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Out of Sync: The Emotional and Social Cost of Living Ahead or Behind One's Time

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I. INTRODUCTION

Most of human life is inseparable from the time when it occurs. Social habits, cultural forms, tools in hand, and political beliefs that give the fabric of individual existence shape are meaningful realities of lived experience. However, there are people whose beat does not fall within the dominant temporal rhythms of their societies. While the vast majority may or may not come to terms with a shift in society—chronically lagging or striving with the ideology, culture, or technology of the times, there are individuals, whether by nature or choice, feel themselves to be “misfits in their times,” either fitting well with prevailing forms or reaching ahead to a future that is not fully present.

This feeling of not belonging in time can come in two quite different but equally distressing forms. There are people who have been left feeling somewhat adrift by the hastening change. Largely clinging to values or thoughts in a more traditional way, they may feel

somewhat wary or uneasy about modern developments, like gender equality, digitization, or multiculturalism. Their pain comes from the fact not only of losing familiarity but also because the social frameworks that could anchor their identity and beliefs are eroding. And on the other side, people are there, who feel intellectually, ideologically, or creatively misplaced. Those avant-garde individuals typically have difficulty finding support or resonance in their communities. Their visions, ideas, and values may be opposed, laughed at, or met with indifference, leaving them feeling lonely and alienated.

This double phenomenon- being too long behind or too long in front of the social curve- raises big questions about the links between personal identity and historical setting. The term cultural lag, first used by William Fielding Ogburn (1922), usually means that society is not able to catch up with tech development, but here it can mean something else: the disagreement at the individual level with main cultural timelines. Also, from an existential psych view, the pain of being out of the right time can twist into crises of meaning, of loneliness, of emotional alienation.

Though highly relevant, little academic work has been done on this subject, particularly in terms of personal narratives and lived experience. Most of the social science works pursue the study of societal change at a macro level; it oftentimes leaves out the internal struggles of those who feel temporally out of step with the environment. The paper will set out to fill this lacuna by offering an exploration of how temporal misalignment influences the psychological well-being, identity formation, and social integration of individuals who perceive themselves to be either “behind” or “ahead” of their time.

This study, therefore, adopted a qualitative-phenomenological approach to inquire into the inner and social lives of two groups of participants: those who feel neglected by the modernizing process and those who feel oppressed by the constraints of their way of life. The study conducts in-depth interviews to perceive how temporal tensions mold their being and becoming, such as their identity, relationships, and emotional well-being. Thus, it adds to the more general question of the subjective cost of temporal desynchronization in a world that is becoming more dynamic and fragmented.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

a) Temporal Experience and the Individual

The experience of being 'out of sync' with one's time is a matter of enduring interest to philosophers and cultural theorists. First, Karl Mannheim (1936) brought in the concept of generational consciousness, contending that individuals are made by the social and historical setting of their birth but into also the awareness of their temporal dissonance. Recently, Rosa (2020) discussed Social Acceleration as the rapidity of change with technology and culture and its reaction with people either struggling to keep pace or demanding change the rest of society resists. These temporal disjunctions very often translate to alienation, feelings of disconnection, and even existential unease.

b) Cultural Lag and Psychological Dissonance

Cultural lag is the term for the relationship between technologically induced change in society and changes in nonscientific, nonmaterial culture (Ogburn, 1922). More specifically, cultural lag refers to the macro-social inertia of society at large. With recent re-readings of the Ogburn thesis, attention has shifted to the micro-level social experience of individuals feeling that there is a lag in time between their values and the values of society (Kavoori, 2021). Those who are slower in adopting emerging norms feel the burden of being left behind and experience anxiety, if not moral panic and even plain confusion (Heim & Ziegler, 2022). Those who are quicker to articulate an emerging social vision are currently well in advance of popular social opinion and, in many instances, are ridiculed by that emerging group and are, therefore, experiencing real psychological distress (Ahmed & Singh, 2023).

c) Existential and Social Costs of Temporal Misalignment

From a view that combines both time and psychology, being mismatched temporally could lead to what was described by Yalom (1980) as "existential isolation"—a profound feeling of not fitting in or being connected. Those who are ideologically late might feel out of culture, while for those ahead of time, it could be an issue of being underappreciated for a long while, or even considered a problem. Failing to connect to one's temporal surroundings often leads to a self-idea that is not whole, less wellness, and problems with people (Smith & Delaney, 2021).

Time is another factor that determines whether or not people easily get integrated into a society. According to the sociological and cultural viewpoints, sharing temporal basics forms a fundamental aspect of social integration. In cases where individual timing sharply deviates from the group's rhythms, one can become marginalized in both subtle and overt manners. This would be the progressives in societies where the collective impulse is received and the conservatives in

places where collective impulse is not welcomed. This tension between the individual will and the general wish creates chronic emotional conflicts in the person.

d) Gap in the Literature

Although there has been increasing consideration of the psychic effects of cultural and technological change, there has been virtually no direct, sustained empirical investigation into the subjective experiences of those who believe themselves to be temporally misaligned with their social context. Most studies deal with issues of generational change, innovation resistance, or future-oriented thinking at the level of the institution. The day-to-day experiences of those for whom "too far behind" or "too far ahead" applies are very much not well understood, at least not through qualitative, person-centered research. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the narratives of individuals who consciously perceive themselves as temporally out of step with contemporary society, using their self-understandings as the primary data source.

e) Research Questions

1. How do people feeling temporally misaligned—either behind or ahead of their time—experience their psychological and emotional life?
2. What social confrontation and forms of marginalization do they encounter in their relationships?
3. What coping strategies do they use to manage the tension between their internal beliefs and the dominant cultural narratives?

III. METHODOLOGY

a) Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design to look into the lived experiences of individuals who see themselves as either laggards or leads in adopting particular technologies. The choice of phenomenology proves the most relevant in this study because it concerns the essence of lived experience, where one learns how to interpret highly subjective matters like alienation, or even destitution and displacement, from prevailing sociocultural currents (Moustakas, 1994). The aim was not to measure or categorize the participants in any which way, but to learn how they themselves make sense of their temporal dissonance and the bearing it has on their identities and emotions.

b) Participant Selection and Self-identification

Participants were chosen by a selective sampling approach and then a snowball sample to find people who felt that there was a time lag in their values and the mainstream culture. The selection materials used inclusive, nondirective wording and asked people who felt "out of step with the times" to share their stories. A total of 16 participants, 8 who saw themselves

as "behind" their time and 8 as "ahead" of their time, from urban areas with different jobs and education levels.

Participants were required to complete a short screening questionnaire before the actual interview in order to establish genuine identification into target categories. The questionnaire comprised Likert-scale statements and an open-ended question meant to determine whether the individual perceived themselves as ideologically or culturally "behind" or "ahead" of their time. Sample items include: "I often feel my values are outdated compared to society," and "I feel that society is not ready for my ideas." These responses were later used to assign participants to either the "Temporal Traditionalist" or "Temporal Visionary" group, based on their self-perception, and not on any existing external classification. This ensured the phenomenological integrity of the study stayed true to the conscious understanding of the experience by the actors.

The participants were aged between 22 and 61 years, comprising 9 males and 7 females – and including university lecturers, artists, IT professionals, students, and retirees. The inclusion criteria were adults aged 18 to 65 years, with fluency in English or Uzbek and able to express themselves in a narrative interview. Active treatment for acute psychiatric presentation was the only exclusion as a means to separate existential experiences from the effects of clinical pathology. All participants provided written informed consent.

c) Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the most common way of gathering information. Depending on what the interviewee was comfortable with, the interviews happened either online through Zoom or directly and took between 45 to 75 minutes. All interviews were recorded after taking permission. Depending on the comfort of the interviewee, the conversation happened in English or Uzbek. The responses in Uzbek were translated and then back-translated by professionals to ensure consistency. The interviews were designed to encourage the sharing of very personal experiences and thoughts. It included questions like: "Can you describe a time when you felt out of place because of your beliefs or values?" and "How do you relate to the current era you live in?".

d) Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed correctly and checked using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase system of thematic study. First came immersion: reading the transcripts time and time again to get to know the content well. After that, codes were made by hand, picking up both direct feelings (like clear mentions of separation, strong feelings, or not understanding) and hidden meanings told in the stories by the people.

Following this phase of open coding, the analyst uploaded the transcripts to NVivo 12 for a

systematic process of further developing and arranging the codes. Categories like "feeling left behind," "being too progressive," and "judged by others" were evident in the respondents. For example, Nargiza said, "Everything changed too fast. The values I grew up with are now seen as 'wrong' or 'old-fashioned,'" first coded with nostalgia but later properly subsumed under the wider theme temporal alienation.

Codes were grouped into basic headings on the basis of common concepts and feelings. The researcher then used visual maps of themes to help sort through codes in order to begin to see how they related to each other. After much back-and-forth discussion, five main themes were eventually decided upon and these included the experience of being disconnected in time, rejected by society and not seen for who they are, the emotional burden of being misplaced, grappling with one's identity and the self-doubt that comes with it, and finally, coping mechanisms and time-bound resilience. For example, under the theme of "coping mechanisms," what Rashid said, "The internet saved me. I may not fit in here, but somewhere out there, someone understands," was first labeled as digital refuge and then eventually combined with others that described alternative communities and all the other types of strategies for psychological survival.

Themes were constantly checked back to the raw data to make sure that they really expressed what the participants' lived experiences were. Actively searching for disconfirming evidence and counter-narratives to keep the analysis sharp. Sharpened in small group discussions and the theoretical framework, improving clarity and representational accuracy.

e) Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out with the highest ethical considerations in qualitative research, especially because the topic is emotionally charged. All participants were fully made aware of the purpose, scope, and procedures of the research before they got involved. An informed consent form was provided, including the rights of the participants to withdraw at any time without consequences, and to stress the voluntary nature of participation.

For the purpose of ensuring and upholding the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants, pseudonyms are applied throughout this data presentation. No identifying detail that may link the responses to any individual or institution is removed or modified. The audio recordings and their transcripts are stored in a secure encrypted password-protected device accessible to the researcher only.

Given the possible depths of emotion that the interviews may lead to, they were informed that at any point they could pause a question, skip a question, or stop the interview. No distress — reported either during the interviews or after — but, just to be safe, all were

given a number for general psychological support service.

Throughout the research process, the emotional and narrative integrity of participants' voices was treated with care and respect, and efforts were made to ensure that their contributions were represented ethically and accurately in the final write-up.

f) Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed throughout the research process.

A constant interaction with the data was kept up by reading and reflecting on it time and again. The transcripts were gone through many reads not just for coding, but also to pick out the subtleties, contradictions, and the emotional color of the narratives.

Secondly, four members were checked by inviting them to review the summaries of their interviews. Feedback clarified that there was no misunderstanding at all, except for some misinterpretations in language or context. For example, one participant noted that their frustration was not with the imputation of societal rejection but with the lack of meaningful conversation.

The third strategy used in this study to reduce researcher bias was peer debriefing. The coding scheme and theme definitions were shown to a qualitative researcher colleague for critical review. This helped in further sharpening overlapping categories and in checking for over-interpretations.

The study fourthly utilized thick description, including proper contextualized quotes relating to the emotions and social realities of the participants. This can help the readers properly engage with the data and make judgments about its transferability to other settings.

Lastly, audit trails were maintained for decisions made during coding and theme development, and NVivo project logs preserved the analytic process for transparency and reproducibility.

g) Researcher Positionality

Being the only one carrying out this study, I admit that my background, beliefs, and personal experiences have informed the inquiry at various levels. A qualitative researcher and a language teacher, I have for long been interested in how individuals deal with social change, especially in cultures where old and new values coexist.

Personally, a feeling of "not belonging in the moment" has often crossed my mind—especially when I have to interact with some older, more conservative-thinking peers, and some younger, more forward-looking students. This double exposure has made me more aware of the cost, both emotional and psychological, that temporal misalignment can have.

My teaching, mentoring, and interaction with people of different generations sparked my interest in

exploring the lived experiences of individuals who feel disconnected from the dominant cultural stories. I had a personal and academic stake in this endeavor: I wanted to give a voice to those whose internal time does not match the larger, social dominant clock.

Throughout the research process, I engaged in reflexive journaling, noting when my assumptions or reactions might have influenced interpretation. This ongoing reflection helped me remain aware of my positionality and to consciously foreground participants' voices over my own expectations.

IV. RESULTS

Five major themes emerged from the experience of emotional, social, and identity-related consequences of temporal misalignment in the 16 interviews. These themes often overlapped, with specific patterns more pronounced in either the Temporal Traditionalist or Temporal Visionary group. The text is kept valid by including direct quotations (using pseudonyms) to show the authenticity and emotional tone of the narratives shared by the participants.

a) Theme 1: Temporal Alienation

All participants in both categories felt a repeated sense of disconnection from the prevailing zeitgeist. In the Temporal Traditionalists group, this feeling came from a seeming loss of familiarity, right and wrong, and togetherness. For instance, Nargiza, who is 54 years old and used to teach, believed:

"Everything changed too fast. The values I grew up with are now seen as 'wrong' or 'old-fashioned.' It feels like the world is leaving people like me behind."

On the contrary, Temporal Visionaries felt isolated not by dejection but by vexation. Their concepts, as oriented toward the future, frequently suffered without backing from society. Farid, a futurist who is 29 years old said:

"It's very tiring to always be ahead of the conversation. People roll their eyes or say, 'You think too much.' I just see where we're headed — why is that so scary to them?"

In both groups, the feeling of not "belonging" in their time was accompanied by internal conflict and social fatigue.

b) Theme 2: Social Rejection and Misrecognition

Participants would feel that their temporal orientation brought a lot of social cost. The traditionalists would feel that the younger mocked them and even the institutions were not valuing them. Sohail, a 47-year-old accountant, noted:

"When I talk about how we used to live or how kids should behave, people act like I'm some backward fool. It's painful."

Visionaries, meanwhile, described a different but parallel form of rejection — not for being behind, but for being “too much.” Layla, a 33-year-old artist and feminist activist, remarked:

“I’ve been told, ‘People aren’t ready for your kind of thinking.’ But how long do I have to wait for the world to catch up?”

There was a great deal of emotional pain involved in feeling misrecognized—seen through inaccurate or distorted lenses, whether with family, coworkers, or any kind of authority figure. This was the main theme that surfaced during the interaction.

c) *Theme 3: Emotional Weight of Misplacement*

The mental burden of feeling “out of time” would be palpable. Traditionalists would speak of anxiety, nostalgia, and even grief. A number of participants would speak of mourning the world it had once known. Zarina, 45 years, homemaker shared:

“I sometimes cry watching old movies. Not because they’re sad, but because they show a time that felt safe. I don’t feel safe anymore.”

For Visionaries, the emotional weight took the form of loneliness, burnout, and a lack of meaningful dialogue. Ali, a 26-year-old sustainability consultant, explained:

“It’s like shouting into a void. I care so deeply, but it’s like nobody wants to listen until it’s too late.”

This theme illustrates that while the source of suffering differs (loss vs. delay), the emotional texture — sadness, exhaustion, and existential loneliness — is shared.

d) *Theme 4: Identity Tension and Self-doubt*

Temporal misalignment created an ongoing struggle for the individuals to reconcile their inside identity with the outside perception. Most of the people from the older generation described feeling irrelevant or obsolete. Shavkat, a 58-year-old ex-government worker, said:

“It’s like I’m a VHS tape in a streaming world.”

Visionaries described moments of imposter syndrome or self-censorship in professional settings. Nilufar, a 38-year-old academic, reflected:

“Sometimes I think, maybe I am out of touch. Maybe I should just tone it down. But then I feel like I’m betraying myself.”

This theme highlights an identity conflict — between holding onto one’s convictions and adapting to the pressures of time-bound environments.

e) *Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms and Temporal Resilience*

Despite the hurt, many involved developed adaptive strategies. Those of the old school often looked to customs, religion, or groups based on olden

times for support. Malika, who was 50 years old and an educator in matters of religion, said:

“I’ve found peace in going back to what matters — prayer, family, simple things. Let the world run ahead. I don’t need to chase it.”

Visionaries, on the other hand, leaned on creative expression, online platforms, or international communities to find resonance. Rashid, a 32-year-old transhumanist thinker, explained:

“The internet saved me. I may not fit in here, but somewhere out there, someone understands.”

This theme suggests that while temporal misalignment can be isolating, it can also generate unique forms of resilience, meaning, and even leadership when participants find or build alternative spaces for belonging.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to analyze the emotional and social experiences of persons who feel themselves as temporally misaligned, whether as “lagging” or “leading” the time. On the basis of in-depth, phenomenological interviews with 16 participants in urban areas, it emerged that though the bases of temporal misalignment are different, the emotive outcomes—alienation, misrecognition, identity battle, and resilience—were quite similar among both groups. The identified themes point at a common psychological and social effort of making sense of one’s identity when feeling discrepant to the dominant cultural and ideological timelines.

Temporal alienation relates closely to Rosa’s (2020) social acceleration, where the increasing rapid transformation of society surges beyond one’s capacity to catch up emotionally or cognitively. Former Temporal Traditionalists expressed such alienation through nostalgia and loss; here, one remembers cultural sociological findings on the relationship between rapid modernization and disorientation and moral unease (Heim & Ziegler, 2022). For the former Temporal Visionaries, alienation manifests anticipatory frustrations: their ideas and values do not find resonance, are misunderstood, perhaps even considered threatening by others. This resonates with Ahmed and Singh’s (2023) argument that cultural progressives often feel symbolically invisible when the broader society lacks a language or a structure within which to apprehend their ideas.

The theme of social acceptance and understanding relates to Ogburn’s (1922) cultural lag theory, which is transformed here from a large social process into an individual dynamic. They were out-groups: the traditionalists because they withheld the change, and the visionaries because they grasped it too soon. Most significantly, the misrecognition was not

radical or conservative but dissenting at a time when it broke with the rest of society. Such rejection compounds what Yalom (1980) described as existential isolation, wherein at one and the same time individuals are separate from others and from shared meanings.

In terms of who they are, participants often struggled to reconcile with how they are perceived. Traditionalists used metaphors of fears of irrelevance, oscillating between self-assurance and self-doubt. Visionaries, on the other hand, described identity instability. This supports Smith and Delaney's (2021) findings that ideological dissonance can erode one's sense of coherence and belonging when sustained over time. Yet, what emerges across both groups is not only suffering but also resilience.

The last notion, coping methods and temporal strength, speaks for human adjust. The old ones usually felt comfort in belief, family custom, or old community, reasserting former fonts of self in a quick world. The new thinkers, however, used internet areas, artistic show, and worldwide links to moor their purpose sense. These results imply that when people are refused acknowledgment within their direct time setting, they often look for—or make—other places where their values can be confirmed.

This study also proves a methodological point by showing that self-perceived temporal identity is a meaningful lens through which to explore individual suffering as well as resilience and adaptation. Rather than frame these participants as deviant or misguided, the phenomenological approach will see them as subjects navigating a deep existential question of where, and when, do I belong?

This study though with immense contributions should be interpreted within the several limitations. First, the sample comprises urban self-selected individuals and therefore the findings may only be applicable within such a sociocultural background and cannot be generalized. Data are subjective because they are based on the experiences of the respondents, a limitation, and at the same time a strength of a phenomenological inquiry. Future research should take the weaknesses further by being cross-cultural, or investigating temporal dislocation in terms of adolescence or even old age, or how dissonance in individuals is received by the different kind of institutions.

Who lag or lead in time. It contended that the temporal misalignment is not just a personal quirk or a characteristic of the generation, but a social and existential condition of much deeper implications. As the societies continue changing-increasingly important to note the subjective, often psychological, costs exacted upon those who fall outside, or cannot keep up with the velocity? of the change, listening to their stories deepens empathy but also lays a critical imperative upon us to question whether our definitions of progress,

relevance, and modernity are as inclusive as we assume.

VI. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study should be applied to further research on temporal misalignment in various cultural, geographic, and generational contexts. Comparison between the rural and urban, or rapidly modernizing against more stable cultural settings, may bring important insights into how sociocultural pace shapes experiences of temporal alienation. The results from this present cross-cultural study are suggestive of the need for a more in-depth, extensive cross-cultural study. Longitudinal research should be used to trace whether and how people eventually change, re-adjust, or re-align themselves after long periods during which they felt themselves to be "out of sync." This study should be followed up by more in-depth studies to identify the nature of the temporal divergences that strong individual informants may exhibit in how different organizations, like schools, businesses, or religious groups, react to such temporal divergences. A quantitative inquiry could test the current relationships between temporal misalignment, psychological well-being, and social integration. Lastly, greater focus needs to be laid on the experience of temporal dissonance by adolescents and the elderly, the two most commonly found categories within the process of generational shifts, who may resist the change and, therefore, express it in a different way.

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Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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