



Cognitive Science Student Journal
Osnabrück University

Emotional Alienation and Online Sociality

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Lohkamp, J. (2023). Emotional Alienation and Online Sociality. *Cognitive Science Student Journal* 2023, 10. 1-8.

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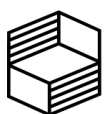
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The project is funded by *Stiftung Innovation in der Hochschullehre*



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1 Introduction

Since the invention of smartphones and the Internet before that, many fear the consequences that come with an increased amount of online encounters. Is the medium of text and emojis unfit for the way we communicate or is it just another tool we incorporate into our lives? Some seem to link decreased empathic capacities with the rise of online encounters. In this essay, I aim to investigate the concept of Emotional Self-Alienation (Szanto, 2017) in the realm of Online Sociality. Specifically, what it means to be alienated from your own emotions and how this relation to oneself is characterized. I start off with Thomas Fuchs' (2014) description of Phantomization and Disembodied Communication, two of the possible negative consequences of increased online affectivity. Second, I want to raise critique of Fuchs' description, referring to Osler's (2021) work "Taking Empathy Online", by emphasizing her argument that despite what Fuchs claims, the Internet can be used to encounter others empathically. Furthermore, I aim to enrich Osler's critique by introducing the concept of Emotional Estrangement or Emotional Self-Alienation (Burkitt, 2019; Szanto, 2017), as I think it compliments her argument of empathy not being limited to offline encounters, as well as accounting for the pathologies raised in Fuchs' critique. In line with this, I argue that some tendencies of common Internet usage may be facilitating emotional estrangement, but not necessarily the Internet itself is reason enough for decreased empathy.

2 Phantomization and Disembodied Communication

In his paper "The Virtual Other", Thomas Fuchs (2014) lays out the argument that the increasing virtuality and fictionality of online communication is ultimately resulting in a lack of empathy. Empathy is supposedly bound to bodily expressivity in face-to-face interactions, but with the diminished embodied communication skills and empathic abilities that accompany increased online communication, we consequently face the problems of Phantomization and Disembodied Communication.

Phantomization refers to a "media-based simulation of direct reality", further "[a] simulated hyperreality, which no longer allows the differentiation between the original and the copy, between reality and imagination" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 165). What once was a clear-cut case of something being real or not, is due to the increase in virtuality nowadays difficult to tell apart. In extreme cases, for example deep-fakes, the difference between reality and fiction is nearly indistinguishable to the human eye. Fuchs fears that media sources, instead of just being mediations, will eventually replace reality itself, as with the progress in technology it is impossible to say what image is fabricated and which is not. Additionally, the world around us "turns into a spectacle and the viewers become passive recipients of the images that the media sources send them" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 166). By having the additional layer added to our lives, namely the possibility to post content that attracts attention, the world is not perceived as something to experience in the moment, but something to be captured and shared. Fuchs' critique culminates in what I may call a fictional body, which is neglecting its needs, such as nutrition and sleep, its sole purpose being to function and to consume the aforementioned content, leaving the physical body behind.

Similarly, the interaction with pictures and symbols alone makes way for Disembodied Communication (Fuchs, 2014, p. 167). Accordingly, the lack of bodily resonance in our communication invites projection, having to compensate for the lack of bodily expressivity, and secondly, it lacks interaffectivity, "the direct feedback from the embodied contact, based on emotional cues and expressive gestures" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 167). We are relying on projection, rendering the other a "product of [our] imagination"; both, Disembodied Communication and Phantomization, allow "fictional emotions" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 168). Fictional emotions are characterized by referring "back to the self, and are not part of an ongoing and dynamic interaction with another" (Illouz, 2007, p. 210). Self-centered

in nature, these fictional emotions make empathic encounters difficult, resulting in a lack of empathic capacities. In addition, this distances us further from our peers, making it hard and effortful to form strong emotional connections online, ultimately leading to less social individuals overall.

3 Lucy Osler's take on Fuchs

In response to Fuchs (2014), Lucy Osler (2021) in her paper "Taking Empathy Online" presents arguments that question Fuchs' claim of online encounters resulting in decreased empathic abilities. In contrast to Fuchs, Osler argues that empathy can take place outside of face-to-face interactions, and that the lived body is not tied to the physical body (Osler, 2021, p. 17). For example, when in a video call with a friend, I am very much able to pick up movements, subtle cues and facial expressions, i.e. the liveliness of my friend. This directly contradicts Fuchs' claim that empathy can not take place online. Still, Fuchs seems to describe something we intuitively understand, his "'disembodied communication' has some intuitive appeal" (Osler, 2021, p. 10). But what is this appeal really? Osler (2021) points out that the "reduced perceptual richness, as well as their [i.e. the online encounters'] temporal structure, may be grounds for challenging [her] claim that empathy occurs online" (p. 20). It is those two factors I want to elaborate on. As has been pointed out, online encounters may be perceived less rich, in the sense that we have less perceptual dimensions available to us. For example, conceptual thought in language or text is missing the bodily dimensions of visual, olfactory and haptic cues. In the case of a voicemail or text message, my expressions are mapped from the full range of dimensions that come with our bodies, to only the dimensions of text, or in the case of voice, pitch and tone. This is quite a drastic reduction and may lead to misrecognition of the other, arguably what Fuchs aims at. Furthermore, the temporal aspects of online sociality can drastically jeopardize empathetic experience (Osler, 2021, p. 21), as the temporal dynamic of perceiving and responding can be skewed from direct to indirect. For example, I may listen to a voicemail several hours or days after it was sent. I can even select a specific moment to listen to it, there is no immediacy to it as in an in-person conversation. I believe that both, the temporal character and reduced perceptual richness and their negative consequences, may be accounted for by Emotional Self-Alienation (Szanto, 2017), which I want to introduce in the next section. By combining Szanto and Osler, I believe I can give a rich explanation to what Fuchs describes by Phantomization and Disembodied Communication without having to ascribe empathic decay to online sociality. But first, I want to give a proper understanding of the concept of Emotional-Self Alienation.

4 Emotional Self-Alienation and Estrangement

Szanto (2017) aims to sketch a relational account of alienation in his paper "Emotional Self-Alienation" (ESA). ESA is relational in the sense that although the relation is a broken or deficient one, the subject of alienation stands in a relation of personal concern to an object (Szanto, 2017, p. 263). Szanto sketches ESA along the following three dimensions (p. 270): (1) the experiential, i.e. what one feels, (2) the self-disclosing, i.e. not appropriately feeling what oneself feels (3) the normative, i.e. not appropriately feeling what one ought to feel. These three dimensions are typically interrelated and may reinforce each other. If one or another dimension is deficient, the subject may fail to identify with, or own up to, their emotion. For example, if you are out of touch with your emotional household, you can not express yourself as strongly as you would like to, since you are not as sure about your emotion in the first place.

Szanto argues that ESA may be accounted for by the deficient relation between an emotion's affective and intentional dimension, the "felt intentional evaluations of [the emotion's] objects"

(Szanto, 2017, p. 271). This affective and intentional aspect of emotions is captured in the affective intentionality paradigm (Slaby & Stephan, 2008). Accordingly, the distinctive feature of emotions to other mental states is that emotions are directed towards a target, and a constitutive part of this directedness is its affective content. When an emotion is experienced, it gives incentive to act, either expressing it or acting out on it as a means of expression. In the case of ESA, sensitivity to the subject's emotion and personal import are increasingly pale and may vanish fully as the result of the cleavage between the affective and intentional dimension of an emotion, i.e. the relation between oneself and the object of an emotion is broken, in a way that produces inappropriate responses (Szanto, 2017, p. 274). If a subject is unable to act upon their emotion, this gap between intention and affect opens up. One may lose the appropriate affective responsiveness to one's environment completely, by neglecting one's evaluative feeling dimension on a regular basis. Emotions are an indication for what matters to oneself, for one's well-being and flourishing, as they convey valuable information (Szanto, 2017, p. 275). Szanto (2017) argues that "in ESA emotions do not fully disclose what they otherwise do, namely the evaluative perspective of the person who has them" (p. 19). In such a case, one may feel a lack of personal commitment and personal investment towards one's own evaluative perspective. Consequently, one has difficulties to match one's evaluative outlook to the actual felt emotion, i.e. embodying one's affective commitment. Arguably, this happens when subjects are forced to act in accordance with "feeling rules" which not only govern the extent, but also duration, direction and appropriateness (Szanto, 2017, p. 279). For example, someone working as a flight attendant may feel it is expected of them to smile at every person that enters the airplane, although they themselves are not happy at all. The emotion is blocked, and the flight attendant may be out-of-touch with their emotions.

This leads us to ESA's normative aspects, i.e. 'what one ought to feel'. Szanto (2017) refers to Hochschild's (1983) concept of Emotional Labor, which entails the managing of one's feelings, in order to create a "publicly observable facial and bodily display" where emotional labor has "exchange value" (p. 7). Again given the example of a flight attendant, there is an exchange value for smiling at work, perhaps monetary incentive if customers feel more welcome during the flight and leave a good review afterwards. Similarly, in the context of social media an individual may generate more likes by posting happy content. In these cases one becomes the manager of emotions, as the emotion displayed may not be the emotion a subject is feeling themselves, but an emotion that is "required" to be shown for the producer as well as the consumer of said content. Importantly, one is not to decide which emotions are being managed, this is decided in accordance with the respective "feeling rules", i.e. societal pressure to display certain emotions in response to certain events or in specific situations. The regulative aspect of an emotion is dominating the other aspects of it, and may even culminate in "emotional overregulation" (Szanto, 2017, p. 281). Even though one experiences the emotion as the result of one's very own regulative process, the emotion itself lacks the import to oneself. Crucially, having a smartphone with us at all times, there is no one stopping us from making use of the emotion regulation possibilities. When I'm stressed about an exam, I can simply go on Instagram and happily waste my time, occupying my mind with other people's lives to not think about what I actually have to do.

One might think that ESA involves manipulation or coercion, but although being manipulated or emotionally invaded can result in ESA, it is not identical to it. Crucially, in both cases there may exist a clear boundary between what is mine and what is alien to me, i.e. being coerced or manipulated to feel something which is not mine. This diffuse relation between what is alien and the subject is characteristic of the experience of ESA, rendering the relation questionable or deficient (Szanto, 2017, p. 266). Additionally, ESA is not a case of self-deception or self-deceptive emotions. Self-deception is a "motivated irrationality", that leads to intentional and deliberate upkeep of a belief contrary to reason or evidence (Szanto, 2017, p. 266). Self-deception then is a relation to my

beliefs, not my emotions. On the other hand, with self-deceptive emotions there seems to be a gap between the normative self-conception one holds and what one strives to be, but still one does not necessarily feel alien to oneself. I act on a feeling that stems from me, while being not in line with my desired self-image.

Lastly, ESA is not concerned with conflicting or ambivalent emotions. One can feel an awful lot of different emotions towards another, for example having resentment as well as admiration for the same person. Again, the emotional conflict at hand may lead to ESA, but it need not. One may accept the ambiguities within oneself without feeling alienated from one's emotions.

In short, ESA describes a relation to oneself, others and the world that is deficient in the aspects of the experiential, self-disclosing, and normative dimension of an emotion. This deficient relation is accommodated by a lack of commitment towards one's very own affective evaluation, others' affective evaluation, as well as a distorted perception of ownership of emotions, in regard to the emotional import and normative dimension. In combination, this renders social encounters shallow in regard to the perception and expression of emotions. After all, if an individual is failing to recognize their own emotional stance, how can they express themselves accordingly, understand others' emotional stance or evaluate an emotion on a personal, subjective level? All of which weigh heavily on the empathic capacities of a subject. Now that the groundwork has been laid, I want to combine ESA with the aspects of Lucy Osler's (2021) work of the Internet as a space for empathic encounters, to give an alternative explanation for what Fuchs (2014) describes as Disembodied Communication and Phantomization, namely placing the two phenomena as a consequence of ESA instead of online sociality alone.

5 The 'grammable' other¹

As was shown, ESA may lead to a lack of commitment to one's very own emotional stance and the one of others. This might entail a lack of expressivity, after all, how am I supposed to show what I feel if I am uncertain about it in the first place. I think it is this uncertainty that hinders our emotional agency, thus perhaps is precisely what Fuchs (2014) describes when speaking of Disembodied Communication. If, however, the lack of interaffectivity and the increasing room for projection are due to ESA, then the framing as a problem exclusively to online sociality may be misguided. ESA effectively describes a condition of confusion in regards to the emotional stance of an individual. But one may ask, and rightfully so, what is the crucial difference that makes online encounters so prone to ESA? I want to argue that it is not necessarily the Internet that invites ESA, but it is social media that invites individuals to be confused in regards to their own emotional stance by opening the intentional-affective gap that may be causing ESA. It does so by its atemporal character, its global normative character, and the accompanying lack of expressivity that comes with current digital media, all of which confuse an individual where and how their emotion is directed to.

In the case of Instagram, the affective import a content-producer may embed into a post, that will eventually be shown in a user's feed, may invite the user or consumer of said post to feel a certain emotion at the time of consumption. For example, you make a short video, a 'reel', that may include some sort of prank to provoke the user to laugh. In the moment of the production, the user is not present, perhaps not even directly addressed, yet when scrolling through the feed the user will be confronted with the aforementioned affective import, i.e. the affordance to be happy and laugh in response to what has been shown to them. Compared to the usual temporal order of an emotion unfolding over time this is drastically delayed and out-of-sync, even more so when considering the fact that after only a couple of seconds of exposure, one will engage in the next post, possibly facing

¹"attractive or interesting enough to be suitable for posting on the social media service Instagram". Retrieved July 4, 2023, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/grammable>

a completely different affective import. Of course, one may choose from the variety of offers and individualize their feed, yet none of which may reflect the user's individual emotional history. It can be argued that all emotions work in a similar manner. I believe the difference lies in the unfolding of an emotion. By being able to quickly switch between different emotions, perhaps we are too fast to identify with an emotion and follow its experiential path over time. If an emotion is something to be lived and unfold, then the rapid change given to us by social media posts is perhaps disruptive to the individual processing time. By this very disruption a subject is then led away from the individual level of their emotional household to become the manager of emotions as described in Szanto's analysis (2017; see Section 4), thereby becoming vulnerable to ESA. Technicalities of the unfolding aside, emotions are subjective in nature. For some the example of a prank to provoke laughter may be perceived as joyful banter, for others it may remind them of being pranked themselves, to give only one differing interpretation. Notably, both aspects of the atemporal character make it harder for an individual to identify a clear target of their emotion. The producer of the reel is not present, perhaps you have watched it all by yourself. The relational aspect of the emotion and its target may then be lost or unclear, since usually emotions have a rather communal aspect to them.

Furthermore, the affective import that comes with such a post always carries a normative dimension. A society's 'feeling rules' may very well reflect on the content of social media platforms. In light of the globally connected realm that is the Internet today, users may be confronted not only with their own normative societal standards but with many different standards at a time. A social media post may invite us to feel a certain emotion, regardless whether it is matching our emotional state or in line with our normative standards. This does not need to be problematic, it only becomes problematic if this engagement is habitualized to overregulate, leading to increased distance between our very own emotional household and that of others. As mentioned before, ESA can stem from a cleavage between the intentional and the affective dimension of an emotion. If confronted with a normative import that does not reflect our own emotional stance, we may become uncertain about our emotional evaluative abilities, since we are unable to properly respond to a 'foreign' normative standard. For example, you may be looking at comedy from a different culture than the one you grew up in, and consequently be faced with jokes that do not fit your humor. Of course this can happen offline as well, yet the connectedness and global aspects of the online world allow a greater deal of variation and therefore confusion. Again, what the individual feels may be confusion about how to enact their emotion.

Problems that come with alienation or estrangement may also account for the phenomenon of Phantomization by Fuchs (2014). Ian Burkitt (2019) gives a convincing argument of how estrangement can lead to the perception of others as a "'kind' or 'type' or 'role'" in what he calls "the generalized other" (p. 30). By abstracting, and isolating single aspects of a person, in his example politicians, the individual becomes a mere reflection of the uniqueness that is characteristic of a person. This favors estrangement, as one may have difficulties to bridge the gap between one's idea of a person and the actual complexity of them. In that manner the possible richness of perception is reduced to a single label for a whole person—politician, comedian, influencer. According to Burkitt, this generalization is ultimately resulting in misrecognition of others, basically what Fuchs argues to be the result of online encounters alone. Additionally, social media is often working in a fast-paced fashion, where long and complex depiction of reality may be unsuccessful or unwanted. In line with Phantomization, "the world turns into a spectacle" since everything that e.g. Instagram does is trying to catch your attention and make you stay on it (Fuchs, 2014, p. 166). This brings the most profit for the platform since you generate the most data, ad revenue and so on. After all, a global company as Meta, the owner of Instagram, strives to grow, and may very well aim to replace reality itself, as Fuchs is fearing. Existence as pure consumption is what, if taken seriously, such a capitalist company implicitly aims to arrive at, by all means possible. The sociality of a platform such as

Instagram is what drives us to use them. The need for connection is ingrained in us, perhaps it is what gave us an evolutionary edge over other animals. I believe that the same need is now being exploited to generate money off of us, disregarding the possible effects on our affectivity.

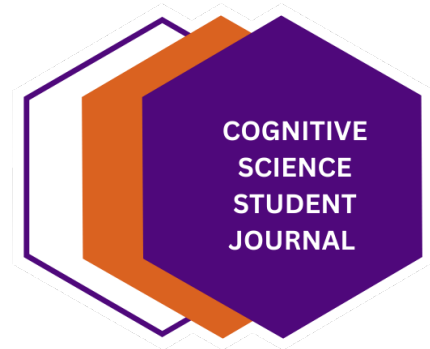
6 Concluding remarks

With the Internet and its ever-new possibilities, we have to be careful in how we adapt to new forms of sociality. I do not mean to be pessimistic regarding the use of new technologies, but careful evaluation is necessary before habitualizing a possibly disruptive behavior into the very intimate emotional household of a person. What may also help to counter emotional estrangement is creating spaces where norms and conventions are purposely ignored. Counter-spaces are a common way to allow diverging views and ideals, perhaps big market-driven platforms will be a thing of the past. After all, the Internet is still very young and small forums with tight communities were what got it started. We also need online communities that are built where there is a clear target for an individual's affective and intentional needs. Perhaps individualizing and engaging in communities may benefit individuals more than consuming post after post. Having a space where one can truly open up, feeling connected with one's emotions and not having to fit certain expectations which may not be your own, will eventually heal the broken relationship one spent years to establish. Contrary to Fuchs (2014, p. 169), I do not believe that the decrease in empathic abilities of the last couple of cohorts is due to technological progress, but perhaps due to emotional alienation. I believe that Fuchs gave us a great description of the pathologies that can result from online sociality, but I do not share his view that there cannot be empathy online. In my opinion, there is little grounds to defend such a position, as it seems there are plenty of examples where one cannot only perceive the body of another, but also respond more or less directly to it. I think the current means of our technology make it harder for us to be social online, not because of the medium itself, but the way we use it and how it is used on us.

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