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Discovery in Streaming Music: Reclaiming tastemaking for listeners in the Spotify era.

Last week, Spotify users were treated to the service’s annual “[Spotify Wrapped](https://newsroom.spotify.com/2020-12-01/6-new-features-to-unwrap-in-your-spotify-2020-wrapped/)” feature: a visual summary of an account’s listening habits throughout the year, including their most listened-to artists. (Spotify) New for 2020 are “in-app quizzes,” a chronological “Story of Your 2020,” and detailed podcast listening statistics. For premium users, “badges” will “crown listeners with various titles based on the ways they listened.”

“For example, if a number of your playlists gained significant new followers, you’ll be a *Tastemaker.*If you listened to a song before it was cool (aka hit 50,000 streams), you’ll get the *Pioneer*badge. And based on the number of songs you added to playlists this year, you just might become a *Collector*."

Their use of the term *Tastemaker* is particularly interesting. “Tastemaking,” a function once relegated to magazines, has taken a concerning bent in the Algorithmic Age. Very much contemporary terms like “[filter bubble](https://megaphone.link/VMP4291212808)” (Pariser) and “echo chamber” – applied more and more often to social platforms like Facebook and Twitter, now – can also be associated with music streaming services like Spotify, who’s “playlistification” of content has had a number of alarming effects on American culture.

In 2018, *The Baffler*’s Liz Pelly explored Spotify playlists’ gender bias in “[Discover Weakly](https://thebaffler.com/latest/discover-weakly-pelly):” (Pelly)

“On Today’s Top Hits, I found that over the course of one month, 64.5 percent of the tracks were by men as the lead artist, with 20 percent by women and 15.5 percent relying on collaborations between men and women artists. When all features were taken into consideration, I found that 85.5 percent of tracks included men artists, while only 45.5 percent included women. This was one of the highest percentages of women artists out of all the playlists I examined.”

She also quotes a LinkedIn post by “Jerry Daykin, the Head of Media Partnerships at Diageo,” in which he observes, “The most popular tracks on Spotify get featured in more playlists and become even more popular as a result.” In January of the same year, the online music magazine *Pitchfork* published an op-ed by musician Damon Krukowski entitled “[How to Be a Responsible Music Fan in the Age of Streaming](https://pitchfork.com/features/oped/how-to-be-a-responsible-music-fan-in-the-age-of-streaming/),” which provided concrete statistics on this phenomenon (emphasis mine:) (Krukowski)

“According to the data trackers at [BuzzAngle Music](http://www.buzzanglemusic.com/" \t "_blank), more than **99 percent of audio streaming is of the top 10 percent most-streamed tracks**. Which means **less than 1 percent of streams account for *all other music***.”

“While streaming media is pitched to us as tailored to our taste, or at least to our browsing history,” Krukowski goes on to note, “the business of it is in fact closer to one-size-fits-all.” Clearly, this is an issue, but technically **only insofar as Spotify advertises itself as a means to discover new music**, which [it does consistently](https://www.spotify.com/us/about-us/contact/). (Spotify USA Inc.)

## **Responsible Curation**

For solutions to address Spotify’s overwhelming skew toward rewarding popular music with even more popularity, we can first look within its own history to just a few years earlier, when human curation was more equally matched in its fight against algorithmic curation. In 2015, the company claimed that “[Half of Spotify users stream from other users’ playlists at least monthly](https://pitchfork.com/features/article/9686-up-next-how-playlists-are-curating-the-future-of-music/).” *Pitchfork*’s Marc Hogan profiled a number of “power users” within the upper percentile in terms of followers and personal playlist popularity.

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