SOUNDCLOUD

P1A Critique | Kyle Burger

Overview

An overview of the Soundcloud app

Soundcloud is among the most popular music and social media platforms, often described as the best way for aspiring artists to get exposure. But what keeps users coming to the Soundcloud app, and how might its design affect them? This critique will analyze the design of the Soundcloud mobile app, and determine if it fosters or hinders its growth as a music sharing platform.

The main features of Soundcloud are:

- Allow users to browse, like, and share new and old music

- Allow users to record and upload music of their own

- Allow users to find playlists, and make playlists of their own

- Allow users to interact with other users

Focus Principles and Critique

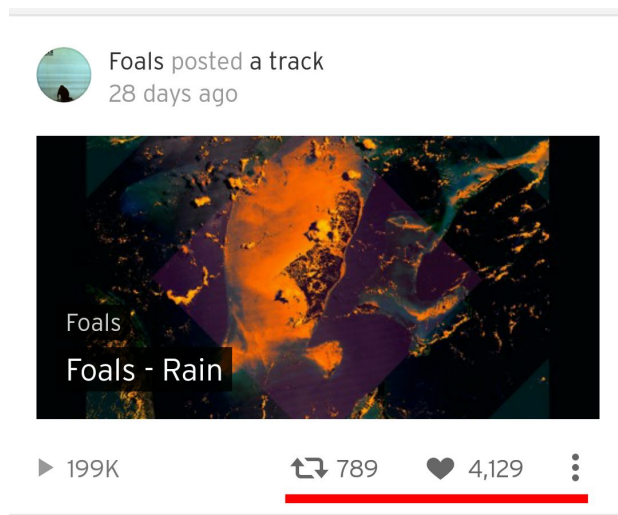*What principles does Soundcloud take advantage of? Are they used effectively?*
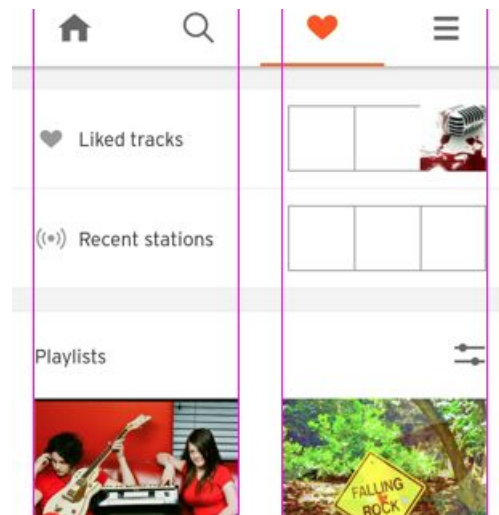
← #chill

Consistency: Consistency means that different areas of an interface won't be foreign to one another. Soundcloud makes use of consistency through utilizing similar color and structural elements across all of its pages. It relies on shades of gray for text and information, and highlights selected/selectable buttons with orange (keeping consistent with its orange logo). It is simple, and doesn't over complicate. It, of course, also expresses functional consistency. For instance, Soundcloud utilizes familiar icons instead of writing out words. Users will recognize the icons below as "share" or "repost", and "favorite" or "like".

◄ *Soundcloud makes use of functional consistency with its familiar 'repost' and 'like' icons*
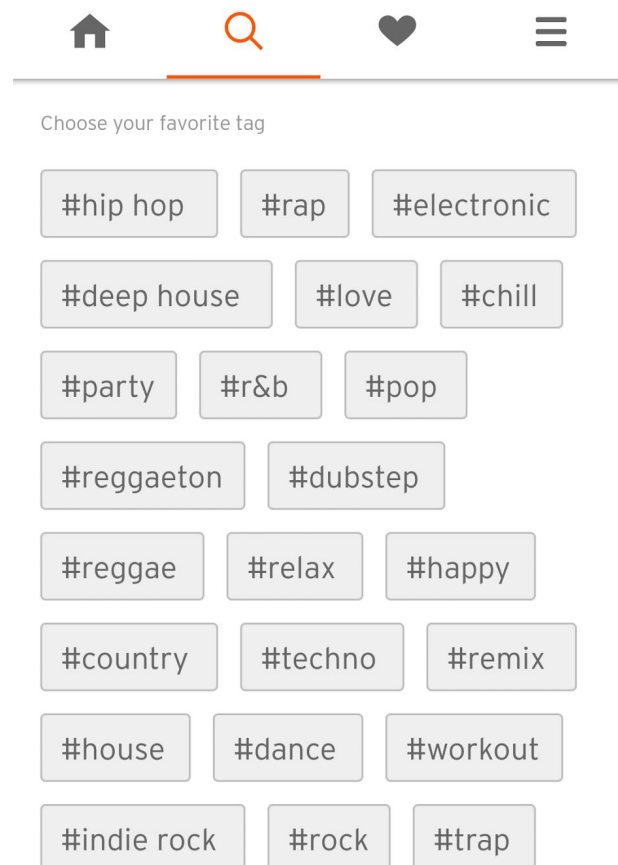
Alignment: Alignment refers to the presentation of information, and good alignment means it is organized in such a way that elements line up across common rows and columns. Soundcloud keeps a consistent lefthand alignment throughout most of its pages. Buttons and information adhere to a grid structure. Some buttons, however, look a little off. For instance, in the home feed, the lower right hand options look like they could move to the right. There are also a few slight modifications that could be made to the "favorites" tab that could make the page feel more vertically aligned. It doesn't seem like a lot of elements are properly vertically aligned (as shown on the next page), though they seem to be horizontally aligned.

A minor alignment issue? The playhead on the left is aligned with the edge, yet the righthand options are not aligned with the right edge

Album art is aligned with above elements on the righthand side, but not the left

Choose your favorite tag

#hip hop   #rap   #electronic

#deep house   #love   #chill

#party   #r&b   #pop

#reggaeton   #dubstep

#reggae   #relax   #happy

#country   #techno   #remix

#house   #dance   #workout

#indie rock   #rock   #trap

◀ *A lot of tags to choose from*

Hick's Law: Soundcloud provides a lot of options when it comes to searching. When the user selects the search tab, they're presented with a vast array of popular tags. It's a little overwhelming to say the least, and they could easily implement a more tags button, or perhaps a "recommended for you". Instead, there is a huge list, as depicted in the image to the left.
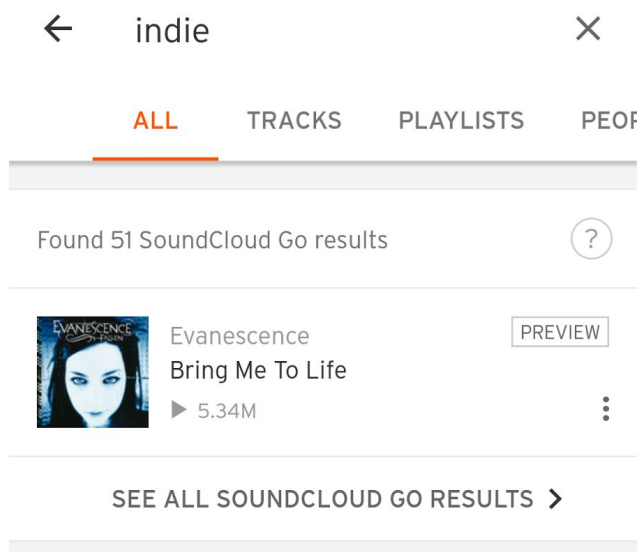
Hick's law states that the more options there are, the more time the user will spend figuring out what to do. While it's great to have options, too many can be overbearing. Soundcloud can easily cut down on their tags. Their designs outside of the tag search isn't nearly as overwhelming. Browsing music and playlists is made simple, as the user can either 'like', 'repost', or 'play' playlists and songs they come across. This was the only page where I was presented with more than just a few options.
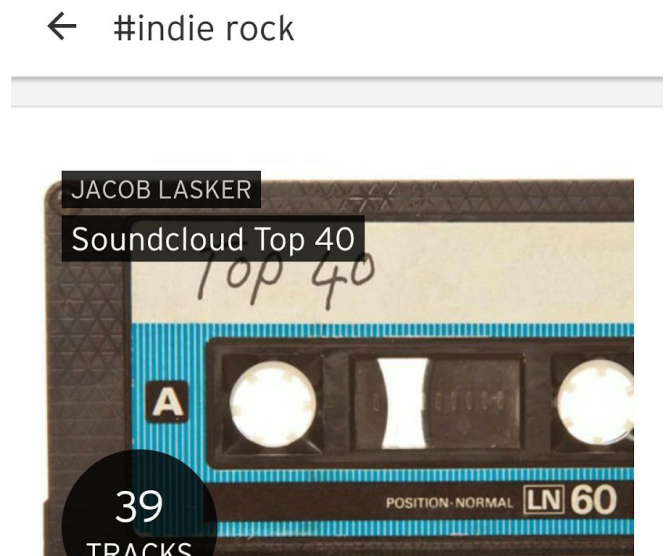
Hierarchy: Hierarchy means establishing a sense of importance when presenting search results or information to the user. On Soundcloud, users can search by tags (as described in the previous section regarding Hick's Law), and when they do, they're given countless results. You can see about 2 results before scrolling down further, as you see some visually pleasing artwork as you're scrolling. While the art is aesthetically pleasing, it might not what the user is looking for. The album art takes up a lot of screen real estate, but that might have been what the designers were going for. So far, Soundcloud has been focused on making this app more about seeing visuals as opposed to reading.

When I searched the tag "#indie rock", the app presented a plethora of playlist results in no particular order. Soundcloud could do with some search filters, or some kind of popularity hierarchy so users can expect what to see on the top. In its current state, it feels as though users will choose a playlist or song based off of its cover art.

Manual searches (not searching with a tag) seem much more effective, but the results still lack hierarchy. You can narrow down your search results to tracks, playlists, and people. Many more results fit on the page (compared to the tag search). Unfortunately, there wasn't a clear sense of hierarchy. When I searched "indie", the first result I got was a punk goth band.
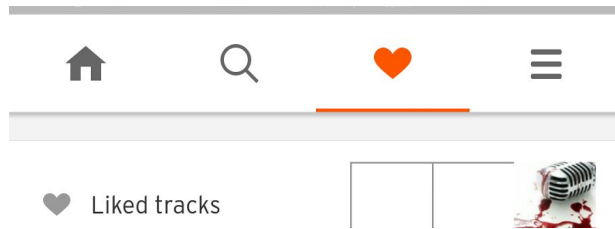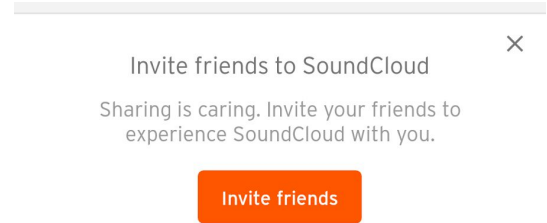

Indie search results

Tag search results in no particular order

Highlighting: Highlighting is the action of bringing attention to certain page elements through use of colors, typeface, text style, inversing, or blinking. The text suggests that pages should highlight no more than 10% of elements so the effects are not diluted. On each of its tabs, Soundcloud only highlights the page your are actively on:
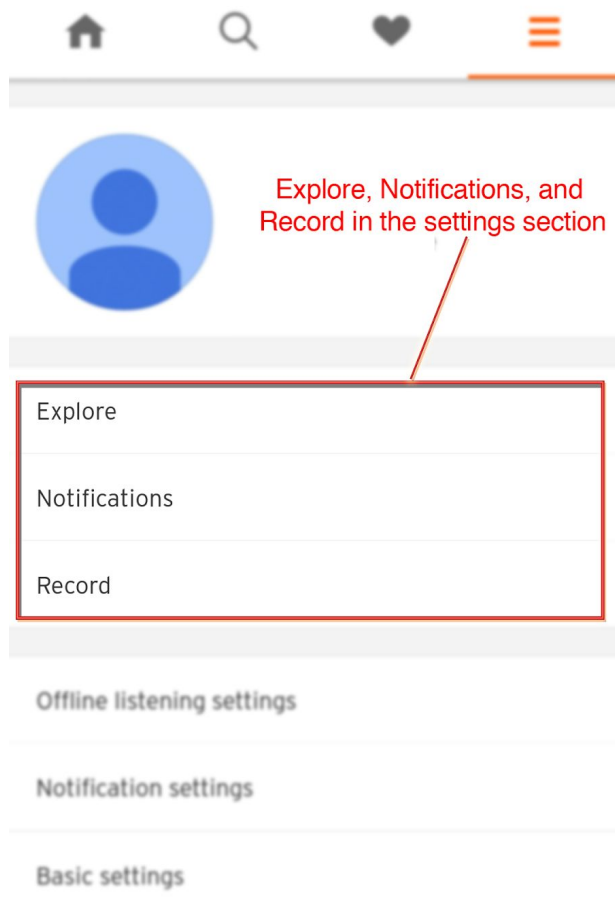
Highlighting used to show users their active page

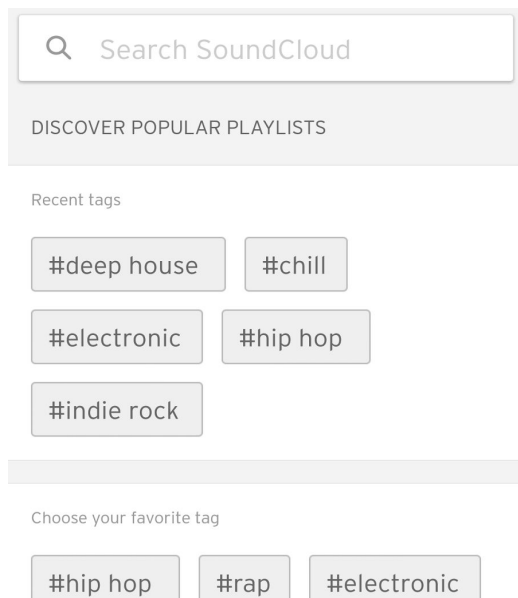*Soundcloud draws attention to a feature that might help it get exposure*

Other than this, the only other element that stands out as a result of color highlighting is the 'invite friends' button. Soundcloud might be drawing attention to this button as it enables users to recruit even more users. The highlighting is minimal, and more importantly, it works.
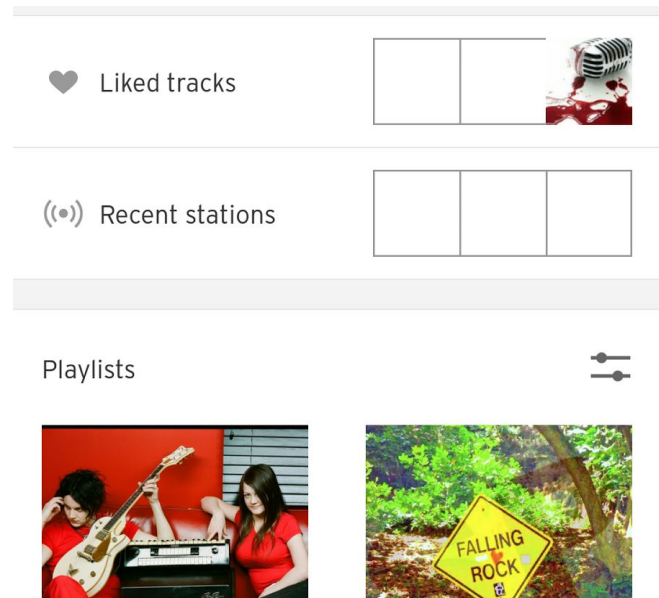

Explore, Notifications, and Record in the settings section

Wayfinding: Wayfinding is how the user navigates through content to get to where they want to be. Fortunately, Soundcloud keeps their designs simple and it is very easy to look up and save music. Users who have just downloaded the app simply create an account, then head over to the search tab. After doing so, they are presented with the long list of tag searches (mentioned in the Hick's Law section). Though the list is lengthy, it does provide new users an idea of what they can look up. The interface is very simple, and is great for searching for music, saving music, and following your favorite artists. There are, however, a few hidden features that I didn't discover until I used the app for several days. In the settings tab, there is an 'Explore' feature, a 'Notifications' feature, and a 'Record' feature. All of these features are arguably important, yet they are tucked away in the settings tab. I might have mistaken them for settings too, since these features were similar, and were close in proximity, to the basic app settings:

◄ *These aren't Notification or Explore settings, these are actually the features themselves*

Proximity: Soundcloud understands the principle of proximity, meaning that elements that are adjacent are perceived as a single chunk. After the user has conducted a tag search, their recent tags appear below the search bar. These recent tags are visibly separate from the huge tag list, and it helps narrow down options for the user. Elements in the favorites tab are similarly grouped - the user can easily distinguish between 'Liked tracks', 'Recent Stations', and 'Playlists'

Recent tags are separated from the huge tag list

Liked, Recent, and Playlist sections are visibly separate

The user can also easily tell what buttons correlate to a given track, and when one track/playlist stops and another begins. As stated in the previous section (wayfinding), there are a few hidden features that I thought to be settings, due to their location and proximity to the basic app settings. They are in a separate column, but it may help to separate these features a little more.

Summary

What do our findings suggest?

Soundcloud does a great job of keeping its app simple. Many of the main functions are easy to find and use. But the app is on the verge of too simple - some important features are hidden in favor of having minimal elements on its main pages. Some features, like commenting, are unavailable on the app completely in favor of simplification - a feature available on the Soundcloud website. The only user interaction available involves liking or sharing music. Soundcloud is great for someone who is looking to casually browse music, but maybe not for anyone trying to find out what's popular, what's new, or find something very specific.

Overall suggestions for the Soundcloud application:

- Incorporate the explore, record, and notifications features into the main interface without hiding it in the settings. This may mean adding in something like a hamburger menu to manage more features

- Cut down the huge list of tags

- Give users the ability to filter or sort their searches

- Work on vertical alignment

Sketches

Representation of how interfaces are organized

Below are rough sketches of the Soundcloud main interfaces: