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# *Melting time and confined leisure under COVID-19 lockdown*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, a growing body of research has examined various aspects of the pandemic. Yet few studies have focused on time and leisure under conditions of melting time, a term used here to describe the slowdown of time resulting from state enforced lockdowns. On the one hand, individuals had greater freedom with regards to time as rigorous schedules were eased. On the other hand, being confined to the home limited one's freedom to choose how to spend one's time. Addressing the paradox of this unique situation, the article presents findings from a study that examined how time was spent and experienced under lockdown. An online questionnaire was circulated and was completed by 100 respondents via social networks in April 2020 during the first wave of the virus. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of participants felt they had more free time during the lockdown with media use, reading and sport, being the most popular pastimes. However, most highly valued and missed by participants due to the lockdown, was social interaction. Exploring how individuals use and assess their time thus reveals what matters to them most, particularly during a time of uncertainty and ontological insecurity.

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## **Introduction**

Before COVID-19 invaded our lives, we were all so used to hearing how busy everybody was and how little free time people had. Life was a race against the clock. Yet, after the outbreak of the pandemic, time became more like a Dali clock. Our rigorous schedules melted into liquid time as regimented time slots became loose, unstructured, and unpredictable. Time – the way we spend it and how we think about it – changed significantly.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020a) declared the novel SARS-coronavirus-2 (COVID-19 or the coronavirus) a pandemic, recommending stringent measures to reduce or prevent its spreading. Since then, a growing body of research has examined various aspects related to the virus. Yet, few studies have focused on the radical changes in time use and perceptions resulting from state enforced lockdowns and other regulations, which prevented people from going to work, meeting with family and friends, or leaving the house for leisure and recreation. This created a unique situation with regard to time. The current article explores time under lockdown, presenting findings from a study that examined how individuals spent and related to time, particularly free time, in the context of those unusual circumstances.

The research was conducted between the 5th and the 9th of April 2020, during the first wave of the coronavirus. At the time, COVID-19 was spreading uncontrollably, and uncertainty reigned as knowledge pertaining to the virus was scant and unclear. By April, the number of deaths had reached incomprehensible numbers in European countries such as Spain, where more than 15,000 died from the virus in a month, as in many areas in the United States, such as New York that suffered thousands of fatalities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020; WHO, 2020b).

Following the WHO's announcement about the pandemic, its first recommendation was social distancing, requiring a minimum 2-metre distance between people and the avoidance of physical contact, including handshaking. In Australia and Israel, the two main countries of residence of the participants in the current study, numerous restrictions were imposed as the virus continued to spread, leading to lockdown within a couple of weeks. In those, and many other countries, government regulations limited the number of people at social gatherings. Self-isolation was introduced as a requirement for individuals returning from international travel and later, borders were closed. This new concept of self-isolation or self-quarantine would become an integral part of combatting the virus, not only for travellers but also for those who had been in proximity to COVID cases. Soon after, schools and universities and most non-essential businesses were closed, as people were instructed to study and work from home. By the end of March, many governments closed down malls, restaurants and bars, theatres and cinemas, as well as gyms, swimming pools, parks, and beaches. In countries with stay-at-home directives, leaving one's home was limited by distance or for specific reasons, such as shopping for food and medication. It was also forbidden, and punishable by law, to spend time with people who were not part of the same household, which meant that socializing was prohibited.

### **Melting time: the slowdown of time**

These multiple restrictions left a void. I use the term *melting time* to describe the slowdown of time resulting from state enforced lockdowns. While busyness and time-pressure had been commonplace in day-to-day life before the pandemic, after the outbreak, the daily pace of individuals suddenly slowed down. If people had yearned for free time in their overloaded schedules pre-COVID, they were now faced with much unplanned, available time. The current research focuses precisely on that newly found time. It seeks to shed light not only on how time was spent during lockdown, but also on conceptions and the experience of time under restrictions.

Those unique, unprecedented circumstances of the lockdown created a paradox. On the one hand, state regulations limited one's freedom to choose how to spend one's time. Thus, while faced with more available time, it was not necessarily free. Yet leisure is not only related to external factors, but it is also a state of mind (Neulinger, 1974; Pieper, 1952/2009; Shir-Wise, 2019a). Therefore, besides limiting choices regarding time use, lockdown conditions may have affected the sense of freedom associated with free time. On the other hand, time was freed from much of the time-pressure brought about by busy schedules before lockdown regulations were instituted. With external demands being greatly reduced, time became far less constrained. The study addresses the question of freedom related to free time, exploring how individuals experienced their time under the new conditions of lockdown. Would they indeed feel freer and less time-pressured than before

restrictions? Was their time experienced as positive despite having limited options? To what extent would they feel stressed about being at home? What did they miss most during that time? Which pastimes were preferred and desired?

These questions were hoped to deepen our understanding of what types of time use are most valued by individuals. The study inquired into subjective preferences regarding pastimes, in order to reveal which are ranked higher or lower in the novel situation brought about by lockdowns. I analyse how participants evaluate their time using the concept *the hierarchization of free time* (Shir-Wise, 2019a), which refers to the ways in which individuals assess and categorize their free time according to its perceived worth, thus classifying some activities as more positive than others. Exploring how individuals evaluate their time may reflect what matters to them most, particularly during a pandemic, a time of uncertainty and ontological insecurity.

### ***Changes in Time and Free Time***

Most of our time, pre-COVID, had been structured by work, errands, or other commitments. The pandemic changed our pace, our schedules, and our perceptions of time. We were so used to being busy all the time, valorising productivity and efficiency (Gershuny, 2005; Shir-Wise, 2019b; Sullivan, 2008) and, all of a sudden, we had to slow down. Before the coronavirus, the use of digital devices, at home and at work, enabled around-the-clock availability, blurring boundaries and creating a sense of time pressure. Long working hours and a lack of leisure time had come to be status symbols associated with social and economic success (Bellezza et al., 2017; Gershuny & Sullivan, 2019; Shir-Wise, 2019b), a reversal of the Veblenian leisure- class relationship (Veblen, 1899/2007). In a culture of “the more the better,” the *melting of time* felt strange and unfamiliar. We could no longer manage our time by planning, because we did not know what the future would bring. This uncertainty about both the present and the future could negatively affect ontological security – one’s sense of order and stability, which enable a feeling of meaning in life (Giddens, 1991). Time lost its structure and felt less productive as state enforced lockdowns confined us to our homes. Unconstrained by external demands, we now had more *free* time.

When we think about leisure or free time, we do not associate it with productivity, time-pressure or busy schedules. On the contrary, it is construed as free on two levels. It is *free from* commitments, whether at home or at work (Roberts, 2006; Rojek, 1999) but it is also perceived as a time when we are *free to* choose to do as we wish, providing satisfaction (Roberts, 2013; Shir-Wise, 2019a). However, encumbered by numerous restrictions due to the pandemic, the extra time available may no longer have been experienced as *free*. In other words, the element of freedom, that had always made free time so attractive, may have disappeared. Young families were certainly not *free from* commitments at home, having children to occupy and take care of, a task requiring much creativity considering the limited options for outings. Those who did not have children at home may have been *free from* childcare duties, but many were required to work or care for aging parents, who were at high risk and living alone. Certainly, nobody was entirely *free to* choose how to spend time due to the multiple restrictions that obviated all leisure activities outside the home. Most leisure sites, such as, shopping malls, cinemas, or restaurants, became inaccessible. Taking a vacation, particularly overseas, or going to the

park, the gym, or the pool were no longer feasible leisure options. In this way, “free” time was stripped of its freedom. Perhaps feelings of satisfaction associated with free time would also be negatively affected. As Roberts (2013) suggested, leisure must be “active (takes people out of their homes), social rather than solitary, and structured” (p. 7) if it is to be satisfying. These criteria were unlikely to exist in the extraordinary circumstances of stay-at-home regulations. The present study examines the experience of free time under lockdown. Would dictates of productivity and efficiency generate negative feelings under the conditions of lockdown or would individuals’ sense of freedom be enhanced due to the slowdown of time? Could leisure still provide satisfaction?

An additional consequence of lockdown was social disconnection. Besides interaction with members of one’s household, social distancing prevented all other forms of face-to-face socializing with extended family, friends or work colleagues. Socializing has been reported as one of the most enjoyable, popular and time-consuming leisure activities (ATUS, 2018, 2020; Gershuny & Sullivan, 2019; Zuzanek, 2014), which contributes to well-being and happiness (Kahneman et al., 2004). Moreover, in sociability, as opposed to other interactions such as those in the workplace, the individual is freed from serious goals, and barriers are lowered (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Simmel, 1949), enhancing one’s sense of freedom. What implications would lockdown restrictions have on social interaction and connectedness?

## Methodology and sample

The data was collected through questionnaires that were accessed and completed online. Participants were reached through various social media, which included Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp, where an explanation about the study was posted together with a link to the questionnaire. Social media users were asked to share the link which was posted on 5 April 2020. The first questionnaires were completed on that date, and the last on 9 April 2020. By limiting the study to four days, it was hoped that external factors, related to the virus or restrictions would remain unchanged.

The questionnaires addressed feelings regarding time during that period, as well as relating to how time was spent. Unlike time use surveys, the study does not examine the amount of time allocated to various activities, yet it focuses on the types of activities pursued and the subjective experience of time. Questions also related to meaning in life, stress, and well-being. Participants were asked to tick their response to various statements on a 5-point Likkert scale while other questions allowed ticking more than one box including “other” where participants were able to type in their own answer. The results were analysed using descriptive statistics, primarily presented in percentages, designed to give an overall picture of findings, allow for comparisons and characterize participants of the study. In an open question, participants could write as much as they wanted. This was intended to allow them to express themselves more freely and thus shed light on feelings about the future as well as what they missed due to the lockdown conditions. Data-driven coding was used to analyse these qualitative findings. After a thorough examination of participants’ responses, a coding scheme was constructed according to major themes that emerged. For example, responses such as camping or going to the forest, were listed under the category of nature. Other categories included sport, family, friends and travel.

Most respondents were from Israel (47) and Australia (41), eight were from the United States, and the remaining four were from South Africa, Singapore, Latvia, and India. The study explored time under lockdown, not in a country, such as the United Kingdom, that suffered great losses from the coronavirus (Roberts, 2020), but focused primarily on countries where, at the time of the study, the numbers of cases and deaths were very low. This means that the way people felt about the restrictions on time use options would be less likely to be affected by fear of the pandemic and impending death allowing a relatively cleaner study of the experience of time.

Ninety percent of the participants had been under lockdown for more than a week because of the coronavirus, with 73% having been at home for between two and four weeks. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents were women and 23% men. The majority of respondents were aged between 20 and 59 (77%), and most (75%) were living with a partner. Seventy-four percent had children under the age of 18 living at home, 28% of whom were under the age of seven. Half the respondents were required to work from home, and 64% were receiving a salary during that time. Eighty percent had higher education degrees and 74% of participants described their status as middle class.

### **Findings: time under lockdown**

The findings of the study indicated that the majority of participants felt they had more free time during the lockdown. Fifty two percent agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, “I have more free time now,” whereas 37% disagreed or strongly disagreed. On the one hand, it is not surprising that the majority reported having more free time, given the restrictions that prevented going to work or leaving the house. On the other hand, 74% of respondents had children at home, and 77% were women, factors that have been linked to feelings of time-pressure and busyness (Cha & Papastefanou, 2020; Mattingly & Sayer, 2006). Therefore, it may have been expected that domestic and childcare duties would limit participants’ free time.

Responses to statements about feelings related to time indicated that more participants felt positive about their time (39%) as opposed to those who didn’t (29%). Only 26% of participants felt they had too much time on their hands while 58% percent did not. As to feelings of stress, 51% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement: “I feel stressed having to spend so much time at home,” while only 34% agreed or strongly agreed. It is somewhat surprising that only 34% felt stressed by the forced time at home. When asked about their experience of time before the coronavirus, 66% said that they had been time pressured and only 17% said they hadn’t been. During the outbreak and lockdown at the time of the questionnaire, 48% felt less time pressured as opposed to 35% who didn’t.

In response to a statement relating to meaning in life, a large majority (67%) of participants agreed that the coronavirus had made them think about the meaning of life, as opposed to only 16% who disagreed. This could be a result of being less busy and having more time to contemplate life, combined with the implications of fear and anxiety of the pandemic (Ahorsu et al., 2020), rising deaths, and existential precariousness. Regarding future effects of the pandemic on the participants’ time, 41% (as opposed to 31%) agreed that after the coronavirus they would change the way they use their time.

A number of questions related specifically to the participants’ time use. Eighty-two percent reported housekeeping and 60% reported working at the time. Yet, participants

also reported various leisure activities that occupied their time. Media use (76%) was found to be the most popular pastime, including various types of media consumption. For example, two thirds of participants spent more than an hour a day following the news. Reading (66%), sport (60%), and other hobbies (46%) were also reported by a large number of participants.

As well as being asked how they spent their time, participants were also asked how they felt about that time. In response to the question “Which of the following do you feel improve your sense of well-being?”, social contact was indicated as playing a major role. More specifically, in answer to that question, talking to family or friends was ticked by 92% of the participants, caring for others by 57%, and physical intimacy by 36%. Sport (57%) and other hobbies (51%) were also experienced as improving well-being as was routine (46%) and meditation (21%). In another question about dealing with social isolation, social media was indicated by 73% as helpful.

Participants were also asked what they missed as a result of the restrictions of the coronavirus. This question was hoped to shed light on the *hierarchization of free time* by revealing the types of time use most valued by the participants. Eighty-two percent indicated outings, 77% socializing, 64% family, and 32% physical touch as being missed at the time of the questionnaire. Sport was missed by 36% and work by 30%. Twenty-eight percent missed routine and 23% missed being busy.

Respondents were asked the following open question: “When life is back to normal after the coronavirus is under control, what is the first thing you would like to do?” By contemplating life without restrictions on one’s time, this question, like the previous one, was designed to uncover what participants considered their top priority. Here too, the importance of social contact among the participants of the study was evident. More than two thirds wrote answers relating to visits or outings with friends and family. Some specified physical contact. For example, “Run to my parents and give them a hug,” “Hug and kiss my family and friends,” or “sex.” Eleven percent said they would like to go to the beach or nature and 12% wished to watch or do sport. Only 6% wrote that they would like to go to a café or restaurant, specifying they would like to go with friends or family. This suggests that the 82% who marked outings in the previous question about what they missed, may have had family or social outings in mind. Five percent wrote they would like to travel or go on vacation and only 3% mentioned shopping or malls. Interestingly, a number of participants did not point to a particular activity that they hoped to do after the coronavirus, but rather referred to a frame of mind. Their responses included, “be free to do what I want to do,” “not worry,” “feel things are normal and safe,” “plan the future,” and “routine.” These answers seem to imply that there is something welcoming about regular schedules, planning, and normalcy as well as being free to spend our time as we wish, without anxiety and uncertainty.

## Discussion

### *Positivity and reflection*

As we have said the state enforced regulations brought about unique conditions with regards to time, creating a paradox. While the lockdown constrained freedom pertaining

to time and leisure, it also generated more free time due to fewer demands outside the home. The study sought to shed light on this paradox by exploring the subjective experience of time under lockdown. Did people feel they had more free time and, if so, how was that time perceived?

It seems that the overall experience of time among many of the participants of the study was positive. Perhaps there was more positivity in the first wave than in the second and third waves since the first lockdown created a novel situation allowing more time to spend with the family without a need for productivity or time-management. Moreover, at that time, the lockdown was conceived as a solution that would solve the problem of the spreading of the virus, and that it would therefore be short lived. The feeling of *melting time* in contrast to the regimented schedules before the pandemic, may have brought with it a certain appeal. Having time in the home, with less time pressure and more free time, was possibly envisaged as a unique opportunity. Perhaps the lockdowns in the second and third waves, months later, were experienced less positively precisely because such conceptions regarding their effectiveness and hence the duration of the virus, had changed, and the novelty of that time in the home had worn off. As the findings suggest, being under lockdown promoted reflection. As we have seen, more than two thirds of participants agreed with the statement, “the coronavirus has made me think about the meaning of life.” It is likely that such contemplation would highlight the importance of family and friends that have been found to contribute to a sense of meaningfulness (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014; Shir-Wise, 2019a). These themes also emerged in clips, memes, and songs that were circulated on social networks during the first wave, more so than later, when the coronavirus continued to spread. One might think that, after the first wave, the extended impact of the virus would make people all the more aware of its contagiousness and potential threat to life, which might make questions about the meaning of life even more pertinent. Yet, human beings seem to adapt to situations, so that the lifestyle changes imposed upon them by the pandemic, eventually seem more normal thus existential questions are no longer the focus of one’s thoughts.

Nevertheless, the fact that many participants thought that the coronavirus would change the way they would use their time in the future, suggests that reflection on the meaning of life during the lockdown may have challenged notions of worthy time. Whereas before the pandemic, busyness, and time-pressure had been an integral part of participants’ lives, it appears that contemplation, along with a more relaxed pace and having more time with the family, may have triggered rumination about everyday time and priorities in life.

In addition to questions related to the experience of time, participants were asked how time was spent when confined to the home due to state restrictions. Besides committed time spent on housekeeping and work, it was not surprising to learn that the most common practice reported by 76% of participants, was media use. Even during regular, pandemic-free times, when people are able to pursue a wide range of leisure options, media use, including watching television, using social media and Internet, are the most time-consuming leisure activities (ATUS, 2018, 2020; Statista, 2016), followed by socializing (ATUS, 2018, 2020; Zuzanek, 2014). Thus, clearly, when social activities and commercial leisure outside the home were ruled out, media use would be likely to increase, particularly considering that media serves as a source of information as well as being a tool for communication (Ahmed et al., 2019; Panahi et al., 2016). Individuals



turned to the news and a variety of Internet sites in order to obtain information, which may generate a sense of greater control in a time of uncertainty. Moreover, social networks may have created a feeling of belonging and also served as a medium for expressing one's feelings, since real social engagement was impossible. The above findings suggest that, despite the negative implications often associated with social media (Dhir et al., 2018; Reer et al., 2019; Turkle, 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2009), digital connections were experienced as beneficial under the unusual circumstances resulting from state lockdowns. Indeed, the WHO (2020c) recommended staying connected with friends and family through digital technology. While before the pandemic, technology had often led to feelings of hurriedness and the "acceleration of life" (Wajcman, 2014), as lockdown conditions slowed down the pace of everyday life, digital media was experienced more positively, as being helpful in dealing with social isolation and loneliness (Shah et al., 2020). Social networks or video conferencing were seen as a substitute for face-to-face interaction, though not valued as much, and time spent on social media was experienced as alleviating social isolation.

### **Well-being**

Additionally, without the option of leisure activities in the public domain, participants spent their time on various pastimes in the private domain, including reading and other autotelic hobbies. Spending time on "serious leisure" or "flow" activities have been found to contribute to well-being as they engage the individual who becomes deeply involved in the activity which often requires creativity or skills to overcome challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Stebbins, 2001). As we saw, reading was a particularly popular pastime as was sport and other hobbies, but they were also indicated by participants as contributing to their well-being. Interestingly, almost half the participants pointed to routine as improving well-being, suggesting that, when free from organized work and schedules, individuals may find solace in daily routine which generates a sense of order in the chaos of an unknown pandemic and the upheaval of our familiar time use. The predictability and familiarity of routine contributes to ontological security and a sense of meaning in life (Heintzelman & King, 2019; Silverstone, 1994).

### **Social connections**

However, more than any other practice, social contact was experienced as the most beneficial to participants' sense of well-being. Practices, such as talking to friends and family or physical contact, require a personal connection, allowing the individual to satisfy the basic needs of love and belonging and foster close relationships which are correlated with happiness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Kahneman et al., 2004; Maslow, 2013/1943). Caring for others, also reported by the majority of participants as improving well-being, generates a sense of meaningfulness (Baumeister et al., 2013).

It is important to note that the study was conducted just before Passover and Easter, festivals that are usually celebrated in the company of family. For many, both religious and irreligious, these occasions, associated with togetherness and solidarity, require planning and preparation as people host large gatherings in their homes. Thus, the

approaching holidays may have exacerbated feelings of loneliness and heightened the desire to meet family, as well as friends. At a time of social distancing, digital technology was the only option, playing a crucial role in keeping people socially connected. Indeed, social media was indicated by 73% of participants as helping them deal with social isolation. During the lockdown, social networks created a sense of community by enabling families and friends to keep in touch, grandparents to see their grandchildren on video calls and clips, and individuals to share photos of their newly found hobbies such as gardening or baking bread. As well as being a means of communication, social media served as a tool for disseminating information and misinformation. Given the mixed data concerning the virus, particularly in the first few months, individuals sought various channels in order to keep informed and inform others, both about the virus and state regulations, a practice that may have fostered a sense of control. Social networks also circulated clips and texts, some informative, others humorous, possibly providing a catharsis in a situation of uncertainty and fear.

### ***The hierarchization of free time***

The findings of the study have shown how participants spent their free time under lockdown indicating activities such as media use, reading and sport. The question is where these activities were ranked on the hierarchy of free time. Although media use was found to be the most popular activity, and probably the most time-consuming as previous research has indicated (ATUS, 2018; Statista, 2016), is it necessarily ranked high on scales of worth related to free time? Past research has suggested that, while being experienced as enjoyable, as opposed to social interaction or “flow” activities, media use is experienced as less satisfying (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Shir-Wise, 2019a; Stebbins, 2001). Indeed, the majority of participants not only spent time on flow activities such as sport, reading and other hobbies, but they also experienced those pastimes as contributing to well-being. Similarly, social contact, including digital connections, was considered to be helpful to participants’ well-being and in dealing with social isolation. The high value accorded to social interaction was also evident in responses to the question about what participants missed as a result of the restrictions due to the coronavirus. Contact with family and friends was indicated when participants were asked about the first thing they would do when life was back to normal after the coronavirus.

The fact that socializing and family were noted by a large majority of participants when responding to both those questions, accentuates the significance of real, face-to-face social connection. Even though social media was indicated by most participants as helpful in dealing with social isolation, it appears that it is certainly not a substitute for real interaction. The current findings suggest that despite the ubiquity of digital connections and social media, adults, including young adults, still seek real human interaction, whether with significant others or in the form of socializing. Sociable engagements have a unique quality, and the very presence of others generates emotional warmth and social integration, without the burden of commitment that characterizes other arenas (Elias & Dunning, 1986, p. 122). Laughter, turn-taking in conversation, and bodily gestures characterize the experience of face-to-face social interaction enhancing “currents of feeling” and a sense of belonging (Collins, 2004).

Outings were also indicated by the vast majority as being missed. Yet, in the open question where participants were asked about the first thing they would like to do when life is back to normal, only a small number noted outings such as shopping, movies, or even travel. This was an unexpected finding considering the culture of consumerism, in which we are so deeply immersed. It promotes consumption as a central pastime, and the commercialization of leisure encourages us to fill our free time by consuming various goods and services (Shir-Wise, 2020). Yet, participants did not mention such practices, nor did they yearn for exotic forms of leisure, or various types of entertainment. Perhaps part of the time spent on digital media was spent shopping online, which may have satisfied the need for consumption to a certain extent.

It seems that social interaction is experienced as a desirable and worthy part of our day-to-day lives, thus human beings crave for time with family and friends when it is taken away from them. The feeling of being stripped of one's freedom may heighten the desire for what is unattainable, be it meeting with family or friends. However, the fact that few mentioned restaurants, movies or shopping, seems to suggest that the wish for human contact is not simply a matter of wanting what one cannot have. As previous research suggests, social time is valorised since it is linked to a sense of purpose, meaning and happiness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Kahneman et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Shir-Wise, 2019a). Therefore, considering the fact that participants felt the coronavirus had made them think about the meaning of life, it is likely that such contemplation would highlight the importance of connections with family and friends, thereby ranking social time high on the hierarchy of free time practices.

## Conclusions

The unprecedented restrictions on individuals' time and lifestyle due to the pandemic raises questions about life in the future, including work, education and leisure. Are people likely to go back to busy schedules that create time-pressure and stress? Is online shopping or education likely to replace real interaction in physical spaces? What will social interaction look like? And how will our free time be spent and experienced as it becomes more available?

At the time of the writing of this paper (June 2021), COVID-19 continues to spread with more than 3.8 million fatalities worldwide and rising every day. Many countries are in their third wave, necessitating public health orders that demand a return to extended lockdowns. A year after the outbreak first started, there seemed to be light at the end of the tunnel as COVID vaccines, at last, became available to the general population. However, they are not expected to have far-reaching effects until the end of 2021 so it is unlikely that life will be back to normal in the near future. The question is whether the old normal will indeed be resumed. Will cultural scripts of busyness and productivity continue to dictate our time (Shir-Wise, 2019b) so that *melting time* reverts to regimented schedules, accompanied by a sense of time – pressure? Only time will tell, yet it seems that, if we have learnt anything from the experience of lockdown and social distancing, it is about the value of social contact. Even though pre-COVID predictions claimed that face-to-face interaction would decrease drastically as digital technology improved, it appears that individuals still yearn for real social interaction. Parents and students

complained about online learning during the pandemic, and individuals crave social contact, whether with family or friends. And despite the expansion and availability of home entertainment, people missed going to concerts, movies and plays and waited restlessly, to return to pubs and restaurants.

We may go back to life as it was. Yet, the pandemic and the unique situation of *melting time* under lockdown may possibly make us more aware of questions of freedom with regards to our time. As one participant put it, “I am concerned about going back to how it was. I want the new normal to be different.” Perhaps the experience of having had more free time with less time-pressure, will be remembered in a way that may bring about a “new normal” and change our perceptions of worthy time as well as how we use it.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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