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**Nuancing Time: The Clock's Role in Digital Discursive Practices Between Strangers Who Look for Love and Sex**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>   | 2  |
| <i>Abstract</i>  | 2  |
| <i>Introduction</i>  | 3  |
| <i>Methodology</i>   | 8  |
| <i>Chapter 1: Finding Time: The experience of Time</i>                     | 10 |
| <i>Chapter 2: Taking Time: The Conceptualisation of Time</i>               | 13 |
| <i>Chapter 3: Making Time: Mechanisms of Inter-subjective Time</i>         | 18 |
| <i>Chapter 4: Approaching the Primary Ethnography</i>                      | 26 |
| <i>Chapter 5: Ethnography, part 1: The Temporal Nuances of The Wait</i>    | 31 |
| <i>Chapter 6: Ethnography, part 2: The Temporal Nuances of The Subtext</i> | 38 |
| <i>Chapter 7: Ethnography, part 3: The Temporal Nuances of The Rhythm</i>  | 44 |
| <i>Chapter 8: Time for conclusions</i>                                     | 50 |
| <i>Bibliography</i>  | 53 |

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### ABSTRACT

Instant messaging services' user interfaces visualise temporal data associated to individual messages by using time-stamps. Viewing conversation in the framework of turn-taking, temporal nuances (by time-stamps) thus feed into people's rhythmic attention of the interaction to the extent they experience culture and context specific time standards with which these interactions are understood. Thus, the case of online interactions between strangers illustrates that there is a form-content symbiosis in which clock-time systems nuance interactions.

# Nuancing Time: The Clock's Role in Digital Discursive Practices Between Strangers Who Look for Love and Sex

## INTRODUCTION

If you would care to know what the current time is, consider asking an anthropologist. Avoid this if you are rushing, though; their response might take longer than it would for your eye to find the nearest clock. In most ordinary cases and in social settings, surely, their answer would be derived from a glance at their wristwatch. Yet, an anthropologist who studies temporality could also ask: "what time is it *where*, and *for whom*" or "the time according to *what*", some might even ask "what time *should* it be". Issues of technique, knowledge, agency and ethics will thus emerge and invite anthropological examinations of time. In this study's approach, correspondingly, time-telling and its derivative markers are not taken for granted, nor is the system of clock-time which is the gateway to the primary interest of this study: how the quantification and visualisation of temporal information affects interactions on digital platforms.

In 2015 the Royal Anthropological Institute published Daniel Miller's study of *Photography in the age of Snapchat*. This study posits that anthropologists now have to account for the ubiquity of photography by the proliferation of smartphones with photographic capabilities and the role given to photography in social media, whereas the current general regard (then) to common photographic practices include archival practices purposed in memory and representation (Miller 2015:1-2). The study's ethnographic research finds that the turn brought by digital technologies (smartphones, instant messaging, and social media, specifically) results in the communicative

appropriation of photography and that 'at this point photography is almost analogous to language itself' (Miller 2015, 14).

Miller's (2015) work is part of a wider anthropological attempt to demonstrate that experiences emerging from digital technologies are not experiences of a technology per se '[...] but an immediately cultural inflected genre of usage' (Horst and Miller 2012, 29). This effort reckons that the materiality of digital technology is not less real than 'offline' sorts of materials which order our social world, and so digital technology should provide ample means for anthropology's mission in reflecting about humanity and its cultures (Horst and Miller 2012, 3–4).

Digital spaces that mediate face-to-face interaction, like instant messaging services (hereafter: IM), highly visualise temporal data by incorporating time-stamps that presents various temporal information relating to each message in a chat's thread. This paper aims to study how single people who reside in Tel-Aviv (as a central, urban environment) experience temporal media in their use of IM when interacting with strangers they consider for either romantic relationships or one-time sexual encounters. Considering the popularity of dating apps and how people might be more observant to nuances during interactions with strangers (as opposed to familiar interactions), I figured that this would be the most promising gateway for a study of temporal nuances on IM. I hope that the study offered in this paper, will contribute to the wider anthropological effort aforementioned by demonstrating that much like the communicative appropriation of photography, the use of time-stamps on IM has enabled time to be experienced in communicative and interpretive terms.

Temporality as a topic in social sciences, as suggested earlier, offers the anthropologist a great number of elements, objects, concepts and practices to study and those relevant to this study will presently be evident to the reader. At this early point,

however, it is important to explain why certain topics in temporality are absent from this study. In my reading, *time* is a subject of study under the umbrella called *temporality*, and for the sake of clarity it should be noted that this paper objective is to study time. It does not expect offer a theory *of temporality*, but rather a theory *in temporality*. I.e., this paper studies a temporal subject but not temporality at large: it focuses on temporal subjects and concepts that are mostly manifested around cultures of time. For instance, planning is a temporal project aided by — among other things — cultures and concepts of *time*; yet, as a subject of study, planning is not akin to time. This paper, when appropriate, does address other objects in *temporality* other than time, such as waiting. This study's fine-grained approach does not litigate for a new categorical definition of *temporality*, no. It is taken in order to streamline an anthropological focus around cultures of time and these are experienced by this study's research participants in digital communication they had with strangers.

This study makes a significant reference to Nancy Munn's (1992) critical anthropology of time. I think her work provides an excellent source and I studied other scholars' literature using lessons I have first taken from her. Truly, she made a significant contribution to how I approached theories that I read elsewhere and consequentially helped me develop the 'voice' with which I wrote this paper.

Another approach that, by proxy, influenced this study is the Aristotelian distinction between *techne* [technique], *episteme* [knowledge] and *phronesis* [ethics]. Borrowed from *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 2002), it is widely embraced in anthropological studies in temporality. Since this distinction has made enough an impact on anthropological knowledge of time (hence 'developed this study by proxy') it is only fair to make an early introduction of it in advance of our first chapter.

The distinction offered in *Nicomachean Ethics* addresses three kinds of human actions. (1) Actions associated with craft and technique, i.e., associated with *techne*; (2) actions associated with reflection and knowledge, these are associated with *episteme*; and (3) actions of ethical and political judgement, these are referred to as *phronesis* (Bear 2016, 489). When considering time-reckoning (the act of telling time) as an action, we should consider its *techne*, *episteme*, and *phronesis*. This advice immediately gives clue for how anthropology can approach the subject of time and sooth any mystification as to how time can be regarded in cultural terms — it having practices and technology, knowledge, and etiquettes.

Most of the studies of time available to us have focused on those three kinds of actions (Bear 2016, 489). And so, it is important to note that anthropological enquiry excels beyond those three aspects: 'as human-centered distinctions formed from categories of understanding and individual action, they cannot fully capture the social reality of the complex networks through which rhythms in time are mediated' (Bear 2016, 489). That is, our study of time should further the analysis of time by delving into its context: structures that organise time-related actions and consequentially form time-related cultures.

Bear (2016) considers most studies to address only time-related action, and this study could certainly have stopped at time-related practices. But the examination offered here of time-related practices, specifically time-reckoning, is conducted because it leads the path to a wider frame of revelation — as Bear (2016) argues it should do. If so, in practical terms, the accounts of time-related practices, knowledge and ethics provided in the forthcoming literature review and by this study's participants will not just be presented in their face-value —which contributes to our understanding of how time can

be told— but in their full value — which contributes to our understanding of how nuances of time emerge in digital conversations between strangers.

This study will commence, after the 'methodology' chapter, with three chapters that are set to develop a theoretical approach to 'time': chapter 1 will offer a concept of subjective time by way of phenomenology, chapter 2 will complete the framework by examining concepts of inter-subjective time and the role given to temporal creativity in time-reckoning, and chapter 3 shall consider provide anthropological understanding of inter-subjective time as it is conceptualised by the clock-time system. These three chapters are essential in setting our approach to the subject of time that would later be set on the ethnography. In following, an interlude will be made to consider that framework in relation to the study's context, addressing the visualisation of temporal data in IM services, and turn-taking. This will be succeeded by three chapters devoted to the ethnographic findings this study wishes to present, ordered by themes: chapter 5 focuses on experiences of waiting, chapter 6 will develop the ethnography further to include experiences of subtextual content, and chapter 7 will address the central theme that emerged in the ethnography — *rhythm*. The final chapter (the 8th) will draw more developed conclusions from the ethnography by applying the framework presented earlier more explicitly. That chapter will also argue that because of the highly visual and proliferating use of clock-time systems in digital conversations (on IM), the interaction with strangers is experienced to be temporally nuanced by normative regimes of performative *time standards* that are evident in the participants' attention to *rhythms* of turn-taking.

## METHODOLOGY

Apart from drawing a literature review, this study offers its own ethnography. At rather an early stage of my fieldwork I realised that I will not be able to recruit many people for the participation in this ethnographic study. I knew interviews will be the main method, using a semi-structured interview guide that I created. It was ideal because I wanted to let the participants lead my interest by the terminology they use in real-time, by their emotion and narration, these are the things that invite follow-up questions — which, I believe, have much more potential than prepared questions. Therefore, I knew that the interviews will be long. Considering the time I had for fieldwork, I had decided to work with a small number of participants. Adhering to the old axiom which favours quality over quantity. I also hoped to co-produce my research findings with them. But, as I began my recruiting efforts, I understood that people prefer to limit their participation to one meeting, considering they are volunteering and are not receiving any compensation for their participation. In light of this, I concluded what I could in real-time to confer with them at the same meeting. My conclusions, of course, developed since the meetings, but not in any way that would compromise the insights that were co-produced with the participants. I also employed QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis) to identify emerging themes and concepts. With one willing participant who had more time, elicitation practices were employed by creating a time-line of messages time-stamps from three different conversations they had with strangers.

I recruited my participants in Tel-Aviv. Scouting by two main factors: (1) age group – 19-25, and (2) high social activity. The first relevant for the research because I needed my participants to be non-settled (marriage-wise) and seeking romantic activity, and the latter factor is also relevant because my study relies on how the high visibility of time influences normative concepts within digital interactions. Thus I should best



approach those who are highly active socially, might be more experienced with romantic correspondence and thus have more referencing-points that can be valuable to my research. This is also why I worked in Tel-Aviv, a central urban environment with a rich night-life culture.

## CHAPTER 1

### Finding Time: The experience of Time

The contemporary anthropological enquiry of time has its genesis in phenomenological concerns with human consciousness (Atkinson 2019, 952). In fact, Husserl's (1964) *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* elaborated the phenomenological concern for conscious experience to consider temporal constitutions of experience as well (Atkinson 2019, 952). Husserl's phenomenological interest in temporality does not provide just the fairest starting point for this chapter: I believe that in taking note of it, a very significant context is provided vis-à-vis the way anthropology approaches the subject of time. In order to move onwards from this general point about anthropological enquiry of time onto theories of time-reckoning, we need to find our theoretical equilibrium.

I suggest that we should develop our framework with the aid of an Husserlian notion regarding temporal orientation: the halo (*hof*). Through this concept we will also get acquainted enough with the phenomenology of time to properly consider what our scholars (and I) mean when referring to 'time'. The concept of the *halo (hof)* asserts that our experience of a present time (of the 'now') is projected by (and projects on) our experience of past and future (Husserl 1964). Accordingly, a halo of those temporal orientations (past and future) extends a present experience in dynamics of *retention* and *protention* (Atkinson 2019, 952; Husserl 1964). If so, for Husserl (1964), the present experience's qualities are derived from more than just present phenomena (Atkinson 2019, 952).

The *primal impression* (the 'tonal now' of an experience) of an object (of a 'present'), for instance, is constantly changing in its 'actual tonal now' (Husserl 1964, 50). The *primal impression* changes in two senses: firstly, time has a *running off continuity*

(e.g., time passes) and experiences are changing in an 'absolute flow' because of this from moment to moment (this illustrates objects' relation to space and time) (Husserl 1964, 48–49). In the second sense, the attempt to draw, recall or infuse a memory with the *primal impression* of an experience (or vice versa) is a dynamic (of temporal experience) Husserl calls *retention* (Husserl 1964, 50–57). Also, the latter kind of attempts are stipulated by the law of modification; thereby, any product of such an attempt should constitute a new experience (Husserl 1964, 50–57). *Protention* is on the other curve of the *halo* Husserl (1964, 58) describes. In my understanding of Husserl (Husserl 1964, 58–62, 76), the temporal interest of *pretention* is directed toward the future not in an attempt to constitute and intercept (to use his terminology) an expectation of the experience that would follow a present one — rather the opposite, *protention* is the way expectation intercepts the present experience.

Phenomenology focuses here on how the experience of time forms in its most preliminary sense. I.e., it treats the individual experience of time and how it features in people's sense of being and becoming (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020, 2). Negating, for a moment, the use of what may give time symbolism, context or structure: understanding the experience of time as aforementioned, what can we assert about time itself — what forms the thing on which our experience radiates the *halo* of *primal impression*, *retention* and *protention*? Husserl, as mentioned earlier, refers to a continuity: 'with regard to the running-off phenomenon, we know it is a continuity of constant transformations which form an inseparable unit [...]' in which each temporal point or interval (experienced in *primal impressions*) cannot occur twice (Husserl 1964, 48). Thus, time can be understood as a *duration*.

The Husserlian *halo* that radiates *primal impression* with *retention* and *protention* sets a fine base for our understanding of what he calls *internal time-consciousness* as

'every perception has its retentive and protentive halo' (Husserl 1964, 139). This phenomenological framework also fastens the relationship between the subject (the individual) and *duration*, thereby stressing the significance of the individual's perception as high as that of time's quality (its 'running off' continuity, i.e., *duration*). This framework allows this paper's attempt in understanding time-reckoning to make its first leap towards more anthropological concepts.

Durkheim refers to this *running-off* phenomenon as '[...] "personal time" of subjective consciousness [...]' which is experienced individually in an undifferentiated flow of *duration* (Munn 1992, 95). . Kirtsoglou and Simpson, too, find that if understood in its most natural sense, time is about duration (2020, 2). As they posit it, when we experience time outside of the cultural structures of it, then we can then understand it as a physical, universal and abstract element in a sense closer to that of Isaac Newton's (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020, 2) If so, when referring to time — the temporal cause of each experience — as *duration*, we come closer to differentiate between the phenomenological experience of it (*duration*) and the cultural experience of it. While they are different subjects (nature and culture), I do not aim to separate them from each other. Yet, it is important to register this elucidation because it invites us to consider time as something wider than its phenomena. Hence, when referring to the *phenomena* of time itself, I will hereafter refer to it as *duration*. Having made this clarification, we now have the privilege to consider time as more than *duration*, as more than a phenomena and look beyond the phenomenological experience of it and to turn to cultural concepts of time. The first step that shall reward this is one visiting the concept of time-reckoning.

## CHAPTER 2

### Taking Time: The Conceptualisation of Time

Time-reckoning (the act of telling time) seems to require a different sort of efforts that go beyond the subjective, individual experience of *duration*. Thus, this chapter will illustrate, time concepts emerge when the experience of *duration* and a wider range of experience are weaved together. Simply put, time-reckoning is the use of specific cultural categories and contingent events that — by being incorporated with *duration* — dictate a frame in which temporal reference points could be set to tell when something occurred (past, present or its assumed future), and to tell our position (as individuals or as a collective) in relation to that temporal frame of references (Munn 1992, 102–3). Time-reckoning, to wit, is what enables us to tell time (Munn 1992, 102–3). It is a term we can use to refer to how time is understood and how it is used for indication. Yet, there are various fashions in which time-reckoning can be practiced. As different fashions of time-reckoning incorporate different sorts of technique (*techne*), knowledge (*episteme*) and ethics (*phronesis*), it cannot be said that there is one way to register what time-reckoning includes as a practice apart from its mission to tell-time.

When time-reckoning is derived from internal sources, as elaborated earlier, it is perceived through the prism of consciousness and senses that are considered more subject-dependent and 'natural'. This sort of time-reckoning begets a, perhaps, less nuanced sort of experience. Durkheim '[...] divides the "personal time" of subjective consciousness — the undifferentiated flow of "duration which I feel passing within me" — from social time's morphology of cognizable units that imposes itself on "all minds"' (Munn 1992, 95). 'Personal time', which Durkheim use to refer to *duration*, is thus distinctively divided in category from 'social time', which is comprised of 'cognizable units' that transpire from collective sources. The latter can be understood as the cultural

association of activities, objects or phenomena (even natural) with time in the attempt to create temporal reference points (e.g., religious and agricultural activities, calendars, clocks, seasons, etc.). Thus, differentiated from the subjective *duration* is an array of inter-subjective time-reckoning practices that incorporate external sources and institutions (not opposite to the individual, but additional) and draw much reference from activities or cultural and social sources. Yet, it must be noted that Munn herself admits that in a Durkheimian sense, overall, 'personal time' has to be infused with '[...] collective time representations and activity rhythms' (1992, 95). Ergo, this division serves heuristic ends for us (the researchers) when we want to address a specific source, and while the two are different we must not assume that cultural knowledge (plural) of time keep a separation between internal time consciousness and a consciousness derived via external sources.

As the research question of this paper sets interaction as its locus, it is for the remaining of this chapter to review what scholars consider external sources of time-reckoning to consist of (e.g., the just mentioned 'social time'; sources external to the subjective experience of *duration*). Meanwhile, I should also note that 'social time' is not what all external sources to time-reckoning should be called, but rather a product of time-reckoning (produced using external sources, of course). Social structures are only one category among many categories of external sources — there are as many, I reckon, as scholars could identify, and their naming can depend on the scholar's conclusions.

For Durkheim, 'social time' is a paradigm of '[...] "collective representations" or "categories" that derive from and reflect the groupings and varied "rhythms" of social life' (Munn 1992, 95), considering time's qualitative heterogeneity (Munn 1992, 94–95). This qualitative sort of time-reckoning, as Munn (1992) often refers to it, rhythmically orders

*duration* according to culturally derived categories (days, months, and seasons are a fraction of the examples familiar to us). I.e., 'social time' is reckoned when *duration* is ordered via the subject's immersion within actions that dictate certain 'rhythms' (Munn 1992, 95–96). Actions' meaning and quality are segmented together with moments as the significance of 'social life' is paramount in this sort of time-reckoning. Namely, Durkheim argues that the shaping of one's experience of *duration* is influenced by social-cultural activities associated with, and exercised within, that moment (e.g., high holidays) (ibid.).

Durkheim's 'social time', if so, sits on the *quality* of certain actions as vehicles for time-reckoning. Malinowski, according to Munn's (1992, 73,103) comparison, is more occupied with the *sequence* in which activities are chained together. Namely, he finds that activities are considered in a sequence (thus forming a structure) with other activities in a way that allows temporal reference points to emerge when considering each activity in a sequential structure (Munn 1992, 73,103). Here, time-reckoning is a means of gauging time spans, coordinating activities, and dating events, and so the view of time concepts that Malinowski's approach seem to subscribe to is that time is a measure of motion (Munn 1992, 96). Malinowski make this case out of Trobriand gardening activities, which may give the false impression that their time-reckoning is 'independent' (natural) to cultural structures — referring to the lunar cycle as their source — since they set their gardening activities in accordance to natural media (Munn 1992, 96). He, on the other hand, argues, Trobriand time-reckoning is actually sourced from the sequence of the (gardening) activities themselves, rather than from natural phenomena, while they maintain an association with 'natural' phenomena (Munn 1992, 96).

Munn (1992) further enriches and sharpens our understanding of what time concepts can convey by offering Evans-Pritchard's *oecological time*. Addressing the question of how time is reckoned, *oecological time* is a concept that brokers (as it were) between (a) the attention to *the quality* of actions (Durkheim) and the *sequence* in which they are understood (Malinowski) and (b) the social and cultural concepts and representations that these activities are associated with, their considered meaning and their *rhythm* (Munn 1992, 96–97). In other words, *oecological* concepts of time convey not just time as motion (i.e., activities and their sequence), but its necessity to create and maintain cultural meanings and position. Oecological understanding of time grasps time not as a composition or rhythmic flow of static units (sensed in *duration* and used as reference points), but as a motion or process (Munn 1992, 96) — as a qualitative locus, I might add. Due to the reference to cultural concepts and representation kept in *oecological time*, the practice of time-reckoning has to be understood as a practice that is not just temporally *expressive* (revealing what time it is or when something should/did happen) but also temporally *creative* in its ability to make, maintain or reject cultural concepts in temporal reference.

One way to consider time-reckoning's function is to 'tell time'. The other view, provided by the concept of *oecological time*, shows how time can be told even if much more than just time is told — indeed it tells more than mere *duration*. Ergo, I hold this lesson: when we ask what time it is, we do not just look at the metaphorical clock, but we look around us, at ourselves and at what we do. The anthropological understanding of this acknowledges the creative process time-reckoning incorporates, which is evident in the materials (concepts and representations) we use when answering the 'when' questions. Only when properly giving creativity the credit it deserves for its part in time-reckoning, we can fully comprehend time as a cultural subject of study. The next chapter



will address creativity by way of focusing on the clock as a timepiece and as a system that regulates inter-subjective time-reckoning.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Making Time: Mechanisms of Inter-subjective Time

The last chapter has pitched an advocacy for the acknowledgement of the incorporation of creative processes in time-reckoning concepts — pointing at a more inter-subjective sense of time. When acknowledging time-reckoning as a creative process, we must (as noted) consider how it bestows and bestowed by cultural substance. The primary ethnography hopes to illustrate this. But since, at this stage, this claim might sound either ideal or amorphic, it would be just appropriate for this paper to include a chapter reviewing the most familiar and available example of temporal creativity, and discuss the clock.

The clock, as a man-made object of which purpose is to tell-time (to aid time-reckoning) provides in itself an example of something created in accordance to cultural approaches to time. Nonetheless, it is 'clock-time' — the culture that sustains the clock's role as an instrument in time-reckoning — that provides the opportunity to delve into the creative processes of time-reckoning. Our next lesson, which is provided by the clock and its system of regulation, does not merely illustrate the place creativity has in time-reckoning but it also illuminates the form in which concepts of time are given cultural roles. This place may be taken in different cultures and contexts by other instrument or by other agents, for now, though, our focus will be devoted to clock-time.

Another point worth remembering is that there were different sorts of timepieces (of instruments used in time-reckoning that were used before the invention of the clock (e.g., sun dials, water clocks, etc.). Quite, '[...] we encounter the fact that the apprehension of time as duration is always mediated by representations and epistemologies that are systematic and shared' (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020, 2). In reverence to the fact that time-reckoning could be centred around different

representations and use different timepieces (or instruments), 'clock-time' should only refer to time concepts that place clocks as the instrument of time-reckoning.

Munn (1992, 103–4) reminds us that what operates time-reckoning is a formulation of a conjunction or a synchronisation between events and (temporal) reference points, and that this reckoning (the time being told) is purpose related (confers to a defined standard of time, for instance). Bastian also recognises the purposefulness of time-reckoning, specifically in clock-time, and argues that '[...] the clock continues to symbolise capitalist forms of control and domination [...]' (2017, 42). And it is true that one of the most essential functions of the clock, as its design suggests (began with hour hands and evolved to include minute hands) is to allow organized societies to keep a highly regulated daytime period so principal activities could be well coordinated (Aveni 1989, 92). Fascinatingly, it was not quantitative science nor an economic/industrial sort of ambition that was the key driver of the desire to keep precise time (and to regulate it) and develop a precise time-telling instrument. It was the religious demand, Christian to be exact, that during the Middle Ages of Western Europe dictated a highly controlled, disciplined life, which, in turn, includes strict times in which people will be called to prayer<sup>1</sup> (Aveni 1989, 92). The cultural, social and ethical but above all religious significance of praying at the correct time of day have driven (especially during the late Middle Ages) the development of the clock and its incorporation in daily life:

Like many artifacts emanating from Christian worship in that age of religious preoccupation, the timepiece of the Middle Ages developed into a work of beauty and complexity. Clocks became showpieces. The one-hand version used to mark only the hour gave rise to two hands, as the hours and their parts chimed, gonged, and clattered their way into our cycle of daily activities, which now began to be submerged in the noise of still other machinery.

(Aveni 1989, 92–93)

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<sup>1</sup> Either manning a bell in accordance to a timepiece or later having the operation automatised.

Recalling the purposefulness of time-reckoning, the development of the clock has thus followed a religious a call-out for more precise timepieces. Early medieval timepieces and other instruments<sup>2</sup> used at that time for time-reckoning were inconsistent, presented non-uniform hours, and had limited applications to certain spaces (also terrain), seasons and geography (Aveni 1989, 93). Societies in Western Europe during the Middle Ages became more eventful and accordingly found a more substantial need of consistent time-keeping by which they could coordinate themselves (Aveni 1989, 92). This was not just linked to the dominant religious aspect (which made coordination more critical), but also to the rise of towns, and the amplification of commerce and of bureaucracy (Aveni 1989, 93). This was particularly evident during the 12th and 13th centuries, when a new, regulated temporal order — to which Aveni refers as the 'work clock' — began to dominate life in European urban communities (1989, 93).

The temporal creativity that we can trace in clock-time as a culture of time keeping is also provided by another note that we must take: the clock was at that time (and still is) not just its precision-enabling technology, but also a system of time regulation. Together (the clock and its regulation system) they create what Aveni considers to be an automated and an unnatural way of telling time (1989, 93). They are, in fact, inseparable. Without the regulation that gives the clock's indication with temporal value, the clock is deprived of its purpose. Now, I suppose one can repurpose it and use it as a decoration, or as paperweight. Yet, while anything else could be used for decoration, the clock-time system cannot replace a clock with a moose head. And so, the two are inseparable. This chapter's title is 'making time', the clock (the instrument) has been fairly discussed so far, and the remaining of the chapter will attempt to grasp a

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., the familiar sundial, gravity water clock (the drops' accumulation indicates time), sandglass, and slow-burning candles that have hours ticked off on them (to indicate time units) (Aveni 1989, 93).

general idea of the system that regulates it and thus creates clock-time. Creates, but does not perfect it. Even though the premise of clock-time is to constitute a universal system, I believe that the perfecting of clock-time is wherein its contextualisation. Thus, it is perfected by cultures, places, time and practices. The universal compatibility of the clock-time system was not merely a hoped-for feature, but a part of its mission. And so, we shall learn not just about the mission of keeping accurate time (e.g., being punctual about prayer time and coordinating daily activities around it in eventful towns), but rather about a cosmological sort of mission (I would say in retrospect) to create temporal order. Of course, Aveni's superb historical anthropology on time keeping systems traces this mission back to more concrete demands.

Par for the course that followed the Middle Ages, an age of discovery and exploration was born (Aveni 1989, 96). Navigating vast distances necessitated the keeping of accurate time, which gave the navigators indication of the distance they travelled and what is remaining. It is well known that the crossing of longitudes is conditioned with slippages of sun-time and so different times have to be kept for charting the course; the system of clock-time, once adopted, made this (time keeping, and by condition, navigation) easier and more reliable (Aveni 1989, 96). After the Middle Ages, tradesmen journeying across Europe carried conversion tables, an absolute necessity up until the 20th century, noting what system of time is kept in each city (like a traveller's guide to time-reckoning), which city began the day at noon, sunrise, or sunset; for instance, Basel started its day at noon, but they referred to it as one o'clock (Aveni 1989, 96). As learned, here not a time-difference as we (the citizens of the 21st century) understand it was to be considered, but rather a difference in applying culturally local systems that differently considered what noon means and how clocks should index day phases (is noon 12 o'clock or 1 o'clock or else). This difference illustrates not just how

natural phenomena are supposed to be referenced by the clock (when does the sun rise, reach its apex, and is set), which is a phenomenon changing from longitude to another. It mostly illustrates a cultural kind of differences in time systems, which then were present despite sharing a time-telling instrument as accurate as the clock. This strengthens Bastian's argument, that '[...] clocks are not fundamentally about measurement [of *duration*], but are produced through choices over competing social needs' (2017, 51). In other words, clock-time is not just creatively made, but creatively used.

At any rate, since the conversion tables allowed different time-systems to be mitigated, we can indeed recognise clock-time's universal compatibility. After all, conversion tables would have been impossible to use without a system as unified as clock-time. Time-reckoning differences between cities could not have been converted with time keeping instruments prior to the clock because, as we earlier learned, those timepieces' units had no precise, singular and consistent value (inconsistent timepieces are unconvertable since their units change their value unpredictably). Precision timekeeping had to be accurate to the minute because of the advent of railroads in Europe and the United States (Aveni 1989, 96). With clock-time, the Munich tradesmen could collect their goods exactly on their arrival. Avoiding running up their storage bills if the station had put their goods in storage, also avoiding the risk of ruining perishable goods which had to depart, arrive, and be collected on time (Aveni 1989, 96). The instrument (the clock) with a system of regulating laws (which also enables the clock to monitor time differences) are two dyads that form the kind of time-reckoning we call clock-time. Even before time became universally regulated in a singular clock-system (e.g., the UTC), clock-time sufficiently allowed Munich to know when a train would approach it from Basel and precisely outline its timetable, for a change.

I trust that the anthropological account of the clock's history gives utterance to the creativity incorporated in practices of time-reckoning and in the system of clock-time specifically. Yet, there is another element of clock-time I have not addressed. Now, that the instrument itself, its system and its context have been given ample attention, our understanding of clock-time is rich enough to consider how it also makes time something communicable. The ability to communicate time was provided by clock-time in a manner similar to how maps made it possible for us to tell someone where the cemetery is without taking him there. We now learned that clock-time has been developed through the ages to form a consistently operating system that can be shared globally. A system in which plans could be made referencing future time, past events could be scrutinised to their minute, and in which Dublin time could be reckoned from Havana. That advanced system of *standardised* time-reckoning made practices of conversion consistent to a globally shared system with which calendars are kept globally in sync (Aveni 1989). Almost making that standard of measurement and calculation an international language of temporality. Ostensibly making time even more communicable than it was during the periods that immediately followed the late Middle Ages; this using *time standards*.

It would be a complicated task for me to approach current *time standards* and I will have to delicately streamline through possible distractions. By that I mean that when discussing *time standards*, the discussion could easily plummet to technical material less relevant to this study. You see, if I will point to the fact that from a certain point in history clocks used to be adjusted according to a mean solar time (e.g., in the 19th century the proliferating *time standard* was calculated according to Greenwich's longitude; i.e., GMT - Greenwich Mean Time) and later according to the UTC (Universal Time Coordinated

[sic])<sup>3</sup> (Wikipedia 2022), it is almost mandatory to dedicate much attention to the difference between the two. I might also have to make an elaborated explanation of the specific mechanism of the current international *time standard* and how the slowing down of Earth's rotation (which gradually makes days longer) is mitigated by the incorporation of leap seconds to the UTC (Wikipedia 2022). I am also tempted to dedicate several paragraphs to how digital clocks are updated automatically according to the UTC (Bastian 2017, 47) and extrapolate that most people do not need to consider how the time showing on their phone is coordinated (apart from when changing time zones or moving to Daylight Saving Time). Truthfully, these technical specificities are less relevant to this study. What is relevant is the acknowledgement of the fact that today there is a single official *time standard* that is universally applied which divides time zones as the meridian system did when mean solar time was used (Bastian 2017).

Acknowledging the use of a universal *time standard* means that time has been officialised, or at least clock-time has. So much so that 'today we live by legalized time' (Aveni 1989, 97). Daylight Saving Time, which is a *time standard* in part of the UTC, is another example of how clock-time has been legalised as the standard is to follow it even when an hour is not physically 'lost' or 'gained' (Bastian 2017, 46–49). Which again reminds us that clocks are '[...] produced through choices over competing social needs' (Bastian 2017, 51). So when we consider clock-time culturally, we must not mistake a universal *time standard* to constitute a universal time culture of time-reckoning that is the same everywhere. The fact that there is a singular, universal *time standard*, does not mean that time-cultures have also become universal or singular<sup>4</sup>. The place clock-time

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<sup>3</sup> The UTC is derived from atomic clocks — the International Atomic Time (TAI) — and a calculation of Earth's rotation — Universal Time (UT1) (Bastian 2017, 47).

<sup>4</sup> This also encourages us to not address claims that posit inherent capitalistic quality in clock-time at large in this chapter and address them only at places when it makes ethnographic sense. How clock-time might be regulated according to capitalism — a system that, by certain supposition, might



takes must still be assumed to depend on context, location, culture, etc. Nonetheless, clock-time's incorporation of a universal *time standard* (the UTC) enhances clock-time's synchronicity and communicability.

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influence cultures to place productivity and accumulation as paramount that frames other activities as well as labour — was mentioned earlier mostly to suggest creativity in time-reckoning practices

## CHAPTER 4

### Approaching the Primary Ethnography

When we consider the digital space of IM, the most important stipulation of my study is that IM services (whether internal to the dating-app or external) by default limit the chat to two parties (the participant and their partner). The privacy of these two-parties conversations mean that my study cannot be used in extrapolation with social media spaces that are open-ended to more than two parties (e.g., group chats, comment threads, etc.). To be clear, even social media spaces that include IM services (e.g., direct messages on Instagram, Facebook messenger, or Kakao's messenger) separate the service from the rest of the platform's features, allowing users to interact in a more focused, private and even intimate space<sup>5</sup>. As noted, this study focuses on digital interactions between strangers that met through social-media or dating-apps in contexts either romantic or sexual. The participants and their partners expect such chats to be private (no participant reported of conversation that took place in comment threads, members groups, etc.).

Another point to remember is that this study focuses on the discursive type of digital interactions (i.e., the 'chat'). Yet, by no means are digital interactions limited to the discursive form. For instance, while two people might be privately conversing on WhatsApp, they might like each other's photos on Instagram (these 'reactions' are visible to others depending on the default privacy settings users choose), thus augmenting their interaction. Participants' digital interactions with strangers, according to my findings, are nonetheless centred around digital chat spaces (especially if the two parties have just started interacting with each other).

Another stipulation is that this study focuses on the digital interactions that occur between strangers. Friends or acquaintances might suddenly initiate (within an existing

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<sup>5</sup> Group-chats are available, too.

and prolonging interaction) a romantic/intimate turn; the context of which is much different than that of strangers. Firstly, when each party has a certain familiarity with the other, we can extrapolate that interaction may materialise differently at this point than in the case of people who just met (e.g., we can safely assume that different questions will be asked and different nuances will be expected). Secondly, when people meet through dating apps, the possibility to chat with each other is only given when they match (in the case both 'liked' or chose each other's profiles). The latter means that in the case of my participants, strangers are not complete strangers; they cannot initiate a chat uninvited but rather are invited to make conversation — unlike the elusiveness of a romantic turn between friends, here a mutual interest is explicitly expressed in its most primary form.

Of course, while this paper studies digital conversations between strangers, this paper is not limited to dating-apps (not limited to conversations that began with a mutual expression of primary interest). It is paramount to keep 'strangeness' in mind while reading this paper — not dating-apps. The research findings, in any case (even when platform migration is considered) mostly revolve the spaces of dating-apps. The subject of this study (to reiterate) is located to the experience of digital conversations with strangers (people who are regarded as 'new' connections) in romantic or intimate contexts; its principle does not change by whether they first met online (through social media or a dating app, etc.) or offline (at a pub, a library, etc.). This study's concern depends on where the participants maintained their first conversations with the new connections that they have made, not on where they have first met.

The space in which the participants hold such conversation (i.e., instant-messaging services within the app in which they met, or alternately on WhatsApp, Facebook, or Instagram) offers itself as a digital space in that it allows the chat parties to not just write, but to use other sorts of media (emoticons, pictures, videos, links to

websites or to music, etc.). My research participants, however, almost never use media other than written media during what they consider the first stages of interactions — with the exception of the arranging of sexual encounters, in which context self-portraits (selfies) are often asked for by the conversation partners (this will be discussed later).

There is another kind of media that the digital space incorporates: temporal media. Each message is accompanied with a time-stamp that presents various temporal information relating to it. Ordinarily, it will show when a message was sent (both to sender and receiver). It could also, at certain platforms and settings, show when a message was read (indicating whether the conversation partner has entered the messages thread since that message was sent). Certain platforms' user-interface will present time-stamps within the 'bubble' of a message along with its content (e.g., WhatsApp). In other cases, the time-stamps will be presented by 'tapping' or 'swiping' the message bubbles (e.g., Instagram messenger). namely, in most cases time-stamps are easily available even if not presented along the body of the message (users can see them in real-time and retrospectively as long as their associated messages have not been deleted). This sort of media is the primary interest of this study.

Furthermore, even though participants confirm that they 'reveal' time-stamps when not readily presented, there are temporal themes that emerge from my research findings that do not necessarily depend on time-stamps, not in an a-priori manner. Still, time-stamps, even at those cases, are used to confirm certain experiences — e.g., when waiting for a response to a message, participants reveal time-stamps to validate their experience with an acumen of objectivity. If so, digital spaces (specifically IM) make conversations unique in their inclusion of temporal media as something presented to the user (making it not just available, but also visible) — it is hard to imagine how each article we utter in a face-to-face conversation is traced to hours and minutes. Therein

lies this study's research question: what role is given to clock-time in digital conversations between strangers who look for a romantic/sexual partner.

As noted earlier, the mode of digital conversation this paper studies is essentially private and limited to two people. Taking note of the dyadic form of these interactions should not lead us to mistake them for letter-writing nor for a mere digital mediation of a face-to-face conversation. And so, the next paragraphs will give a very brief overview of a framework that addresses dyadic interactions (conversations, in kind). This would also complete this introductory chapter.

Typically, the classical linguistic models of communication should proclaim social media (and digitally mediated interactions at large) to be incompatible with standard dyadic frameworks for conversation analysis (Dynel 2017). In most cases digital spaces of interaction may involve more than two participants and enable interaction between participants that are separated spatially and temporally, and thus proliferate with asynchronous interactions (Dynel 2017, 62). Turn-taking frameworks at such settings are, of course, exhibited but are more complicated than the dyadic framework, as notions of 'speaker' and 'hearer' might be inadequate for asynchronous interactions between more than two people (Dynel 2017, 63).

Although the conversations my participants talked about (one-to-one digital interactions) coincide with the speaker-hearer/sender-receiver dyadic exchange, in a linguistic perspective, even face-to-face interactions should not, in most cases, '[...] be reduced to exchanges of merely two participants, necessitating more complex frameworks' (Dynel 2017, 62). Since I do believe it cannot be said that this study simplifies the framework with which it addresses its subject, I am certain that our approach could comfortably contain the notion of role turn-taking (speaker-hearer/sender-receiver) in dyadic interactions. Keeping in mind that this should be

understood as a socially organised practice and is shaped by culture-specific phenomena such as grammar, taboos and impositions — any practice of turn-taking is sensitive to the context within which it is used (Sidnell 2007, 230–31). And so, I hope that the attention to clock-time could contribute some understanding as to how turn-taking could also be shaped by cultural concepts of time. In any case, this little understanding of turn-taking prepares us well enough to take our developed understanding of clock-time and now approach the findings of my fieldwork in Tel-Aviv.

## CHAPTER 5

### Ethnography, part 1: The Temporal Nuances of The Wait

When we consider conversations in the turn-taking framework, it is almost inevitable that we have to consider the issue of waiting. If the gentle reader will kindly recall a conversation they recently had with someone, a stranger or a friend, you should find yourself waiting during this activity. You might recall how you were waiting to speak, waiting to listen, waiting to find something to say or be able to say it, waiting to hear your partner answer your question, waiting together, perhaps, for the emergence of an interesting conversation topic you could break a silence with or even waiting for silence to end your conversation. For this research' participants, waiting for a message on digital IM spaces is much more a visible a practice than waiting in a face-to-face conversation. And so, this chapter will try to incorporate the framework of turn-taking in this study's ethnography by addressing experiences of waiting. Additionally, by demonstrating how turn-taking on IM is visualised, we will begin to consider how clock-time nuances digital interactions with strangers.

The first manner in which the waiting of the participants can be considered in a visual sense is given by the fact that when they wait for a message, they rather wait to *see* that they have gotten a message. Namely, the waiting is halted not by reading the contents of the message but by seeing that you have actually gotten a new message, that the thread in *the chat space* marks a blue or a red dot (or other visual flag) that lets you know something new was added to it, that an object (if you will) was sent to you. Considering the digitality of the chat's space (of instant messaging) and in line with what the research participants told me, messages are experienced, first and foremost, as visual thing. Like a person receiving a wrapped gift, the experience of the activity (receiving a gift) precedes the experience provided in the knowledge bestowed by the

given thing itself (be it a book or a box of cigars). By my participants descriptions of their waiting, I can soundly extrapolate that — during the wait — the expected or hoped-for content of the message is less relevant, as they (in the initials stages of a conversation) seldom expect any written thing, but rather initiative or reciprocity (recall turn-taking). Hence the participants' waiting for a new 'text bubble' in the chat should also be considered in its visual sense, not just in the temporal sense I alluded to through this entire paper.

The second and most significant visual sense I would bring our attention to is that in which the experience of waiting regards the issue of time-stamps. You see, time-stamping allows, as a clock-time instrument, to materialise the timing of each 'turn' made in the conversation by quantifying its temporal position with numbers (as timers do), thus giving it visual form. A message that was sent at a certain time, even if viewed a day after it was received, will be marked by a time-stamp and so will give the reader an opportunity to pay attention not just to the content of the message and to the fashion in which it is written, but also to the timing in which it was sent. More importantly to this study's participants is the use of this (visualisation of turn-taking's timing) to compare each message's time with the time of messages that preceded or succeeded it. Since messages' time-stamps are available in retrospect, they make lags in the conversation more tangible. By attending to experiences of waiting, what this chapter will invite you to consider is how participants' interpretation of their digital conversations may be nuanced with temporal meaning (this is the main interest of this study). Accordingly, the findings presented in this capter will encourage us to consider clock-time not just as something that visually marks each message's place in time, ostensibly having neutral presence, but as something that makes significant impacts on the shaping of this communicative experience, even if considered in retrospect. I will come back to that in more detail, but



first, we will have to turn back a page to genesis, to the ethnography on all its thick descriptions.

The 'waiting' theme emerged as soon as when I asked my participants about why they use dating-apps. Two of my participants, whom are single, referred to the possibility to interact with a great a number of people through these services. I followed up by asking: 'yet you could meet many people in parties, bars and cafes; what advantage do these apps have for you(?)'. To Daria<sup>6</sup> — a 26-year-old woman who has just graduated from college and began working in a highly demanding position — dating-apps' key advantage is tripartite. (1) she feels that on OkCupid she can choose between more people compared to the people she ordinarily interacts with outside the app, thus increasing the chances she will find someone she would be keen on, (2) the digital mediation (via IM) of first-time interactions makes her feel less embarrassed as she would in face-to-face first encounters because she experiences digital interactions with less intensity, and (3) she feels that the app also allows a volume of 'experimentation' (התנסות, her terminology) to be very high, which does not just increase the chance to meet someone 'right' but increases the likelihood it would happen soon.

Thinking about Daria's point, the issue of efficiency comes to mind. As if she is not just trying to meet the right person for her (or someone whose company will be pleasing for the time being) in the most promising of ways, but she is also trying to actualise it as soon as possible. The use of dating apps, she believes, can minimise the risk of waiting. Often she talks about efficiency; in fact, she uses the Hebrew word *hespek* (הספק) which refers to the output by which something can be made/produced compared to the time it took to make it (as in: the *hespek* of the office printer is 10 one-sided pages per minute). This consideration also comes to her mind when I asked her

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<sup>6</sup>The dating app Daria uses is OkCupid; she has also tried Tinder and Bumble. In all of which conversation between two people are enabled only when both 'liked' each other profiles.

about shifts from digital interactions to face-to-face encounters (i.e., dates): '[...] I don't really like talking [on the app] intensively even if the conversation is really flowing and meet them only after a week because it ends up being a disappointment in most cases. Like, you are talking with someone who is really flowing<sup>7</sup> and in reality [referring to face-to-face] it just does not flow, [it turns to be] just a waste of time'. In light of this, when people leave a good impression on her, she says she would rather meet them as soon as she realises her interest in them — waiting serves no end.

The conversations on the app and on dates are primarily, thus, means to an end. This is also evident to the reference Daria makes to the app's advantage in allowing high volume of 'experimentation': '[...] the objective is to pick-out (pick) people, as far as I'm concerned'. On the surface, waiting seems to be the dominant experience — Daria is waiting to meet a suitable partner and confirm his suitability — but if considered more holistically, while waiting can be her *experience* it is not the *activity* she practices in the aforementioned. In this regard, the impression, actually, is that *waiting* is what she is trying to avoid in her efforts to keep the output of experimentation high so it would not take long before she finds a partner appropriate for a relationship.

The experience of waiting has also emerged (as a theme) when Ethan<sup>8</sup> — a 22-year-old man who currently works as a bouncer in one of Tel-Aviv's most popular clubs and has longed worked in Tel-Aviv's night-life scene — has described the advantages of dating apps. Here too, waiting emerged with a manner which treats it with disdain. Ethan says that he expects every Grindr user to know that the app is used with the purpose of finding possible partners for hook-ups (i.e., sexual encounters), not for romantic

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<sup>7</sup> Slang for fluent, spontaneous cooperation which attests to the aptitude of actors to situations or to other actors.

<sup>8</sup> The dating app Ethan normally uses is Grindr, an app dedicated to gay men; he also tries Tinder alternately. In all of which conversation between two people are enabled only when both 'liked' each other profiles.

relationships. Interactions, he notes, may develop to romantic contexts<sup>9</sup> but if they would (which is extremely rare) they would still arise in a conversation firstly intended to arrange a hook-up. The advantage he finds in using dating apps, accordingly, is in the increased *immediate* availability of casual sex. Even parties or hangouts that are considered to be part of the gay scene in Tel-Aviv, he says, cannot be counted on as spaces where a hook-up partner is likely to be found. Grindr is very 'purposeful' about sex, most conversations begin with 'how, when, and what' questions, Ethan says. In fact, the first question Ethan is likely to get asked or ask is 'for now(?)', referring to whether the partner he matched with can meet in the next hours or later than that.

Further, in his understanding of 'the world of casual sexual encounters', a person's attitude and character are not relevant and that is why most conversations will not try to evoke anything relating to personality: 'you are treated like a piece of meat', he adds, 'conversations go very quickly' (a matter of hours, at the most). He would usually be asked about his age, sexual preferences (roles); at times, he would be asked to send pictures of his nude body, and even be asked (this is quite ordinary, he says) whether he has any STDs. I said that this sounds almost like a bureaucratic process, 'exactly so', Ethan retorted, 'as if you just need to fill in your details'.

You might wonder what sign is there to waiting in Ethan's experience of the high-speed, purposeful interactions on Grindr. This high-pacing, responsive environment may change, though; like the screeching halt of a race car on the tarmac, perhaps, waiting is sensed when the meat market's commotion suddenly stops — when Ethan finds himself waiting for his partner to write him back, when he realises he has been rejected. It is clear, by my research findings (and this is true for all participants) that rejections are

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<sup>9</sup> 'Romance' references here the context in which people talk and meet with the intention to discover love that could support a relationship. What Ethan describes, to his differentiation (which I believe most Tel-Avivians share), is that meetings centred around the purpose of having sex, casually, are not romantic in purpose (even if they could be experienced as such). These sexual meetings may occur just once or more.

understood implicitly and are not explicitly expressed (see the next chapter). Some participants might consider a rejection when they wait longer periods of time, but in Grindr's case, due to its high-speed culture (if I may), even an hour's worth of waiting constitutes a rejection. Ethan clarifies this and states that he would not consider any act of waiting as an indication of rejection: it is a swift change between waiting a couple of minutes for a reply to waiting a significantly longer amount of time that tells a rejection (if the message is marked as 'read'<sup>10</sup>). 'If you are in a conversation and the communication is running and then, all of a sudden, he does not answer [my messages] you are then rejected [...] it is not a pleasant feeling'.

Waiting, to frame it in our attention for digital visualisation of time, is experienced in a shift from waiting (expecting) the same few moments that the partner thus far taken for sending a response to waiting significantly longer. This is a quantitative comparison given way by the clock-time (which the app incorporates as time-stamps). Ethan says that when he suddenly experiences a wait, which is further validated as an experience by looking at the time-stamps to confirm that he has indeed waited longer than normal, he tries to stop waiting and to move on. There were cases in which he even blocked the partner, making it impossible for that partner to write him again whatever the message would be; recall how messages are firstly experienced as visual objects. This, he says, helps him regain a sense of control. In Grindr, as Ethan testifies, as long as conversations go smoothly in the high pace of this digital space they more likely to result in a hook-up (recall the comparison with bureaucracy). Ipso facto, as this chapter hoped to demonstrate, participants experience waiting on IM spaces in visual terms and are likely to sense a rejection via temporal media.

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<sup>10</sup> Some instant messaging apps (whether separate or integrated within dating apps) also include the feature of read receipts. This indicates whether a message was read by its recipient or not, it also denotes when exactly in time the message was read (this is also time-stamped).

Having delved into how IM's visualisation of clock-time influences experiences of waiting and how this temporal media nuances rejection, we can now draw an additional lesson out of the observation we took: both Ethan's and Daria's cases imply that each digital space is experienced in association with a temporal regime of *time standards* that dictate what is a proper time for turn-taking (for messages to be sent). Such *time standards are* context specific (the context being either a romantic agenda or sexual) and space specific (what digital IM space is used and in what cultural locale — what city/country). Conversations' development — as Daria considers their progress (*hespek*, to be precise; output) — can spread over longer periods of time while Ethan considers time in a shorter span. In Daria's experience a minute's value is different than its worth in Ethan's experience. Metaphorically, in Daria's time zone (which is her understanding of how turn-taking should be paced in the dating app space and in Tel-Aviv) the sun shines for a longer period than in Ethan's time zone. That is, a workday (the amount of time dedicated to the completion of tasks) is longer in Daria's time zone than it is in Ethan's. The base for this analogy would be further developed in the upcoming chapters, but for now let us acknowledge how waiting articulates a clock-time reckoning that is supported by the visibility of conversations in the digital space (of IM) and appreciate that this reckoning expresses temporal and cultural standards of communication between strangers in romantic/sexual contexts.

## CHAPTER 6

### Ethnography, part 2: The Temporal Nuances of The Subtext

The previous chapter delved into how clock-time influences experiences of waiting on IM between strangers, and proposed that the visualisation of temporal data taken by IM interfaces enables participants to suppose context and space specific *time standards*. This chapter will try to delve into how such waiting might be also associated with communicative meanings. It will also suggest that time-stamps on IM are given (by participants) with a performative property through which subtextual content<sup>11</sup> is communicated and perceived. This chapter will present research findings that illustrate how the *time standards* regime that the participants perceive emerges in interpretive and communicative practices (e.g., *ghosting*) on IM conversations. Whether they interpret time-nuances as receivers or as senders<sup>12</sup>, I believe we can identify a sensibility that considers the clock as something performative.

Digital IM spaces allow interactions to become highly visual and data-informed and thus augment the materials that can be used for articulation. In theory, the incorporation of time-stamps (see chapter 4) augmented these available materials further to also include temporal media. Other examples of materials that the digital medium has made available and are used for articulation in IM spaces are emoticons (emojis), photography, audio (recorded messages), and, of course, 'memes' circulated on social-media. My research findings, to wit, demonstrate that temporal media (specifically, clock-time) is also used in that communicative fashion. If messages contain explicit content (the announced message) and implicit content (its subtextual meaning), time-stamps could be considered, in this ethnography, as holding implicit, communicative function.

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<sup>11</sup> Subtext (noun): 'the implicit or metaphorical meaning (as of a literary text)' (Merriam-Webster 2022).

<sup>12</sup> I.e., whether they use time-concept to explain themselves or to understand messages their partner had sent them.

Ethan, as we have seen, considers the experience of prolonged waiting<sup>13</sup> as such that is indicative of his conversation partner's rejection. This rejection is understood implicitly, not explicitly, and (in his view) he confirms his interpretation by looking at the chat's time-stamps (which allow his comparison of chat lags to be precise). Thanks to him we learn that rejections in Grindr's (Tel-Avivian) space are not stated, but implied. Daria, too, says that men rarely are direct about stating their lack of interest. They do not even cancel dates (if scheduled), she tells me, they just disappear — this is often called *ghosting*. It (*ghosting*) refers to a behaviour (experienced on IM) by which people whom with you had a continuous interaction suddenly ignore your messages for an extensive amount of time but then write back and thus appear and disappear repetitively (like a ghost). However, my participants call any act of ignoring an act of *ghosting*, even if the partner does not re-appear. This may be expected as Israelis use the English '*ghosting*' and not the Hebrew *refaim* (רפאים), ergo the nuanced meaning of the original may be lost on them. Yet the attention to acts of ignoring as practices that are understood culturally (evident in the dedication of a term to a behaviour) alludes to the sensitivity my participants believe conversations with strangers on digital platforms require.

Tanya — a 20-year-old woman who has a boyfriend and does not use dating apps — elaborated on *ghosting* practices (her terminology). She says 'with *ghosting* [...] behaviour is also a language. When people do not answer [your messages] you realise ["]okay, I am not welcomed["']. Since she has a boyfriend, she discards any romantic or sexual proposal offered to her on Instagram's messenger (she refers to Instagram's IM more than to other IM services). She admits that at certain instances, especially if strangers try to flirt with her (to differ from acquaintances she made and are unaware of her relationship status), she would practice *ghosting*. 'How', I asked, 'people might think

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<sup>13</sup> This prolonged waiting is understood in a relative sense which accords with Grindr's space, as elaborated in the previous chapter (recall the swift change in responsivity).

you are just busy and not consider a lack of interest'. Her elaboration on the practice of *ghosting* illuminates how significant the role of nuances is on IM, especially of nuances of time, and how time may function communicatively. You cannot just ignore them, she says, you have to enter the chat's window so their message would be marked 'read'/'seen' or that they will see when you were logged-in for the last time (some apps allow users to see when their partner was last active on the platform). Then, with the passage of time, they will understand that you had seen their message, had an opportunity to reply, and that you chose not to (this is especially assumed when people realise that a significant amount of time has passed).

Let me bring Tanya's master-class in *ghosting* back to the framework of this study. Since 'read' receipts are time-stamped, their *ghosting* meaning is provided by the nuances of clock-time. For if one sees that their message was read at 13:00, and it is 19:00, whether they waited or saw the time-stamped retrospectively, one could assume that whatever kept the partner busy is not keeping them busy anymore and that there is another reason for the lack of response. What kept them busy may be considered to have passed in local understandings of clock-time: whether shift jobs are considered, or whether evening is culturally viewed as a time of leisure activities. I do not wish to stress much attention to this since Ethan's and Daria's cases have shown that *time standards* are kept close to more specific contexts, and what may be considered a long time in the culture of one space (Grindr) may be less acute in another space (OkCupid).

The important thing in Tanya's illustration of how clock-time is given a communicative function is the sensitivity to time-stamps and to the passing of time. Imbedded in the lack of her expressed response, an implicit message is left by the last time-stamp. Thus, Tanya's account reveals a performative use of time for communication (which may be impossible on non-digital grounds because of the lack of



temporal visualisation in turn-taking). 'Does it work(?)', I asked Tanya with a grin, 'I do not think that these people will write again, it hurts their ego', she answered. Perhaps Israelis still call this practice *ghosting* even when partners do not re-appear because (to maintain the metaphor) a sign of life is indeed left, a time-stamped 'read' receipt. Yet, I believe the offended ego is just secondary to the reason 'ghosted' people may not write another message. Daria and Ethan already clarified that rejection is implicitly expressed and temporally identified; only when a rejection is acknowledged, an ego could be hurt.

Let me present another finding by which we could address the reason for my participants' much reverence to implicit information. Ethan talks about how, through IM, he cannot know the scent of a stranger he considers meeting with, though it is very much important to him in sexual encounters; other information takes precedence. Daria, too, admits that she considers whatever is available to her on the digital spaces of IM to decide whether a possible date partner is 'worth the [her] time'<sup>14</sup>. Yet things she can notice on face-to-face interactions, such as body language and facial expressions, are not evident in interactions that take place on IM. According to her, you have to pay attention to more than just the message's content to know whether a date will work out or not. In consideration of time being part of the form of IM by design — one might say that time is 'stamped' into the form of IM — it may not be a surprise that the participants are nuancing their conversation with media that is available on IM services in addition to the textual kind.

As shown, time-stamps are not just a neutral element bestowed by the design of digital conversation spaces, but they are treated with cultural meaning which, in turn, nuance the interaction. Oftentimes participants talk about how, in these delicate circumstances where little about their conversation partner is known to them, the way in

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<sup>14</sup> She points to how she needs to get her hair and makeup done, dress up and commute to the city centre for each date.

which things are written, along with what is written, informs them about the partner's intentions, interest level, and way of conduct (if not to say personality). Almost everything that stems in the digital interactions they have with strangers is treated by my participants' narratives; content and form. This might be the result of their scrutiny of the strangers they converse with: considering that certain kinds of information are impossible to receive through digital mediation, they make up for it with what *is* receivable. In conclusion, the participants' turn to time-stamps is taken not just because partners are not direct about their interest level (e.g., rejection is not explicitly expressed), but also because they consider digital mediation in IM to offer limited impression of the conversation partner (when compared to face-to-face encounters). In any case, their approach indicates an experience of a symbiosis of form with content, which locates the role of clock-time to the subtextual level.

The evidence to the experience of a form-content symbiosis is extremely present when the participants talk about fluent turn-taking, or in Daria's words: 'how things flow'.<sup>15</sup> Much like the bureaucratic attire of the meat-market Ethan describes, the form of interaction is experienced in relation to its purpose, to its context. The purposeful approach to partners on Grindr is set to confirm or refute mutual desires and schedule an encounter, as illustrated earlier. *Ghosting*, the opposite of fluent turn-taking, also demonstrates this symbiosis since communicated absence articulates the absence of interest. In addition, how things 'flow', Daria says, feeds her intuition about the compatibility she might have with her partner. To confirm the validity of her intuition vis-a-vis the flow, she looks at the conversation's time-stamps. Thus, the flow Daria alludes to also demonstrates the role clock-time takes in this form-content symbiosis and it brings this ethnography much closer to the material discussed in the early chapters of this

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<sup>15</sup> Slang for fluent, spontaneous cooperation which attests to the aptitude of actors to situations or to other actors.

study. In using the word 'flow', Daria indexed a theme I identified in meetings I had with the rest of my participants as well: *rhythm*.

*Rhythm*, to which the next chapter is dedicated, is the operative theme in experiences of waiting and the temporal subtext my participants are sensitive to. Hence, *rhythm* is the central theme of this ethnography. Waiting, for one, is experienced as a rejection when there was a swift change in the *rhythm* of turn-taking to a slower degree (e.g., from 3 minutes to 30, if Ethan's experience is to be illustrated in its clock-time form).

## CHAPTER 7

### Ethnography, part 3: The Temporal Nuances of The Rhythm

If thus far we mostly referenced experiences of *rejection* in order to show how nuances of time emerge in conversations between strangers on digital spaces, this chapter will address experiences of *acceptance*. Or rather, how participants consider clock-time nuances in experiences of mutual interest (and of fluent turn-taking). When discussing this, the most central theme in my ethnography will emerge — *rhythm*. This chapter will firstly provide a clearer definition of *rhythm*. Secondly, to be able to approach the upcoming ethnographic findings properly, we have to consider an argument I have made earlier: the participants adhere to culturally and contextually perceived *time standards* by which the motion of turn-taking (of the exchange of messages) is considered proper or improper. This will be followed by an additional discussion of ethnographic findings.

When we consider *duration* (see chapter 1) to be represented in inter-subjective time concepts (see 'social time' in chapter 2) by reference-points (e.g., as provided by the clock's regulation system), we have to associate it (clock-time) with activities or phenomena in order to understand what *rhythm* is. To analogue my participants' accounts of it, a *rhythm* is calculated when sequential activity (e.g., smoking a cigarette) or cultural/natural experiences (e.g., listening to music or witnessing solar day-phases) are given with a temporal reference-point that is then judged against other temporal reference-points of other performances of that activity. For instance, by knowing that someone smokes (activity) roughly three cigarettes (sequence) an hour (temporal reference-point based on clock-time), we know the rough *rhythm* by which they smoke. By looking at a music score sheet (which notes the number of beats in a measure), we know the *rhythm* by which the music should be played.

The clock, as reviewed in chapter 3, is a creation centred around *rhythm*. Its very mission is to accurately represent reference-points in accordance with the *rhythm* in which a locale's mean solar time changes<sup>16</sup>. At any rate, clock-time is a concept of time in which time-reckoning, I remind you, is based on the clock. In cultures that adhere to the system of clock-time for reckoning, activities will be given with temporal references by the use of a clock. Nonetheless, if we watch someone smoking in the park, we might not be able to consider the *rhythm* in which he smokes quite accurately without setting a clock out. Instead, we might just say 'he smokes a lot' — making reference both to quantity and time (smoking five cigarettes an hour and smoking five cigarettes a day invokes different judgements relating to a volume by which one smokes). Yet, my research studies digital conversations on IM. And unlike smoking in the park<sup>17</sup>, each message's temporal reference is visualised by a time-stamp; i.e., the clock is always 'out'. This means, the ability to gauge a *rhythm* is much more available on IM than it is on face-to-face interactions.

As shown, in romantic contexts, where the conversations are supposed to be more personal (as illustrated by Daria's account), rejection is experienced in chat lags that are longer than the lags that would be interpreted as rejection in sexual contexts where conversations are kept more technical or practical (as illustrated by Ethan's account). Since the participant expects each context to have a certain *rhythm* of conversation (of turn-taking), each context may be said to have its own *time*, its own temporal order by which things are expected to occur. A rejection, as shown earlier, is sensed when the time- is deviated (it is not just sensed by the partner's absence). The

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<sup>16</sup> Or at least in how temporal change is perceived in the culture of that locale, not all cultures have to define temporal change (*duration*) by the mean solar time system.

<sup>17</sup> Let me stipulate this distinction: considering IoT (the Internet of Things), certain activities can be quantified. Even electronic cigarettes may, in the near future, automatically gather data and visualise it on an app that would show the user how many puffs he/she inhaled per minute. I am unaware of any such services, but they would make another example of how digital technologies may visualise the association of activities with clock-time.

participants' observance of *standards* that depend on clock-time is evident in the fact that they confirm the suspicion of rejection (or their 'intuition' regarding the partner's interest, to use Daria's words) by looking at the time-stamps; thus, there is a practice by which they validate the sensed deviation. The participants also practice this in instances where their partners re-appear but communicate at a slower pace (this will be addressed in this chapter); what is actually reckoned through time-stamps, according to my ethnography, is a *rhythm*.

Instances where *rhythm* has slowed are understood in addition to rejection vs. acceptance but are rather judged in comparison to an amorphic prism of (the partner's) interest level. However the study's participants construct this prism of interest level, its indication is derived from the *rhythm* by which turn-taking (i.e., the conversation) are exchanged. This *rhythm* (or rather, the expected *rhythm*, the expected *time standard*) is used, I reiterate, by Ethan to set the threshold beyond which the time waited for a response can indicate a rejection. Other elements than time are considered by my participants when they assess their partner's interest in them, not all are relevant to this study. Personal questions, sharing of anecdotes, humour, and continuity of topics proposed by the participants, are explicit articles the participants address when referring to things that express a partner's interest. Yet, I would like to remind the gentle reader of the significance my participants hold for implicit information and the symbiosis they experience between form and content. I hope this chapter will contribute to the elucidation of how *rhythmic* attention (which exhibits a conceptualised *time standard*) relates to that.

Let us consider Ethan's case for this paragraph. He is single, and despite his frequent use of Grindr, he is looking for a romantic relationship. Earlier, I made a note of his conviction of the rarity of romantically oriented conversation to occur on Grindr; but I

inquired into that rarity. I asked Ethan what can indicate the difference between partners that only seek the arrangement of a sexual encounter and those who may also be open to arrange a (romantic) date. If on most Grindr conversations 'you [find yourself] talking very repetitively [because] the questions you get asked repeat themselves [and in a] a very lame and mechanic conversation', a change of this indicates a romantic prospect. Ethan first described such change as that which is sensed when a partner shows more patience. I asked him what 'patience' looks like, and he said: 'I think that messages [have to be] longer [...] than shorter messages like (")yes(") or (")no(") questions [about preferences, elaborated earlier] that are usually asked and that someone on the other side is interested in you and in seeing you [...] not like a vulture'. In opposition to the a high-paced, purposeful, market-like environment of Grindr, conversation that go more slowly are those where Ethan can recognise romantic prospect. Ipso facto, it is the sort of (personal) questions that would allow longer answers and require patience which would make the *rhythm* (of turn-taking) slower and more compatible to the expression of interest and acknowledgement (recall the form-content symbiosis I argued for). In those cases, the *rhythm* would be akin to the *time standard* we can identify in Daria's experience (of OkCupid). To clarify, this is different than a *rhythmic* change that indicates a lack of interest because here what makes the *rhythm* slow down is the quality of the messages, not the presence of chat lags. 'I think that this is what we all want', Ethan adds, 'To be truly seen, [...] accepted and loved. We want [genuine] communication'.

The desire to be seen and Ethan's association of it with (form) the *rhythm* of the chat, should also be viewed from the other side of the looking glass: the desire to see the partner. Daria emphasises the significance of practical considerations when she talks about the 'flow' of the conversation and advances our approach to attend not just to

*rhythmic* speed, but to *rhythmic* continuity. It is a continuous *rhythm* that gives her the 'space' to delve into who her partner is: 'when the chat is continuous there is much more room for a kind of responsivity in the sense of taking the conversation to deeper levels. [...] if I see that I need to wait an hour for a response, then my whole interest in what I asked might fade off. [...] so I would not ask everything I want to if I know it will take him an hour to respond'. Here, again, the visibility of the time-stamp is crucial. Apart from the already illustrated fact of how time-stamps are used to confirm experiences of waiting and their interpretation of temporally-nuanced subtext, they are also used in such instances where practical evaluations are considered. When Daria chats with someone who, at a certain point, begins to lag behind her messages, she might continue chatting with him, but she will move her attention to new partners she matched with. Thus, putting the one who lags on 'the back burner' (to use her terminology) until there will be a change for the better (in terms of *rhythm*) or until her interest in him will fade. When conversations 'flow' in the continuous *rhythm* Daria considers to be optimal, she will consider it as a sign that the partner is worth dating and will begin to wait for an explicit date invitation.

The 'flow' Daria refers to should not be understood only as *rhythm*. When she talks about 'flow', I understand that she refers to both *rhythm* and the quality of what is discussed (recall the form-content symbiosis). She would expect biographical information, but more importantly she would want to experiment enough with the partner to a level that would allow her to have an impression of his personality and his interest in her; considering qualities like responsivity, cleverness, humour, and whether he arouses her curiosity or not. She is very keen on maintaining a 'flow': when referring to deviations from it (in telling of past experiences), she describes them by saying that 'the momentum was lost'. When we consider the symbiosis of form (specifically, the *rhythm* of turn-



taking) and content (optimally, an engaging conversation), it is not hard to empathise with Daria's reference to the loss of momentum. If I were to consider every ethnographic finding discussed so far, it seems that whatever the context is, my participants' first wish is to gain synchronicity with the strangers they meet online — whether to establish an interest (e.g., Daria and Ethan) or to maintain their distance (e.g., Tanya). They wish for a synchronicity of expectations in a digital space that allows asynchronous forms of interactions. Thus, as we have seen in this chapter, participants' *rhythmic* awareness given the clock a central role which, in turn, nuances experiences of interest, of synchronicity.

Where form and content are symbiotic, their wish for synchronicity is like a wish to understand and to be understood. At least, to have that opportunity to express themselves to a partner willing to listen, and be able to understand their partner; hence the attention to the nuances available in digitally mediated interactions. As I wrote earlier: when we keep turn-taking in mind, the participants expect reciprocity (which is expressed in synchronicity). This reminds me of what Ethan told me when I asked him whether he feels that he can control a chat's *rhythm* when the partner seems to be less interested: 'it takes two to tango'.

## CHAPTER 8

### Time for Conclusions

The previous chapters illustrate how the visualisation of turn-taking's temporal nuances (by time-stamps) feeds into the participants' *rhythmic* attention to the extent they experience culture and context specific *time standards*. Embedding experiences of *duration* (subjective time) within what Durkheim called 'social time' (inter-subjective time — e.g., clock-time) (Munn 1992, 95) is also what enables the participants to sensibly experience *duration* in a *rhythmic* sense and regard it with cultural terms through which they could also draw temporal expectations directed at their conversation partner. Due to their *rhythmic* attention, each message (each 'turn' that is taken) can be said to be experienced in *retention* and *protention* (recall Husserl's *halo*) to other temporal reference points based on clock-time. By this embeddedness of the participants' subjective experience (*duration*) with an inter-subjective system (clock-time), their experience is contextually and temporally nuanced with social-cultural concepts (e.g., rejection, acceptance, attraction, and romance).

The way in which my participants use time-stamps to validate their experience illustrates a creative fusion between internal and external sources for time-reckoning (recall the argument made on the creativity of time-reckoning). In the context of clock-time, this oscillation truly illustrates that the conception of time addresses more than mere *duration*. 'Every clock tells a story. Every clock takes a position in a debate about time. Every clock is an attempt to shape how people think about time' (Birth 2013 in: Bastian 2017, 52), especially if we keep in mind that a clock is not just an instrument, but also a system of time-reckoning.

The findings also show that *rhythm's* dependency on synchronicity materialises in the constitution of contextual *time standards*, which in the digital environment of IM are

supported by highly visualised clock-time references. Accordingly, the research findings make the digital case show how activities are appropriated and are associated each with a *rhythm*, with a *time standard* that contextually expresses cultural concepts. This is rather similar in dynamics to Evans-Pritchard's *oecological time* reckoning as it accounts for *the quality* of actions (Durkheim), the sequence in which they are understood (Malinowski) and their defining social-cultural concepts and representations (Munn 1992, 96–97).

Lewis & Weigert offer a typology of time structures within 'social time' (inter-subjective time) and divide them between 'self time' (the individual level), 'interaction time' (the group level), and 'institutional time' together with 'cyclic time' (both address the cultural level) (Lewis and Weigert 1981, 434). Each has its rules of time regulation but their key argument is that these structures are still stratified, embedded and synchronised with each other (Lewis and Weigert 1981, 450). For instance, 'cyclical time' (clock-time in our context), is the central reference system used in the structure of 'interaction time', which is embedded with a strata of 'institutional time' such as 'organisational time' (manifested, for example, in a work schedule that dictates when work may be paused and social activity can commence) (Lewis and Weigert 1981, 445–46). What they describe as 'social time structures' is ostensibly what I referred to when I claimed that the participants demonstrate a use of *time standards*. Additionally, as Lewis and Weigert argue, the embeddedness, stratification, and synchronisation of *time standards* ('social time structures' in their work) are important cultural dynamics that maintain the rationality of time (Lewis and Weigert 1981, 450–52).

Because digital spaces that mediate face-to-face interaction highly visualise temporal data (via clock-time)<sup>18</sup>, a symbiosis between temporal form and communicative

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<sup>18</sup> Those which my participants used.

content is experienced. Since the clock and the universal compatibility of its system are revered with authority, time-stamps can be used as a source of credibility drawn by participants to affirm the value of the temporal nuances they experience. Therefore, despite how we understand clock-time to be a system of fixed, regulative laws (Aveni 1989, 96), the ethnography has shown that clock-time can be culturally and contextually reappropriated with meaning and application. Similarly to how the ubiquity of photography has enabled the appropriation of it with communicative function on social media platforms to the level it is somewhat analogous to language itself (Miller 2015, 13–14), the ubiquitous visual presence of clock-time (via time-stamps) in IM has enabled time to be performed for communicative and interpretive ends. Furthermore, by showing that cultural concepts of time are manifested and are performed in interactions between strangers on digital spaces, I hope this work contributed to the anthropological understanding of digital interaction and that it would tempt more anthropologists to study time in the digital context.

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