



Selected Papers of #AoIR2023:  
The 24th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Philadelphia, PA, USA / 18-21 Oct 2023

## THE POLITICS OF PLATFORM IMAGINARIES

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### Introduction

Over the past decade, a lot of research on digital platforms has been informed by the concept of *socio-technical imaginaries* (Jasanoff & Kim 2015, 2009; Mager & Katzenbach 2021). Building on earlier work on *imagined communities* (Anderson 1991) and *social imaginaries* (Taylor 2004), this concept has been defined as “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures” (Jasanoff 2015, 4). Examining how such visions have been articulated in relation to platforms, data, and online audiences, researchers have further developed the concept, as *algorithmic imaginaries* (Bucher 2017), *data imaginaries* (Beer, 2018), *platform imaginaries* (Van Es & Poell 2020), *infrastructural imaginaries* (Mukherjee 2019), and *imagined audiences* (Litt & Hargittai 2016; Marwick & Boyd 2011). These concepts have inspired a wealth of research on how different societal actors, ranging from major platform companies and social movements to small-scale cultural producers and end-users, not only imagine and perceive platforms, their particular affordances and audiences, but also how these imaginaries enable new social practices and relations.

Lacking, so far, however, is a more precise understanding of how these imaginaries are negotiated between multiple stakeholders. This paper aims to provide insight into these *politics of platform imaginaries*. It will do so through a case study on the competing images, values, and purposes attached to digital health tracking (DHT) platforms, examining how such visions are constructed and negotiated in complex intersectional realities. We will specifically focus on recent societal negotiations over female digital health tracking in the US. These negotiations involve large platform companies, such as Fitbit (Google) and Apple, marketing their products as personal healthcare devices, as

Suggested Citation (APA): Richter, V., Poell, T. (2023, October). The Politics Of Platform Imaginaries. Paper presented at AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Philadelphia, PA, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

well as millions of end-users, ascribing values such as 'neutrality' and 'control' to digital health tracking. And perhaps most impactful, over the past years, digital health tracking has been adopted by workplaces, government institutions, and health insurances (Gorm & Shklovski 2019). As such, it is urgent to consider how different stakeholders understand and organize their activities in relation to these technologies.

This leads us to the following research questions: Which imaginaries are articulated in connection to the leading DHT platforms? How are the differences and frictions between these imaginaries resolved or kept alive? Which societal actors are involved in this process of negotiation? And how do power differences between these actors shape this process?

## **Methods**

The inquiry focuses on the two leading DHT Platforms, Fitbit and Apple Health. These platforms are particularly interesting, as both Google (Fitbit) and Apple have gone beyond the DHT market: producing their own studies on wearables and health, providing research tools (Apple Inc., 2019; Fitbit Health Solutions, 2021), and partnering with governments (Fitbit Inc., 2019), corporations (MobiHealthNews, 2020), and universities (Gregg, 2020). To examine how these platforms are involved in current debates on female health tracking, we use a combination of *critical discourse analysis* (Wodak, 2015) of user and platform content and *walkthroughs* (Light et al., 2016) of the two platforms.

For each platform, we collected posts and reviews by end-users on motivation of use, health perception, and attached values from app stores and Facebook groups. The collected materials were manually coded to find common themes regarding (1) motivation for using the platform, (2) values attached to the platform, and (3) any information on their perception of health. In turn, the walkthrough method was employed to gain insight into the technical specificity of DHT platforms, as well as embedded cultural implications. This additional set of netnographic data helps to identify and deconstruct a technology's cultural discourses' (Light et al., 2016, p. 7). And it allows us to analyze the cultural significance, purpose, and values communicated by the platform companies through their interface and public communication.

## **Analysis**

Examining these materials, it is immediately striking how DHT platforms have pushed imaginaries of health tracking as revolving around *self-determination* and *autonomy*. They have done so through promotional materials and slogans such as "Take charge of your health with the latest from Fitbit" (2023) and "See more of yourself in Health" (Apple, 2023). Yet from the start, these imaginaries have also been challenged by end-users, especially regarding the inadequate support for female health tracking.

While the inclusion of female health tracking features in Fitbit and Apple Health was publicly demanded and welcomed at its advent in 2015, end-users also criticized the platforms for lack of accuracy and inclusivity. Especially women with health conditions and transwomen felt excluded, whereas female users more generally denounced the sexist iconography. Traditional media sources took notice and the discussion moved into the public eye with media reports backing end-users' concerns around values of equal representation and usability (Wakefield, 2018; Tiffany, 2018). To maintain the image of openness and personal autonomy, both Fitbit and Apple Health were pressured into revising features and options such as symptom tracking and dispensing with restrictions on cycle length (Shieber, 2019; MacDonald, 2018). These kinds of negotiations are still ongoing, but have, over the past years, been supplemented by politically laden debates.

The politicization of digital health tracking has especially been intensified by the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*, in June 2022, by the U.S. Supreme Court, ending the federal right to access an abortion. This ruling had a myriad of implications for the US healthcare system, but also for the health tracking market. Even prior to the ruling, women started deleting their health apps, taking off their wearables, or stopping period tracking, fearing the potential use for prosecution (Garamvolgyi, 2022) and signaling a loss of trust in the idea that health tracking equals autonomy and self-determination. Female health tracking in itself is now in question as a safe practice for female users. This has shifted the priorities of both camps of female end-users back to pressuring the platforms to take responsibility for providing secure, reliable, and supportive data for female bodily autonomy against governments and other third parties. Digital health tracking platforms, wanting to be perceived as tools for autonomy and self-determination of users' health and fitness, are now caught up in a US religious, and political debate, which, in turn, affects users across the globe as it shapes the features that become available through Fitbit and Apple Health.

Analyzing these societal negotiation processes and mapping the evolving nature of platform imaginaries, we gain insight into the politics of DHT imaginaries. The paper examines a key slice of the history of building and shaping imaginaries of female digital health tracking, which has a well-documented history of negotiation and contestation in community discourses, user communication, platforms' public communication, and media reports. This episode highlights how digital health tracking platforms have become centrally imbricated in crucial societal issues, such as female bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. It shows how quickly ideas of female self-determination and autonomy, associated with health-tracking apps, can be overthrown and reversed.

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