

## Idleness versus busyness

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The elapse of time disregards the human will. Yet different uses of time result in distinct perceptions of time and psychological consequences. In this article, we synthesize the growing research in psychology on the actual and perceived consumption of time, with a focus on idleness and busyness. We propose that the desire to avoid an unproductive use of time and the ceaseless pursuit of meaning in life may underlie many human activities. In particular, while it has been long presumed that people engage in activities in order to pursue goals, we posit a reverse causality: people pursue goals in order to engage in activities.

### Addresses

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### Idleness versus busyness

Time is the ultimate rare and fair resource. The elapse of time is continual, incessant, and invariable across individuals, and the amount of time that each individual owns is capped, with only slight variations. Even though no form of human activities has any impact on the actual passing of time, the human perception of time is affected systematically by task engagement — people spend time, consume time, kill time, and waste time. From busy to idle, different uses of time result in distinct perceptions of time and have far-reaching psychological consequences.

In this article, we review the growing research in psychology on the actual versus perceived consumption of time, with a focus on idleness and busyness. We briefly synthesize the converging empirical findings that highlight the prevalent aversion to idleness and the need for purposeful busyness that underlies much of human

activities. In particular, we propose the possibility that many purported goals that people pursue may be justifications to be busy. Last, we discuss the implications of idleness aversion and busyness seeking for the future development of human societies.

### The (actual) consumption of time: idleness and busyness

Under the ticking budget constraint of a lifelong supply of time, people try to use the resource productively and purposefully by maximizing the rewards of life and minimizing idleness. Because time is not fungible or transferrable, idleness — the involuntary vacant passing of time — is, in a sense, a waste of the individual's life. The occasional experience of idleness is nonetheless inevitable, as an individual's control over the use of time is limited.

People are frequently idle [1<sup>\*</sup>] when they have nothing to do or have low engagement in external tasks. During idleness, the mind wanders and resorts to its default mode [2,3], generating stimulus-independent thoughts that are typically internally oriented yet not specifically focused [3]. Idleness is aversive [1<sup>\*</sup>,4<sup>\*\*</sup>,5,6<sup>\*\*</sup>], not only because it highlights the waste of a primary resource, but also because it results in boredom and anxiety [7–9]. Furthermore, chronic idleness may impair psychological and physical well-being [10<sup>\*</sup>,11]. The unemployed and unskilled who experience idleness tend to report decreased self-esteem and increased symptoms of depression [13–15]. Similarly, institutionalized nursing home residents who experience idleness tend to report a decreased sense of control, competence, and overall well-being [16–18].

Importantly, idleness is distinct from recuperation and active leisure. We theorize recuperation as the oft necessary break that people voluntarily take between engagement with tasks, during which they use the non-occupied time to rest, refresh, and re-energize to engage more fully in upcoming goal pursuits. Thus, recuperation can be an instrumental use of time to maximize the experience of subsequent busyness. Distinct from both idleness and recuperation, active leisure is the voluntary use of time on entertainment and relaxation. In this sense, our definition of idleness is akin to what is often referred to as passive leisure [10<sup>\*</sup>,11], whereas active leisure is a type of busyness [10<sup>\*</sup>]. Empirical research on the quality of experiences showed that an optimal level of cognitive engagement, or 'flow', positively correlates with the quality of a busy experience in both work and leisure [10<sup>\*</sup>,12].

Contrary to idleness, busyness carries many psychological benefits. Busyness can signal competence to oneself [19], can increase perceived effectiveness in task-completion

while mitigating one's sense of failure [20], and indicates the superior value of one's human capital and social status [21,22]. The self-perception of busyness hence can elevate self-value and affirm self-importance [23,24]. In a classic field experiment, nursing home residents who were asked to take care of a plant and make decisions for their own daily activities retained better cognitive functioning and a general sense of well-being after a few weeks, and a lower mortality rate after 18 months, compared with a similar group that was informed that nurses would take care of their plants and decide about their daily activities [16,17\*]. Such findings shed light on the long-term benefits of purposeful busyness over comfortable idleness for overall life quality.

### The perceived consumption of time: idle or busy

Key to the perception of time is time awareness, which can be affected by activity engagement and motivation [25–27]. Time awareness heightens when the mind is disengaged and when one lacks intrinsic motivation, whereas time awareness weakens when one engages in effortful goal pursuit and when one has intrinsic motivation toward the goal [28,29]. Time spent in idleness, such as waiting, typically is perceived to be longer than its real duration [26,30]. The heightened awareness further amplifies the extent to which people perceive their use of time to be wasteful, rendering the experience more aversive [26,30].

By contrast, time awareness decreases during busyness. A high level of cognitive engagement and intrinsic motivation make the passage of time seem quick [29,31]. When the 'flow' experience emerges, for instance, people lose themselves in the activity with an intense and focused concentration on the present — enjoying the continual cognitive engagement and forgetting about time [12,32]. The flow experience may thus be interpreted as the epitome of optimal busyness, during which a purposeful use of time is accompanied by an effective allocation of mental resources. In sum, the awareness of time further exacerbates the affective appraisal of idleness and busyness: idleness makes time pass slower, whereas busyness is often accompanied with the experience of 'time flying'.

### Idleness aversion and the need for justifiable busyness

Most people dread idleness and enjoy at least a moderate level of busyness. Yet busyness *per se* does not guarantee an efficient use of time because purposeless busyness merely fills time by using up energy and other resources. Thus, people desire busyness that is purposeful, or that at least seems purposeful. We hence propose that, while it has been long presumed that people engage in busyness in order to pursue goals, it is possible that people pursue goals in order to engage in busyness. This notion was first tested in a series of experiments by Hsee *et al.* [4\*\*]. Participants were recruited to fill out a survey in an experimental room and

instructed to return the completed survey at one of two locations: a nearby location, which would leave participants with about 15 min of idle waiting, or a faraway location (a 12–15 min round-trip), which would leave participants with little waiting time before the next task. Participants were told that they would receive as a token of appreciation for completing the survey a piece of chocolate, either milk chocolate or dark chocolate, two similarly liked flavors in the general population. Half of the participants (randomly selected) were told that both locations offered both flavors, so there was no justification to drop the survey at the faraway location. The other half were told that one location offered only milk chocolate while the other location offered only dark chocolate — the distribution of flavors was counter-balanced — so participants could use the different chocolate flavors to justify walking to the faraway location.

When the chocolate flavors were identical at the two locations, most participants (68%) chose to drop the survey at the nearby location and wait idly afterwards. But when the chocolate flavors were different, most participants (59%) chose to drop the survey at the faraway location. Moreover, those who dropped off the survey at the faraway location were significantly happier than those who dropped off the survey at the nearby location. In another experiment, the authors found that even participants who were forced to drop off the survey at the faraway location were happier than those who had the freedom to choose where to drop off the survey, because the majority of them chose to drop off the survey at the nearby location. These findings were replicated in a DIY task. To sum up, people dread idleness yet were not willing to engage in busyness unless they could justify the busyness with a purpose.

In another experiment, Wilson *et al.* [6\*\*] found that people would avoid idleness even by engaging in negative experiences. Participants were given a choice between 15 min of idleness (thinking alone in an empty room) and a negative experience (self-administering a mild electric shock). About 40% of participants chose the shock over idleness, despite having stated previously that under ordinary circumstances, they would pay to avoid such an experience. The seeking of negative stimulation can arguably be justified by its novelty (also see [33]); males are known to seek sensations more than females, and 65% of the male participants in this study chose the negative experience while only 25% of the female participants did so [6\*\*]. In sum, the aversion to idleness may even mobilize people to engage in aversive busyness.

These findings shed light on the human desires to avoid the unproductive use of time and to quench the thirst for meaning in life, which arguably underlie much of human activities. However, busyness and activities are not always beneficial; for example, people may over-work and over-earn [24,34,35]. Moreover, not everyone is capable of conducting constructive activities. Idleness aversion

among many of the unemployed and unskilled who are constrained in their ability to engage in constructive busyness may lead to destructive busyness and even social unrest. Public education and occupational training are thus important means to promote purposeful goal pursuit and facilitate constructive busyness [36,37].

### Idleness versus busyness as human labor becomes substitutable

A sound understanding of idleness and busyness is particularly relevant for the development of future human societies in which technological advances will pose increasing challenges on the constructive uses of time and the pursuit of purposefulness for individual existence. In the recent past of human history when productivity was low, people had to work hard to survive. Idleness was a luxury for the rich. Modernization has elongated people's lifespan, freed many from devoting most of their time for survival needs, and increased their freedom over the discretionary use of time and the pursuit of purposefulness.

As technologies advance further, more of us will be made somewhat useless by AI doctors, driverless cars, and robotic waiters, among others. The day that most of us will not have to work is approaching. Nonetheless, the eternal search for a productive and purposeful life will not cease in future human societies. With progressively less need to work, how can people use their abundance of time purposefully? Engaging in sports and games, self-development, scientific research, hobbies, or destructive behaviors? As we move forward, it ought to be understood that the relative affluence of time does not guarantee the ultimate freedom of human existence, but rather escalates the need for purposeful busyness.

### Concluding remarks

People often say they work hard so that they can be idle. Increasing empirical evidence suggests an alternative interpretation—we work hard to avoid being idle. Unlike other resources, time is non-stoppable, non-transferable, and non-renewable. An individual's consumption of time is essentially the individual's use of life. In idleness, time breeds misery. In busyness, time generates happiness, as long as it is used toward a purpose, even a feebly justifiable one.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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