

Emotions as Freedom: Automodern Life in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract: This essay investigates the ambivalent effects of postmodern thought and its significance for subjectivity. Emerging in the cultural and intellectual upheavals of the 1960s, postmodernism questioned and rejected grand narratives and universal truths and focused instead on legitimizing pluralism, multiplicity, and difference. In this sense, it paves the way towards marginalized voices—women, minorities, children, and LGBTQ+ communities—whose experiences had been neglected by dominant Western narratives. While it is true that postmodernism expanded cultural horizons and led towards social recognition, it also produced destabilizing effects. The refusal to abide by universal and objective truths produced fragmentation, the erosion of social bonds, and the deprivation of psychic rootedness. In focusing on difference without an ontological anchor, postmodernism dissolves the coherence of the self and reduces it to commodity fixations. Hence, I argue that we need a new perspective beyond the relativistic approach of postmodern thinking. Drawing from Robert Samuels’ theory of automodernity, this paper suggests an alternative framework where digital life, situated along post-truth contexts, provides a space for emotional expression and recognition. In doing so, this study contributes to critical theory by mapping out subjectivity that is both plural and grounded, fluid yet anchored in affective and communal ties.

Keywords: Samuels, automodernity, postmodernity, critical theory

The automodern world is best characterized by our free expressions and engagements within the world of digital technology. As argued by some, the automodern era warrants human autonomy by wallowing and immersing itself in the world of the internet. In this regard, Samuels labels this as the capacity of “autonomous individuals to exploit unregulated

automated social systems.”¹ Hence, today, this cultural revolution confers on us digital competencies for interconnections to better understand the world around us. The automodern era, then, is the prevalent mediation of the web and social media platforms in our daily state of affairs. The free expressions of desires and emotions redefine how we now conceptualize human freedom. For Samuels, in our absorption and immersion in the world of a highly digitalized environment, we acquire a heightened sense of individuality, i.e., full control over ourselves and our surrounding environment.² Our fascination and, we might say, gross addiction to the net is actually, as Samuels observes, “a desire for total mobility and individual autonomy” We can express, discuss, debate, and acquiesce on things to further our knowledge and interest in our surrounding environment. But all of these new technologies, as Samuels reminds us, “point to a desire for people to be heard and seen by people they may not even know ... [it is] the desire for recognition.”³ It is for these reasons that this paper would like to propose the thesis that our immersion in the automodern world, our penchant use or inclination toward automated systems is not only a form of freedom *from* external coercion but, most likely, an opportunity for emotional unloading of repressed narratives forbidden and hidden by social constraints. While we recognize the fact that our engagement and use of the net occur within pre-structured frameworks, such as algorithmic governance, data profiling, and market-driven logic, I proffer the idea that the automodern world is now the stage of unmediated articulation of the self in the public space, and this is more audacious and apparent in the post-truth world where emotions play a significant role. Like Samuel’s, which portrays the digital culture as a “confessional booth that allows for the externalization of interior feelings and ideas”⁴, our assimilation of these systems allows for the expression of emotions, desires, and personal struggles outside the traditional confines of institutions like the family, the church, or even the nation-state. We see this manifested in social media, where users can ostensibly engage in discussions and connect with others irrespective of their race, gender, or class, seemingly challenging the postmodern assertion of social constructions and thereby the power dynamics within society. Through digital technologies, we are not simply interacting or consuming. We are, in fact, crafting a space where we feel a sense of belongingness and relatedness, a sense of active co-creators of personal meaning. Unlike earlier social frameworks, which sought to universalize rational autonomy (modernity) and break it into relativized

¹ Robert Samuels, *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

discourses (postmodernity), the digital space exposes the immediacy of affective narration. As mentioned, this becomes more apparent in the post-truth environment by foregrounding emotions as the primary locus of human authenticity. To clarify my contentions in this paper, let me begin with my understanding of the modern and postmodern repercussions to map out why this essay advances the thesis that freedom in automodernity is a form of digital catharsis, i.e., unmediated enunciation of freedom, which is deeply intertwined with our emotional and subjective lives.

The Modern and Postmodern Age

Based on the Enlightenment ideals such as freedom, justice, rationality, and equality, the modern world, as claimed by Berman, provides us with joy, power, growth, and adventures that give us a sense of who we are, i.e., allowing us to experience ourselves and the world in all its possibilities and perils.⁵ With the liberty to choose and act upon our destiny, Taylor remarks that we can now "... decide what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of our lives in a whole host of ways, our ancestors couldn't control."⁶ Unlike the feudal era, modern society bestows on us the freedom to participate, act, and will for ourselves our own destiny in life.⁷ Hence, left with no supernatural or divine interventions, as Taylor puts it, we are no longer sacrificed to any sacred order that transcends us.⁸ Hence, our understanding of who we are and who we could be is all bound up by our concrete material and existential experiences.

Although such might be our aspirations, modernity does not, as pointed out by Wagner, "... offer any guidance as to how one should design one's own rules, nor does it provide any criterion with which one should engage in rule deliberation."⁹ Definitely, some rules and policies were instituted to actualize those ideals, but they are often overshadowed by the power and dominance of the bourgeoisie.¹⁰ We clearly observe this through

⁵ See Marshal Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (US: Penguin Books, 1982), 15.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2.

⁷ Peter Zima, *Subjectivity, and Identity: Between Modernity and Post Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 4.

⁸ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 2.

⁹ Peter Wagner, *Sociology of Modernity, Liberty, and Discipline* (London: Routledge, 1994), xii.

¹⁰ Cf. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. by Gregor Benton and Andy Blunden (Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org), 1999), 39–42. Consequently, owners of giant corporations often dictate the rules of the game, particularly the socio-economic conditions on which our physical and mental survival rests. See Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (Canada: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1955), 348. With this, our family, our traditions, our culture and arts, our religions, and our morality, which are supposed

the rise of corporatism in the global scene, where to be free is to subsume oneself into trade and commerce as sources of power and social mobility.¹¹ Modern society, as we now know, transforms for the benefit of consumerist pleasures and hedonistic games that foster the status quo of domination and subordination.¹² Further, the incessant domination of Western narratives that control the global scene led to oppression and marginalization.¹³ Thus, we experienced and suffered the catastrophic two world wars, the unspeakable terror of Auschwitz, the unimaginable traumas in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the threat of violence, oppression, racism, the marginalization of women and children, issues on migration and citizenship on the national and global scale, and the rise of authoritarian regimes—all of these make the promises of modernity obscure. In the words of Berman, modernity, though it promises us joy and adventure, “it threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, and everything we are.”¹⁴ Modern life, as he continues, is a “paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration.”¹⁵ With this ambivalence of modern living, one questions whether there could still be such a way towards a better future.

It was in the 60s that we witnessed social movements and cultural transformations towards the rise of the postmodern world. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner describe this transformation of events in the *Postmodern Theory*. They claimed:

During the 1960s, sociopolitical movements, new intellectual currents, and the cultural revolts throughout the West against the stifling conformity of the postwar celebration of the 'affluent society' produced a sense that

to elevate us above the animal conditions, have all been set aside to give way to the institutionalization of “techno-rationalities through the rise of culture industries.” See Anthony Elliot, “Social Theory and Psychoanalysis,” in *The Routledge Companion to Social Theory*, ed. by Antony Elliot (London: Routledge, 2010), 58–60. See also Simon Clark, “The Neoliberal Theory of Society” (July 2012), <homepages.warwick.ac.uk/~syrbe/pubs/Neoliberalism.pdf>.

¹¹ Cf. Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), 15.

¹² E. San Juan, *From Globalization to National Liberation: Essays of Three Decades* (Manila: UP Press, 2008), xii.

¹³ Cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), *Preface*, xii and Edwin van de Haar, *Classical Liberalism and International Relations Theory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 18. See also David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 13. This is also echoed and supported by Schwan and Shapiro who claim that the 18th and 19th-century ruling class generated power by institutionalizing a specific form of knowledge—“a defining ‘truth’ about individuals’ behavior and personality, only to discipline.” Anne Schwan and Stephen Shapiro, *How to Read Foucault’s Discipline and Punish* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 12.

¹⁴ Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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a widespread rebellion was occurring against a rigid and oppressive modern society.¹⁶

The disorientation brought about by an oppressive bureaucracy steered towards a different understanding of social reality. It was held that the grand narratives emanating from Western culture could no longer suffice to understand and interpret reality. Western concepts are just one among the many ways to view and understand the world. Culturally, everything is different, and it is from these differences that life flows and unfolds. The Western categories are not the only objective, self-evident, and universal truths that we must believe and adhere to.¹⁷ In other words, as Wagner would assert, there are no universally valid representations of the world with which we must conform.¹⁸ What we indeed have are differences, multiplicities, pluralities, ephemerality, fragmentation, and chaos.¹⁹ Given these social sentiments, there arises what we now call the postmodern way of thinking, where “heterogeneity, plurality, constant innovation, and pragmatic construction of local rules and prescriptives [are] agreed upon by participants.”²⁰ There are no longer meta-languages or meta-narratives that solidify all representations, which can unify all things.²¹ No foundational or objective concepts that determine how life must be. Instead, it proposes the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and difference of our time.²²

As there is no “one-size-fits-all” narrative, Bauman would claim that our time today marks the end of hierarchical value structure and the rejection of all absolutizing thought coming from the West.²³ There are no absolute standards by which we have to live except those that are bound by us through our social discourses. What we have instead are fragmentations of sociocultural discourses that lead to different subjectivities, diverse experiences of space and time, and different modes of encountering the world.²⁴ Thus, by deconstructing traditional hierarchies and questioning universal truths, postmodernism provides us with some tools for cultural and political self-expression. As explained by Harvey, all of us have different ways of experiencing, interpreting, and being in the world.²⁵ With this stance,

¹⁶ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1991), ix.

¹⁷ See Charles Lemert, *Postmodernism Is Not What You Think: Why Globalization Threatens Modernity* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 21–22.

¹⁸ See Wagner, *Sociology of Modernity, Liberty, and Discipline*, 150.

¹⁹ See Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 44.

²⁰ Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 165.

²¹ Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 45.

²² Roger Frie and Donna Orange, *Beyond Postmodernism: New dimensions in clinical theory and practice* (London: Routledge, 2009), 7.

²³ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), 34.

²⁴ See Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 3–4.

²⁵ See Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 53.

postmodernism supplies a relativist or perspectivist approach to social reality, i.e., how we understand and interpret the world is always mediated by our sociocultural and linguistic milieus.²⁶ It is in this regard that postmodern culture directs its attention to how we are all linguistically and culturally mediated. Through these social constructions, we relate, grow, develop, and find communion within our groups and communities.²⁷

While much can be appreciated from this postmodern perspective in giving voices to the unheard, the loss of a unified and objective standard has led to a lopsided view of economic and political correctness. Let us take, for instance, the power dynamics within a particular cultural discourse that, despite the growing cultural, communal, and even personal recognition and respect, postmodernism conveys,²⁸ still legitimize the role of the elite bureaucrats who control the political and economic landscapes. As most of our technological and economic resources are regulated by them, the social divide becomes unequal. Their alliances of power relations, Pingel observes, “are best achieved through the accession of more material wealth based on vertical relationships of dependence.”²⁹ In fact, the reciprocal relationships between predatory politicians and vulnerable clients are strengthened due to the presence of capital, which allows oligarchs to control the socio-political landscape.³⁰ In this sense, postmodern culture, with its focus on social constructivism, fortifies cultural as well as political backlash.³¹ More than these, as noted by Harvey, is the growing sense of disconnection and the breakdown of the signifying chain of meaning.³² Postmodern culture, with its focus on the liquidity of events, does not provide us with a stable past, present, and future. Since everything melts into air, as Marx claims, nothing gives us a sense of ontological security, where our own sense of communal “we” is forged.³³ The well-known sociologist Zygmunt Baumann also stressed this observation. For him, the social changes that occur loosen the boundaries between the “inside” and the “outside” of our sense of community, where identity formation is supposed to take place.³⁴ Accordingly, this leads to the fluidity of the self, i.e., a self that now exhibits

²⁶ See Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 3–4.

²⁷ Cf. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 38.

²⁸ Cf. Harold B. Davis, “Erich Fromm and Postmodernism,” in *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 90:6 (December 2003), <<https://doi.org/10.1521/prev.90.6.839.28790>>.

²⁹ Cf. Jan Pingel, “Patrimonial Power Structures and Political Violence,” in *OBSERVER: A Journal on threatened Human Rights Defenders in the Philippines*, 2: 2, (2010), 10.

³⁰ See John T. Sidel, “Philippine Politics in Town, District, and Province: Bossism in Cavite and Cebu,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56:4 (November 1997), 953.

³¹ See Samuels, *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernism*, 4–8

³² See Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 53.

³³ See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 105.

³⁴ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Community* (London: Polity Press, 2001), 3–5.

normative patterning yet simultaneously exists in a state of flux through social adaptation.³⁵ Further, it not only remains in a state of flux but also is left in perpetual disintegration, struggles, and contradictions.³⁶ As a result, there is no stability of the self, no identity to speak of, since the boundary that delineates one's community from the other is lost. Postmodern thinking would just settle and features the self as a constantly changing, ephemeral, liquid, decentered subject, which is always being tossed by social forces outside its control.³⁷ Hence, in our postmodern culture, it is not substantial anymore to talk of places where personal and social identity are embedded since those routinized social practices which substantially connect the past, present, and an imagined future are cancelled.³⁸ Instead of engaging meaningfully with ethnic groups and communal relations in order for personal and social identities to thrive, postmodern culture sways one's psychic energy towards commodity fixations.³⁹ Life's pulsations, tremors, and unpredictable movements, which make it alive and meaningful, are now transformed into a storehouse of facts, events, and possessions.⁴⁰ What is stored in us is a globalized culture where ethnic and communal differences are obliterated.⁴¹ In this sense, our instinctual drives have become "other-directed" rather than "inner-directed".⁴² In other words, in the postmodern environment, individual agency turns into status identification or herd identity, where one can only sense a self as it unquestionably belongs to the crowd.⁴³ Traditional or conventionalized institutionalized roles are weakened and have been replaced by more individualized and "fluid" lifestyles.⁴⁴ Thus, the postmodern living leads to what Harvey calls schizophrenic lifestyles. He argues:

³⁵ See Robert Dunn, *Identity Crisis: A Social Critique of Postmodernity*, (London: Minnesota Press, 1998), 32–33.

³⁶ See Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 15.

³⁷ Cf. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, "Individual Agency, The Ordinary, and the Postmodern Life," in *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36:3 (Summer, 1995), 555. If the subject is always decentered, says Panfilova, one's psychic energy is deprived of its human base. See Tatiana Panfilova, "Identity as a Problem of Today," in *Fromm Forum* (English Edition), 14 (2010), <<https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-Fromm/home>>. This deprivation, as Fromm would argue, dislodges the individual of the capacity to speak for oneself as a separate entity, as a distinct individual who could express "I-am-I". See Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 59.

³⁸ See Bauman, *Community*, 12–18

³⁹ See Dunn, *Identity Crisis*, 66.

⁴⁰ See Romano Biancoli, "The Search for Identity in the Being Mode," in *Fromm Forum* (English Edition), 10 (2006), 4–5.

⁴¹ See Panfilova, "Identity as a Problem of Today," 43–51.

⁴² John P. Hewitt, *Dilemmas of the American Self* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 5–6.

⁴³ See Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 61.

⁴⁴ See Dunn, *Identity Crisis*, 167.

[postmodernism] ... concentrating upon the schizophrenic circumstances induced by fragmentation and all those instabilities (including those of language) that prevent us even picturing coherently, let alone devising strategies to produce, some radically different future.⁴⁵

Since everything is fluid, fragmented, and decentered, and controlled by the demands of power dynamics, a fundamental question still lurks: What anchors human existence amid such ontological precarity? Where can individuals derive a sense of stability when the very foundations of social life are subjected to a form of psychological warfare that manipulates perception and agency? This essay contends that the automodern way of life could probably present to us a foundational structure of social relations. What we mean by this is, the digital world cuts across boundaries, irrespective of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, economic and political affiliations, or value judgements that we have. Our participation strips these visible social markers and allows us to create and participate in ideas that take precedence rather than socially constructed identities. Nevertheless, this paper acknowledges the fact that automation or digitalization of life is algorithmically structured and controlled, and profiled and even monetized by corporate industries. However, I would like to point out that despite these, our engagements in the digital world provide what Samuels calls a space where power structures that typically define identity become less relevant, enabling a reconfiguration of subjectivity.⁴⁶ Since the modern socio-political structures are a conduit for a decentered and alienated subject, the automodern world provides an emotional relief where we find expression of our deepest fears, struggles, and desires, without immediate societal judgment. It creates a sanctuary where unfiltered human expressions flow. Thus, I claim that, most especially in a post-truth environment, our participation on the web is a kind of rebirth where we reclaim our autonomy. Allow me to explore these deeper in the following discussions below.

Automodernity and the Post-Truth World

Samuels defines automodernity as the combination of our autonomy (human expression) and automation (pre-defined systems), where it provides the means to reclaim autonomy in a world dominated by fragmentation, chaos, and alienation. He extends this description by saying, "These technological objects share a common emphasis on combining together a high

⁴⁵ See Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 53–54.

⁴⁶ Samuels, *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernism*, 12.

level of mechanical automation with a heightened sense of personal autonomy."⁴⁷ Our personal laptops, smartphones, the internet, and social media platforms facilitate this process by offering spaces for emotional expression and connection. In fact, in the world of automation, the digital space is an active co-creator of our freedom, i.e., we find a sense of satisfaction by voicing our concerns, thoughts, feelings, and everyday concerns. Through our personal computers and gadgets, we bring the public realm into our private corners, and we are not merely consuming or interacting; instead, we are crafting spaces where we feel a profound sense of being an active co-creator of personal meaning. Our experiences of sharing emotions online are forms of liberation, i.e., an unmediated articulation of what and who we are that ignores the traditional ways of being recognized. As Wendy Chun explains:

[the digital world] allegedly freed users from the limitations of their bodies, particularly the limitations stemming from their race, class, and sex, and more ominously, from social responsibilities and conventions. The Internet also broke media monopolies by enabling the free flow of information, reinvigorating free speech and democracy. It supposedly proved that free markets—in a “friction-free” virtual environment—could solve social and political problems.⁴⁸

Further, Steinert and Dennis added that the digital world, particularly social media platforms, is an avenue for digital well-being. These systems are ways in which we could precipitate our positive emotions, and thus they contribute to the creation of our personal meaning in life.⁴⁹ Thus, Samuels reiterates that through digital technologies, temporal and spatial differences are veiled. The *otherness* of the other begins to disappear, and within this global access, we encounter different cultures and various social relationships regardless of their race, gender, or affiliations ... and this gives us control and a heightened sense of autonomy.⁵⁰ Consequently, immersing and sharing ourselves online blurs the distinction between what is private and public. Bringing the world into our private lives through our laptops is

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁸ Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (London: MIT Press, 2006), *Introduction*.

⁴⁹ See Steffen Steinert and Matthew James Dennis, “Emotions and Digital Well-Being: on Social Media’s Emotional Affordances,” in *Philosophy and Technology*, 35:36 (2022), 1–21. <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-022-00530-6>>.

⁵⁰ Samuels, *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernism*, 18–19.

making the public privatized, yet at the same time, allowing the private to be consumed by the public. Samuels clearly explains this when he says:

Perhaps the ultimate technology of personal culture is the laptop computer ... [it] gives the individual user the freedom to perform private activities in public ... Thus, the laptop may turn any public or commercial space into a private workplace or play space, and since people can take their work and their games with them wherever they go, the whole traditional opposition between workspace and private space breaks down.⁵¹

Again, he adds:

when one goes to a café, one sees people working with their laptops as if these customers are sitting at home: they have their food, their phone, their newspaper, and other personal items displayed in public. The reverse of the public being absorbed into the private is therefore the private being displayed in public ... Of course, both the privatization of the public and the publicizing of the private are fueled by the twin engines of autonomy and automation.⁵²

This self-expression through the digital sphere is no less than more brazen and daring than what we now experience in the post-truth world. In a society where emotions are the gateway towards legitimacy and truth,⁵³ and where the subject is decentered, truth and morals are relativized, democratic participation is jeopardized, and where everything spins into fragmentation, the issue that has become more relevant is that of recognition and validation. Understanding our needs and desires as fully autonomous individuals boils down to what Honneth would claim: that recognition is a moral and a social demand.⁵⁴ Our penchant for the web, internet, and other social media platforms speaks of our desire to be recognized. We want to be seen and heard. We want other people to respect and validate us as much as we do to

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Cf. Stephan Lewandowsky, "The 'post-truth' world, misinformation, and information literacy: A Perspective from Cognitive Science," in Stéphane Goldstein ed., *Informed Societies: Why information literacy matters for citizenship, participation, and democracy* (London: Facet Publishing, 2020), 73.

⁵⁴ See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. by Joel Anderson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 38–43.

them. Samuels points out that though the use of the internet is algorithmically controlled and driven by the corporate industry, we deliberately absorb ourselves into it because of the desire to be recognized. He says, “All of these new technologies point to a desire for people to be heard and seen by people they may not even know ... [it is] the desire for recognition.”⁵⁵ It is the fear of being left out or the fear of missing out on something that drives us to engage ourselves and express what we are or who we are online. Our aspirations, struggles, fears, hopes, and desires in life are all tied up as emotional baggage that needs to be validated or recognized by others.⁵⁶ Accordingly, the digital space represents a stage where we feel “free and safe” to express our opinions, fears, desires, and struggles. It is the arena where these repressed emotions and desires begin to untangle and are reconveyed once again, hoping that someone out there validates them.

Today, we constantly seek emotional relief amidst the social chaos we find ourselves in, and whatever our choices may be to make both ends meet, we always yearn for that emotional stability in our actions.⁵⁷ While it is true that algorithmic governance, data profiling, and corporate influence determine the scope of one’s self-expression, automodernity’s appeal is even more important in the context of the post-truth era. As McIntyre construes it, our generation has transitioned where objective facts are given less weight than appeals to emotional expressions. With the proliferation of fake news, we come to witness that facts no longer function as stable reference points in searching for truth. With the erosion of our trust in institutions like media, religion, science, and politics, we often rely on emotional expressions as a substitute for certainty. This implies that what is applicable in our social engagements is what really *feels authentic*. In fact, emotional narratives today override factual corrections because, as Higgins explains, the public hears what it wants to hear.⁵⁸ For McIntyre, what satisfies us deep inside seems to be a more relevant factor in avoiding psychic discomfort.⁵⁹ As everything becomes relativized, fragmented, and perspectival, and since no objective ontological constructs to rely on, what is now left for us is a plurality of

⁵⁵ Samuels, *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernism*, 20.

⁵⁶ See Ian Ramond B. Pacquing, “Why Radical Change is Elusive: Rethinking Social Transformation,” in *Kritike*, 19:1 (March 2025), 193–211, <<https://doi.org/10.25138/19.1.a8>>.

⁵⁷ See Erich Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,” in Erich Fromm, *Beyond Freud* (New York: American Mental Health Association, 2010).

⁵⁸ See Kathleen Higgins, “Post-Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed,” in *Nature*, 540:9 (December 2016), 1, <<https://doi.org/10.1038/540009a>>.

⁵⁹ See Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (London: MIT Press, 2018), 5. McIntyre added that it is not about the total rejection of facts that post-truth believers advocate. They, too, believe in the certainty of things. However, the problem lies in how these believers gather and process information since they “only want to accept those facts that justify their ideology ... [facts] that favor their preexisting beliefs.” See McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 10–11.

perspectives.⁶⁰ Truth is now a matter of our interpretation in validating our stories about the world. What is left for us then? The digital screen serves as our comfort, allowing us to feel “free and safe.” As intimated by Turkle, that:

These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time. This can happen when one is finding one’s way through a blizzard of text messages; it can happen when interacting with a robot. I feel witness for a third time to a turning point in our expectations of technology and ourselves. We bend to the inanimate with new solicitude. We fear the risks and disappointments of relationships with our fellow humans. We expect more from technology and less from each other.⁶¹

The digital sphere serves as our refuge in which our repressed feelings and resentments can be articulated and validated. Our fears, frustrations, fascinations, allurements, pains, and struggles—all these emotionally charged responses through which we navigate our environment—find a channel of expression in the digital screen. Hence, regardless of whether we find ourselves monetized, tracked, or algorithmically exploited; online platforms serve not merely as avenues of communication but as affective spaces. It enables the concretization of emotions that might otherwise remain hidden or unspoken in the traditional social context. What we hesitate to share in public for fear of backlash can now be done anonymously through the web. After all, with our attachments to the digital platform, where sharing and liking are considered the language games of our times, we do not consider anymore whether we are tracked or manipulated by the system. What is important is that we convey and release our emotional overloads. The unfiltered self-expressions, clearly conveyed through the screen, are ways for recompensating our inner worlds and thus reconnecting with our individuality. In other words, the screen is a form of digital catharsis where we can articulate frustrations and identity crises without fear of institutional backlash. The web, internet, and social media platforms, as automated systems, create an oasis where we reconnect with ourselves. Our ability to freely express our thoughts and emotions in a

⁶⁰ See Julian Baggini, *A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World* (UK: Quercus, 2017), 42.

⁶¹ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), xii.

fragmented and chaotic world makes these sites critical spaces for self-acceptance and empowerment.

Conclusion

This essay outlines the trajectory from modernity's Enlightenment ideals, through postmodernism's contextualization and cultural recognition of social relations, to the post-truth condition, where emotions dominate public life. Although it is agreeable that postmodern culture has deconstructed and fragmented our social engagements, that no universal narratives are now acceptable, it is quite lamentable too that it leaves subjectivity destabilized and loses its coherence. Everything becomes a product of social constructivism, yet, as we have argued, no stability of the self, no identity to speak of, since the boundary that delineates one's community from the other is lost. The postmodern culture leaves us with no fixed boundaries where we could connect our past, present, and future. Everything is in a state of flux, and this includes personal and social identities. Thus, its effects weaken our traditional institutions and pave the way towards the fluidity of life. It is in this context that automodernity emerges as a new cultural paradigm

Although we might be, as some would argue, algorithmically tracked, monetized, and exploited by the corporate dynamics, the digital platforms provide a space for emotional expressions, recognition, and articulations of our repressed desires. In a postmodern scenario where our trust in traditional institutions and authorities has been eroded and where everything becomes precarious, the digital space serves as a sanctuary for voicing emotionally charged narratives that probably cannot find their realization in traditional public spaces.

This is most relevant in a post-truth scenario where emotions take precedence over objective factual narratives. As argued earlier, with the erosion of our confidence in our socio-political institutions like religion and politics, we now rely on emotional expressions as a substitute for certainty, i.e., what *feels authentic* is what really matters. This is significantly important because with the plurality of perspectives, my narrative is just as valid as *yours*. My story is just as good as yours. In this context, the digital sphere becomes an avenue where fears, frustrations, pains, and joy are actualized and validated. It legitimizes our emotions, which might never be expressed in person or might otherwise remain hidden and unspoken in traditional public spaces. The digital sphere strengthens freedom by offering an avenue to create meaning. Algorithmically exploited or monetized, our engagements in the digital space do not make them less meaningful. What matters most is

that through these arrangements, we are *effecting* meaning.⁶² As Turkle quips, the digital space provides the sweetness we crave in life, for we could fall in and out of love with people and ideas.⁶³ In the digital sphere, we are allured, attracted, moved, and touched, and in these encounters with the other, we feel we are connected to something beyond ourselves. With likes and emojis, *somebody finally validates my story amidst the fragmented scenario I find myself in.*

Hence, automodern life enhances our sense of personal freedom. What we mean is the liberty to express our inner world. It is the ability to share the burdens within a world that becomes so indifferent. It is a digital catharsis, i.e., it is not just a reaction but an affirmation and assertion of existence – creating meaning in a chaotic world. So, the question now is, not whether digital spaces are truly free, but whether freedom is all about control or about participation and self-expression, regardless of who controls the platform.

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⁶² See Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship with the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 23.

⁶³ See Turkle, *Alone Together*, 152.

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