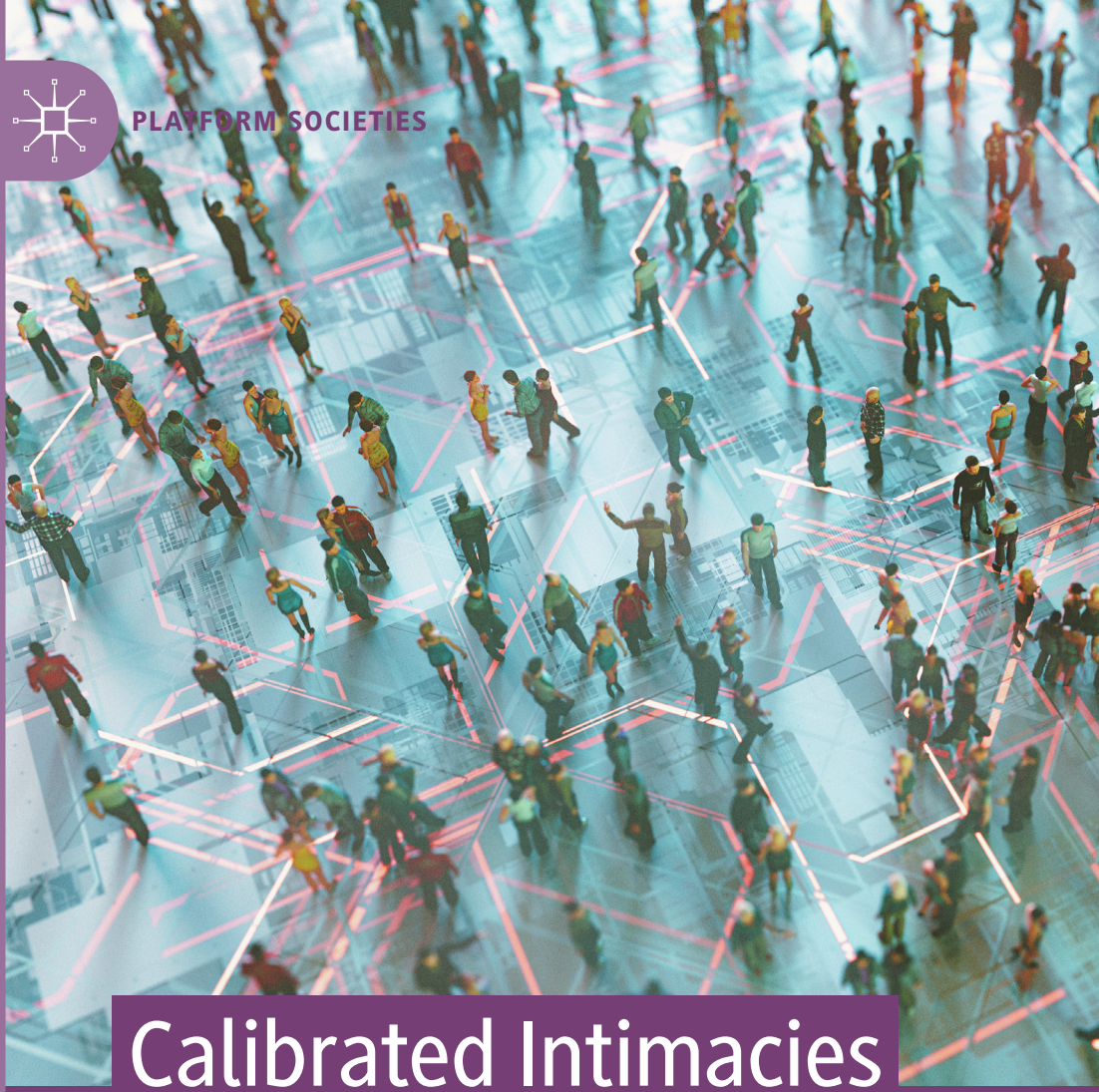


PLATFORM SOCIETIES

Calibrated Intimacies

Algorithms, Emotion, and the Soft Power of Apps

Tanja Bosch

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Contents

1 Calibrated Intimacies: An Introduction 1
Digital Intimacy as an Infrastructural Condition 4
Calibrated Intimacy from the South 5
Conceptual Architecture 7
Critical Autoethnographic Method 10
Chapter Overview 13

2 Running with Data: The Affective Infrastructure of Fitness Apps 17
Introduction 18
Tracking Histories: Loyalty, Memory, and the Device 19
Velocity Half: Being Paced by the Platform 21
Waking with Data: The Affective Force of the Morning Metric 24
Kudos, Captions, and the Intimacies of Being Seen 25
Opting Out: Silence, Shame, and the Incomplete Archive 30
Conclusion: Felt Data and the Intimate Life of Platforms 32

3 Calibrated Intimacy and the Ambient Life of Platforms 37
Introduction 38
Sonic Intimacy and Algorithmic Listening 40
Visual Intimacy and Curated Visibility 42
Locational Intimacy and Ambient Tracking 46

Calibrated Intimacy Across Platforms 48
Conclusion 50

4 Queerness, Risk, and the Limits of Calibrated Intimacy 53
Introduction 54
Platformed Precarity: Governing Queer Desire in the Architecture of Dating Apps 56
Queer Loops and the Labour of Legibility 61
Tremblement, Opacity, and the Affective Cost of Visibility 67
Conclusion 69

5 Surveillance, Intimacy, and the Soft Power of Apps 73
Introduction 74
Protective Surveillance as Care 75
Interface as Infrastructure: How Life360 Scripts Emotional Visibility 78
Optimising the Domestic 80
Tracking the Intimate Body 83
Negotiating Protective Surveillance 85
Conclusion 87

6 Conclusion 89

References 95

Index 101

1

Calibrated Intimacies: An Introduction

Abstract The introduction sets out the book's central claim: that mobile apps operate as affective infrastructures that organise the conditions under which emotional life becomes meaningful. Moving from an earlier concern with platforms as social spaces towards an account of apps as infrastructures of feeling, it develops digital intimacy as an infrastructural rather than interpersonal condition, one in which attachment, recognition, care, and withdrawal are made legible through interface cues, metrics, and feedback systems. The chapter introduces the four concepts that structure the book: affective legibility, calibrated intimacy, emotional governance, and the soft power of apps. Cape Town serves as the site from which the argument is written, and South Africa functions as an epistemic vantage point that exposes assumptions of continuous connectivity and evenly distributed safety embedded in scholarship produced largely in the North. The chapter also sets out the critical autoethnographic method, its empirical archive, and its ethical commitments, before outlining the chapters that follow.

Keywords Digital intimacy • Calibrated intimacy • Affective legibility • Emotional governance • Soft power of apps • Emotional infrastructure

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Apps are integrated into the ordinary rhythms of our everyday lives. They structure how we move, rest, connect, desire, track, or even withdraw. These interactions are often framed in terms of utility, communication, or convenience, but they are also deeply affective. Apps shape how we feel, how we come to understand those feelings, and how we respond to them over time. This book begins from this premise: that contemporary digital life is organised through infrastructures that calibrate our emotional experience in subtle yet persistent ways. Apps participate in emotional interpretation, and connection becomes a means through which power is exercised. They organise emotional life through infrastructures that feel like care, convenience, and connection while operating as soft forms of power.

This book builds on sustained scholarly engagement with how digital platforms shape daily life, intimacy, and social belonging. It continues my earlier work on social media and everyday life in South Africa, where I explored how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Tinder become embedded in practices of communication, self-presentation, and relationship-building (Bosch, 2020). That work was concerned with how users negotiate visibility, identity, and belonging within platformed environments, attending closely to lived experience and the uneven conditions under which digital life unfolds. Platforms were considered there primarily as social spaces, environments in which people act, interpret, and respond to each other.

Calibrated Intimacies shifts attention from platforms as sites of interaction to apps as infrastructures of feeling. The question is no longer only how people use apps, but how apps organise the terms under which emotional life becomes meaningful. This shift foregrounds the soft power of platforms. Drawing on Nye's (2004) formulation, but reworking it in relation to digital infrastructures, soft power here refers to the capacity to align feeling, expectation, and behaviour without overt coercion. Platforms do not need to instruct users explicitly, yet they shape the

conditions under which certain responses feel appropriate, desirable, or necessary. This alignment unfolds gradually, through repeated encounters with interface cues, feedback systems, and a subsequent modulation of attention and affect.

Through infrastructures that interpret experience, orient expectations, and sustain attachment through repeated adjustment, apps function as architectures of feeling that organise how intimacy is expressed, withheld, or misrecognised. The book extends Eva Illouz's (2007) account of emotional capitalism by showing how intimacy and affect are commodified through markets and infrastructurally patterned by apps that prescribe the rhythms and modalities of emotional life. Through notifications, metrics, prompts, and feedback loops, platforms organise how users feel about themselves and others, often under the guise of care, motivation, and personal relevance. A fitness app reassures you that your body is recovering. A playlist seems to anticipate your mood. A notification suggests that someone is thinking of you. A safety alert signals care, even as it marks vulnerability. These moments are small, often fleeting, but they produce the sense that platforms are responsive to the user, that they recognise and align with feeling. This sense of alignment is key to how platforms sustain engagement. It is also key to how power operates through them. As Illouz (2007) argues, contemporary emotional life is increasingly shaped by the logics of capitalism, where intimacy becomes subject to rationalisation, evaluation, and optimisation. Feelings are not expressed but interpreted, managed, and organised through broader systems of knowledge and value.

Across routine practices such as scrolling, matching, or tracking, emotional life becomes intertwined with platform logics that are both intimate and infrastructural. Feelings of motivation, reassurance, anxiety, desire, fatigue, and guilt are not incidental to these practices, but integral to how participation is sustained. To live with apps is to learn to feel with them. This involves adjusting expectations, interpreting feedback, and aligning one's behaviour with the temporal and affective rhythms that platforms quietly establish. Over time, these adjustments become habitual, shaping how users act and how they come to understand themselves as responsive or connected.

Digital Intimacy as an Infrastructural Condition

The concept of digital intimacy is at the centre of this project. The term Digital intimacies has been widely used to describe how affective and relational life is shaped through networked technologies (Hjorth & Lim, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015; McCosker & Wilken, 2020; Rambukkana, 2015). Digital intimacy describes relational and affective life organised through platforms, interfaces, and data. It includes interpersonal connection and the attachments users develop to systems that interpret their bodies, moods, movements, and availability. Drawing on a sociology of emotions (Ahmed, 2004; Hochschild, 1983), this book treats feelings as socially patterned, politically consequential forces that circulate through technologies, metrics, and interfaces. Feelings do not sit outside platforms; they are shaped through the very systems that render them visible and meaningful. Desire, reassurance, anxiety, motivation, guilt, and fatigue are integral to platform life, shaping how platforms sustain engagement and attune users to particular rhythms of attention and care. Emotional life is organised through apps rather than merely expressed by them; it is shaped through the signals continuously generated by apps. Digital intimacy thus refers to the affective relationships that emerge between users, platforms, and the data through which they are made knowable. These relations often feel mundane and habitual, but are loaded with attachment and expectation, built through repetition, the accumulation of traces, and the training of perception and self-evaluation. Digital intimacy is therefore infrastructural: a patterned condition through which emotion becomes organised within platform life.

Intimacy here refers to an infrastructural condition through which attachment, recognition, care, and withdrawal are organised. Apps participate in producing relationships by structuring the terms through which emotional life is sensed and interpreted. Digital intimacy names the relational field in which these processes unfold, while emotional governance describes how platforms organise that field. Soft power specifies the mechanism through which this organisation operates.

Through metrics, notifications, and feedback systems, platforms calibrate attention and affect in everyday use. The book is situated within

and extends scholarship in platform and app studies that has traced how digital systems organise social life through both large-scale infrastructures and the interfaces through which they are encountered. This work treats platforms as infrastructures that organise how feeling is sensed, interpreted, and acted upon. The analysis locates platform power in the calibration of affect and the alignment of attention, through which engagement is sustained by forms of soft power experienced as voluntary and personal. Intimacy is a central site of this process, as attachment, recognition, and care are continually shaped and negotiated within the routines of app-based life.

Calibrated Intimacy from the South

This book is written from Cape Town, and that location is integral to its argument. South Africa functions here as a theoretical vantage point from which platformed life in the majority world brings into view assumptions that scholarship produced largely in the North often leaves implicit. Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) argue that the Global South is a position from which the contemporary world can be read with particular clarity, since many of the dynamics defining the present emerge there early and in intensified form. Connell (2007) similarly insists on the explanatory force of social thought produced outside the metropole and its relevance to the majority of the world's population. Calibrated intimacy is developed as a general concept for understanding how apps organise closeness through ongoing adjustment. Writing from South Africa makes visible the infrastructural assumptions embedded in accounts that presume continuous connectivity, reliable infrastructure, and evenly distributed safety. Racialised inequality, gendered violence, queer vulnerability, digital divides, and uneven infrastructures of safety and care expose the conditions on which platformed intimacy depends.

Platform theory frequently presumes a continuously connected user. Much writing on datafication similarly assumes uninterrupted electricity and effectively unlimited connectivity, secured through subscription models and buffered from the constraints of prepaid purchase. Milan and Treré (2019) describe this as data universalism, the treatment of Northern

conditions as the default from which theory proceeds. South African digital life unsettles this default. For many users, internet access depends on prepaid mobile data purchased in small bundles, at prices a national market inquiry found excessive by international comparison and disproportionately burdensome for poorer users (Competition Commission South Africa, 2019), a finding anticipated by the #DataMustFall campaign of 2016. Connectivity is mobile-centric in Donner's (2015) sense: the phone is the primary, and often the only, point of access. Electricity is also intermittent. At the height of the load shedding crisis in 2023, scheduled power cuts occurred regularly. These conditions are theoretically significant because calibration presupposes continuity. A recommendation system can tune itself only to a user whose signal persists, while ambient intimacy relies on infrastructures that remain available. Where data is rationed and power interrupted, the alignment traced in this book becomes visible as a condition that must be actively maintained and paid for, with its costs distributed along familiar lines of race and class.

These conditions sharpen the book's conceptual field. Racialised inequality shapes whose feelings platforms are calibrated to register. For more than a century, identification systems made legibility a technique of racial rule in South Africa (Breckenridge, 2014), while the defaults of global platforms continue to presume users whose identities and material circumstances often differ from those of the local majority. Gendered violence alters the meaning of safety features. In a country whose relationship to sexual violence Gqola (2015) analyses through the 'female fear factory', location sharing and arrival confirmation functions form part of how women manage the daily anticipation of harm. They make visible the entanglement of care and control that runs throughout the book. Queer vulnerability carries its own historical tension. The 1996 Constitution was the first in the world to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, yet the distance between constitutional protection and everyday precarity, documented by Tucker (2009) in Cape Town, makes platformed visibility a calculation, a tension pursued in Chap. 4. Where public provision of safety and care is thin or unevenly distributed, people themselves become infrastructure in Simone's (2004) sense, assembling support through WhatsApp neighbourhood groups

and the sharing of devices and data. Platform care therefore enters a landscape already organised through improvisation and mutual support.

This situated approach locates the book within African and majority world scholarship on digital cultures. Arora's (2019, 2024) work on digital life beyond the West forms part of a broader intellectual lineage that includes Nyabola's (2018) account of how Kenyan political life absorbed and redirected platform logics, Kwet's (2019) analysis of digital colonialism through the South African case, and South African scholarship on platformed everyday life, including my earlier work (Bosch, 2017, 2020). This lineage gives calibrated intimacy broader conceptual reach by showing how users appropriate systems designed elsewhere under conditions of constraint, redirecting them towards local projects of safety and belonging.

South African conditions test calibrated intimacy by making visible the material and institutional supports on which platform adjustment depends. Experiences of interruption and rationing reveal that platform attunement everywhere relies on infrastructures that Northern scholarship can often leave unexamined. The entanglement of care and control becomes especially consequential where platforms enter gaps in public safety provision and translate existing practices of checking, accompaniment, and mutual care into data. Although the book is situated in South Africa, its argument extends beyond this location. As Arora (2019, 2024) shows, users across the majority world use digital technologies for pleasure, entertainment, romance, sociality, and play, pursuing many of the same ordinary desires as users elsewhere under different infrastructural conditions. The South African vantage point brings the infrastructural conditions of calibrated intimacy into sharper view, allowing the concepts developed in the next section to retain broader relevance while remaining grounded in the analytic pressures of place.

Conceptual Architecture

The argument draws on a set of concepts developed in this project to name how apps govern emotional life while maintaining the appearance of choice, care, and personal relevance. The following concepts specify

how apps organise emotional life through interpretation, adjustment, and attachment. They provide the analytic vocabulary through which the chapters that follow trace how intimacy is produced and unsettled across different platform environments.

Affective legibility refers to the ways platforms render emotional states recognisable, actionable, and valuable. This extends broader discussions of legibility and governance (Scott, 1998) and work in the sociology of emotion that treats feeling as socially organised and consequential (Ahmed, 2004; Illouz, 2007). Apps translate experience into interpretable signals that invite evaluation and response, and through this process, behaviour becomes data. A sleep score, a dating app match, a mood-based playlist, a streak notification, or a safety prompt frame what feeling is, what it should mean, and what a user ought to do next. Affective legibility is therefore a normative process which establishes standards of what counts as improvement, progress, availability, desirability, recovery, or care. It also marks thresholds of inadequacy. The power of affective legibility lies in its mundane 'everydayness', operating through small interpretive cues that become familiar. Over time, users learn to anticipate these cues and to adjust accordingly because the platform's categories come to feel like common sense, highlighting how platforms shape the terms through which feelings can be recognised. In South Africa this normative work inherits the longer history of administrative legibility set out above, and the question of who becomes readable, and on whose terms, returns throughout the chapters that follow.

Calibrated intimacy describes closeness produced through repeated adjustment between users and platform systems. It emerges through the interfaces, defaults, and feedback systems of platforms encountered daily. This relationality is built on alignment, in which users adjust their emotional expectations to fit the rhythms and logics of platform affordances. Scrolling, listening, and messaging become acts of emotional alignment with platforms' curated environments. Platforms guide users through interface cues that make certain responses feel appropriate. A fitness tracker converts steps into emotionally charged feedback in the form of celebrations for reaching goals or reminders when users fall short, and these signals motivate, reassure, or redirect behaviour in ways that seem personally relevant. These interactions accumulate, shaping how users

feel, respond, and understand themselves in ways that feel personal and chosen while being organised through platform design.

Calibrated intimacy names the new forms of relationality apps produce through platform logics. This emotional tuning becomes central to how users engage with platforms, and how they manage, display, or respond to their own emotional lives. Intimacy on platforms reflects an ongoing negotiation with the algorithmic systems that shape how users feel, what they value, and how they understand themselves, and it is through this negotiation that soft power operates. Users learn to feel with platforms, anticipating and aligning, often without registering this as a form of governance. Archambault's (2017) account of mobile intimacy in Mozambique shows that platforms enter existing practices through which people manage disclosure and uncertainty. These practices shape how platform calibration is inhabited without constituting the concept itself.

Emotional governance names the broader process through which platforms shape emotional life by organising the conditions of attachment, recognition, and self-evaluation. Drawing on Foucauldian understandings of power as diffuse, patterned, and operating beyond explicit command (Foucault, 1991), this refers to patterned regulation that operates through interface design, metrics, recommendation systems, and the temporal rhythms of notifications. Apps govern by shaping what feels rewarding, what feels disappointing, what feels urgent, and what feels like neglect. They govern by making certain kinds of attention easier than others, and by making certain kinds of withdrawal costly. Surveillance and data extraction are central dimensions of emotional governance, alongside the wider organisation of affective life. The concept includes the management of anticipation, reassurance, anxiety, and desire, as well as the distribution of recognition through likes, matches, views, and other signals of visibility. It also includes the shaping of self-relation, as users learn to interpret themselves through platform categories, adopting platform vocabularies to narrate their lives. Emotional governance is therefore relational and infrastructural. It is enacted through the user's ongoing orientation towards the platform and through the platform's ongoing orientation towards the user. The concept of emotional governance extends existing work on affect and platform power into the domain of everyday emotional life. These rhythms presume continuous

connectivity. Where data is prepaid and electricity intermittent, governance through platform cues depends on infrastructures that users must actively secure, making its reach unevenly distributed along the lines described earlier in this chapter.

The soft power of apps links affective legibility to emotional governance. I adapt the concept to describe how apps organise attachment and participation through forms of relevance and familiarity that users experience as personally meaningful. This mode of influence operates alongside other forms of platform power, including exclusion, surveillance, and explicit constraint. Apps shape the emotional conditions under which participation comes to feel desirable or necessary. The power here is experienced as voluntary and personal. It is felt as motivation, reassurance, and self-care, the pleasure of recognition, the relief of being understood, the comfort of routine, or the satisfaction of progress. Yet these feelings are not neutral. They are organised through algorithmic infrastructures designed to sustain engagement, to convert attention into value, or to render emotional life datafied. As a conceptual frame, soft power allows the book to analyse how users become attached to platforms even when they are aware of their extractive or disciplinary dimensions. It also allows the book to show how care and control become entangled in app culture, a relationship that forms one of its central concerns. Arora (2024) offers a useful counterpoint to critiques of control and surveillance, showing through feminist fieldwork how the same surveillant logics can be appropriated from below in the majority world, for example, women using location-sharing platforms for collective safety, or gig workers leveraging tracking data to build professional accountability. These practices show how the entanglement of care and control can support collective safety and accountability.

Critical Autoethnographic Method

To explore the dynamics of emotional governance on digital platforms, this book adopts autoethnography as both a method and an epistemological stance. Autoethnography blends autobiographical reflection with cultural analysis, positioning the researcher as both subject and analyst

(Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2013). This approach recognises embodied and affective knowledge as important mechanisms for understanding the power dynamics that structure digital intimacy (Ellis, 2004). It resists the tendency to treat personal experience as anecdotal, situating it as evidence for conceptual development. The work presented here is a form of critical autoethnography in which the self functions as a methodological tool for illuminating the infrastructures that shape it. This method is particularly effective for examining platformed life, where power operates through almost indiscernible cues, habitual practices, and emotional responses, dimensions of platform use that are difficult to capture through methods focused on observable behaviour or retrospective accounts alone. Reflecting on moments of motivation, shame, reassurance, fatigue, and anticipation brings the affective dimensions of datafication into analysis. While autoethnography provides the empirical grounding for this study, the book is primarily a theoretical intervention. The concepts developed across the chapters emerge through engagement with mundane encounters, interface design, and infrastructural conditions, rather than being applied in advance. Method here is part of the process through which emotional life becomes legible as a site of governance. These experiences provide situated evidence for conceptual development and do not stand for all users or all South African platform experiences.

The empirical material for this study consists of a reflective diary maintained throughout the research period, dated screenshots of interfaces and notifications, and activity data exported from the platforms examined in the chapters that follow: Garmin Connect and Strava for fitness tracking; Spotify, Instagram, and Google Maps in ambient daily use; TikTok and Tinder; and Life360 alongside domestic smart home systems. Observations were made in Cape Town during the course of everyday life, outside designated research sessions. Platform encounters were documented through contemporaneous notes made on my phone, periodic longer diary entries, and screenshots captured at the moment of encounter, producing a dated archive that could be revisited as conceptual patterns began to emerge. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Cape Town. The movement from personal experience to conceptual argument

was iterative. Recorded moments were reread alongside scholarship in platform studies and the sociology of emotions, grouped according to shared logics, and tested to determine whether those logics held across different apps. A vignette was included when it illuminated an infrastructural arrangement extending beyond the particularities of my own experience. The four concepts elaborated earlier in this chapter emerged through this abductive process and were named as repeated encounters that generated the need for a distinct conceptual vocabulary. Because everyday platform use is relational, the material inevitably includes other people, including family members visible through location sharing and individuals appearing in matches, feeds, and messages. All individuals are anonymised, with identifying details altered and composite rendering used where necessary to prevent recognition. Household members whose location data or interactions appear in the Life360 material provided consent for their inclusion. Scenes involving others are reconstructed at a level of generality that protects their privacy while preserving the analytic point. This is a familiar tension in autoethnographic writing, where the researcher's story also implicates the lives of others. Ethical decisions were therefore made case by case, with priority given to the interests and privacy of those concerned.

The analysis is written from a situated perspective in which gendered and embodied positionality shape how platformed visibility is experienced and negotiated. Visibility on platforms is structured through self-presentation, ongoing calibration, and the anticipation of judgement. The book treats this partial perspective as analytically productive because it brings the conditions of legibility and evaluation into view.

Autoethnography also enables attention to geopolitical unevenness. Writing from Cape Town keeps the analysis answerable to the histories of inequality and infrastructural unevenness that shape practices of platformed care and surveillance. Technologies carry the conditions of their development and deployment into the contexts in which they are used. Attending to these conditions keeps the analysis grounded in the unequal circumstances through which platform logics are lived. This methodological approach allows the book to analyse platforms as infrastructures of attachment, showing how care becomes entangled with surveillance,

motivation with discipline, and recognition with evaluation in routine engagements with apps.

Chapter Overview

The chapters that follow trace how digital intimacy is produced, organised, and contested across different app environments through four related concepts: affective legibility, calibrated intimacy, emotional governance, and the soft power of apps. The sequence moves from the body as the first site of platform interpretation, through ambient forms of relational adjustment, to friction, and protective surveillance. Each chapter develops a distinct part of the framework while showing how apps organise feeling through ordinary platform use.

Chapter 2 grounds affective legibility in the body through fitness tracking. Garmin Connect and Strava convert effort, fatigue, recovery, and performance into data that invite interpretation and response. Metrics, personal archives, and feedback become affective companions that can reassure, motivate, pressure, or unsettle. The chapter examines the negotiation between bodily sensation and algorithmic interpretation, showing how platform data enters the experience of the body and shapes norms of progress, readiness, and adequacy.

Chapter 3 develops calibrated intimacy through Spotify, Instagram, and Google Maps. It examines sonic, visual, and locational forms of intimacy produced through recommendation, repetition, and habitual adjustment. Playlists, feeds, and routes create an ambient sense of closeness and accompaniment, even in the absence of direct exchange. The chapter shows how this closeness settles into infrastructure as users adjust their attention and expectations in relation to platform systems that continually interpret and return their activity to them.

Chapter 4 tests calibrated intimacy against friction, risk, and uneven visibility. Tinder and TikTok show how geo-fencing, biometric verification, looping, and algorithmic amplification can make visibility precarious and affectively demanding. Queer users negotiate these conditions through temporal strategies, selective disclosure, opacity, and affective labour. Reading these dynamics through Glissant's *tremblement*, the

chapter examines what happens when platform circulation exceeds the terms under which recognition was sought. Affective legibility becomes a resource for connection and a source of exposure within conditions of emotional governance.

Chapter 5 develops emotional governance through protective surveillance. Life360, smart-home systems, and menstrual tracking show how location, presence, and bodily data are made legible within infrastructures of care, safety, and responsibility. Arrival alerts, geo-fences, and other interface cues turn visibility into a source of reassurance and relational accountability. The chapter examines how care and control become entangled as platforms organise expectations of attentiveness and availability. Negotiation, refusal, and user appropriation reveal the reach and limits of this governance.

Chapter 6 brings the four concepts together and returns to the book's central claim that platforms organise emotional life through infrastructures of feeling. It synthesises the embodied, ambient, precarious, and domestic forms of intimacy developed across the book. It also clarifies the contributions of the South African vantage point and critical autoethnography, while considering how infrastructural unevenness and ordinary practices of negotiation expose the limits of platform power.

The discussion begins with the body. Before intimacy becomes ambient or networked, it is felt in the rhythms of effort, fatigue, and recovery. Fitness tracking provides the book's first empirical site, making visible how data organise the experience and interpretation of emotional life.

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2

Running with Data: The Affective Infrastructure of Fitness Apps

Abstract This chapter examines how fitness tracking platforms function as affective infrastructures that render emotional life legible through data. It traces habitual encounters with metrics to show how bodily sensation is translated into interpretable signals that invite evaluation and response. Affective legibility becomes a condition through which emotional governance is enacted, as platforms shape how effort, fatigue, or progress are felt and understood. The chapter extends accounts of self-tracking centred on optimisation and surveillance by foregrounding the ambivalence of these engagements. It argues that running with data involves an ongoing negotiation between bodily experience and algorithmic interpretation, producing forms of intimacy between body, platform, and self. The chapter establishes the embodied foundation of the book's argument, showing how the soft power of apps operates through attachment and habit.

Keywords Digital intimacy • Self-tracking • Affective legibility • Fitness apps • Emotional governance • Soft power

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Introduction

Fitness tracking offers a particularly clear entry point into the mechanics of digital intimacy because it renders emotional life unusually legible through data. Apps such as Strava and Garmin Connect assign metrics to embodied effort and recovery, converting sensation into figures that ask to be read and answered. These metrics record bodily activity while also patterning how feeling is understood and acted upon. These relations are intimate in an infrastructural sense, built through routine, through the affective pull of numbers, prompts, and feedback, and through the accumulation of a personal archive that renders the platform a witness to everyday life. Over time, this archive participates in shaping experience, establishing norms of progress, recovery, and adequacy against which the self is measured. A sociology of emotions offers a framework for understanding these dynamics. Feelings such as reassurance, pride, guilt, and anticipation operate as patterned orientations to data that align subjects with platform logics. Through these affective cues, platforms enact forms of emotional governance, shaping how users relate to physical effort, recovery, and worth. This shaping operates through indirect forms of soft power, sustaining engagement through alignment without overt control or coercion.

This chapter approaches running data as a memory practice to show how these dynamics unfold over time. By attending to the embodied experience of tracking, it traces how digital intimacy is produced through the relation between bodily sensation and algorithmic interpretation. Fitness apps become companions that feel supportive and familiar, even as they organise emotional life through a grammar of optimisation and care. Drawing on Deborah Lupton's theorisation of the digitised body, I understand self-tracking technologies as co-producing affective orientations such as ambition, guilt, satisfaction, and anxiety. Platforms such as Strava participate in governing bodies through promises of optimisation, care, and self-knowledge. As Ajana (2020) argues, these practices externalise self-surveillance while maintaining the appearance of autonomy. Focusing on the embodied experience of tracking makes it possible to trace how such governance is lived, felt, and sometimes resisted.

South African running cultures provide the empirical ground for a broader account of how self-tracking engages bodies and landscapes shaped by social and political histories. The chapter develops a general argument about affective legibility through this setting. In related work, I show how GPS watches and platform metrics mediate racialised belonging within leisure spaces marked by colonial and apartheid histories of land, access, and recognition (Bosch, 2026). Here, I extend that analysis from spatial belonging to affective legibility, examining how metrics teach embodied subjects to interpret effort, fatigue, recovery, adequacy, and visibility. The South African material renders especially visible a wider dynamic in which running data acquires meaning through bodies and landscapes that are already differentially valued.

Tracking Histories: Loyalty, Memory, and the Device

I have tracked my movement for years. I began with an iPod nano and a Nike+ sensor in my shoe more than a decade ago. It was clunky and imprecise, but felt excitingly novel. Later, I acquired a second-hand Garmin watch that, now outdated, still holds the memory of my early runs. Today I use a Garmin Epix Gen 2 with a bright display and touchscreen, but it serves the same purpose as my first tracking tool. These devices collect data and preserve embodied memory.

My data resides within the Garmin infrastructure: distances, paces, elevations, half-remembered loops through suburbs and mountain trails, and memories of the people I was with and emotions I was feeling at the time. When I considered switching to another brand like Apple or Suunto, the hesitation was about loyalty and the continuity of my data traces, not functionality or design. I remain brand loyal to maintain an archive of self. It is a purely emotional decision, an attachment sustained by the infrastructure itself, which makes continuity feel necessary and desirable. My exercise data now functions as a form of self-writing, a practice through which the self is gradually constituted through ongoing records of everyday life (Foucault, 1988). As Abend and Fuchs (2016)

note, self-tracking is underpinned by a desire for legibility and coherence and by the promise that fragmented moments can be assembled into a meaningful timeline. This desire for coherence is structured through what I describe as affective legibility, where data translates lived experience into forms that can be interpreted, evaluated, and stabilised over time. Garmin offers me a temporal anchoring, a stable infrastructure through which I can narrate and revisit the athlete 'self' I am becoming. Self-tracking devices also generate what Lupton (2016) calls a data double, a digital extension of the self that collects bodily histories and imagined futures over time. This digital double becomes an archive I return to, shaping how I remember and evaluate myself.

When I joined Strava, a platform that combines activity tracking with social networking, the appeal was immediately relational: my brother and his sons were there, along with friends from the running club. It was a tool for recording runs, and also a space where those runs could be shared, viewed, and responded to. Strava made running socially visible, as forms of mundane social media use increasingly hinge on visibility and ambient awareness. Platforms like Strava constitute forms of digital intimacy: mediated relations through which users become visible, legible, and affectively connected (Lupton, 2014). Strava extended my private archive into a networked social field, where data and feedback loops began to shape motivation. A personal routine became entangled with systems of tracking, feedback, and evaluation. The platform begins to shape how effort is recognised and evaluated, working on these orientations through subtle forms of power. Fitness tracking apps manage how effort becomes legible and meaningful, and in doing so extend emotional governance well beyond visibility.

Strava also introduced a layer of performativity. My runs became performances, captioned, curated, and calibrated for a growing audience of friends, family, and strangers. This began to reshape how I experienced running itself. Metrics mattered through the ways they were received. Visibility, once incidental, became constitutive of the practice, shaping how the run itself was undertaken. I found myself thinking about how a run might appear to others before I had even finished it. The platform operates through indirect forms of soft power, guiding action through anticipation, recognition, and a growing awareness of being

seen. Running begins as an ordinary, embodied practice, but it is increasingly shaped through the apps that accompany it, as bodily sensation is rendered affectively legible and open to evaluation. These orientations emerge through platform calibration, as anticipation, recognition, and the quiet pull of being watched come to feel constitutive of the act itself. Fitness apps measure steps, distance, and calories, metrics central to regimes of self-optimisation. Beyond monitoring, they introduce a social and relational dimension that transforms fitness into a practice of visibility and recognition. Strava logs a run while situating it within a network. A friend, motivated by my frequent use of the app, signed up for Strava. "I went onto Strava because of you," she explained, demonstrating how participation is drawn through social proximity and shared practice. An individual routine becomes relational, shaped through platforms that make effort visible, comparable, and open to response. Kudos, comments, and rankings make progress socially and numerically evaluable, mediating motivation through recognition, comparison, and anticipation. These orientations align feeling with platform expectations in ways that enact emotional governance through the soft power of apps.

Velocity Half: Being Paced by the Platform

The night before a half marathon in Atlantis, a working-class suburb on the outskirts of Cape Town, I found myself suspended between excitement and growing self-doubt. My training had been steady but patchy. My legs were carrying a recent long trail effort and fatigue eroded my confidence. I've run countless road half marathons, but this time, I couldn't trust my intuition. So, instead of relying on feel alone, I turned to the pacing guidance built into my Garmin, using its predicted finish times and race strategy features to structure the run. Data, devices, and algorithms actively shape confidence, doubt, and bodily rhythm during moments of physical strain.

I relied on my watch to manage the live splits, checking it regularly. This feedback loop between watch, body, and metric, created a strange but steady rhythm. As I ran, I began to feel both paced and held. This iterative and responsive intimacy drew me into a relationship with the

device that felt attuned and directive. During the race, I watched the pace closely. Each kilometre became a point of comparison between what I felt and what the device reported. When the numbers aligned, I felt reassured. When they didn't, doubt crept in. The watch structured how I interpreted each moment of effort. My body ran in relation to the data, bringing the digitised body (Lupton, 2016) into focus as movement became synchronised with a predictive model. The pacing plan functioned as an emotional infrastructure, offering reassurance through generic prompts and inviting trust in Garmin's interpretation of my bodily state. Sensation became legible through the data, which shaped how effort was experienced and evaluated.

The intimacy of being paced by data did not unfold in a vacuum. The race took place in a neighbourhood shaped by apartheid-era spatial planning and still marked by infrastructural neglect. The route wound through industrial zones, past informal housing, and alongside open fields strewn with uncollected trash. Potholes peppered the road. Service delivery is inconsistent here: refuse collection, lighting, and safe pedestrian spaces are unevenly distributed. It was a striking contrast to my previous race, the famous Two Oceans Marathon, which wound through hilly, picturesque tree-lined roads with ocean views, heritage homes, and intact pavements. In that race, comfort and aesthetic pleasure were infrastructurally assumed. In Atlantis, I became hyper-aware of these contrasts. The data was differently situated, embedded in a terrain of material inequality. As a person of colour, I felt a quiet sense of obligation to be here, to support this community race, and to show up in a space where running infrastructure depends on local labour and care. Here, people function as infrastructure in Simone's (2004) sense. Running here was also about presence. My visibility, like my data, carried weight.

This tension speaks to what feminist and postcolonial scholars like Ricaurte (2019) and Noble (2018) have described as the coloniality of data and the racialised geographies of digital culture. Platforms like Garmin and Strava appear placeless, but their use is never neutral. The ability to train with smartwatches, upload in real time, and access predictive pacing tools depends on devices, stable internet, and reliable electricity. Access to these resources remains uneven across South Africa and many other locations. Load shedding has meant that I've sometimes

started races with my watch partially charged. Friends in my run club track runs on old phones or not at all. Yet running is hugely popular. South Africa has many landmark races like Two Oceans, the Soweto Marathon, and the roughly 90 km Comrades Marathon, known as the world's 'Ultimate Human Race'. South African running culture is vibrant and expansive, but the intimacy of tracking, pacing, and visibility is unevenly distributed, filtered through access and infrastructure.

Tracking retained its affective force within these inequalities. When I finished the race three minutes faster than Garmin predicted, I felt seen. My finishing time marked something beyond performance: an alignment of body, data, and expectation that shows how emotional governance operates through resonance rather than command, as the platform structures how confidence and achievement are felt. After the race, I uploaded the run to Strava and checked the data almost automatically. Pace, splits, heart rate, elevation data, finishing time. The numbers seemed to consolidate the run into a coherent account, shaping how I understood what I had just done. The upload retrospectively reorganised the experience. I smiled as I watched the kudos roll in, digital applause flickering across the screen. My performance acquired an afterlife through its inscription by the platform and its visibility to others. Visibility became a form of intimacy.

What this race makes legible is the role of platforms in organising belief, reassurance, and emotional pacing. This intimacy is asymmetrical. The algorithm does not know me and yet it participates in the affective labour of endurance, offering a structure of reassurance that feels personal and supportive. The pacing data and its afterlives across platforms operate as an emotional infrastructure, aligning bodily effort with platform logics through care-like cues rather than command. Metrics calibrate how effort is experienced, evaluated, and remembered. The platform's soft power is felt as accompaniment. Gradually, this relation becomes affectively charged, as I develop a steady reliance on the watch to guide my pace, alongside a sense of confidence and control.

Waking with Data: The Affective Force of the Morning Metric

This orientation carries into the following day. Before I reach for my glasses, I reach for the watch. Sleep score. Heart Rate Variability. Body Battery. Resting Heart Rate. Each metric offers a provisional account of my bodily state. A high score confirms confidence, a low one introduces doubt. In this way, the metrics participate in producing my sense of recovery, rendering the body affectively legible before the day has been experienced. Lupton (2016) describes this as anticipatory affect: future-oriented feeling shaped by algorithmic cues. Garmin's "Body Battery" frames energy as a resource that can be charged, depleted, and optimised. The metric can override my own sensations even when the two conflict. Within this discrepancy, an intimacy develops between body and interface, as the platform organises my orientation to the day before I am even out of bed.

One Saturday, I woke and glanced at my watch. My Body Battery was at 35, low enough to make me hesitate. Was I too tired to run? Should I rest? I had already promised to meet a friend at parkrun, however, and did not want to cancel. I decided to take it easy and simply complete the run. As it unfolded, my legs felt good, my mood lifted, and I finished with a faster time than expected. When I later uploaded the run to Strava, I saw that my fitness score had increased. The device had framed my body as depleted, while the run produced a different account of my capacity. What began as a compromise became an affirmation of momentum, companionship, and perhaps quiet defiance. Showing up despite the data generated a stronger sense of confidence than compliance with it might have done. Here, the limits of affective legibility become apparent. The metric oriented me towards fatigue and restraint, yet bodily sensation and social commitment enabled that orientation to be renegotiated. Emotional governance works through such cues without fully determining action.

Sometimes this affective production extends into retrospective accomplishment. After a hard run, I often check my Strava fitness score, a numerical index that rises or falls with training load, and feel a private

thrill when it climbs. The number is abstract, yet it gives improvement an emotionally legible form. An upward shift recasts exertion as progress and makes post-exercise pain feel purposeful, completing a feedback loop between body and platform, effort and reward. Through such measures, fitness apps mediate the emotional experience of movement and generate affective economies in which metrics are experienced as encouragement, reassurance, or care.

The day after the race, I told myself I would rest. I had logged a heavy training week, run a half marathon on top of a big trail run, and felt fatigued. I thought I might go to yoga, stretch, move slowly. But as the day unfolded, I found myself scrolling Strava, seeing others log new efforts, and feeling the familiar tug of guilt. My fitness score had gone up, but my training readiness score was still low. My watch told me to recover and my body agreed, yet I struggled to stay still. Instead of yoga, I ended up writing a draft of this chapter, channelling that restless guilt into productivity. Emotions circulate as orientations towards what feels like the 'right' thing to do, aligning bodies with normative trajectories of productivity, discipline, and self-management (Ahmed, 2004). These encounters reveal emotional governance operating at the intimate scale of everyday life. Fitness platforms govern through suggestion, nudging, and reassurance, recalibrating how rest, effort, and worth are felt. Their soft power works through anticipation, internalised expectations, and routine. Emotional calibration also unfolds socially. Through uploads, captions, and feedback, data becomes entangled with visibility, recognition, and the affective labour they require.

Kudos, Captions, and the Intimacies of Being Seen

One of my students once mentioned they had found me on Strava but had chosen not to follow me. The encounter made me aware of my legibility across domains, as the platform rendered professional and personal identities searchable within the same affective public. On Strava, pace data becomes a performance of persona. My slow runs are sometimes

captioned 'recovery jog', 'ran with a friend', 'tired today'. These captions function as affective shields: brief acts of justification that pre-empt judgement and manage how the body is read. They are also techniques of managing legibility, shaping how the self is interpreted within platformed regimes of visibility and evaluation. This work of managing how one appears, what is shown, explained, or withheld, is itself a form of affective labour, unevenly distributed across users and contexts (Abidin, 2016). While recovering from an injury, I went out for what I told myself would be a gentle jog. It didn't last long and within minutes, the run gave way to a walk. The pace slowed, then stopped. Later, when I uploaded the activity, I captioned it: "The vibes were off. Went to get a strawberry matcha instead." The caption reframed the run. What the metrics might have rendered as failure or inconsistency was reworked into something lighter, more intentional, even humorous. The caption functioned as a modest intervention into affective legibility, shaping how the activity would be interpreted, both by others and by myself. The gesture remained embedded in platform power. The post still contributes to the archive, circulates within the logics of visibility, and invites recognition and affirmation. The humour and casual tone are themselves forms of intimacy, aligning with platform cultures that privilege relatability and affective lightness. The gesture combined resistance with continued participation. The run did not go to plan, but instead of deleting it, I still made it legible and shareable.

However, sometimes the decision to withhold visibility is not driven by shame or poor performance, but by the desire to privately commemorate something meaningful. During a recent academic conference, I wore my watch while delivering a paper and tracked the session as an 'other' activity. I wanted to see my heart rate, to observe how my body responded to the affective intensity of presenting. Afterwards, I uploaded the activity to Strava and labelled it 'Conference Presentation', setting the visibility to private. No one else could see it; the activity created a personal archive of that embodied moment. The conference presentation became part of a datafied ritual of witnessing. Via this act, Strava was no longer a space for public sports performance but instead became a repository of work exertion. The episode showed how private recording can validate embodied experience. Sometimes the platform holds space for

experiences that are private, affective, and profoundly physical, even when they do not involve sports at all. The platform functions as a private archive of embodied effort, reminding us that platform intimacy can involve being witnessed by data in the absence of a human audience.

A colleague once told me that he deliberately hides many of his activities on Strava so that others do not see him running during work hours. The concern centred on legibility: the fear of appearing undisciplined, indulgent, or insufficiently committed to his job. Presumably in response to such anxieties, Strava introduced a feature allowing users to hide the start time of activities, making it possible to remain visible without being temporally exposed. This design shift is telling. Rather than reducing surveillance, the platform absorbed user discomfort and translated it into a new affordance, offering a way to manage visibility without opting out entirely. This is a recalibration of affective governance in which participation is sustained through adjustments that make visibility feel manageable rather than coercive.

But Strava also builds community. As I have previously argued (Bosch, 2020), Strava becomes a connective infrastructure, a platform for community-making through movement. It's not just the races or maps; it's the micro-rituals: the kudos, the emojis, the digital high fives. Sometimes, this sense of shared presence takes the form of unspoken reassurance. On a group run, a friend's Garmin had failed to charge fully, and she looked momentarily deflated. No data, no record! "Don't worry," I said, "I'll upload and tag you on Strava." It was a small promise, but felt significant. The act of tagging someone, preserving their effort in the archive, became a form of care. It reminded me that self-tracking can become a collective practice of memory and affirmation, a way of saying, "I saw you; we did this together." Her anxiety at not being recorded, and mine at feeling responsible for recording us both, revealed how platformed visibility has become woven into the ways we recognise and honour one another's efforts. Dobson et al. (2018) describe digital intimacies as relational, patterned, and politically meaningful, even when they are fleeting or limited in depth. This small gesture shows how platform intimacy extends beyond individual tracking into shared practices of recognition, care, and memory-keeping.

I once volunteered as a 'sweep' for a local trail race, running and deliberately remaining right at the back behind the slowest participant. It was slow, companionable, and strangely joyful: no pacing plans, no race-day nerves, just steady encouragement and a strong sense of shared purpose. I spent a few hours running alongside people I'd never met before, yet we were instantly bonded by the rhythm of our shared task. At the finish line, some of the other sweeps added me on Strava. At first, I felt fine, but almost immediately a ripple of social anxiety crept in. Would they scroll through my profile and find only modest distances? No races logged recently? Too many 'tired run' captions? I worried I had seemed 'cool' in person, fit, experienced, kind, but that my Strava might betray me as not fast enough, not dedicated or impressive enough. It was a fleeting insecurity, but it revealed how deeply self-tracking platforms shape the social legibility of bodies and selves. As Abidin (2016) and Dobson et al. (2018) show, platforms interpellate us into regimes of comparison and recognition. Even when the performance is relational and generous, as in sweeping, the platform continues to impose its own terms. Strava records movement in forms that make it searchable and silently comparable, stabilising hierarchies of value that persist beyond the original encounter. Emotional governance operates through this anticipation of comparison. But visibility on Strava is not experienced the same way by everyone. For those navigating gendered, racialised, and queer positionalities, the affective work of uploading, explaining, or withholding is shaped by deeper structures of platformed legibility and recognition. Visibility on platforms is not neutral. It is structured by norms of readability and recognition that privilege certain kinds of bodies, affective expressions, and narratives of discipline or progress.

The cultural politics of visibility online are deeply entangled with neoliberal and racialised regimes of value, where empowerment and authenticity are marketable only within narrow, often white, cisgender, and able-bodied frames (Banet-Weiser, 2018). To appear on Strava as a person of colour or a queer runner means managing a feed that invites expression and potentially disciplines it. This is a question of survival within what Sara Ahmed (2004) calls affective economies, where feelings circulate and 'stick' differently depending on whose body is expressing them. Captions, silence, pace charts, and uploads become technologies of self-calibration,

affective shields against misrecognition or overexposure. For some, slowness can be a celebration. For others, it must be explained. What could be casual documentation for some becomes an act of careful self-curation for others.

I once dated someone who wasn't publicly out. We often ran together, sharing pace and conversation, but she never tagged me on Strava. Her runs would appear solo, even when we had just shared the route, stride for stride. I never asked her outright, but I suspected she worried that tagging me might raise questions from friends or family who might scroll her feed and realise we were more than training partners. The omission reflected caution, revealing tracking platforms as structured publics in which self-expression is governed and intimacy becomes evidence. Digital intimacies are always entangled with risk, recognition, and power. For queer users especially, platform legibility can be dangerous, revealing how affective legibility is not neutral but unevenly distributed, structured by power, risk, and differential exposure. Her decision not to link us through data may have functioned as a protective response to the risks of disclosure. But it reminded me that intimacy on platforms is as much about control as about visibility who gets to be seen, and on what terms. In that moment, I realised how something as small as a missing tag could carry the weight of safety or selfhood. On platforms like Strava, intimacy is a relation to power as much as a connection between users. This moment gestures towards a wider set of questions about queerness, visibility, and risk on platforms that I return to later in the book. While this chapter focuses on fitness tracking as an affective infrastructure, Chap. 4 turns more directly to queer digital intimacy, tracing how platformed visibility becomes entangled with safety, exposure, and algorithmic risk.

Scholars such as Noble (2018), Abidin (2016), and Dobson et al. (2018) remind us that platforms are structured terrains shaped by histories of exclusion and conditions of access. Intimacy on these platforms is simultaneously relational and political. It is shaped by who can afford to be vulnerable, who is rewarded for being seen, and who must constantly negotiate the emotional cost of appearing. The quantified self on Strava is an affectively and politically charged self, shaped by race, gender, queerness, and infrastructural possibility. In my analysis of South African trail running, I describe this as a problem of datafied legitimacy: wearable

metrics may confer recognition on a body otherwise read as out of place, but that recognition remains racialised and spatially contingent (Bosch, 2026). Affective legibility concerns whose bodily effort becomes readable, credible, disciplined, and recognised as legitimate. The labour of managing online visibility operates through the emotional force of anticipated comparison and recognition, exercising soft power by shaping how participation and being seen are felt.

Opting Out: Silence, Shame, and the Incomplete Archive

Opting out, in the context of fitness platforms, rarely takes the form of full withdrawal. More often, it appears as hesitation, silence, selective visibility, or temporary disengagement. The moments traced in this section are ordinary negotiations shaped by fatigue, shame, self-protection, and the desire for coherence. They reveal how difficult it is to step away from platforms that function as both archive and witness. I recall a time when I stopped uploading. I kept running, but quietly. Strava fell silent. I didn't want my slowness visible. I felt tired, ashamed. I needed to run 'for myself', without public visibility or judgement. This was a quiet disengagement. After all, platforms are affective infrastructures where absence is not neutral but felt (Bucher, 2018). Absence can be another form of affective legibility, where non-participation is itself interpreted within platform logics.

But disconnection is rarely simple. As Syvertsen (2020) reminds us, opting out is messy, ambivalent. I kept scrolling. I watched others race, rest, recover, lurking at the edges, unseen but still watching. Eventually, I returned. I uploaded GPX files from past runs for the archive. I didn't need applause so much as I craved coherence. The archive exerts an affective pull of its own, encouraging continuity and return even after withdrawal; emotional governance operates here through the promise of completion. Strava, as Neff and Nafus (2016) describe, functions as a life log, a digital diary. The blank months felt like erasure, so I filled them. A milestone run. My 10th Two Oceans. A Cederberg backpacking trip. A

hike with friends. Quietly, I reclaimed my place in the data trail. Chun (2016) describes the default of presence in digital culture: to matter, we must appear. Visibility becomes a mode of survival. And so I reappeared in the data trail.

This behaviour echoes what scholars of self-tracking refer to as archival affect (Lehtiniemi & Ruckenstein, 2019), the emotional attachment to recording one's life through data. The log becomes part of identity. Opting out disrupts this narrative continuity. Even when I didn't want to be seen, I still wanted to be remembered. And so I uploaded those significant events for the sake of the record. Here, the archive itself becomes an instrument of soft power, sustaining attachment through the promise of continuity, memory, and self-recognition. These stored traces function as infrastructures of feeling, organising how the body is remembered, anticipated, and valued across time. Seen in this light, opting out or deleting data becomes a gesture of refusal and a disruption of the emotional circuits that sustain this form of platform influence.

Strava became a site of surveillance and solace, mapping both my progress and my pauses. Its archive records ambivalence alongside achievement, including periods of withdrawal, interruption, and recovery. Returning to the platform produced an intimacy grounded in persistence. The quantified self appears here as punctuated and uneven, moving in and out of legibility while seeking a data trail capable of narrating, however fragmentarily, who we have been and what we have done. Silence, return, and selective visibility form an ongoing negotiation with the platform. Withdrawal does not dissolve its power. Instead, it reveals how closely intimacy, memory, and emotional coherence have become tied to data infrastructures. The desire to step away coexists with the desire to be recorded, remembered, and rendered legible to others, to the platform, and to oneself. This tension exemplifies platform governance through feeling.

A colleague recently told me that he had disabled the alerts on his smartwatch. "I can't have a device of mine give pressure," he said. He nevertheless maintained a two-year streak of completing 5 km or 7,000 steps every day. His discipline persisted without the prompts, suggestions, and daily notifications through which the device performs concern while exercising soft control. Disabling the alerts became an act of

boundary-setting that allowed him to preserve the exercise habit on his own terms. In doing so, he recalibrated his affective autonomy within the infrastructural expectations of fitness technology.

Opting out can also establish a boundary. After ending a relationship, I removed someone from my Strava followers because I no longer wanted them to see where I was running, trace my routes, or know when I was alone. The act felt petty, yet necessary. The platform had shifted from a site of connection to one of potential surveillance. Although the data had not changed, the conditions of its visibility had. Digital intimacies remain contingent, shaped by decisions about what to disclose, withhold, and to whom. Removing the follower became an act of affective self-governance through which I reasserted control over the terms of my visibility. In that moment, the emotional labour of self-tracking acquired a sharper political force.

Conclusion: Felt Data and the Intimate Life of Platforms

Running with data is a practice of measurement and meaning-making. My watch tracks and remembers me, while Strava records my runs and helps narrate them, preserving particular versions of effort, fatigue, progress, and interruption. Fitness platforms operate as intimate infrastructures: sociotechnical arrangements that organise feeling, visibility, and relationality through the everyday accumulation of data (Evans & Ringrose, 2025). Through scores, prompts, predictions, archives, and social feedback, they shape the terms through which embodied experience becomes affectively legible and available for evaluation.

This chapter has traced this process across several registers of self-tracking. Garmin's pacing functions mediate bodily effort as it unfolds, translating sensation into an ongoing comparison between embodied experience and algorithmic prediction. Morning recovery metrics organise anticipation before movement begins, shaping whether the body is encountered as capable, depleted, or requiring restraint. Strava extends these processes into a social field, where effort becomes visible through

pace charts, captions, kudos, tags, and omissions. Across these encounters, platforms cultivate forms of self-surveillance aligned with ideals of optimisation and productivity, while also facilitating care, reassurance, companionship, memory, and recognition. The quantified self emerges through this entanglement of monitoring and feeling.

Critical autoethnography makes it possible to attend to the ambivalence of this relationship. The pleasure of a rising fitness score, the habitual checking of a feed, the reassurance of being paced through difficulty, and the shame attached to a blank period in the archive reveal how platform logics become entangled with emotional rhythms. Yet bodily experience can exceed, contradict, or unsettle the account produced by the metric. A run may feel unexpectedly strong when the watch predicts depletion. A caption can reframe what the data appears to present as failure. An activity can be kept private, recorded not for social recognition but as a personal witness to embodied effort. A user may disable notifications while retaining the exercise routine they once helped establish. These practices negotiate how platform power is inhabited.

As Ahmed (2004) argues, feelings orient subjects towards particular objects, practices, and norms. On fitness platforms, this orientation develops through repeated associations between movement and achievement, rest and hesitation, visibility and recognition, continuity and coherence. These associations remain open to negotiation. Moments of silence, return, selective sharing, and boundary-setting show users reshaping the terms of affective legibility. Removing a former partner from one's followers, withholding a tag that could expose a relationship, or disabling a device's alerts reconfigures how the user becomes visible, responsive, and emotionally available to the platform. Participation and refusal therefore coexist within continuing efforts to manage attachment, exposure, and autonomy.

These dynamics unfold across an uneven infrastructural and social field. In South Africa, the apparent universality of pace, recovery, and performance metrics encounters landscapes and leisure cultures already organised by racialised histories of access, unequal infrastructure, and differentiated recognition. The Atlantis race showed that data is generated within materially distinct environments, where safe roads, reliable electricity, connectivity, and access to wearable technologies cannot be

assumed. The same metric acquires different meanings depending on the conditions under which it is produced and the body to which it is attached.

As I argue elsewhere, South African running spaces show how self-tracking can confer datafied legitimacy on bodies otherwise read as unexpected or out of place, while leaving that legitimacy racialised and spatially contingent (Bosch, 2026). The broader question of affective legibility concerns whose bodily effort can be translated into readable data, recognised as credible and disciplined, and situated within accepted forms of belonging. It also concerns whose access to safe leisure space, devices, electricity, and connectivity makes such recognition possible. Metrics may appear to provide a universal language of effort, although entry into that language remains structured by profound inequalities.

To run with data is to move between continuity and interruption, ease and friction, full archives and partial records. Seamless platform intimacy depends on material and institutional supports that remain unevenly distributed. Within these conditions, pacing cues, Body Battery scores, captions, and Strava kudos continue to organise the emotional life of running data. They contribute to intimate publics (Dobson et al., 2018), fields of visibility and feeling in which recognition is unevenly available yet deeply desired. Small gestures, such as tagging a friend whose watch has failed or preserving a conference presentation as a private activity, allow effort to be witnessed and vulnerability to be managed. Data becomes memory, self-expression, social recognition, and surveillance.

The soft power of fitness platforms lies in their incorporation into ordinary practices of bodily interpretation. Garmin and Strava shape the emotional conditions under which effort feels worthwhile, rest feels justified or suspect, an incomplete archive feels troubling, and recognition feels necessary. Their influence works through discipline, pressure, companionship, reassurance, and the promise that bodily experience can be rendered coherent. The archive becomes difficult to leave because it appears to hold bodily history and evidence of who the user has been. Running with data situates the body within a web of metrics, predictions, feedback, and social visibility. The quantified self that emerges is fragmented, interrupted, and repeatedly reassembled through scores, captions, private records, missing tags, and periods of silence. Affective

legibility is grounded in this ongoing relation between body and platform, while emotional governance operates through the pleasures, anxieties, attachments, and habits by which bodily data acquires meaning.

The next chapter turns from the explicit interpretation of bodily effort to the more ambient forms of intimacy produced through playlists, feeds, maps, and recommendations. These systems generate proximity through repetition, adjustment, mood, attention, and relevance. Calibrated intimacy emerges through the recurring sense of being accompanied by systems that appear to know what belongs next.

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3

Calibrated Intimacy and the Ambient Life of Platforms

Abstract This chapter examines quieter forms of connection produced through continual platform adjustment. It attends to how platforms organise proximity and relevance through recommendation, repetition, and anticipation. It traces three overlapping forms of this intimacy: sonic intimacy, through which music streaming platforms such as Spotify shape mood and memory through listening data and recommendation; visual intimacy, through which apps like Instagram organise recognition and self-presentation within curated feeds; and locational intimacy, through which navigation apps produce a sense of being accompanied and situated through movement. Across these domains, closeness emerges as ambient and iterative, built through repetition and habitual use with direct exchange playing only a limited role. The chapter argues that calibrated intimacy is one means through which platform soft power operates. Platforms organise the conditions under which connection is felt, shaping emotional life through largely invisible systems of adjustment.

Keywords Digital intimacy • Calibrated intimacy • Affective legibility • Emotional governance • Recommendation systems • Soft power

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Introduction

Chapter 2 located digital intimacy in the moving body. This chapter examines quieter forms of connection produced through continual platform adjustment. It considers how platforms organise proximity and relevance through recommendation, repetition, and anticipation. Across apps such as Spotify, Instagram, and Google Maps, users are drawn into relations that feel familiar, timely, and attuned, even in the absence of direct interaction. These encounters unfold through recommendation, repetition, and low-level awareness, as platforms render relations affectively legible and continuously adjustable. These processes produce an ambient intimacy through repeated calibration.

The radio in my car is broken, so I listen to Spotify instead. I am not especially knowledgeable about music, and I rarely know what I want to listen to. Instead, I rely on playlists that are suggested to me, curated mixes, mood-based selections, things I would not have chosen but come to feel as if they fit. More often than not, they do. The music feels uncannily aligned with how I am already feeling, or perhaps how I am about to feel. It is difficult to tell which comes first. There is a shift here from choosing to accepting. The playlist is not mine in any curated sense, and yet I move through it as if it were. Songs follow one another with a coherence I did not design, but come to enjoy. The effect is subtle and ambient, creating a sense of accompaniment without requiring conscious choice. Sometimes, when I arrive home, I let the music continue. I sit in the driveway until the track ends, or step out of the car with my earbuds still in, carrying the playlist into the house. The boundary between movement and stillness, public and private space, begins to soften. The listening continues, and the platform remains present.

The resulting intimacy rests on attunement. The playlist appears to anticipate my preferences without requiring me to articulate them, producing the growing conviction that the system already knows me. Personalisation operates here as calibration. This chapter asks how this kind of proximity is produced and sustained through ongoing calibration, with direct interaction playing only a limited role. I use the term ‘calibrated intimacy’, introduced in Chap. 1, for the relationality that

emerges through adjustment, where algorithms, defaults, and user habits shape what feels close, relevant, or shared. Closeness here is iterative, often taken for granted, and capable of developing without depth or reciprocity. This intimacy is embedded in mundane gestures of scrolling, listening, and following. It draws attention to how platforms participate in shaping the terms of relationships, aligning users with particular rhythms of attention and recognition. The result is a patterned intimacy where feeling emerges in relation to what platforms make available. I approach calibrated intimacy through three everyday sites: listening, seeing, and locating, which I theorise as sonic, visual, and locational forms of intimacy. These three forms overlap, allowing platforms to govern how closeness is felt through shared soundscapes, curated images, and spatial awareness.

Calibration describes a recursive relation. Platforms register prior action, infer what may feel relevant, present a selection, and incorporate the user's response into the next adjustment. The process is probabilistic and temporal. It acquires force through repetition, as small acts of acceptance, skipping, lingering, or rerouting become inputs into future encounters. Users participate in calibration through ordinary habits, often without experiencing these acts as consequential decisions. The platform appears attentive because its adjustments arrive within the flow of everyday life.

This distinguishes calibrated intimacy from personalisation understood as a completed match between a user and a particular object. Calibration remains ongoing because relevance must be repeatedly tested and revised. Its intimacy lies in the continuity produced by this adjustment: the playlist that seems to meet a mood, the feed that returns familiar presences, or the map that anticipates a destination. Each encounter offers a provisional account of what belongs next. The user may accept, ignore, or correct that account, and the response becomes part of the relation. Calibration therefore names both a technique of platform power and an affective experience. It organises attention while presenting its interventions as useful and timely. Attachment grows through the ordinary convenience of being anticipated. Calibrated intimacy can consequently feel supportive while depending on data extraction and predictive classification.

Sonic Intimacy and Algorithmic Listening

Sound here is treated as infrastructure: a set of conditions that shapes how publics come to know, feel, and participate in collective life. As I have previously argued (Bosch, 2025), contemporary sonic environments are increasingly organised through algorithmic soundscapes, where platforms distribute audio through systems that also curate audibility. What becomes hearable, shareable, and affectively resonant is structured through recommendation systems, remix logics, and emergent forms of AI-mediated production, through which sound is at once circulated and governed.

This governance depends on what Prey (2016) calls the datafication of listening. On streaming platforms, each act of listening also generates behavioural data. Every skip, replay, pause, or completion becomes a data point, feeding back into systems that model and reshape user behaviour. Listening time becomes data-generating time, and this data is used to personalise musical experience and to rank and monetise listeners themselves. Algorithmic soundscapes describe the circulation of sound, and datafication describes the extraction processes that make such circulation calculable and profitable. Following Eva Illouz (2007), these processes can be understood as part of a broader transformation in which emotional life becomes organised through logics of calculation and optimisation. Listening becomes a practice through which feeling is continually adjusted and refined, drawn toward what the platform expects. Recommendation systems participate in shaping preferences, orienting users towards what feels appropriate in a given moment. Sonic intimacy emerges through the ongoing management of mood and attention. I encountered this most clearly in the aftermath of a breakup, when I found myself repeatedly returning to a playlist I had assembled in an earlier moment of emotional upheaval. The playlist was reorganised through the breakup, folding my emotional life into the platform's predictive logics. The playlist thus participates in sustaining and recognising an inner emotional state over time (DeNora, 2000; Beer, 2017). The distinction between self-curation and algorithmic curation begins to blur. Intimacy is calibrated through what we choose, and through how those

choices are taken up, reworked, and returned to us. Affect is expressed and reorganised through ongoing interaction with the platform, as self-curation and algorithmic curation become increasingly entangled in practice (Prey, 2016; Seaver, 2019).

This entanglement complicates how we understand ownership and authorship in intimate sonic practices. The playlist remains mine in the sense that it is anchored in my selections, my memories, and my affective associations. Yet it is also no longer fully mine, as it is continuously supplemented and reordered through processes that operate beyond my direct control. This reflects a form of distributed authorship, where intimacy is co-produced through the interplay between user intention and platform inference (Striphas, 2015; Cheney-Lippold, 2017). At the same time, the playlist becomes a temporal object that evolves alongside shifts in mood, context, and repetition. It is responsive, sensitive to patterns that may not be consciously articulated. The platform registers how content is played: the frequency of return, the timing of skips, the duration of listening sessions, alongside what the user chooses to listen to. These micro-interactions accrue into a profile of affect that feeds back into future recommendations (Prey, 2016). As a result, the playlist actively modulates the affective atmosphere within which the breakup unfolds, while also preserving traces of feeling as an evolving archive (Anderson, 2014; Berlant, 2011).

These moments show how platforms calibrate closeness by registering patterns of attachment and anticipating what may feel resonant. A song that seems to 'fit' a moment, or a playlist that appears to understand how we feel, emerges through this iterative process. Intimacy resides in the relation produced between listener, music, and platform through repeated acts of adjustment (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018). Listening therefore becomes a cultural and infrastructural practice. Platforms such as Spotify operate as intermediaries that sort listeners and sounds into differentiated circuits of visibility and value. As Prey (2016) shows, this involves the construction of 'taste profiles' that map users according to behavioural signals and inferred identities, often linking musical preference to demographic, psychographic, and even political attributes. This stratified ecology of listening is not neutral; listeners are differentially valued and addressed.

The political economy of Spotify's recommendation and compensation systems has become increasingly visible. As Pelly (2025) documents, this system structurally advantages major label artists and content farms while returning near-negligible sums to independent musicians. The introduction of 'Discovery Mode', which offers algorithmic promotion in exchange for reduced royalty rates, extends this logic further, effectively making visibility a purchasable condition. In 2025, a wave of artist withdrawals from the platform drew renewed attention to these disparities, with several citing CEO Daniel Ek's substantial investment in Helsing, a military AI company, alongside the platform's compensation practices, as grounds for departure. Simultaneously, the proliferation of AI-generated music on the platform has intensified concerns about the dilution of the royalty pool and the displacement of authentic creative labour by algorithmic content production. These developments expose the political economy concealed by Spotify's interface. The experience of intimate accompaniment rests on an infrastructure that values, sorts, and compensates artists, sounds, and cultural labour unevenly. Spotify's 2021 patent for technology capable of monitoring users' speech, capturing intonation, stress, and rhythm to infer emotional states, and cross-referencing these signals with identity and location metadata extends this extractive logic, revealing how sonic intimacy is increasingly organised through the direct biometric inference of emotional states (Arora, 2024).

My own listening takes place within these stratified conditions of audibility, some sounds amplified, others rendered marginal even as the interface presents a stream that feels personally curated. While sonic intimacy works through the calibration of mood and atmosphere, visual intimacy extends this logic through the curation of visibility, organising what becomes perceptible and who we come to feel close to.

Visual Intimacy and Curated Visibility

Visual intimacy on platforms such as Instagram develops through the patterned visibility of people, places, and lifestyles that become familiar over time. Repetition draws these people or places into the texture of everyday attention, as they are encountered, revisited, and gradually

incorporated into the rhythms of platform use. Scrolling and watching produce a sense of co-presence that is ambient rather than explicit, sustained through exposure. Instagram renders selected forms of everyday life as aspirational, aesthetic, or worthy of attention. As with the calibrated dynamics described earlier in the chapter, this involves an ongoing process of alignment between user practices and platform logics. Feeds are structured environments in which some images recur, some bodies are foregrounded, and some atmospheres become recognisable as desirable. Intimacy often works through aspiration, a pull towards particular ways of living, and through attunement, an affective resonance with what is seen. These modes overlap, producing a form of closeness that is felt and that rarely requires direct communication.

On Instagram, this connection formed gradually. I have met friends and sports activity partners via the platform, but these relationships emerged through mutual following, liking, and eventually messaging, grounded initially in the visual field of mundane life-logging. On my profile, I curate a version of myself as a trail runner and hiker. My feed becomes an archive of movement: trails, shoes, views, and bodies in motion. The Stories feature shapes how these recurring glimpses are encountered and how connection comes to be felt. Intimacy emerges through repeated glimpses: a face in Stories, a familiar route, an ordinary moment offered up and seen. These fragments make the self visible and affectively legible within a shared field of attention. Instagram turns this repetition into a rhythm of return, sustaining connection through an expectation that others will appear again.

The performance that unfolds here is curated while remaining grounded in lived experience. Social media profiles are best understood as strategic self-presentations shaped by context, audience, and platform affordances (Marwick, 2013). The self that appears on Instagram is calibrated, assembled in relation to what the platform makes visible. This calibration operates both aesthetically and affectively, as users learn which images resonate, which posts gain more attention, and which versions of themselves gain traction within the feed. The process also turns inward. Instagram operates simultaneously as diary and dossier, a space where past moments are archived (similar to Strava, see Chap. 2) and made available for return. Recently, a friend asked me about a multi-day trail I

had completed. I scrolled back through my feed to locate the images I had posted at the time. As I moved through them, the experience returned with an unexpected intensity. I could almost taste the drink I had been having in one of the photos, feel the strain in my legs from a steep climb, recall the particular mix of exhaustion and satisfaction that marked the end of each day. The images reactivated the trail, assembling memory through fragments that were already selected, framed, and shared. These posts function as affective breadcrumbs, mapping an emotional terrain of effort, endurance, and memory. What returns in these moments is a calibrated past assembled in relation to what the platform makes valuable and repeatable. As van Dijck (2013) suggests, platforms increasingly mediate how memory is stored, organised, and revisited, transforming personal archives into structured, searchable datasets. The intimacy that emerges here is relational and reflexive, shaped through the ways in which the self is made visible to itself (and others).

This archival and relational work is inseparable from Instagram's broader economies of visibility. As I have argued elsewhere in relation to the representation of geographic place in Instagram cultures, the platform participates in producing physical environments as aesthetic and affective objects (Bosch, 2024). That analysis examined how cities such as Johannesburg are rendered through hashtags, visual tropes, and platform vernaculars. The same process extends across everyday visual culture. Instagram filters and orders places, lifestyles, bodies, and orientations, amplifying some forms of life while allowing others to recede. The feed creates an ambient familiarity structured by ranking and recommendation, inviting users to identify with particular images or measure themselves against them.

The visual processes described here parallel the sonic forms of intimacy discussed earlier. Recommendation systems organise what becomes audible and how mood is anticipated, while visual platforms organise what becomes perceptible and affectively salient. Seeing, like listening, becomes entangled with data extraction, predictive modelling, and the ordering of attention (Prey, 2016). The intimacy of the feed lies in its familiarity, in the sense that these lives, places, and objects are already there and likely to appear again. This apparent continuity is produced through interaction, ranking, and algorithmic adjustment. The closeness offered by the

feed depends on the infrastructures that repeatedly return particular images to view.

Visual intimacy therefore develops through patterned encounters with others and through the platformed presentation of the self. Instagram tunes how users encounter one another, drawing selves and audiences into recurring relations of attention and feeling. These relations become especially visible in moments of friction. I increasingly notice when someone has viewed my Instagram Stories without responding to a message I have sent. The platform does not formally connect these actions, yet their proximity produces a sense of misalignment. Visibility without response begins to carry affective weight. A Story view registers presence, and that presence alters the expectation of reply even when no explicit obligation exists.

This slight unease reveals how platforms recalibrate expectations of attention and care. Viewing a Story and replying to a message remain distinct actions, although they no longer feel entirely separate. Different signals of attention are drawn into relation, blurring the boundary between presence and engagement. This extends beyond established relationships. I follow people I rarely see in person and others I have never met. We are connected through running, hiking, shared interests, and Instagram's recommendation systems, which place unfamiliar users within one another's fields of attention. Repeated exposure gradually produces familiarity. Users interpret these cues, adjust expectations, and revise their sense of connection. Visibility becomes entangled with obligation, anticipation, and the possibility of recognition. Intimacy is sustained through calibrated exposure, as repetition creates a sense of knowing without requiring co-presence.

Visual calibration also enters ordinary judgements about credibility and value. Platformed recommendation acquires authority through repetition and circulation, while the boundaries between peer practice, endorsement, and advertising become increasingly difficult to distinguish. I encountered this dynamic in a Cape Town pharmacy, where a mother and her teenage daughter were examining hair-styling products. The daughter selected one because she had seen it on Instagram and thought it made people's hair look good. The mother hesitated, then placed it in the basket. The product carried the accumulated authority of

repeated online circulation. It appeared familiar, socially validated, and worth trying before either of them had assessed its ingredients or likely efficacy. The daughter's trust was directed towards a stream of mediated experience that felt collective and immediate. The mother's eventual agreement showed how this authority could travel across generations and shape a mundane purchasing decision. Instagram had calibrated the product's affective credibility, making it feel already tested and endorsed by a diffuse social public. Visual intimacy therefore concerns the people who remain present within everyday attention and the objects, practices, and aspirations that acquire value through repeated exposure. Locational intimacy extends this process into movement, producing proximity through route prediction, arrival times, and continuous spatial awareness.

Locational Intimacy and Ambient Tracking

I use Google Maps every day, even for routes I already know. I use it as much to manage time as to navigate. I check traffic conditions before leaving, estimate arrival times, and adjust my departure in response to shifting traffic flows. Even on familiar roads, I keep the app open, glancing occasionally at the blue dot as it moves along a route perhaps already committed to memory. When I arrive home, the app greets me with a soft 'Welcome home'. The phrase carries an affective charge beyond its practical function as the app performs familiarity through a scripted gesture of care that settles easily into routine.

These small interactions accumulate into what I call locational intimacy, produced through the ongoing awareness of movement, proximity, and arrival. It is a way of feeling close to others, to oneself, and to platforms through the ongoing tracking of where one is and where one is going. Like sonic and visual forms of intimacy, it is ambient and iterative, taking shape through repeated gestures that rarely register as significant. Checking an estimated arrival time, watching a route update in real time, or sharing a live location with a friend are not framed as relational acts; yet they carry a sense of connection, a reassurance that movement is visible, coordinated, and known.

Platforms such as Google Maps, and more explicitly location-sharing applications like Life360 (see Chap. 5) shape how movement is tracked, interpreted, and shared. Movement becomes legible as data, broken down into routes, speeds, and pauses that can be recorded and recalculated. Locational awareness is inseparable from datafication. As listening generates data on streaming platforms, movement produces an expanding archive of behavioural traces that can be used to predict future routes, optimise travel time, and suggest alternative paths. I have started to notice how Google Maps anticipates my movements before I fully articulate them to myself. When I get into my car in the morning, a notification appears: '15 minutes to work'. Some mornings I am going there; on others, I am headed somewhere else. The suggestion arrives anyway, quietly assuming a routine and projecting a trajectory onto the day before it has unfolded. At other times, I arrive somewhere, a café, a restaurant, or a shop, and my phone asks: 'Are you at this location?' and 'Would you like to see what others are ordering here?' The prompts appear optional, yet they presume my presence and position me in relation to place, routine, and the activity of others.

These moments accumulate. The platform anticipates where I am likely to be, offering suggestions that feel timely even when they are slightly off. Over time, this produces a sense of accompaniment, as though my movements unfold within a system already oriented towards them. The familiarity and steady regularity of these prompts give them affective weight. Locational intimacy emerges through this repeated anticipation, as the platform translates movement into a sequence of likely destinations, estimated arrival times, and possible actions.

To be known by an app in this way is to be continually situated within a network of routes and routines that makes movement feel predictable and shared. This shift becomes perceptible in otherwise mundane moments. When waiting for someone to arrive, I find myself opening an app after they have shared their live location and watching their movement along the route instead of sending another message. The question 'Where are you?' is displaced by a glance at the screen. Presence is inferred through data.

This awareness also alters expectations. Locatability begins to function as a condition of reachability, while movement beyond the platform's

view can register, however faintly, as absence. Locational intimacy extends calibration into the spatial domain, where predictive systems continually estimate arrival, reroute journeys, and coordinate movement across users. Reassurance and optimisation become intertwined, as the app offers certainty while helping to produce the expectation that such certainty should be available. The emphasis here falls on ambient anticipation and self-location.

Locational intimacy is temporal as well as spatial. Maps convert distance into minutes and organise proximity through estimated arrival. A person is rendered close because the screen predicts that they are seven minutes away, even when the route between us remains unseen. The estimate gives uncertainty a manageable form. I can delay leaving the house, begin preparing, or watch the remaining time contract. These small adjustments coordinate bodies before co-presence occurs. Arrival is experienced in advance through the changing number on the screen.

This temporal calibration also reshapes patience. A delay that once remained indeterminate now appears as a deviation from an estimate. The map gives lateness a measurable form and draws attention to each recalculation. Proximity becomes a moving forecast whose authority rests on continual updating. The app accompanies waiting by transforming it into a sequence of predictions, drawing future presence into the present. (Chap. 5 examines the more explicitly relational and surveillant consequences of continuous location sharing).

Calibrated Intimacy Across Platforms

Calibrated intimacy unfolds across platforms as systems align their logics of recommendation, circulation, and attention, producing an environment in which closeness feels continuous even as its sources vary. Cross-platform movement makes this coordination visible. While conducting research on TikTok for a separate project, I find myself scrolling as both an observer and a participant in its affective rhythm. Short videos circulate with fragments of sound attached to them, a chorus, a beat, a lyric that repeats across clips. Increasingly, these videos include a prompt to 'add to Spotify', allowing sound to travel seamlessly from one platform to

another. What begins as a fleeting encounter becomes a more sustained engagement through listening. Songs enter my playlists through lateral movement between visual and sonic environments, often without deliberate search. Intimacy moves across platforms, sustained through the coordination of systems that anticipate how attention and affect will travel.

These processes are cumulative. The sense of closeness produced in one environment is reinforced in another. A song encountered on Spotify reappears in Instagram Stories. A run tracked through a fitness app becomes part of a visual archive on Instagram. A shared location supplements what is seen or heard with a sense of spatial proximity. Intimacy is distributed across an ecology in which visual, sonic, and spatial data are brought into alignment. This layering intensifies the sense that intimacy is ambient and continuous. Its boundaries are diffuse, unfolding as a low-level awareness that persists across moments of use. Persistence of this kind is infrastructurally contingent. Where data is prepaid and power intermittent, as Chap. 1 argued, the ambience can and does switch off, and its resumption is bought, scheduled, and unevenly distributed. The familiarity of a voice, the recognisability of an image, the reassurance of a moving dot on a screen all contribute to a sense that others are always, in some form, present. These infrastructures make others perceptible in advance of interaction. In this cross-platform register, calibrated intimacy describes the organisation of relational life across interconnected systems. Closeness becomes an effect of coordination between systems that register, predict, and align behaviour. Its infrastructural organisation does not diminish its affective force. The cross-platform coordination of sound, images, routes, and attention produces the continuous sense of connection that no single app could sustain alone.

The continuity described here is never automatic. In South Africa, prepaid data and interruptions to electricity make the material cost of ambient connection unusually perceptible. A playlist may need to be downloaded before leaving Wi-Fi; a route may fail to update when signal drops; a feed may become something entered selectively instead of inhabited continuously. These interruptions expose a general condition of platformed closeness: ambience depends on infrastructures that must be paid

for, maintained, and renewed. When connection returns, continuity is reconstructed through cached content and the resumption of familiar feeds. The platform's apparent persistence is therefore an achievement of material systems and user labour.

Conclusion

This chapter has developed calibrated intimacy as an ambient form of relationality produced through repeated platform adjustment. Across sonic, visual, and locational environments, platforms organise mood, visibility, proximity, and expectation by drawing on prior action to anticipate what may feel relevant next. These processes operate across platforms, producing a sense of continuity and accompaniment that no single interface could sustain alone. The closeness they generate is affectively real. A playlist can accompany grief, a feed can sustain familiarity, and a route prediction can offer reassurance. Such experiences acquire force through repetition and their incorporation into everyday routines. Their apparent spontaneity is continually produced through systems of inference and ranking that extract value from ordinary use.

This ambient continuity is an infrastructural accomplishment. South African conditions make that dependence especially visible, as connection may be rationed through prepaid data or interrupted by failures of electricity and connectivity. The broader theoretical claim is that calibrated intimacy always depends on material systems whose operations become most visible when continuity falters.

The soft power of platforms lies in their capacity to make these arrangements feel timely and familiar. Platforms cultivate attachment by organising the conditions under which relevance and closeness are experienced, allowing governance to operate through habitual attunement and repeated adjustment.

Chapter 4 carries this argument into moments of friction, where calibrated intimacy becomes unstable. It examines how visibility can produce exposure, recognition can become precarious, and circulation can exceed the terms under which intimacy was offered.

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4

Queerness, Risk, and the Limits of Calibrated Intimacy

Abstract This chapter examines the limits of calibrated intimacy by tracing how visibility becomes uneven, amplified, and affectively demanding across platform environments. Focusing on TikTok and Tinder, it shows how algorithmic circulation, looping, and recommendation systems intensify exposure while detaching content from its original context. While previous chapters have shown how platforms produce familiarity and alignment, the chapter attends to moments where these processes become unstable. For queer users in particular, visibility is enabling yet also potentially precarious, requiring ongoing negotiation through practices of timing, opacity, and affective labour. Using the book's concept of affective legibility, the chapter shows how recognition is distributed unevenly, producing conditions in which being seen is both desirable and risky. Under these conditions, intimacy is calibrated and contested as users navigate the tensions between exposure, safety, and control within infrastructures that reward visibility but do not guarantee its terms.

Keywords Digital intimacy • Affective legibility • TikTok • Tinder • Emotional governance • Opacity

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Introduction

In the previous chapter, I traced how intimacy is calibrated through ambient forms of alignment, where closeness comes to feel continuous and mundane. Yet this unobtrusive smoothness is not evenly experienced; it depends on conditions that are not universally shared. While travelling in an African country where queerness is criminalised, I opened the Tinder app. I was immediately met with Tinder's Traveler Alert, warning that LGBTQIA+ users could face risk in that location. In that moment, the dating app's usual script of possibility, organised around matching, flirting, and connection, was interrupted by an infrastructural alert that rendered my presence precarious. Tinder, typically framed as a platform of desire and relational experimentation, momentarily exposed its undercurrent of soft power, where affective infrastructures are not neutral but can become attuned to geopolitical danger. In locations flagged as posing heightened risk to LGBTQ+ users, Tinder may automatically hide a profile from discovery and prompt the user to decide whether to become visible. This intervention temporarily interrupts the platform's usual logic of proximity by making participation contingent on an explicit decision to re-enter visibility. Although framed as a protective measure, it also demonstrates how the platform translates legal jurisdiction into a territorial risk assessment and reorganises access to intimacy accordingly. Visibility becomes conditional, mediated through a platform-defined distinction between safety and exposure.

What had previously felt like calibrated proximity was reconfigured as a condition of risk in which intimacy became inseparable from exposure. The warning exposed the asymmetries embedded in digital intimacy, where visibility can quickly become vulnerability. The alert showed how platform infrastructure translates geopolitical danger into conditions of visibility. It produced the instability Glissant (1997) calls tremblement, revealing how algorithmic architectures mediate who can desire and where, how, and at what risk. The forms of intimacy traced in the previous chapters rely on visibility, proximity, and the promise of algorithmic recognition. Their consequences vary across bodies. This chapter asks

what happens when calibrated intimacy exceeds its own conditions, as visibility introduces risk, exposure, and uneven recognition.

I approach intimacy as socially organised through cultural and institutional forms (Hochschild, 1983; Ahmed, 2004). I also draw on scholarship on digital intimacies, which has shown how platforms shape relational life through infrastructures of visibility, data, and interface design (Bucher, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). Following theorists such as Glissant (1997), Butler (1993), and Muñoz (1999), I read visibility not as inherently liberatory but as a conditional, often risky form of recognition, one that demands legibility within normative frameworks. Visibility is always structured through the terms under which subjects become readable. Opacity offers a strategy of refusal and protection, preserving forms of relation that do not require complete legibility, especially where visibility may invite surveillance, commodification, or violence. Algorithms curate what is seen and how desire, recognition, and risk are felt, embedding users within uneven architectures of affective governance. Following Guyan's (2022) insistence that queer data practices should serve queer lives, I approach queer digital research as ethical, relational, and attentive to extractive logics. By focusing on TikTok's looping video cultures and the feedback loops of algorithmic curation, I theorise minor refusals, experimental performances, and moments of disorientation as strategies for living and surviving within these infrastructures. Glissant's tremblement frames these practices as intimate, affective modes of trembling against normative demands for legibility and coherence. These practices also signal the emotional governance and soft power of apps, as platforms like TikTok modulate feeling, visibility, and belonging through diffuse, algorithmic forms of influence. As Burchell (2024) argues, constant connection can produce social disconnection, emotional overexposure, and communicative fatigue. For queer users navigating algorithmic systems, these tensions are compounded by risk, surveillance, and the pressure to perform authenticity, producing the conditions this chapter traces through TikTok and Tinder.

The chapter moves through two platform environments in sequence: Tinder, where queer desire is explicitly governed through geo-fencing, biometric verification, and monetised visibility; and TikTok, where

governance operates more subtly through looping, algorithmic amplification, and the ambient pressure to remain legible.

Platformed Precarity: Governing Queer Desire in the Architecture of Dating Apps

Building on my earlier work on Tinder as a site of strategic self-presentation and gamified intimacy (Bosch, 2020), I shift attention from negotiation within platform affordances to the infrastructural governance of intimacy itself. Where Tinder previously appeared as a space of relational experimentation, it now emerges as a system that actively calibrates risk, legibility, and exposure through geo-fencing, biometric verification, and monetised visibility. Here calibrated intimacy operates under constraint, as risk and surveillance reshape the terms of exposure. Dating platforms, including Tinder and Hinge, allow users to select from expanded lists of gender identities and sexual orientations, gesturing towards inclusivity that seems to offer broader possibilities for relational recognition. While such interface features appear progressive, they function within tightly managed infrastructures of legibility, desirability, and control. Users manage the platform's visual and algorithmic cultures through strategic self-presentation, carefully curating images, bios, and gestures to remain legible within platform-specific norms. For queer users, this can mean seeking sufficient visibility for recognition while limiting forms of exposure that could invite harassment, exclusion, or platform moderation, a delicate negotiation of self-performance under algorithmic conditions. Visibility is both a resource and a threshold to be managed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamics of platformed intimacy intensified. Mobile apps expanded their emotional governance over social connection as well as domestic space. Tinder, for example, made its global passport feature free during lockdowns, allowing users to swipe and connect with people around the world without having to pay for a premium membership. In a moment of global crisis, dating apps also leveraged the emotional infrastructures of visibility, proximity, and

availability, reshaping the geographies of intimacy through acts of infrastructural generosity that were also deeply strategic. Mobile intimacy increasingly takes the form of a public affective performance structured by platform logics of proximity and relational desire (Hjorth & Lim, 2012). These affordances invite users to disclose and define themselves, while filtering, sorting, and monetising those disclosures. Platforms provide an interface for queer visibility and shape which forms of queerness become visible, searchable, and rewarded. On Tinder, the politics of inclusion is therefore tethered to datafied performance. As Duguay (2017) argues, identity is negotiated through the platform in ways that are affectively intense and structurally asymmetrical. Inclusion operates as a form of conditional visibility, dependent on remaining legible, desirable, and traceable within platform norms.

In some contexts, platform governance becomes explicitly geopolitical. The warning that opened this chapter was not a single occurrence; the same alert met me in several countries where consensual same-sex sexual activity is criminalised, including Qatar and Zambia. Tinder's warning system geo-fenced my emotional life, mapping legal boundaries onto relational possibilities, marking desire itself as conditional. Tremblement became manifest as the platform's territorial infrastructure of risk destabilised desire and redirected its possibilities. At home, no warning appears: Tinder treats legal jurisdiction as a proxy for risk. In South Africa, constitutional recognition produces no warning, although legal protection does not guarantee everyday safety, a gap discussed in Chap. 1. The platform registers formal legality while remaining unresponsive to lived precarity. The South African case exposes the limits of jurisdiction as a platform measure of safety. National law can be translated into a stable classification, while lived vulnerability is situated, variable, and resistant to such formalisation. Constitutional protection does not register differences between neighbourhoods, institutions, social contexts, or encounters, nor does it capture how race, gender expression, class, mobility, and public visibility shape exposure to harm. Tinder can identify the legal status of consensual same-sex activity, but it cannot determine whether a particular user will be safe while travelling, meeting a stranger, or becoming visible within a specific social environment. The platform therefore renders jurisdiction legible while leaving the uneven experience of safety

largely illegible. South Africa illuminates a broader problem in platform governance: risk systems privilege conditions that can be codified, mapped, and automated, even where those conditions offer an incomplete account of how danger is lived.

Apps such as Tinder thus govern the emergence, timing, and territorial legitimacy of queer connection. Intimacy is reconfigured under constraint, with proximity recalibrated through geography and platform mediation.

Platform capitalism intensifies these pressures by monetising visibility. While users can indicate their orientation freely, access to visibility is monetised. Tinder Gold and Platinum allow users to see who has already liked them, while Hinge+ and HingeX provide access to all incoming likes. This model resembles the broader extractive logic identified by Zuboff (2019), in which uncertainty is converted into demand for a paid service. Emotional access becomes an aspirational commodity, withheld to generate desire and sold back to the user as clarity, control, or confirmation. In this configuration, queer (and heterosexual) longing is monetised, folded into cycles of emotional extraction and optimisation. Desire becomes a managed scarcity, calibrated to sustain engagement while deferring fulfilment. These logics of control surfaced again when Tinder unexpectedly flagged my account: *'Suspicious activity detected'*. To continue using the app, I was prompted to submit a video selfie for biometric verification. This precondition was framed as a safety feature but carried affective weight. I was being asked to verify my authenticity through my face and gestures to re-enter a system that already surveilled me. The asymmetry was clear: the platform asked for trust while withholding it, collecting more data in exchange for the conditional promise of connection. The biometric demand moved beyond safety to securitise desire, reinscribing bodily compliance into the architecture of intimacy. Biometric verification also changes the terms on which the body becomes legible. Profile construction ordinarily permits strategic self-presentation through selected images, written description, omission, and aesthetic framing. The video selfie narrows this latitude by requiring the user to become recognisable through a bodily procedure defined by the platform. Authenticity is no longer established relationally through conversation or encounter but demonstrated to a machinic system through the

face, movement, and compliance with an instruction. The platform determines what evidence of personhood is acceptable while withholding the criteria through which that evidence will be interpreted.

This demand makes affective legibility inseparable from bodily verification. The user must provide additional data to recover access to a relational environment, effectively carrying the burden of proving that they are safe, authentic, and entitled to participate. The platform's own operations remain opaque throughout this exchange. It does not explain why suspicion was produced, how the biometric material will be assessed, or what forms of error are possible. The asymmetry is therefore epistemic as well as affective: the user must become increasingly transparent to a system that does not reciprocate that transparency. Safety is secured through compliance, while access to intimacy remains conditional on recognition by standards the user cannot inspect or contest.

Andrejevic (2014) notes that such systems operate through a preemptive logic of surveillance: anticipating risk, enforcing legibility, and demanding submission before granting access. The result is a controlled terrain of desire, managed algorithmically, conditioned by geography, and governed through biometric confirmation. The body itself becomes a site of verification, where intimacy is contingent on recognisability and compliance with machinic standards of authenticity. As Burchell (2024) writes, "the realities of connection today are as social as they are technological; they are also as professional as they are commercially driven by the platform's decision-makers and associated advertising industries" (p. xi). This duality is central to how smart apps govern intimacy through the normalisation of emotional labour, ambient compliance, and the routinisation of relational affect as data. Emotional governance is enacted through algorithmic and infrastructural arrangements that organise when and how feeling emerges and where it is directed. Intimacy becomes conditional, sustained through ongoing demands for verification and responsiveness.

A friend recently shared an encounter that underscores the temporal pressures of digital intimacy. After matching with a woman on Tinder, she was immediately encouraged to share her number, text off-app, jump on a voice call, and meet that same evening. When she explained that she had to work late and couldn't meet, the Tinder match curtly replied that

she should "change [her] profile because [she's] not as fun as [she] pretends to be." The ostensibly playful tone carried an affective charge, reprimanding her for violating the temporal expectations of platformed courtship and declining connection. Intimacy became organised around availability and speed, with responsiveness functioning as a condition of legibility and delay being read as withdrawal or failure. The platform calibrated both connection and the tempo at which it was expected to unfold.

Burchell's (2024) account of "managed disconnection" clarifies this exchange: connection becomes communicative labour, while refusal or delay may be read as interpersonal failure (p. xviii). The encounter is also emblematic of what Striphas (2023) calls repertoires of conduct shaped by algorithmic culture: there is an expectation to be constantly available, emotionally fluent, and instantly gratifying. Moving from the app to text messaging offers convenience while accelerating intimacy and collapsing platform boundaries in the pursuit of affective efficiency. The platform stages the encounter and sets the tempo at which intimacy is expected to unfold.

Tinder territorialises desire and conditions access, while TikTok enables visibility to detach from its original audience and allows circulation to exceed intention. Across both platforms, the conditions of recognition remain institutionally controlled and difficult for users to stabilise. On TikTok, queer legibility is organised through looping sounds, aesthetic conventions, and uneven amplification. The stakes shift from bodily verification to the timing and circulation of performance. Beneath this apparent playfulness, a quieter mode of soft control scripts relational possibilities through the rhythms of algorithmic attention.

Tinder and TikTok govern recognition through different infrastructural forms and temporalities. Tinder intervenes at the point of access, using legal jurisdiction, biometric verification, subscription tiers, and expectations of responsiveness to condition who may enter, remain visible, and pursue connection. Its governance is comparatively explicit, appearing through warnings, prompts, restrictions, and demands for verification. TikTok governs less through direct restriction than through modulation. Recommendation systems alter the scale, duration, and audience of visibility after content has been produced, allowing expression to circulate beyond its initial setting. Tinder governs the conditions

under which connection may begin, while TikTok governs the uncertain circulation and afterlife of expression. Across both platforms, users are required to negotiate forms of recognition whose terms remain institutionally controlled. The distinction is therefore between explicit constraint and ambient modulation, each of which recalibrates intimacy by redistributing the risks of visibility.

Queer Loops and the Labour of Legibility

In the Tinder section above, tremblement described an acute destabilisation produced by law and geography. On TikTok, it operates as a more persistent condition: users cannot know with certainty who is watching or how far a post may travel. This is visible in the circulation of specific audio trends that organise queer expression on the platform. TikTok operates through short, looping videos that are structured around reusable sound clips, in which users select an existing audio track and produce their own visual response. Sounds move across videos as shared templates, with phrases drawn from circulating audio clips that frame particular modes of (sometimes gendered) performance. In one such instance the phrases 'so feminine' and 'so cunt' circulated widely through Doechii's "Alter Ego" (2024), moving rapidly as an audio template on the platform. The sound carries an aesthetic of exaggerated confidence and unapologetic femininity rooted in Black queer and ballroom performance traditions, where to be 'cunt' or 'feminine' is an assertion of style, presence, and self-possession. On TikTok, users inhabit this register through sound and embodied performance. 'So feminine' typically signals an exaggerated or stylised alignment with culturally recognisable markers of femininity, while 'so cunt', within queer and ballroom vernacular, operates as praise, denoting confidence, sharpness, and performative intensity.

The trend accommodates several forms of participation. Some videos align the sound with conventionally feminine styling, gesture, pose, or movement, making the affiliation relatively explicit. Others produce tension between sound and image, pairing the audio with masculine presentation, restrained performance, or ironic distance. In these instances, meaning arises through the relation between the reused sound and the

embodied scene rather than through direct self-description. A sideways glance, a change of posture, a deliberately timed reveal, or a caption legible primarily to an informed audience can be sufficient to signal participation. The comments may then become a secondary site of interpretation, confirming affiliation, extending the joke, or disputing how the performance should be read. These variations show that the audio does not carry a single stable meaning. Its recognisability provides a shared structure, while users calibrate how closely they align themselves with its queer and feminine associations. Some performances invite broad legibility, while others remain intelligible mainly within particular interpretive communities. The same formal template can therefore support disclosure, irony, experimentation, or deniability. Recognition emerges through an accumulation of small cues rather than through an explicit declaration of identity. This is what allows the trend to operate as an affective infrastructure of affiliation while retaining degrees of ambiguity.

The clips draw on ballroom-inflected performance, including stylised walking, posing, and exaggerated feminine embodiment (Bailey, 2011). What circulates is a sound embedded in a recognisable aesthetic vocabulary through which users signal affiliation while preserving partial ambiguity. Participation does not require explicit self-identification; users can inhabit the form of the trend without naming themselves within it. Engagement remains uneven. A small number of creators attract substantial visibility, while others circulate within more localised networks of recognition. This disparity reflects TikTok's selective amplification of particular performances. Users must therefore negotiate how, when, and to what extent they become legible within the feed. Such practices echo longer histories of managing visibility under conditions of risk, where performance enables expression while providing protection. Visibility on these platforms therefore operates as emotional governance and precarious labour within what Burchell (2024) calls a disconnected sociality. The result is a mode of legibility grounded in recognition without full disclosure.

TikTok's For You Page intensifies this instability by distributing content beyond follower networks at an unpredictable scale. For queer users, the scale and unpredictability of this circulation are especially consequential. Videos are directed through a recommendation system centred on

the For You Page, allowing content to be continuously distributed in ways that exceed user control. As Zeng and Abidin (2021) note, this interface is driven by algorithmic recommendation logics designed to personalise engagement and sustain continuous scrolling, making visibility less dependent on follower networks and more dependent on behavioural signals and interaction patterns. A video initially produced for a small or contextually familiar audience can become visible to thousands or millions of viewers, detached from its original setting and interpreted through unfamiliar frames. This process is not transparent to users. Content frequently appears to gain traction suddenly, without clear indication of why it is being amplified or to whom it is being shown. Visibility is experienced as unstable, shifting in scale and reach without warning.

This technical instability has affective consequences. As Evans and Ringrose (2025) show, post-digital intimacies are characterised by the entanglement of digital and non-digital relations, where the boundaries between public and private life become increasingly blurred and folded into one another. TikTok's amplification intensifies this condition. Content that feels situated, personal, or contextually bounded is drawn into wider circuits, acquiring a publicness that is difficult to anticipate or control. The movement from a known or imagined audience to an indeterminate one is a reconfiguration of how intimacy is experienced and exposed.

For queer users, amplification introduces particular risks. The same mechanisms that enable visibility, recognition, and connection can also extend content beyond its intended interpretive communities, exposing it to audiences that may be unsympathetic or hostile. A video that signals queer affiliation through sound, gesture, or aesthetic cues may circulate widely, becoming subject to misinterpretation, scrutiny, or harassment. Amplification expands reach by redistributing vulnerability across unfamiliar audiences. Posting becomes an anticipatory practice shaped by expectations of circulation, as users consider how content might travel, who might encounter it, and how it may be interpreted beyond the setting in which it was made. The promise of discoverability is accompanied by a persistent awareness that visibility can entail exposure, where being seen is inseparable from the possibility of being misread.

Amplification can thus be understood as a condition of post-digital intimacy in which visibility endures, circulates, and detaches from the context of its production. Visibility shifts from a discrete event to an ongoing condition, requiring users to anticipate both immediate reception and future encounters across changing audiences. Digital harms and exclusions in these environments are materially real, shaping how users manage presence, disclosure, and connection in everyday practice. Content can resurface across contexts and accrue new meanings over time, often far removed from the circumstances in which it was produced. Amplification operates ambiently through opaque algorithmic systems that recalibrate visibility beyond users' intentions. This marks a limit of calibrated intimacy, as connection and exposure become increasingly difficult to separate.

Drawing on Glissant's (1997) concept of tremblement as a mode of thought and relation that remains unsettled, TikTok can be read as enabling minor and provisional departures from normative scripts of gender and sexuality. TikTok's looping architecture encourages users to recreate familiar visual and sonic formats while rendering their visibility persistent across contexts and audiences. Content returns to new audiences and accumulates meanings beyond its original conditions of production. For queer users, this creates a temporal condition in which expression cannot be contained within a single moment but must be managed as an ongoing exposure. This temporal labour exceeds time spent online: users learn when to appear, when to withdraw, and how long to remain present without overexposing themselves. This persistence is where precarity emerges. On TikTok, visibility is not evenly distributed or equally safe. For queer users, especially those navigating hostile social or legal contexts, the repetition of a sound, gesture, or caption can amplify exposure while eroding control over where content travels and how it is read. What seems playful at the level of form is experienced as labour at the level of participation. Visibility must be timed, calibrated, and continuously managed to remain legible without becoming dangerous. Calibrated intimacy becomes a practice of risk management, where the conditions of being seen are constantly negotiated in relation to potential harm.

Queer creators use algospeak to manage the costs of legibility. Steen et al. (2023) show that creators use coded alternatives in anticipation of content restrictions they experience as inconsistent, inaccurate, or biased. Direct self-description may expose some creators to removal, harassment, or circulation beyond their intended audience. These substitutions do not escape the platform's attention economy; they remain within it, generating engagement and data while allowing creators to manage who can decode the signal. Steen et al. (2023) frame this as algorithmic literacy. It also involves affective labour requiring ongoing attentiveness to which terms have been flagged, which gestures have travelled too far, and when a code has become too widely recognisable to remain safe. The protective capacity of such codes is temporary. As coded terms circulate more widely, they may become recognisable to moderation systems, hostile audiences, advertisers, or users outside the communities in which they initially carried meaning. A substitution that once limited legibility can therefore acquire the same exposure as the term it replaced. Creators must monitor these shifts and revise their language as codes become visible to the systems and audiences they were intended to navigate.

Algospeak consequently produces provisional opacity rather than a secure withdrawal from platform legibility. It creates intervals in which expression can continue while limiting some forms of recognition, but those intervals narrow as repetition increases recognisability. The labour involved is recursive: users identify a risk, develop a coded response, watch that response circulate, and alter it once its protective ambiguity begins to erode. This movement links algospeak to tremblement. Expression remains possible, but the terms through which it can remain safe are unstable and require continuous adjustment.

Burchell's (2024) notion of constant connection clarifies how this labour operates. TikTok rewards continuous presence and rhythmic participation, generating affective pressure to remain visible. Looping content invites repetition and creates expectations of continued engagement. Withdrawal risks disappearance from the feed, while continued participation intensifies legibility. Queer users are thus drawn into cycles of recognition that are difficult to leave without cost. Participation becomes a temporal demand, requiring sustained alignment with the platform's pace and evaluative logics.

The bind intensifies as trans and queer content documenting identity, embodiment, and relational life circulates over time. Transition narratives, couple formats, and scenes of intimacy function as claims to presence and continuity, especially in contexts where queer life is otherwise marginalised or erased. Yet these same formats expose users to surveillance, commodification, and misrecognition. Visibility becomes a calculated risk rather than an unambiguous good. Recognition is conditional, dependent on remaining legible within platform norms while navigating the possibility of being misread or appropriated.

Practices of opacity therefore become central to how queer users survive platformed exposure. Decisions about what to show, how to show it, and to whom are shaped by an awareness that platforms extract value from legibility while offering limited protection in return. In this terrain, withholding, ambiguity, and partial disclosure function as tactics of care. As Glissant (1997) reminds us through the right to opacity, not all lives must be rendered fully 'knowable' to dominant systems. On TikTok, opacity operates as an active negotiation within infrastructures that demand recognition. It interrupts demands for continuous visibility, creating moments of withdrawal within systems that privilege exposure. For these users, opacity may become necessary for navigating visibility, regardless of whether it is consciously chosen.

The layered negotiation of visibility and risk is also evident in queer remix cultures that circulate through TikTok sound and movement. Certain viral audios draw on longer histories in which queer communities have used repetition, stylisation, and coded performance to manage exposure, sustain community, and enable recognition. On TikTok, looping is thus both a technical affordance and an affective condition, producing moments of connection and affirmation alongside heightened vulnerability. This repetition is also a form of relational signalling, enabling users to recognise one another through shared codes while maintaining degrees of ambiguity. Such strategies precede the platforms through which they now circulate. Queer communities have long used coded language, stylised embodiment, humour, performance, and selective disclosure to enable recognition under conditions where direct identification carried social or material risk. Platform cultures inherit these practices while altering their scale and durability. A gesture or phrase that

once depended on a situated audience can now be reproduced as a searchable and monetisable template, detached from the cultural conditions that made it meaningful. TikTok expands the possibility of recognition while weakening control over context, authorship, and interpretation.

This tension is especially significant where platform trends draw on Black queer and ballroom vocabularies. Repetition can make these forms widely available as resources for affiliation and self-fashioning, but it can also flatten their histories as they circulate through decontextualised audio and aesthetic conventions. Platform recognition may therefore intensify visibility while obscuring the communities and practices from which recognisable forms emerge. The resulting circulation is relational and extractive at once, sustaining queer recognition while translating culturally situated expression into platform engagement.

The repetition built into TikTok trends makes recognition dependent on continued participation and the ongoing management of exposure. It offers intermittent recognition while drawing users more deeply into the temporal rhythms and evaluative logics of the feed. Queer visibility on TikTok therefore moves between relation and exposure, possibility and precarity. This instability gives tremblement lived form as users negotiate the tensions between being seen and remaining safe, recognition and protection. Here, calibrated intimacy reaches its limit as alignment gives way to instability and intimacy is drawn into a more precarious register through repetition, expectation, and exposure.

Tremblement, Opacity, and the Affective Cost of Visibility

The effort required to sustain calibrated visibility introduces an affective cost. Participation is accompanied by low-level vigilance, including continuous awareness of how content might travel and be interpreted. Ordinary practices of posting and watching become inflected by the possibility of misrecognition, exposure, or unwanted attention. This vigilance does not necessarily register as overt anxiety. It is often more diffuse, embedded in habits of checking, adjusting, and second-guessing. This

vigilance is anticipatory. It is directed towards harms that have not necessarily occurred but remain possible because the conditions of circulation cannot be secured in advance. Users may revisit captions, monitor comments, adjust privacy settings, archive content, or reconsider whether a post should remain visible as its audience changes. Such practices extend participation beyond the moment of posting. The user must remain oriented towards the possible future life of content, including encounters with audiences who were not imagined when it was produced. The affective cost of visibility therefore lies partly in the maintenance of this anticipatory orientation. Even in the absence of overt harassment, participation can require sustained attention to what might happen, where content might travel, and how recognition could become exposure.

Opacity must be distinguished here from simple invisibility. Strategic opacity can involve ambiguity, coded expression, selective disclosure, or temporary withdrawal, allowing users to remain relationally present without making themselves fully available to platform classification or audience scrutiny. Invisibility, by contrast, may be imposed through moderation, suppression, hostile attention, or the expectation that safety requires silence. The distinction matters because opacity retains relation while limiting the demand for complete legibility. It does not necessarily reject visibility but modulates its terms. Yet the capacity to do this is uneven. Some users can experiment with ambiguity or withdraw without losing access to community, while others depend on platform visibility for recognition, support, or belonging.

Tremblement names the instability of this position. It is neither a settled strategy nor a temporary failure of calibration. It describes the affective work of remaining open to relation when the conditions of recognition cannot be stabilised. Users continue to seek connection while anticipating that visibility may produce consequences beyond their control. Tremblement therefore registers the movement between presence and withdrawal, recognition and misrecognition, disclosure and protection. It gives conceptual form to an intimacy that remains possible but cannot be secured.

The capacity to manage this vigilance is unevenly distributed. For users whose identities or expressions are more likely to be contested, visibility carries additional weight and requires heightened sensitivity to context,

audience, and timing. Decisions about whether to post, how to frame a video, or whether to participate in a trend are shaped by this awareness. Intimacy becomes a matter of ongoing calibration between exposure and protection. This marks a limit of calibrated intimacy. Where earlier chapters traced how closeness emerges through alignment and repetition, here connection depends on remaining within acceptable bounds of visibility. Once content exceeds those bounds, recognition becomes unstable, and the possibility of connection is accompanied by the risk of being seen in ways that cannot be controlled. Opacity, in this context, operates as a situated practice of limiting legibility while remaining within the platform's circuits of visibility, allowing relation to persist without full exposure (Glissant, 1997).

Calibrated intimacy depends on the capacity to remain visible without incurring disproportionate risk, a condition that is unevenly available. Platform infrastructures therefore sort users according to who can bear the costs of being seen. Intimacy is consequently reconfigured as a relation sustained through the management of exposure, timing, and control.

Conclusion

Tinder's geo-fencing alert and biometric verification demands show how desire and bodily legitimacy become conditional. TikTok's looping circulation reveals a related instability, as content moves beyond its intended audience. Across both platforms, infrastructures of connection recalibrate exposure and shape who can bear the risks of being seen. Glissant's (1997) concept of tremblement clarifies this instability. Tremblement names a mode of relation that remains unsettled and responsive to uneven conditions of visibility. Opacity sustains relation on different terms by limiting what platforms can capture, know, and render legible. It preserves the right to remain irreducible within relation. Intimacy on platforms is ambient, infrastructural, and shaped by asymmetries of risk, recognition, and power. Focusing on these conditions reveals the limits of alignment and the necessity of alternative modes of relation that do not depend on continuous visibility. Platforms produce intimacy while setting the conditions under which it must be negotiated and contested. Tinder's silence

in South Africa shows how platform risk models can register formal legality while missing lived vulnerability.

The limit of calibrated intimacy lies in the unequal capacity to calibrate. Some users can experiment with visibility, absorb misrecognition, withdraw temporarily, or leave a platform without losing access to relation. Others must regulate their presence continuously because unwanted recognition carries greater legal, social, or material consequences. Calibration therefore depends on resources that are unevenly distributed, including legal protection, technical knowledge, social support, economic security, and access to alternative spaces of connection. Platforms place the labour of managing exposure onto users while retaining control over classification, circulation, and access. The problem extends beyond the possibility that calibration may fail. Users are made responsible for navigating risks produced by infrastructures whose operations and consequences they cannot fully govern. This continuing negotiation is captured by tremblement: inhabiting visibility without fully surrendering to its demands.

The next chapter moves into domestic space, where care and surveillance become entangled through the intimate tracking of bodies within households and families. Here, visibility is framed as safety.

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5

Surveillance, Intimacy, and the Soft Power of Apps

Abstract This chapter examines how intimacy becomes entangled with care, surveillance, and responsibility in platformed environments. Focusing on Life360, smart-home systems, and menstrual tracking, I explore how visibility and bodily legibility become conditions of safety, reassurance, and relational accountability. Building on earlier chapters, the chapter shows how affective legibility operates through practices of monitoring, where knowing where someone is, whether they have arrived, or whether they are 'okay' becomes a form of care that is both enabling and constraining. These systems extend emotional governance into the domain of protection, aligning intimacy with infrastructures that organise attention, anticipation, and responsibility. In app culture, care and control become mutually constitutive, producing attachments that feel necessary while introducing new dependencies. Attending to moments of hesitation, negotiation, and refusal reveals the limits of this alignment and the ongoing work required to inhabit it.

Keywords Care • Surveillance • Digital intimacy • Emotional governance • Soft power • Platformed safety • Life360 • Smart-home systems • Menstrual tracking • Reproductive data

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Introduction

In the 2025 film *The Accountant 2*, a scene captures the tenuous boundary between smart infrastructures designed for comfort and their potential for exploitation. Hackers identify a bystander who has inadvertently photographed a suspect, gain access to her computer and smart-home network and manipulate her connected devices while retrieving the image. Her domestic space, presumed private, is rendered permeable. The scene resonates with Bucher's (2018) account of algorithmic infrastructures that mediate users' environments through operations that are often difficult to perceive and control. This is also reminiscent of Katja Brøgger's (2018) concept of soft governance, where non-coercive infrastructures persuade users to participate in their own governance through emotional incentives.

This chapter examines the emotional governance of protective surveillance technologies such as Life360, smart-home systems, and co-presence platforms, tracing how infrastructures designed around care, safety, and convenience shape affective life and organise how intimacy, responsibility, and risk are felt and managed. Everyday practices of tracking and visibility are infused with emotional imperatives, including care, anxiety, reassurance, and guilt. These practices are structured through logics that promise safety while reshaping relational intimacy. The chapter further contributes to debates on digital intimacy by showing how surveillance is a relational practice organised through care, with visibility as a moral and emotional obligation.

When I first saw this film scene in a cinema in Lusaka, Zambia, the audience reacted with laughter rather than alarm. That response marked a distance between the film's smart-home imaginary and the infrastructural conditions through which the scene was encountered. This moment illuminates the situated nature of emotional responses to digital architectures. The encounter shows how infrastructural conditions shape the ways surveillance is felt, imagined, and narrated, illuminating the uneven circulation of affect described by Ahmed (2004). In highly platformed societies, protective surveillance might be internalised as an intimate, almost unobtrusive necessity; in other contexts, it might remain

speculative, or even absurd. The laughter in the Lusaka cinema revealed the uneven emotional geographies of platformed life, showing that the soft control of apps is neither uniformly internalised nor universally experienced.

These forms of monitoring can be understood as soft surveillance, a particular articulation of the broader soft power outlined in Chap. 1. I use soft surveillance to describe monitoring embedded in infrastructures of care, convenience, and personalisation. It solicits participation by framing visibility and data sharing as expressions of trust, safety, and responsibility (Bucher, 2018; Andrejevic, 2011). Within these arrangements, tracking becomes a habitual infrastructure of feeling, shaping expectations of availability, responsiveness, and moralised presence: apps script where we are and how we are expected to feel about being tracked: with reassurance, with guilt, and sometimes with affection. Soft surveillance is where this book's central concerns converge most concretely, since platforms do more than log location; they turn presence and absence into emotionally charged data, shaping how care is felt, expressed, and withheld. The chapter attends to the ambivalence, negotiations, and small refusals through which users manage these intimate yet uneven architectures. That unevenness is not incidental. Arora (2019, 2024) argues that platform cultures in the majority world are entangled with infrastructural gaps, intermittent connectivity, and layers of informal use that resist seamless integration, so that what has become habitual in saturated contexts remains speculative or externally imposed elsewhere. The laughter in the Lusaka cinema signalled exactly this critical distance from the infrastructural saturation that smart-home imaginaries assume.

Protective Surveillance as Care

I first began using Life360 as the parent of a teenager. At the time, nearly every other parent I knew was already using the app to track their children's movements. There was an unspoken sense that if you were not using it, you were being careless or insufficiently attentive. After my son got into trouble for being somewhere he was not supposed to be, we

started using the app too. It felt like a necessary step, a digital extension of parental responsibility. The app offered a gentle reassurance, letting me know where he was without needing to call or text. Later, he told me that some of his friends had figured out ways to resist the app's presence by turning off their mobile data or Wi-Fi so their location could not update, temporarily slipping out of its digital grip. That small act, turning off a network signal, became a tactic, a way of reclaiming space and ambiguity in a system that demanded continuous visibility. As Sandvik (2020) argues, tracking technologies like Life360 render children's movements into data for monitoring and governance.

Children's digital bodies are produced through ongoing data collection and interpretation, a process Lupton and Williamson (2017) describe as the dataveillance of the child. Now that my son is an adult, we use Life360 reciprocally as a safety tool. What has emerged is closer to what I described in Chap. 3 as locational intimacy, a felt sense of connection produced through the quiet awareness of where someone is and where they are going. I keep my location visible when I go on solo hikes, and he checks in occasionally to see where I am. I look to see if he is close to home so I can ask him to pick something up or offer a lift. What once felt like a parental imposition now operates as a shared, negotiated infrastructure of care. The infrastructure remained the same while its relational meaning changed. Location moved from evidence of trustworthiness to a resource for mutual safety and logistical coordination. As Pettegrew and Day (2015) note, the integration of mobile technologies into relational life transforms interpersonal dynamics, introducing new expectations around presence, accessibility, and accountability.

My use of the app shifted from parental supervision to reciprocal safety checking, while its underlying architecture remained unchanged. Algorithmic systems actively structure affective relations by determining what becomes visible, legible, and actionable (Bucher, 2018). But in this infrastructure, visibility is never neutral; it becomes moralised, attached to ideas of care, trust, responsibility, and risk.

Tracking apps like Life360 operate as part of an affective economy (Ahmed, 2004), circulating feelings that stick to certain practices and relationships. The interface associates tracking with care and visibility with safety, while interruptions to location sharing can invite suspicion.

These emotional associations are shaped through interface design, push notifications, and a broader cultural discourse that equates parental attentiveness with digital oversight. In highly mediated parenting cultures, platforms like Life360 extend the domestic gaze into a continuous temporal field, offering what Chun (2016) calls a habitual infrastructure of reassurance, where checking the app becomes a background rhythm or daily routine. This is affective legibility operating at the level of care: the platform reports location while framing what that information means, translating presence and absence into readable signals of safety, trust, or neglect. As Illouz (2007) argues, emotional life under capitalism becomes increasingly subject to rationalisation and optimisation, and Life360 exemplifies this dynamic, rendering relational care as data. Life360 reshaped the relationship by making location available for continuous interpretation. Mobile technologies subtly redefine relational norms, introducing new forms of mediated care, accountability, and emotional management that become naturalised within everyday life (Pettegrew & Day, 2015). The app blurs the boundaries between affection and surveillance, between autonomy and obligation, scripting a new mode of relational presence that is continuous, negotiated, and infrastructurally dependent.

Yet, as my son and his friends demonstrated, these infrastructures are not always passively accepted. Small acts like disabling Wi-Fi or restricting data serve as tactical refusals, gestures that introduce friction into systems designed for seamlessness. These interruptions can be read as tactics of partial opacity, creating temporary ambiguity within a system organised around continuous visibility. This negotiation between visibility and withdrawal, compliance and resistance, is key to understanding how protective surveillance functions as a soft but deeply emotional form of governance. The adult-to-adult use of the app in my more recent experience adds another layer. The same infrastructure now mediates a different emotional relation, yet the architecture remains unchanged. The shift lies in the relational meanings attached to it, and in how users collectively inhabit, negotiate, or quietly subvert its expectations.

Interface as Infrastructure: How Life360 Scripts Emotional Visibility

While the emotional logics of tracking are shaped over time, they are also encoded directly into the interface itself. Life360 actively frames location sharing as an affective necessity. The app's interface presents a map-centric view in which each member of a designated Circle is visualised as a moving avatar, often with labels like At Home, In Transit, or At School. This visibility becomes a baseline condition that establishes continuous location access as default.

The language used within the app reinforces this norm. Arrival notifications announce when a Circle member reaches or leaves a saved place, giving movement a narrative of safety and completion. These are the ordinary signals through which locational intimacy is scripted into family life. Additional features such as Place Alerts, Crash Detection, and driving analysis extend this logic. Speeding and driving-event notifications shift the platform from recording movement to evaluating it. These alerts merge visibility with evaluation. The app scripts care by making missing data feel emotionally consequential.

Bucher's (2018) account of interfaces as active infrastructures clarifies how Life360 narrates safety and prompts vigilance. Life360's design performs emotional labour by narrating safety, prompting worry, and rewarding attentiveness. The interface serves as both affective amplifier and disciplinary tool, organising how concern is expressed, where trust is presumed, and when worry is triggered. What feels like watching over becomes a mode of watching through, seeing others via the platform's language, timing, and framing. Life360 markets itself as a tool for parental care and relational security yet also operates within a capitalist economy of fear, where heightened anxieties about safety create demand for subscription upgrades and expanded surveillance features. The emotional labour of care is thus managed through platforms, commodified and folded into revenue models that profit from the amplification of parental worry.

Such interface dynamics are often gendered and generational. Tracking technologies can intensify gendered expectations that women manage

family vigilance and respond to alerts, extending dynamics of emotional labour that Hochschild (1983) identified. In households where women already carry disproportionate responsibility for family coordination, tracking technologies may extend that labour into continuous digital vigilance. Life360 extends domestic surveillance and labour, outsourcing emotional vigilance to an app that re-inscribes caregiving as constant, frictionless, and digitally optimised. The platform repositions maternal care as a form of ambient data-driven vigilance, folding affective labour into algorithmic infrastructures.

While platforms like Life360 reconfigure emotional life through mobile tracking, smart-home technologies extend these dynamics into the very architecture of domestic space. In both cases, technologies scaffold emotions, structuring how care, security, and responsibility are enacted. Where Life360 organises relational presence through ambient surveillance, smart-home devices promise comfort, efficiency, and safety through infrastructures of automation and optimisation. Yet both forms of mediation embed emotional expectations into daily life, normalising responsiveness, anticipation, and frictionless management. Striphas (2023) reminds us that platforms like Life360 operate as "courts of algorithmic appeal" (p. 13), subtly arbitrating what counts as presence, attentiveness, and relational responsibility. The emotional charge of apps like Life360 lies in their technical affordances alongside the ongoing production of data that underpins relationships. As Burgess et al. (2022) argue, contemporary data cultures are shaped by "the mundane practices through which people live with, make sense of, and resist datafication in everyday life" (p. 4). Location tracking, for instance, becomes care through its incorporation into routines of reassurance, anxiety, and familial attachment. This is the culture of 'little data': small, persistent traces that acquire meaning over time and come to structure interpersonal dynamics. When I open Life360 to see if my son is near a grocery store to ask him to run an errand, I am not seeking to control his movement but performing a kind of data-mediated relationality. Yet even this soft surveillance contributes to a broader affective infrastructure in which emotional responsibility is increasingly calibrated through apps. Life360 operates as an infrastructure of protective surveillance, where knowing someone's location becomes an expression of care. This care is scripted

through the app's defaults, including location alerts, battery warnings, and movement histories, which produce rhythms of reassurance and passive checking. The same logic operates in smart-home systems, where the promise of convenience and safety produces a more total form of affective governance, one that saturates domestic space itself.

In South Africa, protective surveillance enters a landscape of uneven public safety and gendered vulnerability, part of the infrastructural conditions set out in Chap. 1. Location sharing can feel necessary because responsibility for anticipating danger is often carried within households and personal networks. The platform converts this existing labour of checking and accompaniment into continuous data, shifting responsibility towards users while selling reassurance through an interface.

Optimising the Domestic

Smart-home technologies extend these forms of emotional governance into the architecture of domestic space. The device draws comfort into a system of remote management, encouraging me to treat convenience as something that should be anticipated and optimised. As Zuboff (2019) argues, platforms treat experiences and behaviours as resources for economic extraction. In the smart-home ecosystem, emotional patterns such as comfort, anticipation, guilt, and care are rendered into data streams that can be predicted, monetised, and optimised. The frictionless convenience promised by smart infrastructures is thus intimately tied to new forms of surveillance capitalism, where domestic routines are folded into broader circuits of data capture and behavioural modification.

Smart domesticity binds convenience to surveillance. Dominant framings of smart homes often privilege their technical capacities while obscuring the complex emotional and relational dynamics they configure (Solaimani et al., 2015). My devices, a smart fan, lamp, the long-desired smart kettle, are companions in an emerging infrastructural choreography of domestic life. A colleague once described a robot vacuum as their 'lockdown saviour', suggesting that its value lay partly in the rhythm and sense of assistance it introduced during confinement.

Devices like Alexa or Ring automate domestic tasks by issuing reminders and alerts of spatial presence. A smart thermostat records preferences, rhythms, and responses, making temperature adjustment part of a wider process of behavioural learning. This transforms the home into what Brøgger (2018) describes as a soft-governed assemblage, where the user is both agent and subject of optimisation. A friend jokingly told me how her smart scale asked if she was a new user because she had gained some weight between weigh-ins. The device registered change but framed it as an anomaly. What might once have been a private fluctuation was recast as a deviation, quietly flagged by the system itself.

Pettegrew and Day (2015) point out that smart technology introduces new forms of mediated relationality, in which interpersonal and object relations are increasingly shaped by devices that 'speak' on our behalf. In my own experience, these devices quietly shifted how I understood my relationship to care, rest, and autonomy. The fact that I had not yet turned on the kettle using my smartphone felt like a failure to perform the promise embedded in the purchase. Even mundane interactions are shaped by this soft governance. When driving, my car requires confirmation that I am stationary before I can change a playlist. Framed as safety, the friction marks autonomy as conditional. Smart technologies govern through the anticipation of convenience and the discomfort of failing to use them as intended.

These tensions are dramatised in the 2025 Netflix series *Cassandra*, created by Benjamin Gutsche, in which a domestic AI designed to protect a family begins to curate and control their emotional lives under the guise of concern. Care becomes overreach when a system interprets well-being on the user's behalf and acts without meaningful consent. The threat lies in emotional saturation, whereby a system feels on our behalf and then decides for us.

Yet as I acquire smart devices, I experience a persistent sense of guilt. Living in South Africa, where access to electricity, housing, and reliable internet remains uneven, makes the purchase of a smart kettle feel ethically fraught. The pleasure I derive from managing my home through these devices is inseparable from the knowledge that such infrastructural abundance is an unevenly distributed privilege. Ahmed's (2004) idea of sticky emotions is useful, as guilt adheres to objects and practices,

accumulating an affective weight that cannot easily be detached from the conditions that make such comfort possible. Smart devices tether us to wider geographies of exclusion and inequality as much as to the homes or routines they promise to simplify. My excitement about smart domesticity carries the trace of infrastructural injustice, showing how platformed comfort remains personal and political. The design of smart-home ecosystems capitalises on the emotional desire for frictionless comfort, transforming convenience itself into a consumable service. As Zuboff (2019) emphasises, the more granular the data about our lives becomes, the more it can be harvested to refine predictive systems and monetise affective habits. Each device purchase thus extends the platform's reach into emotional life, embedding domestic routines within larger economies of behavioural prediction and consumer nudging.

One morning, a colleague sent me a screenshot from his phone that neatly encapsulates the emotional overreach of infrastructural platforms. Uber had sent him a push notification reminding him to 'leave now' to make it to work by 7:45 am. But it was out of term and he was not teaching; there was no class, and no urgency. He was irritated. Uber's notification, intended as a helpful prompt, became a nagging imposition, a reminder from an algorithm that had mistaken past patterns for present needs. In his screenshot, another alert was also unintentionally visible to me: a motion detection alert from his Ring camera. His domestic surveillance system had registered some activity, even as his mobility platform instructed him to move. Together, the alerts imposed a rhythm of urgency and vigilance that no longer matched his circumstances. Uber treated past routine as present obligation, while Ring framed domestic space as a continuous site of potential intrusion. Bucher (2018) describes this as algorithmic attunement, where systems learn from past behaviour to predict future needs even after those needs have shifted.

The smart home organises movement, responsiveness, and domestic care through continuous prompts. It facilitates domestic life while modelling it as responsive, frictionless, and continuously attentive. I realise I am accumulating a new kind of domestic consciousness shaped by the soft demands of presence, availability, and emotional productivity. Yet this emotional productivity is increasingly captured within broader platform economies, where rhythms of comfort, care, and responsiveness

generate valuable behavioural data, feeding into cycles of surveillance and commercialisation. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, platform culture rewards a marketable form of gendered authenticity, visibility, and emotional transparency that falls unevenly on women. Even minor acts like hiding a fitness activity (see Chap. 2) or delaying a response to a text message could be read as minor resistances to these soft scripts of availability and affective labour.

Tracking the Intimate Body

I see a related dynamic in my partner's use of Garmin's menstrual-cycle tracking. The platform allows users to record mood, physical symptoms, sexual activity, and sex drive alongside period and fertility predictions. These categories translate intimate bodily experience into structured, reviewable data. I find this unsettling, as if something deeply personal is being rendered overly legible. She does not experience it this way. For her it is useful, a layer of information that helps make sense of her body. Our different responses show that the same data can register as care for one user and overexposure for another. The app does not force disclosure, but it quietly normalises a mode of self-relation in which even desire becomes something to be tracked, anticipated, and optimised. My discomfort concerns the platform's conversion of intimate bodily states into actionable data. Period-tracking apps operate through a similar logic to the fitness platforms discussed earlier, but the stakes are differently weighted. Where a fitness score renders effort and recovery legible, menstrual-tracking applications convert hormonal cycles, mood, reproductive health, and libido into continuous streams of bodily and self-reported data. Self-knowledge and bodily autonomy are produced within an extractive architecture. Ford, De Togni and Miller (2021) describe how users engage in what they call hormonal health practices that blur the boundaries between medical knowledge, emotional self-regulation, and neoliberal self-management. Users report feeling less 'at the mercy' of their cycles, yet this sense of agency is produced through a mode of self-relation in which intimate bodily experience is made legible, quantifiable, and algorithmically actionable (Amelang, 2022). These apps function as

techniques of the self in Foucault's (1988) sense, as practices of self-care become intertwined with data production and governance.

These dynamics are compounded by the opacity of how such data circulates. Research on period-tracking applications documents uneven compliance with data-protection requirements, third-party tracking, and limited transparency about how sensitive reproductive data circulates. Apps that present themselves as feminist and health-forward often default to heteronormative, binary framings of gender and reproduction, while simultaneously monetising the very bodily experiences they claim to support. The construction of hormonal health as a category is both an epistemological shift and a commercial strategy that reconfigures gendered embodiment through a medico-technical frame while reinforcing the idea that bodies require management, optimisation, and external interpretation. Marketed as empowerment, these apps can make self-knowledge conditional on ceding control of the data through which that knowledge is produced. The soft power of these platforms is legible here in its clearest form: care and control arrive together scripted into an interface that feels personal, even intimate, while remaining structured by logics the user does not set and cannot easily audit.

Menstrual tracking extends protective surveillance into bodily self-interpretation. Platformed infrastructures reproduce capitalist extraction as well as deeply embedded patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. The soft architectures of care that shape domestic and relational surveillance are part of the gendered logics of data colonialism: systems that differentially extract, govern, and commodify emotional labour, reproductive practices, and relational presence. Contemporary digital infrastructures extend histories of both imperial domination and patriarchal governance, disciplining bodies and feelings in the name of safety, personalisation, and empowerment. Emotional governance, as Chap. 1 established, is not reducible to surveillance or data extraction alone; it includes the shaping of self-relation: the ways users come to interpret their own feelings, bodies, and relational responsibilities through platform categories. In the smart-home ecosystem, that self-relation becomes folded into the ordinary rhythms of comfort, guilt, and anticipation that devices quietly structure.

Negotiating Protective Surveillance

As smart domestic infrastructures normalise responsiveness and frictionless care, they also script particular emotional responses into everyday life. Visibility is equated with trust, automation with security, and optimisation with love. Yet these emotional scripts are not universally accepted. Users navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist the affective demands of these platforms. I have turned off my blue ticks on WhatsApp, and it is one of the smallest but most satisfying forms of refusal I practice. Without these read receipts, I no longer feel compelled to explain why I have not responded immediately or to manage the quiet emotional labour of availability. It is a simple technical setting but shifts the relational script. It grants me a margin of opacity in a platform designed to produce seamless accountability. This act aligns with what Plaut (2023) describes as strategic illiteracy, a purposeful, small-scale refusal to participate fully in infrastructures of communication that expect constant visibility and responsiveness. Similarly, in Strava, the app discussed in Chap. 2, I sometimes choose to hide certain activities from public view. When I tracked a conference presentation as a workout, I deliberately set it to private, aware that making it visible would reframe it within a performative economy of achievement rather than a personal, situated act of documentation (see Chap. 2). Choosing not to display an activity becomes a form of informed refusal, a selective withdrawal from the demands of visibility embedded in algorithmically structured social life.

These refusals intervene in normative data cultures by limiting the obligations attached to visibility. Burgess et al. (2022) note that everyday data practices "carry affective and moral weight," especially when they deviate from the expected flows of visibility and responsiveness (p. 98). The platform architectures of WhatsApp or Life360 encode expectations about how and when one should be available. Choosing not to respond immediately, or withholding location data, are forms of resistance against what they describe as the participatory pressures of platformed life. Refusal limits the platform's claim on availability.

Micro-acts of refusal preserve participation while creating limited spaces of opacity, friction, and emotional autonomy. They represent a

cultivation of disconnection as a long-term, strategic practice, an unassuming form of world-building against the grain of platformed life (Plaut, 2023). These tactics limit how availability and responsiveness are rendered available for monetisation. The practices create situated limits on legibility while preserving participation. Affective legibility remains open to negotiation.

In my own digital life, these decisions offer a way to reclaim fragments of emotional autonomy. Pausing a Life360 update, like muting a read receipt, adjusts the terms on which one remains visible. Users negotiate emotional governance by adjusting these terms, preserving participation while limiting the obligations attached to availability. Importantly, these negotiations are context-specific. They are shaped by relational dynamics, social expectations, and platform affordances. A user might feel comfortable hiding a Strava workout from acquaintances but not from a partner. Tactical opacity is thus a situated practice, relational and often contingent on affective hierarchies of trust, intimacy, and obligation.

These acts of refusal and tactical opacity emerge within particular infrastructural conditions. However, these conditions are far from uniform. Returning to the Lusaka cinema experience, it becomes clear that platformed surveillance technologies are not emotionally universal. They are filtered through histories of technological access, distrust, and infrastructural instability. In contexts where platform penetration is patchy and smart-home imaginaries remain speculative rather than routine realities, the affective economies of surveillance operate differently. Laughter at the idea of a hackable smart home, scepticism towards digital monitoring, and ambivalence about emotional availability through apps like Life360 are situated emotional responses to infrastructural gaps and histories of exclusion. Disconnection or opacity is not always an individual choice but often an infrastructural condition. In South Africa, scheduled and unscheduled interruptions to electricity and connectivity repeatedly suspend platform visibility. Platform monitoring presumes continuous connectivity. When electricity or data access fails, visibility is interrupted independently of user intention, exposing the material conditions required for emotional governance to operate. Protective surveillance is therefore inhabited on unequal terms. Some users accept continuous

visibility as care, others negotiate what they disclose, while infrastructural failure can withdraw visibility independently of intention.

Conclusion

Protective surveillance settles into intimate life through ordinary acts of checking. Arrival notifications, location updates, domestic alerts, and bodily predictions gradually acquire moral meaning, teaching users to read visibility as care and missing information as a potential cause for concern. These expectations rarely need to be stated explicitly. They become habitual through repetition, until reachability appears to be a baseline condition of presence.

This chapter has shown how platforms organise intimacy through the promise of protection. Life360 turns family movement into a shared field of reassurance and responsibility. Smart-home systems draw domestic comfort into routines of monitoring and optimisation. Menstrual tracking extends these processes into bodily self-interpretation, where intimate states become categories for recording, prediction, and intervention. Across these contexts, care and control develop through the same infrastructures, even though their effects remain uneven. Protective surveillance can support safety and coordination while extending gendered labour, commercialising anxiety, and creating new obligations of availability. Users negotiate these demands by limiting read receipts, pausing location sharing, and withholding activities from public view. Infrastructural interruption can also suspend visibility independently of choice, exposing the material conditions on which platformed care depends. In South Africa, these systems enter existing practices of accompaniment and vigilance shaped by uneven public safety and provision. Platforms formalise that labour through data while transferring further responsibility to households and individuals.

Chapter 6 draws these arguments together by examining how affective legibility, calibrated intimacy and emotional governance converge with *tremblement* marking the limits of this alignment.

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6

Conclusion

Abstract This chapter synthesises the book's four concepts: affective legibility, calibrated intimacy, emotional governance, and the soft power of apps. It positions them as a framework that brings platform studies into dialogue with the sociology of emotions and clarifies how the chapters move from embodied interpretation through ambient closeness and unstable visibility to protective surveillance. South Africa functions as an epistemic vantage point from which assumptions of continuous connectivity, reliable infrastructure, and evenly distributed safety are tested. Critical autoethnography makes platform power available for analysis where it is felt in ordinary use. The soft power of apps depends on material continuity and sustained attachment, leaving it vulnerable to friction, interruption, and refusal.

Keywords Digital intimacy • Calibrated intimacy • Affective legibility • Emotional governance • Soft power of apps • Critical autoethnography • South Africa • Infrastructural unevenness

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During a work trip, I noticed two women sharing a restaurant table while each watched a separate screen. Each had propped a smartphone on a stand, and both were wearing wireless earbuds, glancing up only occasionally to take a bite. They appeared at ease within this divided arrangement of attention. Their togetherness was distributed across the table, their screens, and the relationships sustained beyond the immediate encounter.

Platforms redistribute presence across bodies, devices, and routines. They participate in interpreting effort, closeness, visibility, and care, embedding emotional life within systems of adjustment and feedback. Platforms extend attention and recognition beyond the immediate encounter, shaping what it means to be with others and how that togetherness is felt. They organise these forms of attachment, mediating how users know themselves through data and orient themselves towards others through feeds, recommendations, and ambient co-presence.

This book began with the body. Before turning to ambient closeness, precarious visibility, and protective surveillance, the book located intimacy in effort, fatigue, and recovery. In the Atlantis Half Marathon of Chap. 2, I ran with my watch setting the pace, translating bodily effort into data that came to matter as much as the kilometres. From this embodied ground, the argument moved outward. A breakup playlist reorganised itself around grief, absorbing my skips and replays until it no longer felt entirely mine. The playlist marked the movement from bodily interpretation to ambient closeness. A Google Maps notification announced 'Welcome home' before I had reached my door, extending that closeness into the texture of everyday movement. A Tinder alert in a country where queerness is criminalised turned a space of desire into a zone of risk, exposing the danger that attends visibility. A Life360 circle shifted from parental oversight towards mutual care, as watching became an obligation framed as protection.

Across the chapters of this book, the four concepts I propose are developed through their empirical application. Affective legibility names a normative process through which sleep scores, fitness rankings, safety prompts, and match notifications frame how bodily and relational experiences should be understood and what responses should follow. Calibrated intimacy names the relational form produced through repeated

adjustment, as closeness is assembled through algorithmic tuning, interface cues, and habitual use. Emotional governance operates at a broader level, organising emotional life through interface design, notification rhythms, and feedback loops that make some responses feel rewarding and cast others as signs of neglect. The chapters preserve the distinction between these concepts: calibrated intimacy names a relational form, while emotional governance names the wider organisation within which that form develops. The soft power of apps emerges through familiarity, reassurance, relevance, and routine, which sustain attachment and allow platform arrangements to be experienced as personally meaningful and freely chosen. It identifies one mode of platform power within a wider field that also encompasses surveillance, exclusion, and constraint.

The book's theoretical contribution lies in holding connection and governance within a single frame, showing how connection itself becomes a means through which emotional life is interpreted and organised. Platform power is experienced through attachment and through the repeated adjustments that attachment invites. Chapter 2 grounded affective legibility in the body, showing how metrics interpret effort through normative categories that bodily sensation can confirm or contest. Chapter 3 developed calibrated intimacy as a form of closeness sustained through continual adjustment. Chapter 4 tested this relational form under conditions of unstable visibility, where tremblement named relations that could not be stabilised through calibration. Chapter 5 developed emotional governance through protective surveillance, showing how Life360, smart-home systems, and menstrual-tracking apps make location, presence, and bodily states available for recording, prediction, and intervention. It also showed how tracking can be appropriated from below for collective safety and accountability, particularly under conditions of gendered violence. The entanglement of care and control therefore does not always resolve into governance (Gqola, 2015; Arora, 2024). Across these settings, legibility and adjustment connect the datafied body, ambient closeness, precarious visibility, and protective watching.

The framework brings platform studies into dialogue with the sociology of emotions by connecting scholarship on infrastructure and algorithmic power with an account of feeling as socially organised. It directs attention to the interfaces and routines through which apps interpret

experience, organise attachment, and turn connection into a medium of governance. Infrastructural unevenness runs through the argument. The soft power of apps operates unevenly, shaped by users' social positions, locations, and access to material infrastructure. Load shedding sometimes left my watch only partially charged at the start of a race, interrupting the promise of continuous measurement in ways the device itself could not register. A Tinder travel warning received in a country where same-sex intimacy is criminalised made desire conditional and exposed the uneven distribution of safety. These instances show how emotional governance is embedded in the material conditions of access and in the histories through which technologies arrive, are adopted, refused, and adapted.

The South African vantage point makes these conditions analytically visible. Intermittent electricity, costly connectivity, and uneven access to smart-home systems expose assumptions of infrastructural continuity and evenly distributed safety that scholarship produced largely in the North can leave implicit. Conditions often positioned as peripheral constitute the ordinary ground of platform use here, revealing the material supports on which calibration depends. Although the book is situated in South Africa, its argument extends beyond this location. The South African vantage point clarifies how emotional governance is stratified by histories of inequality and differential access.

Critical autoethnography keeps the analysis close to the texture of platformed life. It makes platform power available for study where it registers as routine, reassurance, irritation, guilt, or bodily contradiction, while keeping the researcher's implication in these systems in view. The method traces how platform cues settle into habit before they are recognised as demands. The Garmin Body Battery score overruled my sense of readiness. The Strava caption reframed a difficult run as something lighter, working within platform culture while also pressing against it. These situated negotiations made the limits of platform power briefly perceptible. They allow me to develop the book's concepts from situated experience without claiming that these encounters speak for all forms of platform use. Such encounters are common across many forms of platform use, yet their familiarity can make them appear too slight to warrant attention. Their ordinariness is precisely where their analytical significance lies,

because habitual power often operates through moments that seem too minor to examine.

The chapters also establish the limits of platform power. In Chap. 2, bodily sensation contradicted metric interpretation. In Chap. 3, ambient closeness remained dependent on material continuity and access to platform infrastructures. In Chap. 4, Glissant's (1997) tremblement names a mode of relation under conditions of unstable visibility, while opacity enabled users to limit legibility without withdrawing from platformed relations. In Chap. 5, users negotiated or withheld visibility, and tracking could be redirected towards collective safety and accountability. The soft power of apps therefore remains contingent on functioning infrastructures, successful interpretation, and sustained attachment. Metrics can misread bodies, networks can fail, visibility can be withheld, and participation can cease. These limits show that platform power is never complete.

As I finish writing this book, I have decided to stop running for a while because of an injury. What began as a small, persistent discomfort became impossible to ignore. I initially tried to manage it through the logic that has structured much of my engagement with running: adjust the pace, shorten the distance, watch the metrics, trust the data. The watch continued to offer quiet guidance through recovery scores, suggested rest periods, and Body Battery levels. Each reading made my injury legible as a condition to be managed through further calibration. The injury persisted despite these adjustments, challenging what optimisation could resolve.

Stopping unsettles me. For years, running has been a central way of understanding myself through consistency and care, as well as an intimate site of my engagement with apps. Data, feeling, and self-perception became closely interwoven there. Stopping disrupts this established relationship with the infrastructures that accompanied it. There are no runs to upload, no metrics to review, no quiet affirmations of progress. The feedback loop is silent. Alongside the loss is a less expected feeling: relief from the physical strain and the constant orientation towards measurement, evaluation, and improvement. There is also relief from the pull of the device, habitual checking, and the anticipatory relation to data that begins before the body has spoken. After stepping away from the practice of tracking, I recognise how far running had come to be organised

through the affective infrastructures of the apps that accompanied it, and how what felt like motivation and care also carried a pressure that was difficult to register while I was still fully immersed in it.

The persistence of these questions highlights how apps become part of our everyday lives as we settle into habits of attention, feeling, and self-understanding. Their power lies in this familiarity: they organise our emotional life through scores, prompts, rhythms, and routines that come to feel ordinary, useful, and freely chosen. Stepping away makes this soft power briefly perceptible, revealing how thoroughly apps govern through the attachments they help to sustain. Where, then, do our emotions end and the apps through which we have learned to interpret them begin? The difficulty of locating that boundary reveals their soft power: apps govern most effectively when their categories and judgements come to feel like our own, drawing us into the everyday relations of adjustment and attachment that this book has called calibrated intimacies.

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Index

A
Abend, P., 19
Abidin, Crystal, 26, 28, 29, 63
Affective economies
  and race, 25
  on Strava, 25, 28
Affective labour
  gendered dimensions, 13, 65, 79, 83
  platform management of, 25, 26, 65, 79
  on Strava, 25
  on TikTok, 13
Affective legibility
  and bodily data, 14, 35
  and care, 8, 77
  under constraint, 10, 56
  and fitness apps, 13
  as normative process, 8, 90
  uneven distribution of, 10, 29
Ahmed, Sara, 4, 8, 25, 28, 33, 55, 74, 76, 81
Ajana, B., 18
Alexa (Amazon), 81
Algorithmic amplification
  and queer users, 13, 55, 56, 63
  unpredictability of, 62
Algorithmic attunement, 82
Algorithmic culture, 56, 60
Algorithmic soundscapes, 40
Algospeak, 65
Ambient awareness, 20
Ambient intimacy, 6, 14, 35, 38–50, 54
Amelang, K., 83
Anderson, Ben, 41
Andrejevic, Mark, 59, 75
Anticipatory affect, 24
Apple/Apple Watch, 19
Archival affect, 31

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T. Bosch, *Calibrated Intimacies*, Platform Societies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-92-5503-0

Arora, Payal, 7, 10, 42, 75, 91
Autoethnography
  and embodied knowledge, 11
  as epistemological stance, 10
  and majority world perspective, 12
  as method and critical practice, 11, 14

B
Bailey, M., 62
Ballroom culture, 61
Banet-Weiser, Sarah, 28, 83
Beer, David, 40
Berlant, Lauren, 41
Biometric verification
  as securitisation of desire, 58
  on Tinder, 13, 55, 56, 58, 60, 69
Body Battery (Garmin), 24, 34, 92, 93
Brøgger, Katja, 74, 81
Bucher, Taina, 30, 41, 55, 74–76, 78, 82
Burchell, K., 55, 59, 60, 62, 65
Burgess, Jean, 79, 85
Butler, Judith, 55

C
Calibrated intimacy
  as ambient and infrastructural, 6
  under constraint, 7, 56, 58, 61
  cross-platform, 48, 49
  limits of, 54–70
  as platform logic, 7, 9
Care and control (entanglement of), 6, 7, 10, 91
Cheney-Lippold, John, 41
Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong, 31, 77
Covid-19 pandemic
  and dating apps, 56
  Tinder passport feature, 56

D
Data colonialism (gendered logics of), 84
Data double, 20
Datafication
  of listening, 40
  of menstrual and reproductive health, 83
  of movement, 47
Dataveillance (of children), 76
Day, C., 76, 77, 81
De Togni, G., 83
DeNora, Tia, 40
Digital intimacy
  and fitness apps, 3, 25
  as infrastructural condition, 4–5
  majority world, 7
  queerness, 29, 54, 57, 90
  and race, 6
Disconnection (as practice)
  infrastructural, 86
  strategic, 86
Discovery Mode (Spotify), 42
Dobson, A. S., 27–29, 34
Doechii (Alter Ego, 2024), 61
Domestic labour (digital), 79
Duguay, Stefanie, 57

E
Ellis, Carolyn, 10, 11
Emotional capitalism, 3
Emotional governance

and care, 14, 74, 80, 87
and interface design, 9, 11, 91
and notifications, 9, 91
and self-relation, 9, 84
uneven distribution of, 92
Emotional labour, 32, 59, 78, 79, 84, 85
See also Affective labour
Evans, A., 32, 63

F
Facebook, 2
Feedback loops, 3, 20, 21, 25, 55, 91, 93
Fitness apps
and affective legibility, 13
and bodily data, 14
as memory machines, 19–21
and self-tracking, 18
See also Garmin; Strava
Ford, A., 83
For You Page (TikTok), 62, 63
Foucault, Michel, 9, 19, 84
Fuchs, M., 19

G
Garmin
Body Battery, 24, 34, 92, 93
Garmin Epix Gen 2, 19
and menstrual tracking, 83
and pacing, 21, 22, 32
and self-tracking, 20, 27, 32
Geo-fencing, 13, 55, 56, 69
Gillespie, Tarleton, 41
Glissant, Édouard, 13, 54, 55, 64, 66, 69, 93
opacity, 13, 55, 66, 69, 93
tremblement, 13, 54, 55, 64, 69, 93
Global South/majority world
and platform power, 10
and smart home imaginaries, 75
and surveillance, 10, 75
Google Maps, 11, 13, 38, 46, 47, 90
Guyan, Kevin, 55

H
Habitual infrastructure, 75, 77
Hinge, 20, 56
Hjorth, L., 4, 57
Hochschild, Arlie, 4, 55, 79
Holman Jones, S., 10
Hormonal health, 83, 84

I
Illouz, Eva, 3, 8, 40, 77
Instagram
and self-presentation, 43
and visual intimacy, 42, 45, 46
Interface design
and emotional scripts, 78–80
Life360, 77
Intimate publics, 34

L
Lehtiniemi, T., 31
Life360, 11, 12, 14, 47, 74–80, 85–87, 90, 91
and care *vs.* control, 14
dataveillance of children, 76
interface design, 77
parent-child dynamics, 75
Lim, S. S., 4, 57

Load shedding (South Africa), 6, 22, 92
Locational intimacy, 46–48, 76, 78
Looping (TikTok)
  and queer users, 13
  as temporal structure, 60
Lupton, D., 18, 20, 22, 24, 76

M
Majority world, 5, 7, 10, 75
  and platform power, 5, 10, 75
  and smart home imaginaries, 75
Managed disconnection, 60
Marwick, Alice, 43
McCosker, A., 4
Menstrual and period-tracking apps
  and data extraction, 9, 84
  See also Clue (period-tracking app); Flo (period-tracking app)
Miller, L., 83
Muñoz, José Esteban, 55

N
Nafus, D., 30
Neff, G., 30
Netflix (Cassandra, series), 81
Nike+ sensor, 19
Noble, Safiya Umoja, 22, 29
Notifications
  emotional weight of, 77
Nye, Joseph S., 2

O
Opacity
  as everyday practice, 66
  and queer users, 13, 66
  right to (Glissant), 66
  tactical, 86
  and TikTok, 66
Optimisation
  bodily, 87
  emotional, 18, 58
Opting out, 27, 30–32
  See also Refusal

P
Papacharissi, Zizi, 4
Parkrun, 24
Pelly, L., 42
Performativity, 20
Pettegrew, L. S., 76, 77, 81
Platform capitalism, 58
Platformed precarity, 56–61
Platform studies, 12, 91
Plaut, E., 85, 86
Post-digital intimacy, 64
Prey, Robert, 40, 41, 44

Q
Quantified self, 29, 31, 33, 34
Queer visibility
  and risk, 90
  and TikTok, 67
  and Tinder, 57, 90

R
Race (and platform use)
  and affective economies, 25
  and running culture, 19, 23
  and visibility, 23, 57
Rambukkana, N., 4
Refusal

as everyday practice, 85
infrastructural, 86
and opacity, 55, 85, 86
tactical, 77, 86
Ricaurte, Paola, 22
Right to opacity, *see* Glissant, Édouard; Opacity
Ring (doorbell camera), 81, 82
Ringrose, J., 32, 63
Ruckenstein, M., 31
Running
and data, 18–35
and race, 22, 23, 28
South African running culture, 19, 23
Two Oceans Marathon and half marathon, 21–23, 25, 30

S
Sandvik, K. B., 76
Scott, James C., 8
Seaver, Nick, 41
Self-tracking
and affective legibility, 19, 20, 34
and archival affect, 31
and race, 34
Smart home systems
and domestic surveillance, 11, 79, 80, 82
and emotional governance, 14, 74, 80, 84, 91
Soft governance (Brøgger), 74
Soft power (of apps)
and care, 84
definition, 10
and emotional governance, 10, 13, 21, 87, 91
Soft surveillance, 75, 79
Solaimani, S., 80
Sonic intimacy
and algorithmic listening, 40–42
and datafication, 40
and Spotify, 41, 42
South Africa
infrastructural conditions, 7, 80, 86
load shedding, 6, 22, 92
running culture, 19, 23
Spotify
AI-generated music, 42
Discovery Mode, 42
royalty model, 42
sonic intimacy, 41, 42
taste profiles, 41
Steen, E., 65
Strategic illiteracies, 85
Strava
and affective legibility, 13, 24, 26, 29, 30, 35
and community, 27
and kudos, 21, 23, 25–30, 33, 34
and memory and archiving, 20, 34, 43
and opting out, 27, 30–32
and race and queerness, 29
and self-tracking, 18, 27, 28, 32
and social visibility, 34
Striphas, Ted, 41, 60, 79
Surveillance capitalism, 80
Suunto, 19
Syvertsen, Trine, 30

T
Tactical opacity, 86
See also Opacity; Refusal
Taste profiles (Spotify), 41
Temporal labour (on TikTok), 64
TikTok
algospeak, 65
amplification and unpredictability, 62
For You Page, 62, 63
looping, 13, 55, 56, 60, 61, 64–66, 69
and queer users, 13, 55, 62, 64, 65
and tremblement, 13, 55, 67, 69
Tinder
biometric verification, 13, 55, 56, 58, 60, 69
and Covid-19, 56
geo-fencing, 13, 55, 56, 69
LGBTQ+ warnings, 54
and queerness and risk, 90
Tinder Gold, 58
Tremblement (Glissant), 13, 54, 55, 64, 69, 93
Twitter/X, 2

U
Uber, 82
Unevenness (platform power)
and infrastructure, 12, 14, 75, 92
and majority world, 75
and race, 92

V
van Dijck, José, 44, 55
Visibility
as conditional, 54, 55, 57
gendered dimensions, 12, 83
and queer users, 56
and race, 57
and risk, 13, 29, 55, 61, 62, 66, 76
uneven distribution of, 26
Visual intimacy
and Instagram, 13, 42–46
and self-presentation, 43

W
WhatsApp
blue ticks and read receipts, 85–87
opacity and refusal, 85
Wilken, R., 4
Williamson, B., 76

Z
Zeng, J., 63
Zuboff, Shoshana, 58, 80, 82