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WRAP YOUR HEAD AROUND IT: BRAZILIAN USERS' ALGORITHMIC IMAGINARIES OF SPOTIFY WRAPPED

Vanessa Valiati
Feesvale University

Ludmila Lupinacci
University of Leeds

Felipe Soares
University of the Arts London

Introduction

Spotify is one of the world's most popular music streaming services, operating in over 180 countries. In what is now part of the 'year-end list' tradition, Spotify Wrapped summarises each user's annual listening habits. Although Spotify is generally classified as a streaming service, initiatives such as Wrapped have an explicit component of sociability (Hagen & Lüders 2017) – in this case, not only because they are based on the harvesting of users' behavioural data but also because they are created to be shared on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter/X. Indeed, Spotify Wrapped has acquired its own role in digital popular culture, inciting anticipation and excitement from users worldwide and becoming an 'algorithmic event' (Annabell & Rasmussen 2023) in and of itself.

In this paper, we propose to scrutinise how this algorithmic event is perceived and understood by Brazilian users whilst also identifying and unpacking the platform affordances and algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) that inform those interpretations and their associated performances of taste and identity (Airoldi, 2019, Prey, 2018). We explore, in particular, how users negotiate the tensions between algorithmic personalisation and individuation and the possibilities for shared experience to emerge during this event. Through a mixed-method approach, we argue that the 'eventness' (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2018) 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, which in turn reflects and extends

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previous theorisations of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014), everyday data cultures (Burgess et al., 2022), and social media liveness (Lupinacci, 2021).

Algorithms, performance, and taste

In an "algorithmic episteme" (Fisher & Mehozay, 2019), a focal point of extensive research revolves around platforms observing audiences through the collection of data on users' habits. The individual is perceived through a discernible pattern derived from the data they generate, including their tracks on the platform. Cheney-Lippold (2017) encapsulates this notion with "measurable types", through which individuals are temporarily classified as members of fragmented categories. At the same time, the affordances of digital platforms amplify the persistence and visibility of these users' discourses and taste practices (Airoldi, 2019). Therefore, it becomes crucial to assess how these affordances are integrated into the ways individuals reproduce discourses about their tastes and identity performance through their consumption and sharing of musical information (Webster, 2021). In this context, the assumption is made that musical identity undergoes 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).

As a tool, Spotify Wrapped consolidates the characteristic elements of platformed consumption. It offers the promise of personalisation, leveraging the digital traces users leave throughout the year. Simultaneously, it contributes to the ongoing modulation and individuation of taste and identity, fostering a so-called "shared experience" during this algorithmic 'event.' Then, it becomes relevant to investigate these aspects that cause tension between individual and collective consumption practices: the distinction (how people perform and share their tastes and how they judge or fear being judged by others), whether there is indeed performance management and how this is reflected in their practices, the perceived need to share as an opportunity to participate in a flow of content, and how the platform shapes all these aspects.

Methods

To explore Brazilian users' perception of Spotify Wrapped, we adopted a mixed-method approach. We combined Social Network Analysis of X/Twitter data, a manual review of the most shared messages, and contrasted those results with a preliminary thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 Brazilian Spotify users.

We used Brandwatch to collect X/Twitter data. For data collection, our search query included the combination of the words "Spotify" and "Wrapped", and we filtered for messages in Portuguese only, as we focused on Brazilian users in this study. We collected messages posted in November and December 2023 to encompass the period before Spotify launched the Wrapped to its users and the time after that. We collected 22,283 messages, of which 12,745 were shares/retweets used for the Social Network Analysis. After generating a network graph, we manually reviewed the users with the highest indegree and their most shared messages. We used an arbitrary threshold of 50 weighted indegree to select the most shared messages. We then conducted an exploratory thematic analysis of the 41 most shared messages in the dataset. This dataset will undergo further examination through a content analysis based on the categories identified in the exploratory analysis.

Additionally, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with Brazilian Spotify users to understand their engagement with Spotify Wrapped and how it affects their online self-presentations on social media. Interviews were complemented with elicitation techniques

Preliminary findings and next steps

The network graph based on X/Twitter data shows a variety of small clusters sparsely connected (Figure 1). Each of these small clusters is centred around a specific user who had their message highly shared on X/Twitter. Few users (less than 8%) shared more than one message, and only 26 (0.21%) shared five or more messages. 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 mainly based on users sharing one or a few specific messages rather than engaging in-depth in community-building conversations.



Fig 1. Network of X/Twitter users around Spotify Wrapped

We identified three overarching categories in the preliminary thematic analysis of the interviews and the most shared messages on X/Twitter:

Cultivating your Wrapped: users recognise their active role in ‘nurturing’ their annual listening habits to ensure their Wrapped is accurate, exciting, ‘beautiful’, or good. They recognise the labour of ‘cultivating’ (Siles et al., 2019) their media consumption to obtain affective gratifications; in this case, they acknowledge the happiness and success of getting the ‘right’ data stories. This often involves the incorporation of Spotify listening into existing routines (such as working out to the same playlist every single day) and the creation of new rituals to ensure the desired results.

Managing contexts and algorithmic sensitivity: we identified strategies to manage and manipulate music consumption practices throughout the year to ensure that only what really ‘represents you’ (or, actually, what you *want* to represent you) is shown on Spotify Wrapped. We interpret this as a widespread hope that the platform’s algorithmic systems would 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 or considered noise.

Individual personalisation and the shared experience: participants acknowledge the social aspect of Wrapped, including the anticipation that others will be seeing their annual retrospective and will have opinions on it and the potential these data stories have for generating conversation and sparking connections.

Our findings reflect previous theorisations of social media liveness (Lupinacci 2022), which argued that the emergent sense of ‘shared experience’ is often fleeting, fluid, and ephemeral and does not necessarily translate into a more enduring or complex sense of community. In this context of algorithmically-mediated ‘affective publics’ (Papacharissi 2014), being part of the content stream becomes an end in and of itself.

When it comes to algorithmic imaginaries, then, we highlight the participants’ desire for ‘the algorithm’ to have a much more sophisticated sensibility to context and intention of listening, as the platform should be able to identify the listening sessions that are indeed “Wrapped-worthy” automatically. We also provide further evidence to the previously theorised idea that Spotify Wrapped is an emblematic example of algorithmic eventness (Annabell and Rasmussen, 2023) and of everyday data intimacy and data publics (Burgess et al., 2022), as it foregrounds the ambivalent belief and imagination of the powers endowed to algorithmic systems at the same time it demonstrates the perceived vulnerability of imagined surveillance surrounding the sharing of personal results.

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