

## **DIGITAL TEMPORALITIES**

### **Subjective experiences of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in border areas**

*di Claudia Lintner\**

#### **Abstract**

The article reflects how new communication technologies shape the waiting- as a typical feature of time experience- of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. By linking the physical experience of time to a digital level invites us to rethink our perception of time as a linear description of events and as merely a physical experience. It allows us to understand how ICT is used by asylum seekers and undocumented migrants to overcome the physical boundaries of nation states. It broadens the understanding of how ICT overcomes not only a spatial dimension but also a temporal dimension. The article is based on a qualitative research approach. As the results show, the existence of digital possibilities is indeed empowering for people who cannot rely on formal means of coordination and information. As shown in the analysis, the temporal flexibility afforded by digital means contrasts with the rigid temporal rhythm of the asylum apparatus.

#### **Keywords**

Digitalization, temporalities, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, smartphone, empowerment

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## 1. THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

The article questions how modern communication technologies shape and change the way asylum seekers and undocumented migrants deal with waiting as a typical feature of time experience in situations of immobility in their everyday lives. In answering this research question, I will focus on the digitalization–waiting nexus in order to understand how they employ digital practices to overcome restrictions during their physical state of immobility. In accordance with this, I argue that the digital practices of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants during their physical state of immobility may offer an analytical lens to understand the everyday negotiations of asylum seekers across time and space.

In doing so, I draw on an important strand of studies that examine waiting as a typical feature of time experiences in situations of immobility for asylum seekers (Brekke, 2010; Rotter, 2016; Kohli and Kaukko, 2018). Haas (2017) interprets waiting for asylum decisions and documents as an existential experience that is «a matter of life and death», making the waiting process a «matter of urgency» for asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. Accordingly, waiting can be seen as the «activity» par excellence of asylum seekers, as they have to wait for a response from the authorities regarding the evaluation of their asylum application and the continuation of their lives (Kobelinsky, 2014). Asylum procedures are thus not perceived as a linear and continuous experience, but rather as a «back and forth in the experience of waiting» (Kobelinsky, 2014), which can be interpreted as an exercise of power. Following Bourdieu (2000: 228) and his frequently quoted passage, «Making people wait [...] is an integral part of the exercise of power», Turnbull (2017) interprets waiting as a practice that manipulates others' time and experience as the effects of power. This is particularly relevant for border areas and border practices, as they «enable social rhythms and temporal logics and that can entail a politicized valuing of the time and the temporality of certain groups over others» (Harris and Coleman, 2020: 605). Here, in particular, people on the move are confronted with a bureaucratic infrastructure that can be understood with what Sharma (2014) calls «temporal architectures» meaning border control practices, laws, services and technologies that structure the time of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants (Jacobsen, 2021). Here, borders and border practices are constructed as an exclusive or inclusive mechanism that may change over time rather than being understood as fixed and static in space. Thus, borders and border practices are viewed not as products but rather

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as processes that are dynamic in space and time. To emphasize the processual character of borders, Hurd et al. (2017: 4) describe it as the becoming of a border. This includes not only the spatial becoming of a border but also the subjective level of how people on the move experience borders and border practices temporally.

Against this background, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants often experience time disruptions, which lead to various difficulties in organizing their everyday lives. They have to adapt to the times and rhythms of border practices; they have to be flexible in dealing with changing plans and activities; and they have to react often in unexpected ways in situations of emergency (Griffiths et al., 2014). At the same time, they have the challenge of observing their daily routine or rhythm in the present, which is often difficult to maintain. Different scholars show how insecure and undefined futures leave the migrants unable to visualize the future and integrate their future expectations in their present, by creating a sense of meaninglessness (Turnbull, 2017; Masoumi, 2022). The inability to link the past to the present and the present to the future could create a sense of insecurity and meaninglessness, which can lead to an impaired sense of reality.

By drawing on various existing literature that have proved waiting to be a specific temporal category (Haas, 2017), the article introduces a digital lens in order to contribute and enrich literature on waiting as a digital temporality (Eriksen, 2021). As a result, the article questions the impact of digitalization on the waiting experience of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. More specifically, it is interested in understanding how asylum seekers and undocumented migrants circumvent time-structured border practices during periods of physical immobility using digital means. In doing so, the article draws on several empirical studies (Gillespie, 2018; Kaufmann, 2018; Alencar 2018, 2020) that outline the importance of digital means in the everyday lives of refugees. Accordingly, Witterborn (2015) states that in the era of digitalisation the paradigmatic figure of the uprooted migrant is yielding to another figure, namely the connected migrant. Indeed, more than ever before, social media platforms, phone applications, etc. have released mobility/immobility from their purely physical meaning by adding a digital dimension. Linked to this, Diminescu (2008) coined the term *e-diaspora*, defined as a «migrant collective that organizes itself and is active first and foremost on the web» (Diminescu, 2008: 452). In fact, the increasing development in technology, as Diminescu (2008: 572) highlights, has changed the idea of being present, which is becoming less physically linked to a particular territory and more affective. In line with recent digital sociological approaches (Lupton, 2014;

Orton-Johnson and Prior, 2013), social and other digital media are seen as inherent parts of everyday life and thus inherent features that constitute and configure social life patterns of human behaviour, social relationships and concepts of the self (Lupton, 2014). Accordingly, more than ever before, new mobile technologies have been rooted in the everyday life activities of migrants and have been used in very different ways depending on their needs and specific life contexts (Madianou and Miller, 2012). I argue that transnational communication using digital technologies cannot simply be understood as time-space compression, but as time-structured and time-structuring.

Thus, linking the physical experience of time to a digital level invites us to rethink our perception of time as a linear description of events and as merely a physical experience. It allows us to understand how ICT is used by asylum seekers and undocumented migrants to overcome the physical boundaries of nation states. It broadens the understanding of how ICT overcomes not only a spatial dimension but also a temporal dimension. I argue that by developing digital narratives, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants attempt to challenge the chronopolitics of control (Jacobsen and Karlsen, 2021) imposed on them within the current EU migration system. Empowerment through technology is thus coupled with the physical reality of everyday life (Diminescu, 2008), making the connection between the offline and the online world «intertwined in daily practices and events, creating a continuum between digitalized life experiences and rematerialization and embodiment of technologies» (Van den Boomen et al., 2009: 15).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This study is part of the project “Digital border experiences of refugees: Understanding the use of ICT in the context of forced migration at the Brenner border–Italy (DIBO)”, involving cooperation between the Free University of Bolzano (Italy – Internal Research Fund CRC 2019), the University of Innsbruck (Austria) and the Technical University of Munich (Germany). The study adopted a qualitative research approach. From December 2019 to May 2020, 17 narrative and semi-structured interviews were carried out with asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in the Italian northern border zone.

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Table 1. List of interviewees

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>
IP1	Nigeria	Asylum seeker	Male	23
IP2	The Gambia	Asylum seeker	Male	20
IP3	Afghanistan	Undocumented migrant	Male	28
IP4	Nigeria	Asylum seeker	Male	24
IP5	Afghanistan	Undocumented migrant	Male	22
IP6	Bangladesh	Asylum seeker	Male	27
IP7	The Gambia	Asylum seeker	Male	29
IP8	The Gambia	Asylum seeker	Male	23
IP9	Bangladesh	Undocumented migrant	Male	22
IP10	Afghanistan	Asylum seeker	Male	19
IP11	Pakistan	Asylum seeker	Male	24
IP12	Nigeria	Asylum seeker	Male	24
IP13	The Gambia	Asylum seeker	Male	26
IP14	Pakistan	Asylum seeker	Male	27
IP15	The Gambia	Undocumented migrant	Male	29
IP16	Pakistan	Asylum seeker	Male	30
IP17	Nigeria	Asylum seeker	Male	22

The data collection process was divided into two phases. In the first phase, six narrative interviews with asylum seekers and undocumented migrants were conducted. Using narrative interviews was particularly useful in order to elicit information on subjective experiences with a specific focus on events and actions within concrete space and time contexts (Lindlof and Taylor, 2017). Temporality is central to the narrative approach, as it acknowledges human experiences as dynamic entities that are in a constant state of flux. However, because of the low English language proficiency of some interviewees, the researchers decided to include semi-structured interviews in the data collection process. Accordingly, based on the pre-analysis of the narrative interviews, core themes as well as open questions were identified, resulting in 11 semi-structured interviews being conducted. Semi-structured interviewing is suitable when the researcher already has some grasp of what is happening within the sample population in relation to the research topic. Each narrative and semi-structured interview lasted from 60 to 120 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English and German. Although the proficiency of interviewees in German was high, the average proficiency in English was low as mentioned above. Because of the first outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Italy and the related containment measures, 7 semi-structured interviews out of 11

were carried out over the phone. The interview data were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Meyring, 2014, 2015), which focuses on the development of categories (codes) and a category system (coding frame). In order to conduct more in-depth analysis, axial coding and selective coding, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), were adopted. Axial coding involved putting together parts of interviews in new ways, which revealed new issues and perspectives for analysis. Finally, during selective coding, core categories were defined and connected to other categories by identifying similarities and relationships between the categories. The presentation of the results is based on the following categories and respective codes: Category 1: waiting as a temporal phenomenon (Code 1: temporal ruptures, Code 2: temporal immobility, Code 3: temporal context (bureaucratic), Code 4: creating normality); Category 2: digital dimension of time (Code 1: reconnecting past/present, Code 2: digital agency/empowerment, Code 3: digital precariousness).

All interviewees participated voluntarily. They were informed about the purpose of the study, the data collection process and how the data would be treated. Before data collection began, all interviewees gave their written informed consent. Furthermore, it was made clear from the beginning that all participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Finally, all participants agreed that the interviews would be recorded, transcribed and used in academic publications. In the presentation of the findings, the names of the participants were replaced by pseudonyms.

### **3. RESULTS**

The next section provides in-depth insights into how asylum seekers and undocumented migrants experience waiting as a significant facet of immobility. Drawing on the analysis of narrative and semi-structured interviews, the next section shows how asylum seekers and undocumented migrants deal with practices related to migration, bordering and migration control that produce waiting as a temporal phenomenon. As such, the analysis shows how asylum seekers and undocumented migrants manage temporal insecurity and conflicts in time as a crucial element of migrant experiences of immobility.

#### *3.1 Construction of waiting as a temporal phenomenon*

Since 2015, the Austrian asylum law has tightened. This included restrictive border management, which also provided for a 370-metre-long fence, a so-called registration centre as well as increased control activities

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and staff deployment in the area near the border. These were measures that could be ramped up at any time if necessary. Despite declining refugee numbers, the Austrian army sent 70 soldiers to the Brenner border in August 2017. In October 2017, Austria and Germany confirmed that border controls in the Schengen area would be extended for another six months until May 2018.

In 2016, Farim, a 23-year-old man from The Gambia, came to Italy by boat. He spent five months in Sicily. There he applied for asylum. His destination was not Italy, but Germany, where a friend and part of his family already lived. So, he left the accommodation centre in southern Italy and made his way north on his own. In 2017, he arrived at the Brenner border. Without the necessary documents that would have enabled him to cross the border, he was forced to interrupt his mobility trajectory: «Now, it is very difficult to go to Austria or Germany. They control the trains. For me it is almost impossible. So now, I am here, two years already. You have to wait here, think, look, talk to people until it is possible again. I have lost two years». Similar to what Fontanari (2017) describes in her research, Farim refers to a temporal rupture that led to an extended period of waiting (two years) without any indication of how long this wait will be. Within this waiting process, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants experience uncertainty and insecurity about their future lives, leading to stress, disorientation and a feeling of being out of place (Fontanari, 2017; Lintner and Elsen, 2017). Kayong (Nigeria, 23 years) outlines: «I didn't know what to do; for me, this period of time was the worst I could ever expect. I didn't know what to do, where to go. I felt so alone and no one could help me». Kayong in this quote expresses how being stuck temporally in a specific space put their lives «on hold» (Haas, 2017). Similar to Kayong, Deniz describes this state of temporal immobility not as neutral but as painful: «It is wasted time. I just want to move on and go to Germany where my brother lives. I try to spend my days as best as possible, but sometimes I am not able to stand up, so I stay in my bed». The temporal uncertainty expresses itself through a physical state of malaise and discomfort and thus becomes an experience of existential insecurity (Haas, 2017).

However, as the narratives show, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are not completely passive in dealing with this uncertainty in time and space. In contrast, as the analysis reveals, they are eager to create a kind of normality within this period of waiting characterized by temporal uncertainty. They find new rhythms to organize their everyday lives, «which seems sensible, reasonable, and normal as soon as one looks at it up close» (Goffman, 1961: 7). Normality in this context means

distancing oneself in everyday life as far as possible from the ascribed category of refugee/asylum seeker/undocumented migrant and the social attributions and expectations that are linked to it. Salam (Gambia, 29 years), for example, outlines: «I do this all the time. I spend my time here at the station or in the park. I pretend to talk on the phone. I leaf through the newspaper. Whenever I'm at the station, I always have my backpack with me, though it's empty». He is camouflaged and at the same time protected by the normality and temporal rhythms of the public space. This is also reflected in the narrative of Musa (Nigeria, 24 years): «In the afternoon I meet with friends in the central park. In the afternoon the park is full of people. We sit and talk, and it feels ok. During the night I do not go alone outside; I do so only when I am with my friends. When the police see you at night alone, they stop you, I mean». Thus, within the experienced temporal and spatial uncertainty, they create a kind of stability characterized by a temporal rhythm that is closely linked to the rhythm of public life. As Musa points out in the quote above, he organizes the tempos of everyday life according to the rhythm of control practices in public spaces that are more likely to be implemented during the nights when he is alone.

Since 2015, the city of Bolzano has become a hub of forced immobility for asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who either want to cross the border or are forced to return because of the Dublin II regulation. This has been the experience of Halim, a young man from Afghanistan who first came to southern Italy in 2015, where his fingerprints were registered. Then he continued his journey, went to Austria and then to Germany. He lived until 2019 in Germany, had a job and shared an apartment with two friends. Then the deportation decision was taken: «I was not expecting that. The police came to my home; they told me that I have to go back to Italy. I didn't want that. It was a shock. I couldn't do anything against it; they decided». Thus, according to his interview, the deportation happened in an unexpected manner. Griffith (2014) defines such experiences as dramatic temporal ruptures that alter the patterns and expectations of individuals. Halim describes this temporal rupture as a «shock», indicating a highly stressful and disruptive experience: «I was working there; I had a life. I had already worked in Germany for two years. I had a job. You understand? I had a job». In Germany he built a new life that was close to the one he had imagined before his escape. Thus, he was able to synchronize his intentions of a life in Germany with his lived experience. He created a kind of linearity that links different temporalities. In an unexpected way this linearity was shattered again in an instant that led him back to a feeling of being

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uprooted again: «I didn't know what to do. I had to start again from zero. I didn't even know where I arrived. I didn't know Bolzano. Where was it? What could I do there?» Halim arrived at Bolzano and found himself in uncertain and precarious temporalities that put him in an extremely socially vulnerable position again:

When I came to Bolzano I slept out about 5 months; you have to wait 6 months to get a place. If you come with family you get it right away; but if you are alone, you have to wait 6 months to 8 months. I was always outside. If it was cold, it doesn't matter, it was very difficult. During the day it was better because I could go to the library, but at night it was difficult because it was cold and I didn't have a place and I didn't even have many blankets, which was very difficult.

It is shown how the tempos of asylum procedures is intertwined with his temporality of life. Cwerner (2001: 21) in this respect introduces the term «heteronomous times», which describes the idea that the control over time lies beyond the migrant's reach. Instead, as the narrative of Halim shows, temporal control is shaped by the tempos generated by asylum procedures that require him to wait and thus make his near future unclear. Halim in this way experiences waiting as an exercise of power that he cannot change but can only adapt to. The asylum procedure creates, for all asylum seekers similar to Halim, an existential uncertainty that expresses itself through his body and unfolds over time: «I just can't wait here. They need to tell me within the next six months if I have a place in the accommodation center. I go to the police to ask about this, but they always tell me the same things. I don't know when I can finally hear from them». The example of Halim shows how situational precariousness is transformed into existential precariousness (Dwyer, 2009). He reacts to the situation or condition («I go to the police and ask») on the one hand and experiences the precariousness as an embodied state of being on the other (Jacobsen, 2021). As Dwyer (2009: 25) points out: «There is no fixed line that separates situational and existential waiting. There is, instead, a personally experienced, and context-dependent, threshold». Furthermore, as Jacobsen (2021: 50) outlines, asylum seekers' «time is devalued and usurped in endless bureaucratic procedures». Thus, from a situation of felt stability or continuity (in Germany), Halim suddenly found himself in a situation of instability. As soon as he arrived in Bolzano, he had no direct access to the accommodation centre and was forced to sleep outside (Lintner, 2022). As the quote above indicates, he was left to his own devices («I went to the library; I didn't even have many blankets»). In this state of forced immobility, he kept moving

through the streets, parks or spaces below bridges, developing a new time rhythm/time structure: «I slept under the Roma bridge or even slept here many times (Talvera bridge), but the police came here later and did not allow me to sleep here anymore. Even on the Rome bridge, two or three times the police took away my luggage and my blanket, and they didn't want to give it back to me. They said that it is not allowed to sleep here. I asked "Then where should I sleep?", but they said they didn't know». What Halim underlines in this quote is a feeling of not belonging that can be linked to the concept of «suspended identity» (Stewart, 2005: 505–507). What he is experiencing through concrete border practices based on a zero tolerance policy in the city of Bolzano is a produced feeling of not being part of, and not being worthy (legitimized) to be part of, the place. «Where should I sleep? » can be rephrased with: «Where should I go? Where do I belong? » This suspension of time and belonging makes him labelled as the one who is «roaming around» the city, streets and streambeds. I lean here on what Ralph and Staeheli (2011: 523) define as the *social level of belonging*, which is the experience of being included or excluded in a specific social context. Following Ralph and Staeheli (2011), feelings of exclusion are part of migrants' experiences of belonging. The narrative of Halim shows the exclusion expressing itself on a spatial level («I asked them further: 'But excuse me, where can I go? Where do you think I can go?' And they said, 'We don't know, we just know that you can't stay here, you have to go.' And there are so many guys who have the same situation»), which is intertwined with a temporal dimension («I am trapped; it is like a continuous game they play with me. I go, they stop me, I come away. I never rest, I always hide. »). Halim, although he cannot leave Bolzano, is constantly forced to keep mobile. Figuratively speaking, he is chased, sent around in this city, something that resembles a limbo: *You cannot stay here, you have to go*. As Fontanari (2017) underlines in her work, asylum seekers such as Halim are deprived much of their lifetime. He is experiencing a present time that has no linearity and is continuously in suspension, characterized by forced movement within a situation of immobility. This paradoxical situation does not fully overlap with interpretations that equate the time of waiting with passivity and doing nothing. This can also be observed by taking the example of Kalid.

Kalid is a young man from Nigeria; he came by boat to southern Italy and then he was sent to an accommodation centre in Bolzano, where he now lives for 6 months:

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Sometimes I feel sad. Sometimes I am in the house (accommodation center) just playing music. Sometimes I don't sleep. Not any time I sleep. (...) Sometimes I wake up at 4 o'clock. In my mind I think that I am sleeping, but I am not sleeping. I am thinking. I am thinking about my life, about my family which I have left behind'.

In the interview quote, he describes an inner restlessness that does not let him sleep. He develops strategies to overcome this restlessness (*just playing music*), but such strategies can only be seen as temporary. His mind is restless and caught between the present and the past. This restlessness is intensified in times of temporal immobility/stasis (Griffith et al., 2018) and is further intensified when the asylum seekers compare their own stillness with the seemingly progressive time of others. In line with this, Kalid underlines referring to future temporalities («My friends— who have crossed the border—they are starting over new lives, they have found a job, a house, but I—I am here. ») and past temporalities

They continue their lives. When they want to see their friends, they just go out and go there. But I don't know where to go. I don't know who to see so. I am always in the house. That is the challenge I am facing here. Sometimes I feel sad. Sometimes I am in the house, just playing music. Sometimes I don't sleep. Not any time I sleep. I am just waiting for something to come up.

In comparison to their friends in Germany, «who have already continued their trajectories», and their friends in their homeland, «who continue their life», their own lives are related in the interviews to a lack of personal or social progress, and can produce a strong sense of forced «stuckness» – a feeling that the individual cannot achieve particular life goals while remaining in a space of limbo:

I just want to go out and meet friends, whenever I want, but here there are a lot of things I can't do. By 11 o'clock the door is closed. So if you are outside for work and come back late, entry becomes a problem. At home in my country in Africa, I have my own key. If I go out any time, I can come back any time and open my door. So this one is another big difference. Because sometimes I like to go out, visit my friends and come back late, but I can't do it here.

The interview refers to those out-of-sync temporal tempos and routines that contrast with those established and expected ones, and those migrant subjectivities generated by external temporal conditions. When individuals move in a transnational setting, they can be seized by a new temporal system in which previous daily temporal habits are disrupted:

Here? Honestly, I am not ok. I am not doing anything. No document. No freedom. Honestly, I am not happy to stay here'. In the interviews, having documents and being officially recognized as an asylum seeker is often linked to the idea of a better life: 'When I get my documents, then I can know that it is better, but then I will be happy. 100 percent happy'. This form of recognition can thus be linked to the wish of resettlement by continuing their journey: 'If I have documents, I can continue, I can cross the border, find a job, settle down. They (the documents) will give me that opportunity'.

### *3.2 The digital dimension of time*

Following the analysis of the interviews, I argue that being connected digitally alters sticky and suspended times and aids asylum seekers in developing strategies to deal with time ruptures. Accordingly, the analysis of the interviews reveals that connectivity widely compensates for the spaces of action, spaces of learning, spaces of interaction and spaces of information that are missing offline. ICT has become a vital tool for refugees and asylum seekers in three aspects: first, as a means of reconnecting/resynchronizing with their past (family and friends left behind); second, as a means of creating new temporalities in the present; and third, as a means of protecting themselves and developing new temporal strategies in a transnational context to circumvent border practices.

The results indicate that asylum seekers are able to build up a sense of connectedness across time and space with their families and friends whom they have left behind using new communication technologies. In line with this, Halim underlines: «Facebook, WhatsApp, all this stuff allows me to get in contact with my family every time I want, my life left behind. I am here but I am also there, through [the] Internet». Thus, he creates a constant connection between the now (present situation) and the past using the Internet: «I am communicating with them and I know I am not alone. I am here, they are here». Similar to Amir, who outlines: «Here they do not want me. They do not let me sleep, they do not want me around. Whenever I can, I call my family in Afghanistan and Germany and my friends; my life is still there». Amir very clearly expresses his necessity in times of instability to reconnect with his past and to meaningful social relations that provide him with social cohesion. Here, we see how asylum seekers take up the distinct «affective affordances» (Twigt, 2018: 2) of texting and sharing pictures over the instantaneity of social media affordances to maintain various forms of co-presence with diverging scales of time and space. For some connections, particularly

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those with loved ones, they feel affectively compelled to maintain synchronous and instantaneous links (Leurs and Smets, 2018). Accordingly, Zulu mentions the importance of social media, which allows him to maintain emotional connectedness with his family across space and time. Zulu's mother died while he was in Italy. This dramatic event indicated an emotional rupture as he outlines in the interview: «When my mother died, they shared the picture through Facebook because I needed to see her. There was no other way. You understand? ». Seeing her was essential to recalibrate the death of his mother with his situation of not being there. The affordance of sharing pictures on Facebook helped him be digitally present in times of physical absence. In this sense, the virtual dimension becomes essential because both information and emotions are shared. Through this *transnational care* (Palmberger, 2022), which is closely connected to new information and communication technologies, asylum seekers navigate care and emotional affectivity and build belonging. Moreover, through the experience of being still present in affective communities, it emphasizes the ways in which visually mediated interaction helps to combat feelings of social isolation and loneliness. The digital connectedness with his family allows Bari to resynchronize temporalities that are meaningful and provides them with stability and a feeling of belongingness:

My life here is rough, very difficult. So through the phone I am very close to my family. They reassure me, why I am doing this all. So yes being in contact with them, I feel better here. I do not tell them everything so that they are not in a worry. WhatsApp and Facebook helps me a lot, also sharing pictures, they send me pictures and I know that they are alright. (...) I use my smartphone to call them every time I need.

As Eriksen (2021) outlines, ICT has an impact not only on how we experience space, but also on how we experience time. In this sense, time becomes more flexible and clock time becomes less important by way of accelerating communication and social connectivity. As the quote shows, the smartphone as the main digital device used by refugees during their journeys (Kaufmann, 2018) encapsulates their biography «and thereby frames his current, indeterminate waiting period in a life story that represents a temporality that is longer, slower, cumulative and connected to place in a way that cannot be achieved in the indeterminate liminal phase» (Eriksen, 2021: 25).

Also, as the narratives show, being connected digitally in a transnational space helps them to bear existential precariousness in the present and offers possibilities to share, continue and build a

communication process that is based on shared meaning. Relations are maintained through digital connectedness, uniting people with common beliefs, interests and thoughts. This can be observed in the example of the Mandinka people. The Mandinka are an African ethnic group with an estimated global population of 11 million (the other three largest ethnic groups in Africa being the unrelated Fula, Hausa and Songhai peoples)<sup>1</sup>. Owing to the process of migration to different parts of the world, the verbal transmission of this culture is nowadays expanded by social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. The interviews with Tairu and Ahmed explain the importance of digital togetherness:

This is a WhatsApp group from Mandinka people anywhere in the world. This is for [those] who are staying outside The Gambia. They are in Europe or somewhere because of the work and because they want to learn. Because the Mandinka is very deep. They want to learn their culture and to understand their language. Therefore, if you join this group you can hear many, many words in Mandinka. So you are connected. Here I am often alone. I am not able to speak because of language, so this helps me not feeling alone.

Eriksen (2021) defines digital possibilities as an antidote to the empty time of waiting. As shown, taking the example of the Mandinka group on WhatsApp, digital connectivity enables asylum seekers to take care of collective and individual memory work. In this sense, digital connectivity «fills temporal gaps which would otherwise have been left empty».

Moreover, as the narratives show, asylum seekers also engage more efficiently with personal entertainment using digital means in order to bear restrictions and limitations in the physical living experience. Kalim, who is currently living in an accommodation in Bolzano, gave me insights into his state of restlessness that didn't let him sleep due to his being trapped in a permanent state of thinking. However, when he reflected with me on the role of ICT (in particular his smartphone) in this situation, he opened up a different dimension and gave me insights into specific strategies and actions that help him to hold up with this situation of restlessness:

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<sup>1</sup> The Mandinka are the descendants of the Mali Empire, which rose to power in the thirteenth century under the rule of the Malinké/Maninka king Sundiata Keita. In the twenty-first century, more than 99% of Mandinka in contemporary Africa were Muslims. A majority of the populations of the Mandinka people live in Mali, Sierra Leone, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Niger and Mauritania. Mandinka has been an oral society, one in which mythologies, history and knowledge are orally transmitted from one generation to the next.

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Here in the house I have Wi-Fi, so I am always connected. I am learning English, I am learning German and Italian and Arabic via YouTube, and here I watch these learning videos. That helps, yes. When I learn the language, I am able to communicate also with others here. This is my goal. I do not go to any language course. YouTube is easier and faster, and I can choose when to watch.

Being connected gives him access to such platforms, which he uses in order to learn new things (language) with a specific goal (communicate with others). The most important aspect of the quote, however, is the expressed agency (*I learn; I watch; I choose*). Hence, through the interactive possibilities that the digital world offers Halim, he gained back a certain control over his everyday life. The temporal frames operating in the reception centre described above are expressions of power that produce blurred, uncertain and clashing temporalities. Asylum seekers break out of this system to work out strategies for escaping this institutional control through new communication technologies.

Also, being digitally connected allows asylum seekers to open up about their expectations and projects for the future. According to this, as Ahmed from Nigeria reflected during his interview, learning the language is connected to a profound need to make contact with people from the host country and to overcome cultural diversity: «Here it is difficult for me to communicate with and to meet people because of the language barrier». In addition, the most important tools for learning the language are Google Translate, a free multilingual machine translation service developed by Google, and the social media platform YouTube. Ekong, a young man from Nigeria, during an interview, explains: «When there is something in Italian I [do] not understand, I will automatically use a translator to understand. If you want to find out something, you go to [the] translator and you understand». Furthermore, in contrast to Google Translate, YouTube offers a wide range of language-learning videos used by refugees and asylum seekers, as Sadiiq from Somalia outlines: «I am learning English, German, Italian and Arabic via YouTube and here I watch these learning videos. When you learn the language, you are able to communicate with people from here and to find a job here more easily».

Halim describes his smartphone in this period of physically forced immobility as one of the most important things he owns and which he has to protect from those who want to steal it: «I always have my phone in my jacket. I always take it with me. In this situation here, my phone is so important to me. Here are many thieves, so you have to be careful. I always take care of it». Halim, similar to others, invests much money in phones and smartphones: «They have stolen my phone twice. Now I have

a new one. I spent a lot of money: about 180 Euros. For me, this is too much. But I need it and now it is always here in my pocket. It's one of the most important objects I own». However, its use is strictly linked to digital infrastructure that must be available and accessible for them in order to make use of digital devices. Accordingly, the digital agency of refugees and asylum seekers described above must be understood as partial and fragile, as their access to information is, most of the time, «insecure, unstable and undependable» (Wall et al., 2015: 3). As Eriksen (2021: 23) describes, «The rhythm of micro-coordinated living is faster and tighter than that of the previous era of the clock and the landline, but it is also more flexible, less certain and easier to manipulate».

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The article questioned how new communication technologies have influenced the way asylum seekers in a situation of forced immobility deal with temporal stasis and temporal ruptures in their everyday lives. The article outlined how the physical experience of time overlaps with the digital experience of time. As is shown, asylum seekers merely reflect the affordances of new communication technologies as an open space they use to transcend the limitations imposed upon them in person. They generally discuss the convenience created by new communication technologies as information and orientation tools in a positive way that enables them to enter new spaces of action. In the narratives, interviewees refer not only to the technical affordances but also to the temporal and affective affordances of communication technologies that helped them to (re)create rhythms and manage time ruptures.

In line with this, I argue that the blurring of time zones and digital spatio-temporalities opened up new opportunities for creating a shared temporal rhythm within a transnational context. Accordingly, the results reveal how being connected across space and time provided him with new possibilities to deal with time ruptures that forced him into a state of waiting. Indeed, through social media, he recreates a kind of co-presence (Witteborn, 2015) that allows him to reconnect with meaningful social relations. This re-connectedness provides him with the possibility to care and being emotionally connected to his past. Asylum seekers, in other words, resynchronize their past with the present, which allows them to combat feelings of social isolation and uncertainty and a feeling of being stuck physically (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). Also, the results give insights into how the affordances of new communication technologies allow them to reconnect to meaningful relations and to cultivate

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significant relationships in a transnational context to overcome a feeling of being alone in their physical experience and to deal with strange temporalities in the accommodation centre, for example. Generally, describing their digital interactions gives insight into their agency to gain back control of their everyday time by creating new temporalities. Ramsay (2019: 20) critically reflects on the definition of asylum seekers as being stuck, with the connotation of being passive and ignoring the ways in which they share particular temporal rhythms with other people. Similarly, Eriksen (2015) outlines, and it is also shown in the analysis that refugees try to avoid being stuck. The existence of digital possibilities is indeed empowering for people who cannot rely on formal means of coordination and information. As shown in the analysis, the temporal flexibility afforded by digital means contrasts with the rigid temporal rhythm of the asylum apparatus.

However, this micro-sociological analysis based on enabling practices for greater individual agency in the context of flight provided by the new communication technologies bumps up against a precarious digital infrastructure and must therefore be seen as precarious. Asylum seekers are at the same time exposed to new dangers and vulnerabilities given by an ever greater dependence on digital infrastructure, such as Wi-Fi hotspots, shops that sell SIM cards or the physical offices of wire transfer services (Latonero and Kift, 2016, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018). In fact, as various studies show, the lack of digital accessibility, usability and not least the affordability for refugees and asylum seekers leads to new forms of social and digital exclusion (Kaufmann, 2018) as well as to information precarity (Wall et al., 2015) linked to access (missing or limited infrastructure) and content (relying on untrustworthy sources, for example). In the digital age, access, adoption and digital literacy are imperative resources. This not only calls upon social workers and other professionals to help identify and advocate for communities that continue to experience the digital divide, but also for social policies that provide new digital and socially inclusive spaces in territorial contexts.

To conclude, the narratives confirm the high importance of ICT in their everyday lives, which has changed their experiences of forced immobility by giving them the possibility of reconnecting with meaningful relations and resynchronizing their present situation with their past and recreating a linearity or continuity in their biographies that will help them to overcome as well as deal with (often unexpected) time ruptures in their physical living experience by contributing to strengthening their agency to navigate through temporal dissonances. As the results show, in particular, the virtual dimension allows individuals to

actively design and reconfigure the distribution of their everyday and life course times to alleviate the temporal conflict states they encounter, thus better achieving life aspirations on a micro-scale.

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