Article Group Newsletter Issue 13 - The Discovery Issue on Algorithmic Curation, Taste Formation, and Marketing Beyond Optimization (April 2025)

ISSUE 13 — April 2025

Exploring the messy, contradictory, and video killed the radio star side of creativity

Once, you found a band you loved

because your friend’s cooler older brother burned you a mix. It came in a green jewel case. There wasn’t a tracklist—just Good Stuff scrawled in Sharpie. You didn’t know who the band was, not at first, but you liked how they made you feel. You pieced together lyrics, asked around, heard their name on Z100 eventually. It took effort to connect the dots, but the effort was part of the reward.

That kind of discovery felt personal—not because it was personalized, but because it demanded something of you.

Today, discovery is something we receive, not something we do. Your app generates a playlist based on your listening history and serves you a new song with a knowing nod. You press play. It’s fine. It sounds like you because it is you, reflected through past behavior and pattern-matching. The algorithm is very good at what it does. But that might be the problem.

Taste isn’t just a record of what we’ve liked in the past. It’s shaped by trial, accident, friction, and exposure to things we don’t yet understand. And when discovery is optimized for comfort, curiosity atrophies.

This shift isn’t just happening in music. It’s reshaping what we watch, what we wear, what we read—even how we form opinions. What once required effort is now optimized into a seamless, predictable feed.

Marketers haven’t driven this change, but we’ve certainly adapted to it. The tools of the trade have evolved, and with them, the behavior. When we could only guess what might resonate, we made bold bets. The best campaigns weren’t just reflections of audience demand but arguments for something new. Apple’s 1984 ad positioned a personal computer as a tool of rebellion. Big Milk made people crave something they didn’t even realize they were missing.

Now, every scroll, pause, and partial view is logged, analyzed, and fed back into an optimization loop. Creative instincts have been traded for performance dashboards. The result is more efficient marketing—faster, cheaper, better targeted. But also flatter. A campaign is successful if it resembles a campaign that was already successful.

This is where the loop really becomes dangerous: The same systems that optimize marketing also shape culture. When algorithms feed us more of what we’ve already liked—and when marketers build only what algorithms will approve—we reinforce the boundaries of taste rather than expand them. The illusion of personalization creates comfort, but it limits growth.

So what do we do? We don’t have all the answers, but we have some guesses. First, we stop treating strategy as a map of what’s worked, and start treating it as a platform for what could. That means carving out room in briefs and budgets for intentional risk. It also means reframing performance not just in terms of clicks and conversions, but in terms of cultural resonance. And it means asking harder questions about whether we’re helping audiences grow or just helping them stay where they are.

We’re sick of people talking about Duolingo, but people talk about them for a reason. They built a system that generates originality over efficiency. Their social team operates like a writer’s room. It’s staffed with comedians and cultural creatives, modeled after SNL. Their output is chaotic, weird, and unforgettable—and it’s working. Not because it fits neatly into an algorithm, but because it doesn’t.

That kind of discovery still matters and still works, but only if we’re brave enough

to leave a few tracks unlabeled and trust our audience to find the good stuff.

Let’s fix that.