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EMOTIONAL EMPTINESS IN A LEADER'S WORK: IS BOREDOM A SPECIFIC FORM OF BURNOUT AMONG MANAGERS?

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Purpose: The study aimed to diagnose managerial boredom as an emotional–motivational experience and to determine its relationships with perceived meaning of work and burnout among individuals performing managerial roles. The study focused on managers' subjective experience of boredom at work, understood not as a consequence of being underloaded with tasks, but rather as a signal of a weakened relationship with work and with the meaning attributed to the activities performed
Design/methodology/approach: The study had been designed as quantitative and cross-sectional. A total of 61 individuals performing managerial roles participated in the research. Standardized instruments were used to measure occupational boredom, burnout, perceived meaning of work, and work overload, and the data were analyzed with Pearson's r correlation and linear regression.
Findings: The results indicate that higher levels of managerial boredom are associated with a lower sense of meaning in work and higher levels of burnout, particularly in the dimension of withdrawal from work. The relationship between boredom and perceived meaning of work has proven stronger than its relationship with work overload, suggesting that the experience of boredom in managerial roles is primarily related to a weakening meaning and value attributed to one's work, rather than solely to the workload level.
Originality/value: The study expands existing analyses of occupational boredom by introducing the managerial perspective and its links with the perceived meaning of work and burnout.
Keywords: managerial boredom, perceived meaning of work, burnout, managerial roles, work.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Contemporary work is increasingly associated with a high pace, pressure for results, and high expectations placed on employees. For this reason, researchers and practitioners are paying growing attention not only to work effectiveness but also to how individuals in

managerial roles experience their everyday professional lives. One important aspect of this experience is boredom at work, which is often analyzed in relation to burnout. This relationship is noteworthy because it cannot be reduced to a simple difference between underload and overload. In professional practice, the meaning of work, engagement, and exhaustion may occur simultaneously. Therefore, this article focuses on the subjective experience of boredom and burnout in the context of the managers' professional functioning.

In classical approaches, burnout was primarily understood as the result of overload and prolonged stress, leading to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). More recent perspectives indicate that burnout is also associated with a gradual loss of engagement and increasing emotional distance from work (Schaufeli et al., 2009; Schaufeli et al., 2020; Demerouti et al., 2021), which may be further intensified by experiencing occupational boredom (Toscanelli et al., 2024).

The relationship between boredom and burnout is complex. Research findings show that these are distinct yet related phenomena (Harju et al., 2023; Sousa, Neves, 2021). Experiencing boredom may contribute to deepening exhaustion, for example, by intensifying rumination and the feeling of being stuck in one's work (Sousa, Neves, 2021). On the other hand, exhaustion increases the tendency to distance oneself from work and weakens engagement (Maslach et al., 2001), which in turn may lead to experiencing boredom more frequently.

A particularly relevant context for analyzing these phenomena is the managerial role. Managers' work is often associated with a high level of responsibility, role conflict, and functioning under conflicting organizational expectations (Demerouti et al., 2001). In managerial roles, the apparent boredom may signal a weakening relationship between the effort invested and the subjective sense of meaning in work (Eastwood et al., 2012; Westgate, Wilson, 2018).

In this article, managerial boredom is analyzed as an emotional–motivational experience. It is linked both to burnout and to the perceived meaning of work. At the same time, it is assumed that it does not constitute a separate psychological construct but rather represents a form of professional experience associated with the individual's weakening relationship with their work, which may in turn signal emerging difficulties in a leader's professional functioning.

2. Literature review

2.1. The phenomenon of managerial boredom

Research on occupational boredom shows that it is not merely a state associated with a lack of activity but may also occur under conditions of sustained work engagement. This perspective is supported by empirical studies in which boredom and exhaustion are treated as related but

distinct elements of the work experience. This means that boredom is neither a simple opposite of engagement nor a direct equivalent of burnout, but rather an experience that may co-occur with exhaustion and appear alongside a decline in the quality of professional functioning (Harju et al., 2023; van Hooff, van Hooft, 2014; Junker et al., 2021).

Recent research indicates that boredom is primarily associated with difficulties in keeping focus and attributing meaning to ongoing activities. From a psychological perspective, boredom arises when an individual is unable to sustain cognitive engagement while simultaneously perceiving no realistic and satisfying alternatives for the activity (Westgate, 2020). In this approach, boredom may be understood as a signal of a weakening of the relationships between the individual and the work they perform, especially in the area of engagement and meaning attributed to work.

More recent perspectives describe boredom at work as an experience related less to the nature of tasks themselves and more to the quality of the individual's relationship with their work, particularly in relation to the subjective sense of meaning and agency (Harju et al., 2023; Westgate, Wilson, 2018).

It is increasingly emphasized that reducing occupational boredom solely to a lack of stimulation is insufficient, as it overlooks its dimensions related to meaning and relationships (Van Hooft, Van Hooff, 2024).

The concept of "managerial boredom" has not yet been clearly established in quantitative research nor explicitly defined in the existing literature. In this article, the term is used provisionally and analytically to describe specific forms of experiencing occupational boredom in the context of managerial roles.

In managerial work, boredom more often results not from monotony or quantitative underload but from a lack of stimulating challenges. It may involve the repetitiveness of decision-making, functioning under conflicting expectations, a limited sense of influence despite formal responsibility, or internal tension between role demands and one's professional identity (Van Hooft, Van Hooff, 2024).

2.2. Burnout as an organizational and individual phenomenon

In work psychology, burnout is understood as a long-term response to chronic work-related stress. Research shows that burnout does not emerge suddenly as a result of excessive workload but rather develops over time, leading to the depletion of energetic, cognitive, and emotional resources (Basińska, Gruszczyńska, 2020; Salmela-Aro, Upadyaya, 2018).

In process-oriented approaches, developed among others within the Job Demands–Resources model, burnout is described as a process involving changes in levels of engagement, emotion regulation strategies, and the meaning attributed to work (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Leclercq, Hansez, 2024).

The burnout process involves a transition from high engagement to increasing emotional distance and withdrawal (Basińska, Gruszczyńska, 2020; Leclercq, Hansez, 2024; Bakker, Demerouti, 2017). Particular attention is devoted to later stages of burnout, in which exhaustion itself is no longer the dominant experience. Instead, the factors gaining prominence are psychological distance from work, cynicism, and the loss of a subjective sense of meaning and importance of one's tasks (Schaufeli, De Witte, Desart, 2020; Leiter, Maslach, 2016).

2.3. Meaning of work as a factor in work engagement

The sense of meaning in work plays an important role in shaping psychological well-being, engagement, and the individual's relationship with work. In the literature, it is understood as a subjective belief that one's activities are meaningful, aligned with personal values, and have a real impact on the surrounding environment (Bailey et al., 2017; Lysova et al., 2019). Empirical research shows that a low level of meaning in work is associated with reduced engagement, increased withdrawal, and poorer psychological well-being. At the same time, it is accompanied by a stronger intention to leave the organization (Allan et al., 2019; Martela et al., 2021). More recent perspectives suggest that the sense of meaning may weaken in situations in which an individual experiences a limited sense of influence and a lack of alignment between personal values and the demands of the professional role (Hatami et al., 2024; Martela et al., 2021).

The lack of meaning attributed to one's activities constitutes one of the key factors preceding the experience of boredom, regardless of workload level or the intensity of performed tasks (Westgate, Wilson, 2018; Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017).

The sense of meaning in work is dynamic and largely dependent on the organizational context. It may gradually weaken under conditions of limited autonomy, conflicting demands, and discrepancies between declared organizational values and everyday work practices (Albrecht et al., 2021; Svendsen, 2022; Martela et al., 2021). Such tensions are particularly visible in managerial roles, where formal responsibility is combined with navigating multiple stakeholders and with limited influence over some key decisions (Svendsen, 2022).

2.4. The managerial role as a context of emotional emptiness

Performing a managerial role is associated with a specific context for experiencing the meaning of work as well as with the risk of its gradual weakening. Research on leadership shows that managers operate under constant cognitive and emotional pressure, as they are simultaneously responsible for performance outcomes, relationships with people, and often conflicting expectations from different stakeholders (Andersone et al., 2023; Harms et al., 2017; Hoch et al., 2018). Also, from the perspective of occupational well-being, managers are increasingly described as a group at elevated risk of emotional exhaustion and psychological costs associated with the role, especially under conditions of ambiguity and limited influence over decisions (Maisonneuve et al., 2024; Ellis et al., 2025).

Despite the growing number of studies on occupational boredom, burnout, and the meaning of work, literature still lacks analyses that connect these phenomena with the specificity of the managerial role. Existing studies tend to focus primarily on the general employee population and on profiles of boredom and exhaustion (Harju et al., 2023). In particular, boredom is typically discussed in the context of operational work or at the level of entire organizations, with little attention given to the leadership perspective (Harju et al., 2023; Danckert, Elpidorou, 2023; Kaluza et al., 2021).

At the same time, research on leaders' functioning indicates that in contemporary organizations, decision pressure is increasing, cognitive overload is intensifying, and the sense of meaning at work is gradually weakening (Kniffin et al., 2021; Harms et al., 2017). In the case of managers, not only may boredom relate to workload, but also to changes in their relationship with work, including levels of burnout and the perceived meaning of their work. There is also a lack of studies that simultaneously consider the perspective of occupational boredom and leadership functioning within the managerial role. This gap justifies the need to identify and empirically examine managerial boredom.

3. Research methodology

The study aims to diagnose managerial boredom as an emotional–motivational experience and to determine its relationships with the level of burnout and the perceived meaning of work among individuals performing managerial roles.

Based on the literature review, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: A higher level of managerial boredom is associated with a lower sense of meaning in work.

H2: The relationship between managerial boredom and the sense of meaning in work is significantly stronger than the relationship between managerial boredom and work overload.

H3: A higher level of sense of meaning in work is associated with a lower level of burnout.

H4: A higher level of managerial boredom is associated with higher levels of exhaustion and loss of engagement at work.

3.1. Study Sample Characteristics

The study involved 61 individuals performing managerial roles. The inclusion criterion for participation in the sample was the self-reported responsibility for managing the work of other employees. The sample consisted of 41 women (67.2%) and 20 men (32.8%). Detailed demographic and professional characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. Participants were recruited purposively using online channels and professional networks.

Participants were purposefully recruited using online channels and professional networks between 11 and 26 January 2026. The sample was non-probabilistic and cannot be considered representative of the population of individuals holding managerial roles in Poland.

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of participants in managerial positions

		N	%
Age	30-39	20	32.8
	40-49	31	50.8
	50-59	10	16.4
Managerial position level	Lower management: immediately managing an operations team, no strategic responsibility (e.g. team leader)	14	23
	Middle management: managing teams or managers, implementing strategic goals, responsibility for an area/segment (e.g., department manager, unit head)	26	42.6
	Senior management: co-creating organizational strategy, responsibility for key decisions, the organization's results (e.g. CEO, board member)	21	34.4
How many employees do you manage directly?	1	3	4.9
	2-4	26	42.6
	5-10	14	23
	Over 10	18	29.5
How long have you been in a managerial role?	1-2 years	6	9.8
	3-5 years	18	29.5
	6-10 years	13	21.3
	Under 1 year	3	4.9
	Over 10 years	21	34.4
Industry	Public sector/administration	1	1.6
	Business consulting	21	34..4
	Energy / Utilities	2	3.3
	Finance / Banking / Insutance	9	14.8
	Retail and e-commerce	8	13.1
	Other	2	3.3
	IT / New technologies / Telecommunications	2	3.3
	Production / Industry	7	11.5
	Services (e.g. professional services, B2B, B2C)	7	11.5
	Health / Healthcare	2	3.3
Organization size	Up to 50 employees	9	14.8
	51-250	22	36.1
	251-500	9	14.8
	501-1000	8	13.1
	Over 1000	13	21.3
Dominant work mode	Hybrid	31	50.8
	On-site	24	39.3
	Remote	6	9.8

Source: own elaboration.

3.2. Selection of Research Instruments

To measure occupational boredom, the Dutch Boredom Scale (DUBS; Schaufeli, 2009) was used in the author's translation into Polish. The instrument was selected due to its concise format and its focus on the subjective experience of boredom in the context of professional work. The scale has previously been used in empirical studies on workplace boredom and demonstrates good psychometric properties (van Hooff, van Hooft, 2014). Due to the lack of

a Polish adaptation of the instrument and its prior use in studies conducted outside Poland, its use in the present study is exploratory in nature and should be interpreted with caution.

The scale consists of 8 items describing the subjective experience of boredom at work. Responses were provided on a seven-point frequency scale ranging from 0 ("never") to 6 ("always"). The arithmetic mean of the responses was used as the indicator of the level of occupational boredom. The reliability of the scale in the studied sample was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.69$), indicating a satisfactory level of measurement reliability.

To measure burnout, the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI; Demerouti et al., 2003) was used in the Polish adaptation by Chirkowska-Smolak (2013). The instrument was selected because of its two-dimensional conceptualization of burnout and the possibility of separately analyzing the components of exhaustion and disengagement. The instrument includes 16 items, with 8 items for each of the two subscales: exhaustion and disengagement.

Responses were given on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly agree") to 4 ("strongly disagree"). Some items were reverse-coded in accordance with the scoring key of the instrument. The reliability of the exhaustion subscale was at $\alpha = 0.86$, while the disengagement subscale reached $\alpha = 0.78$, indicating a good level of measurement reliability.

To measure the sense of meaning in work, the Work and Meaning Inventory in the Polish adaptation (WAMI-PL; Puchalska-Kamińska, Czerw, Roczniewska, 2019) was used, developed based on the original scale (Steger, Dik, Duffy, 2012).

The questionnaire consists of 10 items. Responses were provided on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ("absolutely untrue") to 5 ("absolutely true"). The arithmetic mean of the responses was used for analysis after accounting for the reverse-coded item. The reliability of the WAMI-PL scale in the studied sample reached $\alpha = 0.87$ for the SPO dimension and $\alpha = 0.90$ for the SPG dimension, indicating a very good level of measurement reliability.

To measure work overload, the Work Pressure subscale from the Job Demands–Resources questionnaire (JD–R; Bakker, Demerouti, 2017) was used in a working Polish-language version prepared for the purposes of this study based on the original English version.

Due to the managerial character of the sample, the Work Pressure subscale was used as an indicator of quantitative workload, primarily capturing time pressure, the pace of task completion, and the subjective sense of an excessive number of professional duties. Responses were provided on a five-point frequency scale ranging from 1 ("never") to 5 ("very often"). The index value was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the responses. The reliability of the Work Pressure subscale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.92$).

4. Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using the **IBM SPSS software package**. The analyses included **descriptive statistics, tests of normality of distributions (the Shapiro–Wilk test), Pearson's r correlation analyses, stepwise linear regression analysis, and tests of between-group differences (the Kruskal–Wallis test)**. The **level of statistical significance** was set at **$\alpha = 0.05$**.

Table 2 presents the **basic descriptive statistics** and the **results of normality tests** for the analyzed variables.

Table 2.
Basic descriptive statistics of the analyzed quantitative variables in the group of employees in managerial positions

	M	***Me***	***SD***	***Sk.***	***Kurt.***	***Min***	***Max.***	***W***	***p***
Work pressure/overload	3.80	4	0.98	-0.26	-1.24	2	5	0.91	<0.001
Meaning of work in a personal perspective	3.88	3.83	0.81	-0.84	0.80	1.50	5	0.93	0.002
Meaning of work in global perspective	3.17	3.25	1.10	-0.30	-0.91	1	5	0.95	0.022
Boredom at work	1.36	1.38	0.75	0.98	1.87	0	3.88	0.94	0.003
Exhaustion from work	2.22	2.25	0.63	0.15	-0.68	1.13	3.63	0.98	0.248
Withdrawal from work	2.13	2.13	0.55	0.59	0.35	1.13	3.75	0.97	0.099

Source: own elaboration.

Verification of Hypothesis 1

Pearson's r correlation analyses were conducted, revealing statistically significant relationships both for the sense of meaning in work in the personal perspective ($r = -0.49$; $p < 0.001$) and in the global perspective ($r = -0.51$; $p < 0.001$). Both relationships were negative, which means that, in line with the hypothesis, a higher level of managerial boredom is associated with a lower sense of meaning in work.

The first relationship was moderately strong, while the second one was strong. The obtained results, illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, allow the proposed research hypothesis to be accepted.

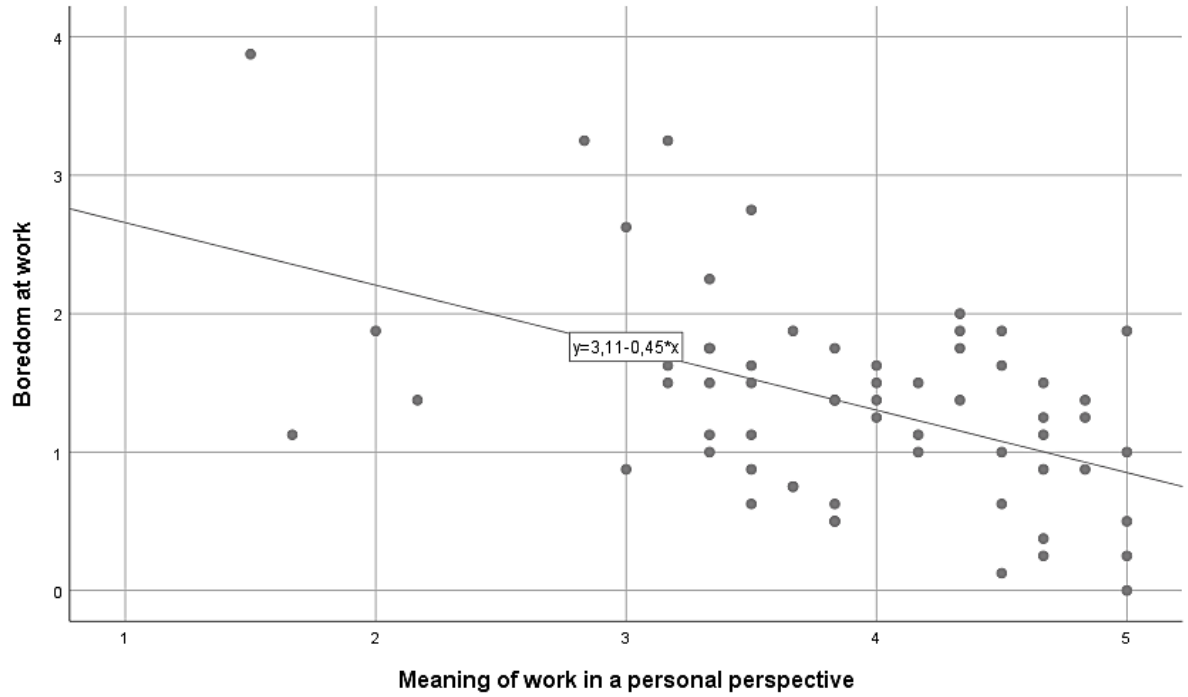


Figure 1. Scatter plot with a regression line showing the statistically significant relationship between the level of meaning of work (personal perspective) and the level of boredom at work.

Source: own elaboration.

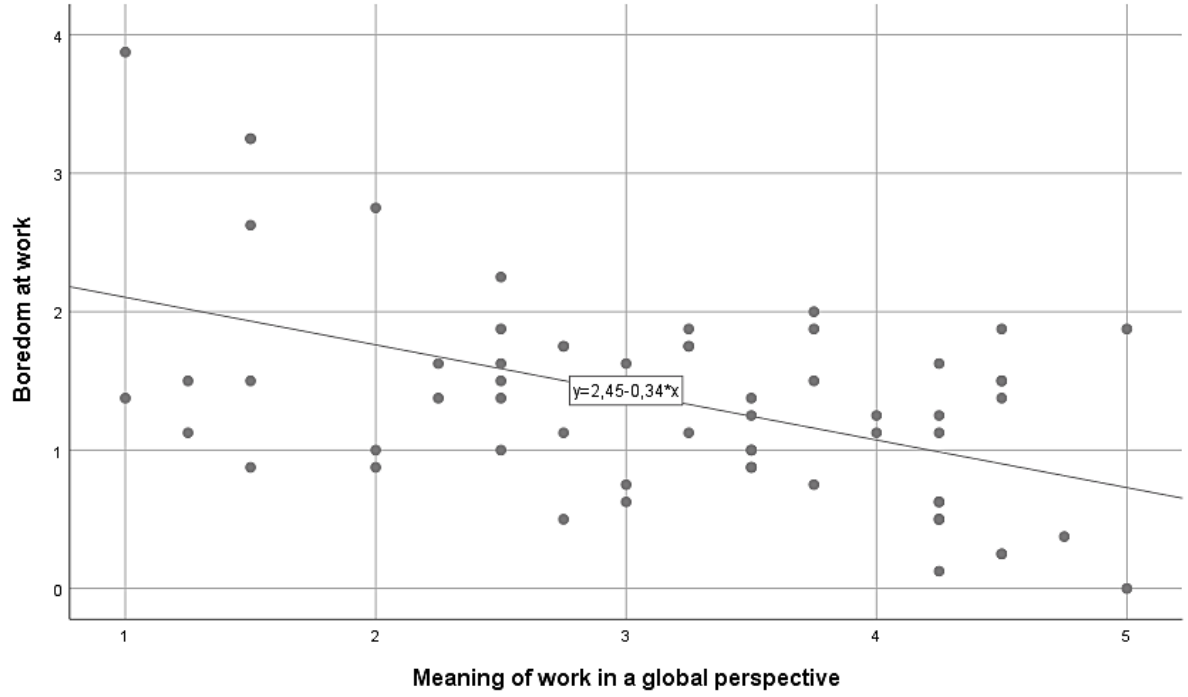


Figure 2. Scatter plot with a regression line presenting the statistically significant relationship between the **level of meaning of work in the global perspective** and the **level of boredom at work**.

Source: own elaboration.

Verification of Hypothesis 2

To test this hypothesis, a stepwise linear regression analysis was conducted. Two predictors were included in the model: the level of meaning in work in the global perspective and work incentives, $F(2, 58) = 13.44$; $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.293$. A higher level of managerial boredom was explained by lower levels of both predictors. Although the level of meaning in work in the global perspective was entered into the model first, in the final model, both predictors demonstrated similar predictive power, as indicated by the standardized Beta coefficient values (Table 3).

The remaining variables were not included in the model, as they did not significantly improve the explained variance of the dependent variable. The obtained results allow for the acceptance of the second research hypothesis, according to which the relationship between managerial boredom and the sense of meaning in work is stronger than its relationship with work overload.

Table 3.
Stepwise regression analyses for the dependent variable: boredom at work

Variable	*B*	*SE*	Beta	*T*	*p*
(Constant)	2.80	0.29		9.59	<0.001
Meaning of work in a global perspective	-0.22	0.09	-0.32	-2.35	0.022
Work incentives	-0.20	0.09	-0.31	-2.30	0.025

Note: B – unstandardized coefficient; SE – standard error; Beta – standardized coefficient; t – t-test value; p – significance level.

Source: own elaboration.

Verification of Hypothesis 3

To test this hypothesis, Pearson's r correlation analyses were conducted. The obtained results (Table 4) show that a higher level of sense of meaning in work in both analyzed dimensions was associated with a lower level of burnout, both in terms of work-related exhaustion and withdrawal from work. All analyzed relationships were statistically significant.

The strength of the relationships between the sense of meaning in work and work-related exhaustion was moderately strong, whereas the relationships with withdrawal from work were strong. The obtained results confirm the third research hypothesis.

Table 4.
Pearson's r correlation coefficients for the relationships between the level of sense of meaning in work and the level of burnout

	Exhaustion from work	Withdrawal from work
Meaning of work in a personal perspective	-0.46***	-0.67***
Meaning of work in a global perspective	-0.44***	-0.64***

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

Source: own elaboration.

Verification of Hypothesis 4

A higher level of managerial boredom is associated with higher levels of exhaustion and/or withdrawal from work, which constitute key components of burnout. To test this hypothesis, Pearson's r correlation analyses were conducted, revealing statistically significant positive relationships both between the level of boredom and work-related exhaustion (r = 0.28; p = 0.028) and between the level of boredom and withdrawal from work (r = 0.55; p < 0.001).

This indicates that a higher level of managerial boredom is associated with a higher level of burnout in both analyzed dimensions. The strength of the relationship between boredom and work-related exhaustion was low, whereas the relationship between boredom and withdrawal from work was strong. The obtained results confirm the fourth research hypothesis.

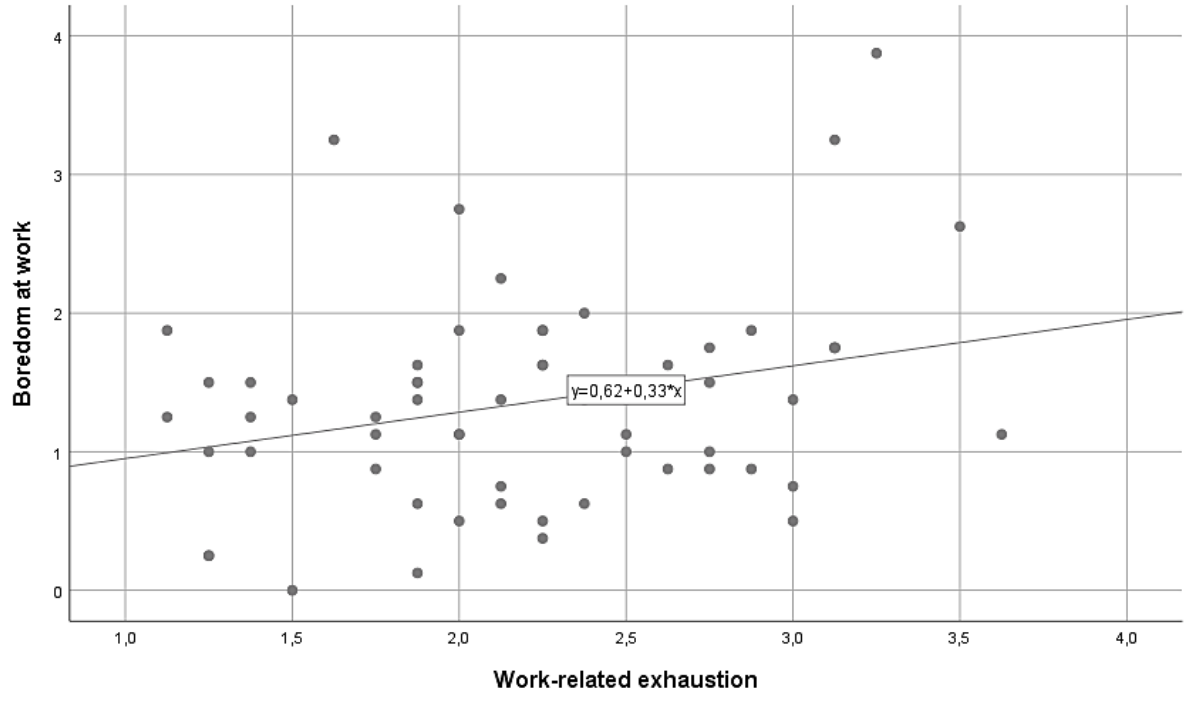


Figure 3. Scatter plot with a regression line presenting the statistically significant relationship between the level of work-related exhaustion and the level of boredom at work.

Source: own elaboration.

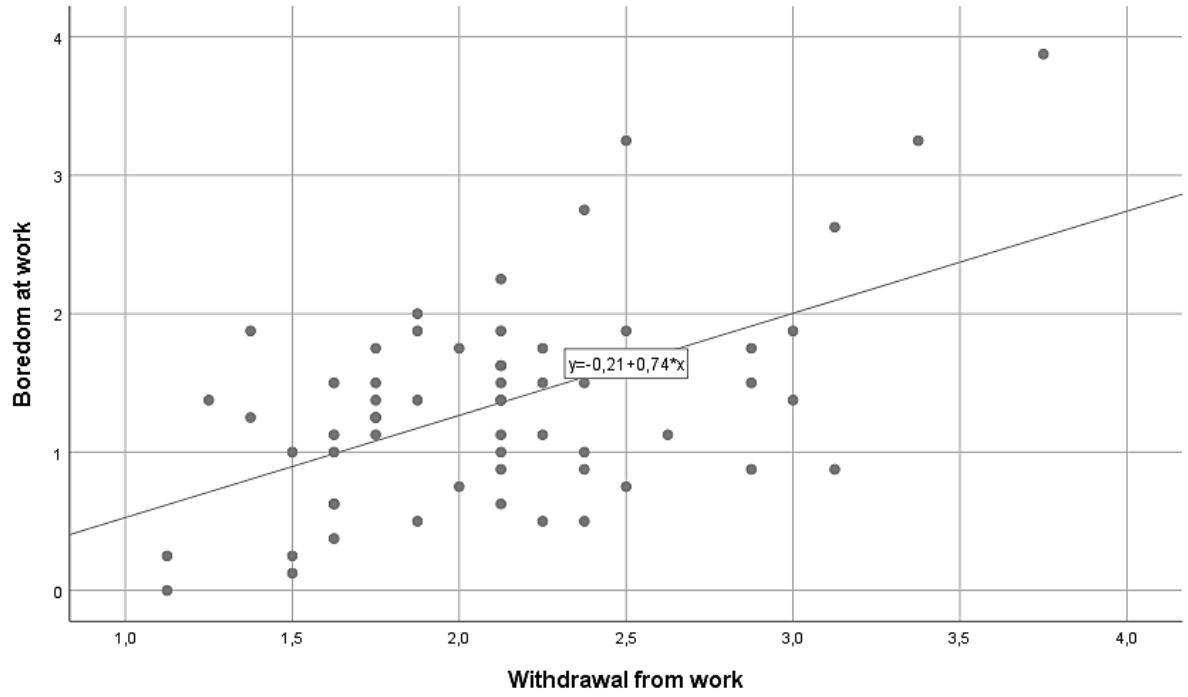


Figure 4. Scatter plot with a regression line presenting the statistically significant relationship between the level of withdrawal from work and the level of boredom at work.

Source: own elaboration.

5. Conclusion

The obtained results indicate that managerial boredom is significantly related to both the sense of meaning at work and burnout. The strongest relationship was observed between the level of boredom and a reduced sense of meaning at work, which supports the assumption that the experience of boredom at work cannot be explained solely by a lack of tasks but is also associated with a weakening of the meaning and value attributed to one's work (Eastwood et al., 2012; Westgate, Wilson, 2018). These findings are consistent with research showing that the sense of meaning in work constitutes a key resource protecting against declines in engagement and deterioration in professional functioning (Allan et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2017; Martela et al., 2021).

The results suggest that among individuals performing managerial roles, a weakening of the sense of meaning in work may constitute an important mechanism contributing to the experience of boredom. From this perspective, managerial boredom may be interpreted as a signal of a weakened relationship between the effort invested and the subjectively experienced significance of work, rather than merely as the result of work overload or underload.

The results also indicate that the relationship between boredom and the sense of meaning in work is stronger than the relationship between boredom and work overload. This suggests that even under conditions of high professional activity and substantial organizational responsibility, the experience of boredom may still occur if the work performed ceases to be perceived as meaningful or contributing to one's development.

The findings also confirm a positive relationship between managerial boredom and burnout, particularly in the dimension of withdrawal from work. This relationship is consistent with earlier studies indicating the co-occurrence of boredom and burnout and their potentially mutual reinforcement (Harju et al., 2023; Sousa, Neves, 2021; Kim et al., 2025). In this context, boredom may be understood as an experience accompanying the process of one's gradual distancing from work and weakening engagement, rather than merely a temporary affective state.

The study has an exploratory character and is associated with several limitations. First, the study was conducted on a relatively small sample and used a cross-sectional design, which limits the possibility of drawing conclusions about the direction of relationships between the analyzed variables. Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs and a more in-depth analysis of the context of managerial work, including the specific nature of leadership roles, the scope of responsibility, and developmental opportunities. It is also advisable to include larger and more diverse samples and to further validate the Polish-language version of the occupational boredom scale.

Despite these limitations, the results allow managerial boredom to be considered an important signal of a weakening relationship with one's work and a potential indicator of declining occupational well-being. From the perspective of management practice, this implies the need to pay greater attention to the meaning-related dimension of managerial work, including opportunities for development, influence, and alignment between the activities managers undertake and organizational values and goals. In practice, reducing boredom may be supported by strengthening the sense of influence, the meaning of work, and the developmental nature of tasks.

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