Remixing "Taste": Authorship and Attribution in Spotify Blend Playlists

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss dimensions of remix, including attribution and authorship, for automated digital music playlists. I use the case study of Spotify Blend, an automated, personalized, mock-collaborative playlist feature that combines up to ten users' music taste and listening histories and regenerates its content daily. I defend the characterization of Spotify Blend as an example of "remix" (or an example of "mashup," a related concept), wherein the source material being remixed is user listening data and wherein sampling is the primary remix tactic. In fleshing out this characterization, I discuss how the concepts of "authorship" and "attribution" operate in the context of Spotify Blend, with the important acknowledgment that Spotify's algorithm remains opaque to users. I also compare Spotify Blend with user-generated, actively collaborative playlists created on the same platform. Observations about Blend and its features of use derive mostly from personal experience with the program.

Keywords: Spotify Blend, digital music playlists, remix, mashup, authorship, attribution, collaboration

S potify is a music streaming service that gives users access to a cloud-based library of recorded music and a variety of tools for sorting music and interacting with music "recommendations." Spotify Blend premiered in August 2021 (Spotify, 2021), adding to the platform's existing and increasing suite of personalized, algorithmically generated playlist options. Blend allows between two and ten Spotify users to "bond" over their respective music tastes by automatically generating a 50-track music playlist with songs "from" each user's listening history (Spotify, 2021). Any Spotify user—anyone with a Spotify profile—can initiate a Blend playlist by sharing a Spotify-generated link with others; to join the Blend, other users would simply click the

shared link. The content in Blend playlists refreshes daily. Figure 1 is a screenshot of a one-on-one Blend between me and my brother.

Figure 1

iPhone Screenshot of a Blend Playlist (March 2, 2023)
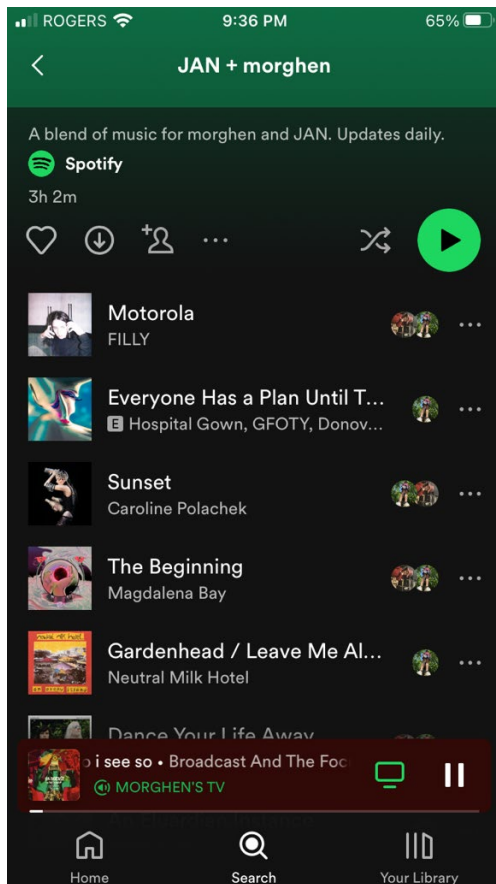
Note. Courtesy of the Author.

Whereas other algorithmically personalized playlists on Spotify, such as "Discover Weekly" and "Release Radar," are unique to individual users and are generated based on individual listening data, Blend playlists combine the listening data of multiple users. The curatorial goals of the feature, according to Spotify designers, are "creating a cohesive playlist" and "representing […] users' tastes accurately" (Maharjan & Lamere, 2021, para. 13).

The option to "invite collaborators" to personal playlists predates the option to "create a Blend" on the platform. Any existing user-generated playlist can be made "collaborative," which allows multiple users to *manually* add, remove, and reorder

tracks. Like with Spotify Blend, users generate invitation links in-app to send to potential collaborators and profile photos are attached to the constituent tracks of a collaborative playlist to denote which user had added which songs (Spotify, 2020). Users can still create these original collaborative personal playlists—Blend playlists did not replace them—but "the playlists which Spotify [creates] and [manages] in-house," including Blend, tend to be understood as having broader cultural impact than user-created playlists (Morgan, 2020, p. 36). Since collaborative digital playlists are "a form of everyday musical engagement" for many people (Harris, 2022, p. 2), Spotify's algorithmic proxy for collaborative playlist-making (its Blend playlist feature), and its mediation of the social playlist experience more broadly, are worth analyzing.

Finally, it is worth noting Blend's name and branding. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines "blend" as "to combine or associate so that the separate constituents or the line of demarcation cannot be distinguished." Spotify "Blend" therefore evokes automated combination into something seamless. As I will discuss, though, the degree of seamlessness of the playlist also depends greatly on how much existing "taste overlap" (Lamere, 2021) there is between the participant users.

Relevant Literature about Spotify Playlists

In this section, I present sources representing different aspects of the recent literature related to Spotify and its (algorithmic) curation of content. A full-scale literature review is outside the scope of this case study.

First, Maria Eriksson et al. (2019) in *Spotify Teardown* document a large-scale attempt to "follow the files" of the now-ubiquitous music streaming service from a user experience perspective, an industry research perspective, and a back-end programming perspective—to the extent that the latter is even possible. Eriksson et al. present Spotify as an increasingly active "producer of unique musical experiences" (p. 64), which supports my exploration of the concept of "authorship" with reference to Spotify Blend.

Robert Prey (2020) writes about the phenomenon of corporate sponsorship on Spotify and artists' goal of "getting playlisted": that is, having their tracks added to influential Spotify-generated playlists (p. 3). The practice of "attribution," the other concept I will explore with reference to Spotify Blend, is relevant to Prey's claim that "there is no way for an artist or their label to know precisely why a particular track was

placed, or replaced, on a playlist" (p. 3). The opacity of the processes behind the organization and presentation of content is a dominant critique of digital streaming services.

In a different but related part of the academic conversation, Anja Nylund Hagen (2015) writes about the personal playlist experience and the concept of music "collection" in a digital streaming environment. As I will explore, Spotify Blends are algorithmic playlists that resemble user-generated collaborative playlists, but Blends are automatically shuffled and edited every day. My case study, Spotify Blend, therefore represents a notable departure from the personal playlist grooming and the maintenance of a "collection" of music articulated by Hagen.

Eriksson et al. (2019) make the important point that Spotify is constantly "[generating] data based on its music streaming that allow for the study of human behaviour at scale" (p. 4). Similarly, David Hesmondhalgh (2022) asserts that listening to music on streaming services necessarily "[converts] user activities into data" (p. 5). Though Spotify's user data collection and (re)use are not the focus of this paper (not least because Spotify fiercely guards the details of its recommender algorithms), it is clear that listeners participating in Blend playlists are being interpreted and re-presented as banks of historic and ongoing listening data. The status of people's online activity as "data"—and what such a status might mean, philosophically and practically—seems to be a foundational question in information studies.

Finally, Hesmondhalgh (2022) helpfully intervenes in the academic conversation about streaming services in remarking that "recent critiques of streaming often draw upon long-standing aesthetic anxieties about the effects of technologies on music" (pp. 5–6). Such anxieties include concerns about musical experiences becoming "passive" or "fragmented" due to technological intervention or conduction (p. 3). Hesmondhalgh encourages a nuanced perspective: that digital music streaming does not exclusively or necessarily cause passive, fragmented listening, and that such passivity or fragmentation is not exclusively or necessarily a bad thing. Though in the presentation of this case study I am ultimately critical and suspicious of Spotify's dubious authorship and attribution remix practices, it is important to remember that many people may enjoy

and derive benefits (functional, aesthetic, or otherwise) from Spotify Blend and other automated playlists.

Spotify Blend as a "Remix"

Following Knobel and Lankshear (2008), who point out that remix is increasingly understood expansively, beyond merely creating an alternative mix of a song (p. 22), I interpret the term "remix" broadly in this paper. The remix product at hand here is the representation—and subsequent daily re-representation—of Spotify users' listening habits and "taste" in Blend playlists.

Streaming services like Spotify play an active and extensive "role in organizing and programming the content they carry" (Prey, 2020, p. 1). Eriksson et al. (2019), drawing from Bruno Latour's (2005) *Reassembling the Social,* also portray Spotify as a mediating "actor that transforms, translates, and modifies the meaning" of its elements despite its "self-definition as intermediary" (p. 15). Spotify can therefore be understood as not only a structural shaper of music-listening, but as an occasionally active "remixer" of content, too. Virginia Kuhn (2012) describes a "remixer" as an "interlocuter in the digital conversation" (section 2.6). Spotify's algorithms and engineers curate actively enough that they warrant the label of "remixer" (or, collectively, the Spotify platform might be the "remixer"). In the following subsections, I present different ways in which Spotify Blend playlists are or resemble remixes.

Sampling

Spotify Blend is a type of remix in that its software uses the technique of "sampling" to create a new musical compilation. According to Abigail De Kosnik (2019), sampling involves "the acts of copying, cutting, and mixing" (p. 157). To create a Blend playlist, Spotify selects bits from each user's listening history and mixes these bits into a playlist; sampling, understood loosely, is Spotify Blend's primary remix tactic. According to Hess (2006), sampling "transforms, critiques, and responds to sources" (p. 282). If we understand users' listening statistics as the "sources" in use, a Spotify Blend playlist "critiques and responds to" them by providing an encapsulation and representation of users' "taste" to their friends participating in the playlist with them. Blend subsequently "transforms" users' listening habits because the automated playlist is meant to be listened to and used for music discovery (Spotify, 2021). Although music listening

data—potentially understood as a stand-in for the users themselves, people with music "tastes"—may be an atypical "source" for remix as it is commonly understood, Spotify Blend effectively cuts and re-presents it in a playlist using algorithmic sampling.

It is fitting that Spotify's remix output takes the form of a playlist, since the platform has always been playlist-oriented (Hesmondhalgh, 2022; Prey, 2020). To Spotify, just like to electronic music creators and DJs, a "playlist [is] just as valuable as a song" (Fischer, 2014, p. 27). As Fischer notes, there is legal precedent, at least in the United States, for creative compilations like playlists being successfully copyrighted, because "there is an expressive element in selecting the order of songs on a playlist" (p. 28). Therefore, playlists themselves are reasonable candidates for "remix," beyond and besides any individual tracks within them being "remixes," which they certainly may be.

Use of Source Material

Knobel and Lankshear (2008) define the verb "to remix" as "to take cultural artifacts and combine and manipulate them into new kinds of creative blends" (p. 22). In the case of Spotify Blend, users' listening habits and profile information are the "cultural artifacts" being remixed. In other words, Spotify creates a "mashup" or a "remix" using the "pre-existing data" of users' listening history on the platform (Harrison & Navas, 2018, p. 197). User listening habits are popularly understood as being indicative of users' music "tastes," so "taste" is another candidate for the status of "source material" in a Blend playlist. Nick Seaver (2022) points out that "taste is not only something people have, but it is also something they do" (p. 11), which makes taste knowable and interpretable by the software programs that users interact with.

Kuhn (2012) presents a similar but distinct perspective on source material in remix, characterizing remix as a "digital argument" (1.3) and interpreting "its use of source material as citation—a form of evidence necessary to make one's point" (3.2). Listener data in a Spotify Blend playlist, operating as its source material, is cited by the company as evidence of common ground between friends and as evidence of the presence of endless, daily-updating music to bond over (Spotify, 2021). As a result, Spotify Blend is "about" the participating Spotify accounts much more than it is "about" the songs or artists that happen to be featured on any given day.

Regeneration and "Endlessness"

Spotify Blend is not a static remix product, since it changes daily and is responsive to the continued listening of its participant users over time. In fact, it is "remixed" daily; Blend playlists tend to look similar but slightly different day-to-day. I have observed that the songs with only one "attribution" (with only one Blend participant's listening history matching it) tend to become swapped out day-to-day more frequently than the songs with multiple attributions. With common ground as the central "argument" (Kuhn, 2012) of the playlist, tracks with shared listener history seem to survive the day-to-day turnover more reliably.

In some ways, Blend playlists embody the remix characteristic Knobel and Lankshear (2008) call "endlessness." Unless participants manually leave a Blend, "there is no end to remixing" (p. 26); the playlist will regenerate every day, whether users are even listening to it or not. The daily regeneration of content supports streaming services' broader goal of "[keeping] the user within their ecosystem by continually suggesting more songs to listen to" (Morgan, 2020, p. 35). Spotify explicitly encourages users to "keep on listening" to ensure the algorithmic representations of their taste remain accurate (Spotify, n.d.). However, the automatic daily regeneration of content in Spotify Blend playlists *defies* the ethos and common practice associated with the user-generated collaborative playlists they resemble; static collaborative playlists are often created "for later use at a specific event (e.g., a birthday party)" (Harris, 2022, p. 3).

Spotify Blend and Attribution

Attribution in Blend playlists is indicated through small profile photo icons that indicate to whose listening habits each of the tracks corresponds. Track attribution causes Blend playlists to resemble what Harrison and Navas (2018) call "mashup": a remixed product whose "elements operate together but remain discrete" (p. 197).
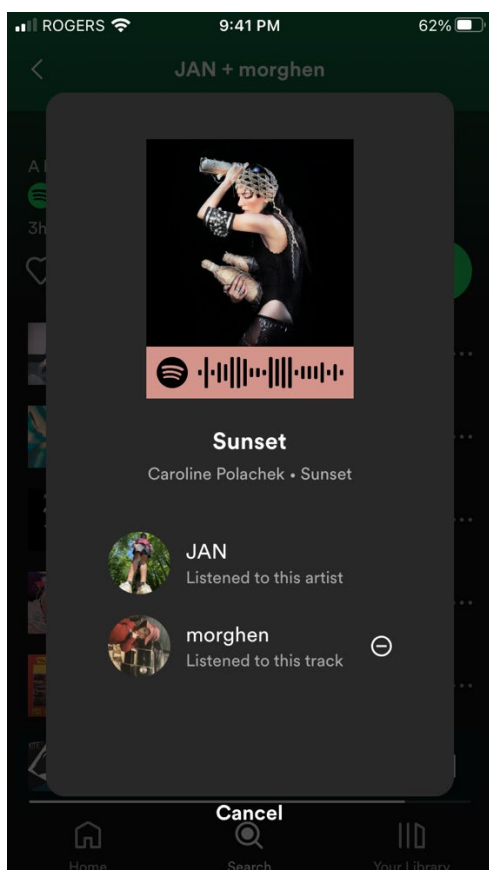
Algorithmic Opacity

Spotify does the bare minimum to reveal how or why it is attributing particular songs to particular Blend participants, and its algorithm is opaque to the average user (Prey, 2020). Eriksson et al. (2019) use the metaphor of the "black box": they argue that Spotify's inner machinations are often invisible and unquestioned and that the service

supposedly "no longer needs to be reconsidered" (p. 7). The software uses "data-driven and automated curation" when it creates Blend playlists, but its precise tactics are a "commercial secret" (Freeman et al., 2022, para. 3). Clicking on the profile photo icons attributed to a song in a Blend generates a pop-up window with information about which person listened to "this track" or "this artist" (e.g., Figure 2). When a user has listened to both the track *and* the artist, the software picks one of the two attribution explanations seemingly at random, or at least for reasons unclear to users.

Figure 2

iPhone screenshot of a pop-up attribution description (March 2, 2023)

Note. Courtesy of the Author.

The opacity of Spotify Blend's algorithm opposes the ethos of remix culture more generally, despite my characterizing these Blend playlists as otherwise remix-like. Remix has been traditionally understood as "linked to open-source and do-it-yourself (DIY) activities" (Navas et al., 2018, p. 2). The efforts of non-automated, grassroots

remixers "often expose the process of creation" (Kuhn, 2012, 2.6), and attributing or citing sources in detail is one way to do so (Hess, 2006). Conversely, Spotify's remixing and attribution are secretive and "effortlessly" automatic, literally taking place overnight and leaving no record of the changes that were made. As a result, Blend participants do not require much technical "literacy" in the software, like they might if they engaged in a more active form of remix (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008).

Beyond the Blend algorithm being opaque to users, there are frequent discrepancies in attribution. Lamere (2021) claims that Spotify is aiming for participants in a Blend to be "represented equally" (para. 4). In practice, though all participants in a Blend have at least some tracks attributed to them, I have observed that participants with more "taste overlap" with others (Lamere, 2021) generally receive more co-attributions to songs and their profile therefore appears to have an outsized influence on the content of the Blend. Another example of discrepancy involves the attribution of songs that users have never personally listened to but, for example, were performed by an artist a user *has* listened to. In Blend playlists, despite Spotify's goal of "making sure that this specific user would agree the song listed is representative of their taste" (Lamere, 2021, para. 4), I have observed songs being automatically attributed to me that I had never heard before and that I would not necessarily recommend to others.

Why Attribute in the First Place?

Designers and engineers at Spotify chose to put profile photo attributions beside songs in Blends, but this feature would not be strictly necessary to create a playlist that "blends" a group's music tastes. (In fact, the demarcation of the "constituent" playlist parts defies the dictionary definition of the word "blend"). There is clearly enough imagined interest in the provenance of the songs—provenance not in terms of song production or performance credits but in terms of whose listening data they were identified within—to warrant Spotify's choice to "attribute" using profile photo icons. Diakopoulos et al. (2007) point out, though, that there are different norms for attribution when "the audience is expected to already recognize the reference without explicit attribution" (p. 136). If users in a Blend playlist know each other's music taste well, the attributions in a Blend may become less necessary for interpreting the mix. Furthermore, Harrison and Navas (2018) describe the personal "thrill of being able to

identify [the] elements" of a mashup through deduction and cultural awareness (p. 197). The profile photo attributions potentially make Spotify Blend less "thrilling" than other forms of remix, especially for participants who already know each other well.

Spotify Blend and Authorship

To strengthen my case that Spotify Blend can be understood as an example of remix, Diakopoulos et al. (2007) define "authorship" as the act of "making choices and selections concerning the structure and content of media elements within the constraints of a particular medium in order to make meaning" (p. 133). The Spotify algorithm makes choices and selections of what songs appear on a Blend playlist day-to-day; in that respect, it could be seen as the "author" of any given Blend. However, participants have some agential capacity, including the ability to leave, and thereby delete, the Blend.

Spotify's Agency

Navas et al. (2018) claim that "remix and its preceding forms have continually disrupted the concept of the individual creator" (p. 6). Spotify's Blend playlists represent a further disruption. These playlists imply multiple creators by attributing the presence of songs in the mix to different participants, but they are in fact automated and created by private Spotify software. Though Spotify Blend is an example of "post-individualistic authorship" associated with remix (Vallier, 2018, p. 39)—since "Spotify" is not an individual producing a discrete work—it still opposes the user-focused democratization that is generally attributed to remix culture. The fact that Blend playlists are exclusively accessible within the Spotify application brands Spotify—and its algorithmic system that is "full of people who make choices" (Seaver, 2022)—as the author(s). Despite allusions to user collaboration through profile photo icons, Spotify's interface and algorithm "set the boundaries and possibilities for music listening" on the platform (Freeman et al., 2022, para. 9). Most simply, it is Spotify's algorithm, not the users, that adds and orders the songs in a Blend playlist.

On another level, Freeman et al. (2022) describe how music recommender software can be understood by users as having "human-like agency" in music curation (para. 15) and frequently becomes involved in "complex socio-technical relationships"

with them (para. 1). Therefore, Spotify (the program, the system) is reasonably conceivable as an informed authorial agent in the production of Blend playlists. It "knows" users' music tastes, and in initiating a Blend link, users give Spotify permission to represent their taste in a remix.

Blend Participants' Agency

Although Blend participants cannot alter the song order or add/remove songs, they can rename the playlist (from the "Friend 1 + Friend 2 + Friend 3" default) and they can opt to "leave" it. "Leaving" a one-on-one (two-person) Blend will instantly delete the playlist for both parties, no matter which of them initiated the Blend link. The initiator of the playlist therefore does not have special authority over the work. This "leave" function also means that Blend participants have ultimate control over the presence or absence of the remix—though whether or not a record of the playlist's former existence remains on Spotify's "back end" is unclear (Eriksson et al., 2019).

Additionally, though they cannot adjust the track listing, participants in a Blend playlist have control over its broader components (i.e., the remixed and sampled Spotify profiles). For example, if a playlist has not yet reached the maximum attendance of ten users, anyone in a Blend can invite new users via invite link. Adding a new user to a Blend instantly changes the playlist content, shifting the track list to accommodate the new user's taste history and recalibrating the "common ground." Spotify might "author" the daily Blend playlist, but it is instantly responsive to certain user actions.

The Illusion of Collaboration and Effort

Ilana Harris (2022) defines collaborative playlist-making as "a form of music co-curation where two or more people select and order recorded music together" (p. 1). On Spotify, user-generated playlists can be made collaborative via direct invite link and become "essentially personal playlists with co-editing functionalities" (Park & Kaneshiro, 2022, pp. 1–2). Blend playlists, in contrast, are *not* "personal" playlists and users cannot directly alter them. However, the profile photo attributions in Blend playlists are visually identical to the designation system Spotify has been using for user-generated collaborative playlists since 2020 (Spotify, 2020), making the two playlist types difficult to differentiate at a glance.

Spotify Blend also mimics collaboratively created playlists in the rhetoric of its invitation to "Create a Blend." For a user, "creating" a Blend amounts to copying an instantly-generated link and sending it to a friend. An invitation to "initiate" or "generate" would be more apt. Spotify wants users to feel like they are "creating" the playlist, despite the otherwise obvious passivity of the situation. Aram Sinnreich (2018), in a chapter of *Keywords in Remix Studies,* points out that "the root of the word 'collaborative' is 'labor'" (p. 56). In this sense, Spotify Blend is the opposite of the user-generated collaborative playlists found elsewhere on its platform, because Blend playlists require very little work to create and no work, beyond a user's normal streaming activity, to update. Harris (2022) describes how ongoing cooperation and discussion is required to create and maintain a traditional collaborative playlist (p. 6). Spotify Blend playlists, on the other hand, do not require any continued coordination between the users "in" them, besides the initial sending and clicking of the Blend initiation link.

Knobel and Lankshear (2008) distinguish between the "art" (the "aesthetics, appreciation, form, and composition"; p. 26) and the "craft" (the "knowledge of its technical aspects"; p. 27) of remix. Spotify lets users feel like semi-contributors to the "art" of a Blend playlist, while the platform handles and obscures the "craft" aspects of the project. For example, participants in a Blend might feel like partial creators of the playlist if they had been actively "curating" their recommender algorithms, as participants in a study by Freeman et al. (2022) intentionally did. However, their contribution to the Blend is always indirect, and being skilled at using a recommender system does not amount to the internal, algorithmic "craft" of an automatically generated music playlist.

Conclusion and Invitations to Remix

In this paper, I presented the ways in which Spotify Blend playlists resemble "remix" products and practices. I discussed the implications for "attribution" and "authorship" that accompany this characterization of Blend playlists as remixes, with reference to existing scholarly conversation about Spotify's curatorial power and about what it fundamentally means to "remix" or be "remixed." Overall, I found that Spotify

Blend remixes user listening data via sampling while mimicking organic user collaboration. This veneer of active participation and co-creation matters. It helps to ease potential suspicions about Spotify's increasing curatorial interventions, which represent a shift away from the company's original ethos of "the centrality of the search box" (Erikson et al., 2019, p. 34). The veneer of active participation also encourages Spotify users to spend time—and monthly subscription fees, in the "funnel" toward Spotify Premium (Prey, 2020)—to continually train the algorithm to "know" their music taste. Further, the case of Spotify Blend can be seen as part of a broader trend towards algorithmic content generation and recommender systems in areas of digital activity that intersect heavily with remix culture: digital *music* streaming services, like Spotify or Apple Music, as well as digital streaming services across media types. Freeman et al. (2022) put the concern succinctly: "[H]uman processes of curation and discovery are increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems" (para. 10). Though Hesmondhalgh (2022) would caution us to avoid thinking of technological involvement in musical experiences as something new, the extent and instantaneity of Spotify's algorithmic remixing is undeniable.

　　Future research (i.e., remixes of my work, to invoke Hess' [2006] conception of academic citation as remix) could consider how—or even whether—Blend playlists are listened to by their participants. Another gap to fill would be studying the way that Spotify Blend reflects, or fails to reflect, the history of collaborative mixtapes and music-sharing. Finally, Spotify Blend could be further analyzed from an everyday information behaviour perspective, such as the framework presented by Melissa Ocepek (2017). For example, how often and in what ways do listeners use Spotify Blend as a tool for new music discovery? Are discoveries serendipitous and secondary to what Laplante and Downie (2015) would call the "hedonic" experience of generating and enjoying the Blend, or are they a primary goal?

　　To end on a realistic note, while Blend playlists seem to save users "time and effort" in showing off their music taste to friends (Mackay, 2022), it is likely that Spotify users do not tend to value them as much as the truly collaborative (user-generated) playlists in their digital libraries. Freeman et al. (2022) found that "for many listeners a human recommendation or personal discovery had more meaning than an automated

recommendation" (para. 56). Though Spotify Blend is a fascinating case of algorithmic remix, it seems unlikely that it will supplant collaborative digital playlist-making in contemporary remix culture in its current form.

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