Music Consumption in the Spotify Age and Cultures of Use

I have been thinking a lot lately about (what I describe as) the *phenomenization of everything[1]* and the importance with which we now approach all cultural objects, seeking almost to curate ourselves through them (and advertently curate how we consume them too). As it is the end of the year, and us Gen Z typically begin the much-awaited anticipation of the infamous Spotify Wrapped right about now, it had been on my mind how music is such a big part of this curated personality of cool.

I myself am victim to this. When I began thinking more about my own listening habits, I became more curious about whether my friends thought about this too– if they thought about their listening habits and also specifically what their individual listening habits were. From that point, I also wondered if there was a point of commonality in our experiences and if the mechanism/s of Spotify itself (and the influence of social media) shapes it in a specific way. And, most importantly, was I right in my assumption? Do we use music as a ground for social projection? Do we perceive that other people are projecting themselves through music? Most importantly– <u>Do we all actually take the act of consuming music so seriously</u>? Or is it just me?

With this intention, I set out to conduct my interviews– every next one longer than the one before– and discovered that yes, in fact, we do! (Or at least such is the case with my friends). In the process of conducting my interviews, I also became aware of how the music consumption habits of my subjects– all urban Gen Z Indians with upper-middle-class

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[1] Today, you can't just enjoy dressing up in florals, you are <u>'cottagecore</u>.' You cannot simply be interested in reading in reading obscure female intellectuals, you are a '<u>thought daughter</u>.' What began as fashion microtrends a few years ago have shaped our thinking of ourselves and guided us to fit ourselves into boxes and labels that very acutely & succinctly describe our **aesthetic** and **vibe**. We (Gen Z) don't simply wish for things, we '<u>manifest</u>' them. We don't just laze around and procrastinate (or be depressed), we '<u>girlrot</u>.' Everything is more than just simply a thing. Everything is a phenomenon, a definable, specific event part of a much larger thing than just itself.

backgrounds– have followed a very similar evolutionary pattern over the years, charting the introduction, rise & normalization[2] of Spotify (and maybe even it's fall).

Rationale

I have been using Spotify since it first launched in India in 2019 and have remembered receiving my Wrapped ever since. Spotify Wrapped is essentially a 'year in review' of all the music you consumed. The data presented is divided into many categories– favorite artists, songs, genres, etc. and often also contains some fun stats about your musical *aura* or what city you belong to based on your taste in music. Especially in the earlier years, it was so highly anticipated and all that everyone talked about for the next couple of weeks when it came out– and continues to be *the* thing on people's minds come November. In the years following the launch of Wrapped, several other apps launched their own version of Wrapped. The main attraction here being the sharing function of Wrapped, primarily on Instagram stories. In all these years I have only posted it once (in the second year I got my Wrapped) because I considered it too gauche but it still continues to be a topic of discussion among my friends & me each year, even if with growing disinterest.

Fig. 1

2 When I say 'normalization,' I mean spotify becoming a household name and *the* go-to app that everyone uses.

It has especially in recent years been such an interesting phenomenon to witness as we shift further from centering music towards an inexplicable appeal of 'cool.' My interest in the examination of the specific 'appeal of cool' is informed by my own experience as an Indian– keeping in mind the later arrival of Spotify to India same as many other Western things to many other Global South countries– but also specifically as someone with the affordances of being able to get a Spotify subscription.

Having lived very similar lives– as upper-middle-class urban Indians– my friends went through a very similar journey going from analog ways of consuming music as kids on music channels, like 9XM, MTV & VH1 on TV and listening to music on the radio & CDs then switched to YouTube and then in the earlier years of high school, having gotten their first smartphones, they got apps like Gaana and Wynk. Streaming music on their phones allowed autonomy & facilitated the development of taste at a pivotal age– and this only went ten steps above with the arrival of Spotify a few years later.

I also consider this an interesting and important topic to explore given my lack of distance from the subject, having gone through all this myself. As my approach is shaped by my own experiences it gives me a more in-depth, *experienced*, and understood perspective of thinking about this, bringing a lot of relevance to this examination.

Methodology

To me, examining conversations around Spotify use meant examining conversations had by those with similar experiences as me, from a standpoint epistemological lens, to be able to 'do this right,' or just do it well (Harding 269-270). Also having already had conversations about evolving media use & the digital cultural landscape with my friends, I thought it would be interesting to talk to them about this as they would be especially open &

comfortable having in-depth discussions with me. I've chosen friends that I know spend a significant enough time listening to music and have had (and certainly been aware of) Spotify since its arrival in India[3]. At the time of conducting the interviews, we were all anticipating this year's Wrapped to drop (which narrowly happened two days after my last interview).

I have conducted five long, conversational interviews, each lasting between 35-75 minutes. The interviews were held online over call as all my interviewees lived far from me– one in Groningen, one in Denmark, and the others back in India. They were carried out in such a manner as to allow the interviewees to speak freely about whatever they felt passionate about and primarily revolved around Spotify Wrapped, music streaming apps, and the sociality of music consumption. The specificity of my data set situates this as a small case study involving my friends, which could function even as a pilot study for a bigger project.

Data analysis was done using a combination of grounded theory and discourse analysis. First, through open coding, I identified utterances that stood out to me in the interviews and turned them into codes which I then categorized into fitting clusters through axial coding. While coding, I was also attempting, informally to analyze discourse and identify the "unintended consequences" in the interviews while doing so, two broad repertoires of cultural capital & 'culture industry' emerged which I used as my selective codes (Strauss and Corbin). When my code tree was ready, I went back to the interviews for a more formal discourse analysis, employing Wetherell and Potter's method, with the context of this classification which helped identify & observe emerging stories among my interviewees (169).

Spotify Wrapped: Fiending the Fiend

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[3] Not all my interviewees use Spotify as their primary music app, except Omisha & Vani. Tarini currently uses YouTube music as her family just got a premium subscription for it. Ishwar switched over to YouTube premium for a bit but now uses Spotify again. Amina, although she does have spotify on her phone, hasn't ever had a paid Spotify subscription.

My interviewees have a love-hate relationship with Spotify wrapped. While the beaming excitement of receiving one's wrapped has fallen over the years, they still certainly look forward to it. All Spotify users from my sample said that they will be checking their wrapped this year, like Tarini who affirmingly said "I will be checking it. 100%." even though she has stopped using Spotify a few months ago. While they are aware that Wrapped is essentially just cutesy-fied data mining, it is criticized but ultimately accepted because where isn't this happening?

"I really doubt that everything is ethical and consensual in this data analysis,
big data world. I feel like [Spotify is] on the lower side of evil." [Tarini]

I do think it's a good concept overall because anyway they are tracking so much data, might as well give us a product out of it. I don't know because what else are you gonna do with it? [Ishwar]
Ishwars adds that he's always been a fan of Spotify Wrapped for its social function and how it aids conversation. There is a consensus that Wrapped results get shared and discussed with close friends but sometimes sharing it with 'everyone' on Instagram stories helps spark conversation with people you wouldn't otherwise talk to.

Vani, who says she doesn't enjoy wrapped anymore (but still curiously checks it and finds the reveal to be fun) mostly engages in critical conversations and cannot take it seriously anymore. It is interesting to note how even while mostly disinterested, Wrapped cannot be entirely ignored. Spotify seems to have cleverly caught onto this value of its own invention– both of people's interest in learning of themselves and the added sociality of this knowledge. The balance of customization and a way of essentially getting free marketing has aided in Spotify's success and establishment as a disruptive tech icon (Yin and Fu 2657-2658).

Soundcloud user (and Spotify hater) Amina, doesn't understand why it has this hold on people and people bother to share it.

> "Spotify wrapped is like the music version of MBTIs. Like, dude yeah, Of course, you have a personality and you listen to music and you care about something. You could just talk about those things instead of sharing a weird pseudo-scientific list. Just say what music you've been listening to. Say "I've been diggin' this fucking track." Just do it. Why you gotta share your Spotify wrapped?" [Amina]

And she makes a fair point. Cultural capital attached to music turns Wrapped and arguably music consumption itself into a game of *social interperception*.

Wrapped's Use of Our Over-consciousness of Cultural Capital

I would define 'social interperception' as how we attach cultural meaning to our presentations of ourselves and those of others due to the everpresent sociality afforded by social media, thus constantly perceiving each other and presenting oneself with the knowledge of being perceived. I theorize this by combining Pierre Bourdieu's definition of Cultural Capital as cultural knowledge as an indicator of social status and Manuel Castells' idea that 'network society' encourages us to visiblize ourselves to cater to the network, while maintaining 'individuality' (Bourdieu; Castells 398).

Omisha, a massive Strokes fan, knows that she is perceived as one. "Of course, Omisha is listening to the Strokes" she says is how people react. She adds:

"I feel like other people [perceive me that way] because I very actively make it that I'm perceived that way. Like, I'm very aware that that's how I'm trying to come off as. But then I'm also surprised by how much has been caught on and how much people kind of associate it with me. And they will find, like, a random Strokes meme and send it to me. They will find, like, some Strokes reference, and then send

it to me. Or, they were like, "oh, I was listening to the Strokes and thinking about you and stuff like that…I feel like that's really sweet because then they're kind of associating [me] with the Strokes and then they send me these things and it's fun to be attached to an artist that way." [Omisha]

Vani feels very differently about curating oneself through music and says she feels over curation leads to turning the self into a product, a *cool* product.

"My point is I don't want to be cool for anyone. I do not want to be. And I think I'm a victim to the fact that even holding up a poster about who you find cool and who your artists are is again, late-stage capitalism. I'm tired of that. I feel like Instagram has done that for me. Instagram has done that for all of us." [Vani]

Today there are many avenues on Instagram to share music– on your stories (both as a standalone story and accompanying other media), accompanying a post, on the new instagram 'notes' feature, on reels and more directly through direct message. There's both a lot of reasons and a lot of though put into sharing music on spotify.

"… the [new] Kendrick album. It was like, I hadn't even listened to it. It had just dropped. It had been like five-ten minutes since it dropped. And I was on the pulse for that. So I was like, 'oh, I'm just going to share it so everybody, at least all my followers know that it's been dropped'… if I'm early to a release of an artist I really like and it's a major release of sorts, I will post it. [Ishwar]

"If I like a song, I'll put it up [on notes]. It usually stays on for, like, a day. Right? And I don't think a lot of people realize it, but when you pick a song to share on your note, you pick which section of the song is shared. I put in so much attention and effort into what I think is the best encapsulation of 15 seconds of this song." [Amina]

Curation and deliberation are not activities limited to social projection and social exchange but can also be creative and aesthetic endeavors.

"It almost feels like a hobby, so I try to make a playlist where the vibe is, like, the same. Then I'll make sure to put a picture that I like, and it kind of suits the vibe of the playlist. And then there's a description. So that in itself is like an enjoyable experience." [Tarini]

"This is something I actually creatively enjoy. I'm not gonna lie, I'm very passionate about putting music along with the photo. I just make it a creative activity. [Vani]

Thereby, my friends are not just consumers of music but 'craft consumers.' A term coined by Colin Campbell, "the craft consumer is someone who transforms 'commodities' into personalized (or, one might say, 'humanized') objects." (28).

There is a juxtaposition between this 'personalized' nature of Spotify and Spotify as 'culture industry' i.e. mass culture produced for mass appeal which allows for its simultaneous enjoyment and critique (Adorno and Horkheimer).

Paradox of Criticism and Participation

The interviewees hold an acute awareness of the capitalistic motives of Spotify and also hold contempt for it. Vani discussed how over time, the choicelessness projected through popular music and all the songs we're essentially forced to hear through social media, owing to their aggressive marketing, has dissociated her from enjoying music.

" I feel like there's a big dissonance between what is my sound and what is everybody's sound. And not like there's a problem in being into what's viral at the moment, but I personally miss having a choice. And I don't know how to explain it but I think being online robs you of the choice to choose what you enjoy. Or it's like what gives you dopamine quite literally. Also, side note literally what

social media and what all these big corporations do is that like they they get in your head and they control what makes you like happy." [Vani]

Additionally, Spotify's increasing attempts to replicate the Wrapped model and create other 'cool' ways of relating to Gen Z come off as "try hard," "corny," "cringe" and "annoying." Spotify is attempting to pander to Gen Z but this doesn't seemed to have worked universally on my interviewees.

I feel like maybe it would be likable by some people. But when you're in my face at all times with something like, [Spotify-made playlist's] names become corny at a point where it's too obvious that you're trying really hard to be, like, you know, 'cool' and 'with the times.' So I don't feel catered in a way that they're trying it to make it a little too new age-y instead of focusing on the quality of suggestions that they give you. [Tarini]

Interviewees also expressed suspicion on Spotify's attempt at wanting to promote some artists over others.

"Generally I do have a problem with Spotify-made playlists, I don't like them as much. Like I said, I feel like there's a huge placement thing where I feel like it's being manipulated to a certain extent." [Ishwar]

On a recent episode of Vulture's 'Switched on Pop,' the popular popular-music podcast's producer Reanna Cruz, not only echoed this concern but virtually confirmed it providing evidence that tracking her listening activity on Last.fm, she realized that Wrapped gave her entirely different and manipulated results (Cruz). There is no general understanding of the functioning of Wrapped. Omisha aptly says "Wrapped works weirdly."

Ishwar had switched over to YouTube Music for some time, due to its better functionality, but returned to Spotify recently. Tarini, currently uses Youtube Music since her family got a joint subscription but (if paid for) she says she would definitely return to Spotify.

Vani has had an Apple Music subscription since buying a new phone but still continues to use Spotify. Omisha exclusively uses Spotify; unless she wants to watch music videos– then she goes to YouTube (interesting to note here that Spotify has now released a new feature where you have the option of watching full music videos on the app). What keeps my friends loyal to Spotify: its design and its sociality.

Social Listening: a Common Good

As a SoundCloud/Prime Music user, Amina has stayed clear of the above-mentioned problems, only having to deal with the inconvenience of sometimes being unable to find songs/artists she likes due to copyright takedowns. However, despite all her resistance, she still uses Spotify for one singular purpose– using the Jam feature for when she's at parties. The Jam feature allows users who join the Jam to form a collective queue of songs that play on one speaker. There is also a remote version of the Jam that allows you to start a Jam session with other Spotify user/s. Omisha had a lot to say about it:

"We're leading our own lives right now in different places and then just listening to these songs together. That's very cute. I really like that. It's also something you're doing together, but at the same time, on your own. And it's just a very cute bonding activity. And I remember doing that, especially with Tharun even for podcasts. So it was not even about, like, music anymore, but we would just listen to podcasts on Spotify together before going to sleep. Like, he knew that I would listen to podcasts before going to sleep, and then at that time, both of us really liked this one podcast. So then it was almost like I was going to sleep listening to his podcast with Tharun." [Omisha]

Further, Ishwar pointed out how digital music has quite the opposite of an isolatory experience with spaces like SoundCloud as the birthplace of game-changing Genres like Hyperpop and the eponymous SoundCloud rap which grew further on other online forums and global exchange.

It is important to acknowledge that it has bridged so many barriers and connected us in many ways. There are demerits but also merits to this digital social space in which

contemporary music consumption exists: the paradox and the flux between connection and disconnection are everpresent. But maybe that's just what everything is like and will be like in this post-industrialist late-stage capitalist world we now live in.

> "…compared to Instagram and all, [Spotify] is the lesser of the evils or maybe not even that evil really because it's not really harming me in any real way." [Omisha]

Conclusion

Social interperception, I argue, impacts not only the music consumption habits of my interviewees but also how they talk about it and also criticize the representation of culture industry that is Spotify. An apt quote from Adorno and Horkheimer's 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' seems quite descriptive of Spotify Wrapped's prevalence– "The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them." (Adorno and Horkheimer)

Beyond this, beneath the surface there exists the confusion of whether social capital fuels culture industry or if culture industry aims to display social capital so much that it increases its wealth. Spotify runs Wrapped every year because we care. They create obnoxious, seemingly AI-generated daylists because they know we will react. We pay attention to our listening habits and measure their social meanings and how they'll be perceived because of the digital interconnectedness that Wrapped plays on. But which came first, the chicken or the egg? Has Spotify Wrapped made us increasingly conscious of our music consumption or does music as a cultural capital motivate Spotify Wrapped to categorize us so extensively?

My answer, from what I've understood from interviewing my friends: the chicken and the egg exist in an infinite loop fueling one another and working in symbiosis. Criticality,

while important, still co-exists alongside using Spotify, checking Wrapped, and (for the lack of a better phrase) "give a flying fuck" about it all [Amina].

It would be interesting to see if similar results yield from a study using this frame of analysis and method, what either/both a different sample and a larger sample and attempt to further understand how we participate in and with media as a result of our own social understandings.

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Appendix

Code Tree

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes
- Specified taste - Hyperspecific taste *Genuine* reccomendations - Seriousness towards music - Internalized pressure to present - Enjoying music in a "nerdy way" - Perceiving others through music taste - Layers of perceiving coolness - Self-consciousness - Conscious non-judgment - Perceived authenticity - Finding music through trusted sources - Associating someone's music taste with their vibe *Needing* to decide if you like something - Music as a reflection of emotions - Panic of perception - Music as a complete aesthethetic experience	Qualifying music	**Cultural Capital**
- Identity validation through music - Vibe curation - Listening to impress - Visual displays of music taste - Music as personlity - Self defined by artist/music - Valuing uniqueness (in self) (Not) seeking validation through wrapped - Fascination for niche artists - Superiority from music taste - Getting into artists before they're big - Bragging	Coolness	

• 'I know the niche thing' • Community feeling • Exchanging playlists • Listener cross-surveillance • Music as a measure of compatibility • Wrapped as a conversation starter • Talking through music • Connection through differences • Connection through similarities • Spotify as a social place • Engaging in music discourse online • Shareability of music • Experiencing music together • Easy bonding music • 'The internet connects us' • Bridging distance through music • Conversational discovery of music • Cultural connections of music • "Similar sounds" • Obsessing over artists • Feeling connected to artists • Empathy towards artist while listening • Music resonating with life • Perceived symbiosis between artist and listener • Consistent fanhood • Global/intercultural exposure • Being introduced to music through crushes • Socializing (IRL) through music • Bridging distance through music	Connection	
• Broad listening habits • "I listen to everything" • Actively seeking music	'Cultural Omnivore[4]'	

[4]Peterson, Richard A. "Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore." Poetics, vol. 21, no. 4, Aug. 1992, pp. 243–58. ScienceDirect, https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(92)90008-Q.

"Rabbit hole" listening - Music discovery on social media - Enjoying "lowbrow" music - Music-related content - Doing it for the culture - Curiosity - Attempting to understand music deeper - Yearning to know more (about music) - Openness towards exposure - Taking music 'seriously' - Idle listening as an upper-class activity - Social difference reflected in music consumption		
- On the go listening - Need for music 'Lock in' music - Music as an indicator of life events - Music as an indicator of emotions - Music as background noise - Seeking convenience - Associative listening - Communicating feelings through music - Hype music - Go-to music - Experiencing time through music - Music as a social crutch - Situation-specific listening - Mood music 'Feel-good' quality of music - Dissatisfaction 'Every platform has wrapped now' - Indifference towards Wrapped - Increasing irrelevance of wrapped - Discontentment (Lack of) anticipation for Wrapped	Reliance Digital saturation	**Culture Industry**

- Unhappiness about lessened engagement - Inattention causing disengagement "Inability to sit in silence" 'Social media ruins everything' - Imbibed impatience - Newfound disconnection 'Spotify was exciting - Disinterest "I'm not enjoying this - Exhaustion 'Music is supposed to be uncomplicated' - Distress - Anxiety - Spotify was a shiny new thing		
- Spotify's inevitable supremacy - Noticable change in Spotify - Circumstantial dictation of use - Circumstantial dictation of subscription - Appreciation of Spotify's design - Facilitated discoverability - Unlimited possibilities - Functional split usage - IRL to URL music discovery - Music discovery through other media - Dearth of concerts in Global South - Youtube/soundcloud for independent artists - Finding music through the algorithm - Phone as gateway to autonomous listening - Industry hegemony - Spotify is "cozy" - Seeking visual experience	Infrastructures of listening	
- Awareness about data collection - Ethical questioning 'Spotify is a lesser evil'	Criticality	

- Recognizing failure of Spotify's catering to Gen Z 'Maybe for others but not for me' 'Too in your face' "Corny as shit" 'Try hard' - Discoverability not as strong as before - Extreme annoyance - Self-criticality - Deep reflection 'Capitalism ruins everything' - Mistrust in wrapped - Craving disconnection of personality and music - Rebeling against shareability "Cringe" "Nobody's taking it seriously" - Initiative for change - Shifting focus towards music itself - Practicing intentionality 'Are we sheep?' - Self aware 'parasociality' - Self-awareness and intentional projection - Embarassment of perception - Self-forced change - Condemning seeking validation through wrapped 'Data mining is disguised cutely' 'It's not that deep' - Classifying as a non-obsessed fan		
- Apps catering to Gen Z - Spotify catering to Gen Z "Internet verbiage" - Coolness over quality - Hyperspecific internet verbiage - Spotify's performative support of Indie artists - Industry appeasing - Spotify as social media - Spotify as an aesthetic place - Sociality > quality	Pandering	

- Sociality > individual experience - Expanding Spotify features - Productification of music - Aesthetic appeal > substance - Instagrammability		
- Loss of community - Circumstantial unsociality - Music as background noise - Feeling in the dark - Inauthenticity of Wrapped - Feeling lost - Yearning for the old ways - Dissociation - Questioning everything - Crisis - Yearning for live music - Seeking agency - Prefernce for comfortable listening - Live music is more immersive - Comfort in nostalgia - Relational (inexperienced) notalgia	Nostalgia	
- Creatively integrating music into Instagram - Prominance of playlist making - Curating music for Instagram - Tiktokification of music - Trendy music - Funny Tiktok music - Brat summer - Curation as a hobby - Unserious fun of wrapped - Wrapped drop day as an event - Excitement for wrapped	'Prosumption[5]'	

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[5] portmanteau of 'production' and 'consumption'.

Interview Guide
Below is the list of topics and questions I made reference to while conducting my interviews. The questions were used not as a questionnaire but to guide the direction and topics of the conversation. (As seen in the transcripts below) interview questions were mended according to the interviewees response and tangential avenues were taken based on interviewees interests and interesting points made.

Cultures of Use

Topics: Wrapped, Daylist, discovering music, making playlists, exchanging playlists, social listening, Youtube music, Apple v. Spotify, Reasons of use, Post-reels/Tiktok, Music discovery, Spotify Usage in India

- Thank you for talking with me today and letting me interview you! How are you doing? So are we ready? Before we begin i'd like to take your consent to record this interview and to use the information you give me in this interview in my assignment. You can give a simple yes or no.
- Can you tell me about you music listening habits? what do you like listening to? how often?
- Do you use spotify? How long have you been using spotify? What is your experience using the app like?
- Are you excited for spotify wrapped?
- What do you think about the categories in wrapped?
  Are you listening activities in any way at all influenced by wrapped?
- Do you check your listening activity? What do you think about the feature?
- Do you post music on instagram or other social media? How do you choose what to post?
- Do you post your wrapped results on instagram?
- Do you look out for other people's wrapped results?
- Do you discuss results with friends? If so, do you also share screenshots?