"SCREW YOU, THIS IS A CHEERFUL PLACE": PLATFORMIZED VIOLENCE AMONG POSITIVE VIBE REDDIT COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

Digital platforms increasingly mediate how we experience violence (Recuero, 2024), shaping how we connect with others (Walther, 2024) and make sense of our surroundings (Morales, 2024). The critical role of such platformization of violence can easily be evidenced in Reddit, the focus of this paper, where approximately one out of every 100 comments has been estimated to be hateful and toxic in nature (Kumar et al., 2023). This platformized violence is not at the fringes of Reddit—indeed, it can be found around mundane conversations, from news and politics to travel and history (Tufa et al., 2024). Given the ease through which hateful speech is enacted within and expanded through Reddit's infrastructures, Massanari (2017) dubbed some environments of this platform as toxic techno-cultures.

But to define Reddit as exclusively a toxic space due to the presence of platformized violence would paint an incomplete picture. Certainly, literature has shown that platformized violence is not merely a toxic affair—it can also promote political discussion (McCosker, 2014), be a strategy for belonging (Morales et al., 2025a), foster creative insurgency (Tovares, 2018), and act as a form of affective resistance (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018). Noting these seemingly pro-social uses of platformized violence forces us to recognize the urgency of separating harmful practices from toxic communities—that is, while a toxic community will likely often engage in practices of platformized violence, platformized violence does not occur exclusively in nor does it necessarily lead to toxic communities.

In this paper, I focus on the uses of platformized violence in spaces where people seek the opposite of a toxic culture —that is, in communities that thrive to define themselves in terms of 'good vibes.' The term 'vibes' is used here to denote a collective affective orientation of the communities, where the objective is to have shared positive moods and sensations (James, 2024; Lupinacci, 2024). By focusing on the use of platformized violence as disentangled from toxic cultures in these positive-vibe communities, I do not aim to erase its real and consequential ethical impacts (Jane, 2015). Instead, I aim to

foreground the tension between the gratifications that motivate people to enact (or at least tolerate) platformized violence and its antisocial consequences.

Method
To respond to this research objective, I draw on insights from an ongoing digital ethnography (Postill & Pink, 2012). I approach digital ethnography as a methodological lens to foreground the ebbs and flows of the everyday through digital platforms (Markham, 2017). As sites of my research, I chose four Reddit communities among the top 100 most popular subreddits that set a specific mission of evoking 'positive vibes' in their members. These communities are r/MadeMeSmile, r/WholesomeMemes, r/UpliftingNews, and r/Aww. In this process, I draw from field notes and content analysis to understand the role of platformized violence in the everyday activities of the subreddit groups. Drawing on scholarship on platformization (e.g., van Dijck et al., 2019) and violence (e.g., Dwyer, 2017), the goal of centring platformized violence is to highlight the processes of mediation of ongoing practices, cultures, and structures of harm. In this way, I approach the analytical process of studying platformized violence by taking a comprehensive view of what can harm—from insults and threats to language that seeks to exclude and dehumanize.

Findings
Two issues were found to be at the centre of the use of platformized violence in these spaces: 1) the targets of platformized violence and 2) the visibility of the violence itself.

Targets. Platformized violence is commonly found in these four communities as a mechanism of enacting harm and sustaining structures of oppression. Examples of these practices include insults ("You are so stupid"), threats ("I would smack you if you said this to my face") and sexual objectification of women. However, there were also numerous examples where the goal of the platformized violence was not to insult other members or to add toxicity to the social wellness of the group. Instead, users commonly relied on platformized violence to enact resistance against those who are perceived to be in power against those who do not. For instance, in a post celebrating the forming of an Amazon union, people took the opportunity to discuss and oppose structural violence, insulting Amazon leadership for impeding other unions from forming, saying things such as "Get fucked Bezos." This example highlights the role of platformized violence in these communities as a strategy of 'punching-up,' whereby harmful language is used to create protective barriers that promote the wellness of those who are perceived to be at a social or economic disadvantage.

Visibility. And while platformized violence—whether for punching up or for punching down—in these communities can easily be found, its visibility varies greatly across topics and contexts. In some cases, the platformized violence was visible at first sight. For instance, when a user posted a story about people in Gaza coming together to support each other, threats and insults among users were among the most visible comments. In other instances, however, platformized violence was not readily visible. Indeed, given Reddit's infrastructure—where downvoted comments are displayed last—it is often necessary to scroll down to the last comments to find toxic messages and conversations. In this landscape, while the platformized violence existed and was

intended to harm, the strategies of community governance made it harder for users to access it easily.

In other cases, moreover, such limited visibility was weaponized. Here, users relied on the downvote function to silence specific voices and perspectives—showcasing how the downvote acted as a form of infrastructural platform violence (Morales et al., 2025b; Riedl et al., 2024). For example, when a user posted a photo celebrating their gender transition, people whose comments were dedicated to congratulating the poster for how they look were often downvoted—and thus, reduced in visibility. These instances showcase how, in the face of the vibe-check that constrains people's abilities to post directly harmful language to others, users meaning to harm others find ways to do so through other affordances of the platform.

Conclusion
The objective of this paper was to examine the role of platformized violence among positive-vibe communities, setting up to disentangle harmful practices from toxic communities. In doing so, I identified two mechanisms concerning the uses of platformized violence in these communities: targets and visibility. These two mechanisms provide insights into understanding how platformized violence can either promote or challenge cultures of toxicity, showcasing a tension between maintaining positive vibes and engaging in harmful practices. Indeed, while some instances of platformized violence sustain structures of oppression through harmful speech, others paradoxically function to uphold positive vibes by suppressing harmful language or deploying aggression in the defence of marginalized groups.

This study provides important clues into how platformized violence might interact in prosocial spaces—and, thus, on what role platformized violence might have in fostering healthy online communities. Accordingly, the findings of this study underscore the need to better understand the complex roles that platformized violence might have in simultaneously fostering positive internet communities (Digital Good Network, 2024) and upholding toxic technocultures in other spaces (Massanari, 2017). Following this research agenda could open spaces to reimagine and design (technical, cultural, social) interventions that encourage the sustainment of healthy communities while simultaneously addressing the spread of toxicity online.

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