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The Musical Generation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Spotify

Since its launch in 2008, Spotify has dominated the online music-streaming market through its branding of personalized data and subscription-based, on-demand listening options. Known as a “freemium” service, Spotify applies powerful rhetorical strategies through its product sampling; a free service is offered with the goal of attracting new monthly subscribers. This freemium function is the basis for Spotify’s rhetorical methodology, for every new user is exposed to subtle and dramatic, gifted and complementary marketing tools that persuade the individual to cheerfully submit \$9.99 a month in return for seemingly unlimited products and services. Spotify combines a sleek layout, music sharing and discovery, genres and charts, and additional subscription benefits to seduce the listener, but its primary rhetorical value is based in personalized playlists and updates which boost the emotional appeal with the listener and transform Spotify from a basic streaming service to an essential commodity of contemporary living.

According to its website, Spotify convinces forty-six percent of its users to purchase a monthly subscription which, compared to Pandora Radio that convinces only 6.9 percent of its users to subscribe, is quite a feat (“Pandora - Statistics”). Spotify has monopolized the music streaming industry in 2018, shown clearly by its multiplying listeners and enterprise value. Since its first million Premium members in 2011, Spotify has accumulated over 83 million paying subscribers, most of whom choose to continue purchasing the service month after month. The churn rate, the rate of decrease in subscribers, is exceptionally low and is shrinking by the year,

as “40% of its churned premium subscribers rejoin the platform within 3 months, yielding an effective monthly churn rate of 3% – 4%” (“Understanding”). Customers cannot avoid the rhetorical calls of this company, and even those who terminate their subscription return almost immediately. With 90% of the company’s income coming from subscribed listeners, it is essential that it gains new users and maintains its current subscribers (“Understanding”). This seems to be an easy feat for Spotify which currently represents 42% of the entire streaming industry’s income, and this alone establishes a confident sense of ethos with the general public (“Company”). The purpose of Spotify’s free program is to persuade potential new subscribers, and by studying its apparently enticing rhetorical approaches, the sources of its success become apparent.

Principally acknowledged in its linguistic messages, the underlying directive of Spotify establishes an emotional bond with its users based on the concept of reward and desire. Even its chosen subscriber word, “Premium,” implies a gift. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘Premium’ is defined as “a reward given for a specific act or as an incentive; a prize” (“premium”). This word was specifically chosen so that its users would recognize Spotify Premium as a gift of daily living; once purchased, this service is subconsciously recognized as a prize. Not only does this sense of reward appeal to pathos, but it also convinces new users to see the subscription in a more meaningful way. Like a child opening birthday presents, Spotify gives its dedicated subscribers the feeling of exclusivity and incentive for the basic price of ten dollars a month. On the topic of rewards, Spotify rewards all customers, both free listeners and subscribers. According to its website, Spotify users who are also Green or Gold members of Starbucks Rewards can get three months of premium for ninety-nine cents along with 125 “stars.” In addition, Spotify partnered with Uber so that customers who use both services can

listen to music while taxiing around. This partnership allows Premium listeners to seamlessly play their music from their house to their Uber to their destination as an exclusive gift for paying customers. The Spotify Rockstar program further enables Premium users to earn points by answering public forum questions which they can use to get t-shirts, a low-cost advertising agent, and free months of Spotify Premium. By enticing free listeners with a “prize” and rewarding current subscribers, Spotify builds and maintains an emotional bond with its listeners. It has built up a strong, emotive appeal which evokes feelings of joy, trust, and desire within the user. With every additional feature discovered, the greater the reward appears to be.

While its gifts and rewards serve well as an emotional appeal, Spotify also gains credibility through its artists. Because fans can be excessively committed to artists, Spotify chose to highlight these artists by providing personal details which extend the listener into the lives of the musicians. The top of each artist’s page includes a personal photo of the singer or band along with the number of monthly listeners; there is an “About” page detailing the history of the group; there is an “Artist’s Pick” album; and there is a tab showing the artist’s upcoming concerts. For these next examples, Hozier’s profile will be used. The top banner shows his new album cover and a section displaying his 11+ million monthly listeners, also advertising that he is ranked 178th in the world for monthly listeners. The picture, being the first thing that catches the user’s eye, creates an instantaneous personal bond with the artist; his statistics not only establish a quantitative foundation by displaying that he is popular around the world, but also that Spotify has millions of users adding to the credibility and accuracy of the source. In studying his “About” page, the listener can find out that Andrew Hozier-Byrne is Irish, joined a blues band at fifteen, and has a new EP that was released on September 6th, 2018. As well as being current, these “About” profiles give the listeners exclusive information that not every fan knows

alongside the artist’s social media and Wikipedia links. This ego boost, in turn, solidifies the bond between the artist and the listener, all under the protective arms of the easily-accessible, exclusivity-driven Spotify Premium membership. The “Artist’s Pick” section adds to this artist-listener bond by suggesting albums that the artist also enjoys. Spotify includes this so that even casual fans can further understand the character of the rock stars they adore. Finally, the “Concert” tab informs the listeners if their favorite artists are in town. If the user does not already have a Premium membership, attending one of these concerts could convince the fan to purchase a Spotify subscription in order to listen to their favorite song over and over, a clear cause and effect relationship. The link between the fans and the artists is the catalyst that inspires these fans to become Spotify listeners and, with the addition of supplementary features, subscribers. These extensive artist profiles establish company credibility through the mutual admiration of talented individuals and the popularity of global listeners.

With such a massive selection of songs and artists, the organization of Spotify encourages users of all types to indulge in comfort, familiarity, and rabbit trails. Even for free users, any song can be put on a queue to then be sorted further into playlists by the individual; customization is crucial to the success of this rhetorical strategy. The button to save songs is clearly displayed as a “+” (or “√” if already saved), and with the universal sign for ‘more here,’ ellipses on each track signal the user to additional actions such as add to a playlist. See Figure 1.

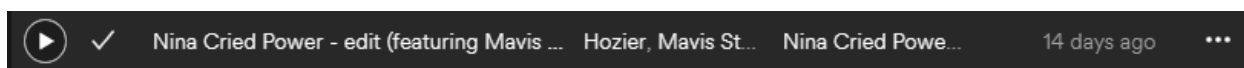


Figure 1.

These signs are easily understood to all ages, and sidebar tabs are in place to navigate both personal and public playlists. When viewing an artist’s page, the most popular songs are displayed at the top along with the number of downloads showing again the popularity of the website and artists. The user sees what other fans enjoy, and with a simple tab titled “Fans Also

Like,” Spotify opens to door for users to explore their personal music genre preferences. See Figure 2.

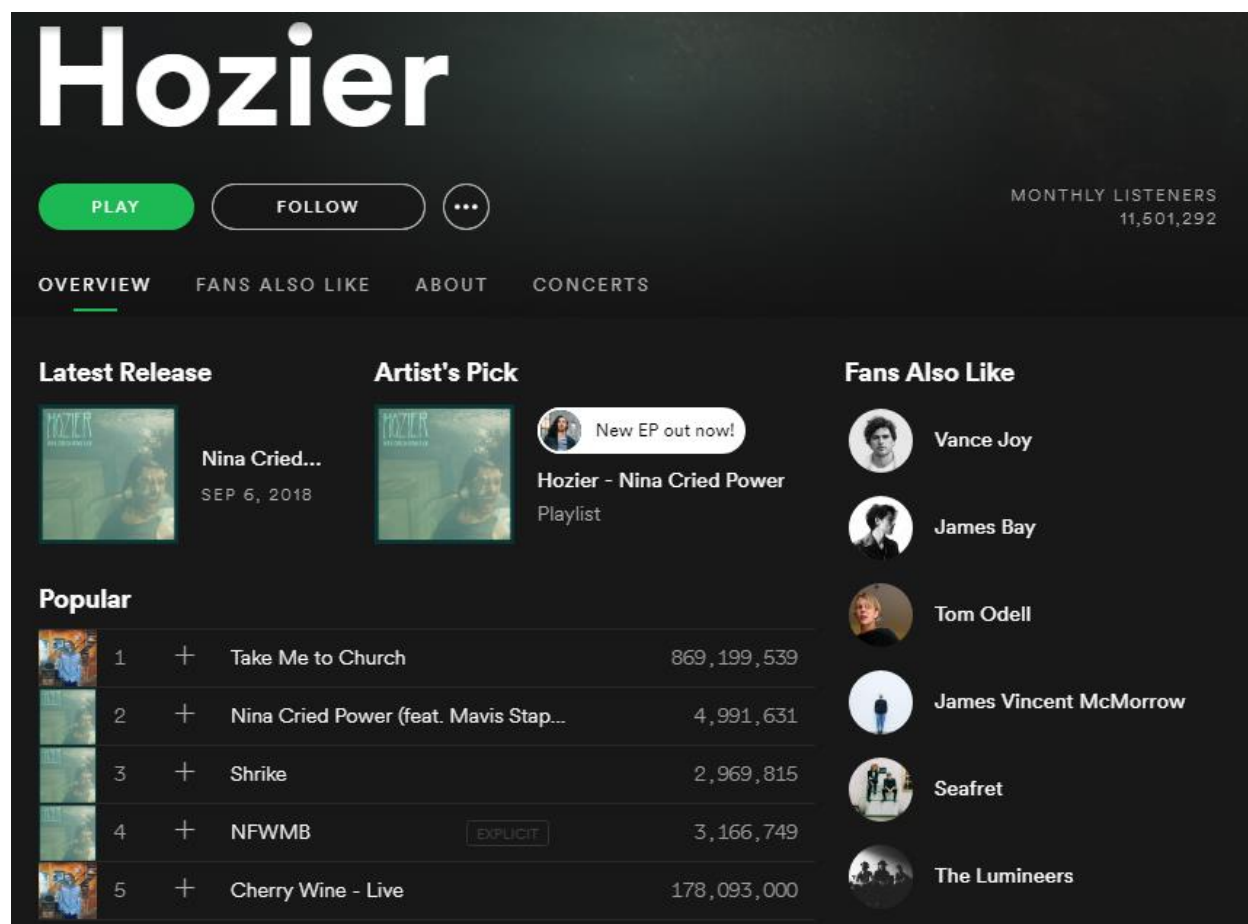


Figure 2.

Every artist’s page is equipped with twenty additional artists that are clearly displayed as mutual allies for the listener to explore and expand into which Spotify uses to create new listeners. As users discover more artist’s pages, Spotify’s original rhetorical strategies of exclusivity, community, and passion are multiplied as new listeners are created. Furthermore, over 35 million songs can be accessed by company-created playlists. The “Browse” tab, which every listener is brought to when opening the program, directs users to “Top Charts,” “Genres and Moods,” “New Releases,” and “Recommendations.” The first thing listeners are exposed to is a surplus of options because regardless of what they’re using music for, Spotify has made it all accessible and

flawless to navigate. The green highlights on a dark background focus the eye of the user on important links and facilitate the natural flow of the program, and combined with availability on practically any device (iOS, Android, SmartTV, Desktop, etc.), Spotify becomes very accessible. With the liberties associated with such a well-organized program, all types of users can appreciate the convenience of discovering new music—the first step to an influx of new subscribers.

Above all, the personalization of Spotify builds a sense of uniqueness for every individual listener, the most successful rhetorical strategy. The highest percentage of new users, both paid and free, came after the implementation of socialized and personal features such as “Facebook Integration,” “Discover Weekly,” and “Daily Mix.” Spotify’s partnering with Facebook enables listeners to see what their friends and family are listening to which “catalyzed rapid audience growth” (“Understanding”). This social feature bonds users with other users, encouraging more people to join the platform because of a sense of unity between Spotify and its listeners. While this is mainly an appeal to pathos, it also creates a sense of credibility—people trust people they know. Spotify gave its listeners faces, names, and locations, making new users more susceptible to trust the streaming platform. The personalization features, however, are the most recent and most successful strategies. Daily Mixes are made by “identifying clusters of [most commonly listened to artists], and extending each with recommendations using [Spotify’s] understanding of the user’s favorite music” (“How Your”). Its software creates fresh playlists everyday based on the interests and passions of the listeners; Spotify has become an extremely listener-oriented, self-developing website that spawns invested users with personalized services. Since the release of Daily Mixes, Spotify’s subscriber base has grown from 40 million to 83 million (“Understanding”). Lastly, its “Discover Weekly” tab increases listener-driven discovery

by presenting “deep cuts chosen just for [the user]” (Spotify). All of these playlists are conveniently located under the “Made for You” tab which suggests that Spotify has designed an entire subsection of its website to help the listener discover new music and enjoy the full extent of the company’s music selection. These features could be the cause of the drastic rise in popularity for the music streaming platform, and they have most definitely aided in Spotify’s rise in users. Overall, the personalization and socialization features help bring a shared sense of unity, uniqueness, and affection to the users, encouraging them to use the free platform more often and, in turn, purchase a subscription.

Spotify has applied a range of extremely successful rhetorical techniques within its software that have made it the top music streaming company of 2018. Its appeal to pathos is evident in its range of desire-based language and personalization features, and it gains its credibility through the artists’ profiles that connect the listeners to the website. Since music listening is a heavily emotional activity, an appeal to logic beyond the basic organization features is unnecessary; however, Spotify’s layout and organization are key components to its success. The goal of Spotify is to acquire and maintain Premium subscribers, most of which come from the free trial version of its site. Because song and artist discovery are so important to expanding the user base, the “Made for You” and “Fans Also Liked” tabs are perhaps the most important features. These not only increase discovery but also bond the user to the company that understands and cares for their music preferences—this is what drives Spotify towards the future.

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