

Digital Emotions and the Commodification of Affect: Toward a Critique of Vital Subsumption

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Abstract

This study critically reflects on the concept of "vital subsumption" by examining the complex interaction between emotions, digital technologies, and the contemporary social fabric. The analysis explores the process through which these emotional experiences acquire the dual value of commodities and tools, with significant economic and social implications. This exploration is informed by the recognition that emotions, historically rooted in face-to-face interactions, are now transmitted and transformed through digital platforms. The study underscores the manner in which digitalization contributes to the redefinition of relational dynamics, thereby fostering the emergence of a novel paradigm in which emotions are not only intrinsic and private, but also an integral part of market logic and communication strategies. The study draws on a critical review of extant literature, highlighting aspects related to behavioral changes induced by the adoption of digital technologies, emphasizing the need to reconsider traditional relational models. Moreover, the notion of "vital subsumption" is identified as pivotal to the interpretation of novel emotional articulations and the provision of insights for the reinterpretation of the ethical and social ramifications of this transformation. The results obtained provide a solid theoretical basis for further studies, contributing significantly to the debate on the frontiers of digitalization and the interaction between emotions and society.

Keywords: vital Subsumption, digital emotions, emotional economies

Introduction

In contemporary society, digital technologies have profoundly changed the ways in which people experience, express and share emotions. Digital platforms are complex devices that mediate and shape emotional relationships, generating new forms of interaction and blurring the boundaries between public and private, and between authenticity and performance. As Eva Illouz (2007) observes, in modern societies, emotions are increasingly codified through cultural and media logics. In late capitalist societies, this process is intensified through the integration of emotions into digital circuits, where they become marketable 'mediated objects' and 'relational goods'. Digital culture not only facilitates emotional communication but also introduces new regimes of visibility and affective performativity (Papacharissi, 2014). These impose normative practices that guide the construction of identity and the regulation of emotions. The digital self is not spontaneously expressive; it is constructed through a process of 'affective attunement' (Paasonen, 2016), in which emotional sharing is often guided by algorithmic logic and visibility metrics. According to Taina Bucher (2018), this creates an algorithmic infrastructure of affectivity in which emotions circulate, are curated, ordered, and monetized by the plat-

forms themselves. Consequently, when analyzing emotions, it is crucial to consider the logics of power, the market and subjectivation that underpin the digitalization of everyday life. In line with the analyses of Foucault (1982) and, more recently, Hardt and Negri (2000), subjectivity is not innate but is produced within biopolitical systems. In the digital age, these systems are characterized by an 'affective capture' of users' lives. As Zuboff (2019) explains in her theory of 'surveillance capitalism', emotions are increasingly being expropriated, quantified, and redirected. They are becoming not only resources to be monetized, but also tools for prediction and behavioral governance. This contribution to the current theoretical debate proposes the concept of 'vital subsumption' as a means of understanding how digital capitalism appropriates and reconfigures emotions. Borrowed and reworked from post-Marxist reflections, this concept describes the tendency of capitalism to incorporate not only the workforce, but also the entirety of existence. It incorporates elements of affective, relational, and cognitive life into production processes (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Berardi, 2009). Vital subsumption specifically refers to the complete integration of life into the productive machine according to a logic of continuous valorization, whereby affections are transformed into labor power and relationships into economically computable resources (Marazzi, 2010). In

platform capitalism, emotions are captured and translated into data, which is then reinserted into value extraction circuits via algorithmic mechanisms that amplify its reach and economic usability. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) points out, surveillance capitalism does not merely observe behavior; it also aims to predict and shape users' emotional responses, exploiting them for control and monetization purposes. Digital platforms therefore operate as devices for absorbing emotions, converting them into 'emotional capital' (Illouz, 2007) that can be commodified. By analyzing everyday digital practices — such as likes, voice messages, emotional memes, and the use of emojis and reactions — we aim to demonstrate how emotions serve dual functions as commodities and as tools for connection and loyalty. As Tiziana Terranova (2004) observes, in digital economies, affective production is a central component, not a by-product, of the value generated. Thus configured, emotions become objects of consumption and vectors of control and governance of subjectivity according to logics that intertwine affectivity, power and algorithms (Beller, 2018; Terranova, 2022). The study has two objectives. Firstly, it seeks to provide an in-depth theoretical analysis of the changes impacting relational and emotional models in contemporary society, focusing specifically on the intersection between emo-

tional experiences and digital media. Secondly, the analysis aims to critically examine digital infrastructures as active agents in shaping emotional experience and capable of influencing forms of subjectivation and social dynamics, rather than merely as neutral tools of communicative mediation. Adopting a mixed methodology that integrates a critical and selective review of theoretical literature with an empirical observation of technologically mediated communicative and affective practices, this study contributes to the interdisciplinary debate on the ethical, social, and political implications of the affective economy. The study thus seeks to provide an analytical framework that can illuminate the logic of the valorization and commodification of emotions within the digital ecosystem and stimulate critical reflection on emerging relational paradigms. Before delving into the details of this paper, it is helpful to introduce some theoretical concepts to assist the reader in navigating the subject matter more easily. Several studies focus on experiences generated online that produce emotional states fundamental to the recipient. For example, the analysis of emotional states conducted by Liu et al. in 2017 on 181 university students in California and Los Angeles, aged 18–20, confirms that publishing updates, tweets, and hashtags on Twitter (now X) is linked to one's emotional state at the time. According to the authors, tweets and social

media communications reflect the feelings and emotions experienced at the time of publication and can therefore provide real-time monitoring of users' stress levels and emotional well-being. Another interesting study was conducted in 2016 by Seabrook et al., investigating the link between anxiety, depression, and social network use. Significant associations emerged from the analysis. Therefore, digitalization is not only transforming the social fabric, but also the emotional fabric. This is defined by López and Marcuello-Servós as 'the set of relationships, structures and elements involved in the adoption of ICTs in any aspect of life' (López and Marcuello-Servós, p. 801, 2018). These technologies are transforming innovation itself, deconstructing what has until now been recognized as the norm — such as the caution some people used to exercise when accessing the internet — and restructuring not only the internet itself, but also scientific practices (Auriemma, 2023). Clearly, such a process of adaptation is neither useful nor sufficient (López & Marcuello-Servós, 2018). In this regard, this process lacks in-depth analyses of the media used, modes of interaction, and the intensity of emotions experienced. Consequently, we find ourselves in a situation where, on the one hand, empathy and emotions in general are being devalued, while, on the other hand, a fetishism of emotions is developing — a constant desire for excitement. Emotions thus

become a necessary tool for generating a system of supply and demand. The risk is that, within a process of subsumption, we become distracted, dependent consumers not only of our work, but also of the emotions we experience while working (Auriemma, 2023).

Emotions as commodities and tools

In today's digital economies, emotions have gradually acquired an ambivalent status, becoming both exchangeable commodities and operational tools for economic and symbolic enhancement within online platforms. This transformation can be understood in the context of a cultural and technological paradigm shift that has gradually shifted the focus from material production to affective experience as an economically relevant resource (Hardt, 1999). In this sense, emotions are no longer merely internal states of individuals; they have become cultural artefacts and performative devices that are generated, codified and circulated within a technical-media infrastructure which allows them to be extracted, quantified and monetized. One of the most obvious manifestations of this process can be seen in the architecture of social platforms, where seemingly trivial gestures, such as 'liking', 'hearting' or using an emoji, are continuously collected, analyzed and converted into behavioral data that can be used to profile users. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) observes, within 'surveillance capitalism',

digitized emotions constitute an immaterial raw material extracted from unsuspecting individuals to fuel predictive models and targeted advertising. From this perspective, emotions are subsumed under extractive logics that erase their subjective and relational dimensions, transforming them into computable capital. However, the economy of emotions is not limited to passive commodification. Emotions also operate as active tools for negotiating and constructing identity. As Zizi Papacharissi (2014) points out, users consciously employ affective repertoires to curate their personal narratives within 'affective publics', which are digital spaces where feelings become a privileged medium for social and political participation. Through these practices, individuals express emotional states and perform affiliations, ideological positions, and symbolic relationships. This contributes to the construction of what Arlie Hochschild (1983) defines as 'emotional management', which is redefined today within algorithmic logics. This instrumentalization of emotions is part of a broader change in contemporary culture, where, as Eva Illouz (2007) argues, emotional discourse has become the lingua franca of social relations, marketing, and work interactions. In this context, emotions are used not only to promote products and services, but also to create and consume content, which is subject to standardization, aestheticization and

optimization. Platforms act as catalysts for these dynamics, shaping emotional expression through engagement-oriented design, personalized feeds and quantitative metrics that incentivize the visibility of affection. Therefore, the affective dimension can no longer be conceived as a residue of intimacy or interiority, but rather as a strategic resource situated at the intersection of the economy, technology and culture. In this sense, digital emotions become true political and productive agents at the center of a post-Fordist regime in which value is constructed through continuous interaction between subjectivity and platform (Berardi, 2009; Masumi, 2002). This requires a radical rethink of the role of emotions in social life. Rather than being considered secondary data in human experience, emotions are now seen as crucial to understanding contemporary power relations and neoliberal dynamics. In the current socio-technological landscape, the affective economy is one of the most significant emerging forms of capitalist valorization. Here, individual emotional experiences are systematically translated into economic value via the technological mediation of digital platforms. This process forms part of a broader post-Fordist transformation in which immaterial labor, particularly affective labor, plays a central role in wealth production (Hardt, 1999). Rather than being a marginal or

decorative element of digital interactions, affectivity becomes the fulcrum of a new cognitive-relational economy in which users' emotional reactions are resources to be capitalized on. As both Hardt (1999) and Illouz (2007) observe, the affective economy is based on the contemporary capitalist system's ability to capture, shape, and reinvest emotions as forms of value. On digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter), users' emotional expressions (e.g. likes, hearts, emojis, reactions, comments and shares) are constantly tracked and collected through sophisticated algorithmic monitoring systems. Although these affective signals are minimal in terms of their materiality, they function as highly significant behavioral indicators as they allow tastes, inclinations, desires and moods to be mapped. Their aggregation and analysis fuel the extractive logic of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), in which the primary goal is to generate behavioral data that can be used to create consumer profiles, design targeted advertising campaigns and optimize digital environments. Thus, emotions enter the circuits of value production and are transformed into actual units of semiotic and economic exchange. As Zuboff (2019) points out, such affective data constitute the raw material of 'surveillance capitalism', a new accumulation regime in which anticipating and influ-

encing users' future behavior is more profitable than directly selling goods or services. Digital platforms therefore operate as semiotic machines, converting emotional experience into symbolic and monetary capital through gamification, visibility metrics, and reward systems that incentivize the continuous production of affectivity. This dynamic has significant effects from economic, cultural and psychosocial perspectives. As Eva Illouz (2007) points out, emotional discourse is taking on an increasingly central role in the construction of identity and social relations. This discourse is being codified and mediated according to the logic of mediated communication. The way emotions are expressed, performed and recognized in digital contexts does not allow for spontaneity; rather, they are filtered through the technical design of platforms and the imposed affective grammars. In this sense, emotions are consumer products and normative devices that regulate access to visibility and social legitimacy. Therefore, the affective economy does not merely record users' emotional state; it produces, organizes and redistributes it according to algorithmic criteria in a continuous cycle of extraction and valorization. This transformation necessitates critical reflection on the assumptions of contemporary subjectivity, which is increasingly shaped by the logic of emotional transparency, affective performativity, and the commodification of

the self. In the context of contemporary digital culture, the so-called 'emotionalization of communication' (Wittel, 2001) is a cross-cutting and structural element of the various media regimes that characterize the platform era. This concept describes the increasing importance of emotions in communication processes. Rather than being a marginal element of information transmission, emotions become the core of performative and relational processes through which social bonds are formed and maintained. In other words, emotions are not just expressed or shared; they represent the primary symbolic currency of interactions and can generate value in the form of social capital, media attention, and algorithmic recognition. Andreas Wittel (2001) has effectively described this dynamic in his analysis of the transformation of communication in networked societies. He observes how the liquid, discontinuous and performative nature of digital relationships imposes a new form of 'network sociality' based on the constant production and circulation of emotional content. In this scenario, communication is less oriented towards the rational exchange of information, and more towards producing temporary, situated — often weak, yet emotionally dense — bonds that act as catalysts for engagement and social visibility. The centrality of emotions in this media ecosystem must be considered considering a broader cultural shift. As Eva Illouz (2007) has

demonstrated, affectivity is no longer viewed as a private, spontaneous and natural phenomenon. Instead, it is a culturally and historically codified construct, shaped by discursive grammars, social expectations and technological practices. In other words, emotions are cultural devices that are learned, performed and consumed within specific socio-technological contexts, rather than universal biological entities. Illouz highlights how contemporary capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal forms, has embraced emotional discourse as a strategic resource, resulting in what she terms 'emotional capitalism': a system in which the language of emotion permeates market relations, work practices, and personal interactions. This process of emotional codification is particularly relevant in the context of digital platforms. Through the design of interfaces, algorithms and metrics, digital media impose ways of expressing and managing emotions. Emojis, reaction buttons, automatic reactions, short comments and temporary stories all structure affective communication according to pre-established forms, encouraging the simplification and standardization of emotional states. These devices are by no means neutral but constitute what Illouz (2007) defines as an 'emotional regime', i.e. a set of norms and practices that guide the production, expression, and recognition of emotions. In this context, emotions also become fundamental to the

construction of digital identity. In fact, affective performativity lies at the heart of what Papacharissi (2014) refers to as 'affective publics': digital communities formed around shared emotional narratives that replace argumentative logic with a more sensitive and sentimental approach. Users connect, participate and mobilize not only based on common ideologies or interests, but primarily through emotional bonds that foster feelings of belonging, empathy and indignation. This 'emotionalization of the public sphere' redefines the construction of collective discourses, transforming political, cultural or social debate into an arena dominated by emotions, sensations and instant reactions. In this sense, digital platforms operate as biopolitical devices that capture attention and shape users' subjective experience, inducing specific forms of 'emotional availability'. The design of interfaces encourages users to have the expected and desired emotional responses and reinforces mechanisms of social recognition by providing immediate feedback such as likes, views and comments. This association between emotional expression and visibility is reinforced. As Berardi (2009) points out, in a context dominated by hyperstimulation and cognitive saturation, emotion becomes the primary means of conveying meaning, gradually replacing reflection with reaction and depth with immediacy. The performative and regulated nature of emotional

expression in digital contexts also has profound psychosocial implications. As Ahmed (2004) observes, emotions are not only the result of social relations, but also a cause: they 'circulate' between bodies, creating proximity and distance simultaneously, and including and excluding at the same time. In digital environments, this circulation is mediated by technical infrastructures that amplify certain emotions, such as indignation, fear, and compassion, while silencing others. This generates veritable selective affective economies. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the algorithmic logic of virality, which rewards emotionally intense, polarizing and easily shareable content, thereby encouraging a culture of 'hyper-emotionalization' (Leys, 2011). The consequence is the progressive internalization of this logic by users, which influences how they construct their sense of self. Digital identity is shaped by constant interaction with a platform's emotional codes, producing subjectivities defined by how users feel and express these feelings publicly. From this perspective, the self becomes a 'brand persona' that must continually demonstrate emotional authenticity to gain visibility, approval, and social capital (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Emotions are therefore not only a means of communication, but also a criterion for legitimization and a measure of social participation. In this context, it is

crucial to question how emotions are channeled, managed and exploited by the technical architecture of platforms. Digitally mediated emotional communication is never neutral, but is always oriented towards economic, governance and control purposes. As Zuboff (2019) points out, digitized emotions are one of the most important assets of surveillance capitalism as they enable not only the prediction of future behavior, but also its conditioning through sophisticated affective engineering. In short, the so-called 'emotion-alization of communication' is now a multi-level process involving technological, cultural, economic and psychological dimensions simultaneously. Emotions are no longer merely an intimate aspect of human experience; they are at the heart of an epistemic and productive regime in which affect, information, and value converge. They are generated, performed and measured according to extractive and regulatory logics, which impose new modes of subjectivation and hierarchies of visibility. Understanding these mechanisms therefore requires a critical, interdisciplinary approach that can grasp the profound interconnection between emotion, technological mediation and power. From this perspective, emotions are not only objects of exchange, but also genuine tools for engaging with, optimizing and governing users.

Materials and Methods

This narrative review employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating critical theory, media studies, and affect theory to conceptualize the transformation of emotional life within the context of digital capitalism. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the research utilizes a structured interpretative analysis of existing theoretical frameworks. A particular focus is placed on the manner in which concepts such as the commodification of emotions, the phantomization of affect, and algorithmic governance are articulated in contemporary academic literature. The research was conducted using the digital library for social sciences JSTOR, according to the following inclusion criteria: a) articles published from 2019 to 2024; b) articles only in English language.

The analytical process is divided into three primary phases:

-A selection of theoretical sources was made for the purposes of this study. The contributions under scrutiny were selected based on their thematic pertinence and critical acclaim within the domains of digital media, the sociology of emotions, and political theory. The conceptual foundation of the investigation was established through the contributions of renowned authors such as Illouz, Ahmed, Zuboff, Hardt, and Foucault.

-The following elements are incorporated into the conceptual mapping and synthesis: The

selected texts were examined to trace how affective phenomena are theorized in relation to technological infrastructures and market dynamics. A comparative analysis of recurring themes was conducted, encompassing emotional performativity, the datafication of affect, and networked intersubjectivity.

-The heuristic application of the concept of vital subsumption is demonstrated as follows: The study draws from post-Marxist and Foucauldian traditions, proposing vital subsumption as an interpretative lens to understand how emotions are incorporated into digital value-generating systems. This concept underwent a process of refinement through iterative dialogue with existing literature, culminating in its utilization to underscore the epistemological lacunae inherent in prevailing approaches.

Results

Redefining relationships in the digital age: Emotional performativity, identity and social bonds

In today's world, where digital technology plays a significant role in our daily lives, the ways in which people establish, maintain and transform social connections are undergoing significant changes. The emergence of an affective economy and the increasing 'emotion-alization' of digital platforms mean that we

need to reconsider the nature of social relations. These are no longer based solely on face-to-face interaction or discursive communication; they are also deeply influenced by digital emotional codes. From this perspective, emotions not only reflect internal states or accompany relationships, but also perform, constitute and enable them within algorithmic communication ecosystems. To grasp the impact of digitized emotions on relationship dynamics, the paradigm of performativity is a useful reference point. This concept has been gaining prominence in the social sciences since the 1990s. The term 'performative' was originally developed by Austin (1962) in the context of the philosophy of language. It was subsequently adopted by Judith Butler (1990) to describe the social production of gender and identity through iterative linguistic and bodily acts. Within this theoretical framework, identity is not considered an inherent quality, but rather the result of repeated and socially codified practices. Applying this perspective to the fields of emotions and digital interactions reveals that emotions not only accompany social relations, but also constitute them through codified practices of expression, reception, and recognition. As Sara Ahmed (2004) has argued, 'emotions are not simply something you have or are, but something you do': they are performative acts that generate attach-

ments, exclusions, and affective configurations of the social world. In the digital environment, these emotional acts are mediated by technical infrastructures, such as emojis, reaction buttons and visibility algorithms, which determine their form, frequency and meaning. In the context of digital platforms, the expression of emotions takes on a coded, publicly visible form. Seemingly simple actions such as liking, sharing content, inserting an emoji or posting a story constitute performative acts through which individuals communicate emotions and actively construct identities, social positions and networks of relationships. These practices form part of what Papacharissi (2014) defines as the formation of 'affective publics': temporary communities that are built around shared emotional narratives rather than ideological or rational foundations. In these configurations, emotion is not only a vehicle for content, but also the foundation of social bonds. Therefore, relationships are not necessarily structured based on physical proximity or discursive coherence, but rather through forms of emotional resonance intensified by algorithmic infrastructure. Digital emotional expressiveness is thus a practice that renders individuals visible while simultaneously placing them within affective hierarchies, temporary communities, and circuits of meaning. Emotional visibility becomes a value in itself — a strategic resource that can be exploited in terms of

attention, influence, participation, and social recognition (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). These mechanisms constantly construct and negotiate identity through the public reiteration of coded affections, balancing authenticity with performativity. Digital platforms do not merely host users' emotional performativity; they also profoundly condition its modalities through technical and economic logics. As Gillespie (2014) points out, visibility algorithms operate as regulatory devices that select, order and hierarchies emotional content based on predictive and economic criteria. In this sense, emotional expression is encouraged when it is 'engaging', i.e. when it can stimulate rapid reactions, sharing and involvement. Digital emotional performativity is therefore embedded within an algorithmic regime that favors certain emotions, such as indignation, surprise, nostalgia and fear, while penalizing those that are considered less functional within the attention economy. This mechanism produces a 'natural selection' of visible emotions, contributing to the polarization of public discourse and the standardization of connection methods. The resulting relationships are often ephemeral and reactive, oriented towards visibility rather than depth. Another element that characterizes the redefinition of relationships in the digital environment is the increasing dramatization of intimacy. As Illouz (2007) observes, contemporary culture is permeated by a 'mediatization

of emotions' that transforms the affective sphere into a public performance. On social media, this trend is evident in the common practice of sharing personal moments, moods, and emotional connections via highly curated visual and textual narratives that adhere to the platforms' aesthetic and moral standards. Such practices of affective self-narration are not only a means of self-expression, but also a form of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), which is aimed at producing recognition, symbolic support and sometimes economic capital. The spectacularizing of intimacy redefines the concept of 'private' and generates new relational configurations, blurring the boundaries between authentic affection, performance, and communication strategy. From this perspective, digital emotions take on the function of real relational infrastructure, providing a structural, albeit immaterial, basis on which social bonds are built and maintained. They accompany interactions and constitute their precondition. Mutual recognition, trust, loyalty and solidarity are increasingly conveyed through minimal emotional signals (such as likes, reactions and story views) that take on significant meaning within the everyday microphysics of online social relationships. As Massumi (2002) has demonstrated, emotions precede and influence rational meaning; they are pre-cognitive 'intensities' that direct attention, desire and action. In the digital

sphere, these intensities are continuously recorded, analyzed and mobilized by platforms that operate as 'affective machines' capable of channeling emotion towards forms of participation and consumption. In this sense, emotions are not merely content; they are infrastructures through which society is constructed, articulated and governed. The redefinition of relationships considering emotional performativity also raises important ethical questions. Internalizing performative and algorithmic logics in the management of emotions carries significant risks, including the loss of emotional authenticity, the instability of relationships, dependence on external feedback and emotional manipulation by economic actors. As Berardi (2009) argues, the colonization of imagination and affectivity by the market produces forms of alienation that affect not only work, but also the entire psychic and relational life of the individual. In response to these critical issues, there is a need to develop a new relational ethic that recognizes the complexity of emotional performativity and promotes more conscious, plural and inclusive forms of interaction. This requires, firstly, the deconstruction of the emotional regimes imposed by platforms, and secondly, the promotion of relational practices that transcend the logic of visibility, calculation and efficiency. Redefining relationships in the digital environment is one of the most complex and fascinating challenges

of our time. Emotions digitized and performed on platforms do not merely reflect identity and social bonds; they also constitute, shape and regulate them. In this context, emotional performativity is an ambivalent practice: it enables new connections, solidarity and visibility, but also exposes individuals to control, standardization and relational insecurity. Understanding these mechanisms requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines social theory, media studies, ethics and digital anthropology. Only then will it be possible to analyze and imagine alternatives to the dominant modes of relationship building in the digital world.

Future and innovative paradigms: Calling for a relational ethic that matches the new emotional infrastructures

What has been described is therefore a sort of preamble to what we are experiencing today on the internet, particularly in the part of the internet that has become the new American dream. The quest for fame is becoming increasingly urgent. The world is based on views, likes and comments, and their absence denotes a social position that relegates a person to anonymity. In his analysis of transcendental subjectivism (i.e. the a priori of experience), Husserl (1952) aimed to emphasize that sensory experience should be set aside to place the Ego at the center. This is lacking today, with a preference for sensory

experience, which Husserl defines as a 'dream', but which has been transformed into a series of virtual images projected onto the individual. This represents a return to a pre-Cartesian conception, which sanctions the disappearance of the subjective self and leaves individuals with a passive view of the world. Socio-technological transformations triggered by digital platforms and ubiquitous communication technology have radically changed the forms of social relations and the ways in which emotions are expressed, shared, codified and valued. In this context, the future of human relations appears as a field of tension and experimentation, in which it is essential to develop new theoretical and practical approaches to confront the growing algorithmic infrastructure of the emotional sphere. Emotions are no longer confined to the intimate realm of subjective experience; they have become tangible objects of governance, exchange and capitalization (Illouz, 2007; Striphas, 2023). Considering these changes, it is crucial to develop a critical and proactive approach to the future that considers the complexity of the dynamics at play and directs individual and collective action towards fairer, more diverse and more sustainable forms of emotional coexistence. As Hardt (1999) and Illouz (2007) note, the intertwining of technology, emotion and capitalism takes shape in the configuration of an affective economy — a productive regime in

which emotions become resources to be mobilized and monetized. In this context, emotions are transformed into data flows, segments of attention, and behavioral patterns that can be used to profile users and predict their future behavior (Zuboff, 2019). Interaction devices such as likes, hearts, reactions and emojis are not merely expressive tools; they are mediatized interfaces through which emotion is computed, classified and redistributed according to the logic of algorithmic optimization. Digital platforms, as affective architectures (Paasonen, 2023), influence not only what we can feel, but also how and in what form we should express it. They structure emotions as units of calculation and symbolic capital (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), thereby promoting a performative and quantified view of the self and of relationships. In this scenario, the future of social interactions appears to be governed by an algorithmic rationality which not only measures the emotional world, but also actively produces it, thereby generating new socially and economically functional regimes of affectivity (Gillespie, 2014). As the affective economy evolves, artificial intelligence systems that can recognize, interpret and simulate human emotions are playing an increasingly important role. Technologies such as sentiment analysis, emotional facial recognition systems, and affective voice assistants are changing the way

humans interact with machines and are redefining the boundaries between humans and machines. Conversational agents (chatbots, AI companions, etc.) are now designed to establish empathetic relationships by modulating the emotional tone of communication and simulating 'credible' emotional responses (Crawford, 2021). These technologies raise crucial ethical, political, and anthropological questions: what does it mean to 'feel' emotions in a context where they can be simulated or artificially modulated? What are the implications of delegating care, listening or comfort to non-human entities that operate according to predictive protocols? Furthermore, what new forms of dependence or relational alienation may emerge from the intimacy established with synthetic affective agents (Danaher, 2019)? In this sense, critical reflection on the ontological and epistemic status of digital emotions, and on the possibility of discerning between lived, performed and computed emotion, is essential for the future of relationships. In an environment where the appearance of affectivity can replace its embodied experience and emotional competence is trained rather than felt, the distinction between authenticity and simulation is becoming increasingly blurred. Considering these developments, there is an urgent need to explore the potential for new theoretical paradigms that can capture the unique nature of relationships in the digital

age, moving beyond the limitations of individual psychology and traditional sociology of emotions. Some recent contributions to the fields of affect studies (Clough, 2007; Ahmed, 2004) and media theory (Parikka, 2012; Paasonen, 2023) offer valuable insights in this regard. These approaches emphasize the relational, transindividual and infrastructural nature of affect, rejecting an internalized and essentialist view of emotion in favor of a situated, processual, technologically mediated understanding. In this context, emotions are not the property of a subject, but rather flows, vectors and intensities that traverse bodies, devices and environments. In turn, the subject is configured as an unstable node within affective networks that traverse, constitute and modify it. Therefore, emotional subjectivation does not occur in isolation, but is shaped by digital emotional ecologies that select, amplify or inhibit certain emotional patterns (Massumi, 2002; Braidotti, 2013). This process has two outcomes: firstly, a greater awareness of the intersubjective and mediated nature of affections, and secondly, growing exposure to normative regimes that regulate emotional expressiveness according to metrics of visibility, engagement, and adaptation to standards of algorithmic recognizability. In this context, the relationship must be reconceptualized as a political and aesthetic space in which the sense of 'being with' others — whether human or non-human — is

removed from functional logic and returned to the sphere of encounter, otherness and co-creation. If the present is characterized by the colonization of emotions by extractive and computational logics, then the future must be conceived as a space for critical imagination where alternatives to dominant emotional infrastructures can be developed. This suggests, above all else, the acknowledgement of the political character of emotions: they are not merely private sentiments, but rather components of the social structure, instruments of inclusion and exclusion, mobilization and control (Ahmed, 2004). This necessitates the conceptualization of digital environments and interaction models that do not reduce emotions to commodities or signals of consumption but rather recognize them as dimensions of the human condition. This entails the promotion of platforms that facilitate non-mediatized forms of affective communication, recognize the complexity of emotional experience, protect vulnerability and encourage relational practices based on listening, care and reciprocity (Van Dijck, 2013). In this regard, it is possible to delineate several design principles that can serve as a framework for the development of alternative affective futures. Decentralized affectivity can be defined as the promotion of relational models that are not based on the centrality of the self, but rather on reciprocity, widespread rela-

tionality and the recognition of interdependence. The concept of situated emotionality can be defined as the valuing of cultural, historical and bodily specificities of emotions. This contrasts with the standardizing universalism of global platforms. The ethics of care emphasize the promotion of practices of active listening and empathetic response. These practices are not directed towards data accumulation or control, but rather towards the provision of mutual support and the co-construction of inclusive affective spaces. In the context of the digitalization of emotions and the growing centrality of platforms as spaces for socialization, production and affective consumption, there is a strong need for a new ethical horizon that can regulate and guide the relationship between technologies and individuals. The present paper calls for a relational ethics that is commensurate with the new emotional infrastructures. To achieve this, it is necessary to imagine and design spaces for interaction that not only promote emotional well-being, but do so in an equitable, fair and responsible manner. In addition, such spaces must protect the authenticity of human experience and promote harmonious integration between affective, social and technological dimensions. This ethical framework acknowledges the inherent vulnerability of emotion while simultaneously affirming its transformative capacity. It is a system that

fosters the establishment of stronger, fairer, and more conscious bonds.

Discussion

The transformations brought about by the digitalization of emotions and the emergence of new affective infrastructures profoundly question not only the nature of social relations, but also the very constitution of the subject in the contemporary era. Emotions, which have always been subject to social regulation (Hochschild, 1983), now appear to have been completely restructured by extractive and algorithmic logics, which reduce their complexity and ambivalence to standardizable metrics, computable signals, inputs for behavioral profiling and predictive governance of bodies and subjectivities (Zuboff, 2019; Gillespie, 2014). In this context, as Illouz (2007) has argued, the affective sphere can no longer be conceptualized as a private and autonomous dimension of experience. Instead, it should be understood as the result of socio-technical processes that are historically situated and deeply politicized. The centrality assumed by digital platforms in the production and circulation of emotions therefore necessitates a profound revision of the theoretical paradigms through which we analyze subjectivity, intimacy and sociality. Contemporary affective infrastructures, which include digital architectures, recommendation algorithms, user interfaces and machine

learning models, actively produce the conditions of possibility for what is emotionally sayable, visible and monetizable (Paasonen, 2023; Coleman, 2025). These technologies do not merely function as a means of mediation; rather, they act as normative environments that prefigure and direct the construction of emotions themselves. This radical reinterpretation of the relationship between emotion and technology gives rise to inevitable ethical and political questions. On the one hand, it engenders new opportunities for affective expression, empathic connection and collective processing of emotional states. Conversely, it has been argued that this shift engenders novel forms of emotional surveillance, relational alienation and symbolic manipulation, whereby affective spontaneity is translated into a communication strategy, vulnerability becomes a computable resource, and intimacy is transformed into economic value (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Berardi, 2009). Confronted with these challenges, there is an imperative to formulate a relational ethics that is commensurate with the emergent emotional infrastructures. This ethics is not confined to the establishment of limits on the technological manipulation of affectivity; rather, it is capable of conceptualizing intersubjective, plural and non-hierarchical relationships founded upon care, listening and mutual recognition (Butler, 2004; Ahmed, 2004). Such an ethic should guide

not only individual behavior but also technological design processes, pushing towards forms of affective design that restore dignity and complexity to the emotional experience. Finally, it should be emphasized that the construction of alternative affective futures cannot be conceived as a mere exercise in regulatory norm-setting, but as a collective process of critical imagination, in which theoretical reflection, political action and technological innovation are integrated into a shared vision of emotional justice. It is imperative to comprehend that this is the sole method through which digital environments can be engineered to genuinely accommodate, encourage and cherish the heterogeneity of emotional experiences, thereby circumventing the algorithmic reification of intimacy.

Limitations and Future perspectives

No original data were collected, and no systematic content analysis was conducted. However, the theoretical framework is supported and illustrated through the application of empirical insights derived from extant sociological and media studies. These studies include, but are not limited to, research on emotional labor, online behavior, and algorithmic dynamics. These references fulfill a purely contextual function and do not constitute primary data that was analyzed during the study. This contribution is a theoretical and critical reflection aimed at constructing

an interpretative framework for emotions in the context of digital capitalism. Future research could integrate qualitative methodologies to empirically verify the formulated conceptual hypotheses. A variety of methodologies have been employed to investigate the expression, coding, and negotiation of affective practices in digital communities. These methodologies include netnographic observation, semi-structured interviews with users and content creators, and analysis of emotional discourse on social media. These tools have proven to be particularly promising. The utilization of primary data would facilitate the validation and refinement of the concept of vital subsumption. Furthermore, it would inform the design of more inclusive and ethically aware digital environments. From this perspective, it is hoped that a convergence will be observed between theoretical innovation and situated observation, thereby strengthening the transformative potential of affect theory in the critical analysis of the platformization of emotions.

Author Contribution: V.A. and B.C conceived the article.; B.C cured the methodology; V.A., B.C. cured Validation and Writing; V.A. supervised the final draft.

Funding: The article did not receive funding for publication.

Data Availability Statement: There are no data to share.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Citation: Auriemma, V., Carboni, B. (2025). Digital Emotions and the Commodification of Affect: Toward a Critique of Vital Subsumption. *Synapsis Journal*, 1(2). 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.69127/synapsis.2025.01.06>

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