

**Bortolan, A. Forthcoming. Online Emotions: A Framework. *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*. Please cite published version.**

## **Online Emotions: A Framework**

### **Abstract**

The paper develops a philosophical account of emotions experienced and communicated on the internet, and, in particular, in the context of social media use. A growing body of research across disciplines has investigated the distinctive features of emotions in the digital age, and a key question in this regard concerns whether online emotions are the same kind of phenomena as those undergone offline. In this paper, I contribute to addressing this question by suggesting that the structure and characteristic features of internet-mediated emotions can be accounted for within the perspective of Peter Goldie's narrative theory of emotion.

To do so, I first offer a reconstruction of Goldie's conception of emotions as complex, dynamic, episodic, and structured phenomena. I then move to show how the experience of emotions on social media like Facebook displays the characteristics which are at the core of Goldie's account, proceeding to suggest that this enables us to better understand some of the central features of emotions undergone on the internet. More specifically, I argue that the significant levels of intensity, persistence, and contagiousness that are typical of some online emotions can be better understood if we adopt Goldie's framework.

### **Keywords**

Emotions; Peter Goldie; Online; Internet; Social Media

## 1. Emotions on the Internet

An increasing amount of our lives is spent online, and emotions are a key aspect of this experience. Online, emotions can be communicated or aroused, but they can also be manipulated, regulated, illustrated, shared, repressed, and much more.

The emotions that we encounter on the internet are “mediated” emotions, namely emotions whose arousal, experience, or communication is brought about by the use of certain technology. “Unmediated emotions”, on the other hand, are those that occur in “embodied face-to-face interactions” (Benski and Fisher 2014, 2) without relying on technological mediation.

Internet-mediated emotions are just one type of mediated affect.<sup>1</sup> Letter writing, texting, or telephone calls, for example, are other technologies through the use of which emotions can be undergone in the absence of in-person, physical interaction.

However, online emotions have been the focus of increasing attention (e.g. Benski and Fisher 2014; Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013; Karatzogianni and Kuntsman 2012), and this seems to be due to the specific features of cyberspace. For example, due to its capacity to facilitate high-speed and low-cost long-distance interactions, the web has become a space where “any place can be reached expending the same effort in terms of time and cost” (Jakoby and Reiser 2014, 68). In addition, where online connectivity is ubiquitous, people tend to spend more time using internet technologies than other technologies involved in emotion mediation<sup>2</sup>, and presumably this has resulted in more affects becoming mediated in this way. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> In the literature, different characterisations have been offered of the notion of “emotion” and “affect. Here, I use the latter (and related terms such as “affective experience”) to refer to a set of mental states - distinct from cognition - that have a distinct phenomenology: they are ‘felt’ states, in so far as they involve the presence of bodily feelings or feelings of other kinds. The term “emotion”, on the other hand, is used to designate a particular set of affects, namely those which have an intentional structure.

<sup>2</sup> For example, as reported by Ofcom (2020, 4), “OTT communication, and particularly Instant Messaging, appears to have partially displaced traditional voice calls (mobile and landline)”.

online emotions tend to have particular characteristics, for example the easiness with which they are transmitted, amplified, and polarised.

In this context, various questions have been put forward with regard to the nature of emotions experienced online, and one aspect to which attention has been drawn - in particular in the field of sociology and media studies - concerns the seemingly “disembodied” nature of online emotions, and whether this should lead us to see emotions online as a different kind of phenomenon from offline affects. As explained by Benski and Fisher:

One of the striking conundrums raised by considering mediated emotions is: what is the status of emotions in an environment of virtual presence and disembodiment? That is, because emotions are inextricably bound with embodiment in at least two ways. First, emotions are felt and “run” through the body. [...] Second, emotions are perceived as reactions to external events, particularly actions by others, which affect the person and mostly involve social interactions in embodied face-to-face situations. (2014, 2)

This, more broadly, raises the question of whether online and offline emotions can be understood within the same conceptual and theoretical framework, or, on the contrary, the experience of emotions on the internet reveal features novel enough to require the adoption of different perspectives.

However, is it really possible to differentiate online and offline worlds clearly enough to justify these questions? Due to the seamless integration and wide-ranging impact of technology in our everyday lives, do we have grounds to distinguish between what takes place on and off the web?

Certainly, the spaces we inhabit “inside” and “outside” the internet have become very porous, and it is possible that in many cases the emotions we undergo cut across these domains, thus being both mediated and unmediated by digital technology. For example, some emotions can be aroused online and communicated offline, or vice versa.

Nevertheless, if we accept that the internet has distinctive characteristics that at least in part set it aside from other emotion-mediating devices, and that the web offers an array of new experiential and interactive possibilities, it is important for us to explore the potential impact that online dynamics in particular can have on affectivity.

For this purpose, and to try to delimit the scope of this analysis to cases in which the mediation of digital technology is particularly prominent, in this paper I focus on emotions that are both experienced and communicated on the internet, and, more specifically, in the context of social media use.

This does not exclude that the emotions in question could also be undergone and shared offline; however, my interest here is in investigating the structure of the emotions when they are mediated by a certain type of technology, i.e. the one that constitutes the infrastructure of social networking sites.

These are emotions that a person may experience and communicate in response to others’ emotions, and they may have the latter as their object. For example, a friend on a social media is grieving due to a recent bereavement, and I feel and express sadness for their loss and their suffering. However, not all emotions on social media have this structure: for instance, upon reading the news of an upcoming storm on the Met Office’s Twitter account, I feel regret for having booked my holiday and I tweet about it. This is an emotion experienced and communicated on the internet, but one that is not elicited by or directed at other people’s emotions.

In addition, the emotions I am considering are experienced by a subject, as opposed, for example, to being the emotions of a particular online environment. As such, they are personal phenomena, but this does not exclude the possibility of them being experienced by multiple individuals at the same time.

In this paper I will suggest that online affects of the type under consideration can be best understood through the main tenets of Peter Goldie's theory of emotion (2000; 2011; 2012).<sup>3</sup> This is an account concerning the characteristic features of emotions *in general*, and, while Goldie may have conceived of it as applying to both offline and online emotions, like other main philosophical views on the topic, the typical examples that the theory seeks to explain are not specific to experiences and interactions on the web.<sup>4</sup>

Here I am not concerned with the persuasiveness of Goldie's account as a general theory of emotion (although I think that this is indeed a persuasive view). Rather, I am interested in how such an account can do justice to some of the key features of emotions experienced online, especially in the context of social media use. In other terms, independently of whether Goldie's theory provides an adequate understanding of all types of emotion, I will claim that it illuminates the nature of *online emotions*.

To do so, I will first provide a reconstruction of Goldie's position, illustrating his conception of emotions as complex, dynamic, episodic, and narratively structured phenomena

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<sup>3</sup> As stated above, my analysis concerns primarily emotions experienced and communicated on social media. However, a range of platforms on the internet have features (e.g. the possibility to create a personalised profile or comment sections) which are similar to the ones offered by social networks, and allow for similar types of interaction. As such, while this paper cannot explore the applicability of my account to affectivity on the internet in general, it suggests that such an account may be well suited to shed light on various emotional phenomena occurring on the web.

<sup>4</sup> In a very recent article, Fredrik Svenaeus (2021) has drawn upon Goldie's work in the context of the exploration of empathic processes taking place online. My approach and focus in the present study are different, in so far as I am concerned with the narrative structure of online emotions and not with the nature of intersubjective understanding on the internet. However, as highlighted by Svenaeus' analysis, there is an affective dimension to at least certain forms of empathy. As such, it is arguable that bettering our understanding of online emotions could also further our comprehension of empathic experience in cyberspace (and vice versa), thus making this an area of inquiry that it would be very promising to further explore.

(2000; 2012). I will then move to show how the experience of emotions on social media like Facebook displays the characteristics which are at the core of Goldie's account, proceeding to suggest that this enables us to better understand some of the key features of emotions undergone on the internet. In particular, I will argue that the significant levels of intensity, persistence, and contagiousness that characterise online emotions, can be made sense of within Goldie's framework.

As a result, this study contributes a distinct perspective to the investigation of a set of phenomena which are still comparatively under-explored in philosophy. Work in this area has targeted specific affective states or dynamics, for example online shaming (Norlock 2017), love (Ben Ze'ev 2004), and empathy and feelings of 'togetherness' (Osler 2012; Svenaeus 2021), drawing attention also to questions concerning the relationship and comparison between online and offline experience (e.g. Ben Ze'ev 2004; Krueger and Osler 2019). In this paper, I provide a contribution to this growing area of interest by exploring how a particular theory of emotion can be drawn upon to account for the structure and characteristic features of affects on the internet.

## 2. Goldie's Theory of Emotion

Goldie claims that emotions should not be conceived as single mental states or events (2011); rather, in his opinion, emotions are better characterised as *processes* constituted by a plurality of states,<sup>5</sup> and this is why they are attributed a *complex* character (Goldie 2000).

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to preliminarily stress that, within Goldie's account, emotions are *personal* processes, namely they are processes undergone by someone to whom the emotions can be ascribed. From this perspective, Goldie's view differs from the idea - at the core, for example, of accounts of affective atmospheres (cf. Riedel 2019) - that emotions can be present or circulate without them being the emotions of a particular experiencer. For Goldie, both the emotional processes, and the current and dispositional states that are part of it, are indeed individual mental states.

For Goldie, emotions involve the presence of a series of elements, “including perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of various kinds, and bodily changes of various kinds”, as well as dispositions, for example dispositions to think, feel, and behave in certain ways (2000, 12-13).

In order to exemplify this idea, we can consider the emotion of fear. A range of bodily sensations can be associated with this affective experience: we may shiver or tremble, ‘goose bumps’ may appear on our skin, or we may freeze and be unable to move. In addition to this, however, we may entertain various thoughts, such as “this is dangerous”, or “where is the closest escape route?”, as well as desires like “I wish this was over” or “I want to get help”. In addition, dispositions may be part of this experience: we may be inclined to prevent contact with the source of our fear, or to flee when forced to face it.

Goldie conceives of emotions as processes that can last for different periods of time, but he also emphasises that during such periods emotions do not remain unchanged. According to him, emotions have an *episodic* and *dynamic* structure, which means that the experiential components which constitute them (i.e. the “emotional episodes”, Goldie 2000, 11 ff) and the relevant dispositions are not always present and can vary over time. As Goldie explains:

Emotions are episodic and dynamic, in that, over time, the elements can come and go, and wax and wane, depending on all sorts of factors, including the way in which the episodes and dispositions interweave and interact with each other and with other aspects of the person’s life (2000, 13)

For Goldie, the same emotion can persist over time, even if its components and phenomenology change. If I am afraid of not passing an exam, for instance, my fear can manifest at different moments in different ways. At times, the experience of fearing may be marked by thoughts

focusing on how unpleasant the exam situation will be, while at other times my thoughts may revolve around the actual consequences of not passing, for example imagining someone else's potential reaction to the news of my failure. These thoughts may or may not be accompanied by specific bodily feelings and desires: I can feel shaky when I picture the exam all, or wish I didn't have to sit the exam, but this does not always need to be the case. As highlighted above, Goldie indeed considers occurrent thoughts, desires, and feelings as elements of an emotion - the *emotional episodes* - which need not always be present when an emotion is undergone. For him, there can be periods of time during which only the dispositional aspects of the emotion are present, but no actual emotional episodes are occurring. For instance, I may be afraid of the exam even when I am not thinking about it, as long as I am still disposed to respond in fear-related ways in certain circumstances (e.g. if I am disposed to react with anxiety when someone mentions a "test", or to react with elation when I am informed that the exam itself has been postponed).

Finally, for Goldie emotions are *structured*, in so far as they are "embedded" within a particular narrative, a broader "unfolding sequence of actions and events, thoughts and feelings" (2000: 13), which are connected from the point of view of the individual (2000, 4).

Various aspects of the notion of "narrative structure" are discussed by Goldie in different works (e.g. 2000; 2011; 2012), and attempting to provide a comprehensive reconstruction and interpretation of these ideas would exceed the scope of this paper. However, I would like to highlight one aspect that I take to be central to Goldie's account, namely that the notion of narrative underscores the existence of a specific relationship between the components of an emotion.

For Goldie, such components are not merely juxtaposed, they don't simply follow one another in sequential order: rather they hold together in a certain way. Nor are the constituents of an emotion merely causally connected: their reciprocal relationships cannot be understood



in terms of cause and effect only (cf. Goldie 2011, 127-128; 2012). Rather, Goldie suggests, the elements which are constitutive of a narrative structure - including the narrative structure of emotions - are coherently and meaningfully related to each other, and this depends, at least in part, on the fact that the components of an emotion are seen as aspects of a process through which the object of the emotion is evaluated in a certain way.

In particular, a key aspect of the link between the constituents of an emotion is described by Goldie through the notion of “recognition-response tie” (2000: 28ff), and this is key to understanding why such constituents are coherently and meaningfully related. From this perspective, emotions are ways of grasping and reacting to certain evaluative properties - for example, *dangerousness* in fear. The components of the emotions are the means by which the presence of the property is recognised and responded to.

Recognition and response are thought of by Goldie as being inseparable. Goldie indeed agrees that an evaluative property is “a property whose recognition *merits* a certain sort of response” (2000, 30), and it is through the emotion that such form of recognition can take place.

The constituents of an emotion - the set of emotional episodes and dispositions that are typical of it - are thus understood as the means by which a certain appraisal takes place. The thoughts, feelings, desires, and action tendencies that make up fear are that through which the objects of fear are experienced as “dangerous”, and it is also in virtue of this that they can be considered to have a narrative structure.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Emotions Online

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of “narrative” is employed by Goldie to refer to a specific feature of emotions, namely the fact that their constituents are intelligibly related as parts of an evaluative process. However, this is a feature that essentially distinguishes emotions from other kind of processes, for instance those whose components are connected merely by causal relationships. As such, the notion of “narrative” has a defining role in Goldie’s theory, and indeed he refers explicitly to his own account as a “narrative account” (2011).

So far I have outlined some of the key claims at the core of Goldie's theory of emotion. As previously mentioned, this aims to be a general account of the nature of affective experience, and, to my knowledge, Goldie does not use specific examples of emotions undergone on the internet.

As no specific distinction is made between online and offline emotions, we may hypothesise that for Goldie there was no reason to distinguish between the two. However, since, as outlined in the first section of this study, there may be reasons to question the similarity of internet-mediated and unmediated emotions, investigating the structure of affects experienced and communicated in cyberspace is a worthwhile endeavour.

In the following, I will do so by exploring the extent to which emotions undergone and shared on social media display the characteristics that Goldie attributes to emotions more generally. I will then proceed to argue that online emotions have some specific features – that is, a certain degree of intensity, persistence, and contagiousness – which Goldie's account is well positioned to account for.

### ***3.1. Emotions Online as Complex, Episodic, Dynamic, and Narratively Structured***

We have seen that a key tenet of Goldie's account is the claim that emotions are to be understood as processes, rather than individual mental states or events. This idea, however, may at first appear to be counterintuitive when applied to emotions online.

Rapidity is often a mark of interactions on the internet, and on social media in particular: here we are exposed to a continuous flow of information and stimuli, so particular emotional responses may be quickly offset and replaced by other emotional reactions as we shift our attention from one post or Tweet to the other. In line with this idea, Ben Ze'ev (2004), for example, has argued that a transient character is one of the key features of emotions on the

internet. As he explains (2004, 59), “[c]yberspace is more unstable, dynamic, and transitory than our actual environment is. Thus we would expect to find that transitory emotions are more dominant in cyberspace while enduring affective attitudes are more rare”.

It is however important to recognise that cyberspace can also be “stable and reliable” (Krueger and Osler 2019, 223) in significant ways. In addition to the endless stream of new information coming up through our news feeds, social media like Twitter and Facebook also offer repositories of old information: someone’s Tweet or post will remain accessible on their profile or wall, which functionally become *archives* of a significant amount of that person’s activity on the media (Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, 44). In addition, on these networks, a certain amount of biographical and personal information about the user remains available and potentially un-changed over time.

Despite the transient nature of many of the activities we can perform within them, the architecture of social media is thus stable enough to potentially enable us to experience emotions that extend over time, and which exhibit the characteristics at the core of Goldie’s theory. In order to illustrate how this may be the case, let’s consider an example with which most of us are likely familiar: sharing an emotion-related post on Facebook.

Imagine that on a news website I come across an opinion article which angers me, and I decide to share it in a Facebook post, adding a short commentary about the reasons for my disagreement and my suggestions as to what a better approach to the question that is discussed might be. This is a case in which I both experience and communicate an emotion on the internet and thus falls within the category of “online emotions” as previously defined.

In the post I mention explicitly that I am angered by the piece, but it is worth noting that even when not mentioned explicitly, emotions can be expressed by posts in multiple ways. If text is included, vocabulary and syntax may provide indications about one’s state of mind. In addition, images and emoticons can give an explicit and vivid illustration of one’s emotions.

In some cases, the media interface offers pre-set ways of indicating one's state of mind through the combination of text and icons. In the example in question, I choose to avail myself of this option, and I select the "feeling angry/angry emoticon" button, further emphasising the emotion expressed in my post.

The publication of the post on the social media already exemplifies one of the features ascribed by Goldie to emotions, namely their being complex states. As previously highlighted, for Goldie this means that an emotion is not a single state or event, but rather consists in a set of phenomena. The anger that I communicate through the sharing of the article exhibits such complexity, as a range of anger-related thoughts and desires, for example, have already converged in the publication of the post. Thoughts like "this is offensive", "it is the wrong way of approaching the matter", or "surely it must be clear to people that this person is mistaken" may have been popping into my head not only as I was reading the original article, but also as I was re-posting about it, and this is in addition to all the more specific thoughts about the reasons of my disagreement expressed in the text of the post itself. Furthermore, multiple desires have already been experienced as part of this dynamic, for example, the wish to offer a criticism of the position which triggered my anger, and to make a suggestion as to possible alternative approaches which would not incur in the same mistakes. It's also very plausible that bodily feelings associated with anger have accompanied me throughout the process, for example, I may have felt the anger "boiling up" in my stomach, or I may have been involuntarily slightly clenching my hands as I was reading or reflecting upon what to write.

So, the act of posting itself already exemplifies the presence of multiple components to my experience of anger. However, the structure of this emotion is further complexified through the ways in which others and myself can interact with the post and with each other after its publication.

One of the most immediate ways of doing so on Facebook is through the use of the “like” function. Almost instantaneously after posting I may start receiving likes which make me feel corroborated in my reaction, and give me the sense that my anger is not a solitary experience, but rather that there are others who are or could be participating in it with me. This is the effect that also approving comments added to the post can have. These can foster my belief of having good grounds for my reaction and prompt me to engage again in the thoughts which triggered the response: “really the author of the article should have thought this through more”, I may think, or “it is clear to everyone that this is not the right way to tackle the issue”.

Some of the comments may also bring to my attention additional information I was not aware of, for instance by providing links to relevant resources such as other websites, blogs, or Twitter threads. This may trigger new anger-related thoughts: for example, if a comment highlighted that the author of the original article had been rebuked for expressing similar views in the past, and still persisted in defending them, my anger could intensify and the thought that the author refused to retract their positions even when having a specific opportunity to do so can become part of it.

Through the interactions afforded by the online platform the anger I originally expressed there can thus grow to incorporate new mental states, displaying the complex structure which, according to Goldie, is a key feature of emotions. This can happen during a short period of time, with a number of exchanges (e.g. likes and comments) taking place, as in the example, shortly after the publication of the emotion-related post.

However, synchronous interactions are only one of the possible types of interaction afforded by social media like Facebook, and the structure of the relevant emotion can be further developed through exchanges that take place over more or less extended periods of time. This makes it possible for the emotion to be configured as a longer process involving various emotional episodes, and to potentially enhance its dynamic character.

Responses to the post in which I expressed anger can take place hours, days, months, or even years after its publication, and I may not see them as soon they take place, due for instance to not being online or ignoring the notifications concerning the relevant activity. There will thus be periods of time of different length during which I do not engage with the post in any way. While during these periods I may still be entertaining anger-related thoughts, desires, feelings, and so on, it is also possible that there will be times at which I will not have any mental state related to that anger, being instead absorbed in other matters and emotions. Upon re-engaging with the post, however, mental states integral to that emotion may resurface. Reading new comments left by my friends can rekindle the thoughts, desires, and feelings experienced when I first posted, or can trigger new ones. For instance, someone may have in the meantime pointed out that there were some relevant facts I hadn't taken into consideration when assessing the article, or that there were some problems with the alternative approach to the matter I had suggested. This may lead me to revisit my original assessment, and while still thinking that the author of the article was wrong and being angry at its publication, I may feel less sure about the persuasiveness of the alternative approach I was suggesting. Through subsequent interactions on the social media, my anger can therefore not only be re-ignited, but can also be modified, being mitigated or exacerbated through the acquisition of new information or further reflection.

The anger discussed in this example thus presents a process structure, which is shaped by my activities on the social media. The emotion that is so experienced is a pattern of mental states which unfold over time and coalesce around specific emotional episodes. In addition, the structure of the pattern is dynamic, as the emotion, while enduring over time, also undergoes certain changes.

So, online affects not only involve patterns of experience, rather than isolated moments, but these patterns are also flexible, displaying the episodic and dynamic structure that Goldie considers to be typical of emotions.

In addition, like the emotions discussed by Goldie, the emotion in the example of the Facebook post I previously introduced is narratively structured. The components of the emotion – the particular thoughts, feelings, and desires, for example, through which the emotion develops over time – are embedded in broader patterns of experience, actions, and events, a narrative of my life or parts of it, within which they are intelligible. For instance, there is a close connection between the anger I experience at the opinion article, and the fact that I have a long-lasting interest in the role played by media in society, or that I endorse certain values concerning the way in which personal and public communication should take place.

As we saw above, however, emotions are narratively structured not only in virtue of being intelligibly connected to other dimensions of our life, but also because of the type of relationship which exists between their components. The constituents of an emotion, for Goldie, are not merely juxtaposed; rather, they are coherently and meaningfully related, due to be aspects of a unitary evaluative process. This is manifest also in the anger example I have been analysing: here the different thoughts, feelings, desires, and dispositions through which my anger unfolds over time are constitutive of a certain appraisal, namely my taking the publication of the opinion article as problematic in some way. More specifically, the elements that make up my anger are that through which the opinion article is recognised and responded to as possessing the evaluative property of *offensiveness* (Deonna and Teroni 2015) or *wrongness* (Solomon 1973).

Both offline and online emotions thus display a narrative structure. However, the structure of emotions on social media - is heavily dependent on the interaction with other people. What the example I have illustrated shows is indeed that social interactions are cardinal

to the processes through which the (narrative) structure of the emotion experienced online is constituted, upheld, and developed over time. In this context, my thoughts, feelings, desires, and dispositions concerning the object of the emotion unfold to a greater extent in response to inputs and prompts from others, who thus become primary influences on the emotion, enabling the resurfacing of emotional episodes, and shaping the elements which are part of this affective pattern.

This, however, does not entail that the emotions here at issue are no longer - or to a lesser extent - the emotions of an individual subject. The fact that the actions of other people, and our interactions with them, can trigger or modulate mental states that are integral to emotional processes does not mean that those actions and interactions are a constitutive part of the processes themselves. Mental states can be distinguished from their causes,<sup>7</sup> and my claim here is that, when emotions on social networks are concerned, these causes tend to have an interpersonal character.<sup>8</sup>

In other terms, interactions with others on social media substantially contribute to constituting and shaping emotional processes, but these are still processes that should be ascribed to an experiencing subject. The online emotions that are the focus of this analysis are the emotions of individuals; nevertheless, they appear to be social in a robust way. Not only they are often communicated in public or semi-public contexts, but other people are central to the dynamics which originate, modify, and support the structure of the emotion itself. So, these emotions are not only social because they generally have an audience – real or imagined. Rather

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<sup>7</sup> For example, my anxiety about an impending deadline may be caused by lack of sleep, but this does not entail that the lack of sleep is a constituent of my emotion (nor that it is its object, as highlighted by Solomon [1973] through a similar example).

<sup>8</sup> Goldie's view is also different from (although not incompatible with) an extended account of mental states, and, in particular, affects. Expanding the Extended Mind thesis to include various forms of affective experience, Colombetti and Roberts (2015) suggest that under certain circumstances (i.e. when they play particular functional roles) also objects that are external to the body can be components of the emotion itself, so that the constituents of emotions need not be confined within "biological boundaries". This view that is neither defended, nor presupposed or implicated by Goldie's theory; however, it seems possible to pursue an integration of the two.



they are social because interpersonal interactions play an essential role in their making, weaving, so to speak, their complex patterns in multiple ways.<sup>9</sup>

### *3.2. Intensity, Persistence, and Contagiousness*

So far I have argued that emotions experienced in the context of social media use can be understood through Peter Goldie's account as having a complex, episodic, dynamic, and narrative structure. More specifically, I have claimed that this range of online emotions are best understood as processes that develop over time and in the constitution of which others tend to play a central role.

This account, I believe, enables us to make sense of some of the features of the experience of emotions on social media, and, in the following section I will illustrate why I take this to be the case. In particular, I consider three features which appear to be characteristic of online emotions, namely their intensity, persistence, and contagiousness, and I show how these can be best understood through the narrative account I have presented.

#### *Intensity*

It has been argued that the experience of emotions online can be very intense. Ben Ze'ev, for instance, observes that:

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<sup>9</sup> Online, various dynamics can contribute to emotion regulation and dysregulation, and this corroborates the idea that emotions can be shaped through interactions in cyberspace. In their exploration of how affects can be regulated and dysregulated on the internet, Krueger and Osler (2019) highlight how these phenomena are essentially social, an idea with which my application of Goldie's account is in strong alignment.

The lack of stability in cyberspace often generates more intense and transitory emotions. This is true of both positive emotions and negative ones. In cyberspace we find intense love and sexual desire, but also intense fear and despair. (2004, 59)

This idea is supported by the observation of the heated and sometimes extreme tone of exchanges on social media. As highlighted by Ronson in his investigation of online shaming:

[...] with social media we've created a stage for constant artificial high dramas. Every day a new person emerges as a magnificent hero or a sickening villain. It's all very sweeping and not the way we actually are as people. (2016, 73)

Ben Ze'ev's and Ronson's claims seem to align well with the phenomenology of some of the emotions that can be undergone online, but to what extent can these remarks be generalised? Isn't it the case that, similarly to what happens offline, while some emotions may be heightened in the context of online interaction, others have the same - or perhaps even lower - intensity than their offline counterparts?

The skepticism voiced by these questions seems to be reinforced by the fact that the accounts that emphasise the intensity of online emotions often focus on specific types of emotion. Ben Ze'ev, for example, is concerned with the way in which love, and in particular romantic love, is experienced in cyberspace, while Ronson's analysis revolves around the experience of being shamed, and thus involves specifically emotions of self-assessment, and, arguably, "emotions of blame" (Prinz 2010) such as anger and contempt.

However, there are reasons in virtue of which it is possible to claim that emotions online are typically, and not just occasionally, intense. First, the kinds of emotions that are explored by accounts such as Ben Ze'ev's and Ronson's are frequently encountered on the internet, and

indeed tend to be predominant in certain online spaces.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the dynamics in virtue of which the intensity of emotions such as love or shame is increased online are not exclusive to these emotions; rather, they are dynamics that tend to make emotions of any kind more intense.

According to Ben Ze'ev, various factors play a role in this context (2004, 66-67): some having to do with the impact that the triggering event is perceived to have, and others regarding the background circumstances of the subject. As far as the former is concerned, Ben Ze'ev observes that, the greater the extent to which the event is evaluated in a certain way - for instance, as being a misfortune - the bigger its strength. He claims that the strength of events that take place in online interactions is usually perceived as greater than that of events which occur offline, and he suggests that this may be due to the role played by the imagination on the internet (2004, 67).

Online we may interact with people we have never seen, and it is thus easier to magnify their features. In addition, according to Ben Ze'ev, imaginative processes contribute to the intensity of emotions online also because of their capacity to enhance the degree to which events on the internet are taken to be real. While cyberspace is different from the space we inhabit offline, Ben Ze'ev highlights how our "vivid fantasies" (2004, 67), alongside the existence of actual interactions on the web, confer reality to it. In addition, he suggests that online people are more willing to disclose information about themselves, and that this can enhance "emotional closeness" and, therefore, the relevance of triggering events (2004, 68).

With reference to the relationship between intensity and the background circumstances of the subject, Ben Ze'ev observes that unexpectedness and uncertainty are greater online - which makes it the case that the agent is less prepared for the events s/he faces, and this significantly contributes to enhance the intensity of emotions. In his view, cyberspace tends to be unstable and, as hinted at above, this is key to bringing about intense emotions.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, research on the centrality of anger in online debates (Wollebæk et al. 2019).

The factors that Ben Ze'ev identifies as playing a role in strengthening the intensity of online emotions are certainly very relevant. Changes of a certain kind, or unexpected events, for example, can indeed often trigger emotional experiences on social media: upon logging into Facebook I find that a friend I haven't heard from for a long time has posted a rather affectionate message on my wall, and I feel surprise, or perhaps embarrassment. Or I see that someone I know and follow on Twitter has tweeted something very disrespectful, and I feel indignation, or maybe sorrow.

Ben Ze'ev is also right in pointing out the centrality of the imagination to the experience of online emotions. While on social media we can see or hear other people "live" - for instance through the use of audio-recorded materials - this is still often a less frequent mode of interaction. In many cases, we read what other people write or we watch or listen to content they post that does not include them, or if it does, this may be content produced at a different time. For instance, we may be seeing pictures taken hours, days, or months before they are actually shared on the media.

So, online there are a lot of possible gaps for our imagination to fill.<sup>11</sup> For example, we are left to imagine what the facial expressions, tone of voice, and bodily postures of our interlocutors may be; as well as picturing the environment they may find themselves in, and how they might be navigating it.

However, while unexpectedness and the imagination can engender intense emotions, it seems that there also other factors involved in determining the intensity of emotions on the internet. One of such factors is the increased awareness of the emotions themselves, which is facilitated by the particular process structure they display online.

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<sup>11</sup> Norlock (2017) highlights the role of imaginative relationships in online shaming, which is a key affectively-laden dynamic on social media.

Let's go back to the Facebook post example I previously discussed. I highlighted how the emotion of anger experienced on that occasion is constituted by a set of thoughts, feelings, desires, and dispositions which develop over time in response to inputs and prompts offered by other people. These interactions leave a "material" trace on the media, for example as strings of likes, comments, shared posts that display any time I look at my original post. As such, my emotion and its development become particularly visible to me, which can in turn intensify the emotion. Looking at my post reminds me of the existence of my anger – it brings it to the fore, so to speak, and this contributes to make stronger the emotional experience itself. Observing the way in which my anger has unfolded online - for example, noticing the number of comments and retweets which have coalesced around its original expression – fosters my awareness of having been angry, and such an awareness can strengthen the anger itself. As mentioned before, social media can effectively become "archives of feelings" (Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, 44), and the existence of these archives facilitate the enhancement of the feelings themselves.

Research on the relationship between emotions and language highlights how becoming conscious of an affective experience through its verbalisation can refine and enhance the affective experience itself.<sup>12</sup> More broadly, it is suggested that reflective awareness can impact on the quality of the emotion, conferring on it a special character. As observed by Solomon with regard to the experience of love:

Our sense of romantic love is a thoroughly reflective emotion [...] (It is well-known that men and women sometimes "discover" that they are in love, but the critical point is that their love is fully realized only once they recognize that they

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Colombetti (2009) and Bortolan (2020) for a fine-grained analysis of the relevant dynamics.

are in love.) The notion of a purely prereflective love would yield little more than animal attraction and some sense of affectionate attachment. Important, yes, perhaps even “basic,” but hardly the stuff of romance, poetry, and song. (2007, 227)

So, an emotion of which we are aware is phenomenologically different from an emotion that is experienced pre-reflectively, and one of the differences seems to have to do with intensity. Becoming conscious of being emoted in a certain way emboldens and sharpens the emotion. As such, due to the easiness with which we can keep track of them, emotions become more visible online, and this is also a significant contributor to their intensity.

In addition, emotions experienced online can be more intense also because here we may be more frequently reminded not only of the experience of the emotion, but also of the object of the emotion, and of the reasons we have to evaluate it in certain ways. The architecture of social media, facilitates my attention being drawn again and again to what motivated my original emotional reaction, as verbalised, for instance, in my own and other people’s comments. Returning to these comments is likely to make salient for me the features of the article which made me angry in the first place, thus reigniting my initial response. As previously discussed, in the process, I may also become aware of additional factors corroborating my original assessment, which can thus become more severe, strengthening the intensity of the emotion.

### *Persistence*

Ben Ze'ev, as we have seen, emphasises the instability of the internet, portraying it as a realm in which change can occur more frequently and abruptly than offline. However, while transient and volatile experiences and relationships can certainly occur on the internet, solid and enduring ones can also take place through this medium.

An illustration of this can be provided by considering the specific role that online activities may play in affect regulation. Krueger and Osler (2019), for example, have drawn attention to how we make use of the internet in various ways to regulate our emotions, arguing that this gives rise to the creation of specific “techno-social niches” providing us with tools for managing our affective experience. More specifically, in this context, a niche is conceived as a “self-styled environment” (2019: 209), comprising a set of socio-material resources, which reflect the needs of an individual and offer particular resources that act as *affective scaffoldings* (cf. Colombetti and Krueger 2015), sustaining and regulating emotional experience.

Although their analysis is not limited to the use of social media, Krueger and Osler's account highlights some of the key aspects of the way in which the use of these media can shape emotions. Many of us, for example, rely on social media as a form of entertainment, or distraction: we may access them when we are taking a break from work, or during a commute, or when waiting in line at the post office. In these cases, they can act as something that prevents or mitigates boredom, or that brings about a more light-hearted and cheerful mood. Importantly, and independently of the specific emotions that we may seek to trigger through their use, they are resources that we know are constantly, or almost constantly, available to us (Krueger and Osler 2019, 223-224). Facebook and Twitter are always “to hand”, being only as far as a device or the closest WiFi connection.

As a result, it seems that, due to its ubiquity and accessibility, the internet, and the affective regulation resources it offers, are highly “stable and reliable” (Krueger and Osler 2019, 223). As such, it is not necessarily the case that our emotions online are transient states:

on the contrary, such emotions can be frequently long-lasting, and this is another feature that the account developed in the first part of this study seems well positioned to account for.

I have highlighted how, following Goldie's approach, we can conceive of online emotions as processes – rather than individual mental states and events - which unfold over time. This characterisation does not in itself commit us to the idea that emotions are *long-lasting* processes; they could indeed just be short-lived patterns of experience. However, the illustration I have previously provided of the way in which emotion processes tend to be articulated on social media can shed light on why online emotions tend indeed to be particularly persistent.

As emphasised before, the architecture of social networks is such that they act as repositories of previous experience and activity, where such experience and activity often has an affective character. On these media, our emotions are constantly available for us and others to interact with, and, as we have seen, to a significant extent, it is through social inputs and prompts that they expand and develop over time. In other terms, through the 'hooks' offered by other people on the internet, emotions that offline might otherwise have been forgotten or might have quickly faded away, can become more prominent in our experience and more stable.

This is also facilitated by the speed of online interactions. As illustrated by Ben Ze-ev:

Online relationships are based upon an improved version of an old-fashioned way of communicating: writing. In the new version, the time gap between writing, sending, receiving, and reading has been made almost instantaneous – the sender can receive a reply while still in the state of emotions in which she sent the original message. This difference, which may appear merely technical, is of great emotional



significance, as emotions are brief and involve the urge to act immediately. (2004, 7).

The possibility of interacting in real time with others, in other terms, makes it possible for us to witness other people's responses to our emotions while we are still experiencing them, and this can have a magnifying and perpetuating effect. While offline we could be more easily distracted, allowing for our feeling to settle or fade away, online we can be kept in a situation of emotional arousal for longer, thus enabling the experience of more persistent emotions.

### *Contagiousness*

There are various circumstances in our life offline in which emotions appear to be contagious (e.g. Hatfield et al. 2014; Scheler 1954). Excitement or melancholy, for instance, may sweep among the attendees at a concert, while those who take part in a political demonstration may be 'infected' with each other's elation or indignation.

The exact characterisation of these phenomena is a matter of debate. However, it seems that what is meant here by "contagiousness" is the fact that the same emotion comes to be experienced by a number of people who happen to share the same space or to be engaged in the same activity.

This dynamic appears to be present also in online interactions, and indeed emotions on the internet seem to be particularly contagious (Steinert 2000). An exemplification of this is offered by the so-called "Twitter storms", which often take the form of situations in which negative emotions of blame propagate rapidly among the members of a particular social network.

Some of the features of these phenomena can be connected to the presence on social media of what are sometimes referred to as “echo chambers” or “bubbles” (Cinelli et al. 2021; Nikolov et al. 2015), namely spaces in which the ideas that are expressed tend to display a high degree of uniformity. This applies also to affectivity, as in these cases the emotions of the people involved tend to converge. In echo chambers or bubbles there are indeed dominant emotions, which propel the conversation and orientate it in certain ways, while at the same time preventing it from developing in certain directions.

Conceiving of the emotions experienced on social media through the framework of Goldie’s theory can be helpful to better understand also the contagiousness of online emotions.

In the first place, both the intensity and the increased persistence of certain online emotions may enhance their contagiousness. Something that is felt strongly and for a long time will indeed tend to become particularly visible, and, as a result, more likely to be undergone by other people. The experiences that are salient for us, the ones that we can observe, indeed provide models or examples of the experiential possibilities that are open to us, offering ‘prototypes’, so to speak, of mental states that it is possible to emulate (Colombetti 2009, 17-20).

The application of Goldie’s theory, however, provides us also with other insights which can be helpful in clarifying why emotions on the internet appear to be contagious, and these insights are related in particular to Goldie’s account of the narrative structure of emotions.

Goldie (2000) claims not only that different emotions have different “paradigmatic” narrative structures, but also that these narrative structures are, at least in part, the product of the environment one has grown up or found oneself in (92).

For him, the notion of narrative structure makes it possible to account for the similarities and differences in the way emotions are conceived, expressed and experienced across different cultures (2000, 85). According to this position, there is a level of variability in

the narratives associated with a particular emotion which reflects the specificity and interests of the individual, group or society in which the narrative is crafted. Different cultures can indeed have different conceptions of which are the constituents of a specific emotional process and of how these unfold over time.

In this regard, much attention has been given, for instance, to the existence of a number of cultural variations in the experience of shame and guilt. Wong and Tsai (2007), for example, highlight how in Western cultures shame is usually induced by a transgression committed by the individual, while in Eastern cultures it can be triggered also by actions performed by others (216). Furthermore, they highlight that where a “collectivistic” conception of the self is in place, it is more likely for shame to be experienced in public rather than in private, while the opposite tendency would be present when an “individualistic” view is embraced. Wong and Tsai (2007, 216-217) also emphasize how these cultural models have an impact on the behaviours that are associated with the experience of shame, which, for instance, seems to enhance pro-social behaviours in Eastern but not in Western countries.

As shown by these examples, certain feelings, thoughts, or actions can be considered typical of a particular emotion in one culture but not in another: the constituents of the “recognition-response tie” (Goldie 2000: 28) and the way in which they unfold – in other terms, the narrative structures of emotions – are subject to variation at the cross-cultural level.

Despite this, Goldie suggests, it is possible to recognise two different, culturally shaped affective experiences as instances of the same emotion (cf. 2000, 92-94). His position relies on the acknowledgement that similarity and difference in this context are not a matter of ‘all or nothing’, but rather a question of degrees. While some of the components of the emotional process will vary across cultures, others will be the same and it is by virtue of their sharing a number of significant aspects that two different narratives can be conceived as narratives of the same emotion. Otherwise said, notwithstanding their differences, the narrative structures of

certain affective experiences are similar enough to enable us to consider these experiences as variants of the same emotion.

These considerations can be applied to the analysis of emotions on social media, and can contribute to our understanding of the contagiousness of online emotions. On the internet we are provided with models – ‘paradigms’ – of certain types of emotional experience, which can be particularly influential due to their visibility and the easiness with which they can be replicated across different online spaces. Implicit or explicit conventions may form on the web with regard to which emotions are appropriate in certain circumstances, and the particular form that they should take, and these conventions come to be tacitly recognised and replicated, shaping individual experiences.

The emotion of anger, again, appears to be a good candidate to exemplify this.<sup>13</sup> It currently seems completely acceptable to express anger on social media in circumstances in which we wouldn’t likely feel comfortable expressing anger if we were offline. As observed by Derks and colleagues (2008, 780), “more intense negative emotions are even expressed more overtly in CMC [Computer Mediated Communication]”, and anger seems to be one such emotion. For example, on Facebook and Twitter it is customary to display angry reactions when faced with the expression of thoughts which one finds troublesome, stupid, or disrespectful, even when the person expressing them is someone with whom we don’t have a personal relationship.<sup>14</sup> In addition, anger has been shown to be a dominant emotions in online debates (Wollebæk et al. 2019). This does not seem to parallel (at least not yet), the way in

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<sup>13</sup> Grief is another emotion the experience and expression of which seems to be subject to specific rules online (see e.g. Jakoby and Reiser 2014).

<sup>14</sup> It is certainly possible that some of the emotional expressions interpreted by an audience as anger (or even qualified by an experiencer as such) are not manifestations of anger, but rather of other emotions. However, assuming that people do not mis-label emotions expressed online more than it’s the case with emotions expressed offline, we have no reasons to doubt that the more frequent manifestations of anger on the internet go hand in hand with more frequent experiences of this emotion.

which we behave when off the internet, where vehement disagreement is more rarely expressed directly and immediately to strangers or others with whom we are not very familiar.

Anger on the internet has its rules, which can be picked up on through repeated observation, and which are illustrated by a huge number of examples to which we have constant access (as opposed to what happens offline). As such, especially where online communities are close-knit and homogeneous, social media can act as a ‘magnifying lens’ for the narrative structure of emotions, making it easier for people to re-enact it, and “spread” it to others when communicating online.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper I have suggested that the structure and some of the key characteristics of emotions experienced and expressed on social media can be accounted for through the framework of Peter Goldie’s theory of emotion. I started by providing a reconstruction of this theory, highlighting how, for Goldie, emotions are to be understood as processes, and as complex, dynamic, episodic, and narratively structured phenomena. I then moved to show that emotions undergone and shared on social networks like Facebook display the features which are at the core of Goldie’s account, and I then proceeded to illustrate how such an account can help us to shed further light on specific aspects of online emotions, namely their intensity, persistence, and contagiousness.

On this basis, we can conclude that some of the theoretical frameworks employed in the study of offline emotions are also suitable to account for the structure of online emotions. This aligns well with the idea that emotions on the internet are not a completely different phenomenon from emotions undergone and expressed offline: while the technologies through which the former are mediated may have specific characteristics, such differences have not

(yet) determined the emergence of a type of affective experience fundamentally distinct from that which is present in interactions off the internet. In other terms, while online emotions may be a particular case of technology-mediated emotions, the fact that a “traditional” theory of emotions is applicable to them supports the idea that there is a degree of continuity between the structure of emotions that are experienced and communicated on- and off-line.

These insights also bode well with the observation that the experience and communication of emotions is rarely confined to either ‘online’ or ‘offline’ spaces, but rather it often cuts across them. We are angered by an interaction on Twitter, and we share that anger in a conversation with our friends at the pub, or vice versa. In other terms, the same emotional process often unfolds on and off the internet, and, as such, it is not always possible to establish a neat divide between emotions that are and aren’t mediated by the relevant type of digital technology. The account developed in this paper can accommodate these cases too, in so far as it shows that Goldie’s theory can do justice to both offline and online affective phenomena, and is thus suited to account also for processes in which these two dimensions are integrated.

This study, however, does not provide a conclusive answer to the question concerning the potential differences in kind between emotions the arousal, experience, and communication of which take place entirely online and their offline counterparts. While Goldie’s theory seems to do justice to both sets of phenomena, there could still be differences in virtue of which the two need to be seen as distinct types of affect. Nevertheless, the applicability of Goldie’s account suggests that there is a level a continuity between emotional experiences on and off the internet, and that the two may rather lie across a spectrum.<sup>15</sup>

## **Acknowledgments**

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<sup>15</sup> A similar point is made by Osler (2021) with regard to the experience of empathy, as she argues that online we can empathetically perceive others in ways that parallel, at least to an extent, the dynamics which are the core of offline empathy.

Previous versions of this paper were presented at the following events: Social Ontology 2020 (The 12<sup>th</sup> Biennial Collective Intentionality Conference), the 2020 Annual Conference of the British Society for Phenomenology (BSP), and the EGENIS Seminar at the University of Exeter. I am very grateful to the audiences of these events for their feedback. My sincere thanks also to an anonymous Reviewer for their helpful comments, and to James Miller for stimulating discussions and the encouragement to pursue this project.

### **Disclosure Statement**

The Author reports no conflict of interest.

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