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What day is it? Changes to the Sociotemporal Order and the Self during COVID-19

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What day is it? Changes to the Sociotemporal Order and the Self during COVID-19

Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

This study equips a sociological perspective to examine two interconnected changes to social life during the COVID-19 pandemic: shifts in established temporal patterns of daily life, and the sudden increase of online (mediated) social interaction. These changes are explored through qualitative analysis of 31 digital artifacts that together comprise an “Internet meme.” Artifacts were collected between April and December of 2020 from Instagram and Twitter; they reference time in the year 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, and/or the notion of “self” specifically in 2020. Findings suggest that these interconnected changes have consequences on shared meanings of symbols that construct the meaning of time, and the qualitative experience of living in time that concern the social and temporal structures of daily life.

Keywords: sociotemporal order, qualitative time, online self, COVID-19, Internet meme

Introduction

Of course, being confined to our homes has taken its toll on everyone. The reduction in social interaction and the removal of so many of the things that usually shape and define the week – such as the morning commute, taking the kids to school, or meeting friends for a Friday-night drink – can lead to the feeling of days blending into one another and time beginning to lose its meaning. People have seized upon the term *Blursday* – a day of the week that is indistinguishable from any other – to describe this phenomenon... since March it has gained traction, especially on social media.

—*Oxford Languages, 2020 Words of an Unprecedented Year*

Oxford Languages’ selection of *Blursday* as one of many 2020 words of the year suggests unique orientations towards time in the historic year. As the definition indicates, 2020 has been characterized in part by changing conceptions of time; both what “time” means (“time beginning to lose its meaning”), and what specific times, like “Thursday” or “2:00 PM,” mean (“days blending into one another”). The idea that days lack distinction from one another due to the upheaval of longstanding, routine activities by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 has substantial implications for the temporal structure of society. The pandemic

drastically altered the succession of activities that once gave time meaning and in doing so, forced new ways of experiencing time and structuring activities and interactions *within* time. Another key component of Blursday is the drastic decrease in physically co-present interaction and increase in digitally mediated interaction that accompanied the onset of the pandemic, bringing notions of the online self into this discussion.

This study explores the complex intersection of time and online interaction to identify unique meanings of time in the year 2020 and explain the burgeoning role of the online social world in the experience of time. Discussions of these meanings take place primarily through online media and are integrally connected to online interaction and the COVID-19 pandemic. By assessing a series of digital artifacts that create the Internet meme, “Time in 2020,” it is clear that the qualitative experience of living *in time* differs in 2020 relative to previous years. This suggests that the foundational temporal structure of society may be more susceptible to change than previously thought. How said changes come about is of critical concern to sociological explorations of time, and general understandings of coordinated social action.

This exploration centers around three questions: (1) What is “Time in 2020” according to the widespread Internet meme on the topic; (2) What changes to the process of meaning making for time does the “Time in 2020” Internet meme suggest; and (3) How might the increasing enactment of self online permit those changes?

In addition to revisiting concepts associated with the social functions of time, this paper explicitly connects the online self to the experience of temporality. Furthermore, the unique methodological approach in this inquiry, the study of digital artifacts that comprise an “Internet meme,” positions this paper as an early attempt to employ Internet memes in timely, topical discussions of high importance. By writing this paper during the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporal oddity of 2020, it can itself serve as a sort of artifact of the temporal processes challenged by events associated with “2020.”

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced profound changes to the temporal arrangement of events, interactions, and activities throughout society and thus has impacted understandings of time and the self. It is a significant historical event with consequences on the temporal makeup of society and therefore on what “time” means. This literature review establishes the necessary frameworks to address these concerns with time, meaning making, and the self.

The Sociotemporal Order

The sociotemporal order “regulates the structure and dynamics of social life” (Zerubavel, 1981, p. 2). It is the series of patterns that organize daily life characterized by the regulation of certain temporal characteristics of events, namely: sequential structure, the order of events; the duration or length of an event; the time and date of an event; and the frequency of occurrence of an event (Zerubavel, 1981). Regularity or “rigidification” of these characteristics is “among the major background expectancies which are at the basis of the ‘normalcy’ of our social environment” (p. 21). This regularity is something people count on. School starts at 8:30 AM Monday through Friday but only 9 months of the year. The summer break, as a temporal regularity, can be counted on.

Understanding of these patterns permits people to chart “temporal maps” which are simply one’s expectations for the aforementioned temporal characteristics of events (see Zerubavel, 1981, p. 14). Like real maps, temporal maps help one navigate an environment, specifically, a social environment. These co-constructed maps of temporal norms and patterns organize and enable coordinated social action. These processes and concepts that characterize the sociotemporal order are exemplified by the global institution of the seven-day week (Zerubavel, 1985). People are “habituated to thinking about the passage of time—and, thus, also to measuring it—in terms of seven-day units” (p. 96).

This study is concerned with what it *feels* like to live within patterns like the seven-day week. Friday and Monday are both 24 hours long, but they are entirely different in a qualitative sense because of their proximity to the weekend and the fact that, “for most of us, [the weekend] functions as the principle temporal milestone with respect to which all other days of the week acquire their distinctive meaning” (Zerubavel, 1985, p. 109).

Logically, how one spends their time changes throughout the life course which consequently changes meanings associated with times. For example, retirees might find that they lose track of the day of the week or not feel a difference between a Sunday and a Tuesday because their lives unfold somewhat outside the intense workweek structure (Zerubavel, 1985). Thus, the qualitative characteristics of time depend on how the time is “filled” which is determined by temporal patterns initiated by the sociotemporal order that are retained through temporal maps.

As much as events give meaning to time, time gives meaning to events. “The meaning of social acts and situations is largely determined by their temporal context” (Zerubavel, 1981, p. 101). A phone call at 1:00 AM will take on different meanings than the same phone call at 1:00 PM. When events or interactions occur outside their normative time associations, they take on different meanings.

The qualitative experience of living in time is inseparable from the qualitative meanings ascribed to certain times of the day, week, or year. How the general passage of events “feels” has meaning of its own, but cannot be held separately from the meanings of the individual events that comprise the general passage of time. Henceforth, meaning (singular) refers to how the passage of time “feels” and how people assess the general experience of living in time; and meanings (plural) refers to the various meanings granted to specific events as they exist in time; as well as the meanings ascribed to specific times of the day, week, month, and year.

When dealing with the meaning(s) of time(s), one must account for the unifying patterns in the sociotemporal order but also the fact that, obviously, people have different schedules and routines. Scores of scholars have sought to explain how differences in experience both unify and divide meanings of time across individuals. This is usually conducted through some sort of distinction between an individual or personal time and a collective or universal time (see Raymond & White, 2017, p. 110). Citing Garfinkel’s (1967) work on the necessity of time for collaborative social action and Schütz’s (1962) notion that temporal synchronicity is critical to achieving intersubjectivity, Raymond and White (2017) assert:

The achievement of intersubjectivity and the constitution of action must therefore be conceptualized as a temporally emergent, collaborative, and publicly accountable process between interactants. (p. 110)

Time means different things to different people, but for society to function, there must be a certain degree of unity between people regarding those meanings.

In summary, temporal maps chart temporal patterns. Temporal patterns are the rigidification of temporal characteristics of events. These patterns perpetuate the sociotemporal order and result in routines that influence qualitative characteristics of time by both associating certain activities with certain times *and* by ascribing meanings to events that occur outside normalcy that is determined by temporal maps. The seven-day week exemplifies this entire process. This study is concerned with qualitative conceptions of time which include both the meaning assigned to the “flow” or passage of time, and the meanings of individual times of the day, week, or month within the sociotemporal order.

Theoretical Orientation: Meaning

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced drastic changes to methods for meaning making. It changed the cultural, social, and physical contexts for interactions in which the meanings of symbols used to understand time are used as well as the structure of the interactions, events, and activities

occurring within time that inform how people negotiate meaning(s) of time(s).

In *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), George Herbert Mead provides a framework for dealing with meaning. Mead proposed that people “constantly are engaged in mindful action where they manipulate symbols and negotiate the meaning of situations” (Carter and Fuller, 2016, p. 933). Time is an abstraction that only exists in these co-manipulated symbols. While the word “symbol” has a nuanced history in semiotics and elsewhere beginning with Peirce and Saussure (Chandler, 1994), today, such symbols are widely understood as “vehicles for the conception of objects” (Langer, 1951, p. 61). As such, a symbol is not the object itself “and it is the conceptions, not the things [objects], that symbols directly mean” (p. 61). To Langer, “we convert our experiences into images and symbols” (Sandstrom, 2011, p. 18). For example, the *experience* of the time during which the sun sets is symbolized by the word “evening.” This is an example of a symbol as a *linguistic sign*, another concept championed by Langer (see Chandler, 1994, p. 20) which refers to symbols in the form of written or verbal language.

Shared conceptions of a symbol between people demonstrate Mead’s (1934) notion of a “significant symbol” which “entwines two or more attitudes that belong to the two or more positions within a social act” (Gillespie, 2005, p. 32). Geertz (1973) summarized Mead’s significant symbols as “words for the most part... used to impose meaning upon experience” (p. 51). Without significant symbols, time could not exist. “Saturday” is a significant symbol for the 24 hours falling after Friday and before Sunday. Saying “Saturday,” does not make it Saturday, but makes one think of particular activities, emotions, and dynamics associated with the 24 hours that the linguistic sign signifies. “Hour,” “day,” “minute,” and “week” are significant symbols; “2:00 PM,” “noon,” and “dusk” are significant symbols; as are qualifying terms associated with time such as “fast/slow,” “busy/free,” “fun/boring,” “late/early,” and so on. The phrase “flow of time” I have employed in this article is also a symbolic representation.

Symbols associated with time are different from symbols like Langer’s famous example, “Napoleon,” because there is no physical object called “time” that can be perceived through the senses. Like friendship or joy, time is purely abstract and symbolic. So, significant symbols relating to time do not embody conceptions of “objects” but rather embody qualitative meaning(s) of time(s). Symbols for time, then, are given meaning through an individual’s unique makeup of events in time *and* through interactions between people who share temporal experiences and are able to negotiate meaning(s) of time through significant symbols.

For many, the entire schedule of such interactions, events, and activities was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption is largely characterized by the sudden shift to online or “remote” work and/or education as part of efforts to control the pandemic. This shift imposed strict new expectations and limits on what activities can be conducted at what times, at what locations, with whom, and through what communicative mediums. Informal and in-person social gatherings were substituted for scheduled “Zoom Happy Hours” and the bedroom became the office space. This marked a sudden increase in online social interaction and decrease in face-to-face interaction. The temporal fabric of society and the very notion of self are called into question with this shift. As suggested by the third question addressed in this paper, changing ways of enacting the self may be one of many reasons for the temporal oddity of 2020.

The Self

In harmony with the symbolic interactionist perspective of meaning making, I employ a dramaturgical perspective of the self. Erving Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical notion of self equates individuals in society to actors on a stage. The self is a “staged” performance aimed at presenting certain “impressions” that achieve certain objectives in an interaction. Goffman calls the act of staging these performances “impression management,” and asserts that “any social establishment may be studied profitably from the point of view of impression management” (p. 152). Summarizing Goffman’s conception of the self, Schwalbe (2016) stated that:

... the self is created not simply by individual performances but by how those performances— consisting of numerous bits of signifying behavior—are interpreted by an audience in a particular situation.
(p. 75)

In other words, one creates various versions of oneself through daily interactions with others in which they evoke and negotiate meanings of significant symbols (“signifying behavior”). The self is situation dependent. Goffman’s dramaturgy “posits the self as fluid, negotiated, and emerging through interaction” (Gottschalk & Whitmer, 2016, p. 310) which makes the physical instance of interaction with another person critical to how the self functions and how meaning is created. The pandemic greatly upended the itinerary of interactions that would normally characterize the development of performances of the self and replaced them with mediated enactments of self. What happens when interaction moves into a mediated, online environment?

Online Self

Goffman was primarily concerned with performances of self in face-to-face interactions, but later dramaturgists have examined how his notion

of self functions in mediated interactions. A decade ago, Gottschalk (2010) noted that online interactive avenues “contain promise for unimaginable future possibilities” (p. 521) for the performances of self. It appears that Gottschalk’s unimaginable future possibilities are here, as video chat, email, and social networking sites characterize the 2020 work/school environment. As he noted in his study of presentations of self in the social virtual world, “Second Life,” the innumerable online interactive outlets offered today present opportunities for “replacing the rigid cultural-structural codes of identity-construction by flexible and recombinant digital ones” (p. 522). Online performances of self differ from face-to-face performances in three primary ways: (1) increased purposivity, (2) temporal flexibility, and (3) multicomunication.

Increased Purposivity. The online self is more purposive than the in-person self, that is, one can be more intentional when crafting the performances of the self they present. As Markham (2016) noted,

Digital media heighten dramaturgical awareness because of the need to deliberately write self into being, an activity that requires both technical skills and reflexivity about what is required to enact embodiment. (p. 281)

The online self can be perpetually edited and crafted with far more attention to detail than during in-person interaction. In some cases, like designing a social networking site profile page, one can craft a particular performance of the self *before* an interactive instance occurs. The self can be so finely tuned that “users can create different, even contradictory selves by fashioning the information about themselves they present to different audiences” (Gottschalk & Whitmer, 2016, p. 312).

Furthermore, different online mediums require different methods for staging performances of self. For example, to manage impressions of self on a video call may require one to wear certain clothes befitting the situation. In contrast, impression management through email requires only textual manipulation to craft a message that puts forward the desired presentation of self.

Temporal Flexibility. The differences between video chat and email demonstrate the second change to the dramaturgical self online: changes to how the self exists in time. While it is generally acceptable to take a few hours or even days to respond to an email, it would be ludicrous to wait that same amount of time to respond to an interactive partner while on video chat. “Internet technologies can disrupt time, shifting it from an unchanging and universal flow to a pliable variable in everyday interactions” (Markham, 2016, p. 283). The various mediums for performances of self introduced in the online environment introduce differing timelines for interactions and enactments of self.

This temporal meddling of online mediums grows more severe when one considers the disembodiment of self that accompanies online interactions (Waskul, 2005). For example, in Fall of 2020, this author conducted online school from Dallas, Texas while attending classes that took place over 1,000 miles away. Through video, my performance of self moved away from the physical location of my bedroom and into a virtual “Zoom room.” The space in which my self existed was incongruous with the space of my physical body, thus creating an odd schism between the typical unity of self and body in time.

Multicommunication. The final change to self in online interactions is the number of interactive instances one can take part in at any given time. This is a fundamental change to the meaning of “presence.” The communicative mediums afforded by digital internet technology in 2020 permit the practice of multicommunicating which, ... occurs when a person (the focal person) simultaneously participates in two or more interactions that might require a speaking turn. Thus, the focal person must coordinate verbal behavior with two different partners or sets of partners. (Reinsch & Turner, 2019, p. 142)

Online social environments enable the management of multiple impressions simultaneously which means one can be present in multiple contexts and often through different mediums at the same time.

Temporal flexibility interplays with multicommunication, for the multicommunication one can conduct is determined by the mediums of the different interactions in question. For example, it is not uncommon to answer an email during a meeting or read a text while conducting a video call, but it would be unusual, if not impossible, to conduct two video calls at once. Multicommunication requires a mixing of mediums that might have different temporal demands. In general, textual mediums permit greater “flexibility of tempo” (Turner & Foss, 2018), than video or in-person interactions, that is, they allow “the focal person to delay taking up a speaking turn” (p. 143) and prolong the interaction in time.

The enactment of self in virtual interaction clearly has implications of the experience of the self *in time*. Multiple performances of self can occur simultaneously but at different rates within time and through different mediums that mandate different tactics to craft the performance of self. These two foci, time in 2020 and the online self, converge in the methodological orientation of this project.

Methods

Internet memes are an appropriate research site for these concerns with time, symbols, meaning, and online self. The 31 digital items analyzed

in this study in various ways relate to the experience of time in 2020 and/or the COVID-19 pandemic. This study employs Shifman's (2014) widely accepted definition of an "Internet meme" as:

(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. (Shifman, 2014, p. 41)

The pieces of media in this study comprise an Internet meme primarily through their "common characteristic" of shared content (time in 2020 and/or COVID-19). The Internet meme created by this cluster of digital items is called "Time in 2020." Each individual digital item that contributes to the Internet meme is called a "memetic instance" (Shifman, 2014). Memetic instances of the Internet meme, "Time in 2020" include images, texts, and videos that share similar content but also meet the second and third criteria of Internet memes: mutually aware creation and circulation/creation/transformation via the internet by many users. The shared attitudes towards time in 2020, and shared vocabulary such as "covid time warp" suggest that these memetic instances share a certain degree of awareness of one another, and the extensive different sources for the Internet memes suggest creation by many users.

Shifman's definition of Internet memes frames them as "(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends" (p. 15). This study is an examination of the meanings assigned to different time periods, acts within time, and experiences of the flow of time, which positions Internet memes (as artifactual vessels for shared norms and values) as an appropriate data source. The memetic instances contributing to the Internet meme, "Time in 2020" overwhelmingly acknowledge that time in 2020 "felt" different than prior years. They suggest different uses of time and associations of events with times (temporal maps) in 2020 relative to the past. This Internet meme provides hints to examine the challenges to sociotemporal processes introduced by COVID-19.

In addition to becoming "(post)modern folklore," in Shifman's framework, Internet memes "become instant awareness platforms of current issues within communities" (Herbert, 2019, p. 93). This ability to glimpse into timely communal issues is permitted by Internet memes association with participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Internet memes are made by diverse groups of users with different size followings and varying opinions towards the Internet meme in question. While any individual may create a memetic instance, an Internet meme is always a group effort. The "Time in 2020" Internet meme is likely to communicate common

meaning(s) of time in 2020 because of the high degree of unity across a range of memetic creators.

Internet memes are not only cultural artifacts but *crowdsourced* cultural artifacts; they are “bottom-up creative resources” that are “invoked by different groups to express views about current issues and events” (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 485). Though the COVID-19 pandemic is a global event, the bulk of Internet memes in this study appear to have originated in the United States. The “community” in question is primarily the US but could extend to other English-speaking nations that have also been unsuccessful in diminishing the effects of the pandemic on daily life and public health.

“Time in 2020” Internet memes were archived between April and December of 2020. The majority were collected through informal scanning of “meme accounts” (accounts with anonymous creators that post original, remixed, or recreated memetic instances) with large followings (at least 10,000 followers) on Instagram. The rest were found via keyword searches on Twitter. Some of the memetic instances are what Shifman (2014) calls “virals” which are media instances that can “propagate in many copies” (p. 56) but are not Internet memes in and of themselves. An individual viral, for example, a photo, can proliferate into millions of copies, but because it is not a group of different digital items it does not stand alone as an Internet meme. A viral certainly may contribute to an Internet meme but is not itself one. Because the memetic instances in this study most always appeared in many copies and were posted by anonymous accounts, identifying the original source of a given memetic instance proved impossible. Identifying information for the accounts that circulated the memetic instances was not collected beyond verifying the size of the accounts’ followings (with two exceptions of instances created by businesses).

This method of collecting memetic instances is not intended to establish a representative sample of the entire body of memetic instances that group together to form the Internet meme “Time in 2020.” It is “virtually impossible to track and examine all of [a] meme’s versions” (Shifman, 2014, p. 45). As much as it is impossible, it is also unnecessary. Internet memes are cultural artifacts but also individual communicative instances. Studying Internet memes in this way is a qualitative research endeavor similar to traditional qualitative methods involving varying degrees of participant or non-participant observation.

This study examines 31 memetic instances as cultural artifacts to characterize the “Time in 2020” Internet meme which opens a gateway to analyze the processes of meaning-making of time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies on Internet memes have examined concrete

events or phenomenon such as political movements like *Put People First* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) or the examination of LGBTQIA+ normative boundary creation online (Gal et al., 2016). Examining time through Internet memes presents unique challenges because of the before discussed complexity of symbols without objects. There are no physical markers to measure the sentiments in the Internet memes with “reality.” Most scholarship involving Internet memes so far have focused on characterizing Internet memes rather than employing them in research, and there are no studies on Internet memes as they may communicate entirely symbolic entities like time.

The closest instance of exploring time in this way is Raymond and White’s (2017) investigation of how “language provides mechanisms through which situating time can be accomplished” (p. 110). Since the memetic instances are simultaneously communicative instances, language plays a critical role in rendering Internet memes useful for studying time. The memetic instances that create “Time in 2020” present an avenue to examine the “natural” ways people talk about time through text, photo, video, and audio media. Indeed, with a notable decrease in face-to-face interaction in 2020, Internet memes could be the *dominant* site of meaning making for time in 2020, not just a supplement to in-person interaction. Since Internet memes are made by individuals with intent to be shared, they necessarily attempt to evoke shared notions of time or shared experiences of the passage of time in 2020, further increasing the likelihood that these memetic instances both embody and perpetuate shared meanings associated with “Time in 2020.”

While memetic instances can be considered instances of performances of self online in their own rite (Shifman, 2014), this study is more concerned with how they communicate the meaning(s) of time in 2020. Online self enters the discussion in part three of the findings section, after dealing with the Internet meme in question. Increased online selfhood during COVID-19 is a possible *contributing factor* to the unique temporal experience of 2020. That is, one factor of many that could contribute to the “covid time warp,” as some memetic instances put it.

Findings

What is the Internet meme “Time in 2020” as created by these memetic instances?

A primary assumption in Shifman’s characterization of Internet memes is that they are embedded in “local cultures and power structures” (Shifman, 2014, p. 151) and as such can “decipher contemporary political, cultural, and social processes” (p. 172). Characterizing the Internet meme,

“Time in 2020,” is therefore synonymous with uncovering the cultural/social qualitative meaning(s) of time in 2020.

The first step for analysis, then, is to understand how individual memetic instances construct the meme, “Time in 2020.” This is best discussed through examining the ways in which the different memetic instances relate to one another through Shifman’s (2014) shared features of Internet memes: content, form, and stance, for it is through these relations that the meaning(s) of time in the year 2020 come into view.

Content

The content of an Internet meme is the “ideas and ideologies conveyed by it” (Shifman, 2014, p. 40). In this case, these are ideas and ideologies *about time* that are unique to the year 2020. After thorough inductive coding and analysis of the memetic instances as cultural artifacts, several noteworthy dimensions of meaning(s) of times(s) in 2020 emerge. First I explain the meanings (plural) of times in 2020, and then meaning (singular). A special content trend, the self in 2020, is discussed separately at the end of this section.

Content: The Meanings of Time in 2020. The first and most prominent idea across the contents of these memetic instances is blurring. In harmony with the idea of “Blursday” from the introduction, blurring is the experience of not knowing what day or month it is or feeling that days are indistinguishable. One memetic instance depicts a news broadcast in which the anchor introduces a segment addressing viewers working from home who may have trouble telling the day of the week. The segment is called “What day is it?” The video cuts to another reporter who dryly states, “It’s Monday,” followed by a long pause that highlights the absurdity of the segment and adds comedic effect.

Complications to distinguishing between days of the week are suggested in other instances. One tweet reads “2020 got no weekends .. everyday just everyday,” thus implying that the qualitative meanings that, before COVID-19, distinguished between weekdays and weekends are either less noticeable or entirely absent in 2020. Another viral tweet reads: “sorry i didn’t respond to ur email in a timely fashion i literally cannot tell days apart anymore and thought today was 2 weeks ago.”

In a viral series of screenshots of an email exchange between a student and professor, the irked student justified their late assignment, stating “Because of the actual pandemic we are in I assumed we were no longer keeping track of time or days,” and that “I couldn’t tell you how long it’s been since I remember experiencing a ‘Friday.’” By framing Friday as an “experience,” and evoking what the student believes to be a shared loss of temporality, this exchange (and the earlier examples) emphasize how meanings of days of the week are diminished or at least perceived

differently in 2020. These instances also imply that those changes are directly associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The status of days of the week as significant symbols is called into question.

Like days and weeks, a blurring effect seems to have taken place at the month level. One memetic instance from the Spotify corporation that was sent to millions of users says, “Thanks for spending all 67 months of 2020 with us,” suggesting that months have not been endowed with the meanings and peculiarities that typically allow one to identify twelve distinct months to make a year. This sentiment is shared by a viral tweet that simply states “January, February, Quarantine, December,” implying that all the months between February and December blurred together into an event that holds the weight of only one month, the month of “Quarantine.”

Another tweet captions screenshots from the TV series *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* that depict the protagonist stating: “Mark the day Gina. May 18th at 4:00 PM,” to which Gina replies “We’re well into October.” The caption reads: “literally how my brain is processing time this year.” This memetic instance, like most others, specifies “this year” or “2020” or “right now,” indicating that the ideas and ideologies of time conveyed in “Time in 2020” are indeed unique to the year in question and the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond months, the year 2020 itself has a unique meaning. “2020” is virtually synonymous with COVID-19. One viral Tweet reads “December next week?? Time flies when your life is falling apart in a pandemic,” implying that the entire experience of 2020 was characterized by the (negative) experience of the pandemic.

A graphic by Instagram artists @lizandmollie, depicts a “Chronology of 2020” where instead of a straight timeline (as is typically employed to visualize the passage of time), the timeline is characterized by loops, spirals, and various incorrect attempts to identify “Today” and “Last Week.” The contortions on the timeline begin in the month of March. March 2020, as the month when the virus began its assault on daily life in the United States, has been endowed with intense meaning above all other months in 2020.

March 2020 is the final content trend for meanings of times. In the “Chronology of 2020,” graphic, March marks the beginning of the tangled mess of 2020 temporality. In another viral instance, a cartoon depicts one character pointing a knife towards a comically cowering victim. The assailant is labelled “March 2021,” and the victim “Me still processing last March.” This instance demonstrates the intense significance behind “March 2020” as a symbol. March 2020 is mutually understood as a particularly traumatic month, one that must be “processed.” March 2020

also serves as a sort of temporal reference point to anchor the passage of time in 2020 and beyond. One memetic instance depicts four depressed looking celebrity actors with the caption “March again in 3 months.” Nearly a third of the memetic instances in this study either explicitly mention March or through some other assessment of time in 2020 allude to the significance of the month. As a symbolically significant segment of time, “March 2020” seems on par with specific times like “September 11, 2001.”

March thus occupies a unique position in the collective process of “time-reckoning,” that is, “The choice of temporal reference points and use of instruments to measure time” (Bergmann, 1992, p. 99). March serves as the primary point of reference by which many memetic creators assess how “long” or “short” the passage of time “felt,” in 2020, thus bridging the meanings of times to the meaning of time. March as a reference point is unusual. Typically, January serves as this sort of anchor because it is the symbol for the first month of the year. It is only because of its association with the COVID-19 pandemic that March takes on this new symbolic significance. This suggests that monumental events like the pandemic have the capacity to alter how people assess the passage of time.

Content: The Meaning of Time in 2020. With March as an anchor to gauge how long time in 2020 has “felt,” several memetic instances marvel at how quickly, or slowly, or quickly *and* slowly time passed in 2020. A Tik Tok video from October 2020 marvels that “Covid has been around for 7 months” (again pinpointing the start of the temporal oddity of 2020 to March). Three memetic instances demonstrate changing attitudes towards daily life between March and December as they relate work/school from home. The creators recollect positive attitudes towards the change in March, but negative or depressive feelings in December, suggesting the passage of time in 2020 had negative impacts on wellbeing.

Over half of the memetic instances include content regarding the speed of the passage of time in 2020. Some reference March, but others are simple sentiments like an Instagram caption that states “HOW CAN IT POSSIBLY BE ALMOST A YEAR SINCE WE’VE BEEN ON LOCKDOWN... 9 months in my childhood bedroom... I can’t take it anymore”. Another caption reads “Can u believe it’s been a year since we heard about corona virus”.

The second and perhaps most shocking trend in content is the idea that in the year 2020, time lost its meaning altogether. The caption from the aforementioned “March 2021 Mugging” memetic instance reads: “this year simply doesn’t exist.” The year 2020 has such different meanings than its predecessors that this memetic creator seems to favor not even considering time in 2020 any sort of time at all. Three memetic instances

reference three unrelated virals from pre-pandemic 2020 with awe regarding how long it “feels” since those virals first circulated. One reads: “time has seriously lost its meaning in 2020 because I cannot believe this [viral] happened this year”. Another tweet exemplifies the utter absurdity of the year 2020, stating “this year has been so transformative for me , i don’t think about anything anymore, i don’t know what’s going on and I have no idea what or even who or even where i am”.

This example embodies the final content trend for meaning of time in 2020. Because the COVID-19 virus gained public attention at the beginning of 2020, and continued for the entire year, it appears that all of 2020 has been underscored by the single event of the pandemic. By stating the overwhelmingly negative ways in which this year has been “transformative” this tweet is alluding to the upheaval to daily life caused by the pandemic. The experience of time in 2020 is the experience of the pandemic. In the same way that the meaning of “2020” is synonymous with “COVID-19 Pandemic,” the meaning of the passage of time in 2020 is the same as the series of events such as lockdowns, case spikes, and reopenings that characterize the pandemic.

This is explicitly articulated in a series of memetic instances that caption documentary photographs of the world grappling with COVID-19. For example, an exchange from Tumblr, screenshotted and posted on Instagram, includes a photo of a movie theater marquee reading “I assure you we are not open” that is accompanied by a discussion of how 2020 will be recorded in history books. Because such photos deal explicitly with the pandemic, it appears that the story of 2020 is the same as the story of the pandemic. The pandemic is a sort of super-event that underscores all interactions and activities in 2020. It is a constant and totalizing temporal background that has become a new dimension of how we assess normalcy in our collective temporal maps.

Form

The form of an Internet meme is the “physical incarnation of the message” (Shifman, 2014, p. 40). That is, what sorts of media are used in the memetic instances. Virtually all of the memetic instances involve text either as the entire form of the meme, captions for other types of media, or integrated into other types of media (like text Photoshopped over images). It appears that the easiest way to represent time is through linguistic symbols. “Time in 2020” is not created through shared images or sounds (as many Internet memes are), but rather through the shared vocabularies and corresponding attitudes about time in 2020 that are best communicated through language. The meaning(s) of time(s) in 2020 are created through ways of talking about them more so than visualizing them. Since meanings associated with “Time in 2020” are primarily negotiated

through language, it is likely that survey data and/or in-person discourse analysis regarding perceptions of time in 2020 could uncover similar sentiments to those included in these memetic instances.

Stance

The stance of an Internet meme is “the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers” (Shifman, 2014, p. 40). By and large, people relate to “Time in 2020” as a source for commiseration. Not a single memetic instance suggested any sort of improvement to daily life, wellbeing, or the world in general in 2020. The memetic instances may as well be probing, “This sucks for all of us, doesn’t it?” This commiserating includes a shared sense of grief, that is, grieving for one’s past ignorance or optimism before enduring time in 2020. One memetic instance referencing the Pixar film *Wall-e* demonstrates a degree of hope felt in the early days of 2020 and the pandemic. The image, which in the film depicts a spaceship captain on a prolonged search for a new Earth, states “Welcome to month 9 of our 3 week pandemic”.

Commiseration paired with another stance, absurdity, account for nearly all the memetic instances in this study. When the instances remark how long or short the passage of time has felt, or how much individual wellbeing has been impacted this year, they often include laughing emoji, sarcasm, or other indications of how utterly ridiculous the sentiments in the memetic instances are. Time in 2020 is both a source of misery and incomprehensible absurdity.

The Self

Notions of performances of self are present in about a third of the memetic instances, often in relation to the *online* self. The self is a unique dimension of the content of the “Time in 2020” Internet meme, hence its removal from the more general content discussion above. This sets the stage for my later suggestion that increasing enactment of the self online contributes to the temporal oddity of 2020.

The bulk of memetic instances about the self relate to changes in 2020 regarding what, where, when, and with whom activities may be conducted. In one memetic instance, a user reflects on their former “suburban life” characterized by visits to Chili’s and Barnes & Noble with friends, experiences which they used to take for granted but yearn for in 2020. Social gatherings such as these typically act as frequent contexts for enactments of self, and their loss suggests changes in the general landscape of opportunities for one to craft self into existence.

Three different memetic instances depict college students tuning in to Zoom classes from unusual locations or conducting absurd activities that would be impossible to co-conduct with class if not for the shift to

online education. The instances depict students skiing, fishing, and going to the dentist during class. These are comedic examples of the sort of multipresence afforded by online mediums and further suggest changes to what, where, when, and with whom activities may take place. Attending class while on a ski lift marks an odd change to the typical temporal separation of such activities where one would be expected to attend class during the week and would only ski while free of scholastic responsibilities.

Nine different memetic instances discuss negative changes associated with the self or online self throughout 2020. The overall emphasis is that people were happier and more innocent at the beginning of the year. In 2020, it seems, the self “aged” more than typical in a year, as memetic creators (mostly students and young professionals) present themselves as burned out, depressed, lonely, sick of enacting the self online, and yearning for unmediated interactions. Four of those nine memetic instances contrast the initial excitement of a two week spring break granted to many US students as universities prepared to shift to remote instruction (in March 2020 no less), to the current depressed state after months of online schooling. The self is depicted as more cynical, dark, seasoned, and overall, less happy relative to the beginning of 2020.

Time in 2020

Thus, the Internet meme “Time in 2020” can be summarized by the following statements. Time in 2020 is subject to a blurring effect that blends or makes indistinguishable days, weeks, and months. 2020 has the specific meaning as “the year of the pandemic.” March of 2020 holds particular significance in “Time in 2020.” Time in 2020 has flowed both quicker and slower than usual. Symbolically, “time” holds less meaning in 2020. The pandemic is a super-event that underscores all of time in 2020. “Time in 2020” is largely characterized through text or ways of talking about time. Time in 2020 is both absurd and a source of shared misery. The self exists differently in time because of the online mediums that are part of the shared content of “Time in 2020” memetic instances. The self has changed in negative ways over the course of time in 2020.

What changes to the process of meaning making for time does the “Time in 2020” Internet meme suggest?

Now that it is clear how time is understood in 2020, let us return to the theoretical level to see what dimensions of sociotemporality are challenged by time in 2020.

Meanings of Times

The “Time in 2020” Internet meme suggests unique challenges to long established methods for dividing the passage of time, primarily at the

daily, weekly, and monthly levels. “Time in 2020” devotes less attention to meanings of smaller units of time like minutes or hours. Days of the week lack symbolic distinction from one another, as do the workweek and weekend. The seven-day “beat,” as Zerubavel (1985) calls it, is weaker and less noticeable, and the passage of twelve distinct months is virtually inconsequential.

Less distinct meanings of times may play a role in the apparent diminished significance of the weekend as a symbolic temporal milestone. The weekend used to grant meanings to days of the week and mark the boundaries between the endless succession of weeks. But if a weekend “feels” like a weekday, the division of time into seven-day cycles becomes less stringent and creates the blurring effect voiced by so many memetic instances.

The symbolic labels and qualifiers that characterize the division of time into significant symbols like days and months begin to lose their unique colors; the passage of time grows gray and less distinct. Whereas in years past, Thursday and Friday were noticeably, qualitatively different, their symbolic meanings are now less so. Whereas in years past, “last week” and “this week” could be neatly separated, weekly cycles lack any sort of symbolic “reset” for the order of events.

Typically, shared meanings for distinct times of the day, week, month, and year permit a flow of “social traffic” (see Zerubavel, 1985, p. 108), where people naturally convene and socialize at certain times and places (for example, crowded restaurants during “the lunch rush”). Social traffic is part of a shared rhythm (beat) in society that helps confirm or gradually adapt the symbolic meanings of times by demonstrating shared understanding of temporal maps.

The long frozen temporal characteristics of events that characterize individual schedules (sequential structure, duration of an event, time and date of an event; and frequency of occurrence (Zerubavel, 1981)) thawed in 2020 and permitted new norms for the temporal structure of daily life. In general, this has to do with the shift to work/school from home and the decreased itinerary of activities one can safely conduct at a given time. The most obvious change is the frequency of occurrence of events. In a dominantly virtual social environment, informal social interaction is almost impossible, and instances such as chatting with colleagues or assembling a last-minute lunch group occur with less frequency. Typically exciting events like weddings, parties, and game nights are infrequent and in many places illegal, further limiting the typical itinerary of events.

The duration of events is also called into question. Tasks that require digital co-presence may take more or less time to accomplish than they did in-person. In the process of adapting to work/school from home,

scores of professionals were forced to learn new expectations for how much time certain tasks, interactions, and events require. In a similar way, expectations for the appropriate times of the day, week, or month for events differ in the COVID-19 era. The times of day one might work, and the locations they might work, are more flexible. Why not schedule a meeting for 8:00 AM instead of 9:00 AM? After all, there is no morning commute to force an earlier alarm clock. Why not take a nap at 2:00 PM on a Tuesday? One can easily make up for lost time after typical work hours. One memetic instance even voiced differing norms for the acceptable duration of time to play Christmas music. The perceived cheerfulness of the genre was deemed much needed in 2020, and the memetic creator encouraged prolonging the typical timeline for holiday celebrations.

With changes to meanings of times and to the rigidification of sociotemporal patterns, the temporal maps that allow individuals to coordinate in time lost utility. COVID-19 influenced how temporality can be mapped. The maps that once permitted the successful participation of temporality in society lost true North and forced drastic changes to daily life.

Meaning of Time

As times blend together and grow gray, what it feels like to live within a sociotemporal fabric changes. Temporal synchronization of events between people permits all sorts of coordination, whether it be workplace projects or a game of golf, that helped frame how fast or slow time felt pre-pandemic. “Time in 2020” suggests that the passage of time in 2020 felt both incredibly fast and slow, and the numerous memetic instances that address changes between March and December of 2020 suggest that the general experience of time in 2020 has been isolating and harmful to individual wellbeing. Time as a solitary experience has monumental consequences on the very notion of sociotemporality. One is left to negotiate meanings of time symbols on their own (or as I suggest, primarily through Internet memes). The meaning of time is characterized through shared temporal experiences that grant symbols the status of significant; experiencing time in isolation presents a barrier to developing these significant symbols of time.

Furthermore, with online work/school, one is less likely to physically change locations across times and activities, graying the passage of time even more by diminishing associations of different places with different times. In 2020, the symbolic “flow” of time is not a background for diverse experiences to take place, but a frigid river, ever eroding the wellbeing of those living in time. Time is something to endure. Time is not the playground on which to stage experiences, but an unwelcome presence

characterized by dark imagery, vocabulary, and a shared sense of grief. Simply, time in 2020 is a bad thing. “2020” is a symbol with significant negative meaning that will likely endure in coming decades.

If nothing else, the very presence of the pervasive “Time in 2020” Internet meme suggests increased interest in, or thought about, time in 2020 relative to years past. Changes to meaning(s) of time(s) are critically dependent on the changes to daily life associated with work/school from home. Logically, this shift increases the frequency of instances in which the self exists online. Without the current landscape of communication technology through which the online self is enacted, the changes to daily life associated with the COVID-19 pandemic would be impossible.

How might the increasing enactment of self online permit these changes?

Increasing enactment of self online is one of many factors contributing to the temporal oddity of 2020. Other factors might be the pandemic as a “super-event” that underscores all other events in 2020, the perceived density of other dramatic events in 2020 (e.g., celebrity deaths, economic crises, the 2020 US presidential election, wildfires (in the US and Australia), hurricanes, the Beirut explosion, mass protests against police brutality and racial injustice, etc.). Or perhaps it is all a false nostalgia of how time used to feel, even if it didn’t actually feel all that different.

Recall that online, the self is: more purposive, temporally flexible, and multi-present. Together, these three changes to self compress time and space. One may exist in a living room while exchanging messages with coworkers in a virtual chat room (like Slack) while on a Zoom call for telehealth. Each “place” for the self requires different methods and intentions while performing the self. The self in time and space is fractured yet dense. As Harvey (1989) famously noted, “Time-space compression always exact its toll on our capacity to grapple with the realities unfolding around us” (p. 306). Because time and space are compressed, the gaps that distinguish times from each other blur and the existence of self in time grows complicated.

The online self is placed under stress as it exists at different speeds, in different spaces, and as different versions of one person. One communicative interaction, like an email chain could unfold over two weeks, but be impacted by video interactions with the same interactive partner(s). Two mediums, two enactments of self, two different time spans. These sorts of instances characterize the state of interaction day-in and day-out for those getting by in the online social world. I ask, how

could this *not* influence how time feels? How could time not take on new meaning when the self that exists in time is so greatly impacted?

Conclusion

The “Time in 2020” Internet meme presents unique meanings to existing symbols that have to do with specific times of the day or week, and the general passage of time. Conducting this exploration during the pandemic permits me to rely somewhat on my own COVID-19 story as an autoethnographic account that might increase the value of this paper over time. I write this as one of many experiencing the gray blob of time in 2020. As much as this is a scientific exploration, it is also a personal one, concerned with the challenges to wellbeing introduced when time and the online self take us all for a ride. Arguably, this paper could serve as an overly complex memetic instance of “Time in 2020” in and of itself.

A limitation of this study is a bias towards people with occupations or educational situations that permit working remotely. Essential workers, healthcare providers, and other occupations that cannot be conducted remotely create drastically different pandemic stories. This too might add to the temporal knots in 2020, as it creates a schism between experiences of temporality depending on one’s occupation. The unifying effect of the sociotemporal order is further challenged. A second limitation is a bias towards those who experience more severe limitations to daily life introduced by the virus. The controversial partisan differences in responses to the pandemic and lack of federal guidance in the US created vastly different changes to daily life depending on one’s political leanings and geographic location. It is possible that many of the temporal processes in this paper are limited to those who are both able and willing to make changes to their lives to address the pandemic.

The concrete impacts of the meaning(s) of time in 2020 and increasing enactment of the online self on community, health and wellbeing, and social cohesion are yet to be studied, but would help forge a path towards recovery from the pandemic. The story of the pandemic is still unfolding, and the meaning(s) of time(s) deduced in this study will continue to evolve. Even so, this paper presents a sort of bookmark for the story of temporality in the pandemic for future reference and suggests a highly impactful relationship between the enactment of self online and experience of time.

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