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## MAKING PERSONALIZATION ✨DELIGHTFUL✨: STAGING POWER FOR DATA INDULGENCE ON SPOTIFY

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### Introduction

Digital platforms' systematic 'data grab' (Mejias and Couldry 2024) is commonly associated with the promise to enhance users' experience through personalization. Yet, scholars have highlighted the 'chilling effects' (Büchi et al 2022), cognitive injuries (Hill 2019), discomfort and alienation (Hogan 2024), and frequent resignation (Ajana 2020) associated with data extraction. This paper contributes to the understanding of the role of affect, emotion, and desire in mediating datafication (Grover et al 2025). Whilst 'Big Data' discourse is often justified through claims of objectivity and accuracy (boyd and Crawford 2012, van Dijck 2014, Cheney-Lippold 2017), in seeking to emphasize the complexity of contemporary data cultures (Burgess et al 2022) I conceptualize what I call 'data indulgence' – the tentative framing of datafication and personalization as pleasurable, enjoyable, delightful. I do so through a technographic examination of the promotional and institutional materials circulated by 'audio-first' platform Spotify to explain its data-driven operation.

### Aims and framework

There is a growing literature dissecting the transformations brought by platformization to music production and consumption (Prey 2018, Hesmondhalgh 2022, Siles et al 2019, Morris 2020), with Spotify receiving significant attention (Eriksson et al 2018). Here, I mobilize Spotify as a case study to explore a broader tendency amongst platforms of different sectors in justifying their operation through hedonistic, sensuous values such as enjoyment, pleasure, and 'feeling good' (Shifman et al 2025). Whilst Spotify is not the only platform doing so – a similar strategy is deployed, for instance, by TikTok's focus on 'sparkling joy' (Scharlach 2024) –, I consider it to be an emblematic example of our 'psychic economy' of algorithms (Drott 2018, Bruno et al 2019). Scrutinizing Spotify's rhetoric of personalization (Strecker 2023), I contribute to recent debates on the symbolic manifestations of platform power (Scharlach 2024) and the potential incorporation of 'aesthetic power' (Degen and Rose 2024) by tech companies.

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I inspect how Spotify crafts a positive atmosphere for datafication and personalization – examining the semiotic and discursive strategies mobilized to persuade users to not only tolerate but actually find value, meaning, and even pleasure in such processes –, and unpack the theorization of what I call ‘staging power’ (Lupinacci 2025). A focus on the staging of atmospheres (Böhme 2018, Salazar 2023) sheds light on the orchestration of individual and collective desire, and implies that sensual, affective, and emotional responses can be to some extent shaped and anticipated, even if not entirely controlled (Bille et al 2015). It also invites a reflection on platforms’ capacities to appeal to particular affective and cognitive dispositions, whilst bringing forth specific types of ‘aesthetic subjects’ (Ngai 2012).

### **Research design**

To examine the desires and aspirations projected onto datafication and personalization, I conducted a digital technography (Berg 2022, Bucher 2018) of Spotify’s institutional blogs *For the Record*, *Advertising*, and *Insights*. These materials simultaneously fabricate and promise to fulfil particular media fantasies (Drott 2018), functioning as complementary ‘boundary objects’ (Scharlach et al 2023) through which Spotify offers a ‘behind the scenes’ glimpse into its inner operation, explaining and contextualizing the release of new features and campaigns, reiterating its mission, and reinforcing its identity in face of different publics – including users, advertisers, creators, and developers. The technographic analysis was preceded by a thorough exploration of the archives published on the blogs up to December 2024, from which 120 stories were selected. The purposeful sampling was premised on the identification of information-rich cases (Patton 1990). These entries were repeatedly read and inductively coded to identify how Spotify’s personalization is imagined to work, through the examination of the interpretive repertoires, symbols and metaphors mobilized by the company (Berg 2022). Whilst the chosen method does not allow me to examine how the platform is appropriated by its users, it provides critical insight into how its creators envisioned Spotify to stage users’ experiences to support the company’s data practices.

### **Preliminary findings and intended contributions**

The first finding emphasizes the discursive entwinement of rational and supernatural grounds for personalization. Crystal balls, tarot cards, constellations, horoscopes, and palm readings are deployed as metaphors for the ‘prediction’ of users’ taste and the ‘manifesting’ of “cosmic playlists”. Spotify’s data-driven personalization is simultaneously described as priming for the positivistic ‘science of numbers’ *and* marked by a magical, new age mystical power, which resonates with historical narratives of technological sublime (Burgess et al 2022) and recent conceptualizations of ‘algorithmic conspiratoriality’ (Cotter et al 2022). The inherent contradiction of this ‘computational mojo’ is never explicitly acknowledged in the materials, which conveniently tap into calculating and magical logics to (not) explain how the platform works. This pattern echoes identified tendencies from AI companies in using metaphors of enchantment to shape people’s imagination of data and algorithms, thus creating confusion about their technical operation whilst emphasizing their dazzling effects (Nagy and Neff 2024).

The second finding refers to the focus on the harmony, ‘timeliness’ and attunement of algorithmic matches (Bucher 2020, Brown et al 2024) and the beauty of this ‘contextual’

recommendation for users, creators, and advertisers (Drott 2018, Prey 2018, Seaver 2022). This is manifested, for instance, in the presentation of playlists that “harness the power of AI” to “identify the mood you’re in”, and in the promise that through both their personalized and “multiuser recommendation” products Spotify can “get it right” and “create some really delightful experiences”. The materials emphasize specific affective tonalities, with the prolific use of terms such as ‘relaxing’ and ‘energizing’ – a tendency that has been previously documented (Allen Anderson 2015, Eriksson et al 2018). This match between feeling and ambience is framed as an active process, but one in which the outcome is always positive for users and advertisers. ‘Context’, then, is mobilized as a spatio-temporal signifier that produces an ‘abundance’ of opportunities for listeners to improve their mood and for brands to reach their desired audiences. Datafication is harnessed for emotional forecasting, and for creating templates of feeling for listeners and brands. On Spotify, ambience is treated as a commodity (Roquet 2021) and atmospheres are turned into assets – available to be owned, controlled and capitalized by the platform and its partners.

Expanding on this, my focus here is not simply on the scenic production of ‘moods’ but chiefly on the staging of subjectivity. More than examining Spotify as a service that offers people tools for ‘furnishing’ their emotional lives through music, I identify the tentative production of users as specific types of aesthetic agents: data-indulgent subjects. Data indulgence – the craving, appetite for, and enjoyment of data-driven experiences – becomes then a psychosocial disposition that is explicitly pushed by Spotify when emphasizing its contextual recommendations and, especially, its ‘interactive experiences’ (such as Wrapped, AI DJ, Blend, Playlist in a Bottle, daylist). I conclude that rather than relying solely on common tropes such as accuracy or objectivity, Spotify disrupts these established premises of dataism by targeting a more visceral, sensual notion of validity and reliability: *delight*. Users should feel compelled to engage with the data practices offered by the company because it *feels good* to do so. Yet, any potential delight obtained through Spotify’s ‘designed experiences’ emerges precisely, and paradoxically, from the allegedly creepy, injurious, ‘chilling’, practices of data expropriation they rely upon. This conversion of the ‘disgusting’ (Lupton 2014) into the delightful, however, is not organically occurring. Thus, by *staging power* I am referring to a twofold process in which Spotify’s discourse simultaneously offers users the opportunities for ‘staging’ their lives and controlling their aesthetic environments and moods (DeNora 2000, Allen Anderson 2015, Salazar 2023), and strategically crafts the provision of a particular ‘architecture of seduction’ (Biehl-Missal and Saren 2012) or ‘persuasive power’ (Schäfer and van Es 2017) for datafication (Lupinacci 2025), which in turn encourages users to relish ‘data indulgence’. It is, therefore, the co-option of ‘aesthetic power’ (Degen and Rose 2024) by techno-corporations, and its deployment to orient people towards datafied atmospheres and data-craving modalities of subjectivity.

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