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Commodifying Taste: An Autoethnography of Free Labour, Exploitation and Alienation on Spotify

Charles Owen

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Article abstract

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the business and marketing practices of the music streaming service Spotify. The paper demonstrates that Spotify's features are designed to elicit free labour from its users so that Spotify may exploit this labour, alienate its users from the products of this labour, and ultimately reap the maximum benefits from this labour. This is accomplished primarily through the attachment of marketing to, or the commodification of, the social and affectual roles that music plays in the human experience, such as allowing individuals to forge bonds over shared music taste. Spotify benefits from these practices in numerous ways, such as the obtaining of user data that betters the platform's algorithm and attracts paying targeted marketers, or the propagation of free and effective marketing for the service undertaken by users. The processes by which these benefits are realized also, in many cases, act in a cyclical nature, perpetuating themselves. The end goal of this paper is to bring academic attention to the specific forms of free labour, exploitation and alienation occurring on Spotify in an effort to lay groundwork for the development of alternatives.

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Commodifying Taste: An Autoethnography of Free Labour, Exploitation and Alienation on Spotify

Charles Owen

Metropolitan University

charles.owens@ryerson.ca

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the business and marketing practices of the music streaming service Spotify. The paper demonstrates that Spotify's features are designed to elicit free labour from its users so that Spotify may exploit this labour, alienate its users from the products of this labour, and ultimately reap the maximum benefits from this labour. This is accomplished primarily through the attachment of marketing to, or the commodification of, the social and affectual roles that music plays in the human experience, such as allowing individuals to forge bonds over shared music taste. Spotify benefits from these practices in numerous ways, such as the obtaining of user data that betters the platform's algorithm and attracts paying targeted marketers, or the propagation of free and effective marketing for the service undertaken by users. The processes by which these benefits are realized also, in many cases, act in a cyclical nature, perpetuating themselves. The end goal of this paper is to bring academic attention to the specific forms of free labour, exploitation and alienation occurring on Spotify in an effort to lay groundwork for the development of alternatives.

Introduction

The first time I realized the accuracy of Spotify's algorithm was by accident. I was listening to an album that had been recommended to me by a friend while doing housework, and at some point, I noticed that the vocalist had changed. I checked my phone and realized that not only had the

vocalist changed, but I was also no longer listening to the same band. Swiping backward through the tracks, it dawned on me that the album had ended about 3 tracks previously and what was playing was Spotify's algorithmic suggestions, I just failed to notice. Captivated by this, I began using this feature more and more, letting an album or single finish playing, then allowing Spotify to begin playing a stream of music based on what I had previously been listening to. The algorithm was consistently able to match the sound and mood of what I was listening to, even when incorporating artists I had never heard before. This left me with the distinct feeling that Spotify knows me, and my music tastes, better than I do.

This paper investigates the methods through which Spotify alienates and exploits free user labour, as well as how it uses the products of this exploited and alienated labour (data) to better the platform (such as through the strengthening of Spotify's algorithm, which relies on data gathered from users to determine what to recommend to other users). In order to accomplish this, the paper draws on a personal journal of my usage of Spotify, and the thoughts, feelings and reflections arising from this usage on both the individual and social levels. This paper also examines the ways in which Spotify capitalizes on individuals' sociality and sense of identity to encourage free labour in the form of marketing and data generation. Central to this exploration will be an examination of the sharing features integrated into Spotify, and the methods that Spotify employs to encourage its users to engage with these features. The primary method examined will be the 'Spotify Wrapped' feature, which repackages user data and presents it in the form of colourful, 'fun' infographics that encourage users to act as marketers through the sharing of these personalized infographics to their social media. This examination will demonstrate how Spotify is leading the charge on new fronts of user exploitation through the creation of Wrapped as a viral users-as-marketers campaign that is made possible by alienating users from their labour, as well as exploiting this labour, and the affective role that music plays in our lives.

Theoretical Framework

The three central themes examined in relation to Spotify and social media are free labour, the alienation and exploitation of this labour, and the way in which those engaging in this labour are alienated from its products and conditions.

Terranova defines free labour as labour that is "…simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited…"[1] While Terranova is defining the term in a largely digital context, it can aptly be applied to real-world cases as well. In a digital context, this labour can consist of, for example, being a volunteer moderator for chatrooms or image boards, beta testing and identifying bugs in video games, or even liking and sharing content on social media or streaming platforms (labour which generates data and helps keeps the platforms alive). In a real-world context, this labour may consist of starting and hosting fan clubs, posting fliers promoting a local band, or helping music acts load and unload equipment for live shows. In either case, this kind of free labour can contribute to the development and maintenance of dedicated communities that revolve around art and culture. For example, In the article 'Amateur Experts: International Fan Labour in Swedish Independent Music' authors Baym and Burnett detail the extensive amounts of free labour that fans of Swedish independent music are willing to undertake in both on and off-line contexts. This labour, undertaken out of fandom and a sense of community, includes promoting bands via the Internet and even going so far as to book shows for them at local venues.[2]

Outside of fandom, the free labour of sharing music can play an important role in human sociality. In the article 'Social Streaming? Navigating Music as Personal and Social' authors Hagen and Luders point out that, due to homophily (the tendency for people to form relationships with those they perceive as similar to themselves over those they perceive as dissimilar) music can often be an important tool for allowing individuals to bridge the social gap between themselves and

[1] Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor," in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (London: Routledge, 2013), 34.
[2] Nancy K. Baym and Robert Burnett, "Amateur Experts," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 5 (2009): https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877909337857, 434.

peer groups.[3] Free labour undertaken out of a desire to form social bonds and participate in musically oriented social groups, such as promoting artists by introducing them to friends, sharing concert details, or spreading the word of new album releases (amongst a variety of other activities) can act as a core pillar of sociality, and can also contribute to the development of communities based around music, as demonstrated by the indie music communities described by Baym and Burnett.

Through Spotify and other streaming services, the mode that this kind of free labour takes on has changed radically. Largely gone are the days when someone would, for example, make a physical mixtape to introduce others to bands that they liked, or to use as a social tool to form a closer relationship with a group or individual. In the place of sharing music physically through making mixtapes or loaning records, there now stands user generated playlists and sending people links to an album. While these activities do carry the element of sociality and fan promotion that are/were present in physical music sharing, they also allow Spotify to insert marketing into what was once a largely social and interpersonal act of free labour. Whenever a user makes and shares a playlist with another user, they are tacitly promoting Spotify and encouraging another person to engage with the platform. Moreover, Spotify incorporating the sociality of music sharing into its platform introduces a multitude of new potentials relating to free labour, and its exploitation.

In the era of social media, music streaming, and platformization, free labour has tremendous potential to be exploited by both social media and music streaming platforms. Within these platforms, users are not only exploited for free labour such as uploading content or liking and sharing, but also for their data, typically simultaneously with the former acting as a vehicle for the latter.[4] User data and free labour is what keeps these platforms alive.[5] In an older example

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[3] Anja N Hagen and Marika Lüders, "Social Streaming? Navigating Music as Personal and Social," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 23, no. 6 (2016): https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516673298, 645-646.

[4] José van Dijck, "Users like You? Theorizing Agency in User-Generated Content," *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 1 (2009): https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443708098245, 48-49.

[5] Terranova, 47.

of this, the essay 'Free Labour' by Tiziana Terranova details how the service America Online (AOL) took advantage of users' free labour by having them act as unpaid chat hosts to keep the service running.[6] As the Internet evolved, the subtler form of user exploitation that is data extraction became common. This user data is extracted from any number of activities that may occur in online platforms and websites, such as clicking links or liking or sharing content.[7] The data that is generated from this labour and collected by the platforms on which it occurs is often used for targeted marketing purposes,[8] but it takes on several unique functions on services such as Spotify. While Spotify does engage in the practice of selling access to user data for the purposes of targeted marketing, it also uses data collected from users' labour for the purposes of bettering its own service.[9] The data generated by the user labour of making playlists, saving and liking albums, or skipping songs (amongst other activity) can be 'fed' to Spotify's algorithm to optimize algorithmic music recommendations and determine what material should end up on personalized, algorithmically generated recommended music playlists.[10] [11] To make this happen, Spotify users are alienated from the products of their labour (their data), which is then broken down into demographic information and used by Spotify to inform its algorithms about the listening habits of users in similar demographics. If enough Black Sabbath listeners, for example, also listen to, like or save the music of Electric Wizard, it is safe to assume that Black Sabbath listeners who have never heard of Electric Wizard will, at some point, find the band on their recommended playlists. This is not at all dissimilar to Terranova's example of free labour keeping the AOL chatroom service alive. In both cases, it is the participation of users that allows the services to function. The key difference is that in the case of AOL, chat room hosts knew precisely what role they (and their labour) were playing, and how it contributed to the platform. In the case of Spotify, many users do not know that the free labour of listening, sharing, liking, and making playlists is generating the data that allows Spotify to develop the proprietary

[6] Terranova, 33.
[7] van Dijck, 48.
[8] Nicole S. Cohen, "Commodifying Free Labor Online: Social Media, Audiences and Advertising," in *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture*, ed. Matthew P. McAllister and Emily West (New York: Routledge, 2015), 178.
[9] Jeremy Wade Morris and Devon Powers, "Control, Curation and Musical Experience in Streaming Music Services," *Creative Industries Journal* 8, no. 2 (March 2015): https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2015.1090222, 113.
[10] James McInerney et al., "Explore, Exploit, and Explain," *Proceedings of the 12th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1145/3240323.3240354, 2.
[11] Jordan Wirfs-Brock, Sarah Mennicken, and Jennifer Thom, "Giving Voice to Silent Data: Designing with Personal Music Listening History," Spotify Research, May 15, 2020, https://research.atspotify.com/giving-voice-to-silent-data-designing-with-personal-music-listening-history/.

algorithm that sets it apart from other streaming services and helps to keep it alive in a competitive marketplace.

The accuracy of the algorithm is crucial to the success of Spotify. As authors Hracs and Webster point out, the convenient and personalized nature of Spotify (thanks to the algorithmically determined playlists presented to users on their homepage) allows it to "overcome the spatial constraints imposed by digital devices and introduce novelty, relevance and serendipity into the user experience."[12] It also allows for Spotify users to build their music listening and discovery habits around the functionality of the platform, keeping them engaged with it and preventing them from switching to a competing service.[13] Moreover, authors Morris and Powers assert that recommendation algorithms play an important role in determining the overall 'quality' of a music streaming service in comparison to its competitors, noting that offering a "branded musical experience" over simply providing a service is a crucial element of competing in the music streaming marketplace.[14] Just as chat hosts on AOL kept the chat rooms alive, the free labour of Spotify users keeps the algorithm alive, which keeps the platform alive and competitive.

When music fans and listeners engage in free labour (such as the creation of playlists, liking, saving or sharing content, etc.) within digital spaces such as social media or music streaming platforms, they are engaging in labour that exists in an abstract space, as opposed to a physical or strictly social space. Abstract spaces are inherently capitalist spaces that are monitored (and sometimes manipulated) by the authorities which control the space for the sake of rendering "… qualitatively heterogeneous social space… homogenous and thus quantitatively comparable."[15] Because Spotify is one such space, its users can be alienated from the products and conditions of their labour to a much greater degree. As stated by Prey, paraphrasing Lefebvre, "abstract

[12] Brian J. Hracs and Jack Webster, "From Selling Songs to Engineering Experiences: Exploring the Competitive Strategies of Music Streaming Platforms," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 14, no. 2 (2020): https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2020.1819374, 249.
[13] Hracs and Webster, 247.
[14] Morris and Powers, 109, 117.
[15] Robert Prey, "'Now Playing. You': Big Data and the Production of Music Streaming Space." (dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2015), 113.

space is alienated space."[16] When unpaid music listeners perform free labour through Spotify, one of the most valuable products of their labour is their data. This product is then taken from them by Spotify and put to use for a range of purposes that benefit Spotify, which are entirely outside of the control of the labourers who produced the data. As stated by Mark Andrejevic, "alienation subsists not just in the surrender of conscious control over productive activity, but also, consequently, in its product."[17]

The surrender of the products of labour (such as data, or the content users produce) by Spotify users is an important element of Spotify's business model. It is what allows Spotify to strengthen its algorithm, and to draw advertisers (by selling access to data), which supports its free subscription service.[18] Alienating users from their data is also important to Spotify because it allows for the data to be repackaged and presented back to users as something entirely new, a feat that would not be possible if users had full control over, and access to, the data that they generate, or the conditions under which it is generated. If, for example, users were not alienated from the products and conditions of their labour, they would have the ability to decide if they wanted their data collected at all, and if so, what it would be used for—greatly complicating the targeted marketing and algorithmic refinement processes that Spotify relies on. This alienation also allows Spotify to introduce features that act as encouragement for their users to undertake forms of free labour outside of just data generation.

Spotify Wrapped

Features like Spotify Wrapped and Only You are yearly releases that repackage user data into infographics which detail users' most listened to artists, how long they spent listening to specific artists and songs, and what their most listened to genres were (among other information). These infographics are presented to the user with a 'share to' button that allows them to instantly share

[16] Prey, "'Now Playing. You': Big Data and the Production of Music Streaming Space," 218.
[17] Mark B Andrejevic, "Surveillance and Alienation in the Online Economy," *Surveillance & Society* 8, no. 3 (September 9, 2010): https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v8i3.4164, 284.
[18] Tim Paul Thomes, "An Economic Analysis of Online Streaming: How the Music Industry Can Generate Revenues from Cloud Computing," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2011, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1866228, 2.

either the entire set of infographics, or individual infographics, to their social media. The intention of these features is to appeal to users' sense of taste and individuality to encourage them to share the results to their social media accounts, thereby advertising the service to their friends and followers (and increasing Spotify's brand awareness). The most recent Spotify Wrapped release (2021), for example, included a call-to-action slide before the final, summative slide. The messaging on this call-to-action slide read: "Thanks for making us a regular part of your totally irregular year, now go forth and proudly share your top-tier taste with the world."[19] This opportunity to express taste and individuality to one's social network is a powerful incentive to undertake free labour, as taste and taste sharing are well-established methods of identifying oneself in social contexts.[20] [21]

Features such as Spotify Wrapped- which encourage and allow for users to act as marketers- present a clear affirmation of Fisher's assertion that "…the audience is involved in three moments along the value chain… consumption, production and marketing."[22] In introducing these features as viral marketing campaigns (wherein the users are the marketers), Spotify mobilizes "… the audience in social media [that] acts also as media, constructing and maintaining communication channels through which messages are delivered."[23] In this case, the audience (or users) are mobilized to flood these communication channels with marketing for the service, which maximizes brand awareness, creates a fear of missing out, and may drive traffic to the platform for further data extraction.

Methodology

[19] Spotify, "Spotify Wrapped," 2021.
[20] Paul DiMaggio, "Classification in Art," *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 4 (1987), https://doi.org/10.2307/2095290, 443.
[21] Hagen and Luders, 645.
[22] Eran Fisher, "'You Media': Audiencing as Marketing in Social Media," *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 1 (2014): https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714549088, 51.
[23] Fisher, 52.

This paper uses autoethnography as its primary method of analysis. Adams, Jones and Ellis define autoethnography as a research method that:

> "uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences, acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others, uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as 'reflexivity'—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society… Shows 'people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles', balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion and creativity, [and] strives for social justice and to make life better."[24]

In the following section of this paper, I will reflexively examine my own use of Spotify. I will examine the role that the service plays personally in my life, and at the intersection of myself and my peer group, and the struggle that occurs therein. On one hand, as a music fan embedded in a peer group of other music fans, Spotify allows us to easily introduce each other to new music and share our individual tastes both at the one-to-one, and group levels. It also allows us to make and share playlists, to follow each other's existing playlists, and to share original music created by members of the group. It acts as a catalyst for bolstering feelings of belonging to a community, but also of individual uniqueness and identity. The music it grants us access to plays heavily into the group affect at gatherings, and, on a personal level, my own individual affect on a daily basis. On the other hand, the platform alienates us from the products and conditions of our labour and exploits this labour in a number of ways. The aim of this examination is to delve deep into the cross section of society that I personally know best- that of myself and my peer group- to show music fans "in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of [our] struggles…"[25] with Spotify as both a pillar of sociality, and, simultaneously, a surveillance platform that aims to profit from our interactions. While this paper may not propose alternatives,

[24] Tony E. Adams, Holman Jones Stacy Linn, and Carolyn Ellis, "Introduction to Autoethnography," in *Autoethnography* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1-2.
[25] Adams et al., 2.

it will hopefully bring academic awareness to the struggle, which I see as one of the first steps in the end goal of making life less commodified.

Autoethnographic Analysis

As cliché as it is to say, I have been a fan of music my entire life. I still remember the joy that welled up in my chest when waking up on Saturday morning to my mother cleaning and belting out the lyrics to Fleetwood Mac's *Landslide*, a sure sign that it was going to be a good day. By age 13 I'd seen Sublime (with Rome), Pearl Jam and Black Sabbath live, each concert being a carefully chosen birthday outing, and each concert producing the same growing anticipation in my chest starting weeks before the show, giving way to the same intense adrenaline rush the second the first note was played. When I entered adolescence and began struggling with my mental health, I listened to Elliott Smith albums on repeat to comfort me. Suffice to say, music has always been an emotional companion for me, and it is extremely seldom that I find myself in a mood that music cannot enhance or pacify at some level and I am far from the only person who feels this way.

Music streaming services, and Spotify in particular, have, over the past several years, been working to develop algorithms and marketing opportunities that cater not just to their users' tastes, but to specific moods and contexts as well. This practice, in addition to allowing Spotify to recommend music more accurately to its users, also introduces new opportunities for major brands to commodify affects, emotions and activities. In the article "Nothing Personal: Algorithmic Individuation on Music Streaming Platforms" Robert Prey discusses Spotify's 'Branded Moments' campaign, a marketing campaign that allows brands to place ads before context-sensitive playlist that relate to their product. For example, Gatorade was chosen to be a launch partner for this campaign, and they were given the opportunity to sponsor Spotify curated workout playlists, whereas Bose (another launch partner) was selected to sponsor the 'chill time'

playlist.[26] Here, the struggle of reconciling music streaming services as simultaneously a convenient companion that can bolster affect and enhance activities, and a surveillance, exploitation, and marketing machine, is realized. Users take to Spotify to curate a playlist that will help motivate and inspire them to perform during their workout, or help them relax after a stressful day. Spotify uses data taken from these user curation projects to help them build their own curated workout or 'chill time' playlists, then markets these playlists to users. When users inevitably engage with them, they are greeted with context-sensitive targeted marketing designed to appeal to their current affect or activity in a bid to sell them headphones or sports drink.

Outside of simply being my emotional and affectual companion, music has also been a social tool. When I entered high school, knowing no one, music allowed me to form my first lasting friendship. Someone tapped me on the shoulder as I was walking to class and asked me where I had gotten the Dead Kennedy's patch on the sleeve of my jacket. The following semester we shared a history class, most of which we spent squirrelled away in the back-corner, swapping download links for, and bonding over, abrasive experimental albums (given that neither of us had a subscription to any music streaming service).

While this method of sharing music had its own charm, it was also time consuming, took up huge amounts of storage space, and was (technically) illegal. The resolution of these issues is a large part of what makes participating in free labour on Spotify so appealing. Spotify intentionally makes sharing music extremely simple by incorporating sharing methods directly into the platform. While users are exploited when they take advantage of these sharing features, the streamlined nature of them makes sharing music- and ultimately fostering relationships and a sense of community around music- considerably easier.

[26] Robert Prey, "Nothing Personal: Algorithmic Individuation on Music Streaming Platforms," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 7 (2017): https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717745147, 1094.

As I grew older, the use of music as a social device proved to be a permanent fixture in my life, and I found myself frequently making friends by going to see local bands with whom I shared mutual friends. This is still a regular practice for me, and as a result, my peer group is extremely musically minded, and tends to bond over the sharing and discussion of music. While, initially, our go-to methods of music sharing tended to be swapping filesharing or YouTube links to download, this has largely transitioned into the use of Spotify. This is (mostly) due to Spotify's general convenience, and the ease with which it allows us to share music. What we were unaware of as we made the switch to Spotify, however, was the heightened levels of surveillance we were opening ourselves up to. All we knew was that paying for streaming services meant more music available anytime, anywhere, and more options for discovering new music.

This constitutes what Mark Andrejevic dubbed the "pleasures of participation" in his discussion of critiques of the conceptualization of participation as labour. He notes that it is justifiably difficult to view free labour on Internet platforms in the same light that one would view sweatshop labour, because, amongst other reasons, the technologies that profit from this free labour are not (yet) necessary for day-to-day survival- people choose to engage with them.[27] While it was not necessary that we switch to Spotify, given that our old methods were still functional, we did it because of the impact it had on our affect- the pleasure it brought us. The convenience that streaming services provided in the discovery of new music meant that the joy we felt when we discovered a new band or album that we liked came more frequently and required less effort to achieve. Additionally, the ease that Spotify provided in sharing music bolstered our sense of community by allowing us to share and discuss new music more frequently.

The increasing prevalence of Spotify as the preferred method of listening to, discovering, and sharing music within the group eventually led to a change in the way we shared music publicly as well. Our preferred methods quickly became sharing music from Spotify to our Instagram stories, or, occasionally Facebook. While, at the time, these practices seemed to be little more than a logical evolution of our regular music sharing activity, we failed to realize that the push to

[27] Andrejevic, "Surveillance and Alienation in the Online Economy," 153.

get Spotify users to share their music via Facebook owned social media was part of a carefully organized partnership. In 2011 author Tim Paul Thomes wrote about a deal being struck between Spotify and Facebook to allow users to share music directly from Spotify to Facebook owned social media.[28] Since then, not only has this deal been realized, but integrated sharing functionality in both platforms has made the process so streamlined that it has become, for many, a standard for music sharing. This growth in popularity represents an advancement of what Andrejevic labelled 'the digital enclosure movement'. To Andrejevic, digital enclosures represent "… a variety of strategies for privatizing, controlling, and commodifying information and intellectual property."[29] In this case, we see, through a campaign of inter-platform deals and connectivity implementations, the flow of music-centered sociality being controlled and commodified via its encasement in the digital enclosures that are Spotify and Instagram. This represents perhaps the most concrete example of the internal struggle that many surveillance-conscious music fans face when using social media and music streaming platforms to share music. They have the opportunity to reach the widest possible audience (everyone in their social media network) with a varied array of music (the entirety of the Spotify catalogue), but this opportunity comes at the price of having every step in the sharing process monitored and exploited by the same digital enclosures that grant them this opportunity.

One such example of a wide-reaching sharing function is Instagram stories. Instagram stories are a space to publicly share photos, links, posts, or other user's stories (under certain circumstances) which last 24 hours. When you log in to Instagram (in its current version) the stories that you have not viewed from everyone you follow are shown as icons across the top of your feed. Tapping on one and letting the time run out on it, or tapping the right side of your screen, will play the next story, be that one posted by the same user, or one from another user, until you either view all the new stories posted by those you follow, or manually exit out.

[28] Thomes, 2.
[29] Mark Andrejevic, "Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure," in *The New Media of Surveillance*, ed. Shoshana Magnet and Kelly Gates (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 24.

One relatively unique function of Instagram stories is the ability to share music directly from Spotify to your story. This is done on Spotify's end. When users click the share button on a song or album a slew of options come up, including sharing the music to a variety of different social media. In this way, the sharing functionality built into Spotify allows the service to incorporate an unpaid version of the set of same principles of audience labour that drive Facebook's sponsored stories. In Eran Fisher's analysis of sponsored stories, it is stated that "audience labour here involves constructing segmented channels and targeted audience [sic] and mobilizing human capital to promote a brand or product."[30] In the case of music sharing, Spotify offers the opportunity for users to showcase their unique taste and individuality, or simply capitalizes on the human desire to share music as a function of sociality, to mobilize human (or social) capital to promote their service. Because Spotify hosts the song or album, anyone who interacts with the link is taken to Spotify, upping traffic on the platform. Even if no one interacts with the link, the fact that it is being seen inherently increases Spotify's brand awareness via a social media showcasing.

When music is shared to an Instagram story, as well as Snapchat and Facebook stories (which operate largely the same way), an image of the album art will be made visible to those who view it, with the song or album name below. From here, it takes merely two taps to open Spotify and begin streaming the content. This easy to use, integrated sharing tool is one important part of Spotify's method of 'helping' its users discover new music on the platform, thus keeping them engaged with the platform. As authors Morris and Powers state:

> Spotify positions musical discovery and consumption as social processes… Spotify now offers what it calls a 'three-dimensional approach to music discovery'- the combination of recommendation from friends, proprietary algorithms and real music experts.[31]

[30] Fisher, 58.
[31] Morris and Powers, 113.

In doing this, Spotify encourages its users to help keep other users engaged with the platform in exchange for the opportunity to share their music taste. Just as Terranova described users helping to keep AOL alive by hosting chatrooms, Spotify users now help to keep Spotify alive by introducing other users to new music.

In this practice, we see how Eran Fisher's analysis of the logics of sponsored Facebook posts becomes fully prevalent on Instagram (which now falls under the umbrella of Facebook owned social media) to the benefit of Spotify. As noted, these sharing practices encourage Spotify users to keep each other engaged with the platform. This is accomplished by leveraging the social capital that Instagram users have in the eyes of their followers- or in other words, the influence that they have on their followers. This allows Spotify to take advantage of the labour that Instagram users have undertaken in the act of building social channels (or networks) to create a form of word-of-mouth marketing that has been updated for the social media age.[32] This kind of marketing is beneficial in more ways than one. For starters, it costs nothing for Spotify to have a user share a song they like to their Instagram story. Additionally, when a user shares a song they like to their extended social network through Instagram, they are likely reaching people who are not only in the same demographic, but also who trust the sharer's taste (or find them 'credible') to some degree.[33] This increases the likelihood of these people interacting with the link, driving engagement and traffic to Spotify as a platform.

Beyond just driving engagement to Spotify from existing users, having users tacitly promote Spotify itself (by showcasing their use of platform) to members of their social network is a remarkably effective strategy for advertising the service to new users. In the 2011 case "Fraley vs. Facebook Inc." Facebook's then Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg was quoted as saying "… on average, 68% more people are likely to remember seeing the ad with their friend's

[32] Fisher, 60-61.
[33] Fisher, 61.

name. A hundred percent—so two times more likely to remember the ad's message; and 300% more likely to purchase."[34] In this way, Spotify leverages its users' social capital not only to encourage interaction with links, but also to promote the service in its entirety. Here, we see a new angle on the internal struggle that many exploitation-conscious Spotify users experience. Not only is their data leveraged for use in Spotify's marketing, but their social networks and sociality itself are as well. Nothing better exemplifies this than Spotify Wrapped season.

Spotify Wrapped, as noted previously, is a set of infographics (which include built-in sharing functionality) that are fashioned out of data extracted from users' listening habits, and presented to them on an annual basis. Essentially, Wrapped is a 'year in review' for individual users that takes the data Spotify has gathered on them throughout the year, turns it into fun, personalized infographics, and returns it to users as an opportunity to publicly display it as a badge of 'good' or 'unique' taste and individuality. These infographics, which are explicitly designed to be shared by users as an act of marketing for Spotify, are made possible by the alienation of users from the products of their labour—data.

While using Spotify, the data generated by users is harvested, and then completely sealed off from them, removing their control over the products of their free labour. This allows the data to be 'turned around' on users, in this case being re-presented to them as something new, to encourage users to undertake further labour. As Mark Andrejevic put it in his discussion of digital alienation, "the alienated world envisioned by interactive marketers is one in which all of our actions (and the ways in which they are aggregated and sorted) are systematically turned back upon us."[35] This observation can aptly be applied to Spotify Wrapped in the context of free marketing labour. Users are alienated from their data, which is then re-contextualized and presented in the form of infographics (turning it back upon them) in an effort to convince them to undertake marketing labour. What makes the prospect of undertaking this marketing labour so appealing (and a large part of why it is so difficult to recognize as labour) is how important music

[34] Casetext.com "Fraley v. Facebook, Inc. (2011), 18.
[35] Andrejevic, "Surveillance and Alienation in the Online Economy," 286-287.

is as a distinct marker of identity and individuality, and how our music tastes can shape how we view ourselves in relation to friend groups and our generational peers.[36] When this is considered, it becomes clear why so many people are eager to participate in Spotify Wrapped. For many users, the alienation of their data generating labour, and the recontextualization of this data, obfuscates the true nature of what is happening, which is that the products of their labour are being used to encourage further labour. Even for users who are aware of the exploitation occurring, the draw of expressing their individuality, and the sense of community that is fostered by the opportunity to participate in a mass moment of taste sharing is hard to resist—even if that means simultaneously marketing for a multi-billion-dollar company. This also marks another example of exploitation conscious Spotify users being forced to face down the struggle between wanting to participate in music-oriented activities (in this case the sharing of Spotify Wrapped results) and not wanting to be exploited by engaging in free labour.

Despite the user exploitation that Spotify Wrapped embodies, it is a bit of an event in my peer group. Seemingly everyone in my wider friend group shares something related to Spotify Wrapped publicly when the time comes. The day that the most recent Wrapped was released, nearly every Instagram story on my feed included Spotify Wrapped to some degree, and the more I saw, the more I wanted to share mine- yet I found myself wary of doing so. The primary reason for this was because my most listened to artist was an incredibly mainstream artist that not many of my peers like. I felt as though my most listened to artist did not reflect how I wanted others to perceive me. As Hagen and Luders have pointed out, similar pop-culture tastes can be an important element in connecting individuals to new social groups. By not making the results of Spotify Wrapped known publicly, I was attempting to manage the way I was/ am perceived by the loose social network that is my Instagram followers. This is not uncommon. As stated by Prey:

> It seems that the desire to share cherished music is always matched by the desire to maintain some degree of control over publicizing personal listening

[36] Hagen and Lüders, 645.

> habits… there is often a yawning gap between the music that gives us pleasure, and the music we use to project our identity to others.[37]

This desire to maintain control over the publicizing of personal listening habits offers users another incentive for sharing both music, and (in some cases) the results of their Spotify Wrapped. In addition to the potential for Spotify's sharing tools to be used to connect to others socially on a genuine level, it also allows users to selectively share music to exert some level of control over others' perceptions of them. These multiple incentives, working in conjunction, constitute the genius of how Spotify Wrapped encourages users to act as marketers, convincing them to showcase a 'fun' and 'unique' Spotify offering.

Beyond just being a showcasing of Spotify's unique offerings, Spotify Wrapped also creates a fear of missing out in non-Spotify users. In a journalistic article titled "How Spotify Wrapped 2020 Marketing Campaign Boosted Mobile App Downloads And Engagement" author Pulkit Jain wrote "In 2017, Spotify launched Wrapped as a successor of the 'Year in Music' campaign, intending to create fear of missing out… Since then, every year, Spotify users look forward to their Spotify Wrapped stories, while non-Spotify users (like me) feel excluded."[38] Jain is not alone in this- even a small amount of time spent on Twitter during Wrapped season will uncover an abundance of memes from and about people disappointed about having to sit out while Spotify users have all the fun.

Ultimately, Spotify Wrapped and Spotify's sharing features are marketing tools that attach themselves to sociality as a means of driving new users to the platform (and keeping existing users engaged) for the purposes of data mining. These tools also act to spread brand awareness for Spotify, take advantage of users' social capital, and create a fear of missing out in non-users.

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[37] Prey, "'Now Playing. You': Big Data and the Production of Music Streaming Space," 186.

[38] Pulkit Jain, "How Spotify Wrapped 2020 Marketing Campaign Boosted Mobile App Downloads And Engagement," MoEngage Blog, March 23, 2022, http://www.moengage.com/blog/spotify-wrapped-2020-app-downloads-engagement/.

The fact that it is users themselves conducting the free labour that allows these tools to function embodies the struggle that every exploitation and labour-conscious Spotify user must face when they feel the urge to use Spotify as a social tool—or at least, the users that do view this activity as labour.

Conclusion

Music, and unpaid labour surrounding music, have played a well-documented role in humans' sense of community, individuality, and identity (both in relation to themselves and others) for centuries. Moreover, for many, like myself, music plays an important role in affect and emotional state on a near daily basis. This is why it is such a fertile ground for the exploitation and alienation of free labour. In the case of Spotify, this exploitation/ alienation functions in a patterned way. First, users come to the service for any number of reasons (they have been seduced by the convenience, because their friends use it, etc.). From here, they become exploited by the platform as it turns their every activity into a form of data-generating labour, then seals the user off from this data. This removes any user control over the products of their labour, alienating them from it so that it may be used as Spotify pleases. Spotify uses the data for purposes such as strengthening their algorithm, which creates a more personalized experience—drawing new users to the platform and keeping existing users engaged so their data can be mined, restarting and continuing the cycle. Spotify also uses the data to fashion new functions on the service, such as Spotify Wrapped, which are presented to users as an opportunity to demonstrate their unique taste, identify themselves as part of a community, exert some control over their peer's perception of them, or attempt to connect with social groups. In exchange for this opportunity, users act as marketers for Spotify, advancing a viral marketing campaign that strengthens Spotify's brand presence, sparks the fear of missing out in non-Spotify users, and showcases a unique feature of the service, potentially drawing new users to the platform (and keeping current users engaged) so their data may be collected- restarting the cycle yet again. Finally, the data may also be split into demographic information and used to attract advertisers. These advertising dollars fund Spotify's free version, which makes the service accessible to more users whose data can then be collected, once again restarting the pattern.

Ultimately, this study has demonstrated that, while Spotify acts as an unspoken core-pillar of my (and undoubtedly many other) friend groups, that allows for the convenient sharing, discussion and exploration of music, it also acts as an ever-watchful form of surveillance. It attaches itself to our sociality and music sharing habits, profiting from them and encouraging us to act as marketers using data it has extracted from us via exploitation and alienation. Because of this, there is a constant internal struggle (for me, at least) between the desire to stay connected with my friend group by having access to the same music streaming and sharing tool that they use, and the knowledge that this tool violates my privacy, exploits me, and alienates me from my labour and the products of my labour, all while I pay them to do it.

This study focused more on the personal and interpersonal mechanisms that allow such a service to function, with the end goal of bringing awareness to the fact than an alternative is needed, rather than proposing or highlighting potential alternatives. Whether an alternative service could exist within the logics of the mainstream Internet (as opposed to a more socialized, alternative Internet) is an area wherein more research would be necessary. What this kind of service would look like, how it would remain affordable for average users, and what services seek or have sought to accomplish this same goal are all areas of recommended further research.

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