

Out Of Sync: The Emotional and Social Cost Of Living Ahead Or Behind One's Time

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with the emotional and social outcomes brought upon individuals who consider themselves as temporally misaligned either behind or ahead of the prevalent cultural and ideological standards at that time. Based on the cultural lag theory (Ogburn, 1922) and existential psychology (Yalom, 1980), this study examines the influence of temporal dissonance on identity, belonging, and well-being. The paper adopted a phenomenological research design in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews with sixteen respondents, divided into two groups: those who consider themselves traditionalists and are finding it challenging to adjust to the changes of modern times, and those who consider themselves visionaries and are getting upset about the pace of social change. A thematic analysis unveiled these five major findings: temporal alienation, social misrecognition, emotional burden, tension in identity, and coping mechanisms wherein different belief systems led to identical underlying experiences of psychic pain and marginalization. Many also showed strengths by creating different value systems and support groups. These results suggest that time not being in line is a meaningful way of looking at who a person is and how they feel, and it should be studied more in the fields of culture and psychology.

Introduction

Most of human life is inseparable from the time in which it unfolds. Social habits, cultural forms, tools in hand, and political beliefs that shape individual existence are embedded within broader historical rhythms. However, some people's internal tempo seems out of sync with the dominant rhythms of their time. While many may eventually align with cultural or ideological shifts, others experience themselves as "misfits in their times"—individuals whose thoughts, values, or emotional orientations are incongruent with prevailing societal norms and historical currents.

In this study, the term *misfits in their times* refers to those who feel temporally alienated—either anchored in the past or oriented toward a future not yet realized. These individuals may perceive themselves as too slow, traditional, or principled for the fast pace and shifting norms of modern life, or too forward-

thinking, reformist, or visionary to be fully understood or accepted in the present. This misalignment results in not only social friction but also deep psychological tension, often accompanied by feelings of marginalization, loneliness, or inner conflict.

This two-sided temporal alienation raises important questions about the intersection of identity and historical moment. Ogburn's (1922) theory of cultural lag originally referred to society's slow adaptation to technological change, but it also applies here as a metaphor for the friction between individual temporal consciousness and collective cultural pacing. From an existential standpoint, the pain of not belonging in time can give rise to meaninglessness, alienation, and identity disruption (Yalom, 1980). Although the emotional weight of cultural change has been explored at a macro level, there is still little empirical insight into how individuals live with and adapt to such misalignment in their day-to-day psychological and social lives. In response, this study adopts a qualitative-phenomenological approach to explore how self-perceived temporal misalignment shapes identity, emotional well-being, and social experience.

Importantly, the study also sheds light on the coping mechanisms and forms of temporal resilience that participants employ. Beyond returning to customs, religion, or traditional support networks, participants used a variety of cognitive and behavioral strategies to navigate their misalignment. Some engaged in deliberate cognitive reframing—telling themselves that their “out-of-sync” position is a strength rather than a deficit. Others maintained journals or personal archives as a form of memory preservation or future-oriented hope. Behavioral strategies included seeking out like-minded subcultures online, avoiding triggering conversations, or intentionally moderating one's opinions in public discourse. These acts—whether reflective, expressive, or avoidant—reflect an effort to reclaim agency in a time context that feels misattuned to their values.

By investigating these diverse coping practices, the study enriches our understanding of not only the cost of temporal misalignment but also the adaptive responses that give people the ability to endure, redefine, and resist. As societies grow more complex and culturally fragmented, such inquiries become essential for understanding the psychosocial burden of progress and the resilience it demands.

Literature review

Temporal experience and the individual, Time is not only a universal constant but also a deeply subjective and socially shaped experience. Sociologists and psychologists have long recognized that individuals do not simply live in time but relate to it through internalized rhythms, expectations, and cultural frames. The

sense of being temporally “in sync” or “out of sync” arises from this interaction between personal temporal orientation and collective societal pacing. Individuals who feel “behind” may cling to values, habits, or identities perceived as obsolete within dominant narratives. Conversely, those who feel “ahead” often report frustration with perceived inertia or resistance in the world around them. However, these positions are not fixed. Many individuals may oscillate between the two depending on context, age, or domain—feeling ahead of their time ideologically, yet behind economically or socially. This fluidity challenges binary categorizations and suggests that temporal alignment is experienced across multiple, intersecting axes of identity. Importantly, even those who appear “in sync” with the cultural moment may suffer emotional or social dissonance. Conformity does not always confer harmony—especially when the dominant cultural tempo feels hollow, alienating, or ethically misaligned with one’s deeper sense of self. Thus, the experience of temporal fit or misfit is as much about subjective resonance as it is about external synchronization.

Cultural lag and psychological dissonance, William F. Ogburn’s (1922) theory of cultural lag remains a foundational framework for understanding the friction between individuals and evolving societal norms. He argued that material change (e.g., technology) often outpaces non-material culture (e.g., ethics, laws, relationships), creating a lag that results in instability. While traditionally applied at the macro-societal level, this concept is highly relevant to the micro-level of lived experience. Individuals may internalize this lag as a feeling of being temporally displaced—either left behind by the march of progress or misunderstood for being too far ahead. For example, a middle-aged participant in a rapidly modernizing society may feel disoriented by shifting norms around gender, family, or work—leading to identity confusion and social withdrawal. Alternatively, a young person championing environmental reform in a resistant community might experience cultural friction and burnout. These tensions reflect not only value conflicts but also temporal misalignment between the individual and the surrounding world. This dissonance is often context-specific, shaped by access to global narratives, digital literacy, and generational belonging. Moreover, temporal misalignment can manifest differently across domains: one might be technologically “ahead” but emotionally or spiritually rooted in tradition. Such complexity reveals the multidimensional nature of temporal identity.

Existential and social costs of temporal misalignment, Irvin Yalom’s (1980) concept of existential isolation—the inescapable aloneness of one’s personal experience—provides a poignant lens through which to examine the costs of being “out of sync.” When individuals feel misaligned not just with people but with the

broader historical moment, this form of isolation deepens into ontological insecurity. The world feels not just unfamiliar, but inhospitable to one's moral compass, creative vision, or emotional truth. The psychological toll may include loneliness, anxiety, moral exhaustion, or even depression. Socially, temporal misfits often experience exclusion, condescension, or invisibility—as their contributions are seen as either obsolete or premature. Coping mechanisms vary: some retreat into nostalgic enclaves, others engage in future-oriented activism, and some construct hybrid identities that allow for simultaneous engagement with multiple temporalities. The concept of time itself plays a critical role here. While Western paradigms often emphasize linear, progressive time, alternative models—such as cyclical, sacred, or relational time—may offer more accommodating frameworks for those who feel misaligned. Incorporating such pluralistic temporalities into the analysis allows for a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of the misfit experience.

Gap in the literature

Existing literature acknowledges the emotional weight of cultural and generational change, yet few empirical studies have explored temporal misalignment as a lived identity. The binary of “ahead” vs. “behind” remains under-theorized, often ignoring the fluid movement between these poles and the possibility of experiencing both simultaneously. Moreover, there is limited exploration of how intersecting identities—such as gender, race, class, geography, and political location—shape the nature and consequences of temporal misfit. For instance, a rural woman promoting feminist ideas may be labeled as “out of sync” differently than an urban male artist envisioning post-capitalist futures. Each may face distinct forms of resistance, coping demands, and social costs. Finally, coping strategies are often presented in abstract or general terms. Few studies have examined the specific psychological or behavioral adaptations individuals develop to survive or reframe their misalignment—such as cognitive reframing, archival self-documentation, strategic silence, or affiliation with translocal virtual communities.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how people experience, interpret, and adapt to perceived temporal misalignment—and how their responses are shaped by broader social, cultural, and existential forces.

Research questions

1. How do people feeling temporally misaligned—either behind or ahead of their time—experience their psychological and emotional life?

2. What social confrontation and forms of marginalization do they encounter in their relationships?
3. What coping strategies do they use to manage the tension between their internal beliefs and the dominant cultural narratives?

Method

Research design

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

Participant and self-identification

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling strategies, with the primary criterion being their self-identification as feeling temporally misaligned—that is, either perceiving themselves as “ahead of their time” (e.g., holding progressive, futuristic, or unconventional beliefs) or “behind their time” (e.g., strongly adhering to traditional values or struggling with modern social changes). To facilitate this, the recruitment flyer and outreach emails included reflective prompts such as: *Do you often feel like you belong to a different era—either past or future?* or *Do you ever feel misunderstood or out of place because of how you think, live, or see the world?*

These prompts encouraged self-assessment rather than assigning categories externally, aligning with the phenomenological commitment to participant-centered meaning-making. Participants contacted the researcher voluntarily after reviewing the prompts and were screened via brief follow-up conversations to ensure that their lived experiences related directly to the central theme of temporal misalignment.

The sample included individuals across a range of ages (from early 20s to late 60s), professions (including educators, artists, technologists, and retirees), and sociocultural backgrounds. Efforts were made to ensure maximum variation in lived experience without aiming for demographic representativeness in the statistical sense. This approach allowed the research to capture both ends of the “temporal

misfit" spectrum and explore possible overlaps, complexities, and identity negotiations in between.

Data collection

This phenomenological study gathered data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 16 individuals experiencing temporal misalignment. Participants, recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity, discussed their emotional, social, and existential relationship with their perceived temporal positioning. Interviews (60-90 minutes) were audio-recorded and transcribed. The sample size of 16 was sufficient for achieving thematic saturation, a key criterion for phenomenological research, where new themes ceased to emerge after 13 interviews. This ensured a comprehensive understanding of the lived phenomenon across diverse viewpoints.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed correctly and checked using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase system of thematic study. First came immersion: reading the transcripts time and time again to get to know the content well. After that, codes were made by hand, picking up both direct feelings (like clear mentions of separation, strong feelings, or not understanding) and hidden meanings told in the stories by the people. Following this phase of open coding, the analyst uploaded the transcripts to NVivo 12 for a systematic process of further developing and arranging the codes. Categories like "feeling left behind," "being too progressive," and "judged by others" were evident in the respondents. For example, Nargiza said, "Everything changed too fast. The values I grew up with are now seen as 'wrong' or 'old-fashioned,'" first coded with nostalgia but later properly subsumed under the wider theme temporal alienation. Codes were grouped into basic headings on the basis of common concepts and feelings. The researcher then used visual maps of themes to help sort through codes in order to begin to see how they related to each other. After much back-and-forth discussion, five main themes were eventually decided upon and these included the experience of being disconnected in time, rejected by society and not seen for who they are, the emotional burden of being misplaced, grappling with one's identity and the self-doubt that comes with it, and finally, coping mechanisms and time-bound resilience. For example, under the theme of "coping mechanisms," what Rashid said, "The internet saved me. I may not fit in here, but somewhere out there, someone understands," was first labeled as digital refuge and then eventually

combined with others that described alternative communities and all the other types of strategies for psychological survival.

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

Results

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

Theme 1: Temporal alienation

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

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

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

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

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

Theme 2: Social rejection and misrecognition

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

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

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

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

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

Theme 3: Emotional weight of misplacement

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

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

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

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

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

Theme 4: identity tension and self-doubt

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

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

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

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

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

Theme 5: Coping mechanisms and temporal resilience

Despite the hurt, many involved developed adaptive strategies. Those of the old school often looked to customs, religion, or groups based on olden times for support. Malika, who was 50 years old and an educator in matters of religion, said:

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

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

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

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

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the layered and deeply personal nature of temporal misalignment as a lived experience. Participants who identified as either "ahead" or "behind" their time described a constellation of emotional states—including isolation, disillusionment, frustration, and creative yearning—often framed in relation to the norms and expectations of the society they inhabit. But beyond individual psychological or social costs, the phenomenon also has broader societal implications that merit closer examination.

One major implication is that widespread feelings of being "out of sync" may signal or even fuel social unrest and polarization. When significant segments of a population feel alienated from dominant timelines—be it because of conservative traditions or radical aspirations—their discontent may manifest as resistance, apathy, or even active subversion. The growing divide between groups who perceive time as moving "too fast" and those who see it as moving "too slowly" can create ruptures in intergenerational communication, civic trust, and national narratives. In this sense, temporal misalignment is not only an individual burden but a collective fault line.

However, temporal misfits also play a paradoxical role as catalysts for cultural innovation. History has shown that individuals who live ahead of their time—visionaries, reformers, artists—often face marginalization initially, only to be celebrated posthumously or in radically changed social conditions. Conversely, those who preserve the values of prior generations may serve as moral or spiritual

anchors during times of rapid upheaval. This echoes Rosa's (2020) theory of social acceleration, which notes that temporal "resistors" and "accelerators" are both necessary components of cultural dynamism. The tension between these positions can ultimately produce productive friction, sparking new narratives or adaptations in society.

The ways in which societies respond to their temporal misfits—through suppression, toleration, or celebration—can reflect underlying attitudes toward difference, dissent, and non-linearity. In some contexts, progressive outliers are fostered through artistic grants, academic freedom, or digital platforms. In others, both regressive and radical voices may be silenced in the name of stability. As Ahmed and Singh (2023) suggest, symbolic invisibility can often be more damaging than overt rejection, particularly when misaligned individuals feel their experiences are not even acknowledged.

From a cultural perspective, the experience of being "out of sync" is highly contextual. The meanings of "tradition" and "progress" are not universal; they are constructed differently across geopolitical, religious, and historical landscapes. In Uzbekistan, for instance—where Soviet modernity, Islamic heritage, and global capitalism intersect—individuals may feel pulled in multiple temporal directions. For some, being "behind" may signify devotion to communal or spiritual values that resist Western materialism. For others, being "ahead" may involve engaging with global discourses of climate justice, feminism, or digital futurism—discourses that may not yet be widely accepted in local social spheres. These tensions highlight how post-Soviet and postcolonial temporalities often carry compounded complexity, blurring the boundaries between past, present, and future.

The findings of this study both confirm and challenge prior theoretical work. Ogburn's (1922) theory of cultural lag is reaffirmed by participants' reports of psychological dissonance when social norms failed to keep pace with technological or ideological shifts. Yet the study complicates his framework by showing that individuals can experience multiple lags simultaneously, and that misalignment is often not between culture and technology alone, but between inner time and external expectation.

Yalom's (1980) concept of existential isolation is likewise deepened: while many participants articulated a sense of ontological loneliness, they also expressed agency through coping—reclaiming meaning via creativity, affiliation, or inner alignment. This nuance offers a counterpoint to purely deficit-based models of isolation, suggesting that being "out of sync" can also become a source of reflective strength.

Smith and Delaney's (2021) work on ideological dissonance is echoed in participants' accounts of being socially penalized for their beliefs, while Rosa's (2020) work on acceleration is visible in their critiques of speed and volatility in modern life. What this study contributes is a phenomenological grounding of these abstract theories—illuminating how they are embodied, narrated, and emotionally navigated in the everyday lives of those who feel temporally misaligned.

In sum, this study not only reveals the emotional contours of temporal dissonance but also invites a broader sociological and cultural reckoning with how time is experienced, enforced, and resisted. Misfits in time are not simply outliers—they may be signposts, warning or guiding us through the disorienting pace of change.

Conclusion

The findings of this study open several promising avenues for future inquiry. To build on the current qualitative, phenomenological approach, further research could be grouped and developed across the following thematic domains:

Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Research: Future studies could employ quantitative instruments to measure the prevalence and intensity of temporal misalignment across larger populations. Developing validated scales that assess perceptions of being "ahead" or "behind" one's time, along with associated emotional and social outcomes, could help formalize this phenomenon and its predictors. Mixed-methods approaches could also triangulate narrative insights with broader attitudinal data to explore correlations between temporal misfit and variables such as life satisfaction, civic participation, or identity salience.

Longitudinal and Life-Course Studies: Temporal misalignment may not be static; individuals may move between feeling ahead, behind, or aligned depending on life stage, historical shifts, or personal transformation. Longitudinal research could trace how these experiences evolve over time and how coping strategies develop or fail. Understanding whether temporal fit fluctuates with changing social norms or personal milestones (e.g., retirement, parenthood, migration) would add depth to the current snapshot approach.

Cross-Cultural and Transnational Research: Given the cultural specificity of what constitutes "progress," "tradition," and "the right time," future research could examine temporal misalignment across cultural contexts. Comparative studies across collectivist and individualist societies, postcolonial vs. industrialized nations, or religious vs. secular communities could reveal how cultural values and historical narratives shape experiences of being temporally "in" or "out." Investigating non-Western conceptions of time (e.g., cyclical, spiritual, or seasonal frameworks)

could illuminate how cultural time orientations mediate feelings of alignment or alienation.

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