MIXED FEELINGS: THE PLATFORMISATION OF MOODS AND VIBES

Ludmila Lupinacci
University of Leeds

Introduction

This paper examines the growing entanglement between the pervasive techno-corporate infrastructures we generally refer to as 'digital platforms' and 'cultural feelings' (Highmore 2017) such as vibes and moods. My focus on those terms, rather than on more popular notions such as affect and emotion, is premised on the idea that they have been incorporated into digital vernaculars in ways that emphasise the increasing mediated aspect of both human feelings and ambient energies, as well as their transformation into commodities. Over the past few years, digital platforms from different sectors have started tailoring their content, affordances, rhetoric, and interfaces to both respond to and create certain moods and vibes. In so doing, they become 'atmospheric architectures' (Bohme 2018), also entering the industry of affective modulation. I focus on recent case studies and introduce a critical-phenomenological framework for the theorisation and empirical examination of this ongoing shift.

Vibe check: platforms as moodscaping devices

Moods can be broadly described as flickering background feelings that frame experience and action (Coleman 2022). Mood-regulation has long been considered a function of media (mostly, music), especially from a cultural studies standpoint (Highmore 2017, Coyne 2016). The topic of affective modulation can also be linked to canon concepts in cultural theory, such as 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977, Coleman 2017). In a similar vein, the term 'vibe' has been defined as a new vernacular method of self-awareness, perception, and 'sympathetic resonance' (James 2022), and as an interpretive technique that favours un-named feelings and bodily responses (Miles 2022). Although the terms are somewhat overlapping, I understand vibes as the externalisation and collectivisation of moods, even if not necessarily through intersubjectivity. 'Vibe' then becomes a mediated affective form of 'co-subjectivity'– a mode of collective orientation through shared energy (DeNora 2000) –, which is more about common sensations than about the exchange of thoughts.

Affective modulation is often associated with therapy culture and broader demands for self-reflexivity and emotional control (Illouz 2007). This suggests that moods and vibes are maintained through labour that is at once "ours" but also often delegated to particular objects and environments (Highmore 2017). I start from the premise that, in our contemporary mediascape, part of the lure seems to be to delegate this labour to digital platforms themselves. Based on this, I explore the working hypothesis that contemporary digital platforms are increasingly becoming vibescaping and moodscaping devices. I take moods and vibes to be deeply embedded in socio-technical and material practices (Highmore 2017). In so doing, I understand that ambiences are not naturally or organically occurring (Roquet 2016) and call for the examination of their production and orchestration.

In the mood: Toward a critical phenomenology of digital platforms

I posit that a critical-phenomenological framework is a productive epistemological, theoretical, and methodological resource for scrutinising this shift precisely at the intersection of embodied affect and the political economy of platformisation. By critical phenomenology I mean a phenomenological disposition that is not blind to the social, technical, and political environment in which it is situated (Couldry and Kallinikos 2018). For this preliminary analysis, I explore the contemporary case studies of TikTok, Spotify, Threads, and 'AI slop' to flesh out these new formations in which platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) meets emotional capitalism (Illouz 2007).

TikTok's self-claimed mission is to 'inspire creativity and bring joy'. Contrary to many of its competitors, the platform mostly has no pledge to friends or contacts, and indeed prioritises the resonance of the content with the user. Amongst the variety of genres uploaded every single day, a lot of TikTok's content is meant for sensorial appreciation. There's a visceral playfulness in those 'oddly satisfying' materials, in which sensory perception, enjoyment, and pleasure are favoured over interpretation, connection, or sociality. Also, the audiovisual-oriented character of the platform and its incentive for the incorporation of repetition contribute to the creation of certain 'vibes' (Burgess et al 2022). Whilst other platforms were already permeated by moodboards and #aesthetics emblematic of specific cultural scenes, on TikTok the idea that what matters is just sharing a vibe through algorithmic associations (Brown et al 2024) is intensified.

Audio streaming service Spotify, in turn, has been focusing its institutional communication on the 'emotional journeys' of music consumption, claiming to offer 'music for every mood' through personalised playlists (Ericksson et al 2019). Its promotional campaigns, interface and affordances aim to make algorithmic personalisation 'delightful', shifting away from mere recommendation to 'resonance'. Through initiatives such as the 'year in review' Spotify Wrapped and smaller designed experiences such as 'daylists', 'song psychic' and 'playlist in a bottle', the platform combines therapeutic rhetoric, New Age mystic jargon, and computational sorting to deliver the audio 'moods' that best represent each user's 'melodic vibe'.

Another interesting example is the case of Threads, Meta's competitor for Twitter/X. When trying to convey their vision for what Threads should look like, Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri defended an environment with no hard news, no politics, and no

negativity. A critical eye could say that this is targeted to stakeholders such as investors and advertisers, probably as a reaction to the damage that recent political scandals have done to Facebook's reputation, and to the common perception of X as a 'toxic binfire'. In this strategic 'platform hygiene' (Rauchberg 2023), certain topics are meant to be avoided or suppressed so that the app becomes as clean and friendly as possible. After all, as conveniently summarised by Mosseri, Threads is for 'good vibes' only.

Meanwhile, we are now in a rapidly evolving technological landscape, with a bourgeoning industry developing new solutions in detecting, processing, understanding, and deploying emotional and affective states for training systems of artificial intelligence of all sorts. The potential use of Generative AI to create 'atmospheric aesthetics' (Salazar, 2023), for instance, invites us to rethink what we already know about the mediation of cultural feelings once computational technologies become central not only to the representation and modulation of mood and the clustering of people according to 'vibes', but to the automated production of these atmospheric categories (even if they often result in 'AI slop').

Those cases demonstrate that moods and vibes appear as part of the personalisation opportunities afforded by platforms, as tools for the user to calibrate their own experience, as a way of reflecting and performing their inner state of being, and of attuning to the world. They exemplify how the modulation of cultural feelings is now being repackaged not as a backdrop to mediated experience but rather as a product in and of itself (Roquet 2021).

Just vibing: preliminary findings and intended contributions

I propose to examine this phenomenon as associated to the notion of "staging power" – a twofold process in which platforms simultaneously offer users the opportunities for 'staging' their lives and controlling their aesthetic environments according to certain moods and intending to create or respond to certain 'vibes', and provide a particular 'architecture of seduction' or 'persuasive power' that makes datafication and algorithmification not only acceptable but perhaps also desirable. A focus on staging sheds light on the orchestration of individual and collective experience, and implies that sensual and emotional responses can be to some extent shaped and anticipated, even if not entirely controlled (Bille et al 2015).

I argue that the analysed cases illustrate the alleged shift towards the datafication, personalisation, standardisation, categorisation, and algorithmitisation (Stark 2020) of states of being, configuring a new form of sensing and knowing with significant implications for our increasingly 'computationally-oriented modes of existence' (Pedwell 2024:190). In the conversion of moods and vibes into practices that can be managed through techno-commercial assemblages, they become central to everyday 'regimes of sensory calibration' (Starosielski 2021). Moving forward, I hope to explore both the new anxieties and vulnerabilities emergent in the marketisation of states of being and the human and non-human labour involved in the production, circulation, and maintenance of platformised 'cultural feelings' (Highmore 2017).

Ultimately, I propose that we are entering a new stage in programmed sociality (Bucher 2018), focused less on sharing, connecting, or engaging, and more on the platformisation of the merely felt. The examination of this phenomenon demands us to acknowledge the significance of those mixed feelings – which involve an interplay of the emotional and the computational – and of their entanglement with a corporate technoscape. This requires an 'ambivalent curiosity' (Markham 2020), which takes ordinary affects (Stewart 2007) as a legitimate object of analysis. From this lens, then, perhaps what the platformisation of moods and vibes means is that digital platforms, which historically have used the rhetoric of experiential enhancement to legitimate and justify their actions (Beer 2019, Lupinacci 2022) are increasingly becoming markets for the 'experience of feeling itself' (Highmore 2017).

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