Received: 12 November 2021 | Revised: 2 March 2022 | Accepted: 16 April 2022

DOI: 10.1111/pere.12421

ARTICLE

Personal RELATIONSHIPS WILEY

Relational boredom as an obstacle for engaging in exciting shared activities

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Funding information
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

Abstract

Although engaging in exciting, shared activities with a partner is one strategy for warding off relational boredom, people might be less likely to pursue these activities when they are bored, which could have implications for the maintenance of passion in romantic relationships. In the current study, we assessed couple members' ($N = 122$ couples) daily experiences of relational boredom, the occurrence and quality of exciting, shared activities, and passion in a 21-day daily diary study and followed up with participants 3 months later. Overall, there was evidence that relational boredom obstructed the occurrence and quality of exciting, shared activities. In turn, less enjoyable shared activities were associated with lower daily passion, and engaging in fewer exciting, shared activities accounted for declines in passion over time. Implications of the findings for passion decay are discussed.

KEYWORDS

relational boredom, relationship maintenance, self-expansion, shared leisure

Statement of Relevance: The benefits of exciting, shared activities for promoting passion in intimate relationships are well-documented, however, less is known about what challenges couples face when engaging in such activities in their daily lives. In the current study, we demonstrate that relational boredom impeded exciting, shared activities in couples' daily lives, which was associated with a lower passion that day, as well as declines in passion over time.

1 | INTRODUCTION

When romantic couples feel like they are "stuck in a rut" in their relationship, popular advice given to combat such feelings of relational boredom is to plan dates to "spice things up" and revive passion (e.g., Gottman et al., 2019). Such advice is not unfounded as evidence suggests that engaging in exciting, shared activities can increase relationship quality (Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Harasymchuk et al., 2021), and spark passion and desire (Aron et al., 2000; Muise et al., 2019). Despite evidence suggesting the potential benefits of exciting activities, the actual implementation of them in daily life might be challenging due to practical barriers (e.g., childcare, time, finances) and relationship factors, notably, feelings of boredom. For instance, evidence suggests that people know what they *should* do when bored in their relationships (i.e., engage in exciting activities together), but at the same time, they are not likely to do so (Harasymchuk et al., 2017). Additionally, even though they may be planned with good intentions, not all dates are enjoyable or ultimately spice up the relationship (Girme et al., 2013). Thus, ironically, couples feeling bored in their relationship might not be able to reap the benefits of engaging in exciting, shared activities. In other words, just when couples need it most, they might be unable to implement this relationship maintenance strategy and, when they do, their shared activities might be lower in quality (e.g., lower feelings of satisfaction, closeness, and enjoyment).

2 | PASSION IN RELATIONSHIPS: THE SELF-EXPANSION MODEL

Passion is commonly defined as intense feelings of longing for a partner (emotionally and sexually) and has several theorized sources including uncertainty, changes in intimacy, self-concept expansion, and motivational drives (see Carswell & Impett, 2021 for review). One perspective of passion in relationships is the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996). According to the self-expansion model, people are motivated to seek and form relationships to obtain rewards related to expanding their self-concept (e.g., learning a new skill, acquiring a new perspective; see Aron et al., 2013, for a review). Given that the beginning stages of relationships are typically filled with self-expansion experiences (e.g., trying new restaurants, learning about the partner), passion is expected to be the highest. However, in the context of established relationships, when self-expansion wanes (i.e., the new skills, resources, and perspectives become commonplace), passion does as well. One strategy for couples to promote passion is to engage in exciting activities together.

Self-expansion scholars theorize that engaging in exciting, shared activities can increase relationship quality, particularly passion, in established relationships (Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996). Although there is some debate about the specific qualities of the exciting, shared activities, they are generally perceived as novel, arousing, challenging, and broadening of a person's perspective (see Tomlinson et al., 2019 for review). Scholars suggest that rather than there being a one-size-fits-all list of exciting activities, the potential effectiveness of these activities is based on whether individuals view the activity as exciting (Aron et al., 2013). Although it differs for everyone, examples of more exciting, shared activities include elements of adventure (e.g., camping, day trip to another town), arousal (e.g., hiking, rock climbing), and novelty (e.g., trying a new restaurant, learning a new skill; Harasymchuk et al., 2021). Evidence has linked the occurrence of exciting, shared activities (vs. less exciting or familiar activities) with

increased relational self-expansion (Harasymchuk et al., 2021), relationship satisfaction (Coulter & Malouff, 2013), sexual desire (Muise et al., 2019), and passionate love (Aron et al., 2000).

Despite clear evidence for the benefits of exciting, shared activities, the implementation of these activities, including what prompts and hinders them, is less understood. Engaging in exciting, shared activities is one of several ways to maintain relationship quality and couples must decide when it is best to initiate new activities. Some people are more proactive and capable of incorporating excitement in their shared leisure time to promote passion. For instance, people high in approach relationship goals (i.e., goals related to promoting growth and intimacy in relationships) plan and engage in activities that have more excitement (Harasymchuk et al., 2020, 2021) and relational self-expansion more generally (Mattingly et al., 2012). However, other people might not be as proactive or might face challenges or external stressors (e.g., health, financial concerns); others might not be as capable of planning exciting activities with their partner (e.g., less creative, less able to coordinate mutually enjoyable activities). Regardless of the type of obstacle, the failure to engage in exciting activities for a long period of time in a relationship might contribute to lower passion.

3 | BOREDOM AS A HINDRANCE TO EXCITING, SHARED ACTIVITY OCCURRENCE AND QUALITY

The damaging effects of boredom-like states in relationships—such as feelings of disillusionment (Huston et al., 2001; Niehuis et al., 2011), relationship stagnation (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1992), and having a "bland marriage" (Caughlin & Huston, 2006)—have long been underscored by clinicians and scholars. Common features of these boredom-like relationship states include apathy, lack of fun and laughter, and feelings of confinement. The focus of much of this work has been on ways to classify deteriorating relationships, implying that once boredom is experienced, it is likely that the relationship will end. However, other scholars have focused on relational boredom as a dynamic, fluctuating state that can be viewed as an ongoing relationship maintenance challenge (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Definitions of relational boredom as a challenge include a dynamic tension between novelty and predictability in which the relationship momentarily leans towards too much predictability (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), as well as low arousal, a tired state due to a deceleration of self-concept change (i.e., low self-expansion; see Aron et al., 2013). One implication is that people can use boredom-like states (e.g., feeling too predictable, feeling like one's self-concept is no longer expanding) as a prompt to change their relationship maintenance behaviors to promote passion and, ultimately, continued relationship quality. Ironically, however, being in a state of relational boredom might impede people's attempts to get out of that state.

For instance, Harasymchuk et al. (2017) examined the question of whether relational boredom serves as a prompt to engage in novel, growth-enhancing activities (e.g., exciting) rather than security-restoring familiar activities. Although people reported that they should engage in novel rather than familiar activities when bored, they also reported that they were not likely to do so and, generally, did not display greater intention to engage in novel activities when primed with relational boredom. This fits with research outside the relational domain that suggests that although boredom can serve as a signal to prompt constructive action (e.g., Fishbach et al., 2011; Harris, 2000; Mann & Cadman, 2014), boredom has been primarily associated with disengaging, and avoidance qualities (see Vodanovich & Watt, 2016 for review). More

specifically, scholars have argued that boredom prompts the pursuit of alternative goals rather than treating it as a signal to work on the goal at hand (Bench & Lench, 2013).

In addition to relational boredom reducing the likelihood that people plan and engage in exciting shared activities, another way that relational boredom contributes to passion decay is that it makes exciting activities less effective at boosting relationship quality. Outside the relational domain, boredom is associated with less enjoyment in academic and work settings (Mann & Robinson, 2013; van Hooff & van Hooft, 2014). Thus, it follows that when people are bored in their relationship and engage in activities with their partner, they might perceive the activities differently (e.g., less enjoyable) than if they felt less bored in their relationship. Generally, engaging in shared activities with a partner, including exciting activities, is viewed as positive (e.g., Girme et al., 2013; Harasymchuk et al., 2021); however, even in the context of this more restricted range of positive activities (vs. any type of time spent with a partner), not all shared activities are alike. Not only do people differ from each other in terms of what they classify as exciting, but people also differ from one day to the next in terms of what they find exciting. In other words, a shared relational activity seen as highly exciting at one point might be experienced as less exciting at another time.

4 | OVERVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The goal of this research was to examine whether relational boredom hinders people's efforts to enhance their relationships with exciting, shared activities and, in turn, contributes to passion decay. To test our hypotheses, we assessed couple members' daily experiences of relational boredom, the occurrence, and quality (i.e., perceived success of the activity, felt satisfaction, and closeness to their partner as a function of the activity) of exciting, shared activities, and passion in a 21-day daily diary study. Additionally, we assessed relational boredom and passion in an intake survey and followed up with participants three months later to reassess passion. We predicted that on days when people felt more bored in their relationship, they would be less likely to engage in exciting, shared activities, and if they did, these activities would be less effective at promoting relationship quality, and in turn, they would report decreased passion. We also hypothesized that people who report being more (vs. less) bored in their relationship would report decreased passion three months later partly as a function of engaging in fewer exciting, shared activities and lower quality of the activities over the three-week period. Following the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, 2018), we assessed actor and partner effects, but our key predictions centered on actor effects, given that the evidence to date for relational boredom has been based on individual effects (Figure 1).

There are several possible contributions of this research. First, the current study is the first to our knowledge to examine relational boredom as a potential obstacle to exciting, shared activities in couples' daily lives. While researchers know that exciting, shared activities promote relational self-expansion (Harasymchuk et al., 2021) and relationship quality (Aron et al., 2000; Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Graham, 2008; Muise et al., 2019), less attention has been focused on factors that impede these activities. Second, another contribution of this work is that in addition to the occurrence of exciting, shared activities, we also consider the quality, acknowledging that not all shared activities, even exciting ones, are similarly rewarding. Finally, examining our model at a daily level and over time (3 months later) permits us to analyze whether what happens at a more proximal daily level extends to more cumulative effects over time.

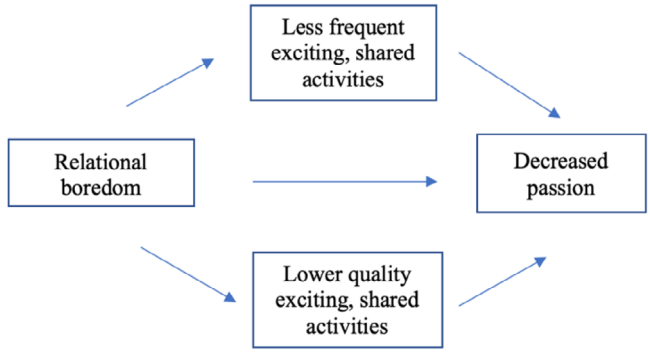

FIGURE 1 Multiple mediator models (parallel)

5 | METHOD

5.1 | Author positionality

Given that all the authors of this paper are from Canada, our research questions and approach to studying relationship functioning might be influenced by a "Western-lens" where passion is considered an ideal in intimate relationships. Additionally, all authors are White and in long-term, mixed-sex relationships.

5.2 | Participants

Our sample consisted of 122 couples who were in an exclusive, monogamous relationship for at least 2 years, were currently living together, and both partners agreed to participate. We selected a 2-year minimum for relationship length because our hypotheses apply to more established relationships outside of the honeymoon period (i.e., 2 years into a relationship). The study obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the lead author's institution and the data were collected from 2016 to 2017. Participants were recruited through online advertisements (e.g., Reddit) across several major Canadian cities and through posters around a major Canadian city (e.g., community centers). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 67 (M_{age} = 31.53, SD = 9.46) and reported being in their current relationship for approximately eight years (M_{length} = 8.24 years, SD = 7.10 years, range = 2–48 years). Most couples were married (56.2%) or engaged (21.6%) and were in mixed-sex relationships (93%). Approximately one-quarter of the couples had children (22.8%), and of these, couples had one or two children on average ($M_{children}$ = 1.54, SD = .64). Most of the participants were White (78.3%), followed by Latin American (6.8%), East Asian (4.3%), South Asian (2.6%), Black (2.1%), and 6.0% were bi- or multi-ethnic/racial or self-identified as "other."

5.3 | Measures and procedure

Participants were pre-screened for eligibility via e-mail and telephone; each partner was emailed a unique link to the survey after informed consent. Participants first completed a

55-min online intake survey and then completed a brief online daily survey every evening (before bed) for the next consecutive 21 days (a link was emailed to participants each day). Each partner was paid up to CAD 55 for participating; payment was prorated depending on the number of daily surveys completed. Participants completed a total of 4773 diary entries for an average of 19.56 (out of 21) entries per person.[1]

5.3.1 | Intake and follow-up measures

See Table 1 for descriptive information of all measures. The 15-item *relational boredom* questionnaire asked participants about their general relational boredom experiences (Harasymchuk & Fehr, 2012) and included statements pertaining to their relationship such as "feels like a chore" (1 = *not at all true*, 7 = *completely true*). *Relationship passion* was assessed at both intake and follow-up with the 3-item passion subscale from the Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC; Fletcher et al., 2000) including "How passionate is your relationship?" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). To consider alternative explanations we assessed *relationship satisfaction* with the three-item satisfaction subscale of PRQC (Fletcher et al., 2000)

TABLE 1 Zero-order correlations

	M (SD)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Actor daily boredom (1)	1.61 (0.72)	_									
Partner daily boredom (2)		.22	_								
Actor daily quality of activity (3)	6.23 (0.87)	−.29	−.16	_							
Actor daily passion (4)	5.76 (1.35)	−.46	−.21	.50	_						
Actor intake boredom (5)	2.30 (0.90)	.41	.16	−.45	−.55	_					
Partner intake boredom (6)		.17	.41	−.29	−.30	.48	_				
Actor mean quality of activities (7)	6.14 (0.70)	−.25	−.18	.73	.43	−.54	−.34	_			
Actor sum of activities (8)	3.72 (3.45)	−.21	−.17	.18	.21	−.28	−.20	.16	_		
Actor passion intake (9)	4.76 (1.48)	−.29	−.15	.37	.50	−.65	−.42	.42	.29	_	
Actor passion follow-up (10)	4.54 (1.74)	−.25	−.19	.31	.51	−.64	−.42	.40	.29	.69	_

Note: All variables were measured on a seven-point scale, except for daily relational boredom (on a four-point scale). Actor mean quality of activities was based on the aggregate quality of exciting, shared activities over the 21-days; actor sum of activities was based on the total number of these activities listed over the 21 days. Actor and partner passion were correlated at intake, daily, and follow-up, respectively, *rs* >.32).

including "How satisfied are you with your relationship" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*; $M = 6.20$, SD = 0.93). We assessed *time spent engaging in shared exciting activities* with a single item from the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale ("How often do you engage in outside hobbies or interests with your partner?"; Busby et al., 1995) on a 6-point scale (1 = *never* to 6 = *every day*; $M = 4.00$, SD = 1.5). All multi-item measures had excellent reliability in the sample ($\Omega s > 0.91$).

5.3.2 | Daily-Level measures

Each day for 21 days, we assessed *relational boredom* with the two-item relational boredom measure (To what extent did you feel the following states in your relationship today? Scale: 1 = *not at all*; 2 = *a little*; 3 = *somewhat*; 4 = *a great deal*; for example, Felt that my relationship was in a rut; adapted from Tsapelas et al., 2009; see Table 1 for descriptives, $\alpha = .68$).

To assess the *occurrence of exciting shared activities* participants were asked to indicate yes or no to the following question "Thinking about your responses to the questions above, can you think of a specific activity that you did with YOUR ROMANTIC PARTNER TODAY that resulted in you feeling a sense of excitement, a greater awareness of things around you, an expansion of your sense of self, and/or an increased knowledge of yourself and the world around you?" If they answered yes, they were prompted with additional questions related to the *quality of the activity*, "During this activity, how close did you feel to your partner?" (1 = *not at all close* to 7 = *extremely close*); "During this activity, how satisfied were you about your relationship with your partner?" (1 = *not at all satisfied* to 7 = *extremely satisfied)*, "Overall, how would you evaluate the success of this activity with your partner?" (1 = *terrible* to 7 = *terrific*).[2]

We assessed *passion* with two items including "Today I experienced powerful attraction to my partner" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *completely*) and *relationship satisfaction* each day with a single item "How satisfied are you with your relationship?" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*; $M = 6.13$, SD = 1.17; Fletcher et al., 2000).

6 | RESULTS

6.1 | Daily analyses

For the daily analyses, we used aggregation and centering techniques to partition the daily predictor variables into their within-person and between-person variance components, respectively (Raudenbush et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2009). We conducted multilevel mediation path analyses using the software MPlus (Muthen & Muthen, 1998), which allowed us to construct a path model while accounting for the interdependence in our data (i.e., we tested a three-level model in which days were nested within partners and couples). All the continuous daily predictor variables were person-centered in our analysis, thereby allowing us to see how the dependent variable was influenced by every one-unit change from the participants' own mean scores. However, the exciting, shared activity participation variable was dummy coded (1 = *participated in an exciting, shared activity*, 0 = *did not participate in an exciting, shared activity*). Although we included between-person effects in the model by including each participant's aggregate score across the 21-day study period, we tested and reported mediation only through the within-person variables. Exogenous variables (i.e., variables that do not have any predictors in the

model such as both partners' daily relational boredom) were allowed to covary freely with one another. The actor's daily relational boredom was expected to predict whether the actor reported participating in an exciting, shared activity on a given day and, in turn, the actor's daily relationship passion. Additionally, we included the quality of the exciting, shared activities as an additional mediator, creating a multiple mediation model, and explored partner effects. Direct pathways between participation in an exciting, shared activity/quality of the shared activity and daily passion were also added. Given that we were interested in whether daily relational boredom was indirectly associated with daily passion through participation in exciting couple activities and higher quality when they do engage in such activities, we tested the indirect effects of the actor's daily relational boredom (and explored the effect of partner's boredom). To account for increases in daily passion, passion from the previous day was controlled.

We used the following fit indices to evaluate the overall goodness of fit of the data to the models: Comparative fit index (CFI) value above .95, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) below .05, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) below .08 (Kline, 2016). We report the unstandardized estimates and their corresponding standard errors, 95% confidence intervals (CI), and *p*-values for each of the model estimates as appropriate (see Table 1 for zero-order correlations) and provide estimates of standardized estimates for an indication of effect sizes. We also conducted auxiliary analyses to assess alternative explanations.

To test our daily hypotheses, we included both the within-person activity quality and daily activity occurrence mediators and tested a multiple mediation model, controlling for the between-person aggregates.[3] Overall, our data fit the hypothesized multiple mediator models well (CFI = .97, RMSEA = .02, SRMR = .01). In line with our hypothesis, daily relational boredom predicted lower daily participation in exciting, shared activities ($b = -0.10$, SE = 0.02, $p < .001$, CI [−0.13, −0.07], $\beta = -.12$) and lower quality when engaging in such activities ($b = -0.36$, SE = 0.04, $p < .001$, CI [−0.55, −0.16], $\beta = -.23$). Participating in exciting, shared activities did not predict higher daily passion, controlling for passion the day before ($b = -0.18$, SE = 0.33, $p = .59$, CI [−0.82, 0.47], $\beta = -.09$). However, the quality of an exciting activity *did* significantly predict higher daily passion ($b = 0.40$, SE = 0.07, $p < .001$, CI [0.26, 0.55], $\beta = .37$). Importantly, only the actor indirect effect between daily relational boredom and daily passion through the quality of exciting couple activities was significant, while the actor indirect effect through activity occurrence was not significant (for occurrence, $b = 0.02$, SE = 0.03, $p = .60$, CI [−0.05, 0.08], $\beta = .003$; for activity quality, $b = -0.14$, SE = 0.04, $p = .001$, CI [−0.23, −0.06], $\beta = -.02$). Similarly, the indirect partner effect (i.e., higher partner boredom predicted lower actor passion, mediated by the actor's activity occurrence/quality) was significant only for activity quality and not for activity occurrence (for the occurrence, $b = 0.01$, SE = 0.02, $p = .60$, CI [−0.03, 0.05], $\beta = .001$; for quality, $b = -0.08$, SE = 0.03, $p = .01$, CI [−0.15, −0.02], $\beta = -.01$).[4]

6.2 | Longitudinal analyses

To test our longitudinal hypotheses regarding the effect of relational boredom on passion over a three-month period, we used the Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation Model for fully indistinguishable partners (APIMeM; Ledermann et al., 2011). To better tease apart the temporal sequence of our mediation model, we tested a model in which relational boredom at intake predicts the number and quality of exciting, shared activities over a 21-day period and, in turn, passion three months later. We also controlled for passion at intake. Both mediators were

included in the model simultaneously. All variables in this model were between-person, including boredom at intake, passion measured after 3 months, and aggregated daily variables (number of activities, activity quality), which suggested the APIMeM methodology was the most appropriate statistical approach for the model. Between-person APIMeM also allowed us to bootstrap the indirect effect (with 10,000 samples drawn for bootstrapping purposes). We explored all actor and partner effects as described in the APIMeM approach. We used the same fit indices criteria as the daily analyses.

The data fit our multiple mediator longitudinal model within the specified fit parameters (CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = 0.00, SRMR = 0.03). Consistent with our hypotheses, higher actor relational boredom at intake predicted less frequent engagement in exciting activities for the actor ($b = -0.93$, SE = 0.17, $p < .001$, CI [−1.25, −0.61], $\beta = -.24$) and lower average activity quality over the 21-day period ($b = -0.39$, SE = 0.04, $p < .001$, CI [−0.47, −0.31], $\beta = -.51$). Participating in more exciting activities over the 21-day period was associated with higher reported feelings of relationship passion 3 months later, although this effect did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($b = 0.03$, SE = 0.02, $p = .06$, CI [0.00, 0.06], $\beta = .06$). The higher average quality of the exciting activities did not predict higher relationship passion 3 months later ($b = 0.02$, SE = 0.11, $p = .83$, CI [−0.19, 0.24], $\beta = .01$). When testing the mediations, the actor-actor indirect effect between relational boredom at intake and passion 3 months later was only significant through exciting activity engagement and not through average activity quality (for the occurrence indirect effect, $b = -0.03$, SE = 0.02, bootstrapped CI [−0.06, −0.001], $\beta = -.01$; for the activity indirect effect, $b = -0.01$, SE = 0.04, bootstrapped CI [−0.10, 0.07], $\beta = -.003$). None of the other indirect effects that we examined were significant for activity quality. However, the partner-actor indirect effect through activity engagement (higher partner boredom at intake predicting less actor relationship passion three months later, mediated by less actor activity engagement over the 21-day period) was significant ($b = -0.01$, SE = 0.01, CI [−0.03, −0.001], $\beta = -.003$).

Taken together, in the daily analyses, an actor's daily relational boredom predicted lower passion at the daily level as a function of the lower quality of the exciting activity. However, in the longitudinal analyses, people who scored higher (vs. lower) on relational boredom had passion decreases 3 months later as a function of the number of exciting activities reported over a 3-week period. In our exploratory analyses, there was also evidence to suggest that for all the statistically significant findings discussed, the pattern of results extended to a partner's relational boredom as well. That is, not only did an actor's relational boredom predict their own passion decreases through the less frequent occurrence (longitudinal analyses) and lower quality (daily analyses) of exciting, shared activities, their *partner's* relational boredom did as well (above and beyond the actor's relational boredom). This suggests that a partner's relational boredom might play a role in shaping feelings of passion decay, independently of their own.

6.3 | Considering alternative explanations

We also wanted to test whether our findings for the occurrence and quality of exciting couple activities were simply due to relationship satisfaction. In both the daily and longitudinal analyses, we reanalyzed our data by statistically controlling for relationship satisfaction (from either the daily or the intake level, respectively). In the daily analyses, we found that the actor's within-person relational boredom still predicted less activity occurrence and success ($p < .05$), and the actor's indirect effect on the activity quality mediation was still significant ($b = -0.06$,

SE = 0.03, p = .02, CI [−0.10, −0.008], β = −.01), although the partner indirect effect for the activity quality mediation became non-significant (b = −0.03, SE = 0.02, p = .12, CI [−0.60, 0.01], β = −.004). Similarly, in the longitudinal analyses, boredom at intake still predicted both average activity quality and activity occurrence over the 21-day period, even when controlling for relationship satisfaction at intake (p < .001). In addition, both the actor and partner indirect effects for the activity occurrence mediation remained significant (for the actor effect: b = −0.03, SE = 0.01, bootstrapped CI [−0.07, −0.007], β = −.008; for the partner effect: b = −0.02, SE = 0.01, bootstrapped CI [−0.06, −0.005], β = −.005).

Another alternative explanation that we wanted to explore is whether our findings were due to the typical number of exciting activities in which people report engaging with their partners (measured at intake). That is, we wanted to examine whether the daily findings were due to whether people have a habit of engaging in these activities prior to beginning the study. People who have a habit of engaging in exciting, shared activities might have more practice at successfully initiating these types of activities and making sure they are successful at promoting relationship quality. To assess this idea, we focused on our between-person analyses only, and we controlled for time spent engaging in shared exciting activities measured at intake. We found that the occurrence mediation indirect actor effect remained statistically significant, but the partner effect did not (for the actor effect: b = −0.02, SE = 0.01, bootstrapped CI [−0.05, −0.001], β = −.005; for the partner effect: b = −0.006, SE = 0.01, bootstrapped CI [−0.03, 0.001], β = −0.002).[5]

7 | DISCUSSION

In the current study, we proposed that couples might have difficulty getting out of a rut because being bored in a relationship impedes strategies known to combat boredom, namely engaging in exciting, shared activities, and that this would be associated with decreased passion. In a community sample of couples who provided reports of their relationship experiences over 21 consecutive days as well as at a 3-month longitudinal follow-up, we found evidence to support the idea that relational boredom obstructs engagement in exciting activities (in terms of occurrence and quality). The lower occurrence and quality of the exciting activities accounted for the association between relational boredom and lower passion, although the findings depended on whether we assessed the association daily or over time.

7.1 | Relational boredom and exciting shared activity occurrence and quality

Consistent with past research (Harasymchuk et al., 2017), we found that relational boredom reduced the likelihood that couples engage in exciting, shared activities. That is, relational boredom acted as a deterrent for the very types of activities that have been found to promote passion in relationships, namely engaging in exciting, shared activities that have the potential to promote relational self-expansion. We found that when people reported more relational boredom, whether it was experiencing higher daily boredom than their average or whether they tended to be more bored compared to others, they reported fewer, not more, exciting activities, and when the activities were reported, they were lower in quality.

Why might relational boredom obstruct constructive action instead of prompting people to engage in exciting, shared activities? There are a few characteristics that make relational

boredom particularly challenging to tackle. First, relational boredom may be similar to general feelings of boredom which are associated with a lack of action and motivation and impede the enjoyment of the task (see Vodanovich & Watt, 2016 for review). Second, relative to other negative experiences in relationships (e.g., conflict) which may be easy to see and difficult to ignore, feelings of boredom might not be as noticeable or easy to identify in relationships (for the self or for the partner). That is, couple members might not be aware of their own relational boredom and, consequently, they might be less likely to take action. Alternatively, in situations in which only one couple member is bored, even a highly responsive partner might find it difficult to notice this state in the other. Thus, the lower visibility of this challenge may contribute to the relationship "withering on the vine" (Harasymchuk et al., 2021, p. 94). Third, even if boredom is acknowledged, it might not be an experience that people feel is a priority to address. Instead, partners might prioritize "putting out fires" such as conflict and stressors rather than tending to the more slow-going growth of the relationship. Taken together, the insidious nature of relational boredom is hypothesized to hinder the occurrence of the very activities that are known to reduce relational boredom, namely, engaging in exciting activities with a partner.

Aside from a person's relational boredom being associated with their own reports of a lower occurrence and quality of exciting, shared activities, we also found evidence that it was associated with their partner's reports of occurrence and quality of these activities. The strength of our study is that we recruited both couple members and, in our exploratory analyses, we also found evidence for partner effects (see Footnote 3). It is possible that even if a person does not know that their partner is feeling bored, the partner's higher than usual relational boredom might still be reflected in the occurrence and quality of the exciting activities. For instance, a bored partner might not be as enthusiastic about a suggested activity and might prevent the exciting activity from happening. Further, if the plan does manage to go through, they might not enjoy the time spent with their partner as much. This is consistent with previous research that has found that people who thought their partners were less dedicated to the date (i.e., the extent to which they wanted to participate in the date and their investment in the activity) had less successful shared activities (dates) in terms of feeling less close, meaningful, and satisfied after engaging in the activity (Girme et al., 2013).

7.2 | Implications for understanding passion decay

At a broader level, the goal of our study was to examine whether exciting activity occurrence and quality mediate the association between relational boredom and decreases in passion. Passion is commonly defined as intense feelings of longing for a partner (emotionally and sexually). Passion decay is hypothesized to occur when there is too little uncertainty (i.e., too predictable) when intimacy has hit a plateau (even if it is at a relatively higher level compared to others), when the self-concept is no longer expanding at the same rate, and when sexual drives have decreased (Carswell & Impett, 2021). Our study focused on decreases in passion from a self-expansion perspective, namely how relational boredom impacts exciting, shared activities that are known to expand the self-concept. Stepping back, we propose that the mediation findings for quality observed at the within-person level illustrate what happens over time to eventually shape the overall occurrence of exciting, shared activities (as reflected in our longitudinal analyses). That is, the passion dips associated with lower quality exciting activities gradually make people less likely to engage in exciting activities. In support of this idea, we found a positive association between quality and the overall occurrence of the exciting activities over the 21-day

period (i.e., people who had fewer exciting, shared activities also reported lower quality activities). Moreover, at the daily level, we also found that the lower the quality of their activity, the lower their intentions to engage in the activity again (see Footnote 2). Extrapolating from this information, one possibility is that people who have exciting, shared activities that are less effective at promoting quality gradually engage in them less frequently. We propose that this process happens slowly over time, especially if the exciting activities are not completely ineffective, as is the case in our data set (i.e., people did not tend to rate the activities as low in quality; they were still rated above the midpoint of the scale). It is expected that for people engaging in shared activities that they do not even consider exciting or perhaps rate as not enjoyable (scoring below the mid-point of the scale), the decline would be expected to occur more rapidly. Our results might reflect the insidious nature of relational boredom—people might not have a big moment where they realize something is wrong until the boredom becomes entrenched, and passion has eroded to an irreparable level. This may take many years of a slow decrease in relationship rewards associated with shared leisure time. Thus, in the context of studies that examine cross-sectional, between-person differences in exciting, shared activities and passion, it is important to consider that the people engaging in fewer exciting activities might have a history of the exciting activities becoming less enjoyable over time and affecting their occurrence, rather than having a long-standing habit of not engaging in them at all. The people who engage in frequent exciting activities might have a history of higher quality exciting, shared activities; an insight gained from tracking relationship experiences over time.

The broader question is, why might the passion decline cycle continue? First, according to the self-expansion perspective, it is possible, that the self-other overlap might have reached a natural peak, and while this might be good for perceived closeness and intimacy, it might be challenging to find new ways to jump-start feelings of growth. According to the self-expansion model, exciting, shared activities are just one way to promote growth and passion in the relationship; another way to do so is for the partners to individually change and grow (Aron & Aron, 1986). For instance, engaging in a self-expanding activity on your own (e.g., hobby) might alter how your partner sees you as you try to master a new skill and contribute to daily changes in passion (Carswell et al., 2021). Consistent with the self-expansion model, navigating passion decay might involve a multi-pronged approach that also involves changes to the self and not relying on engaging in exciting, shared activities.

Second, our findings are consistent with the concept of disillusionment wherein people perceive their relationship to be declining and this impacts their behavior and motivation to engage in activities that might benefit the relationship (Niehuis et al., 2011). For instance, when people feel disillusioned about their relationship, they may feel that there is little point in trying to remedy the situation (Niehuis et al., 2015). The disillusionment can become a self-fulfilling prophesy: if a person enters a shared activity situation (e.g., date night) with the expectation that their relationship does not have the same spark as it used to have, it is possible that this will shape their attitude towards the activity. In turn, the partner might see a less enthusiastic response and also not enjoy the activity. This, in turn, might confirm the person's initial belief that their relationship lacks passion and spark, contributing further to disillusionment. Our partner effects support this idea.

7.3 | Limitations and future directions

Although there were many strengths of the present study, such as examining couples and using a daily diary design (over 21 days) with a three-month follow-up, there are limitations. Although we

found that the associations with daily passion were above and beyond the previous day's passion and that the changes in passion 3 months later were above and beyond passion measured in the intake survey, we are not able to confirm causality. In future research, it would be beneficial to tease apart the direction of effects using more frequent experiential sampling (multiple assessments in a day) or an experiment in which perceptions of boredom are manipulated. It is, however, also possible that this is a cyclical process, that is, relational boredom impedes the occurrence and quality of exciting, shared activities, which is associated with dips in passion and increases in relational boredom. The increased boredom, in turn, is expected to restart the cycle.

Second, like many studies involving couple volunteers, we recruited people who were in relatively happy relationships and were not experiencing high levels of relational boredom, or passion decay. Thus, our results might not generalize to people experiencing major stressors (e.g., health, financial) or who might be in later stages of relationship deterioration. Although the range of boredom and associated exciting activity occurrence and quality were restricted, it is possible that the findings would be even stronger with a fuller range of boredom, shared leisure activities, and passion.

Third, we recruited people who were in a relationship for at least 2 years to increase the chances of observing relational boredom. However, this decision might have restricted our ability to notice people responding more constructively to boredom cues. That is, in the early stages of the relationship, the early signs of relational boredom might be more likely to be viewed as a cue to take action. It is possible that as relationship length increases, the ability of relational boredom to prompt constructive cues might decrease (partly because a person might recollect previous attempts not being as rewarding as earlier ones). Thus, we want to be cautious with our conclusion that relational boredom is always a hindrance and leave open the possibility that under some conditions (e.g., early stages of the relationship) and with some people (e.g., people with high approach goals), relationship boredom might lead people to reflect on what is needed in the relationship and to take action.

Fourth, there are limitations related to the generalizability of the findings. Our participants were recruited from several major Canadian cities where ideals for romance and passion in intimate relationships might be higher than in other parts of the world that have a more collective focus (i.e., the importance is placed on the larger family unit, rather than just the intimate partner; see Carswell & Impett, 2021 for a review). In future research, it will be useful to examine not only whether the findings of this study generalize to different cultures but also whether the underlying concepts (relational boredom, passion decay) even have the same meaning and impact on relational and general well-being. Additionally, most of the couples in our sample (93%) were in mixed-sex relationships and, although we expect the findings to replicate in sexual and gender diverse samples, we are limited from drawing these conclusions in the current data.

Finally, more broadly, we are interested in the maintenance of growth in relationships with shared exciting leisure time. Couples are not expected to engage in non-stop excitement; however, the "wait and see" approach (i.e., wait until the early signs of relational boredom to act) does not seem viable either. Our data do not allow us to comment on how people successfully manage self-expansion and growth in their relationships (i.e., juggling too much vs. too little self-expansion). Future research should consider how people navigate growth maintenance over longer stretches of time in the context of other relationship needs (e.g., security).

8 | CONCLUSION

Passion decay in intimate relationships is a complex process. We considered a snapshot of this process by examining the possibility that one factor—relational boredom—might impede

engaging in exciting, shared activities, the very same activities that are known to buffer against passion decay. When feeling bored, couples might be less likely to engage in activities that might help them get out of a rut and buffer against passion decay. Further, when people do engage in exciting, shared activities when feeling more bored than usual, they might enjoy the activities less and be less likely to engage in them in the future. Taken together, our results are consistent with the idea that most passion decay is the result of a slow decline of rewards, rather than one major negative event.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This research was not preregistered. The data and materials used in the research can be obtained by emailing Cheryl Harasymchuk: Cheryl.Harasymchuk@carleton.ca.

ENDNOTES

[1] This is part of a larger study on growth in intimate relationships and this paper uniquely focuses on relational boredom, the quality of exciting shared activities, and the assessment of the passion decay mediation model. The variable "occurrence of exciting activities" has been reported by Muise et al. (2019) and Harasymchuk et al. (2020) and "passion" has been reported by Carswell et al. (2021).

[2] Participants were also asked how likely they would be to engage in the *same/similar* activity(ies) in the near future on a seven-point scale, where 7 = extremely likely ($M = 5.72$, SD = 1.54; $r = .67$, $p < .001$ between the two items). Higher activity quality (within- and between-person) was significantly associated with higher intentions to engage in the activity again, $ps < .001$.

[3] We found a similar pattern for partner effects, albeit the finding did not reach statistical significance for quality in the longitudinal analyses.

[4] When we tested the mediation models separately (occurrence in one model and quality for the other), participating in an exciting, shared activity did significantly predict higher daily passion, controlling for passion the day before ($b = 0.24$, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$, CI [0.18, 0.31], $\beta = .12$) and the full mediation model indicated that the indirect pathways for within-person activity occurrence were statistically significant.

[5] We examined relationship length as a moderator and did not find that it moderated any of the associations in our models.

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How to cite this article: Harasymchuk, C., Lonn, A., Impett, E. A., & Muise, A. (2022). Relational boredom as an obstacle for engaging in exciting shared activities. *Personal Relationships*, *29*(2), 350–365. https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12421