

Mapping contemporary uses of 'vibe': affect, platform publics, capital and computational formalisation

Eight texts that use, formalise, or are read through the term 'vibe' — ordered left to right by a rough gradient from affect/ambiguity toward formalisation and infrastructure, with Brown, Carah & Dobson placed last as the text that cuts across all three strands

	Watson Methodological	Miles Racial-epistemic	James Affective-political	Gerbaudo Platform-publics	Fendt Institutional-political	Grietzner Aesthetic-formal	Brunila Computational-econom ic	Brown, Carah & Dobson Cross-cutting / hinge
Discipline	Qualitative social research	Sociology, critical race theory	Sound & media philosophy, feminist theory	Sociology, platform studies	Political science / organisational studies	Literary theory / AI theory	Geography, information theory	Media & cultural studies
Text type	Review article (methodological)	Journal article	Newsletter (Substack)	Encyclopedia entry (peer-reviewed)	Essay (Glass Bead)	Journal article	Journal article	Book chapter
Status of 'vibe' in the text	Central emic term, not formally defined — used throughout as object of study	Explicitly defined and central — ethnographic term for racialised felt knowledge	Explicitly defined and central to the argument	Rarely used directly — infrastructural theory read as a vibe-mechanism	Explicitly coined as a political-analytic term ('vibocracy'), citing Brown et al.	Explicitly defined and central to the argument	Not the term itself — 'embedding'/cosine capital' is the object; vibe used analogically	Explicitly defined and central to the argument
Conceptual positioning								
Core claim about 'vibe'	Generative ambiguity long engaged with in qualitative methods	Emotional epistemology — vibe names racism that resists institutional accounting	Sympathetic resonance between subject and milieu; also a sorting mechanism	Clustered publics replacing 'networked publics'	Vibocracy — legitimacy enacted through affective resonance, not deliberation	Compressed representation — non-propositional (autoencoder analogy)	Cosine capital — value with neither name nor rank	Structure of feeling of postdigital intimacy
Key concept	Affects/atmospheres, imaginaries, more-than-human	Felt criminality, emotional epistemology	Horizon, orientation (after Ahmed)	Networked vs. clustered publics	Epistemic fugacity, neo-orality, collapse of shame	Autoencoder canon — 'abstractum inseparable from its concreta'	Cosine capital vs. eigencapital	Vibe-centric intimate publics
Contemporary diagnoses								
Critical / political stance	Methodologically reflexive: ambiguity as resource	Sharply critical: vibe as language for racism that evades naming	Sharply critical: vibe as racial-capitalist sorting	Democratic-theoretical: opacity, fragmentation	Diagnostic-normative: names institutional dysfunction	Aesthetic-formal, little explicit politics	Structural-economic: vibe as a new form of capital	Ambivalent: vibe as protection and extraction
Example material	Ethnography, interviews, arts-based methods	Ethnographic interviews with Black southern US communities	Finance capital, security apparatuses, Kant	TikTok's 'For You' feed, recommender architecture	Corruption scandals, hashtag activism, branding	Literature (Kafka, Beckett, Stein), ML autoencoders	Word2Vec, Tinder, Airbnb	TikTok videos, aesthetic compilations
Formalisation / infrastructure								
Relation to vectors	Barely present (briefly notes 'vibes-based' LLM testing)	None — no technical dimension at all	Metaphorical (resonance, horizon)	Applied infrastructural relation: recommender systems and interest clustering	None — no technical dimension at all	Explicit, formal (autoencoder as model of vibe)	Explicit, formal (embeddings, cosine similarity)	Implicit (algorithmic association)
What's missing	No connection to AI/embeddings	No engagement with platform/AI vibe discourse	No technical formalisation	No focus on affect/meaning itself	No engagement with vibe/vector or affect-theory literature	No political economy	No account of lived or phenomenological experience of vibe	No formal vector theory
Connection to other texts	Covers the 'human' methods strand others don't address	Cited directly by Brown, Carah & Dobson as source for racialised vibe	Supplies the critique Gerbaudo grounds empirically (publics)	Concretises Brunila's cosine-capital thesis (TikTok case)	Extends James/Gerbaudo up to the institutional register	Supplies the formal structure Brunila charges with capital theory	Connects Grietzner's formalism with Marxist value theory	Bridges James/Miles (politics) and Brunila/Gerbaudo (technology)

Reading the ordering

The ordering makes visible a rough gradient rather than a strict matrix: Watson, Miles, and James foreground ambiguity, affect, and orientation — Miles specifically as a racialised emotional epistemology, naming a form of racism that resists institutional accounting; Gerbaudo and Fendt translate vibe into public and institutional diagnosis; Grietzner and Brunila formalise vibe through compression, embeddings, and similarity. Brown, Carah & Dobson cut across these strands by linking intimacy, platform aesthetics, and affective capitalism — and cite Miles directly as a source. The section bands group texts by dominant register, not by a strict hierarchy of levels — several texts (notably Gerbaudo and Brunila) engage 'vibe' only indirectly, as the status row makes explicit. The left-to-right ordering is itself an analytic construction: apart from Fendt's and Brown, Carah & Dobson's direct citations of Miles, these texts rarely cite one another, and the table's apparent conversation is largely a reading imposed across otherwise separate literatures.

What this table does not cover

This table maps contemporary uses of 'vibe' in platform, AI, methodological, political, and racial-epistemic theory. It does not include the broader classical genealogy of the concept through atmosphere, Stimmung, aura, and affect theory proper (e.g. Böhme, Anderson, Ahmed, Stewart) — that genealogy would need its own, separate mapping. Three further omissions are worth flagging explicitly: (1) 'vibe coding' and adjacent 2025–2026 software-engineering discourse (e.g. 'vibe-check protocols', LLM 'vibe testing') — arguably the single most widely used present-day sense of the term, absent here entirely; (2) the vernacular musical-etymological line running from the vibraphone through VIBE magazine's 1990s hip-hop branding to contemporary Black musical culture, which is at least as direct a genealogy of the word as the affect-theory canon above; and (3) empirical or quantitative treatments of the term's diffusion — James herself has done this elsewhere (James, 2022, using Google Ngram and News Search to trace 'vibe's rise since the 1990s and its early-2010s shift from describing places to describing brands, people, and identities), but that piece is not among the texts mapped here. Finally, every text included here treats 'vibe' as analytically useful; no skeptical or debunking counter-voice is represented.