predictions about the interest level of conversations on interesting topics were relatively well-calibrated, *paired* $t(47) = -1.24$, $p = .219$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.65, 0.15], $d = -0.20$.

Enjoyment

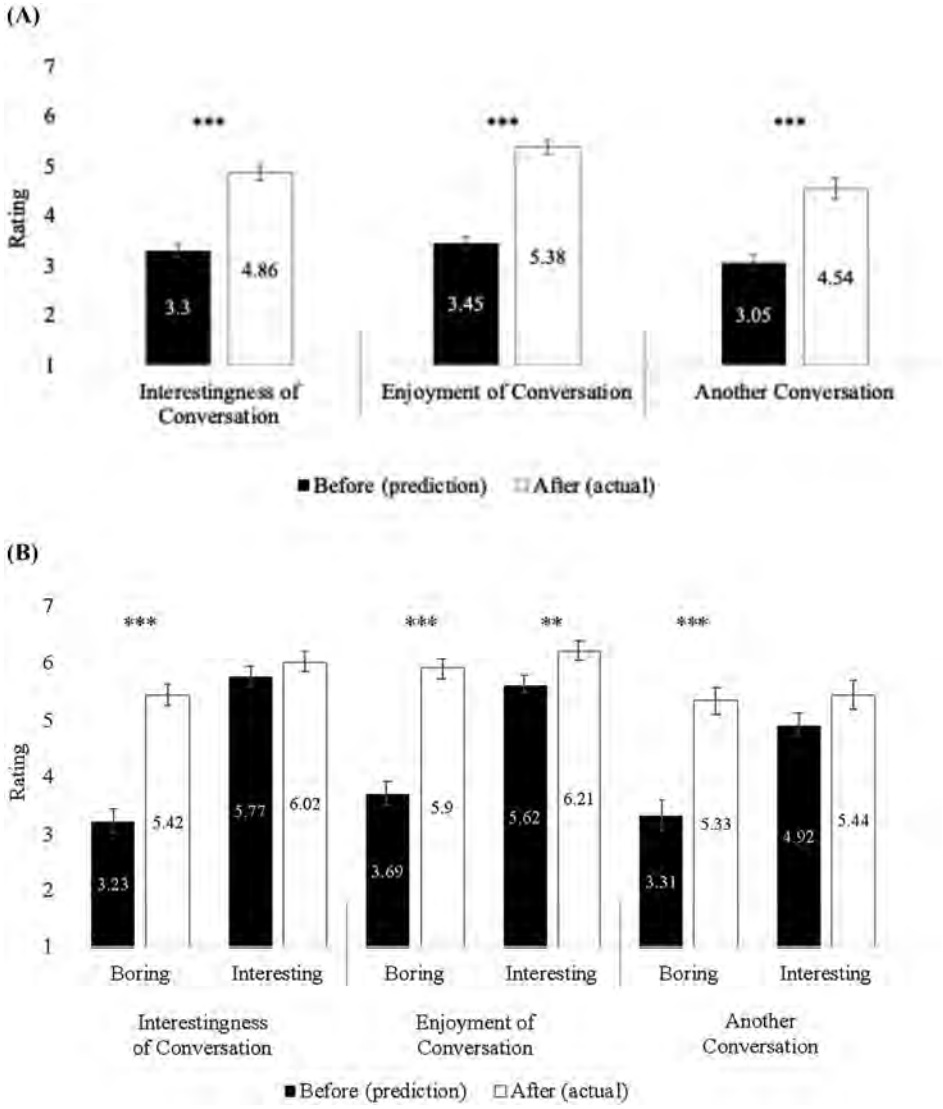
For boring–boring pairings, participants underestimated how enjoyable conversations about boring topics were, *paired* $t(93) = -12.05$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−2.26, −1.62], $d = -1.45$. For boring–interesting pairings, participants also underestimated how enjoyable conversations about boring topics were, *paired* $t(47) = -7.61$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−2.79, −1.62], $d = -1.60$. Participants also underestimated how enjoyable conversations about interesting topics were, *paired* $t(47) = -2.86$, $p = .006$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.99, −0.17], $d = -0.51$. Notice that underestimation of enjoyment in conversations about boring topics was associated with larger effect sizes than in conversations about interesting

[2] Four pairs were assigned to the boring–boring condition but did not share a topic that both had rated as 1. To facilitate scheduling, the laboratory initially matched them based on a shared rating of 2, the next-lowest available match. We later clarified our recruitment criteria to ensure that boring–boring pairs were defined strictly as dyads in which both participants rated the same topic as 1.

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Figure 2

Boring–Boring (A) and Boring–Interesting (B) Pairings in Experiment 2



Note. Error bars represent ±1 standard error.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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topics (zs ≥ 2.86, ps $\leq .004$), suggesting that while participants exhibited a miscalibration in predicting the enjoyability of both types of conversations, their miscalibration was more pronounced for boring topics.

Desire to Have Another Conversation

For boring–boring pairings, participants underestimated their desire to have another conversation about boring topics, *paired* $t(93) = -7.32$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−1.89, −1.09], $d = -0.81$. Likewise, for boring–interesting pairings, participants underestimated their desire to have another conversation about boring topics, *paired* $t(47) = -6.43$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−2.65, −1.39], $d = -1.12$. In contrast, participants' predictions about their desire to have another conversation about interesting topics were relatively well-calibrated, *paired* $t(47) = -1.94$, $p = .058$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−1.06, 0.02], $d = -0.33$.

Comparing Topic Matches

We next compared topic matches—boring–boring versus boring–interesting pairs—to examine whether having a partner who considered the topic to be interesting influenced the prediction–experience gap. Table 1 presents the relevant Match × Timing interactions.

For interest, the interaction between topic match and timing was nonsignificant, $F(1, 372) = 1.03$, $p = .310$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, suggesting that topic matches did not affect the prediction–experience gap. There was a main effect of topic match: Participants expected

Table 1
Analysis of Variance Results for Level of Interest, Enjoyment, and Desire to Have Another Conversation in Experiment 2, Which Manipulated Boring–Boring Versus Boring–Interesting Pairings

	Main effect			Interaction effect	
Measure	Topic (boring vs. interesting)	Timing (predicted vs. actual)	Match (boring–boring vs. boring–interesting)	Topic × Timing	Match × Timing
Interest	$F = 61.85^*$	$F = 0.06$	$F = 55.32^*$	$F = 23.37^*$	$F = 1.03$
	$p < .001$	$p = .805$	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .310$
	$\eta_p^2 = .14$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 = .13$	$\eta_p^2 = .06$	$\eta_p^2 = .003$
Enjoyment	$F = 35.79^*$	$F = 2.24$	$F = 51.20^*$	$F = 18.62^*$	$F = 3.70$
	$p < .001$	$p = .135$	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .055$
	$\eta_p^2 = .09$	$\eta_p^2 = .006$	$\eta_p^2 = .12$	$\eta_p^2 = .05$	$\eta_p^2 = .01$
Desire to have another conversation	$F = 11.40^*$	$F = 0.20$	$F = 30.27^*$	$F = 8.73^*$	$F = 0.23$
	$p < .001$	$p = .659$	$p < .001$	$p = .003$	$p = .631$
	$\eta_p^2 = .03$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 = .08$	$\eta_p^2 = .02$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$

Note. For all analyses of variance, the degrees of freedom are $F(1, 372)$.
$^* p < .05$ (main or interaction effects).

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conversations in the boring–interesting pairing to be more interesting than those in the boring–boring pairing, $F(1, 188) = 25.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. They also experienced conversations in the boring–interesting pairing to be more interesting than those in the boring–boring pairing, $F(1, 188) = 16.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$.

For enjoyment, the interaction between match type and timing was marginal, $F(1, 372) = 3.70$, $p = .055$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$. The prediction–experience gap was directionally larger in the boring–interesting pairs, *paired* $t(93) = -12.05$, $p < .001$, than in the boring–boring pairs, *paired* $t(47) = -7.61$, $p < .001$, but nonsignificantly so ($z = 0.33$, $p = .741$). There was also a main effect of topic match: Participants expected conversations in the boring–interesting pairing to be more enjoyable than those in the boring–boring pairing, $F(1, 188) = 31.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$; they also experienced conversations in the boring–interesting pairing to be more enjoyable than those in the boring–boring pairing, $F(1, 188) = 12.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.

Finally, for desire to have another conversation, the interaction between match type and timing was nonsignificant, $F(1, 372) = 0.23$, $p = .631$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$, suggesting that topic match did not influence the prediction–experience gap. There was a main effect of topic match: Participants expected conversations in the boring–interesting pairing to elicit a stronger desire to have another conversation than those in the boring–boring pairing, $F(1, 188) = 17.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. They also experienced conversations in the boring–interesting pairing to elicit a stronger desire to have another conversation than those in the boring–boring pairing, $F(1, 188) = 9.73$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$.

Discussion

Experiment 2 replicates and extends Experiment 1, providing further evidence that people underestimate their enjoyment, interest, and desire for future conversations about topics they perceive as boring. This persists when both partners find the topic boring, suggesting that the hedonic and social benefits of conversation do not depend on one partner's interest. This does not mean that talking about an interesting topic did not matter at all: Conversations in which one side found the topic interesting resulted in greater enjoyment and interest.

Experiment 3: Conversations Between Friends Versus Strangers

Experiment 3 explores whether these results differ between friends and strangers. Friends may have had previous experiences that inform their expectations, whereas strangers lack this context (Kardas, Kumar, & Epley, 2022). Thus, one possibility is that friends, due to their shared history and mutual understanding, might be better at predicting the enjoyment of conversations about boring topics compared to strangers. This study was preregistered; see https://aspredicted.org/dk4j-qntx.pdf.

Method

Participants

A total of 326 participants (67.48% female, 30.67% male, and 1.84% other; 49.08% White or Caucasian, 25.77% East or Southeast Asian, 8.28% Hispanic or Latino, 6.75% South Asian, and 2.45% Black American; $M_{age} = 20.24$, $SD_{age} = 2.68$, age ranged between 18 and 45 years) from a large Midwestern U.S. university completed this experiment. Most (85.45%) were full-time students without employment. We aimed for at least 100 dyads (200 participants) but recruited for 1 month to gather as much data as possible. No interim data analysis was conducted.

Procedure

Research assistants (RAs) approached individuals in the university campus's main open space using a random selection method to invite participation in a social experiment. RAs were randomly assigned to recruit either friends (e.g., two people walking together and talking) or strangers (e.g., people who did not know each other). The RAs presented the consent form and explained the study procedure. Dyads partook in two in-person conversations about different topics. Participants were allowed to generate their own

topics, partly reflecting the spontaneous topic selection found in real-life conversation settings. Each participant was asked to suggest a conversation topic they found interesting but thought might bore the other person, guided by the question, "What is a conversation topic that is interesting to you but might be uninteresting to the other person?" Both members of the dyad received identical instructions and were explicitly told they would discuss both topics, creating a context in which each person was aware of the other's perception of the topic.

For the categorization of topics, we considered a topic to be "interesting" to the participant if they proposed it and conversely "boring" for their interaction partner. Each dyad participated in two separate conversations, one about the topic proposed by each partner, such that every participant experienced one "interesting" topic and one "boring" topic. The order of topics was randomized across dyads. Because friends are often naturally aware of one another's preferences, both friends and strangers were informed whether their partner found the assigned topic to be interesting or boring, ensuring equivalent awareness across dyads.

Before beginning the conversations, participants were informed of the two topics, one proposed by each partner, and provided their predictions for both conversations. They rated how interesting and enjoyable they expected each conversation to be, as well as their desire to have another conversation on the same topic, using the same measures as in Experiments 1 and 2. Participants also rated how interesting they perceived their partner to be as a person (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Each dyad then engaged in the first randomly assigned 2-min conversation, after which participants separately rated their actual experience on the same measures. The procedure was then repeated for the second topic. Finally, participants completed demographic questions before being thanked and dismissed. All surveys, initially completed on paper, were later digitized by RAs.

Results

For brevity, Figure 3 provides a visual representation as well as the means for each condition. We report ANOVA results in Table 2. We report below in detail the key hypothesis tests.

Deviation From Preregistration

While our preregistered plan included the use of paired *t* tests, we also included mixed-design ANOVAs to examine the effects of relationship status (friends vs. strangers), topic (boring vs. interesting), timing (predicted vs. actual), and their interactions on the dependent variables. We also conducted mixed-effects models, which we include in the Supplemental Material.

Interest

Participants underestimated how interesting conversations about boring topics were in the friends pairings, *paired* $t(160) = -4.64$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.67, −0.27], $d = -0.30$, as well as in the strangers pairings, *paired* $t(159) = -5.85$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.91, −0.45], $d = -0.51$. In contrast, participants' predictions about their interest in conversations on interesting topics were relatively well-calibrated in the friends pairing, *paired* $t(162) = -0.79$, $p = .433$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.28, 0.12], $d = -0.06$, as well as in the strangers pairings, *paired* $t(157) = -0.52$, $p = .602$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.21, 0.12], $d = -0.04$.

Enjoyment

Participants underestimated how enjoyable conversations about boring topics were in the friends pairings, *paired* $t(160) = -3.22$, $p = .002$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.55, −0.13], $d = -0.24$, as well as in the strangers pairings, *paired* $t(159) = -7.78$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−1.11, −0.66], $d = -0.70$. In contrast, participants' predictions about the enjoyment of conversations on interesting topics were relatively well-calibrated in the friends pairing, *paired* $t(162) = -0.43$, $p = .666$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.24, 0.15], $d = -0.03$, as well as in the strangers pairing, *paired* $t(157) = -1.00$, $p = .319$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.30, 0.10], $d = -0.09$.

Desire to Have Another Conversation

Participants underestimated their desire to have another conversation about boring topics in the friends pairing, *paired* $t(160) = -3.92$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.78, −0.26], $d = -0.32$, as well as in the strangers pairing, *paired* $t(159) = -8.94$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−1.32, −0.84], $d = -0.76$. Similarly, participants underestimated their desire to have another conversation about interesting topics in the friends pairing, *paired* $t(160) = -4.10$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.68, −0.24], $d = -0.31$, as well as in the strangers pairing, *paired* $t(157) = -4.29$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.82, −0.30], $d = -0.40$.

Comparing Friends Versus Strangers

Although not the main hypothesis of the present research, the theory that static elements of conversations affect expectations more than experiences of them invites a test of how relationship status (as a static element) separately affected expectations and experiences.

As Table 2 shows, for interest level, the interaction between Relationship × Timing was nonsignificant, $F(1, 1283) = 0.46$, $p = .496$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$, indicating that this possibility was not supported for interest.

However, for enjoyment, the interaction between Relationship × Timing was significant, $F(1, 1284) = 4.78$, $p = .029$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, whereby friends expected their conversation to be more enjoyable than strangers did, $F(1, 640) = 10.51$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. However, friends and strangers enjoyed the conversation to a similar degree, $F(1, 650) = 0.13$, $p = .723$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. This suggests that participants based forecasts on relationship status, which did not matter for experiences.

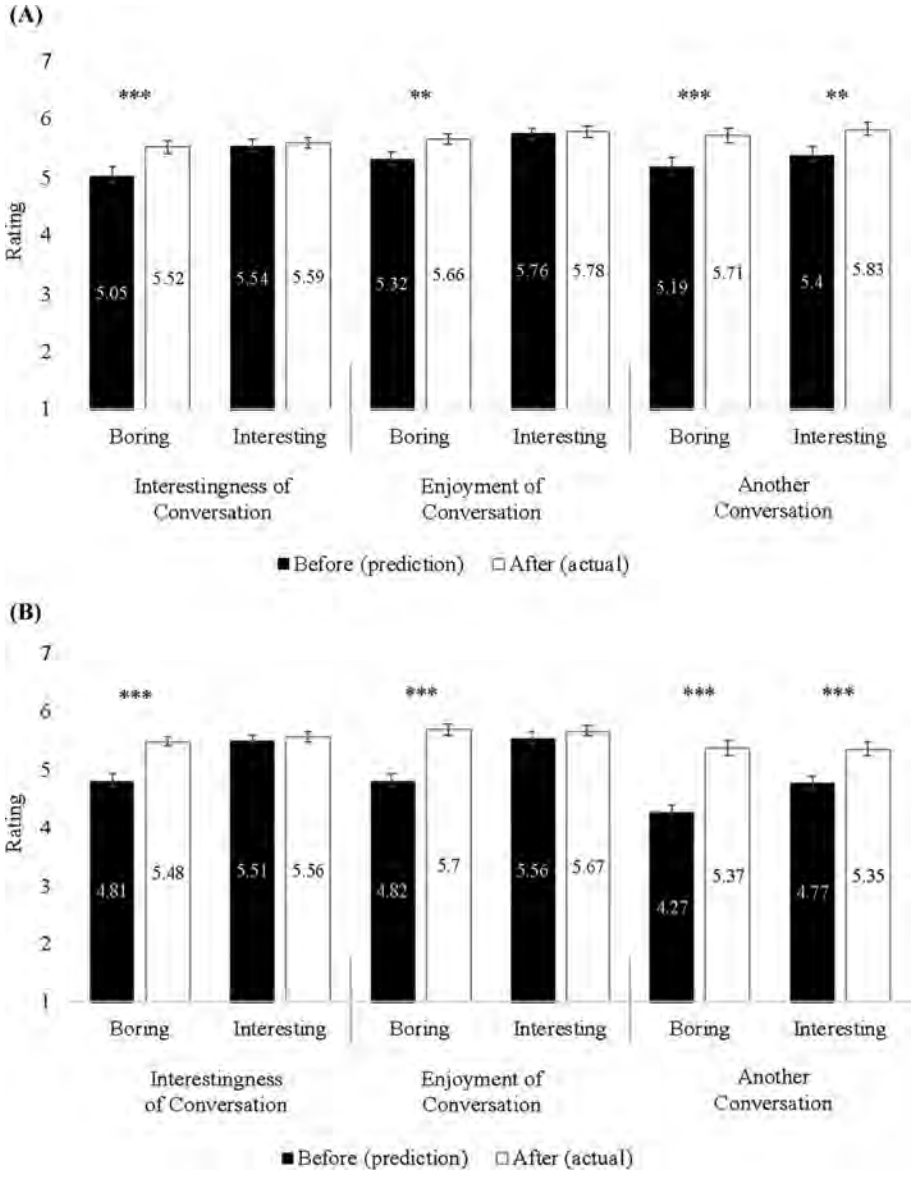
For desire to have another conversation, the interaction between Relationship × Timing was significant, $F(1, 1282) = 4.77$, $p = .029$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$. Before the conversation, friends expected to want to have another conversation more than strangers did, $F(1, 638) = 41.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. After the conversation, friends did have a greater desire to have another conversation compared to strangers, $F(1, 650) = 12.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. However, as the interaction and Figure 3 indicate, participants based forecasts on relationship status, which mattered less than they thought for experiences.

Overall, there was some support for the notion that relationship status affected participants' expectations more than their experiences.

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Figure 3

Conversations About Boring and Interesting Topics Between Friends (A) Strangers (B)



Note. Error bars represent ±1 standard errors.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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Were Study Partners Interesting?

As an ancillary measure, we tested how interesting participants thought of each other as people. There were main effects for relationship status, $F(1, 643) = 11.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, and timing, $F(1, 643) = 18.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. There was no interaction between relationship status and timing, $F(1, 643) = 1.20$, $p = .275$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.002$. While friends generally found each other to be more interesting than strangers did, they underestimated how interesting they would find each other after the conversation ($M_{predicted} = 5.40$, $SD_{predicted} = 1.51$ vs. $M_{actual} = 6.13$, $SD_{actual} = 1.15$), *paired* $t(162) = -6.32$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−0.97, −0.51], $d = 0.50$. Similarly, strangers underestimated how interesting they would find each other after the conversation ($M_{predicted} = 4.96$, $SD_{predicted} = 1.15$ vs. $M_{actual} = 5.91$, $SD_{actual} = 1.04$), *paired* $t(159) = -9.14$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{difference}$ [−1.14, −0.74], $d = 0.72$.

Discussion

Experiment 3 finds that both friends and strangers underestimate enjoyment, interest, and desire for future conversations about topics they find boring.

Table 2

ANOVA Results for Level of Interest, Enjoyment, and Desire to Have Another Conversation in Experiment 3, Which Manipulated Conversations About Boring Versus Interesting Topics Between Friends Versus Strangers

	Main effect			Interaction effect			
Measure	Topic (boring vs. interesting)	Timing (predicted vs. actual)	Relationship (friend vs. stranger)	Topic × Timing	Relationship × Timing	Relationship × Topic	Topic × Timing × Relationship
Interest	$F = 19.72^*$	$F = 5.69^*$	$F = 1.35$	$F = 12.15^*$	$F = 0.46$	$F = 0.51$	$F = 0.42$
	$p < .001$	$p = .017$	$p = .246$	$p < .001$	$p = .496$	$p = .478$	$p = .516$
	$\eta_p^2 = .02$	$\eta_p^2 = .004$	$\eta_p^2 = .001$	$\eta_p^2 = .009$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$
Enjoyment	$F = 19.56^*$	$F = 6.89^*$	$F = 7.09^*$	$F = 14.71^*$	$F = 4.78^*$	$F = 0.25$	$F = 2.39$
	$p < .001$	$p = .009$	$p = .008$	$p < .001$	$p = .029$	$p = .618$	$p = .122$
	$\eta_p^2 = .02$	$\eta_p^2 = .005$	$\eta_p^2 = .005$	$\eta_p^2 = .01$	$\eta_p^2 = .004$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 = .002$
Desire to have another conversation	$F = 5.83^*$	$F = 22.10^*$	$F = 50.15^*$	$F = 3.30$	$F = 4.77^*$	$F = 0.23$	$F = 1.68$
	$p = .016$	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .069$	$p = .029$	$p = .629$	$p = .195$
	$\eta_p^2 = .005$	$\eta_p^2 = .02$	$\eta_p^2 = .04$	$\eta_p^2 = .003$	$\eta_p^2 = .004$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 = .001$

Note. For interest analyses of variance (ANOVAs), the degrees of freedom are $F(1, 1283)$; for enjoyment ANOVAs, the degrees of freedom are $F(1, 1284)$; and for desire to have another conversation ANOVAs, the degrees of freedom are $F(1, 1284)$.
$^*p < .05$ (main and interaction effects).

Experiment 4: Conversations in Which Engagement Varies

We suggest that what people miss about boring conversations is that talking with another person is engaging, regardless of the topic. Experiment 4 (AsPredicted No. 166902 and No. 173136) tested this mechanism by varying the level of engagement participants experienced during a conversation. We manipulated whether participants either took part in live conversations, read a transcript of a conversation, or observed conversations about boring or interesting topics. We theoretically categorized live conversation as high engagement and reading a transcript and watching a recording as low engagement due to differences in cognitive, social, and attentional involvement during these experiences. Live conversations require active participation, where individuals must listen, process, respond, and adapt to their conversation partner in real time (Clark & Schaefer, 1989; Garrod & Pickering, 2004; Goffman, 1981; Grice, 1975). We reason that participating in live conversations fosters psychological and social engagement, as both individuals coconstruct the flow of the conversation and must respond to each other in real time. In contrast, reading a transcript or observing a recorded conversation is a relatively passive experience because participants do not have to cocreate a conversation and respond in real time to another person. Nevertheless, actively conversing, reading a transcript, and observing a recorded conversation expose participants to the same content, allowing us to isolate the role of engagement.

If engagement drives the misprediction of interest and enjoyment in conversations about boring topics, then we should see the gap between predicted and actual interest and enjoyment only in live conversations, when participants' engagement is high. Conversely, we should not see this gap when reading a transcript or watching a recording of conversations when engagement is lower. This study was preregistered; see https://aspredicted.org/xw3y-t3p2.pdf.

Method

Participants

We oversampled to reach our preregistered goal of 100 participants per condition (live conversation, reading, and watching). We recruited participants from an organizational research lab pool of mostly working adults in Singapore. After exclusions due to technical issues or failed attention checks (i.e., two from the live conversation condition, three from the reading condition, and seven from the observing condition), each condition had a final sample of 100 participants. The final sample consisted of 300 participants (57.7% female; 95% Singaporean; $M_{age} = 32.15$, $SD_{age} = 9.13$; age ranged between 19 and 62 years).

Procedure

This experiment utilized a 3 (engagement level: live conversation [higher engagement] vs. reading a transcript [lower engagement] vs. observing a conversation [lower engagement]) × 2 (topic: boring vs. interesting) × 2 (timing: predicted vs. actual) experimental design.

For the live conversation condition, participants ranked their interest in 15 topics (1 = *not interested at all*, 3 = *very interested*). Topics were edited and expanded from the topics used in Experiments 1 and 2. They were paired for 5-min conversations based on these ratings, with one participant finding the topic boring and the other interesting. For the 1–2 and 2–3 pairings, the participant with the lower interest rating was categorized as finding the topic boring, while their counterpart with the higher rating was categorized as finding it interesting. Before the 5-min conversation, participants were informed of the topics that they would be discussing and then rated their expectations on three questions about interest, enjoyment, and desire for future conversations (all scales: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). The experimenters then placed both participants in a Zoom room for them to partake in a conversation about the chosen topic for 5 min and recorded their conversations. After the conversation, participants rated their actual experiences on the same questions and provided optional comments and demographic information.

For the reading and observing conditions, we employed a matched design. Participants were assigned to either read transcripts or watch recordings of the live conversations. For every live conversation that took place, we paired two participants in the reading condition and two in the observing condition with the conversation. Each participant in the live conversation condition was thus matched

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to one participant who read the transcript and another who watched the recording. This design ensured that for every live interaction, there was a corresponding participant in each of the other two conditions, allowing for direct comparisons across conditions based on the same conversational content.

Participants in the reading and observing conditions first ranked their interest in the same 15 topics and were assigned a topic they found boring or interesting to match the target participant who had a live conversation with whom they were matched. Before launching into the material (either reading a transcript or observing a conversation), participants rated their expectations for reading or observing, respectively, on the same three questions as in the live conversation condition. Participants in the reading and observing conditions were also asked to imagine a live, in-person conversation about the topic and predicted their interest, enjoyment, and likelihood of future conversations (same 7-point scales).

Participants were then shown either the transcript of the conversation or the video recording of the conversation for their assigned topic, depending on the condition. Afterward, participants assessed their actual experiences of either reading a transcript or observing a conversation on the same measures as they rated their expectations.

Finally, because the live conversation condition entailed predictions about participating in live conversations, we also asked participants in the reading and observing conditions to also imagine having a live conversation and rate their predictions on the same scales. These results are reported in the Supplemental Material and are largely consistent with the main results reported here.

Results

Per our preregistered analytical plan, we used mixed-effects models to examine the effects of condition (live conversations vs. reading conversations vs. observing conversations, with the live conversations condition as the reference group), topic (boring vs. interesting), and timing (predicted vs. actual), as well as their interactions on our three outcomes of interest. These models included random intercepts for participants nested within conversations. Pairwise comparisons were conducted using Bonferroni-adjusted contrasts to further explore significant interaction effects. We also conducted mixed ANOVAs, treating condition and topic as between-subject factors and timing as a within-subject factor, which we report in the Supplemental Material.

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of each outcome.

Interest

Full results of the mixed-effect model are presented in Appendix Table A1 at the end of the article.

Our hypothesis was that the underestimation of interest in conversations about boring topics would occur only in the live conversation condition. Predicted interest in a live conversation about a boring topic was indeed lower ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.40$) than actual interest ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.50$), estimate $= -1.40$, $SE = 0.22$, $t(294) = -6.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.83, −0.97], replicating previous experiments.

In contrast, no such underestimation occurred when engagement was low. When reading transcripts of conversations about boring topics, predicted interest did not differ from actual interest, estimate = 0.10, $SE = 0.22$, $t(294) = 0.46$, $p = .649$, 95% CI [−0.33, 0.53]. When watching recordings of conversations about boring topics, participants *over*estimated predicted interest compared to actual interest, estimate = 0.70, $SE = 0.22$, $t(294) = 3.19$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.27, 1.13].

More broadly, participants' predictions about how interesting the conversation would be were driven by the topic, whereas their actual interest was more strongly influenced by the level of engagement experienced during the conversation. To see this most clearly, we regressed predicted interest on experimental condition and topic, accounting for clustering by conversation using random intercepts. Topic influenced predicted interest (estimate $= -2.01$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−2.31, −1.71]). Experimental condition also influenced predicted interest; however, participants predicted that reading a transcript (estimate = 0.43, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .022$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.80]) or watching a recording (estimate = 0.67, $SE = 0.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.30, 1.04]) would be more interesting than participating in a live conversation.

In contrast, actual experiences were driven by the engagement level that the experimental conditions created. To see this, we regressed actual interest on experimental condition and topic, accounting for clustering by conversation using random intercepts. Topic still had an effect on actual interest (although smaller than on predicted interest; estimate $= -0.75$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.10, −0.41]). More importantly, participating in a live conversation increased actual interest relative to reading a transcript (estimate $= -0.65$, $SE = 0.22$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [−1.08, −0.22]) or watching a recording (estimate $= -1.28$, $SE = 0.22$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.71, −0.85]), contrary to participants' predictions.

Enjoyment

Full results of the mixed-effect model are in Appendix Table A2 at the end of the article. Here too, underestimation of enjoyment from a conversation about boring topics occurred only in the live conversation condition, where engagement was high. Predicted enjoyment ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.25$) from a live conversation about a boring topic was lower than actual enjoyment ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.54$), estimate $= -1.42$, $SE = 0.22$, $t(294) = -6.43$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.85, −0.99], replicating previous experiments.

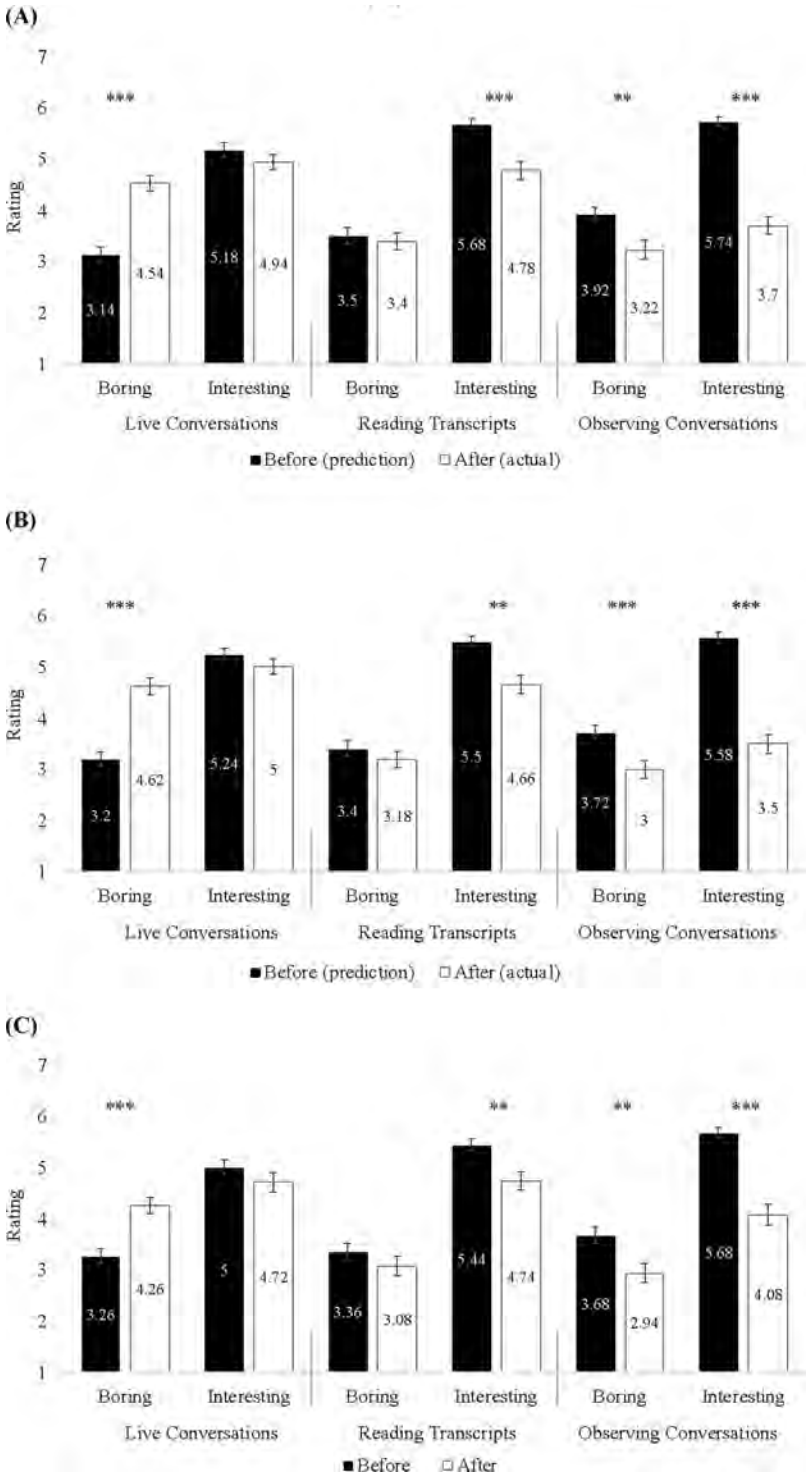
In contrast, there was no difference between predicted and actual enjoyment in the reading condition, estimate = 0.22, $SE = 0.22$, $t(294) = 1.00$, $p = .320$, 95% CI [−0.21, 0.65], and predicted enjoyment in the observing condition was *higher* than actual enjoyment, estimate = 0.72, $SE = 0.22$, $t(294) = 3.26$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.29, 1.15].

As before, the topic drove predicted enjoyment, whereas the engagement level entailed in the experimental conditions determined actual enjoyment. To see this, we regressed predicted enjoyment on experimental condition and topic, accounting for clustering by conversation using random intercepts. We found that topic influenced predicted enjoyment (estimate $= -2.00$, $SE = 0.145$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−2.28, −1.72]). Participants also believed that participating in a live conversation would be less enjoyable than observing a recording (estimate = 0.43, $SE = 0.18$, $p = .017$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.78]), but not significantly different from reading a transcript (estimate = 0.23, $SE = 0.18$, $p = .199$, 95% CI [−0.12, 0.58]).

In contrast, when we regressed actual enjoyment on experimental condition and topic, accounting for clustering by conversation using random intercepts, we found that topic still had an effect on actual

Figure 4

Conversations About Boring and Interesting Topics in Live Conversations (A), Reading Conversations (B), and Observing Conversations (C)



Note. The figure shows participants' level of interest (A), enjoyment (B), and desire to have another conversation (C) about boring and interesting topics across live conversations (high engagement) versus reading transcripts (low engagement) versus observing conversations (low engagement) conditions. Error bars represent ±1 standard errors.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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enjoyment (although here, too, it was smaller than on predicted enjoyment; estimate = −0.79, $SE = 0.18$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.15, −0.43]). More importantly, participating in a live conversation increased enjoyment relative to both reading a transcript (estimate = −0.89, $SE = 0.22$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.33, −0.45]) and watching a recording (estimate = −1.56, $SE = 0.22$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−2.00, −1.12]), contrary to participants' predictions.

Desire to Have Another Conversation

Full results of the mixed-effect model are in Appendix Table A3 at the end of the article. Here too, underestimation of the desire to have another conversation about a boring topic occurred only in the live conversation condition. Predicted desire to have another conversation about a boring topic ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.44$) was lower than the actual desire to do so ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.59$), estimate = −1.00, $SE = 0.23$, $t(294) = -4.29$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.85, −0.99].

In contrast, there was no difference between predicted and actual desire to have another conversation about a boring topic in the reading condition, estimate = 0.28, $SE = 0.23$, $t(294) = 1.20$, $p = .231$, 95% CI [−0.21, 0.65], and predicted desire to have another conversation about a boring topic was *higher* than actual, estimate = 0.74, $SE = 0.23$, $t(294) = 3.18$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.29, 1.15].

As before, the topic drove the predicted desire to have another conversation, whereas the engagement level determined the actual desire to do so. Regressing predicted desire on experimental condition and topic, accounting for clustering by conversation using random intercepts, we found that topic influenced predicted desire to have another conversation (estimate = −1.94, $SE = 0.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−2.26, −1.62]). Participants also believed that participating in a live conversation would decrease their desire to have another, relative to watching a recording (estimate = 0.55, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.94]), though the difference was not significant when compared to reading a transcript (estimate = 0.27, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .177$, 95% CI [−0.12, 0.66]).

In contrast, regressing actual desire to have another conversation on experimental condition and topic, accounting for clustering by conversation using random intercepts, we found that topic still had an effect on actual desire (here, too, it was smaller than on predicted desire; estimate = −1.09, $SE = 0.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.50, −0.68]). As before, participating in a live conversation increased actual desire compared to both reading a transcript (estimate = −0.58, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .025$, 95% CI [−1.08, −0.08]) and watching a recording (estimate = −0.98, $SE = 0.26$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.48, −0.48]), contrary to participants' predictions.

Discussion

The gap between predicted and actual hedonic benefits of conversations about boring topics occurred only for live conversations, and it did not occur when participants read a transcript or watched recordings of these conversations. We suggest this happened because it is difficult to appreciate that conversations about boring topics are engaging. When engagement is high, as is the case during live conversation, people are likely to underestimate hedonic benefits. When engagement is low, as in the other experimental conditions, no such underestimation occurred.

Experiment 5: Fixed-Topic Conversations

Two related additional mechanisms that can explain the results focus on the extent to which a boring topic either naturally changes during conversations or comes to be construed more positively during conversations.

One possibility is that conversations naturally lead participants to deviate from a boring topic into a more interesting variant. In this case, a boring topic actually changes as participants conavigate the conversation, and this escapes participants' expectations prior to the conversation.

Another possibility is that the positive experience of conversing with another person leads participants to construe the same boring topic more positively. In this case, a boring topic does not actually change but is perceived more positively during the conversation than participants expect.

If either of these occurs, then this would help explain the underestimation of interest and enjoyment from conversations about boring topics.

It should be noted that these mechanisms, as well as the mechanism of engagement, can theoretically coexist: Conversations about boring topics can be more engaging than participants expect, can lead participants to unexpectedly change topics during the conversation, and can lead participants to unexpectedly construe the same topic more positively due to the experience of conversing with each other.

To test these possibilities, Experiment 5 instructed some pairs not to deviate from the assigned topic, while other pairs were given no such instructions. If the topic naturally changes during conversations, then the prediction–experience gap in interest and enjoyment should decrease when participants cannot costeer a conversation toward a topic of mutual interest. This tests the possibility that boring topics naturally change during conversations.

In addition, we also measured whether participants perceived the topic to have become more interesting during the conversation. This tests the possibility that participants construe a boring topic more positively due to the experience of conversing with each other.

Finally, this experiment also measures the mechanism of engagement, whereby participants fail to anticipate how psychologically engaging a real-time conversation would be, even about a boring topic.

This experiment was preregistered; see https://aspredicted.org/4nr6ir.pdf.

Method

Participants

We preregistered 200 participants (100 dyads) and recruited 206 participants from a university lab in France. Six pilot pairs who participated in 3-min conversations (as opposed to the 5-min conversations) were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 194 participants (71.65% female; 86.08% French; $M_{age} = 27.82$ years, $SD_{age} = 5.61$).

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Procedure

This experiment used a 2 (topic change: no change vs. control) × 2 (topic: boring vs. interesting) × 2 (timing: predicted vs. actual) mixed design.

At the start of the experiment, participants rated their interest in 15 topics on a scale from 1 (*not interested at all*) to 3 (*very interested*). The topics were identical to those used in Experiment 4. Participants were then randomly assigned to either the boring or interesting condition, ensuring that the selected topic was very interesting to one participant (rated "3") and not interesting to the other (rated "1"). For 1–2 and 2–3 pairings, the participant with the lower rating was categorized as being in the boring topic condition, while the participant with the higher rating was categorized as being in the interesting topic condition.

For pairs assigned to the no-topic-change condition, participants were asked to "stay focused on the assigned topic" and not to change the topic or introduce new topics. This instruction was also reiterated verbally by the experimenter immediately before the conversation began. Pairs assigned to the control condition received no special instructions about topic change.

Participants then learned their assigned topic and completed preconversation predictions of (a) interest, (b) enjoyment, and (c) desire to have another conversation about the topic (all scales: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). To assess anticipated engagement, participants also rated how engaged and immersed they expected to feel during the conversation (both scales: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

We also included five items assessing perceived cognitive demands during the conversation (i.e., levels of attention, mental effort, cognitive load, mind wandering, and perceived challenge; all scales: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). These items were adapted from the attentional component of the Meaning and Attentional Components model of boredom (Westgate & Wilson, 2018), which conceptualizes engagement as a function of cognitive demands and available mental resources. Engagement and cognitive demands were positively and moderately correlated, $r(386) = .33$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.41], $p < .001$, indicating that participants who reported higher engagement also tended to experience greater cognitive demands during the conversation (see the Supplemental Material for results).

To measure construal of the topic, participants also indicated whether they expected the topic to shift toward something more or less interesting (−3 = *change to something less interesting*, 0 = *no change*, 3 = *change to something more interesting*).

On an exploratory basis and to measure additional downstream consequences of interest and enjoyment from the conversations, we also asked for participants' predicted levels of willingness to introduce their conversation partner to someone else in their professional network, their willingness to help if their conversation partner asked for help with a professional problem, and their willingness to work with their conversation partner on a work project (see the Supplemental Material for results).

Finally, as a manipulation check, participants also indicated whether the conversation topic would change from its original assignment (1 = *the topic did not change at all*, 7 = *the topic changed a great deal*).

Participants then partook in a 5-min conversation via Zoom about the assigned topic. Afterward, they completed postconversation measures of their actual experience using the same items and provided demographic information. As in Experiments 1 and 2, all materials were translated into French.

Results

Analysis Plan

Per our preregistered analytical plan, we used mixed-design ANOVAs. We conducted a 2 (topic: boring vs. interesting) × 2 (topic change: no change vs. control) × 2 (timing: predicted vs. actual) mixed ANOVA for all outcomes, with topic and topic-change conditions as between-subjects factors and timing as a within-subjects factor. We followed significant interactions with paired-sample t tests to explore the simple effects. We also conducted mixed-effects models that yielded identical patterns of results (see the Supplemental Material).

Figure 5 provides a visual representation as well as the means for each condition. For brevity, we report ANOVA results in Table 3. We report below in detail the key hypothesis tests.

Manipulation Check

The topic-change manipulation worked as intended. Participants in the no-change condition ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.73$) reported significantly lesser topic change ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.91$) than those in the control condition who were free to deviate from the assigned topic, $t(386) = 5.32$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.62, 1.35], $d = 0.54$.

Interest

There were significant main effects of topic, $F(1, 190) = 44.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$, and timing, $F(1, 190) = 75.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .29$, qualified by a Topic × Timing interaction, $F(1, 190) = 44.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$. The main effect of the topic-change condition was nonsignificant, $F(1, 190) = 0.93$, $p = .336$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$, and all interactions involving topic change (Fs < 1, ps > .10) were also nonsignificant (see Table 3).

Participants underestimated how interesting conversations about boring topics would be. This was true in the no-change condition, $t(49) = 7.50$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.51, 2.61], $d = 1.06$ [0.71, 1.40], and in the control condition, $t(45) = 6.67$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.32, 2.46], $d = 0.98$ [0.63, 1.33]. For interesting topics, participants were relatively well-calibrated in both the no-change condition, $t(49) = 0.75$, $p = .457$, 95% CI [−0.34, 0.74], $d = 0.11$ [−0.17, 0.38], and in the control condition, $t(47) = 1.72$, $p = .092$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.72], $d = 0.25$ [−0.04, 0.53].

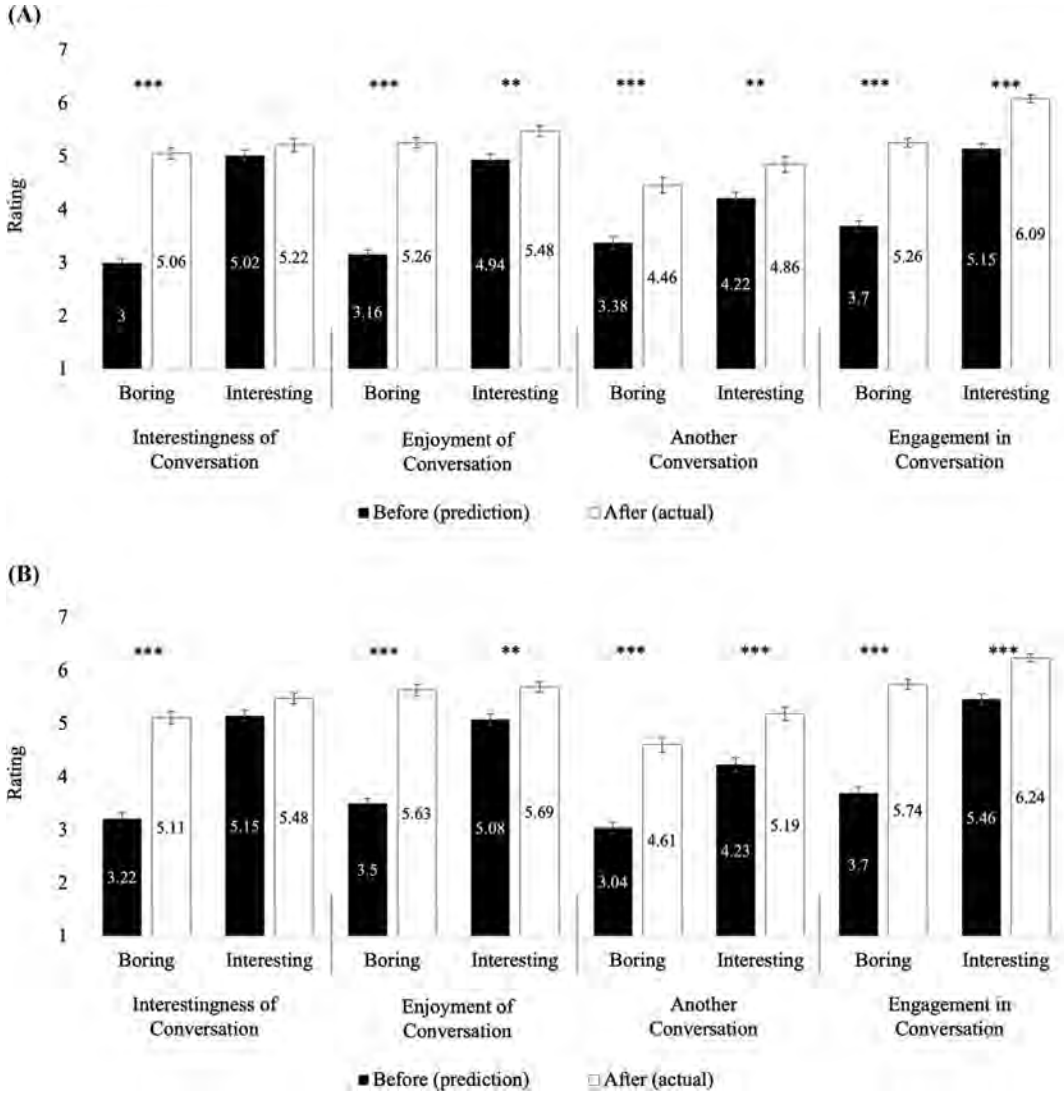
Enjoyment

There were significant main effects of topic, $F(1, 190) = 32.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$, and timing, $F(1, 190) = 143.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .43$, as well as a Topic × Timing interaction, $F(1, 190) = 47.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$. The main effect of the topic-change condition was nonsignificant, $F(1, 190) = 2.79$, $p = .097$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$; all other interactions involving topic change were also nonsignificant (Fs < 1, ps > .10; see Table 3).

Participants underestimated how enjoyable conversations about boring topics would be. This was true in the no-change condition, $t(49) = 8.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.61, 2.59], $d = 1.22$ [0.85, 1.59],

Figure 5

Conversations About Boring and Interesting Topics Between the No-Topic-Change Condition (A) and the Control Condition (B)



Note. Error bars represent ±1 standard errors.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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and in the control condition, $t(45) = 8.88$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.65, 2.61], $d = 1.31$ [0.91, 1.70]. For interesting topics, participants also underestimated their enjoyment in the no-change condition, $t(49) = 2.38$, $p = .021$, 95% CI [0.08, 1.00], $d = 0.34$ [0.05, 0.62], and in the control condition, $t(47) = 3.39$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.96], $d = 0.49$ [0.19, 0.79].

Desire to Have Another Conversation

There were significant main effects of topic, $F(1, 190) = 11.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and timing, $F(1, 190) = 53.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$, but their interaction was marginal, $F(1, 190) = 3.26$, $p = .073$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. The main effect and all interactions involving the topic-change condition were nonsignificant ($Fs < 2$, $ps > .10$; see Table 3).

Participants underestimated their desire for another conversation about boring topics. This was true in the no-change condition, $t(49) = 3.62$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.48, 1.68], $d = 0.51$ [0.22, 0.81], and the control condition, $t(45) = 4.85$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.92, 2.21], $d = 0.72$ [0.39, 1.04]. For interesting topics, participants also underestimated their enjoyment in the no-change condition, $t(49) = 2.16$, $p = .036$, 95% CI [0.04, 1.24], $d = 0.31$ [0.02, 0.59], and in the control condition, $t(47) = 4.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.48, 1.43], $d = 0.59$ [0.28, 0.89].

Table 3
Analysis of Variance Results for Experiment 5

Measure	Main effect			Interaction effect			
	Topic (boring vs. interesting)	Timing (predicted vs. actual)	Topic change (no change vs. control)	Topic × Timing	Topic Change × Timing	Topic Change × Topic	Topic × Timing × Topic Change
Interest	$F = 44.08^*$	$F = 75.87^*$	$F = 0.93$	$F = 44.07^*$	$F = 0.00$	$F = 0.03$	$F = 0.34$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .336$	$p < .001$	$p = .945$	$p = .860$	$p = .558$
	$\eta_p^2 = .19$	$\eta_p^2 = .29$	$\eta_p^2 = .005$	$\eta_p^2 = .19$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 = .002$
Enjoyment	$F = 32.79^*$	$F = 143.99^*$	$F = 2.79$	$F = 47.48^*$	$F = 0.04$	$F = 0.32$	$F = 0.01$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .097$	$p < .001$	$p = .833$	$p = .572$	$p = .940$
	$\eta_p^2 = .15$	$\eta_p^2 = .43$	$\eta_p^2 = .01$	$\eta_p^2 = .20$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$
Desire to have another conversation	$F = 11.85^*$	$F = 53.51^*$	$F = 0.03$	$F = 3.26$	$F = 1.92$	$F = 0.36$	$F = 0.08$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .865$	$p = .073$	$p = .168$	$p = .549$	$p = .774$
	$\eta_p^2 = .06$	$\eta_p^2 = .22$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 = .02$	$\eta_p^2 = .01$	$\eta_p^2 = .002$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$
Engagement	$F = 56.69^*$	$F = 203.55^*$	$F = 2.39$	$F = 25.43^*$	$F = 0.76$	$F = 0.00$	$F = 2.96$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .124$	$p < .001$	$p = .385$	$p = .978$	$p = .087$
	$\eta_p^2 = .23$	$\eta_p^2 = .52$	$\eta_p^2 = .01$	$\eta_p^2 = .12$	$\eta_p^2 = .004$	$\eta_p^2 < .001$	$\eta_p^2 = .02$

Note. The table shows analysis of variance results for level of interest, enjoyment, desire to have another conversation, and engagement in Experiment 5, which manipulated conversations about boring versus interesting topics between participants assigned to the no-change versus control condition. For all analysis of variances, the degrees of freedom are $F(1, 190)$.
* $p < .05$ (main and interaction effects).

Engagement

There were significant main effects of topic, $F(1, 190) = 56.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$, and timing, $F(1, 190) = 203.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .52$, and a significant Topic × Timing interaction, $F(1, 190) = 25.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. All effects involving topic change were nonsignificant (Fs < 3, ps > .10; see Table 3).

Participants underestimated their engagement in conversations about boring topics. This was true in the no-change condition, $t(49) = 7.22$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.13, 1.99], $d = 1.02$ [0.68, 1.36], and in the control condition, $t(45) = 9.86$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.63, 2.46], $d = 1.45$ [1.03, 1.87]. Participants also underestimated their engagement in conversations about interesting topics. This was true in the no-change condition, $t(49) = 5.33$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.59, 1.29], $d = 0.75$ [0.44, 1.06], and in the control condition, $t(47) = 5.80$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.51, 1.05], $d = 0.84$ [0.50, 1.16].

Mediation

To test whether engagement can help explain the key outcomes, we followed recommendations by Montoya and Hayes (2017) and modeled within-person mediation using 10,000 bootstrapped samples in R with the *lavaan* package. For each dependent variable, we examined whether the prediction–experience gap in engagement predicted the corresponding gap in the outcomes.

The prediction–experience gap in engagement significantly predicted the prediction–experience gap in interest ($B = 0.80$, 95% CI [0.62, 0.99], $p < .001$), the prediction–experience gap in enjoyment ($B = 0.81$, 95% CI [0.69, 0.94], $p < .001$), and the prediction–experience gap in the desire to have another conversation ($B = 0.38$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.58], $p < .001$). This was also true when splitting the data into conversations about boring topics and interesting topics separately.

These findings suggest that, within participants, underestimating the extent of engagement during a conversation was consistently associated with underestimating how interesting and enjoyable the conversation would be and how much one would want to have another conversation about the same topic.

Additional Mechanisms

Recall that there were two additional mechanisms: First, boring topics actually change during conversations. Second, participants construe boring topics more positively during conversations.

In terms of actual topic change, the lack of effects in the no-topic-change condition suggests that actual changes to the topic did not drive the underestimation of interest and enjoyment of conversations about boring topics. Participants reported lesser topic change in the no-change condition, but this did not affect the main results.

In terms of topic construal, we first tested whether participants underestimated whether the topic would shift to something more interesting. A mixed ANOVA testing the effects of topic (boring vs. interesting), condition (topic change vs. no change), and timing (predicted vs. actual) revealed a significant main effect of condition, $F(1, 190) = 16.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. There was no main effect of topic, $F(1, 190) = 0.77$, $p = .383$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, and no main effect of timing, $F(1, 190) = 0.19$, $p = .664$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. None of the two-way or three-way interactions were significant: the Topic × Condition interaction, $F(1, 190) = 1.08$, $p = .301$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$; the Topic × Timing interaction, $F(1, 190) = 0.22$, $p = .641$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$; the Condition × Timing interaction, $F(1, 190) = 3.33$, $p = .070$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; and the Topic × Condition × Timing interaction, $F(1, 190) = 1.08$, $p = .300$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$.

For boring topics, participants' predicted and actual topic construal (i.e., whether the topic would shift to something more interesting) did not differ significantly in either condition. In the control condition ($M_{predicted} = 3.76$, $SD = 0.99$; $M_{actual} = 3.71$, $SD = 1.13$), the difference was nonsignificant, $t(49) = -0.42$, $p = .674$, $d = -0.06$. Similarly, in the control condition ($M_{predicted} = 3.91$, $SD = 1.02$; $M_{actual} = 3.78$, $SD = 1.15$), the difference was nonsignificant, $t(45) = 0.37$, $p = .710$, $d = 0.06$.

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For interesting topics, participants' predicted and actual topic construal was marginal in one condition (in the opposite direction of what would support the topic construal mechanism) and nonsignificant in the other. In the no-change condition ($M_{predicted} = 4.19$, $SD = 0.93$; $M_{actual} = 3.75$, $SD = 1.07$), participants marginally overestimated the extent to which the topic would shift into something more interesting, $t(49) = -1.82$, $p = .075$, $d = -0.26$. In the control condition ($M_{predicted} = 4.32$, $SD = 1.17$; $M_{actual} = 4.20$, $SD = 1.19$), the difference was nonsignificant, $t(47) = 1.00$, $p = .322$, $d = 0.14$.

We next used a mediation model to test whether topic construal and engagement predicted the prediction–experience gaps in enjoyment, interest, and desire for future conversation (see Figure 6). Both predictors were entered simultaneously using bootstrap standard errors (10,000 resamples).

For interest, engagement predicted the prediction–experience gap ($b = 0.79$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.60, 0.97]). Topic construal exerted a smaller but also significant positive influence ($b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .025$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.34]). A direct comparison indicated that the difference between the two mediators was significant ($b_{diff} = 0.60$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.84]). Thus, both engagement and topic construal mediated the prediction–experience gap in interest, with engagement being the more reliable mediator.

For enjoyment, engagement predicted the prediction–experience gap ($b = 0.80$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.68, 0.92]). Topic construal again exerted a smaller but also significant positive influence ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .042$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.26]). A direct comparison indicated that the difference between the two mediators was significant ($b_{diff} = 0.66$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.50, 0.83]).

For the desire to engage in another conversation, engagement continued to predict the prediction–experience gap ($b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.57]), whereas topic construal did not ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .32$, 95% CI [−0.10, 0.28]).

Discussion

Underestimating interest and enjoyment in conversations about boring topics was partly explained by greater than expected engagement participants experienced during these conversations.

In addition, a positive construal of the topic as more interesting than participants expected also partly explained the main results, albeit to a lesser extent than engagement. It should be noted that participants did not underestimate the positive construal of the topic, also inconsistent with this mechanism.

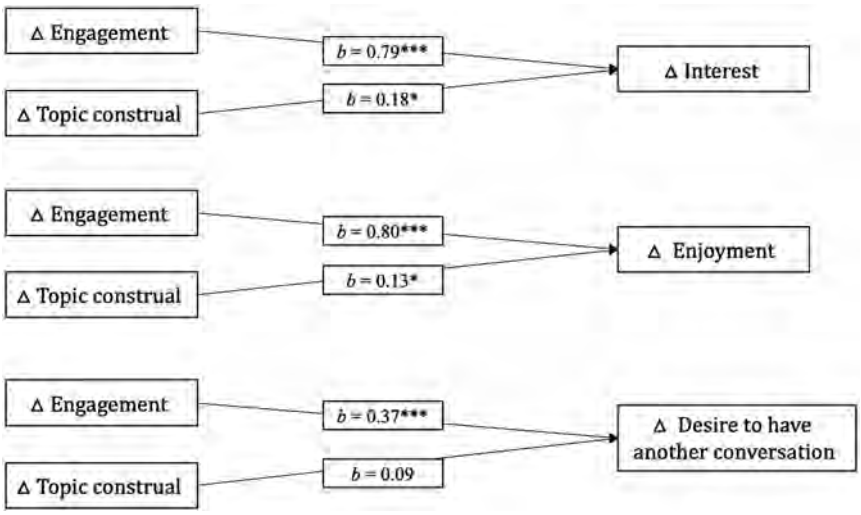
Underestimation of interest and enjoyment from conversations about boring topics occurred regardless of whether participants were instructed to remain on the same topic, suggesting that being able to change the topic was not a likely mechanism.

General Discussion

Across five preregistered experiments and four additional experiments reported in the Supplemental Material, our findings consistently demonstrate that people underestimate their interest, enjoyment, and desire to have another conversation about boring topics. This miscalibration was evident across various contexts and types of interactions, including both in-person conversations (Experiment 3) and virtual face-to-face interactions (Experiments 1, 2, and 4). This effect was not simply due to having a conversation with someone who found the topic interesting; even when both participants considered the topic boring, they still underestimated how interesting the conversation would be (Experiment 2). This replicated conversations with both friends and strangers (Experiment 3), suggesting that the results did not depend on familiarity with the conversation partner. The tendency to underestimate enjoyment persisted regardless of whether participants discussed self-generated boring topics (Experiment 3) or experimenter-provided boring topics (all other experiments). Moreover, as we report in the Supplemental Material (Experiment S3), this finding

Figure 6

Mediation Effects of Engagement and Topic Construal on Interest, Enjoyment, and Desire to Have Another Conversation in Experiment 5



* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

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persisted across more than one conversation about boring topics. Finally, compared to conversations about boring topics, we found that people were more well-calibrated in predicting their enjoyment of conversations on interesting topics, although there were some exceptions.

Experiments 4 and 5 provide evidence that indicates that people primarily base their predictions of the enjoyment and interest in the topic and do not sufficiently consider the emergent engagement that comes from interacting with another person. We found that engagement plays a significant role in shaping the actual experience of a conversation, and this escapes participants' expectations.

Static and Dynamic Components of Social Interactions

As noted, we see the present research as illustrating a broader distinction between static and dynamic components of social interactions. Static components refer to elements that are known and remain relatively stable before and throughout the interaction (e.g., the conversation topic or relationship status). In contrast, dynamic components are those that emerge or evolve during the interaction itself (e.g., engagement). This framework suggests that people are less likely to successfully anticipate dynamic components than static components, as the former are a moving target—unfolding and evolving during the interaction—while the latter are more stationary and known in advance.

In our case, the topic is a static component, whereas the engagement participants experience during the conversation is dynamic. Notice that this framework does not imply that static components do not influence the experience of taking part in conversations; all else being equal, talking about an interesting topic will likely be more enjoyable than talking about a boring one. Instead, this framework suggests that people will overweight the topic in their assessments of future conversations while underweighting more dynamic elements.

Beyond the present research, this framework offers a useful lens for integrating and enriching other lines of research. For example, existing research finds that people tend to underestimate the hedonic benefits that result from talking with strangers (Atir et al., 2022; Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Gunaydin et al., 2021; Kardas, Kumar, & Epley, 2022) and with acquaintances (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). Under this framework, one's prior relationship (or lack thereof) with a conversation partner is a static component; it is known in advance and easily accessible at the time of prediction. As a result, people are likely to rely on it when predicting whether a future conversation will be enjoyable. However, because dynamic components also matter, people tend to overweight prior relationships and end up underestimating the hedonic outcomes of talking with "weak ties."

Similarly, existing research on overestimating the negative effects of certain social interactions can be enriched by highlighting the contrast between static and dynamic components of conversations. For instance, when anticipating conversations involving receiving negative feedback (Gilbert et al., 2004) or discussing politics with adversaries (H. K. Collins et al., 2022; Wald et al., 2024), individuals may fixate on static cues when forecasting what these experiences will be like. The presence of negative feedback and political adversaries are static elements that are likely to weigh (too) heavily in predictions about the hedonic impact of certain conversations, which in turn leads to underestimation.

Beyond this, this framework can help formulate future research directions about types of conversations that are likely to exhibit the pattern of underestimation of hedonic outcomes. Specifically, conversations characterized by salient static differences between people should result in an underestimation of hedonic benefits. Some examples include differences in socioeconomic status that might lead people to assume that conversation with others "from the other side of the tracks" would not be enjoyable. As another example, intergenerational conversations may be another candidate, whereby younger and older people may underestimate the hedonic benefits of talking with each other. Given the necessity of social connection for well-being and longevity in old age (Rentscher et al., 2023), this possibility would be of practical importance if younger people avoid talking with older others due to a mistaken assumption that such conversations would not be enjoyable.

Likewise, the distinction between static and dynamic elements of conversations can also point to dynamic elements that may be underappreciated in expectation but important in experience. Dynamic features, such as storytelling (McGregor & Holmes, 1999; Reis et al., 2010) or the level of self-disclosure and reciprocity (Miller & Kenny, 1986; Sprecher et al., 2013; Trinh et al., 2025), may also contribute to making conversations more engaging than people might expect. Future research could investigate these dynamic elements by analyzing linguistic and behavioral markers of engagement or by using physiological measures to capture moment-to-moment changes in attention and interest. A deeper understanding of these factors may help explain why people consistently underestimate the appeal of everyday interactions.

Learning From Experience?

Can people learn from experience that talking about boring topics is not as boring as it seems? One way of testing this is through relationship closeness. Being close to someone entails having had many conversations with that person, some of which are bound to be about topics boring to oneself. Our Experiment 3 measured the expectations and experiences of friends. Closeness appears to have narrowed, but did not eliminate, the prediction–experience gap. This suggests that it is possible that some learning could happen, although its extent is unclear.

To further explore the possibility of learning from experience, we conducted Experiment S3 (AsPredicted No. 162300), reported in the Supplemental Material, where participants engaged in two consecutive conversations about different boring topics with two different strangers. Despite having a surprisingly enjoyable first conversation, participants still underestimated their enjoyment of the second. The persistence of miscalibration suggests that changing expectations requires more than repeated interactions.

Notably, in Experiment S3, participants remained in either the boring or interesting condition across both conversations. However, the ability to compare between conversations about a boring and an interesting topic may enable participants to better predict their enjoyment (Hsee & Zhang, 2010; Hsee et al., 1999; Morewedge et al., 2009; Parducci, 1965; Stevens, 1975). Future work could explore topic order effects: for instance, whether changing from an interesting to a boring topic and vice versa alters expectations. A boring topic might serve as a cognitive "palate cleanser" following an interesting topic that is more demanding, helping maintain attention and reduce social fatigue. From a practical perspective,

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such exchanges may be valuable in contexts involving multiple back-to-back interactions, such as speed-friending, speed-dating, networking, or even conversations that follow emotionally charged disagreements.

Reconsidering "Boring" Conversations About Boring Topics

Our findings suggest that conversations about boring topics may not be as unenjoyable as people often assume. Although people often avoid such interactions, anticipating low enjoyment, we find that conversations about seemingly uninteresting topics can be surprisingly engaging. In doing so, our research complements and extends prior work on conversations with strangers (e.g., Atir et al., 2023; Sandstrom et al., 2022; Schroeder et al., 2022). As we noted, people appear to rely heavily on salient, static features, such as whether the topic is boring or interesting or whether one's partner is a stranger, when forecasting how a conversation will be. In other words, people not only underestimate how much they will enjoy talking to strangers (Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021) but also do not realize that the topic matters less than they think.

Notably, we observed generally larger effects on the level of interest and enjoyment than on participants' desire to have another conversation. Our findings for desire to converse again align with previous work by Sandstrom and Boothby (2021), who documented a reluctance to reengage with a stranger despite having previously experienced an enjoyable interaction. We argue that this occurs because people overweight static features in their predictions, as these are more accessible, while undervaluing dynamic processes that actually affect experiences. We suggest that engagement is one such underappreciated dynamic process, but there can be others. In addition to the two examples that we previously mentioned (i.e., storytelling and reciprocal self-disclosure), humor (Cooper, 2008; Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014; Strick et al., 2012), emotional resonance or synchrony (Giorgi, 2017; Páez et al., 2015), and the transition from small talk to deep talk (Kardas, Kumar, & Epley, 2022; Mehl et al., 2010) may also improve conversations. We also highlight that deep topics and interesting topics are not synonymous: A deeply personal story can be uninteresting if the listener would prefer not to hear, while a light or impersonal topic can still invite curiosity if participants are open and invested.

Although our studies focused on brief interactions (2–5 min), they reflect the length of many real-world interactions. Still, it remains unclear whether these effects we observed persist over time. Longer conversations may magnify boredom if the enjoyment of a boring topic wears off over time or if conversational dynamics stagnate. Repeated exposure to the same boring topics could, paradoxically, dull the very engagement that initially made them enjoyable. In this sense, the relationship may be curvilinear: Occasional boring-topic conversations may be unexpectedly rewarding, but persistent participation in conversations about such topics could backfire. Moreover, our design in Experiment 2 paired participants who both deemed the topic to be boring, a situation that may be rare in organic conversations. Future research should examine how engagement evolves over time and how structure, duration, or partner interest influences outcomes.

While topic is central to our research, it is also worth noting that topic is not the only potential source of boredom in conversation. In Experiment S1, participants cited other reasons in addition to the topic for what makes a conversation interesting or boring, including monotony in tone or delivery (Di Stasi et al., 2023), asymmetric participation (Leary et al., 1986), and awkward silences or interruptions (McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). These factors relate to the interaction rather than the content. Understanding how such features interact with topic and how they may influence engagement offers a fruitful direction for future research.

Practically, our findings suggest that people may be overly cautious about entering conversations they expect to be boring. While we do not advocate seeking out boring interactions indiscriminately, we suggest that people could benefit from lowering the bar for what makes a conversation "worth having." One approach to overcoming this is to place individuals in conversations about topics they might not initially find interesting. For example, in structured workplace "get-to-know-you" exercises, participants can engage in discussions about less obviously interesting topics. Although somewhat prescriptive, this method may encourage broader engagement. Similarly, reframing conversational goals (e.g., from "Will I enjoy this?" to "What might I learn?") may help individuals approach a wider range of conversations than they otherwise would with greater openness.

There is a difference between lowering one's bar for having conversations about boring topics and agreeing to have any and all boring conversations. At the extreme, if people adopt the latter as a rule for life, having conversations about boring topics may become less fruitful over time. The benefits from conversations about boring topics may not scale indefinitely. Prior research suggests that the happiness boost from social interactions plateaus with frequency (Ren et al., 2022), hinting that the benefits of boring-topic conversations may be subject to diminishing returns.

Concluding Thought

Understandably, people are reluctant to take part in conversations about boring topics. Author Paulo Coelho expressed this sentiment in declaring, "I can stand defeats, pain, anger. But I can't stand boredom" (Coelho, 2011). However, our findings suggest that the anticipation of a boring conversation may often be worse than the experience itself. Once experienced, however, boring conversations may hold greater hedonic value than people think.

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Appendix

Full Model Results for Experiment 4

Table A1

Full Model Results for Interest in Experiment 4

	Interest						
						95% CI	
Predictor	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
(Intercept)	5.18	0.21	24.68	484.60	**<.001**	4.77	5.59
Condition: Reading conversations	0.50	0.29	1.71	419.83	.089	−0.07	1.07
Condition: Observing conversations	0.56	0.29	1.91	419.83	.057	−0.01	1.13
Topic: Boring	−2.04	0.29	−6.97	419.83	**<.001**	−2.61	−1.47
Timing: Actual	−0.24	0.22	−1.09	294.00	.275	−0.67	0.19
Condition (Reading Conversations) × Topic (Boring)	−0.14	0.41	−0.34	419.83	.736	−0.95	0.67
Condition (Observing Conversations) × Topic (Boring)	0.22	0.41	0.53	419.83	.596	−0.59	1.03
Condition (Reading Conversations) × Timing (Actual)	−0.66	0.31	−2.13	294.00	**.034**	−1.27	−0.06
Condition (Observing Conversations) × Timing (Actual)	−1.80	0.31	−5.81	294.00	**<.001**	−2.40	−1.20
Topic (Boring) × Timing (Actual)	1.64	0.31	5.29	294.00	**<.001**	1.03	2.24
(Condition [Reading Conversations] × Topic [Boring]) × Timing (Actual)	−0.84	0.44	−1.92	294.00	.056	−1.69	0.01
(Condition [Observing Conversations] × Topic [Boring]) × Timing (Actual)	−0.30	0.44	−0.68	294.00	.494	−1.15	0.55

Note. Significant values appear in bold. Reference groups are as follows: condition = live conversation; topic = interesting; timing = before the conversation (i.e., prediction). *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

(*Appendix continues*)

Table A2
Full Model Results for Enjoyment in Experiment 4

	Enjoyment						
						95% CI	
Predictor	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
(Intercept)	5.24	0.21	25.20	488.63	**<.001**	4.83	5.64
Condition: Reading conversations	0.26	0.29	0.90	428.38	.368	−0.30	0.82
Condition: Observing conversations	0.34	0.29	1.18	428.38	.240	−0.23	0.90
Topic: Boring	−2.04	0.29	−7.07	428.38	**<.001**	−2.60	−1.48
Timing: Actual	−0.24	0.22	−1.09	294.00	.278	−0.67	0.19
Condition (Reading Conversations) × Topic (Boring)	−0.06	0.41	−0.15	428.38	.883	−0.85	0.73
Condition (Observing Conversations) × Topic (Boring)	0.18	0.41	0.44	428.38	.660	−0.61	0.97
Condition (Reading Conversations) × Timing (Actual)	−0.60	0.31	−1.92	294.00	.056	−1.21	0.01
Condition (Observing Conversations) × Timing (Actual)	−1.84	0.31	−5.89	294.00	**<.001**	−2.45	−1.23
Topic (Boring) × Timing (Actual)	1.66	0.31	5.32	294.00	**<.001**	1.05	2.27
(Condition [Reading Conversations] × Topic [Boring]) × Timing (Actual)	−1.04	0.44	−2.36	294.00	**.019**	−1.90	−0.18
(Condition [Observing Conversations] × Topic [Boring]) × Timing (Actual)	−0.30	0.44	−0.68	294.00	.497	−1.16	0.56

Note. Significant values appear in bold. Reference groups are as follows: condition = live conversation; topic = interesting; timing = before the conversation (i.e., prediction). *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

Table A3
Full Model Results for Desire to Have Another Conversation in Experiment 4

	Desire to have another conversation						
						95% CI	
Predictor	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
(Intercept)	5.00	0.23	21.48	470.85	**<.001**	4.54	5.46
Condition: Reading conversations	0.44	0.33	1.34	470.85	.182	−0.20	1.08
Condition: Observing conversations	0.68	0.33	2.07	470.85	**.039**	0.04	1.31
Topic: Boring	−1.74	0.33	−5.29	470.85	**<.001**	−2.38	−1.10
Timing: After	−0.28	0.23	−1.20	294.00	.231	−0.73	0.17
Condition (Reading Conversations) × Topic (Boring)	−0.34	0.47	−0.73	470.85	.466	−1.25	0.57
Condition (Observing Conversations) × Topic (Boring)	−0.26	0.47	−0.56	470.85	.577	−1.17	0.65
Condition (Reading Conversations) × Timing (After)	−0.42	0.33	−1.27	294.00	.204	−1.06	0.22
Condition (Observing Conversations) × Timing (After)	−1.32	0.33	−4.00	294.00	**<.001**	−1.96	−0.68
Topic (Boring) × Timing (After)	1.28	0.33	3.89	294.00	**<.001**	0.64	1.92
(Condition [Reading Conversations] × Topic [Boring]) × Timing (Actual)	−0.86	0.47	−1.85	294.00	.066	−1.77	0.05
(Condition [Observing Conversations] × Topic [Boring]) × Timing (Actual)	−0.42	0.47	−0.90	294.00	.368	−1.33	0.49

Note. Significant values appear in bold. Reference groups are as follows: condition = live conversation; topic = interesting; timing = before the conversation. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

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