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How algorithmic events like Spotify Wrapped can reveal what tech companies really 'know' about us

As 2024 drew to a close, Spotify Wrapped once again took centre stage, transforming our personal music habits into vibrant data stories designed to be shared on social media. Based on their creative research with users, Taylor Annabell and Nina Vindum Rasmussen consider how ordinary people experience Wrapped as an algorithmic event.

It's a new year, but Spotify Wrapped still lingers in our minds like the hook of a catchy song. If you opened the streaming app in early December, you were likely greeted with a personalised breakdown of your top songs, artists, podcasts and genres of 2024. According to the platform, Wrapped is your year of music boiled down to a series of colourful slides.

Since its first iteration in 2015, this year-in-review has become an 'algorithmic event': a moment in time in which we are collectively oriented towards a particular algorithmic system and mode of data capture. Not only does Spotify's annual data spectacle provide a glimpse into the vast amounts of behavioural data captured and aggregated by the company. These data stories also reveal how Spotify makes inferences about users' identities, tastes and lifestyle. Our research examines the way users experience and engage with these categorisations.



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commercial intent.



Leading up to the release of Wrapped every year, Spotify stokes anticipation and excitement by teasing slight variations of the audiovisual data stories. What will it show this time? Previous years introduced users to their 'Audio Aura' (2021), 'Listening Personality' (2022) and 'Sound Town' (2023) – to name a few examples. The most recent iteration revolved around 'Your Music Evolution,' unveiling users' three defining musical phases labelled with hyper-specific titles ('Pink Pilates Princess Strut Pop,' anyone?).

This time, Spotify also embraced the hype surrounding generative AI by pushing a personalised AI podcast, courtesy of Google's NotebookLM. The podcast featured two synthetic hosts who dissected your listening behaviour for roughly five minutes, delivering remarks such as: "You know, I've got to say: 50,369 minutes on Spotify this year? Wow, that's serious dedication!" These latest features were met with lukewarm or outright disgruntled [reviews from users](#). Some commentators connected the lower quality of the latest Wrapped with [Spotify's recent mass layoffs](#).

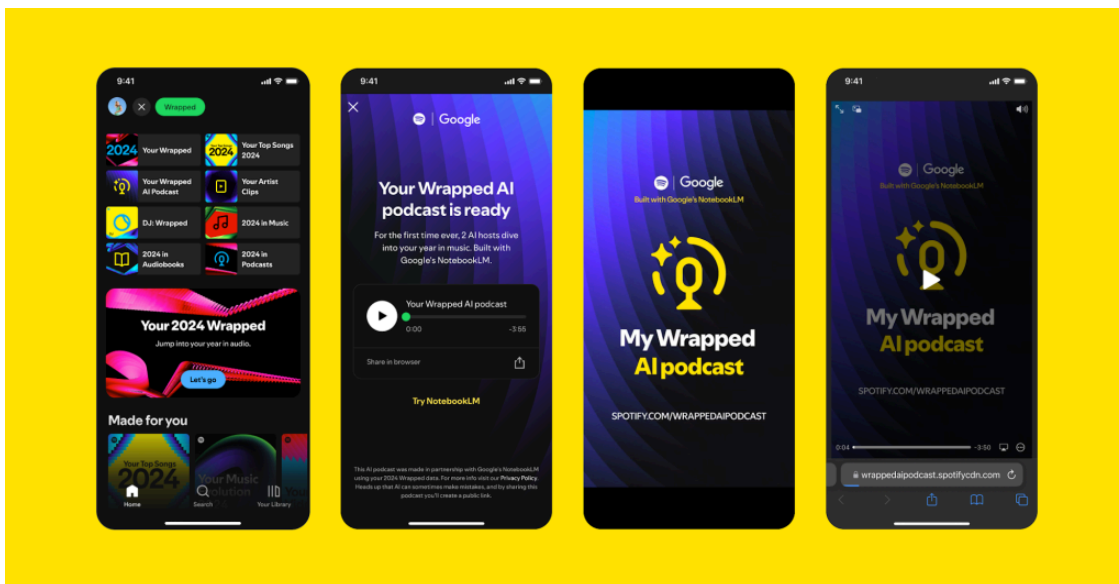
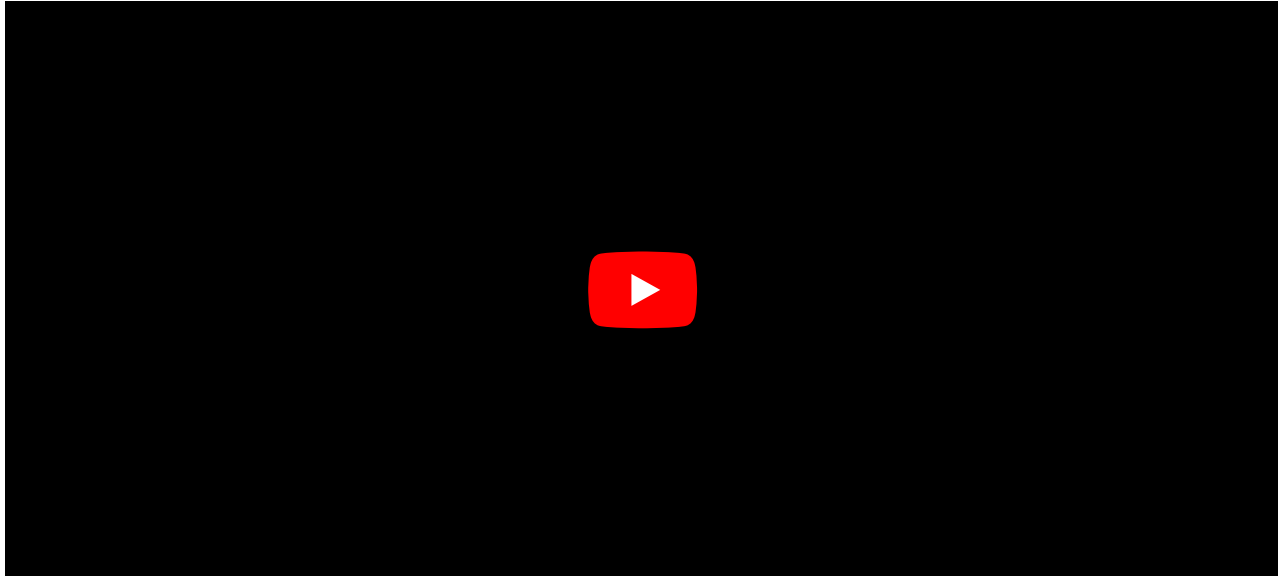


Image credit: [Spotify](#)

At its core, Wrapped is a marketing campaign intended to drive subscriptions and engagement with the platform. The personalised cards are designed to be shared on social media, which the platform prompts with 'Share' buttons on each slide. It appears to work. Wrapped gets bigger every year, with the 2024 version triggering a record number of shares [according to a Spotify spokesperson](#).

Even so, our ongoing research shows that users interact with this algorithmic event in ways that both transcend and nuance its commercial intent. Over the past couple of years, we have hosted creative workshops with more than 200 participants in the UK. The Spotify (Un)wrapped workshop

is structured around five key components: (1) an introduction to Wrapped and our conceptual toolkit, (2) decoding the different Wrapped ‘listening characters,’ (3) analysing Wrapped or the Spotify interface by using an academic method called a **walkthrough**, (4) creating a ‘**Spotify data selfie**’ collage, and (5) a concluding discussion where participants reflect on their own analytical journey.



The workshops open up different pathways for creatively and critically examining the data-driven logics of Wrapped. Among other things, we encourage participants to reflect on the platform’s claims of ‘knowing us’ through data. For instance, what does it signify when Spotify ranks you in the top 0.5% of Sabrina Carpenter’s listeners or summarises your September listening habits as ‘Royalcore Fantasy Dark Academia’? The workshops make space for users to collectively consider the purpose, value and impact of such algorithmic constructs. As such, our research contributes to a broader conversation about how algorithms shape our self-perception and how much autonomy we have in defining our **algorithmic identity** in a streaming era.



Wrapped is a prime example of an algorithmic event where users both celebrate and critique data capture.



Users’ lived experiences demonstrate a mismatch between Spotify’s algorithmic assumptions and the complexity of *actual* listening patterns – or what users themselves consider to be their true behaviour. As one participant said, Spotify only quantifies behaviour within its own ecosystem, leaving out the minutes spent listening to vinyl records, radio stations or other platforms like

YouTube. This narrow focus creates an incomplete picture. Other users alluded to the glitchy nature of Wrapped: like when your top song is a brown noise track that helps you concentrate or that annoying hit you accidentally had on loop while falling asleep one time. Such observations raise questions around accuracy: what are the Wrapped metrics even tallying – and if they only capture an imperfect fraction of our listening behaviour, why do we care?



Our emerging findings show the contradictory nature of data-driven music listening. The Spotify users we have met find real value in the repackaged data provided by Wrapped. Some even adapt their behaviour in the lead-up to the algorithmic event in an attempt to shape the outcome. At the same time, our participants express discomfort with how the platform squeezes their listening patterns into simplistic categories and templates geared towards social media. They also feel uneasy about being reduced to a set of data points, posing critical questions about Spotify's lack of transparency when it comes to their data-driven practices.

Wrapped is a prime example of an algorithmic event where users both celebrate and critique data capture. Our participants are deeply attuned to the disconnect between Spotify's portrayal of their habits and the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of what they consider to be their 'true' musical preferences. Even so, Wrapped's visual storytelling continues to exert a powerful influence over how they perceive their relationship to music listening both before, during and after the algorithmic event.

*This post draws on the authors' article, [Spotify \(Un\)wrapped: how ordinary users critically reflect on Spotify's datafication of the self within creative workshops](#), published in the *Journal of Gender**

Studies.

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About the author



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Taylor Annabell is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the multidisciplinary European Research Council Starting Grant HUMANads project at Utrecht University School of Law. She holds a PhD in Culture, Media and Creative Industries from King's College London. Her research interests include platform governance and influencer cultures, platformisation of memory and everyday experiences of datafication.



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Nina Vindum Rasmussen is a Fellow on LSE100, where she teaches on how we can control AI and create a fair society. Her research examines the impact of digital technologies on media production, distribution and consumption. She is currently working on her first book, *The Streaming Machine*, which analyses how film and TV workers make sense of their collaborations with data-driven streamers like Netflix.

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