

Users both celebrate and criticise the algorithmic event “Spotify Wrapped”

*The end of November marks the arrival of “Wrapped” season: the time of year when companies like Spotify encourage users to consume and share data stories about their listening behaviour. **Taylor Annabell** and **Nina Vindum Rasmussen** discuss their creative workshop format which affords Spotify users the opportunity to critically examine this algorithmic event.*



Join Taylor Annabell and Nina Vindum Rasmussen in the “Spotify (un)wrapped” workshop, part of the LSE Festival.

Spotify keeps track of the songs, podcasts, genres and artists you have on repeat throughout the year. The music platform then uses its advanced machine learning algorithms to crunch all that behavioural data and determine what it reveals about you. At the end of the year, Spotify repackages this information into an aesthetically pleasing data story tailored to each user. In these stories, Spotify both presents key statistics to users while making claims about their identity, lifestyle, and music taste. This is what the platform calls ‘Spotify Wrapped.’ These annual year-in-reviews first appeared in 2013 under a slightly different name and format. In 2016, it was rebranded as ‘Spotify

Wrapped,’ and the campaign has propelled the music platform to [increased levels of popularity](#) ever since.

The “Wrapped” data story is accessible in the app, where users tap through the experience like an Instagram story. Each ‘card’ includes a ‘share’ button that nudges you to share just how many minutes you listened to Beyoncé, Troye Sivan, and that obscure Norwegian band you like so much. The resulting social media buzz turns “Wrapped” into a viral marketing engine for the platform, along with outdoor ads that hint at global trends across its aggregated user data.

“Wrapped” makes it clear just how much behavioural data platforms like Spotify collect, use and monetise. However, little is known about how users respond to platforms claiming that they can “know” us in this particular way. In our ongoing research, we examine how ordinary Spotify users make sense of “Wrapped” and its data-driven logics. We approach “Wrapped” as an “algorithmic event”, defined as a moment in time in which people are collectively oriented towards a particular algorithmic system and mode of data capture.

Our workshops bring together ordinary users to explore “Wrapped” in both a creative and critical manner. So far, we have hosted eight workshops for 172 university students across the UK with around 20-25 participants in each workshop. We centre our participants as co-analysts, because we think it is worth taking seriously the insights and experiences of ordinary users. In other words, their lived experiences do not just feed into our study as empirical data for us to analyse. Rather, we work with them to propose ways to think through interactions with data-driven platforms like Spotify.

Images from past workshops (by Zeashan Ashraf)







The project relies on feminist arts-based research methodologies to illuminate user experiences of datafication. In our experience, such workshops provide an ideal setting for people to think critically about the extent to which a company like Spotify is collecting and aggregating user data.

Participants work in smaller groups to complete three main activities that invite critical engagement with “Wrapped” as an algorithmic event. Among other things, participants interrogate the annual ‘listening characters’ feature in “Wrapped”. In the latest iteration, “Me in 2023”, one such category was called “Vampire”, which was accompanied by the following explanation: “When it comes to your listening, you like to embrace a little... darkness. You listen to emotional, atmospheric music more than most”. Participants consider the types of data collection implied by such categories as well as their feelings towards this kind of labelling.

They then carry out a modified version of a [“walkthrough”](#), a digital method developed by Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay in 2016. In the walkthrough exercise,

participants map the affordances of an app by systematically moving through the navigation and flow of the interface. In pairs, participants “walk through” a particular “Wrapped” data story or the Spotify app, drawing attention to the way data, personalisation, and identity are made (in)visible.

Towards the end of the workshop, participants produce a creative response to their “Wrapped”, using materials like CDs, records, stickers, glitter, and magazines. While they assemble their artworks, we put on a playlist with our participants’ top “Wrapped” songs from that year. On a few occasions, a musician has performed live for our participants while they complete the creative exercise. They are only given about half an hour to produce their artworks. Even so, they manage to produce incredibly insightful responses to “Wrapped”.

Our emerging insights point to the ambivalent feelings towards “Wrapped” as an algorithmic event. The responses range from celebration of this mode of data capture to more critical readings. For instance, some users contest how Spotify claims to “know” them as individuals by somehow revealing the “truth” about music consumption and taste. For some, “Wrapped” is experienced as personalised but not personal. Our participants are also highly aware of the commercial imperative that drives “Wrapped” and Spotify more broadly.

Even so, many participants approach “Wrapped” with excitement and anticipation, especially in the lead-up to its release: what is this going to reveal about me and my listening habits? Some users actively adapt their practices to engineer the “right” kind of result to be shared on social media. This signals an attempt to gain autonomy over the algorithmic system.

Sometimes people are presented with results that feel at odds with their lived experiences or their imagination of what they are listening to. As such, our research shows a tension between the quantified breakdowns in “Wrapped” and how people feel about music and their listening habits. Participants often play with this tension in their creative artefacts and emphasise the inadequacy of “Wrapped”. It is revealing some things but concealing part of what makes music so important in their lives.

In short, our preliminary findings offer insights into the complex way users understand and interact with algorithmic events promoted by data-driven platforms. “Wrapped”

exemplifies an algorithmic event in which people both celebrate and critique data capture, affording an opportunity to critically think through algorithmic systems.

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