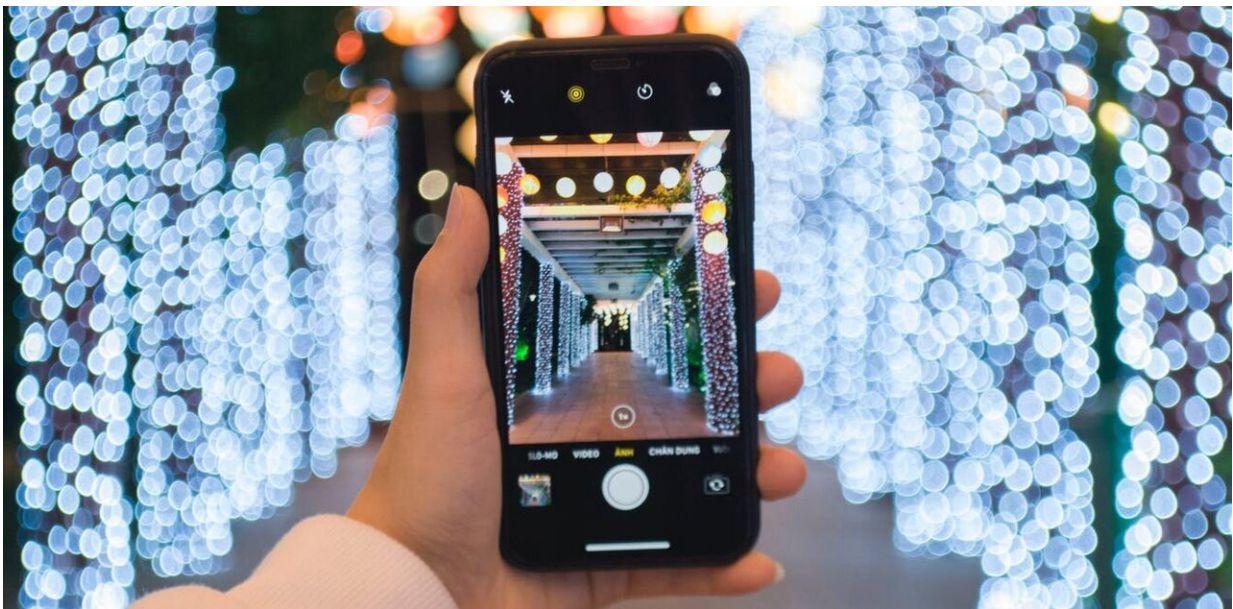


Your emotions are the new hot commodity—and there's an app for that

June 23 2020, by Anna Rudkovska and Danica Facca



Many of the most popular apps are about self-improvement. Credit: Thúy Lâm/Unsplash

Emotions are the newest hot commodity, and we can't get enough.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've come to rely even more on our digital devices, including to help manage our emotions.

There are approximately 2.57 million apps available for Android users to download and approximately [1.84 million apps available for Apple users](#). Apps are those tools on our phones or tablets which help us monitor, record and regulate some of the most intimate aspects of our lives, from sleep and menstrual cycles, to food intake and finances.

Many of the most popular apps in the West include the goal of self-improvement, which seems to be a constant drive for many.

The investment of our time and money into apps that help us become better performers, managers and producers is one of the consequences of neoliberalism, [the idea that humans can make progress in their lives through market competition and economic growth](#).

Neoliberalism emphasizes [individualism, economic efficiency, low to no government interference](#) and generally ignores systemic issues.

Under neoliberalism, a person is [an enterprise](#) whose personality traits and skills are considered valuable assets that need continuous [management, improvement and investment](#).

Apps can help with the business of us: we can easily track and monitor our bodies with [workout classes](#), [diets](#) and [skill-building exercises](#). As we track our progress in apps, we can literally visualize our bodies and capabilities improve.

Emotions, however, are trickier. We haven't had the same kind of metric tools and assessment criteria to track our minds to the same degree we can track our bodies [caloric intake](#) or [waist circumference](#).

Enter mood tracking apps.

The simultaneous production and consumption of emotion, or [emotional](#)

[prosumption](#) manufactures emotion for consumer consumption.

The pursuit of happiness

Mood tracking apps are sophisticated tools which promise the ability to track, measure and improve our emotions. Positive emotions, like happiness, are encouraged through visual features like "[best day streaks](#)."

Negative emotions like sadness or anger are dissected with aims [to avoid or erase their existence](#).

In this new [emotional](#) frontier, happiness is the bar against which we measure all other emotions. The very existence of mood tracking apps is a testament to this.

The potential to improve our emotional traits and skills through apps appears limitless. While there is nothing wrong with pursuing a more fulfilling emotional life, there is a danger in being blinded by the quest for happiness. Since mood tracking apps are designed to direct us solely toward happiness, will we be prevented from understanding and engaging with the true complexity of our emotions?

Data dangers

By reducing our experiences, bodies and emotions to numbers, or quantified data, we make them ripe for consumption by app developers and interested third parties.

As a critical health researcher and a digital health literacy researcher, we are both concerned with how unsuspecting users may be taken advantage of within this frontier of continual self-improvement, especially if their [personal data](#) falls into the wrong hands and manipulated against them.

When it comes to commerce, emotions are powerful. They have the ability to move us towards action, change our minds and foster new relationships. They are also fast and reactive. Making decisions becomes more challenging when choices are everywhere and need to be made at lightning speed.

Modern advertising, by design, targets this impulsivity by hooking us on products and content through emotion.

In his book, [*Psychopolitics, Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*](#), cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han discusses how this shift signals a creation of emotional consumption. We no longer buy a phone because it's a good phone, but rather because the ad displays happy people surrounded by friends using that phone.

We are drawn to ads and marketing campaigns because [of the way they make us feel](#) rather than the service they provide.

In a similar vein, [social media platforms](#) like Instagram, Tinder and Facebook hook us by "selling" us "likes," matches and affirmation through numbers. Since likes and swipes take less than a second to perform, they target and rely on the reactive nature of emotion.

The consumption of emotions

Emotions then become a new commodity that we knowingly or unknowingly produce and are for sale to the highest bidder. This is known as emotional prosumption.

Emotional prosumption produces two consequences. First, due to the reactivity of emotions, our decision making can be swayed when the information we consume is emotionally charged.

As such, in 2016, the emotions of voters in the United States were taken advantage of and manipulated through [specifically targeted ad campaigns](#). Specifically, emotionally charged ads pertaining to [immigration, gun laws and other political issues](#) were deliberate targeted at the U.S. electorate just days before the election.

Our emotional data can be sold to third parties without our permission. Likes, swipes and mood tracking logs can all be classified as emotional data and provide companies with information on how to promote products to us in ways that trigger the highest emotional response.

These abilities raise questions not only for data privacy, but also for advertising ethics.

The unregulated creation and consumption of emotional data is therefore problematic for two reasons: It places emphasis on "positive" emotions rather than a healthy spectrum, and it takes information about immaterial consumption without user knowledge.

The ethical implications of emotional prosumption may leave a lasting impact on how we advertise, how and what we consume, and what aspects of ourselves we are willing to alter in the never ending quest of personal optimization.

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