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Wrap your head around it: algorithmic self-making and performances of taste on Spotify Wrapped

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Spotify Wrapped is perceived and understood by Brazilian users, exploring the algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017), that surround its appropriation in everyday life and how the datafication and the dashboarding of music consumption are incorporated into performances of taste (Airoldi, 2021; Prey, 2018). Focusing on Wrapped as an annual 'algorithmic event' (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024) we contextualise it as part of ongoing discussions on the platformisation of music and the algorithmic mediation of identity, as well as debates about digital memory and media events. Based on a social network analysis of posts collected from Twitter/X and a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 38 Spotify users, we argue that in Brazil the 'eventness' of Spotify Wrapped is distributed, clustered but sparsely connected, and marked by fleeting, fluid and ephemeral feelings of shared experience and recognition rather than by enduring communities. Foregrounding ordinary acts of constrained agency (Siles, et al., 2022), our findings also indicate that Brazilian users playfully and skilfully incorporate the perceived logics of datafied consumption and algorithmic mediation to produce desirable Wrapped results - whilst also hoping that 'the algorithm' would be able to understand listening contexts and only capture those sessions that are 'Wrapped-worthy'. We conclude by highlighting the continuities and specificities of the phenomenon in relation to existing theorisations of everyday data cultures (Burgess et al., 2022). In doing so, we contribute to the growing body of literature on music streaming studies, platform studies, and critical algorithm studies.

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Introduction

Who were you as you streamed this past year? Your most adventurous self, dedicated to finding new artists and genres? Or perhaps a more introspective type, focused on creating your own perfect playlist? Maybe you were a combination. Throughout it all, your listening

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was true to yourself. That realness is something to celebrate, and Wrapped serves as your receipt. (Spotify, 2023a)

Launched in 2015 (then called ‘Year in Review’), *Wrapped* is Spotify’s now-traditional year-end campaign, summarising users’ annual listening habits through playful identity labels and personalised lists of top artists, songs, and genres. Described as a ‘data dive turned cultural phenomenon’ (Spotify, 2023b), *Wrapped* is more than a celebration of one’s musical taste as understood by the platform; it increasingly presents itself as a ‘receipt’ for how each user has felt and behaved over the past 12 months. *Wrapped* taps into common ideas about music consumption, identity, and taste – notably, the notion that music gives us access to a particular repertoire for understanding our most intimate feelings and authentically communicating these emotions to the external world (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). These cultural tropes are combined with allegedly sophisticated algorithmic systems that can track, compare, and categorise vast amounts of behavioural data in real-time (Seaver, 2022), which opens new possibilities for self-awareness and identity management.

Spotify users are also nudged by the platform to share their *Wrapped* results, and often produce related commentary on social media. Ultimately, the ‘data stories’ presented through *Wrapped* are a repackaging of consumption footprints into compelling narratives about one’s personality and taste, which are circulated with broader networks, configuring a particular type of ‘algorithmic event’ (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024). Whereas *Wrapped* was launched with a focus on each user’s listening charts, over the years new categories started to be added to the promotional recap – including ‘in-app quizzes’ (Spotify, 2020a), the mood-based ‘audio aura’ (Spotify, 2021b), and the ‘listening personality’ (Spotify, 2022). These ongoing innovations demonstrate the platform’s efforts to keep the initiative exciting and engaging, whilst simultaneously normalising data extraction (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024). *Wrapped* is a paradigmatic example of how the platform industry leverages users’ data – often extracted under the pretence of benefiting the users themselves through more accurate personalisation – for marketing purposes and, ultimately, commercial gain. It is then a fertile case for exploring concerns over personalisation, algorithmification, and users’ ambivalent relationships with data-driven categorisations.

This paper examines how Spotify *Wrapped* is experienced, understood and interpreted by ordinary users based in southern Brazil – using this specific context to explore the broader algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) that surround and inform its adoption as a device for both introspection and sociability. It focuses on how the logics of platformed music consumption are incorporated into identity management and performances of taste (Airoldi, 2021; Prey, 2018), while highlighting the multiple, complex, and often contradictory reactions produced from ordinary encounters with datafication. As such, we contribute to the understanding of contemporary ‘everyday data cultures’ (Burgess et al., 2022).

Whilst focusing on the consumption practices of selected users based in Brazil, and despite openly recognising the potential contextual nuances of these situated experiences, our focus here is less on the local specificities or ‘Brazilian-ness’ of the phenomenon – which we aim to address in a separate publication. Here, we are more interested in the identification and interpretation of evocative, real-life encounters with data and

algorithms from which we draw broader theorisations and conclusions. Rather than assuming that over-powering platforms and algorithmic systems have homogeneous effects, we focus on the playful cultural practices and constrained modes of agency that characterise their domestication – contributing to broader efforts towards a bottom-up popular theorisation of algorithms (Siles et al., 2022; 2024) and to the global literature on music streaming and platform studies.

You are what you listen to: identity and taste in everyday data cultures

As a ‘global campaign’, Wrapped is premised on the idea that a user’s year can be defined by what they listened to, offering them a ‘customised, interactive experience’ (Spotify, 2018) based on the metrification of their music consumption. It is an exemplary case of the ‘dashboarding of everyday life’ (Tkacz, 2022) – the growing tendency to represent and manage daily activities, behaviours, and feelings through display formats that frame data as something to be continuously monitored, optimised, and controlled –, transforming quantifiable information into aesthetically pleasing visualisations through which users are invited to make sense of and communicate their identity and taste to others. In so doing, Wrapped resonates with discussions about our contemporary ‘algorithmic episteme’ (Fisher & Mehozay, 2019), where digital platforms observe audiences through the continuous extraction of behavioural data. Cheney-Lippold (2017) encapsulates this phenomenon with the notion of ‘measurable types’, through which individuals are temporarily classified as members of fragmented and flattened categories. In this context of increasing datafication of consumption and subjectivity, musical identity has undergone a continual process of ‘algorithmic individuation’, which should be understood as a ‘dynamic socio-technical process engaged in enacting the individual’ (Prey, 2018, p. 1095). In other words, Spotify Wrapped exemplifies the core dynamics of platformed consumption: it promises personalised experiences by harnessing the digital traces users generate throughout the year; rather than merely ‘reflecting’ existing identity markers, it plays a significant role in the continuous modulation and individuation of taste and identity.

Taste emerges as a core element in the construction and performance of identity in music streaming, weaving together intimate, social, and economic dimensions – with the affordances of digital platforms amplifying the persistence and visibility of users’ performances of taste (Airoldi, 2021). Therefore, it becomes crucial to assess how platforms become integrated into the ways individuals communicate identity and taste through the consumption and sharing of musical information (Webster, 2021). Hanrahan (2018) observes that the emphasis on metrics and hyper-personalisation is reshaping aesthetic judgment and the notion of ‘difference’ in musical experience, provoking user anxiety about their own choices and potential judgment by others. Personalisation, she argues, steers musical discovery away from novelty and toward the listener’s self – emotions, activities, and memories – often resulting in frustration when music fails to ‘fit’. Within this landscape, Hagen and Lüders (2016) emphasise the challenges of expressing musical taste in networked environments, shaped by the phenomenon of ‘context collapse’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Music consumption, once it becomes entwined with networked infrastructures, requires a more complex and careful management of self-presentation (Hagen & Lüders, 2016). This tension between music as an intimate, personal experience

and as a public statement of preferences and identity fosters a constant ‘social awareness’ of how one’s taste is perceived and judged (Drott, 2018; Walsh, 2023). Thus, musical taste is continuously redefined through platforms’ logics and affordances.

Spotify Wrapped has been positioned as a key example of contemporary ‘everyday data cultures’ (Burgess et al., 2022) – a notion that highlights how individuals are subjected to datafication but also actively participate in it, sometimes accepting and engaging with it, others disrupting, reacting, or resisting it. In this context, users may actively seek to ‘educate’ (Moreira et al., 2024) algorithms to improve the accuracy of recommendation systems. Yet, these opportunities for agency emerge amid complex power dynamics that require the constant negotiation of autonomy and control. As Ávila Torres and Beer (2025) observe, users actively shape algorithmic recommendations by setting listening goals and maintaining trust relationships with platforms. This underscores the idea that personalisation emerges from strategically enacted everyday interactions, rather than merely functioning as a unilateral imposition made by technology.

Examining playlists, Siles and colleagues (2019b) identify a process of ‘cultivation’ in ritualistic practices involved in producing, capturing, and exploring moods and emotions through music consumption. This is linked to the concept of ‘domestication’, which describes how audiences integrate recommendation algorithms into their lives – a process intertwined with their ‘folk theories’ on how platforms function. Similarly, these folk theories are also embedded within what Bucher (2017) calls ‘algorithmic imaginary’, ‘the way in which people imagine, perceive, and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible’ (Bucher, 2017, p. 31). Algorithmic imaginaries are, to some extent, also informed (even if not fully dictated) by platform rhetoric – which often includes the use of tropes such as the narrative of ‘algorithmic magic’ (Burgess et al., 2022). Indeed, Spotify attempts to frame its data practices as transcendent, seamless, and ‘magical’ (Spotify, 2023b). However, as demonstrated by Annabell and Rasmussen (2024), Spotify users are not always entirely convinced by the descriptors provided by the platform, and do not necessarily believe in the correspondence between the ‘data stories’ offered and their inner selves. In the wake of these emerging efforts towards a popular theory of algorithms that rejects universal narratives and homogenising narratives in favour of context and nuance (Siles et al., 2022), we argue that the Brazilian context offers a critical vantage point for this analysis. Brazilian digital culture is frequently characterised by a distinct mode of sociality driven by humour, ‘playfulness’, and creativity (Lunardi & Burgess, 2020; Vieira & Amaral, 2024). This cultural specificity shapes the reception of data stories in the country, allowing us to capture not only how users imagine algorithms to operate, but also how they creatively repurpose these narratives for identity management and social connection.

Algorithmic event: mobilising memory and liveness for data publics

Whilst Wrapped exemplifies the focus on individuation, self-awareness, and identity previously theorised by the literature on the platformisation of music, as discussed above, it does so through explicit invitations for sociability and social comparison. This prompts us to consider the role of algorithmic mediation in potentially creating a sense of collectivity and community through media. In encouraging the transformation of its promotional campaign into an annual topic of conversation, Spotify continuously

attempts to foster some sort of ‘shared experience’ through individual personalisation, whilst simultaneously building a thick sense of *nowness* and *liveness* through the resurfacing of retrospective data.

Inspired by Annabell and Rasmussen’s conceptualisation of *Wrapped* as an ‘algorithmic event’ (2024) – which they define as ‘a moment in time in which there is a collective orientation towards a particular algorithmic system and its associated data’ (p. 1) – we articulate a connection between the discussions of ‘the algorithm’ and the notion of ‘media event’ (Dayan & Katz, 1992). An ‘event’ is understood as something that breaks the ordinariness of the regular flow of everyday life; more than mere happenings, events are ritualised social practices (Dayan & Katz, 1992). As previously discussed, *Wrapped* is not simply delivered to users; it is a patterned, cultivated, ‘digital media ritual with data at its heart’ (Burgess et al., 2022, p. 123). The ‘data stories’ that compose *Wrapped* are designed to be shared on platforms like Twitter/X and Instagram, bringing a deliberate component of sociality to it. In centralising users’ attention at a particular time every year (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024), *Wrapped* is a testament to both the ‘eventfulness’ (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2017) of datafied music consumption – in which daily media use becomes pregnant with latent futurity, available for repackaging, resurfacing and rediscovery in the future – and the distributed configuration in which multiple networked perspectives (rather than a single mediated centre) simultaneously create this thickened sense of ‘eventness’ (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2017).

More than witnessing distant happenings, the mediation of an event provides audiences with a sense of being there, participating in it as it unfolds alongside others who are also experiencing it (Hammelburg, 2021; Van Es, 2016). Historically, the concept of ‘liveness’ has been mobilised to capture this idea of a real-time connection that provides a sense of togetherness, collectiveness, and participation through media, even if only fleetingly (Couldry, 2004; Lupinacci, 2020). Although *Wrapped* is premised on the individual relevance of ‘personalised’ dashboards, it is also framed as socially noteworthy. In articulating the notions of the algorithmic and the eventful, we want to examine the resultant tension between individual and collective consumption practices. To capture this perceived collectivity mediated by social media and foregrounding the role of datafication in contemporary practices, Burgess et al. (2022) propose the concept of ‘data publics’ – how we ‘come to see ourselves and act collectively through data, or in relation to data’ (p.115). *Wrapped* exemplifies this conceptualisation: it is based on the extensive capture, processing, and repackaging of users’ data, and then shared and experienced as an affectively meaningful event through platforms mediated by algorithmic systems.

Despite platforms’ emphasis on producing and managing experiences of the ‘now’ (Coleman, 2020), *Wrapped* is also deeply marked by a nostalgic appreciation of the past – it is, after all, a recap of each user’s year. This demands we pay attention to how music consumption via platforms like Spotify becomes an instrument for the automated production of memory (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021). Social media memories blur the boundaries between the public and the private, whilst allowing us to explore ‘quantified nostalgia’ in its ambivalence as both a product of surveillance and a playful personal record (Jacobsen & Beer, 2022). Reading’s (2009) discussion of how mobile media have transformed our relationship to memory is helpful to frame *Wrapped* as an exemplary case of ‘memobilia’. *Wrapped* is, at least in theory, a recapitulation of each user’s *own*

listening practices, feelings, and moods, supported by allegedly sophisticated algorithmic systems and data practices that can track and match their behaviour with the relevant categories. It is, then, a personal piece of memorabilia, which users can deploy to capture and recollect special moments as digital souvenirs and share them with others (Reading, 2009). Bearing this in mind, we aim to examine how it feels to engage with Spotify Wrapped in the context of everyday life and how algorithms inform both self-making and public performances of taste.

Methods

For this study, we adopted a mixed-method approach, combining social network analysis, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis. This interpretive mixed-method approach (Hesse-Biber, 2014) allowed us to gather and combine insights on both how Spotify users communicate about their end-of-year Wrapped on X/Twitter, thus participating in this algorithmic event, and how they reflect on their intimate experiences with music streaming, algorithmic mediation, and the datafication of consumption and taste.

First, we used Brandwatch to collect X/Twitter data. For many years, social media users have been going to the platform to share and discuss live happenings (Baym & Burgess, 2020), making it a key space to explore discussions about algorithmic events like Spotify Wrapped. Although X/Twitter has changed since Elon Musk took over the platform, it has not lost reach for news over the last four years (Newman et al., 2025). Brandwatch is a social media data provider company that allows access to X/Twitter data for social listening and social media monitoring. Although Brandwatch has limitations, it is one of the few reliable data sources for X/Twitter, considering the increasing restrictions in data access via public APIs (Brunns, 2019). Our search query combined the words 'Spotify' and 'Wrapped'. We filtered for messages in Portuguese posted in November and December 2023 to encompass the period before Spotify launched that year's Wrapped to its users, as well as the period immediately after that. We collected 22,283 messages, of which 12,745 were shares used for the Social Network Analysis.

We used Social Network Analysis (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) to explore the structure of the conversation about Spotify Wrapped on X/Twitter, in a network that had accounts as nodes and shares as edges. The value of using this approach stands in understanding the sociability of Spotify Wrapped on X/Twitter through identifying the most influential users in the conversation and their most popular messages. After generating a network, we reviewed the users with the highest indegree (those that received the most shares in the network) and their most shared messages. We used an arbitrary threshold to select the messages shared at least 50 times in our dataset (= 41 messages). We used this arbitrary threshold due to the long-tail distribution of indegree/shares in our network (see [Figure 2](#) in the 'Findings and Discussion' section). Although a relatively small sample, these 41 messages were shared almost 10 thousand times (accounting for over three quarters of all shares in our dataset) and received over 8 million impressions. To interpret how users communicate about Wrapped on X/Twitter, we thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the most shared messages in the dataset, in combination with transcribed data from interviews, as described below.

In parallel, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) with 38 Brazilian music consumers to understand their engagement with Spotify Wrapped. The

interviewees (23F, 15M, ages 18-33) were recruited from a pool of 217 responses following a Call for Participation survey. Most participants have received formal higher education and come from urban settings in southern Brazil – mostly residing in Porto Alegre and its metropolitan area. This region of Brazil was affected by severe flash floods in April and May 2024, which not only disrupted our fieldwork schedule but also impacted the lives of millions of Brazilians in the region during that period and the following months. Therefore, we started conducting interviews in February 2024 and only completed the 38 interviews in April 2025. While, as a qualitative method, interviews are not meant to be fully representative of a population, this is a valuable approach for a more in-depth understanding of social and cultural phenomena (Brennen, 2017); in this case, how Spotify users engage with their Wrapped throughout the year and when released – foregrounding meanings, experiences and motivations as articulated by users themselves.

The interviews included questions about music consumption, music discovery, and streaming in everyday life; for this paper, we are focusing on the questions that centred Spotify Wrapped to understand how ordinary users imagine their ‘year in review’ to be algorithmically mediated, and how those imaginaries inform their performances of taste and identity. The interviews were around 45-60 min long, and the content was thoroughly transcribed, anonymised, and translated for analysis. Before the interviews, all participants signed an Informed Consent Form, and the project was approved by the ethics committee of the first author’s institution.¹ To protect participants’ identities, we have given them pseudonyms in the findings and discussion section below.

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to make sense of the interview data in combination with the data extracted from Twitter/X. For the thematic analysis, all three authors engaged in a qualitative deep-reading of the X/Twitter posts and transcribed interviews to identify emerging categories. Through an iterative process with multiple rounds of review and discussion between the authors, we identified four core themes: taste and identity; sociability, participation, and publicness; cultivating Wrapped; and managing contexts and algorithmic sensitivity.

Findings and discussion

The network graph based on X/Twitter data shows a variety of small clusters sparsely connected (Figure 1), each centred around a specific user who had their message highly shared on X/Twitter. The distribution of weighted indegree in the network shows that a small number of users received most of the attention on Twitter (Figure 2). Few users (less than 8%) shared more than one message, and only 26 users (0.21%) shared five or more messages (Figure 3). Consequently, the average degree of the network is close to 1. This means that the network around Spotify Wrapped on X/Twitter in Brazil was primarily based on users sharing one or a few messages rather than engaging in-depth in community-building conversations.

Based on this network analysis, we argue that the ‘eventness’ (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2017) of Spotify Wrapped is distributed, clustered, but sparsely connected – which reflects theorisations of social media liveness. Despite the relatively sparse conversation about Spotify Wrapped on X/Twitter, social network analysis allowed us to identify the most shared messages about the topic. These highly shared messages are relevant because

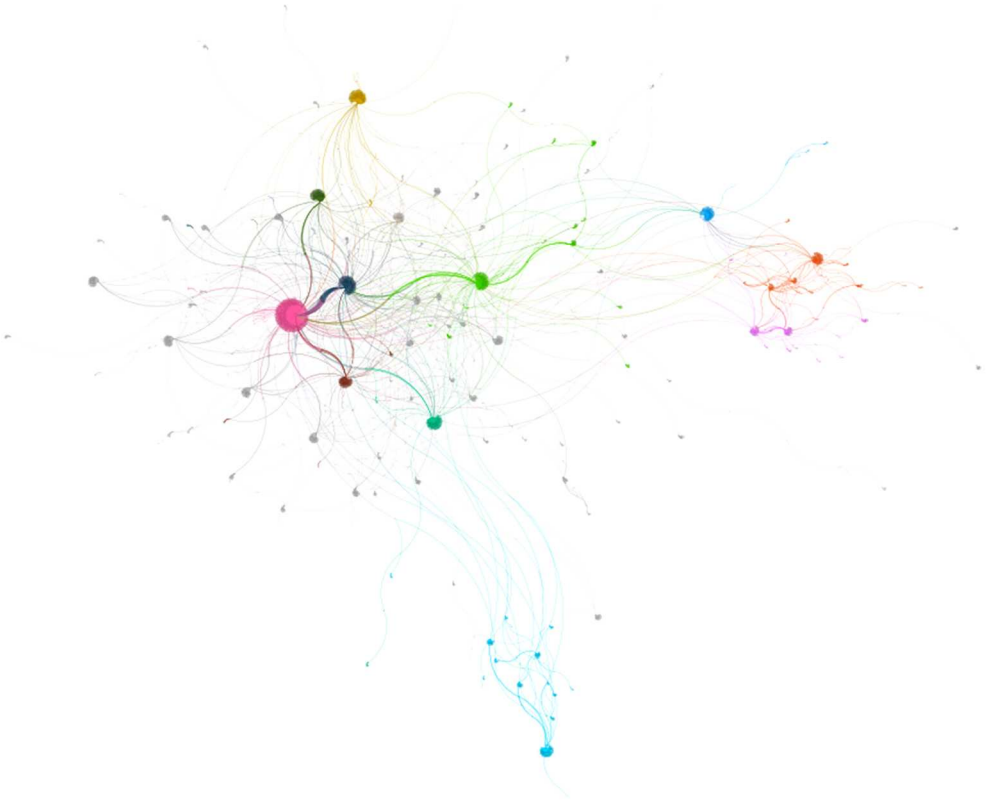


Figure 1. Network graph of Spotify Wrapped conversations in Portuguese on X/Twitter (November and December 2023).

they likely resonate with a multitude of users either due to identification with the experience described, because users found the content witty, funny or engaging, or because they speak to how users want to represent their experience with Wrapped to their connections

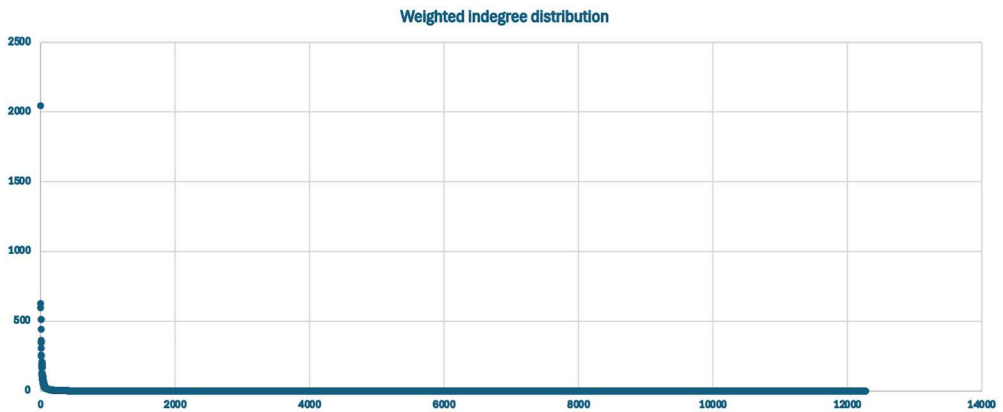


Figure 2. Weighted indegree distribution in the dataset (X axis is the number of nodes/users and Y axis is their weighted indegree).

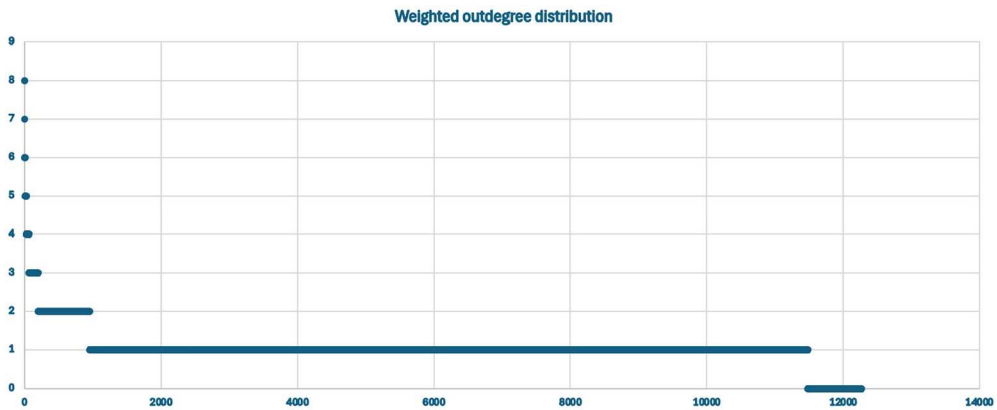


Figure 3. Weighted outdegree distribution in the dataset (X axis is the number of nodes/users and Y axis is their weighted outdegree).

on X/Twitter. In combination with the data from the interviews, we discuss the identified thematic categories below.

The dashboarded self: the algorithmic mediation of taste and identity

Our empirical analysis of the collected tweets and interviews demonstrates that Spotify Wrapped configures a complex space where consumption data is transformed into a resource for identity construction. In this section, we provide evidence for the idea that musical taste, once it becomes intertwined with digital infrastructures in the context of everyday life, becomes a repertoire for self-awareness and self-knowledge, whilst simultaneously requiring a more complex management of self-presentation (Hagen & Lüders, 2016). And yet, our findings also highlight the perceived limitations of Wrapped in truly acting as a receipt for who the user really is.

Participants described using the campaign as a resource for making sense of their preferences, thus learning about their intimate personalities and habits. Some respondents reported that they only realised how they had *'listened to a lot of music'* (Luis, 21, M) when they reflected on their activity after getting their Wrapped results. As described by Marilia, 22, F, *'I usually realise this when the retrospective comes around'*. In providing a metrified summary of their annual music consumption, Wrapped enables users to recognise consumption patterns that might otherwise remain imperceptible. This indicates that the platform transforms unconscious everyday practices into quantifiable data, prompting moments of self-reflection and exemplifying what Tkacz (2022) calls the *'dashboarding of everyday life.'* Users' surprise at their results suggests that Wrapped reveals previously unarticulated aspects of their subjectivity.

As expected, Wrapped was also mobilised by the participants as a digital souvenir, resonating with Reading's (2009) conceptualisation of *'memobilia'*. As described by Sara, 29, F, *'I have screenshots of my previous Wrapped, as I like to remember them. When the next one comes through, I like to recall what the former one looked like, so that I can compare what has changed in a year'*. As further explained by Leo 23, M, *'I*

will share my happiness, and I also like to save it. (...) I have a folder with all of them, 2017, 18, 19, 20, 21. (...) I like to go back to old stuff to see how much my taste has changed. This indicates the enjoyment arising from the use of Wrapped as documentation of the evolution of one's musical taste – even if, as recognised by Sara, *'it doesn't really change much actually'*.

And yet, many participants expressed feelings of alienation caused by the jargon and the somewhat fuzzy genre labels employed by Spotify. As Joana, 20, F explains: *'Spotify's categories and the types of music it puts on are sometimes a bit abstract; you can't quite understand what it is'*. We see this as indicating a clash between promises of personalisation and the mobilisation of a limited number of commercially driven identity classifications that must be broad enough to encompass a range of practices and habits. When users fail to understand or relate to the witty categories presented in their data summaries, promises of datafication as personally relevant (Kant, 2020) fall short. This seems in line with the findings from Annabell and Rasmussen (2024) that users often describe Wrapped categorisations as simplistic or generic, signalling a limitation of the campaign in meeting the promise of truly 'knowing' each user.

We also observed a perceived mismatch between the platform's often limited classifications and the more complex and nuanced reality of the participants' daily music consumption. We noticed a frequent disappointment with the lack of 'fidelity' in the self-representations provided by the results. As described by Rafaela 26 F, *'[the summary of music genres mentioned by Wrapped] is part of what I listen to, but it's not everything, you know. I also think that's why I'm not that into Spotify anymore'*. That is, our data reveals how users experience a tension between the multiplicity of their musical tastes and the invariably limited categories mobilised by the platform, whilst also manifesting a desire to present a coherent identity through Wrapped. Participants also demonstrated an acute awareness of how external influences – from social media algorithms to cultural events – shape their musical choices throughout the year and, consequently, their representations in Wrapped:

There was a song by Maluma at the time that was used a lot on [Instagram] Reels, and I think it became my top song of the year on Spotify. I didn't even like it that much, but it was lively, and I ended up playing it several times ... I'm not sure if it changed my taste, as I don't particularly like it, but I ended up listening to it a lot because it was there. I consumed it, and it influenced me directly in a way. (Cristina, 23, F)

This reflection highlights the complexity of 'algorithmic individuation' (Prey, 2018) in the context where viral trends and algorithms from multiple platforms shape individual performances of taste. The *'total shame'* this participant mentioned regarding the prospect of sharing Wrapped results influenced by *'external things'* underscores the tension between consumption practices perceived as inauthentic (motivated by factors such as popularity and virality rather than personal preference) and the expectation that musical taste should represent a 'true' personal identity (a 'receipt', as described by Spotify itself). As such, our analysis of Wrapped reveals its dual role in shaping musical taste and identity. While the initiative serves as a tool for personal insights and encourages users to engage in self-reflection about their listening habits, it simultaneously reinforces the limitations imposed by algorithms perceived to filter, cluster and flatten musical exposure, constraining individual experiences. Ultimately, it illustrates the ongoing

tension between promises of personalisation and the potentially homogenising effects of technology on music consumption (Hesmondhalgh, 2021).

Everyday data made eventful: sociability, participation and publicness

We have been focusing on how participants negotiate their self-perception and identity management with and through Wrapped. However, the campaign is also an invitation to perform identity and taste publicly through social media. In this section, we focus on the sociability afforded by Wrapped, which involves a complex combination of desire for participation and belonging and the fear of peer-surveillance. In examining these aspects, we explore the inherent tension between the personal and the social components of music consumption via streaming.

Both the participants and the collected tweets indicate the recognition of the release of Spotify Wrapped as a significant moment in the year – something to look forward to and to take part in. This testifies to the fact that the campaign has become a yearly ritualised ‘algorithmic event’ (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024), concentrating attention for a limited period and shedding light on the potentially enjoyable aspects of datafied consumption. It is, as described by Figure 4, an event more significant than the holidays.

More than nurturing memories and data stories for their own sake, participants acknowledge the social aspect of Wrapped. However, this also means the anticipation that others will be seeing your annual retrospective and might have opinions on it – including concerns over potential aesthetic judgement (Hanrahan, 2018). We note, in particular, that tweets commenting on the incoming release of Wrapped results highlighted the fear of getting an ‘ugly’ output (Figures 5 and 6), which in turn might harm efforts of self-presentation.

Our findings indicate that the decision to share or not share the Wrapped results involves a continuous negotiation between identity management and belonging, emphasising the potential that these data stories have for generating conversation and sparking connections (even if through humour or self-deprecation). As described by Renata, 25, F, ‘Everyone is excited when it shows up. I shared it because I wanted people to see what my year had been like. Everyone was sharing it, so that others could see what their year had been like’. We noted the recognition that if you don’t share your Wrapped, then you are not part of that collective experience, since everyone seems to be doing it at the same time – which brings joy, pleasure, and nostalgia, as also illustrated by Figure 7.

Based on those findings, we argue that Spotify Wrapped is, at the same time, incorporated into people’s annual media use as an anticipated playful personal record (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021; 2022), and a particular moment in which ‘social awareness’ is foregrounded and informs practice, highlighting the complex negotiation of music consumption via digital platforms as simultaneously personal and social (Hagen & Lüders, 2016).

podemos concordar que o spotify wrapped ja é muito mais importante que o natal e o ano novo

Figure 4. ‘We can all agree that Spotify Wrapped is already much more important than Christmas and New Year’.



Figure 5. 'Pretending that I don't care about Spotify Wrapped because if mine comes out and it looks ugly I won't post anything'.

o maior medo da minha vida eh o meu spotify wrapped vir feio

Figure 6. 'The biggest fear of my life is that my wrapped Spotify comes out ugly'.

dia q sai o spotify wrapped tem esse climinha de reunião no pátio do recreio com todo mundo com seu cdzinho na mão

Figure 7. 'Spotify Wrapped release day has this School break vibe, everyone with their own CD in hand'.

Reflecting Burgess et al. (2022)'s discussion of 'data publics', our findings provide evidence for the mobilisation of personal data as both a resource for looking inwards and understanding oneself and for comparing, judging, and relating to the data practices of others, thus creating an ephemeral sense of shared experience.

As an algorithmic event (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024), Wrapped provides a vantage point for examining the tensions between the individual and the collective. Its

eventfulness (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2017) is marked by a complex temporal logic in which the past (previous music consumption) and the future (the anticipated results) are mobilised to construct a sense of urgency to share ‘in the moment’ and participate in the ‘here and now’ – resonating with theorisations of social media liveness (Lupinacci, 2020). Crucially, though, the recapitulation and celebration of the past seems to involve a combination of automated memory-surfacing informed by platforms’ logics and the active cultivation of particular moments as memorable or Wrapped-Worthy by the users themselves – as we explore in more detail below.

The ‘you’ you want to be: cultivating your Wrapped results

We identified many instances of resonance with existing accounts of everyday data cultures as theorised by Burgess and colleagues (2022), which highlights the more complex, ambivalent, and mutual relationship between users and the data practices deployed by digital platforms. Our findings demonstrate that Wrapped is understood to be configured by a combination of automated data collection and user-led input. In this section, we focus on users’ active work of cultivating their Wrapped – planting the ‘seeds’ through the establishment of personal listening objectives to then ‘harvest’ the expected outputs at the end of the year.

This active stance is illustrated by Figure 8, in which a user explicitly deploys the (assumed) end of the data collection period for that year’s Wrapped as a call-to-action encouraging fans to stream a particular track and ensure that it achieves a top position on the charts. Rejecting naïve conceptions of Wrapped as an organic, authentic receipt for user preferences and engagement (as sometimes pushed by Spotify), this case demonstrates the imagination of the platform’s operation and the deliberate attempt to manipulate the results by artificially boosting stream counts, essentially ‘hacking’ the system. This aligns with Morris’s (2020, p. 4) account of a ‘growing assemblage’ of actors across

!! FALTA 1 DIA PRO FIM DA CONTAGEM DO SPOTIFY WRAPPED, temos um gap de -7.997.848 pra conseguir o #2 de musica de kpop mais transmitida em 2023 e só temos UM DIA pra passar!

**STREAM LIKE CRAZY
LIKE CRAZY 2ND MOST STREAMED KPOP OF 2023
[#LIKECRAZYbyJIMIN](#)**



open.spotify.com
like crazy 40x fast
Playlist · tixie · 120 items · 492 saves

Figure 8. ‘ONLY 1 DAY LEFT UNTIL THE END OF SPOTIFY WRAPPED SCORING, we have a gap of – 5.813.159 listens to get the #2 most streamed K-pop song of 2023, and we have only ONE DAY to get it!’.

cultural industries who engage in ‘creative (and sometimes unsanctioned) practices to take advantage of platform affordances’ – from musicians tailoring content and fans engineering popularity to marketers artificially boosting plays. However, while Morris highlights that these tactics are usually motivated by ‘economic or cultural gains’ such as visibility or profit, our findings reveal a variation of this phenomenon: here, ‘gaming the system’ is re-appropriated by ordinary listeners not for financial reward, but chiefly as a tool for self-presentation and identity management.

More than a concern with broader charts, our interviewees often described their strategies for protecting the place of certain artists or tracks on their personal Wrapped. Leo, 23, M, mentioned that *‘There is one [track] that I really want to make sure is going to be there [on Wrapped’s top songs]. The other ones are actually organic – they are the ones that have in fact listened to’*. Once again, we interpret this as demonstrating an awareness of the inorganic nature of their yearly ‘receipts’, with users openly recognising their active role in nurturing their annual listening habits to ensure that their Wrapped is exciting or good. That is, participants are explicitly recognising the labour of ‘cultivating’ (Siles et al., 2019a) their individual media consumption to obtain affective gratifications; in this case, the happiness or success of getting the ‘right’ data stories. At first, as explored above, the consumption of the dashboards provided by Wrapped was described as a moment of self-discovery and realisation, with participants getting particularly excited about the number of streams for a given artist over the year. At a deeper level, however, our analysis demonstrates how users were constantly assessing their results against their expectations of what a receipt of their personal tastes *should* look like – which suggests a subjunctive approach to algorithmic mediation. This can be illustrated by Roberto, 21, M, who admitted that *‘Actually, at the end-of-year when I saw that I had listened to that song 115 times, I realised ‘it has fucked up my Wrapped!’*.

We noted that participants were using their previous experience with Wrapped to inform their music consumption in the following year, ‘playing the game’ (Siles et al., 2022) by consistently trying to force or even farm streams to boost their preferred artists and songs. Interestingly, the mitigation of undesirable outcomes often involves not only the incorporation of Spotify listening into existing routines (like working out to the same playlist every single day, as described by some of our interviewees) but also potentially the creation of new rituals to ensure the desired results:

There’s a song I love and which I thought was going to be my #1 last year but it wasn’t. It ended up being another song. So this year, every time I start to listen to my Taylor [Swift] playlist, that song is the first one I play, and also the last one before I stop. It’s so that it plays more than every other one. [...] My biggest motivation for sharing my Wrapped results is pride – the amount of minutes I listen to Taylor Swift is incredible. (Sara, 29, F)

The quote above illustrates the implementation of ‘listening goals’ (Ávila Torres & Beer, 2025) to achieve the desired output, and further testifies to the inherently social dimension of Wrapped – with users manifesting concerns about the potential discrepancy between their results and their expectations and the potential judgment from their peers (as we explored in the previous section). This continuous cultivation of the desirable Wrapped also involves actively avoiding Spotify for the consumption of ‘guilty

pleasures', in an attempt to prevent the contamination of their yearly summaries. Carlos, 23, M, for instance, deliberately avoids using Spotify to listen to specific tracks he feels embarrassed about, opting instead for other platforms:

When I want to listen to a song [that I'm ashamed of], I go to YouTube instead, because otherwise it shows up there. Also, when I'm with my friends – like in a group – I avoid listening to music on Spotify.

Such strategies reflect a conscious negotiation between private musical pleasures and the public persona constructed through Wrapped. They also demonstrate the ongoing planning involved in trying to ensure desirable outputs, which evidences both the awareness of datafication and the attempt to game the system to achieve a 'receipt' that represents the 'you' you want to be known for. As Leo, 23, M explains, *'I usually start doing this [planning] in September to make sure it is going to appear, I have a plan for it to come out.'*

When successful, this active cultivation of listening goals seems to produce pride, with the sharing of Wrapped being used as a 'badge of honour' on social media. When unsuccessful, though, it brings shame – as described by Klara, 28, F *'two years ago, I remember that I did not share [my Wrapped results] because I was embarrassed. It was too bizarre, too random, songs that I don't think anybody else listens to, you know?'*. That is, despite explicit efforts in optimising their listening to cultivate desired results – which involve the continuous monitoring of their annual music consumption and the creation of new rituals and routines to boost certain tracks, artists and genres whilst suppressing others –, participants eventually realise that their own Wrapped is not entirely under their control, with their yearly data summaries containing songs, artists and genres that were not meant to be there.

Wrapped-worthiness: managing contexts and algorithmic sensitivity

Despite claims of accuracy, magic, and precision made by platform rhetoric, users are often unhappy with the results they get through Spotify's data practices, even when meeting their personal listening goals. We observed, specifically, users' perceived collapse of their crafted identities and performances of taste once the platform merges every listen into their Wrapped summary, disregarding both the context of consumption and the person who was actually listening to music at the time of data capture. While in the previous category, users tactically curate their listening practices to cultivate their output, in this section, we focus on users identifying moments of disruption in that cultivation and how the limited sensitivity of 'the algorithm' might create a Wrapped that does not represent them. To avoid this, the participants frequently acknowledged not only the active monitoring of the 'pollution' of their Spotify streams but also the desire for 'the algorithm' to automatically help with that.

We noticed a persistent sense of anticipation from the interviewees, in which they understand that whatever they do in the present might have a direct impact on their future data stories, often followed by a fear of getting undesirable results. As described by Sara, 29, F, *'For instance, when I go to my mother's house – she really likes pagode.² I like pagode too, but I don't want it to appear on my Wrapped. I don't do anything to prevent it, but I get very anxious about it'*. Despite admitting not taking any measures to

mitigate the issue, the participant wondered whether over-compensating through listening to other genres would help make her Wrapped closer to her actual preferences: *‘I should play other types of music a little more often, so that they get more listens than the pagode my mom listens to’* – which resonates with the cultivating strategies discussed in the previous section. This perceived conflict between desired results and quantified plays can also be demonstrated by the tweet below (Fig. 9). It shows a user complaining about their Spotify Wrapped potentially being ‘ruined’ by the fact that their grandmother was persistently consuming religious content on their account, which made them be placed in the top 0.5% of fans for Cid Moreira’s³ biblical audiobooks on Wrapped.

Spotify (2020b) seems to encourage an active stance from users, offering tips and tricks to help them ‘enhance’ their Wrapped experience. This evidences how the company is aware that users might be surprised (and even frustrated) with whatever they see on their yearly summaries – with the institutional materials explicitly suggesting that users should, for example, actively remove certain tracks (e.g., ‘audio you fall asleep to’) through using their app’s private listening mode, or use separate profiles to make sure their children’s playlists are not incorporated into their Wrapped data (Spotify, 2021a). In so doing, says Spotify, whatever a user listens to won’t impact their Wrapped results – thus truly acting as an authentic receipt of who they deeply, intimately are. As further illustrated by the quote that opens this article, Spotify Wrapped is repeatedly framed by the platform as an accurate and authentic representation of who users really are and how they have felt over the past year – even if recognising that this self can be complex, fluid, and somewhat inconsistent. Despite these more naïve framings, our analysis demonstrates that, for Brazilian users, authenticity is not always inherently



Figure 9. ‘My grandmother’s hyperfocus on Psalm 91 kind of ruined my Spotify Wrapped’.

organic. Their verbalisations seem to foreground what Hochschild (1983) previously described as the paradox of authenticity: it must be simultaneously sought after, managed, and yet perceived as natural, spontaneous, and therefore ‘real’. Rather than ‘just being’, the datafied ‘authentic self’ requires labour from both users and the platform.

This adds further layers of complexity to the discussion of algorithmic identity and taste. The participants’ verbalisations indicate that just because you listen to a song or artist often – or even every single day – that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are particularly meaningful, or that they should automatically be on your annual summary. There is the recognition that whatever ‘you’ gets represented on Wrapped is always an artificial and limited construction that doesn’t fully capture their more complex preferences and personalities:

Sometimes you get intensely into a music genre or a band, an artist, a song, and then you spend two or three weeks listening to them a lot. And then, it’s done – because it catches that intensity. But it is not exactly what ‘you’ are, or the music genre you like the most, you know? (Eduardo, 21, M)

According to the interviewee, temporarily obsessing over an artist or track shouldn’t grant this song or genre a placement on your yearly top chart – after all, it doesn’t necessarily represent your taste and identity over the whole year. We interpret this as a widespread hope that the platform’s algorithmic systems could somehow be able to identify the contexts of listening that are indeed ‘significant’ (and therefore worthy of being on your Wrapped) and those that are trivial, ephemeral, or considered to be noise. Whilst the recent literature on the music streaming industry indicates a move towards context-based recommendation (Seaver, 2022), our findings suggest the desire for a similar logic to be applied to the moment of data capture: in this case, the contextual understanding of the act and intention of music consumption. In so doing, users seem to confirm that they expect a much more granular and accurate process of datafication, almost as if they are frustrated with the platform failing to fully deliver promises of ‘mutual domestication’ (2019b). When it comes to algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017), our analysis suggests that users desire ‘the algorithm’ to have a much more sophisticated sensitivity to context and intention of listening, as the platform should be able to automatically identify and compute only the listening sessions that are ‘Wrapped-worthy’.

Conclusions and final remarks

Contributing to existing efforts that examine Spotify Wrapped with a critical focus on the logics of datafication (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024), our analysis emphasises the creative incorporation of these logics into people’s listening practices, highlighting the mutual shaping between algorithms and popular culture. Rather than seeing the participants as naïve or unaware of the critical implications of data extraction, we defend the importance of capturing the domestication of these systems in practice, from which we can better understand and theorise the datafication of the cultural industries as it unfolds in popular settings (Siles et al., 2022). Instead of reproducing myths about the predictive power of Big Tech, our empirical data demonstrates how encounters with datafication produce a range of reactions, including pleasure, pride, happiness, frustration, and shame.

Focusing on Wrapped as an ‘algorithmic event’ (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024) means treating it as both an object of introspection and sociability. Based on the analysis of tweets and interviews, we argue that its ‘eventness’ is marked by fleeting, fluid, and ephemeral feelings of shared experience and recognition, reflecting previous theorisations of social media liveness, which argue that the emergent sense of ‘shared experience’ can happen even in contexts of algorithmic mediation and ‘personalisation’ (Lupinacci, 2020). As such, we provided empirical evidence to the complex temporal and intersubjective dimensions of its unfolding. In the case of Wrapped in Brazil, we also noticed that many of these ephemeral conversations have a humorous and self-deprecating tone, signalling a more light-hearted and perhaps even cynical approach to data practices. Whilst an in-depth exploration of these aspects was beyond the scope of this piece, we hope to examine the cultural specificity of Brazilian music consumption via streaming in future research outputs.

Instead of being understood as a datafied receipt of one’s realness, our findings demonstrate how Wrapped is appropriated by users as a resource for active self-making and self-presentation. More than a concern with getting results that are ‘true to themselves’ (as promoted by the platform), our findings highlight efforts towards the cultivation of desirable outcomes, which often involve understanding (or imagining) the logic of algorithmic systems to ‘play the game’, and the attempt to ‘hack’ their personal charts through allegedly inauthentic tactics of consumption – foregrounding the constrained modes of agency that characterise the appropriation of algorithmic technologies by ordinary people (Siles et al., 2022). This involves the establishment of close attachments to dashboards and digital memorabilia, the development of particular skills to learn, anticipate, and steer data collection, and myriad ambivalent feelings associated with the public sharing of one’s annual results – including anxieties about self-representation (Hanrahan, 2018) – resonating with theorisations of data intimacies, data literacies, and data publics (Burgess et al., 2022). In so doing, we focused on Wrapped as a phenomenon of ‘popular culture’, marked by playful, contradictory, and imaginative practices (Siles et al., 2022), in which guesses, speculations, and folk theories about data and algorithms shape music consumption, identity, and the performance of taste.

Notes

1. Research Project 77678024.6.0000.5348, approval protocol 6.756.093, Feevale University.
2. A popular Brazilian musical genre that emerged in the 1970s as a variety of samba from Rio de Janeiro, and was particularly fashionable in the 1990s. Also, pagode leads the ranking of the 50 most played songs in 2025 (Billboard Brazil, 2025).
3. Cid Moreira (1927 – 2024) was the anchor of Brazil’s leading TV news programme and was recognised as one of the most influential journalists in the country. He had one of the most remarkable voices on national television.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical considerations.

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