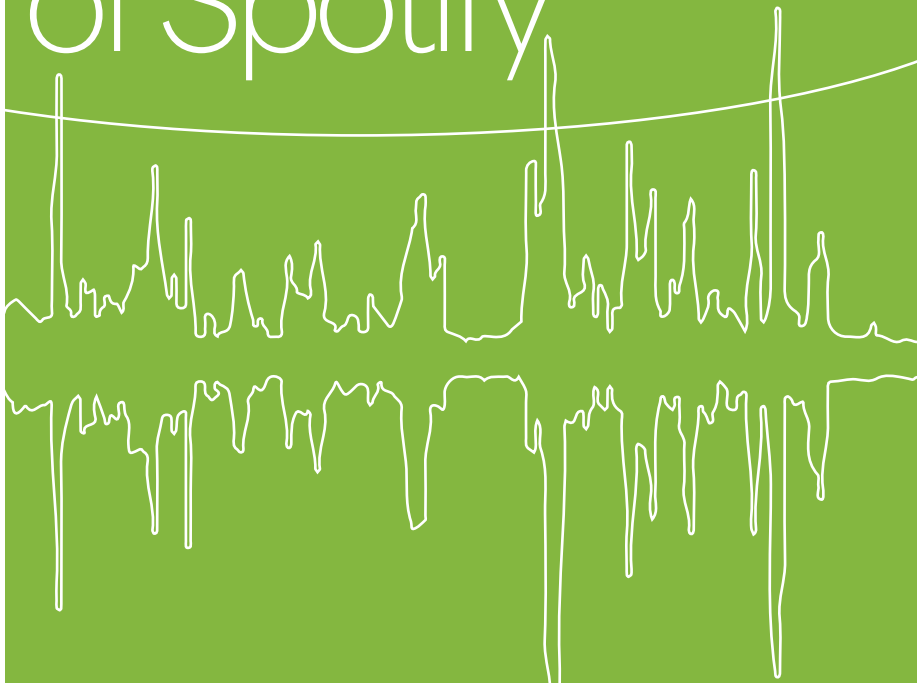


Semiotics of Spotify



Introduction

Spotify is an absolute Juggernaut in the music and audio entertainment industry right now. Boasting over 100 Million Tracks, 6 Million Podcasts, 200,000 audiobooks, and 624 Million users across more than 180 markets. Spotify generated 14.39 Billion dollars in 2023. Streaming music has absolutely changed the way we consume the medium and the subscription model has bled into all other forms of business. Gone are the days of paying for each album or song individually, and even further gone are the days of waiting outside of a music store to buy your favorite artist's new album.

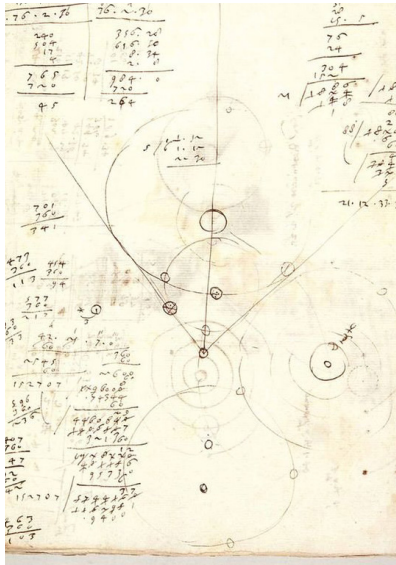
Music and the way we consume it has morphed tremendously since the creation of the record. This has led to many different formats and services coming and going, greatly changing our perception of what “music” could mean to us individually.

How do you depict something visually when you can't see it? What is recognizable to different people and consumers. Spotify's logo is just 3 curved lines and a circle, why do we attribute these elements to sound? Spotify's history; and its history of contemporaries and ancestors, may be able to show us how we got here.

First Visual Depictions of Sound

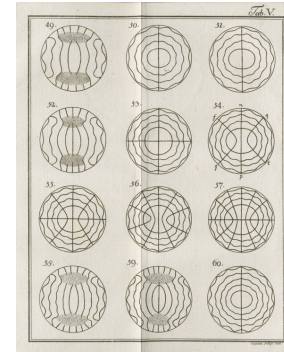
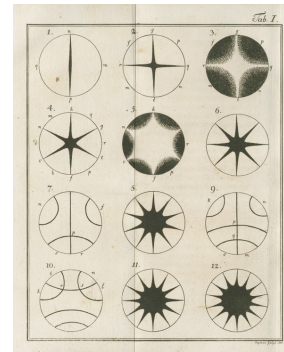
The first visual that comes to mind in regards to sound is of course waves. We can easily depict the way the sound travels in order to “see” what the sound looks like. The theory that sound moves like waves dates all the way back to 1st century B.C. and can be attributed to many different people. Though Galileo Galilei is credited as the origin of “modern” sound study.

Cymatics is the study of the effects sounds and vibrations have on matter. In the late 1400s Leonardo Davinci was the first to make serious note of these phenomena; noticing that dust would be left in certain patterns after he would strike his table.



It would not be long until others noticed this occurrence. Ernst Chladni is an important distinction when it comes to visualization. He would use a high-resonance copper plate with a layer of fine dust on top to record sounds from his violin. These recordings would be called Chladni Figures.

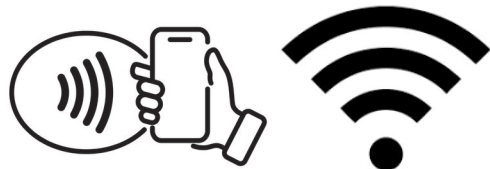
These patterns and depictions are already reminiscent of Spotify's logo, a circle with waves depicted. Though admittedly Spotify's depiction of waves is a little more graphic.



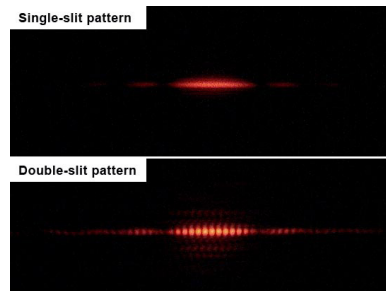
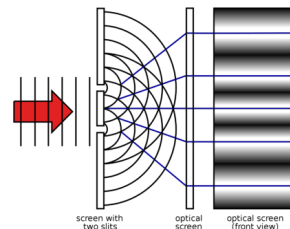
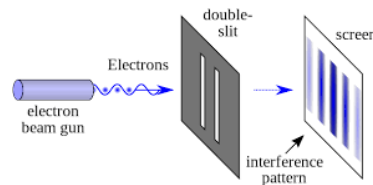
Wireless Technology

The magic of wireless and radio technology has a lot to do with waves just like sound. Wireless technology makes use of light waves to communicate information without the use of a wire. The reason we don't see this light is because the frequencies are outside of the visible spectrum.

Radio logos old and new show lines being released from a point (antenna). This is very similar to the way modern wireless technology is depicted.



So why lines? Well it could be a simple way of depicting something non visible being emitted, but light waves specifically can also be depicted as lines. The most famous example is the “double slit” experiment. Wave interference can be recognized by clean vertical lines. This was first discovered all the way back in 1801 by Thomas Young. It was recognized as an easy way to see when travels a wave, which is very important for complex sciences like quantum mechanics.

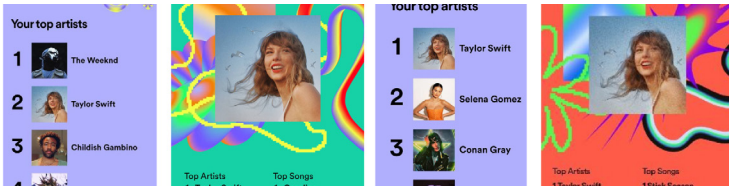


Music Notation

Another and perhaps more obvious way to depict specifically music is the music note. Music notation in the way that we are familiar has been around since 1000 AD; invented by Italian monk Guido d'Arezzo



Spotify's logo and signage contains very little to no usage of musical notation. This is likely due to Spotify containing other audio based entertainment like podcasts and audio books. Even in regards to their specifically music based designs they prefer graphic shapes and photos of artists.



The use of musical notation as a mark is more important to Spotify's contemporaries like apple music. In regards to history it's usage is ubiquitous and spans all sorts of music related services and designs.



Despite it being uncommon, examples of music notation can still be found on the Spotify Website.

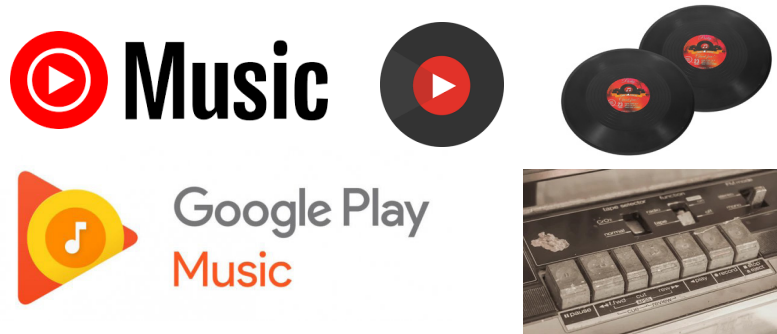


Spotify Loud & Clear

Musical Formats

Using old or pre existing tools as a skeuomorphic or contemporary imagery is very common in the world of design. What makes music interesting is the rapid evolution of mediums the art has been engraved in.

The phonograph/gramophone has an iconic silhouette and a common vector element found online. And the record player has been a musical tool that has stood the test of time and proved itself as a medium that is truly timeless. One of Spotify's contemporaries, Youtube Music, uses a record player in its logo. The play button is a signifier relating to the real life media controls present musical devices since their early years; it is also a common element in many of Google's entertainment services.



Music would live in Tape Decks and CDs before fully stepping into the world of digital. Headphones and speakers remained prominent signifiers throughout music design. Apple's iPod would go on to be an iconic silhouette of its own as computers began to take hold of the music industry.



The Digital Age

As computers began to infiltrate the common household, many became acquainted with digital media rather than physically based formats. There was a lot of promise with digital media because of how fast, efficient, and convenient it was.

Napster was released in 1999 as a file sharing format that specialized in mp3 files. Due to the nature of how Napster operated, it was really difficult to track where files were hosted because the network was peer to peer. Suddenly music had become a public good that anyone with a computer could access or upload. With 80 million users the service was incredibly influential to the music industry as people entered the digital age.

After its court ordered shut down in 2002, other services like LimeWire and KaZaA took its place. It was estimated that LimeWire was installed on one third of computers globally in 2007.



These services were hugely influential as the precursor to Spotify and Apple's iTunes software. Napster, LimeWire, and KaZaA use circular designs with use of green elements. The latter two especially bear great resemblance to the modern day Spotify logo. Existing around the same time it can be assumed these two logos came from similar design mindsets and contexts.



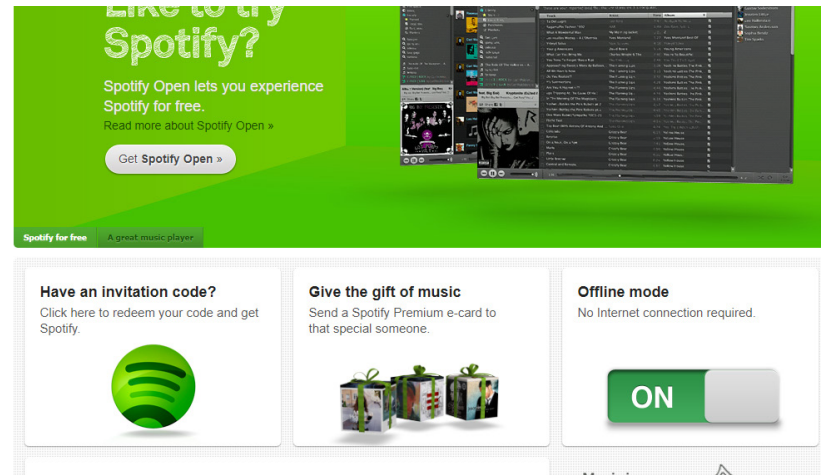
Spotify's Competitor

After seeing the market that existed for digital music, Apple created iTunes. The service would allow you to access music online with your computer in a safe, fast, legal, and high quality way. Consumers did not mind paying for their music when given the opportunity for convenience. 10 months later Apple would release the iPod, since then nearly all devices would have iTunes support which would further incentivise consumers to buy their music on iTunes rather than physically.

Apple makes use of Music notation in their logos. In older desktop versions of iTunes a CD was used as a skeuomorphic element. This would eventually evolve into a circle, just like seemingly all other audio programs online.

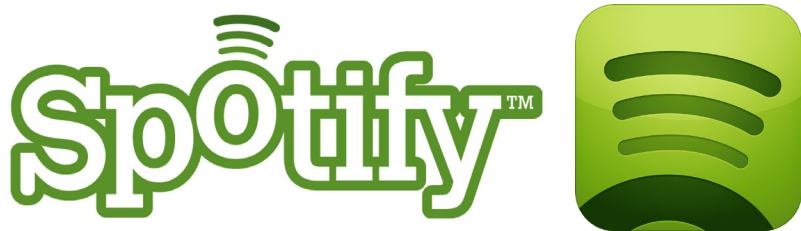


Spotify was able to carve out its niche due to the fact that iTunes still required every user to buy each song or album they wanted to listen to. Spotify instead offered an interesting value proposition where users could listen to the entire catalog for free, or you could pay one fixed price each month to eliminate ads and downloading ability. A lot of their design choices could be attributed to being an iTunes competitor, like their black user interface to make them distinct from iTunes's white layout.



History

Spotify was conceived in 2006 then launched in 2008 by Swedish Founders Daniel Ek and Martin Lorentzon. The name of Spotify comes from something Ek misheard Lorentzon say during a name brainstorming session. The “Spot” in “Spotify” could be one of the reasons for the circular shape of their logo; though originally their logo was made of type.



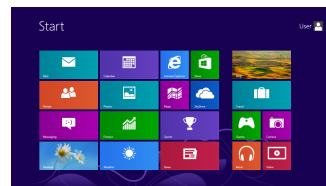
Spotify grew throughout Europe and then launched in the United States in 2011. Since then they pioneered algorithm based suggestions and playlists. They also began hosting other audio based entertainment like podcasts and later audiobooks. As mentioned before this could be the reason that most external Spotify material does not contain specifically music based signifiers, instead having a greater focus on sound in general.

Visually Spotify evolved the same as the world around it did, and 2013 saw its first visual overhaul. In the landscape of design, 2013 stands out as the year many other companies began to create flatter and more simplistic iterations of their designs.

Designers wanted to return to a sense of elegance and simplicity, and now that computers were becoming ubiquitous there was less pressure to add ornamentation and three dimensional skeuomorphic elements for potential new users.

Tech companies would start to lean into this design language, notably Microsoft with Windows 8 a year prior. 2013 is also the year that Apple released iOS 7. It radically changed the design language of one of the most popular user interfaces, bringing this new design language to everyone.

BEFORE
Google
AFTER
Google



History

Since Spotify had an image to maintain, they would need to update their designs in order to fit into this evolving digital design landscape. Other tech companies had already begun changing their look and the rest would soon follow. They decided on simplifying their text to a less obtrusive sans serif font. It was a custom version of Gotham; a change to this style of typography became very popular at this time. They also focused and highlighted their most prominent mark as they had already done with their app icons. Choosing to commit to the 3 curved lines being their recognizable symbol.



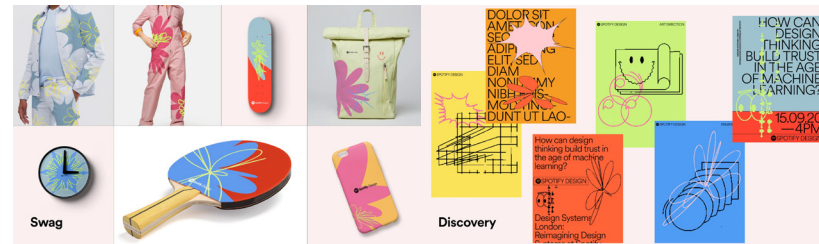
The image to the right serves to illustrate how larger companies rid themselves of serifs and began to follow a more uniform approach to corporate tech design.



The 2013 design would only last for 2 years, as in 2015 they changed their logo again. This time they focused on changing their shade of green. Designer Tobias van Schneider said that the old green “dreary”, “broccoli”, and “desperate for an upgrade.” Thus moving to a significantly cooler shade of green.



June of 2020 would see Spotify really committing to their space in the design world. Building a design team and a website that showed off their new commitment to thoughtful and playful design.

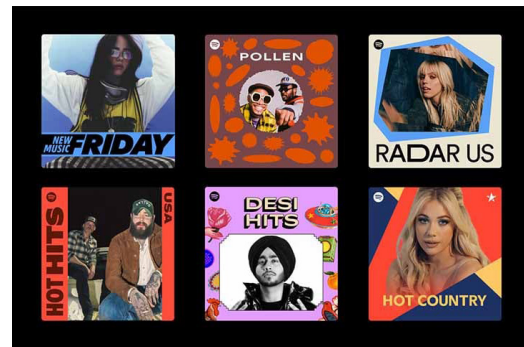


Modern Times

2024 would bring the addition of “Spotify Mix”, A new Font family created with Dinamo Typefaces that follows the latest trend in variable type. This allows things like weight to change to any amount rather than predetermined thicknesses set by the typeface designer.



image from design.tutsplus.com



Conclusion

Spotify seems to have an appreciation for where it came from and the signifiers everyone can understand; yet it revels in the new world we live in. One where many of its users had never bought a CD before, or have never known a time before the internet. In recent years spotify has shown itself as an institution concerned with modern appearances and intelligently designed visuals. With a look in the past, it is interesting to see where their visual language comes from.

Written and Designed by Asher Teal. University of Depaul 2024