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CHILL VIBES: WELLNESS CREEP INTO MUSIC STREAMING PLATFORMS

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Introduction

This paper addresses the increasing pervasiveness of ‘wellness cultures’ (Smith et al 2024) in music streaming platforms (MSP). By ‘wellness’ we mean a set of psychosocial tendencies emphasizing lifestyles, habits, and behaviors that center health and positivity as the obvious pathway towards happiness and success. This conception of well-being as an individual responsibility that can be managed through consumption (O’Neill 2020, 2021) now dominates different sectors, becoming particularly prominent in contemporary digital platforms and social media environments (Docherty 2021, Smith et al 2024). Following Bishop’s (2023) notion of ‘influencer creep’, we propose a conceptualization of ‘wellness creep’, whereby normative approaches to health and positivity increasingly influence wider areas of culture and society. We unpack this conceptualization through the examination of music distribution via streaming products, critically exploring how MSP reproduce and reinforce neoliberal, datafiable and advertising-friendly (Drott 2018, Eriksson et al 2018; Prey 2018) conceptions of physical and emotional well-being.

Contextualizing wellness creep

Our conception of wellness creep is informed by wider discourses around subjectivity and the body, in which pursuing a good life demands the instrumentalization of digital technologies for self-actualization, resonating with neoliberal demands (Lupton 2014, Stark 2020). Such discourses are often associated with the ‘datafied self’ (Lupton et al 2022), the rise of digital health ‘gurus’ (Ajana 2022), and the popularization of wearable devices and health apps (Ajana 2020) in our increasing datafication of everyday life (Burgess et al, 2022). We aim to critically explore the entanglements between promises

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of wellness (O'Neill 2020, 2021) and data-driven self-optimization. We approach wellness creep as a dynamic spectrum that ranges from more neutral understandings of well-being (e.g. improved sleep or focus) to extremist biopolitics that promote hyper-monitoring of the self or 'biohacking' (Grewe-Salfeld 2021).

We are also in dialogue with the scholarship on popular music and capitalism, particularly the history of programmed music in commercial environments (Sterne 1997). Our approach concurs with certain aspects of recent critiques of MSP as modern Muzak (Allen Anderson 2015), in ways that decontextualize music tracks from their creative context, turning them into 'emotional wallpaper' (Pelly 2017, Eriksson et al 2018). This is aligned with the rise of 'mood' as genre in music distribution and commercialization (Krogh 2022, 2020; Allen Anderson 2015), and of hyper-personalized (Spotify 2023) and 'genre-less' (Leight 2019) playlist products. Finally, we draw on discussions on the use of media technologies to orient affect and cognition through the staging of 'atmospheres' (Roquet 2016, Böhme 2018, Salazar 2023, Lunt 2024) – which, in the platform lexicon, is often encapsulated by the term 'vibe' (James 2022).

Research design

Deliberately responding to a current 'Spotify-centrism' (Hesmondhalgh et al 2024), we combine the platform walkthrough and critical interface analysis of Spotify, Apple Music and Amazon Music. We focus on the meanings embedded in these platforms' interfaces, as they make "normative claim[s] about [their] purposes and appropriate use that both demonstrates an understanding of users and builds a set of possibilities into the object" (Stanfill 2015:1060). In doing so, we also draw attention to the visual and textual semiotic content of MSP. Although we do not examine user interpretations of such built-in possibilities, we use walkthrough methods (Light et al. 2018; Duguay and Gold-Apel 2023) to understand how these interfaces are shown to users and how they prescribe certain forms of navigation and interaction. Here, we focus specifically on the everyday interaction with these interfaces to document "screens, features and flows of activity", establishing what the "intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings and implied ideal users and uses" are (Light et al 2018: 881). We foreground how MSP shape understandings of music and wellness, and how particular elements of these platforms (e.g. playlists) are instrumentalized to respond to neoliberal understandings of culture and wellbeing.

Preliminary findings and conclusions

Our analysis demonstrates how streaming platforms 'stage' wellness-focused atmospheres, prioritizing ways of acting and feeling that reproduce normative conceptions of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The three analyzed MSP rely abundantly on vague emotional descriptors, including the widespread use of 'wellness' itself but also other elusive terms such as 'mindfulness', 'soothing', 'healing', 'mellow', 'wistful', 'wholesome', as well as imperative moods such as 'relax', 'sleep', 'rest', 'unwind', and activities like 'spa day', 'duvet day', and 'relaxing bath'. Eventually, they more explicitly adopt the rhetoric of therapization typical of the wellness discourse

found in other industries – for instance, the playlist ‘sad girl vibes’, on Amazon Music, is accompanied by the tagline “Music is our therapy and the doctor is in”.

‘Chill vibes’ is mobilized as an umbrella term to refer to the staging of comforting, calm, ‘cozy atmospheres’ (Salazar, 2023) – where microclimatic states such as rainy, foggy, cloudy are pervasive, as are westernized readings of medicinal and spiritual traditions such as vinyasa yoga – by allegedly sophisticated algorithmic systems. ‘Chill vibes’ invokes particular affective and cognitive dispositions (Ngai 2012), simultaneously constructing and promising to fulfill fantasies of happiness (Drott 2018) – the playlists produce and respond to a demand for ‘downtime’ to make the daily grind more manageable, prefiguring a subject that is always rushing, aiming for productivity, and who finds in music a much-needed escape from the tolls of capitalism. Expanding on the arguments of Eriksson et al (2018), we posit that ‘chill vibes’ are supposed to unproblematically mitigate the effects of, while preparing the user to keep thriving in, a reality of stress and unrest. We argue that MSP appropriate and exploit common human responses to stress and unrest through the management of musical consumption and sonic environments (Hesmondhalgh & Campos Valverde, 2025), thus monetizing deep-seated cultural ‘tactics’ (De Certeau 1984) to cope with everyday life.

We shed light on how industry discourse, user interfaces, affordances and playlist products push pseudoscientific ideas of health and self-care as tools for the pursuit of an aspirational good life through cultural consumption. For example, Amazon Music’s partnership with Berlin-based company Endel, focused on “creating digital sound atmospheres with the intent to improve listeners’ well-being” with “sleep, relaxation, and ultimately productivity in mind”. Although Endel’s AI-powered soundscapes are available on all of the analyzed MSP, the collaboration with Amazon Music has further resulted in the playlist ‘Sleep Science’, one of the top recommendations for the ‘Wellness’ category (Figure 1), which is composed by 118 AI-generated tracks that are meant to guide the user through 9-hours of sleep. Endel’s proprietary algorithm is repeatedly described as “backed by extensive scientific research”. Yet, such ‘scientific’ backing is not demonstrated, constituting a kind of PR discourse that promotes junk pop science.

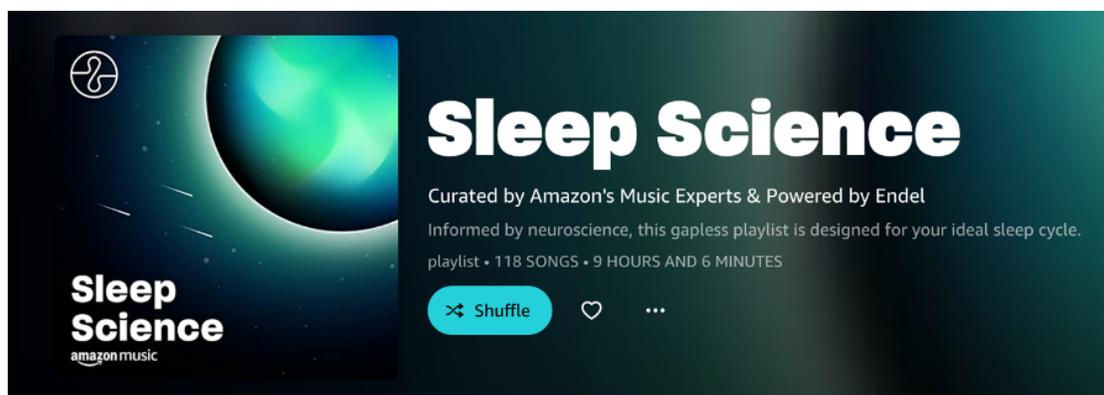


Figure 1

Ultimately, we propose that the phenomenon of wellness creep into MSP illustrates the articulation of music's social power (DeNora 2000), and platforms' algorithmic power (Bucher 2018) and symbolic power (Scharlach 2024), and speculate that it may further fuel the wellness to far-right pipeline (Gordon et al 2021) seen in other consumer products. We note that users of streaming platforms that consume these products are likely to be recommended other health fad audio content, kickstarting an algorithmic rabbit hole that has been demonstrated to draw users to extreme ideologies about health and politics. We show how the promise of wellness can be mobilized to promote regimes of subjectivity and governmentality, including ideas about self-interpretation and self-improvement, and how these are increasingly entwined with the commercial optimization of data and artificial intelligence.

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