

Embodiment, artificial intelligence, and digital emotions: a sociological perspective

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

This contribution explores how digital embodiment, artificial intelligence, and immersive technologies are transforming emotional experience in contemporary virtual contexts. Starting from the sociology of emotions, the paper argues that emotions are not simply transferred from offline to online environments. Rather, they are reconfigured through technological mediation, avatar-based interaction, haptic feedback, and AI-driven relational systems. The main aim is to understand how emotions change when the body, presence, and interaction are mediated by digital devices and virtual environments. The central research question is: How does digital embodiment reshape emotional experience, identity construction, and social interaction in virtual contexts?

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that digital emotions should not be considered less authentic or secondary compared to offline emotions. They are socially meaningful experiences that contribute to shaping identities, relationships, and collective imaginaries. Three main processes emerge. First, virtualization makes emotions visible, traceable, shareable, and recordable. Second, technological mediation modifies the ways emotions are expressed, perceived, and intensified. Third, cultural hybridization connects offline emotional norms with new digital practices. Avatars play a central role in this transformation. They do not merely represent identity; they actively participate in its production. Through avatars, users experiment with different forms of self-presentation, emotional expression, and relational positioning. Haptic technologies further complicate this process by introducing touch and bodily feedback into virtual interaction. These technologies may strengthen empathy, fear, intimacy, and emotional involvement. However, this transformation is ambivalent. Digital embodiment may promote empathy, perspective-taking, and inclusive interaction, but it may also produce emotional exploitation, fragmentation of the self, and new forms of digital emotional labour. Artificial intelligence adds another layer of complexity. AI systems can simulate empathy and recognition, creating forms of pseudo-intimacy in which users may feel emotionally understood without true reciprocity.

METHOD

This study adopts a theoretical and interpretive sociological approach. The analysis is based on a critical review of key contributions from the sociology of emotions, phenomenology, interaction theory, and digital sociology. The theoretical framework combines different perspectives: Hochschild's concept of emotional labour is used to interpret the regulation and commodification of emotions. Goffman's theory of the presentation of self helps explain avatar-mediated identity performance. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology supports the idea that experience is always embodied. Collins' interaction ritual theory is used to analyse emotional intensity in digitally mediated interactions. Finally, contemporary approaches to digital sociology and surveillance capitalism are used to examine the social, economic, and political implications of emotional data.

CONCLUSION

Digital emotions are not marginal phenomena. They are central to understanding contemporary social life. Digital embodiment represents a crucial point of intersection between technology, identity, culture, and power. The main issue is not whether digital emotions are "real" or "fake", but how technologically mediated environments reshape the way people feel, interact, and construct social meaning. From a sociological perspective, the key question is no longer whether machines can feel, but how their mediation changes what it means for humans to feel together.

FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES

Future research should further investigate the social consequences of digital embodiment in different contexts, including education, healthcare, social VR, gaming, metaverse platforms, and AI-mediated communication. Particular attention should be given to the relationship between emotional experience, data extraction, algorithmic mediation, and new forms of emotional inequality. Future empirical studies may explore how users perceive emotional authenticity, intimacy, empathy, and self-continuity in avatar-based and AI-mediated environments.

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