

Uncovering Implicit Associations in Intimacy-Related Playlists:

An Exploration of Gendered and Ethno-Racial Patterns in the Realm of Music

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Abstract

Contemporary sex, love, and heartbreak playlists exhibit gendered and ethno-racial patterns that predominantly favour male artists and display a prevalence of White artists in heartbreak playlists, while sex playlists are dominated by Black artists. These biased structures perpetuate gender and ethno-racial biases, demanding an investigation into the underlying factors and emergence of these patterns in intimacy-related playlists. Therefore, the current work aimed to uncover the implicit cultural associations that underpin the gendered and ethno-racial patterns observed in love-related playlists. Through the creation of self-constructed playlists in the three themes and subsequent in-depth interviews, this study sought to highlight the implicit culture at play. This approach revealed a variety of implicit associations involving vocal preferences, sexualisation, historical connotations, and external influences, accentuating the multifaceted nature of the matter. By and large, this study provides insight into the underlying structures that reinforce deeply ingrained biases, emphasising the necessity for critical interrogation of these mechanisms to foster a more inclusive musical landscape.

Keywords: implicit associations, gender bias, playlists, racial bias, sexualisation

Introduction

Over the past decade, the popularity of editorial playlists has flourished due to the emergence of music streaming services such as the widely used platform Spotify (Curry, 2023; Iqbal, 2023). These platforms have transformed the way music is consumed, allowing music consumers to enjoy a seamless sequence of songs from various artists and albums. This has enabled listeners to create ambience, decorate spaces and time, regulate their moods and emotions, and immerse themselves in particular moments (Fuentes et al., 2019; Hagen, 2015; Siles et al., 2019).

One notable aspect of editorial playlists is their promotion in anticipation of special events, such as Valentine's Day, with dedicated playlists for sex, love, and heartbreak. These playlists are curated through a collaborative effort involving human editors and algorithms that consider a listener's preferences (Eriksson, 2020; Heath, 2015; O'Dair & Fry, 2020; Spotify, n.d.-d) and similar-themed playlists created by Spotify users themselves (Lynch, 2018; Van Bohemen et al., 2020). Consequently, despite the substantial influence of curators and algorithmic selections over this aspect of music consumption, the impact of consumer data input should be acknowledged. In fact, given that these track selections are based on user playlists and data, they inherently reflect implicit cultural associations embedded in the patterns present in Spotify's love-themed editorial playlists.

Seeking to identify these patterns, I reviewed the top 10 songs of three selected compilations representing the themes of sex, love, and heartbreak. Consider these top 10s of Spotify's editorial playlists, titled "Make Out Jams" (Spotify, n.d.-b), "Timeless Love Songs" (Spotify, n.d.-c), and "Broken Heart" (Spotify, n.d.-a) respectively, displayed in Figure 1. Is there anything that stands out?

Figure 1

The top ten artists and songs of Spotify's 2023 love-themed editorial playlists

SEX	LOVE	HEARTACHE
1. Kali Uchis – Moonlight	1. Beyoncé – Halo	1. Tom Odell – Another Love
2. New West – Those Eyes	2. Elton John – Your Song	2. Lizzy McAlpine – ceilings
3. Cigarettes After Sex – Apocalypse	3. Adele – Make You Feel My Love	3. Billie Eilish – lovely (with Khalid)
4. Brent Faiyaz – JACKIE BROWN	4. Alicia Keys – If I Ain’t Got You	4. Conan Gray – Heather
5. The Neighbourhood – Daddy Issues (Remix) feat. Syd	5. Whitney Houston – I Will Always Love You	5. Sea Fret – Atlantis
6. SZA – Snooze	6. The Righteous Brothers – Unchained Melody	6. Olivia Rodrigo – traitor
7. Harry Styles – Love Of My Life	7. Ed Sheeran – Thinking out Loud	7. Ed Sheeran – Photograph
8. The Weeknd – After Hours	8. Céline Dion – It’s All Coming Back to Me Now	8. Radiohead – Creep
9. Coco Jones, Leon Thomas – Until The End Of Time	9. John Legend – All of Me	9. Alec Benjamin – Let Me Down
10. Montell Fish – Fall in Love with You.	10. Bruno Mars – Just the Way You Are	10. Coldplay – The Scientist

Source: Spotify

A notable observation concerned the gender distribution among the top 10 artists of these playlists, assuming a binary understanding of gender because no non-binary performers were included in the playlists. This division demonstrated a higher representation of male compared to female artists in the sex and heartbreak playlists (7 to 3), whereas the love playlist presented an equal ratio (5 to 5). Additionally, a remarkable pattern emerged when examining the artists’ ethno-racial¹ backgrounds, particularly within the heartbreak and sex playlists. Specifically, all top 10 heartbreak tracks were performed exclusively by White artists, while the sex top 10 predominantly featured Black artists. Conversely, the love playlist top 10

¹ While “ethnicity” and “race” are distinct concepts, with “ethnicity” referring to cultural similarities shared by members of a particular ethnic group, and “race” being “a collection of biological markers that help sort people and cluster them in natural kinds” (M’charek, 2013, p. 421), they are intricately tied and often used interchangeably in everyday dialogue. To capture this connection, the term “racial-ethnic” was suggested by Essed (1996). Throughout this study, variations of this term will be used to highlight the inseparability of these socio-cultural constructs.

displayed a more diverse composition, with 5 White artists, 4 Black artists, and 1 artist of mixed ethno-racial background.

A similar trend was identified by Van Bohemen et al. (2020) when examining Spotify's 2018 top global sex, love, and heartbreak playlists. In particular, these playlists' top 10s included listings exclusively by Black and White artists for the sex and heartbreak themes respectively, while the love top 10 predominantly featured White artists (8 out of 10). Additionally, a gendered pattern was observed, indicating an overrepresentation of male performers in all playlists top 10s.

In an effort to more thoroughly investigate the 2023 editorial playlists patterns, I expanded the examination to encompass the entire playlists, each consisting of 100 songs. This extension revealed more pronounced ethno-racial patterns, with a clear predominance of Black artists in the erotic playlist (72 out of 135), compared to 33 White artists and others from Latina/o, Asian, and mixed backgrounds. In contrast, the melodramatic playlist was overwhelmingly dominated by White artists (100 out of 111), with minimal representation of Black and other ethno-racial backgrounds (7 and 4 songs, respectively). The romantic playlist presented a more nuanced ethno-racial representation, leaning slightly towards White dominance (60 out of 103), with 38 Black artists and 5 from mixed or Latina/o backgrounds. Altogether, these findings confirm ethno-racial patterns favouring Black artists in the sex playlist and White artists in the heartbreak playlist, while showing a slight white predominance in the love playlist.

In addition to the amplified ethno-racial patterns, full playlist examination also informed enlarged gendered patterns, indicating a gender bias towards male artists. Indeed, the most significant contrast was observed in the sex playlist, which featured 93 males compared to 38 female performers. This trend continued in the heartache playlist, with 70 male and 35 female performers. Conversely, the gender contrast was less pronounced for the love playlist, which included 59 male and 41 female performers. While not surprising given the gender imbalance

in the male-dominated music industry (Berkers & Schaap, 2018; Götting, 2022; Sisario, 2018; Strong & Raine, 2018; Tulalian, 2019), these findings are remarkable, as romantic themes have historically been associated with notions of femininity rather than masculinity (Christenson & Peterson, 1988; Skipper, 1973; Warner, 1984).

The enduring nature of ethno-racial and gender biases becomes evident when examining the overlap between the contemporary and 2018 intimacy-playlists, indicating their persistent presence in Spotify's intimacy-related playlists over the past five years. An attempt at identifying the source of these patterns leads to the origins of the playlists' content, which comprise both human curator picks and machine-based selections relying on human input data. Consequently, this observation indicates that the patterns observed within these curated playlists are a product of implicit culturally shaped beliefs and associations regarding gender and race/ethnicity².

These patterns are noteworthy as scholars have extensively shown the multifaceted role of music in mood regulation, identity formation, and coordination of everyday encounters through playlists (Fuentes et al., 2019; Hagen, 2015; Siles et al., 2019). Additionally, music is recognised as a means of social identification and self-representation (Campbell et al., 2007; DeNora, 2000; Lamont & Hargreaves, 2019; Larsen et al., 2009; North & Hargreaves, 1999), impacting emotions and social behaviour at both individual (Boer et al., 2012; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Schäfer et al., 2013; Wells & Hakanen, 1991) and shared levels (Boer et al., 2011; Gabriel & Paravati, 2021; Juslin, 2021). In essence, music profoundly influences individual experiences and interpersonal social processes.

² While it is important to recognise that gender and ethno-race are social constructs that are not fixed or universally applicable, but rather shaped by context subject to change, this study chose a more narrow approach of these concepts. It focuses on an understanding of these notions as predicates that are attributed to objects and bodies through cultural meaning-making processes.

Considering music's significance, it is crucial to examine the patterns in editorial playlists, which serve as a primary platform for users to discover and engage with streaming music, thereby functioning as cultural gatekeepers in the music industry (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Eriksson, 2020; O'Dair & Fry, 2020; Prey, 2020). Although the partially machine-based curation of these playlists is often framed as a neutral and democratic means of promoting music due to algorithmic decision-making (Eriksson, 2020), these selections perpetuate embedded cultural associations given that they are based on human data and complemented by human selection data. Moreover, these implicit beliefs are reinforced by Spotify features such as *Enhance* (Spotify, 2021), *Smart Shuffle* (Spotify, 2023), and the recommended suggestions at the bottom of a user-curated playlist, which algorithmically aid users to "easily add personalized recommendations to their playlists" (Spotify, 2021, para. 2). Taken together, the interplay of human and machine-based song selections solidifies the implicit assumptions and beliefs informing the gendered and ethno-racial patterns detected in love-related playlists.

However, despite increased scholarly attention to playlist user experience (Eriksson & Johansson, 2017; Hagen, 2015), creation (Dias et al., 2017), and curation (Dhaenens & Burgess, 2019), the underlying mechanisms that underpin playlist construction and the patterns arising from it remain unaddressed. Undoubtedly, understanding the complex dynamics of playlist consumption and construction is vital to challenge persistent gendered and ethno-racial patterns. These mechanisms are influenced by associations related to gender and race/ethnicity, emphasising the need to explore their emergence in self-curated playlists and the factors informing playlist creation, from the perspective of individual playlist creators. With personalised and curated playlists accounting for a significant portion of music consumption on Spotify (Goodwater, 2022), investigating these patterns and the associations shaping them becomes essential given the crucial role of music in social processes.

This study, therefore, aims to uncover the cultural beliefs and associations perpetuating gendered and ethno-racial patterns found in love-themed playlists through the music voice

method. This approach involves participants constructing their own love-related playlists and engaging in in-depth conversations to draw out implicit cultural influences and the factors shaping their song selections. I will draw on this data to address the research question:

*How are cultural beliefs and associations regarding gender and race/ethnicity
(re)produced in sex, love, and heartbreak playlists?*

Theoretical Framework

This section offers the necessary context for understanding the potential sources of the identified ethno-racial and gendered biases and their deep-rooted presence in implicit assumptions. Specifically, it explores two rationales, musical bounding and historical cultural connotations, that contribute to the emergence of these biases within the observed structures. Additionally, it highlights the ways in which these biases become ingrained in implicit associations.

Ethno-racial linkage

The first account evoking prejudices involves the linkage of certain music genres with specific ethno-racial backgrounds, leading to unconscious assumptions about who should listen to or create certain types of music. For example, genres including hip-hop, rap, and rhythm & blues (R&B) are frequently linked to African American music (Appelrouth & Kelly, 2013) through a mechanism known as musical bounding, which describes the shaping of “a society’s system of alignment between conceptual distinctions (e.g., how music is classified into genres) and social distinctions (e.g., race, class)” (Roy & Dowd, 2010, p. 194). This connection between musical genres and ethno-racial groups structures these genres along ethno-racial lines (Roy, 2004), a link that dates back to the 1920s when the music industry established a black-white dichotomy, labelling African American music as “race records” and music of rural Whites as “hillbilly music” (Otto & Burns, 1974; Roy, 2004). Although these labels did not long survive,

the current association of rhythm & blues with African American music and country & western music with white music (Mann, 2008; Roy, 2004) illustrates the embeddedness of these implicit mechanisms. This strong linkage of certain genres to ethno-racial categories is further confirmed by the dominance of White artists in heartbreak playlists and Black artists in sex playlists – a distinction that heavily relies on the songs' genres included in the lists.

In fact, the prevalence of certain artists in certain genres obtains to historical cultural connotations – a second plausible factor influencing the observed patterns in intimacy-related playlists. For instance, heartbreak playlists, characterised by sentimental music genres such as pop and its sub-genres, predominantly feature White artists. This can be attributed to the historical domination of White artists in sentimental music genres such as pop ballads (Leight, 2020; Younger, 2020; Unterberger, 2020) and indie, which is known for its white sound and emphasis on emotional lyrics (Hesmondhalgh, 1999). Furthermore, cultural values and expectations surrounding heartbreak music may contribute to the prevalence of White artists in this domain, as sentimental songs are often associated with themes of romance and emotional vulnerability, aligning with the notion of white innocence. This can be viewed in the portrayal of artists such as Taylor Swift, renowned for her heartache songs, who is framed in popular culture as a White, innocent, and virginal figure (Pollock, 2014).

In contrast, sex playlists, known for their prevalence of sensual genres such as hip-hop and R&B, exhibit a higher representation of Black musicians, which can again be understood given the historical ties between these genres and Black artists (Brackett, 2017; Garofalo, 1994; Robinson, 2006). Yet, the significant presence of Black performers in sex playlists may also be influenced by broader cultural norms and assumptions surrounding race and sexuality. Particularly, Black performers are often eroticised (Matthews, 2018) and their voices are associated with smooth and deep sounds, reflecting the racialisation of vocal timbre (Eidsheim, 2008). These mechanisms contribute to the objectification of Black individuals and perpetuate misconceptions about their characteristics or behaviours, including criminalisation (Johnson et

al., 2000) and the hyper-sexualisation or exoticization of Black people in general (P.H. Collins, 2000; De Laat, 2019; Paul, 2021; Matthews, 2018).

Moreover, this division between black and white within the music industry informs “black-body-sex” and “white-mind-love” associations (Evans et al., 2010; Van Bohemen et al., 2020), which stem from historical and cultural connotations linking Whiteness to purity, intellect, and love, while connecting Blackness to physicality, sexuality, and desire. Such associations are rooted in societal beliefs, stereotypes, and power dynamics associated with race and sexuality, originating from the times of colonialism and eurocentrism.

Male Dominance in the Musical Domain

In addition to historical cultural connotations connecting genres and ethno-racial categories, genres also foster gendered historical cultural connotations. One of which is the linkage of certain genres to male performers due to their historical male dominance, as exemplified by the traditionally male-dominated hip-hop genre (Callahan & Grantham, 2012; Frechette, 2019; Hobson & Bartlow, 2007; Leonardelli, 2021). Similarly, other genres such as rock (Bielby, 2004; Cohen, 1997), metal (Krenske & McKay, 2000; Straw, 1984), country (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2019; Payne, 2020), and classical music (Cooper, 1995; Duchon, 2020) have also been historically dominated by male artists. This male predominance in music genres extends to a larger-scale overrepresentation of men in the music industry as a whole (Hepworth-Sawyer et al., 2020; Wolfe, 2019).

The patriarchal hegemony is further reflected in gender biases in various aspects of the industry, including music recommendation (Shakespeare et al., 2020), being taken seriously as a woman in the industry (Smith et al., 2019), the attribution of success to male and female artists (Colley et al., 2003; Millar, 2008), the underrepresentation of non-cis-male individuals in key roles in the music industry (Smith et al., 2021), the objectification of women in music based on their physique rather than their musical competences (Smith et al., 2019), and a general

preference for male voices in music (Millar, 2008), to name a few. Altogether, these instances demonstrate the implications of gendered historical cultural connotations informing gender biases towards men in the music domain.

From Bias to Implicit Association

Having considered several origins of gendered and ethno-racial biases, it must be recognised that these structures are rooted in historically long-standing societal beliefs and associations concerning gender and ethno-race. Moreover, these biases can manifest as implicit associations through interconnected social and cultural processes, encompassing factors such as socialisation, media representation, cultural norms and values, and contextual influences.

During the process of socialisation, individuals acquire societal norms, values, beliefs, and behaviours from various sources including family, peers, education. These and other influences transmit cultural messages, expectations, attitudes, and stereotypes based on the cultural norms and values that shape perceptions on gender, ethno-race, and other social categories.

Correspondingly, research suggests that in addition to internal cognitive processes including social categorisation (Lieberman et al., 2017), and generalisation (Kutner & Gordon, 1964), implicit associations are shaped by external factors that shape an individual's cognitive frameworks, attitudes, and beliefs about various social groups. Biases and stereotypes, for instance, can be transmitted through explicit messages of prejudice in social interactions (Dovidio et al., 2002) and language (Collins & Clément, 2012), as well as implicit messages embedded in healthcare decisions (Green et al., 2007) and media portrayals that perpetuate certain narratives about gender (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Collins, 2011; Santoniccolo et al., 2023) and ethno-race (Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2013; Oliver, 2003; Tukachinsky, 2015), including the representations in music playlists.

Moreover, historical and societal contexts contribute to the formation of inherent assumptions through substantial forces such as widespread systemic inequalities and prejudices that reinforce biases and stereotypes (Plous & Williams, 1995; Taylor et al., 2019). Essentially, the development of biases into implicit cultural associations involves an intricate and interrelated set of processes, as supported by scholarship.

Considering the interconnected nature of these processes in shaping gendered and ethno-racial patterns in love-related playlists and their transformation into implicit assumptions, this study is eager to explore how these patterns are reflected in participants' self-constructed playlists and the underlying factors that influence their song selections.

Methodology

To reveal how the gendered and ethno-racial cultural assumptions and connotations are (re)produced in the self-constructed sex, love, and heartbreak playlists, the current work aimed to get an insider's perspective on the playlist construction process by engaging in conversations about these curated song selections. Specifically, it sought to grasp the associations and perspectives underlying the chosen songs and the patterns that emerged within the playlists. To achieve this, the study employed the music voice method, which invited participants to assemble three Spotify playlists – one for each theme of sex, love, and heartbreak – and subsequently conducted in-depth interviews to delve into the playlists' composition.

The employed music voice approach serves as a productive method aimed at drawing out implicit cognitive processes through creative expression (McDonnell, 2014; McDonnell & Vercel, 2019). This approach was previously applied in the study by Van Bohemen et al. (2018), where it was utilised to investigate how youth experience good sex by inviting the participants to curate their ideal sex playlist and subsequently discuss this. In the current context, creative expression was stimulated through the construction of three themed playlists, followed by conversations to reflect on the selected songs and, more importantly, the included artists.

Adopting this approach enabled the exploration of individuals' unconscious associations that are deeply embedded in their beliefs, values, and experiences, thereby uncovering implicit cultural influences that may not have been easily accessible through traditional research methods.

Moreover, considering the influence of individual experiences, relationships, and cultural influences that shape the self-constructed intimacy-related playlists, they are highly personal and context-specific. Therefore, the productive music voice approach enabled participants to share their personal perspectives and connections to the songs, allowing a deeper understanding of the cultural context and individual experiences that contributed to the construction of intimacy-related playlists.

In summary, by promoting participants' creative expression and discussing their work subsequently, the music voice approach facilitated the uncovering of implicit culture and associations in the construction of intimacy-related playlists. Additionally, this approach contributed to a greater understanding of the underlying mechanisms at play.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via an informative flyer that reached various networks including family, peers, coworkers, and social media, accompanied with the request to share the message with potential participants in their own networks to reach an even wider audience. Eligibility criteria included being 18 years of age or older and being actively involved in playlist creation and consumption, ensuring a pool of participants possessing diverse perspectives regarding their song collections, listening habits, and the dynamics of the music industry. This recruitment approach resulted in a diverse sample of 15 participants, ranging in age from 21 to 37, reflecting a range from high school graduates to those with a university bachelor's degree, and including individuals not only from Dutch, but also mixed and other ethnic backgrounds³.

³ A summary of the respondents' data is outlined in Appendix I.

To uphold ethical standards, participants were informed about the study procedure and their right to withdraw through an informed consent form and clear instructions. In this way, special emphasis was placed on addressing potential discomfort or challenges that could arise from discussing songs related to sensitive topics such as sex, love, and heartbreak.

Prior to the scheduled conversations, the respondents were instructed to build three playlists representing their ideal selections for sex, love, and heartbreak respectively using the popular platform Spotify. This platform was chosen for its estimated familiarity among participants and the option to create private playlists shared between select users, ensuring easy access for both the participant and the researcher. Participants had the freedom to build the playlist at their own pace, with no restrictions on the minimum or maximum number of songs, enabling individual expression and an extensive exploration of musical preferences. The accessibility of the playlists further provided me with plenty of time to review and prepare questions about the song choices prior to the discussions.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, providing room for the participants to introduce their own topics and perspectives. Alongside specific questions about track selections, the interviews delved into the process of playlist construction, participants' listening habits, and the representation of gender and ethno-racial backgrounds of the artists included in their playlists. The conversations took place offline, at the Erasmus University Love Lab or at a mutually convenient location for the participants. In a few cases where logistical constraints arose, interviews were conducted via Google Meets. Moreover, the dialogues were recorded using a mobile phone's voice recorder, resulting in recordings from 30 to slightly over 60 minutes in duration, which served as the sources for analysis.

Analysis

In addition to the recorded interviews, the self-constructed playlist data was included for analysis, which both were subjected to a distinct analytical approach aimed at uncovering

participants' implicit cultural associations in the construction of love-themed playlists. While the content of the songs, such as their emotional impact (Barradas & Sakka, 2021; Batcho, 2007) and cultural significance (Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2006; Fuld et al., 2009), can provide valuable insights, the focus of the analysis was on participants' song choices and the underlying implicit mechanisms, rather than analysing lyrics or other musical properties including beat, loudness, tempo, and performing artist. Hence, the analysis process was guided by the music voice approach to uncover participants' decisions, motivations, and implicit associations related to the selected songs.

Initially, the participant playlists were examined ahead of the interviews. This involved exporting the playlists as .csv files using *Exportify* (*Exportify*, n.d.), a tool that converts Spotify playlists into files containing columns for various attributes including track names, artist names, genres, and more. Two additional columns were added to represent the gender and ethno-racial information of the artists, and manually filled by researching the ethno-racial backgrounds and genders of the respective artists. Reviewing photos, gendered pronouns, and references, the gender of each performer was obtained online and categorised as either male (hom), female (fem), non-binary (x), unknown, or mixed (mix) when a musical formation included artists of 2 or more distinct genders. The artists' ethno-racial backgrounds were determined following a similar approach consulting resources including *Ethnicelebs.com* (Ethnicelebs, n.d.), a website designed to inform those curious about the ethno-racial backgrounds of famous celebrities, and *Wikipedia.org* (Wikipedia, n.d.). This data was categorised as White, Black, Asian, Latina/o, other⁴, or mixed for solo artists with multi-ethno-racial backgrounds or bands including artists of multiple ethno-racial backgrounds. In cases of mixed descent, a note was included to detail the exact backgrounds. Moreover, for songs with multiple performing artists, the gender and ethno-racial background were determined separately for each artist. In instances of double notation where artists were listed under both their individual names and the name of the duo

⁴ The category "other" included artists from Northern African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, South Caucasian, Māori, and Russian ethno-racial backgrounds, along with artists whose ethnic background remained unidentified.

they form together, such as Bruno Mars and Anderson. Paak in Silk Sonic, only the demographic information of the solo artists was considered to avoid duplicate entries.

Scrutinising the constructed playlists resulted in a separate file for each participant, with three tabs dedicated to the heartbreak, love, and sex playlists, of which an example is presented in Figure 2. The tabs were individually examined to determine the distribution of gender and race/ethnicity and identify any gendered and ethno-racial patterns in the themed playlists.

Figure 2

The partial file of one of the sex playlists containing the manually added data.

1	Artist Name(s)	Race/ethnicity	Gender	Artist Genres
2	Robin Thicke	white	hom	dance pop,neo soul,pop rap,r&b,urban contemporary
3	PARTYNEXTDOOR, Rihanna	black, mix	hom, fem	r&b,rap,toronto rap,urban contemporary,barbadian po
4	Giveon	black	hom	r&b
5	Måneskin	white	mix	indie rock italiano,italian pop,pop
6	ZAYN	middle eastern	hom	pop,uk pop
7	Chris Brown	black	hom	r&b,rap
8	Mac Miller, Ariana Grande	white, white	hom, fem	hip hop,pittsburgh rap,rap,pop
9	The Weeknd	black	hom	canadian contemporary r&b,canadian pop,pop
10	Summer Walker, Drake	black, mix	fem, hom	r&b,canadian hip hop,canadian pop,hip hop,rap,toront
11	Rihanna	mix	fem	barbadian pop,pop,urban contemporary
12	SZA, The Neptunes, Pharrell Will	black, mix, black, black	fem, hom, hom, hom	pop,r&b,rap,dance pop,pop,hip hop,pop rap,r&b,south
13	Daniel Caesar, Kali Uchis	black, latin	hom, fem	canadian contemporary r&b,colombian pop
14	Russ, Tamae, Capella Grey	white, black, caribbean	hom, fem, hom	hawaiian hip hop,pop rap
15	Chase Atlantic, GOON DES GARC	white, black	hom, hom	
16	Summer Walker, Bryson Tiller	black, black	fem, hom	r&b,kentucky hip hop,r&b,rap
17	The Weeknd	black	hom	canadian contemporary r&b,canadian pop,pop
18	H.E.R., Bryson Tiller	black, black	fem, hom	r&b,rap,kentucky hip hop,r&b,rap
19	Summer Walker	black	fem	r&b
20	Kehlani	mix	x	pop,r&b
21	Giveon	black	hom	r&b
22	Brent Faiyaz	black	hom	dmv rap,r&b,rap
23	PARTYNEXTDOOR	black	hom	r&b,rap,toronto rap,urban contemporary
24	SZA	black	fem	pop,r&b,rap
25	SZA	black	fem	pop,r&b,rap
26	Keyshia Cole	black	fem	hip pop,r&b,urban contemporary
27	Bruno Mars, Anderson .Paak, Silk	mix, black, black, black	hom, hom, hom, hom	dance pop,pop,escape room,hip hop,indie soul,neo so

The playlist data files served as a framework for formulating interview questions, which were central to the dialogues. Subsequently, the recorded interview data retrieved from these conversations was subjected to a two-phase methodology for separate analysis. During the first phase, a bottom-up comparative technique was employed, involving the transcription and coding of the interviews following an inductive coding approach. This iterative process of reflection facilitated the identification of recurring themes and concepts. In the second phase, a top-down approach was performed to connect the findings with existing theories and relevant

literature on cultural associations in music. Through this grounded theory approach, a comprehensive understanding was obtained regarding of how participants curated their playlists and the implicit cultural associations shaping their choices and perspectives. These insights will be further unfolded in the subsequent section.

Results

The participants' playlists formed a large body of data which varied greatly in terms of genres, number of songs, and the overall energy they conveyed as a whole, often referred to as the "vibe". Included genres ranged from metal to K-pop, from trap to country, and playlist sizes ranged from as few as 6 songs to as many as 92. The diversity in vibe within the playlists did not only arise from the thematic differences but also from the personal touch added by each participant, as they curated songs to their individual taste and often formed personal connections with them. The love and heartbreak playlists, in particular, showed great variety in terms of songs, reflecting the unique personal associations of each participant. Consequently, despite the presence of some overlapping songs, no single track emerged as the most frequently chosen in the heartbreak playlist. Considering the heartbreak playlists' artists, Frank Ocean and Lewis Capaldi appeared most frequently, with each a total of 7 entries across all 15 heartbreak playlists. Moreover, in the love playlists, both Vance Joy and Frank Sinatra held the highest number of appearances, with 6 entries each. Although the love songs varied greatly, "Those Eyes" by New West stood out as the most popular, with a total of 3 selections. Conversely, the sex playlists included a higher degree of repetition, possibly due to a lesser personal connection to the songs. For these playlists, the tracks "Get You" by Daniel Caesar and Kali Uchis, and "Call Out My Name" by The Weeknd were most frequently selected, with 4 entries each. Strikingly, The Weeknd was the dominant artist choice across the sex playlists, obtaining 16 notations.

Gender Distribution in Playlist Selections

A closer look into the playlists' gender distributions not only revealed variety, but also the remarkable trend that nearly all playlists were male dominated⁵. In particular, only two heartbreak playlists predominantly featured female artists whereas all love and sex playlists were dominated by male artists. Translated into numbers, that is a total of 43 playlists containing more male performers in contrast to 2 female-dominated playlists.

The prevailing dominance of male artists in the love-related playlists, which aligns with previous research on the music preferences of young adults (Millar, 2008), can largely be attributed to a general inclination towards male voices. This inclination is supported by research indicating that female listeners tend to be drawn to men's low-pitched voices (S. Collins, 2000; McDermott, 2012, p. 233; O'Connor et al., 2012), as well as studies demonstrating a widespread preference for low-pitched male voices (Hollien et al., 1991). Historical influences, such as the predominant presence of men in positions of power across various domains and their greater representation in media portrayals involving voiceovers and narrations, have further contributed to this preference. Consequently, low-pitched voices have become subconsciously associated with authority, dominance, and influence, reinforcing the perception of male voices as desirable and establishing a pervasive preference for male voices in the musical domain (Hope, 2023).

The influence of male voices on the participants' playlist selections became apparent when Gabriela (f), a 36-year-old Brazilian/British team leader, was made aware of the male dominance in her playlists. In response, she attributed this tendency to hearing preferences:

I think I listen to more male artists now that you said it. I had also not realised that. *laughter* I'm not sexist. *laughter* Yeah, I don't know why (...) but maybe the preference for my ears is for male voices.

⁵ Appendix II provides a comprehensive breakdown of the playlists' gender distribution.

Several other respondents supported this preference by stating how they favour low, smooth, and deep voices of male artists when listening to music. This preference for male voices in music was, for instance, sustained by Nina (f), a Dutch 24-year-old back-office employee, who expanded on this as follows: “Yeah, I think female artists are fantastic (...) but I’m just less of a fan of their vocals,” indicating that her liking is a given instance instead of a subjective choice.

Other explanations for the overrepresentation of male artists in the playlists included the predominance of males in particular genres. As was the case for Timothy (m), a 29-year-old British quality professional, who attributed the male-dominance of his playlists to his preference for songs primarily in male-dominated genres when informed of the male dominance in his playlists:

No, I don’t know. I suppose I listen to mainly male-dominated fields. (...) Like with rap and of course, these old-school Crooners⁶. You know, a lot of the music I listen to is heavily male dominated. So, I’m not surprised that my taste would then lean that way.

This male monopoly in certain genres indeed came as no surprise, given the overpowering position of men in the music industry in general (Hepworth-Sawyer et al., 2020; Wolfe, 2019), as substantiated by a report that sheds light on the underrepresentation of women on different levels in the (popular) music business (Smith et al., 2021).

The sex, love, and heartbreak playlists constructed for this study largely mirrored the music industry’s male hegemony. However, there were two exceptions of heartbreak playlists where female artists were more prominent, each with its own unique explanation. One participant, Zahra (f), a 34-year-old Moroccan/Dutch project manager, expressed that she never experienced a heartbreak that had her “crying on a carpet for a week (...) like Elle Woods (...) [in] *Legally Blonde*, with chocolate in bed.” Rather, she associated heartbreak with empowerment, which she translated into curating her playlist “by summoning the old-school

⁶ Timothy refers to male singers that sing sentimental songs, in particular romantic songs of the 1930s and 1940s (Collins Dictionary, 2023), examples include Tony Bennett, Nat King Cole, and Bing Crosby.

divas” including Celine Dion, Mariah Carey, and Whitney Houston. As a result, Zahra’s heartbreak playlist displayed a slight female dominance with a male-female ratio of 9 to 11. In contrast, Lynn (f), a 24-year-old Dutch Medicine student, struggled to assemble her heartbreak playlist due to a lack of resonance with the theme. Consequently, her 5-song heartbreak playlist had a male-female ratio of 3 to 4, which, for Lynn, were “the only [songs] that came to mind (...) when (...) think[ing] of heartbreak.” This may suggest an initial association of vulnerability and heartbreak with female performers in her perception.

Ethno-racial distribution: first reactions

In addition to examining the gender representation of the selected artists, an examination was conducted into their ethno-racial backgrounds⁷. The findings revealed a significant prevalence of White artists in both the heartbreak and love playlists, with exact matching distributions for these themes. That is, among the participants, 11 individuals curated love and heartbreak playlists primarily featuring White artists, while 3 participants built playlists in both themes dominated by Black artists, and 1 participant primarily included Asian performers in their love and heartbreak collections. In contrast, the sex playlists exhibited a clear predominance of Black artists, with 8 playlists mainly featuring Black performers, 5 playlists being White-dominated, one predominantly Latina/o playlist, and another sex playlist including songs primarily by mixed-ethno-racial artists. These findings to a large extent mirror the composition of the 2018 playlists examined by Van Bohemen et al. (2020) and the contemporary intimacy-related playlists discussed in the introduction of the current study, considering the overall male predominance, the White-dominated heartbreak playlists, and the Black-dominated sex playlists. To gain insight into the underlying decisions and associations that informed the observed patterns in the participant playlists, these were further explored in the interviews.

⁷ A complete representation of the playlists’ ethno-racial distribution is offered in Appendix III.

Interestingly, when inviting the participants to review the ethno-racial distribution of their playlists, a first reaction for the majority (n = 9) was that of being surprised by the turn that the conversation took. Moreover, several participants (n = 6) explicitly stated not paying attention to artists' ethno-racial background when listening to music. The participants' unconsciousness of ethno-race as a factor in their playlists was captured by their responses to the question "What do you notice about the distribution of the ethnic backgrounds of the artists in your playlists?":

Giel (m): *Ja master*, I had never thought of it that way (...)

Jules (x): Oh! Have I considered this? No.

Daina (f): Oh, that's interesting. Ethnic backgrounds...

Gabriela: I never look at that. Not a factor for me.

These responses, furthermore, reaffirm the implicit nature of the respondents' song choices. However, despite limited awareness regarding the ethnic distributions, participants with a predominantly Black sex playlist often quickly recognised the tendency of Black predominance. This was exemplified by Suze (f), a 24-year-old Dutch Psychology student, who provided the following response when asked about the ethno-racial distribution of her playlists:

Oh, that's kind of funny. I think (...) [for the] sex playlist, there are a lot of Black people in[cluded] (...). And then for [the] love [playlist], yes, mostly western. Heartbreak [is] also pretty much western. Especially that one actually.

Similarly for Jules, a 24-year-old Dutch interdisciplinary master student, drawing attention to the artists' ethnic background was enough for them to quickly point out that their sex playlist

predominantly featured artists of colour⁸: “I think [I included] a lot of people of colour (...) I think in [the] sex [playlist] really a lot of people of colour predominate.”

Correspondingly, Renske (f), a 28-year-old Dutch customer relationship executive, had a similar and prompt reaction when asking about the distribution in ethnic background of her playlists and provided an explanation for it: “I think my sex playlist is mostly dominated by dark-skinned people. (...) they are also just more likely to be in that R&B thing.” These excerpts confirm an apparent link between their sex playlist and Black artists for several respondents.

Furthermore, explanations for this connection emerged from several interrelated themes including historical connotations and the prevalence of their music in genres that fit a playlist for intimate moments, as Renske pointed out when linking Black people to R&B, as well as culture, genetics, and vocal qualities. As will become clear when each of these explanations is expanded upon, associations take centre stage in all of them.

Perceptions of Black and White Artists

In line with the evident connection between sex and Black performers, the prominence of Black artists in the sex playlists informs the prevailing assumption that Black people are more sexually and sensually inclined, in line with the objectification (Wallace, 2002), as well as the hyper-sexualisation and exoticization of Black people (De Laat, 2019; Matthews, 2018; Otto et al., 2022; Stevens A., 2021). The persistence of these sexual objectification processes was shown in associations of Black individuals being sensual and sexual, as became apparent during the conversation with Suze.

That is, after disclosing the existing pattern of a predominance of White artists in heartbreak playlists and Black artists in sex playlists, we discussed the consequences of these patterns for the way these ethno-racial groups are perceived in society. Suze pointed out these widespread associations of Black and White people: “I do think that, you often hear that too,

⁸ The term “artists of colour” is used to describe non-White individuals, encompassing a wide range of ethno-racial backgrounds including but not limited to Black, Asian, Latina/o, Indigenous, and mixed-ethno-race.

that Black people are often perceived as sensual (...). And I never really have that with White people. I see them more as (...) stiff and rigid.” When subsequently addressing the consequences of the overrepresentation of White artists in heartbreak playlists on how White people are perceived, the conversation continued as follows:

Suze: I find that a bit more challenging. (...) I do associate [heartbreak songs with] a White boy, (...) with a guitar [singing] (...) sad songs (...). But I’m not quite sure what that is, because (...) when I look at British culture, I don’t see them as very sensitive people (...) It’s more [that] it surprises you that they have that side as well.

Interviewer: So, (...) you don’t necessarily think that White people in general are very sensitive, but they can come across that way in their songs. Is that what you mean?

Suze: Yeah.

Interviewer: And then going back to Black people and their sensuality, is it the same in that way?

Suze: No, because with that, I do have more of an expectation that it is that way.

Remarkably, the association of White people being sensitive for Suze only applies in the context of music whereas the association of Black people being sensual is an association of Black people in general. This finding aligns with the widespread mechanisms that categorise Black individuals as increasingly sexual compared to other ethno-racial groups.

In addition to Suze, also Renske addressed the perception of artists, this time regarding a particular image that, in her opinion, ought to be held high. She initially related the dominance of Black artists in sex playlists to the content of the included songs:

Of course, it is typical that the things being sung about by dark coloured [artists] are more about sex. That is more objectified, I think. (...) That’s obviously very generalising [and] stereotyping, but of course, you often see that... when it comes to dark[-coloured], kind of R&B rappers, it is much more about money, women, sex (...) those kinds of topics.

She continued by stating that these artists frequently sing or rap about materialistic topics, because they are required to uphold a stigmatised image:

I think that might also be the stigma (...) [that] dark[-coloured] people must hold up. Or what dark[-coloured] rappers (...) must show. Because it's seen as cool and tough. (...) Occasionally a bit misogynistic. But that is often linked to sex.

Through her multi-layered response, Renske not only highlights the prevailing stigmatised associations about Black people that exist in our society, but also demonstrates her critical reflection on these mechanisms through her awareness of the generalising and stereotyping nature of these associations when reproduced in the conversation. Furthermore, Renske's perspective reveals that despite the prevalence and stigmatisation of these associations, they are not entirely overlooked.

The Role of Lyrics and Emotional Attachment in Thematic Distinctions

Renske was not alone in observing the songs' content, particularly the lyrics, which became a crucial aspect discussed when reviewing the respondents' music choices. That is, the significance of lyrics in the love and heartbreak playlists was often contrasted with their importance in sex playlists, with the former being deemed high and the latter low. Moreover, multiple respondents (n = 11) mentioned how they selected heartbreak and love songs based on how well the lyrics matched the themes, as Lynn confirmed by explaining her thought process when selecting songs for her love playlist:

What (...) stands out to me is that in the case of heartbreak and love, the lyrics play a significant role. The (...) [playlists] actually [include] songs that are about heartbreak and songs that are about love. And with sex, the lyrics don't really play a role (...) When I was looking for [songs for] my love playlist, I was also thinking, okay, which songs are really about love?

Correspondingly, Erick (m), a 21-year-old Indonesian/Dutch Public Administration student, emphasised the importance of lyrics in different playlist themes and their impact on emotions:

(...) I think that in love, and also in heartbreak, almost every song is literally about love. I think that, even more with for sex, the lyrics have an influence on your emotions. Because I think that with sex, you less often explicitly listen to the lyrics. And with love and heartbreak, you tend to focus more on that.

As both Erick and Lynn pointed out, lyrics play a less significant role in sex playlists and are often undesired, as prominent lyrics could be distracting during intimate moments. Similarly, Suze emphasised this difference by comparing the tempo and the importance of lyrics for the three collections of songs, stating:

The sex playlist (...) is indeed a bit slow. But I didn't pay much attention to the lyrics, I think. No. (...) I thought, are you really going to listen to that? I hope not actually. Then something is not quite right.

In essence, Suze feels that hearing the lyrics during moments of intimacy indicates a lack of full immersion in the moment, thereby confirming the distinction between the playlist themes and their intended purpose. This distinction was reflected in the overall vibe of many of the sex playlists, which predominantly featured songs suitable for background ambiance, prioritising elements such as rhythm, beat, tempo and other musical attributes over lyrical content.

The distinction between love and heartbreak on one hand and sex on the other, is further supported by the level of personal attachment expressed in the conversations regarding specific songs. By allowing the participants to highlight specific songs, a deeper exploration of the playlist contents unfolded, moving beyond surface-level analysis of the artists' genders and ethno-racial backgrounds. That is, these selected songs were often intertwined with personal experiences, evoking memories and transporting listeners back to specific moments. Specifically, among the 30 instances where participants elaborated on songs connected to

personal experiences, only 3 were related to songs from the sex playlists, while the majority were found in the heartbreak (14) and love (13) playlists.

To illustrate, the experience of personal attachment certain songs was indicated by Giel, a 37-year-old Somalian/Italian currently on a sabbatical from the music industry, when reminiscing about moments of heartbreak:

(...) so, *Blame Game*, *Loyal*, and *Emotionally Scarred*. *Loyal*, when I'm in a heartbreak, feeling shit and I'm like *fuck you, bitch, these hoes ain 't loyal*. (...) *Emotionally Scarred*, well, that came after the breakup with the *In Amsterdam*-girl, and *Blame Game*, yeah, that's just getting lost, man, that's really sick. (...) So those tracks are literally from my own heartbreak feels (...)

Giel hereby expressed how these songs relate to his own experiences of heartbreak and hold personal significance for him.

Moreover, the increased personal resonance with songs in the love and heartbreak themes emphasises the greater emotional significance associated with these themes compared to the physical theme of sex. Meanwhile, this discrepancy in the level of emotional attachment to songs in love and heartbreak playlists as opposed to sex playlists can be interpreted within the framework of perpetuating ethno-racial imbalances. In fact, the strong emotional connection respondents express towards “white” music implies a potential perpetuation of ethno-racial inequality, further marginalising artists from diverse ethno-racial backgrounds within sentimental music.

Furthermore, combining both the fact that lyrics are found to be more important for love and heartbreak playlists and that both these themes are more prevalent when songs are connected to personal experiences, these findings align with a study by Lippman and Greenwood (2012). This research allowed participants to select personally significant music and suggested the potential of song lyrics to articulate participants' experiences. Additionally, the distinction between the emotional nature of the love and heartbreak themes, tied to feelings, memories, and the mind, and more physical nature of the sex theme, less attached to personal

moments and experiences, resonates with the “white-mind-love” and “black-body-sex” associations (Evans et al., 2010; Van Bohemen et al., 2020).

Cultural, Genetical, and Vocal Influences

The associations following the lines of the “white-mind-love” and “black-body-sex” dichotomy surface in the culturally embedded differences in music genres, which appear to be ethno-racially segregated and associated with certain communities. For example, pop, rock (Schaap & Berkers, 2019), indie (Sexton, 2022) and country (Mann, 2008; Roy, 2004) genres are typically associated with white musical traditions, while afrobeat (Stewart, 2013), hip-hop, jazz, R&B, and soul (Brackett, 2017; Garofalo, 1994; Robinson, 2006) genres are established in and associated with Black culture. This connection between musical genres and ethno-racial groups was acknowledged by participants, such as Giel, who expressed a preference for *urban* music, which he defines as “R&B or hip-hop or something Black music, if you want to call it that.”

Moreover, participants recognised the dominance of certain ethno-racial groups in sex and heartbreak playlists and the corresponding prevalence of Black artists in genres commonly found in sex playlists, such as R&B, and White artists in genres commonly found in heartbreak playlists, such as pop and indie. Nina, for example, mentioned the dominance of Black artists in the R&B genre and the corresponding prevalence of Black artists in her sex playlist:

Nina: I think the R&B genre is mainly characterised by, how do you say it?

Interviewer: Black artists? (...)

Nina: Yes, (...) I think that genre is more dominated by them.

Correspondingly, also Erick acknowledged the connection between genres and the distribution of ethno-racial backgrounds when elaborating on his first associations with certain genres:

Yes, I think that it also relates to the genres. (...) I think the origins of the genres and those styles are also rooted in certain cultural groups. So, when it comes to heartbreak, like ballads and such, I immediately think of Adele. (...) So yeah, it (...) comes from a certain corner.

When further exploring the reasons for the presence of specific ethno-racial groups in certain genres, influences from culture, genetics and vocals were mentioned. Lynn, for instance, associated the deep, rich voices of Black artists with certain kinds of music, considering genetic and cultural factors as explanations:

I think that in general, (...) many Black artists tend to have a deeper, richer voice. And I don't know if that's genetically determined, for example. It could be that having a deeper, fuller voice is more common in their genetic pool, which suits that kind of music better and is more associated with love and sex. (...) Or maybe it's culturally determined that certain ethnic groups tend to make that kind of music. Like, for example, the jazz from the past. (...) it was often dark-skinned people who made that kind of music. (...) I think that having that deep, rich voice may even be somewhat genetically determined, and it is simply associated with sensuality.

Similarly, Jules connected the inclusion of artists of colour in sex playlists to the perceived beauty and smoothness of their voices:

Regarding the sex playlist, for me personally, it's simply because those voices are just more beautiful. And (...) they often sound smoother. And of course, there are exceptions (...) but generally speaking, those are often people of colour. So, for me, it makes sense to include them in the sex playlist.

By assigning smooth, deep vocal qualities to specific ethno-racial groups, these hypotheses illustrate how voices are racially constructed (Eidsheim, 2008). They, furthermore, suggest that cultural differences contribute to the association between ethno-racial groups and music genres, ultimately influencing the composition of love-related playlists. Moreover, it is noteworthy that vocal qualities are again highlighted as a factor influencing the selection of artists in sex

playlists, particularly Black performers, besides being a factor affecting the male dominance observed in the playlists. However, it is important to recognise that perceiving certain voices as intrinsically suitable for sensual music is subjective and not an inherent characteristic passed on through genetics. In essence, sensuality is not exclusive to any particular ethno-racial group.

Music Industry Dynamics and Algorithmic Involvement

Despite the significance of cultural influences that inform implicit associations, these factors alone cannot fully explain the prevalence of increasingly sexual song content and heightened energy in various genres, especially in contemporary music. In fact, it is crucial to recognise the significant role played by the corporate music industry, driven by profit and market dynamics, in shaping artists and their repertoire. Timothy elaborated on this impact by the music industry in our conversation when discussing possible explanations for the observed gendered and ethno-racial patterns in intimacy-related playlists:

(...) the music industry (...) There's a lot of money in it and (...) the entire thing is owned and managed by record labels, which own artists lives. (...) So when (...) that is a factor into the understanding behind how all this gets pushed out to the public and how stories are told about artists and how music is written and delivered as well (...) that's what the world has become because someone wanted it that way.

He highlighted the consolidated power of these powerful agents who shape people's tastes and opinions through social media, algorithms, and curated content:

(...) of course, that reflects in terms of how people's tastes are directed and formed by opinions and social media and all these things, (...) and of course, then algorithms are created to curate that and to keep it going and to exemplify it. So, I think it just feeds into itself, but it started way back in the day and now we're at this point where even the algorithms reinforce it (...)

These citations underscore his concerns regarding the influence of money and power within the music industry, forces that are challenging to resist. Moreover, they highlight the inherent role of algorithms in perpetuating a continuous feedback loop that amplifies existing structures.

However, the industry is controlled not only by influential executives at major record labels, radio stations, and streaming services but also by non-human factors, as noted by Timothy. With the digitisation of music and the arrival of music streaming services, algorithms have become increasingly involved in song promotion, discovery, and recommendation through customised playlists. Platforms such as Spotify, where algorithmic recommendations account for one-fifth of streams (Anderson et al., 2020), have a significant impact on listeners' behaviour and the popularity of certain songs (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018). The participants' discussions on their approach to selecting songs revealed the prevalence of these techniques, with a majority (n = 12) mentioning the use of algorithmic suggestions as a common method.

For example, Jenny (f), a 23-year-old Bosnian/Dutch Industrial Product Design student, elaborated on a Spotify function that she uses, which is located in self-curated playlists: "if you scroll down, you get all these recommendations for what would fit in that playlist." In addition to this function, other Spotify functionalities, including *Enhance* (Spotify, 2021), song radios, and *Smart Shuffle* (Spotify, 2023), are designed to provide personalised suggestions based on current and previous listening behaviour.

The popularity of these functions was further illustrated by Giel who, among others, illustrated his heavy use of personal playlist built on algorithmic suggestions: "Spotify (...) based on your algorithm, (...) create[s] a playlist for you with tracks you listen to the most and then you have your own kind of radio. That is my *shit*, man."

These machine-based techniques, however, can introduce biases (Aguiar et al., 2021) and shape consumer preferences by influencing which music receives attention and streams. In this regard, they have become a crucial element of the continuous feedback loop of music production and consumption, reinforcing implicit behaviours. Therefore, while cultural

influences contribute to the development of music genres, it is essential to acknowledge the powerful gatekeepers within the music industry who play a significant role in determining both the production and consumption of music, thereby exerting considerable influence on the gendered and ethno-racial tendencies observed in love-related playlists.

Discussion and Conclusion

Upon discussing the objective of the current research in conversations with acquaintances, the ethno-racial pattern observed in intimacy-related playlists was often deemed logical, with Black artists dominating R&B and White artists prevailing in pop. However, it is fundamental to the field of sociology to challenge and question phenomena that may seem common-sense and delve into the factors that contribute to their existence. In light of this, the current study aimed to uncover the hidden cultural associations that give rise to the biases observed in playlists centred around sex, love, and heartbreak.

To achieve this, the productive music voice approach was employed, which involved engaging participants in conversations about their self-constructed playlists, offering valuable insights into the mechanisms driving these biased structures. Additionally, scrutinising the assembled playlists revealed patterns favouring male artists, as well as ethno-racial structures that align with prevailing tendencies found in existing love-related playlists from the past five years. Specifically, it disclosed heartbreak playlists dominated by White artists, sex playlists predominantly featuring Black artists, and male artists prevailing across all playlists. By reflecting on the findings of this study, it becomes evident that the multifaceted complexities of the topic offer engaging insights that require further investigation.

One prominent finding from this study highlighted the significant role of vocals in shaping the gendered and the ethno-racial biases observed in intimacy-related playlists. That is, the overall male dominance in these playlists was attributed to a preference for male voices, while the perceived smoothness and sensuality of Black voices contributed to their prevalence

in sex playlists. These findings align with previous arguments suggesting a preference for male voices in music (Hope, 2023; Millar, 2008) and the racialisation of vocal timbre (Eidsheim, 2008). Further, participants often discussed cultural influences as contributing to these patterns, but there were also suggestions that genetics and vocal qualities played a role, implying a more fixed nature to these qualities and reinforcing the perceived non-negotiability of the observed patterns. This solidification of the patterns can be attributed to patriarchal mechanisms (Smith et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2021; Wolfe, 2019) and the sexual objectification of Black individuals (P.H. Collins, 2000; De Laat, 2019; Paul, 2021; Matthews, 2018), which have ingrained these perceptions so severely that they appear stable. However, it is noteworthy that these preferences for specific voices among male and Black artists are subjective and cannot be attributed as inherent to a specific gender or ethno-race.

Furthermore, the connection between Black voices and sensuality aligns with the greater context of sexualising Black bodies, which was both explicit and implicit in the participants' perceptions, revealing another significant finding. These processes of sexual objectification are historically shaped forms of social inequality and discrimination that originated in colonial times, when Black bodies were dehumanised and enslaved individuals of African descent were often portrayed as hypersexual beings (Chideya et al., 2007). Such narratives continue to be perpetuated through media representations that hypersexualise Black bodies and are reinforced by racist ideologies and discriminatory practices. While participants attributed the prevalence of Black artists in sex playlists to cultural variations, genre preferences, and song content, the underlying mechanisms that inform sexual objectification remained evident. This finding too resonates with existing scholarship that highlights the broader issue of the sexualisation of Black bodies (P.H. Collins, 2000; De Laat, 2019; Paul, 2021; Matthews, 2018).

Moreover, these processes of sexualisation conform to the established associations of black-body-sex and white-mind-love (Evans et al., 2010; Van Bohemen et al., 2020), which portray Black individuals as hypersexual and linked to physical pleasure, while attributing traits

of innocence and emotional depth to White individuals. This dichotomy emerged in participant discussions and was strongly influenced by the thematic distinction between love and heartbreak on the one side, and sex on the other, revealing a third insight into the underlying mechanisms. This division was attributed the level of emotional attachment and the significance of lyrics in each theme, ultimately perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contributing to the marginalisation of Black artists (De Laat, 2019). Indeed, these implicit associations reinforce longstanding mechanisms of racial objectification and sexualisation that have persisted since colonial times, thereby emphasising the urgent need to critically address these structures.

In addition to the social forces at play, an additional finding verified the significant role of non-human factors in shaping gendered and ethno-racial patterns. Specifically, participants confirmed their widespread use of algorithmic techniques in both constructing and consuming playlists, aligning with previous research highlighting their substantial influence on consumer behaviour (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018; Anderson et al., 2020). Moreover, these algorithms exert even more influence due to their prominence in editorial playlists, serving as gatekeepers in the music industry (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Eriksson, 2020; O'Dair & Fry, 2020; Prey, 2020). However, these algorithmic processes, based on human data, maintain and reinforce existing patterns by occupying a central role in the continuous feedback loop of music production and consumption. Consequently, they increase the complexity of escaping the male-dominated and ethno-racial patterns prevalent in love playlists.

Another factor to take into account besides the influence of algorithms, is the presence of biased structures as situated within the music industry, which operates within the framework of profit-driven power dynamics, supply, and demand. Hence, while this study focused on uncovering the (re)production of the observed patterns from a consumer-perspective, it acknowledges the need for further exploration into the influence of external factors, including machine-based elements and industry dynamics.

In summary, the exploration of love-related playlists has provided valuable insights into the cultural, gendered, and ethno-racial dynamics in the realm of music. By examining the role of implicit cultural associations found in vocal qualities, historical connotations, sexualisation processes, and cultural variations, as well as the influence of algorithms and industry dynamics, a complex interplay of factors contributing to the formation and perpetuation of the observed biases was uncovered that highlighted the implicitness of these processes. Furthermore, the current findings confirm both the production and the reproduction of implicit cultural associations in several forms and shapes, provided that the self-constructed playlists confirmed the earlier observed pattern in the sex, love, and heartbreak playlists of 2018 and 2023.

To arrive at a more inclusive and unbiased landscape, it is important to interrogate and challenge these patterns rooted in historical and systemic inequalities. This is particularly significant given the implicit nature of these mechanisms, which easily are reinforced if proactive measures are not taken. By actively promoting diversity, amplifying unheard voices, and being critically aware of the mechanisms at play, it becomes possible to dismantle current biases. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to delve deeper into these biases, taking into account additional factors such as intersectionality, the impact of streaming platforms, and other external forces. Ultimately, this study calls for the comprehensive understanding and examination of these mechanisms, to move away from biased patterns that perpetuate divisions within the music industry, and towards an environment that embraces the diversity of various cultural expressions.

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Appendix I: Overview respondents

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Education (highest level completed)	Occupation
Zahra (f)	34	Moroccan/Dutch	Business Communication (Higher vocational education)	Project manager at a digital bureau
Nina (f)	24	Dutch	High school	Back-office employee at Kevin Murphy
Giel (m)	37	Somalian/Italian	Secondary vocational education	On a sabbatical from the music industry
Jenny (f)	23	Bosnian/Dutch	Secondary vocational education	Student Industrial Product Design (Higher vocational education)
Clint (m)	25	Dutch	Bachelor's degree in Information Science	Data analyst
Lynn (f)	23	Dutch	Bachelor's degree in Medicine	Student Medicine (Master)
Jules (x)	24	Dutch	Bachelor's degree	Student International Crimes, Conflict and Criminology (Master)
Ross (m)	30	Mixed ethnic background (Norwegian, Irish, Polish, and Lebanese)	Bachelor's degree	Sales representative
Daina (f)	23	Latvian	First level professional higher education with the qualification of Programmer	Software engineer
Renske (f)	28	Dutch	Pre-master's degree	Customer relationship executive at an e-commerce company
Gabriela (f)	36	Brazilian/British	Bachelor's degree	Team lead at a software firm
Timothy (m)	29	British	High School	Quality professional at an Utrecht-based company
Erick (m)	21	Indonesian/Dutch	High School	Student Public Administration (Bachelor)
Suze (f)	24	Dutch	Bachelor's degree in Psychology	Student Psychology (Master)
Alex (m)	29	Dutch	Propaedeutic year of higher vocational education	Team lead at an Utrecht-based company

Appendix IIa: Gender distributions – Dominant gender per theme

	SEX	LOVE	HEARTBREAK
<i>Male</i>	<u>15</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>13</u>
<i>Female</i>			2

Appendix IIb: Gender distributions – A complete overview per participant

	SEX														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<i>Male</i>	<u>9</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>12</u>
<i>Female</i>	7	2	8	4	6	1	4	13	9	46		5	10	11	2
<i>Non-Binary</i>			1					1		2				0	0
<i>Mixed</i>				1	1			1		5				1	6
<i>Unknown</i>			1						2						1

	LOVE														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<i>Male</i>	<u>17</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>38</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>21</u>
<i>Female</i>	3	4	8	2	6	7	8	4	5	34	0	11	9	18	3
<i>Non-Binary</i>															
<i>Mixed</i>	1		2	1		1			1	8			1	7	11
<i>Unknown</i>										1	1			1	1

	HEARTBREAK														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

<i>Male</i>	<u>14</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>5</u>	3	<u>23</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>29</u>	9	<u>25</u>
<i>Female</i>		1	5	3	<u>4</u>	14	1	1	12	39	1	9	25	<u>11</u>	8
<i>Non-Binary</i>						1				1					
<i>Mixed</i>			1	2		1			4	2		1	1		6
<i>Unknown</i>															3

Appendix IIIa: Ethno-racial distributions - Dominant ethno-race per theme

	SEX	LOVE	HEARTBREAK
<i>White</i>	5	<u>11</u>	<u>11</u>
<i>Black</i>	<u>8</u>	3	3
<i>Asian</i>		1	1
<i>Latina/o</i>	1		
<i>Mixed</i>	1		

Appendix IIIb: Ethno-racial distributions – A complete overview per participant

	SEX														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<i>White</i>	0	2	4	<u>6</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>7</u>	6	6	8	38	<u>9</u>	2	9	6	<u>12</u>
<i>Black</i>	<u>13</u>	<u>7</u>	8	3	5	3	<u>10</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>41</u>	3	<u>37</u>	8	<u>18</u>	4
<i>Asian</i>					1	4				1	7				1
<i>Latina/o</i>	2		<u>10</u>				1	1	1	5		1		2	
<i>Mixed</i>	1		1	1	2		1	6	3	14	4	4	<u>10</u>	1	1
<i>Other</i>			1					2	6	4		2			3

	LOVE														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<i>White</i>	<u>12</u>	3	11	<u>7</u>	<u>10</u>	8	<u>8</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>14</u>	3	<u>43</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>16</u>
<i>Black</i>	9	<u>13</u>	<u>18</u>	1	8	2	3	5	2	21	3	<u>36</u>	5	12	5
<i>Asian</i>						<u>9</u>		1		3	6		1		
<i>Latina/o</i>			1		1	2	6	2		1		2			1
<i>Mixed</i>		1	3		4	2	1	3	5	22	1	7	3	4	12

<i>Other</i>	1	5		3			1	5	2	1		3	2		
HEARTBREAK															
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<i>White</i>	<u>13</u>	1	5	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	14	<u>9</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>20</u>	6	<u>50</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>21</u>
<i>Black</i>	1	<u>8</u>	<u>11</u>			7	3	4		19	1	<u>37</u>	1	8	5
<i>Asian</i>						<u>15</u>				3	1				3
<i>Latina/o</i>				2			1			1			3		
<i>Mixed</i>			1	1		1	1	1	5	9	2	10	1	2	7
<i>Other</i>			9			2				1	3				6