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Transforming newsroom membership program with service design: a  
case study from Ukraine during wartime

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### **ABSTRACT**

As traditional revenue models in journalism continue to decline, media organizations are increasingly seeking innovative strategies to ensure sustainability in a digital-first environment. This thesis examines how service design principles can be applied to transform newsroom membership programs, with a focus on The Village Ukraine during the Russian invasion. Through a mixed-methods approach, including semi-structured interviews, an expert interview, questionnaires, and data analysis, the research investigates the effects of service design interventions on member engagement, user experience, and revenue generation under challenging conditions.

A cross-case analysis with South Africa's Daily Maverick, informed by an expert interview, underscores the importance of data-driven strategies and continuous experimentation in the development of effective membership models. The findings reveal that service design provides a valuable framework for co-creating value propositions, enhancing member satisfaction, and building resilient monetization strategies, particularly in resource-constrained settings. The study highlights how data-driven decision-making and a commitment to iterative improvement can foster stronger audience relationships and long-term sustainability.

This research illustrates how service design's human-centered, iterative approach enables media organizations to adapt to shifting audience expectations, ensuring that user needs are prioritized in strategic planning and decision-making processes.

**Keywords:** digital journalism, media innovation, podcast, monetization, membership program, service design, customer satisfaction

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The financial infrastructure underpinning digital journalism is undergoing a profound transformation, with traditional advertising-driven revenue models increasingly proving inadequate to sustain news organizations. Recent data reveals a sharp decline in digital ad revenue, with some publishers reporting reductions of up to 30% in the first quarter of 2023 alone (Digiday, 2023). This decline stems not only from macroeconomic pressures but also from structural shifts in digital advertising, such as diminishing web traffic, reduced effectiveness of premium ad placements, and the realignment of advertising spend away from traditional media sectors. The anticipated introduction of Google's Privacy Sandbox—a system designed to replace third-party cookies—promises further revenue contractions, with some projections estimating a 60% decline in revenue from programmatic advertising (Press Gazette, 2023a). These developments exacerbate the financial vulnerabilities of digital journalism.

Prominent media organizations such as Guardian News and Media and The New York Times have both reported substantial declines in advertising revenue, reflecting a broader industry trend toward the erosion of ad-based models (Press Gazette, 2023b). News Corp offers a particularly illustrative case, with advertising revenue now constituting just 16% of its total income, down from nearly half a decade ago (AdExchanger, 2023). These trends underscore the increasing fragility of traditional revenue streams and highlight the urgent need for more resilient financial strategies.

In response, there has been a notable shift towards reader revenue models, including subscriptions, memberships, and donations. These models emphasize deeper, more personalized audience engagement and offer a potential buffer against the volatility of advertising income. Publications like Slovakia's Dennik N—where subscribers fund 70% of the newsroom's costs—and South Africa's The Daily Maverick—where a membership program account for 30% of revenue—demonstrate the viability of reader-supported journalism (Wan-Ifra, 2024). The growing disruption from ad blockers, evolving privacy regulations, and the impending changes with Google's Privacy Sandbox further intensify the need for diversified revenue streams.

In this context, service design presents a flexible framework for reshaping membership programs, tailoring them to better meet user needs during crises such as wartime or economic downturns. With service design, media outlets can create membership programs that engage members more

effectively, improve their experience, and ultimately boost retention, as customer satisfaction is key to building loyalty.

This thesis investigates how service design principles can transform membership programs, with a focus on The Village Ukraine during the Russian invasion. By applying service design principles, newsrooms can develop user-centric strategies that enhance financial sustainability and strengthen member relationships, even in times of crisis.

Through a detailed analysis of The Village Ukraine's membership program, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on sustainable revenue models in journalism. It offers novel insights into how service design can improve engagement, retention, user experience, and ultimately ensure the financial viability of independent newsrooms in the digital age.

### **1.1. Background of the research problem**

A widely accepted explanation for the persistent challenges faced by the traditional media industry is the difficulty in adapting its conventional revenue model—reliant on readers and advertisers—to the demands of the digital era (Krumsvik, 2012, as cited in Barland 2013). Historically, media organizations were sustained by a relatively straightforward financial structure: advertising revenue supplemented by subscription fees from readers. However, the digital transformation has disrupted this model, introducing complexities that have rendered traditional revenue streams increasingly inadequate.

This transformation has been particularly pronounced in regions experiencing major disruptions. In Ukraine, the media sector has been hit hard by Russia's full-scale invasion, leading to a two-thirds drop in advertising revenue in 2022 (The Fix Media, 2023). Media outlets like The Village Ukraine, which once relied entirely on advertising, have had to adapt quickly, now depending on grants for 80% of their revenue. This shift highlights the critical importance of diversifying income strategies, particularly during crises. This dramatic shift underscores the critical importance of diversifying income strategies, especially in contexts where external crises further exacerbate existing vulnerabilities.

These developments reflect not only a broader global trend toward declining reliance on ad-based revenue models but also a heightened need for innovative approaches to financial sustainability in the media industry. As digital platforms continue to dominate the media landscape, the search for

resilient revenue models that can withstand both economic pressures and geopolitical crises has become more urgent than ever.

## **1.2. Research gap**

Despite the growing application of service design across various sectors, its specific role in enhancing membership programs within newsrooms remains underexplored. While existing research has predominantly addressed the broader challenges of transitioning traditional revenue models into the digital landscape, there is a notable absence of studies that strategically apply service design principles to optimize membership programs in news organizations, particularly during crises such as wartime or natural disasters. The unpredictability of these crises demands a more adaptable, user-centered approach that aligns with rapidly evolving user needs and operational constraints.

Although research into journalism innovation has grown significantly in recent years, theoretical, methodological, and systematic contributions remain fragmented and have received limited attention (García-Avilés, 2021), particularly regarding the nuanced application of service design within the media industry. Scholars have underscored the difficulty of transferring traditional revenue models, reliant on readers and advertisers, into the digital era (Krumsvik, 2012, as cited in Barland, 2013). However, there has been little exploration of how service design might address these challenges. This gap in the literature extends to the integration of service design into membership models, where critical issues such as developing a compelling value proposition, ensuring seamless user experiences, and maintaining engagement remain underexplored.

As Lindmark et al. (as cited in García-Avilés, 2021) propose, media innovations can be categorized along two key dimensions: the type of innovation—whether related to content, consumption, production, or business models—and the temporal aspect, which considers the maturity and market proximity of the innovation. Although media innovations are thoroughly classified, their potential to transform membership-driven revenue models has not been fully realized, indicating a need for more targeted research and application.

## **1.3. Research objectives and questions**

The primary objective of this research is to investigate how targeted service design interventions can enhance The Village Ukraine's membership program, particularly in the context of the



challenges posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 22nd February 2022. This study aims to identify and address specific deficiencies within the membership experience, assess the impact of service design on key performance indicators such as revenue and engagement, and explore how these interventions can effectively meet the evolving needs of the audience during times of crisis.

### **1.3.1. Research objectives**

- **Identify critical deficiencies** within The Village Ukraine's membership program that undermine user engagement and satisfaction, employing service design methodologies such as Customer Journey Mapping.
- **Evaluate the impact** of specific interventions, including the implementation of new membership benefits and content delivery platforms, on metrics such as revenue growth, churn rate, and member retention.
- **Examine the role of service design** in addressing audience needs during wartime, with a particular focus on interventions that enhance user experience, increase content relevance, and strengthen community engagement.

### **1.3.2. Research questions**

#### **Main question:**

- How can service design interventions strategically improve user engagement, experience, and revenue generation within wartime newsroom membership programs?

#### **Additional questions:**

- What specific deficiencies within the current membership program can be rectified through service design to enhance member satisfaction and reduce churn?
- How do the introduction of new features, such as improved content accessibility, impact key performance metrics like revenue and engagement?
- In what ways can service design help The Village Ukraine better understand and address its audience's needs during wartime?

## **1.4. Significance of the study**

This study addresses a crucial gap between the theory of service design and its practical application within the media industry, particularly during periods of crisis and disruption. By exploring how service design can enhance membership programs, it provides practical insights for newsrooms striving to build resilient and sustainable revenue models as traditional income streams decline. While the focus is on the unique challenges faced by newsrooms operating in high-stress environments, such as those in Ukraine, the findings may also be relevant to organizations dealing with other forms of instability.

In addition to its practical relevance, this study contributes to the academic conversation on service design within the media sector. It demonstrates how service design principles can be applied to address the specific needs of this industry, offering approaches that could inform other sectors transitioning to digital-first revenue strategies.

### 1.5. Definitions of key terms

- **Service Design:** A human-centered approach to innovation that utilizes design principles and tools to develop and improve services. It focuses on collaboration among customers, service providers, and stakeholders to create valuable, user-focused experiences. This approach is particularly effective in adapting complex service systems to meet evolving needs and drive value creation (Ostrom et al., 2015; Patrício et al., 2011; Karpen, Gemser, & Calabretta, 2017).
- **Customer Journey Mapping (CJM):** The customer journey typically encompasses the process customers undergo before, during, and after engaging with a product or service, involving a series of touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, as cited in Reitsamer & Becker, 2024).
- **Kano Model:** The Kano Model, developed by Noriaki Kano in 1984, categorizes customer preferences into six types: Must-be, One-dimensional, Attractive, Indifferent, Reverse, and Questionable (Kano et al., 1984). This model helps prioritize features based on their impact on satisfaction. Must-be attributes are essential, while One-dimensional and Attractive attributes can significantly boost satisfaction (Berger et al., 1993; Matzler & Hinterhuber, 1998).
- **Membership Program:** A revenue model where users pay a recurring fee for exclusive content, services, or benefits. Unlike traditional subscriptions, membership programs emphasize community, loyalty, and active participation, offering perks like early content

access or community-focused benefits while supporting the organization's mission and values (Bleyen et al., 2014; Olsen, Kalsnes, & Barland, 2021).

- **Reader Revenue:** Income generated directly from the audience through subscriptions, memberships, or donations. This model reduces reliance on advertising by attracting paying users who seek higher-quality news, premium experiences, and additional benefits like lifestyle features. In some regions, support for independent journalism and alignment with the news brand's values or political outlook also play a key role (Chyi & Ng, 2020; Vara-Miguel et al., 2021; Newman & Robertson, 2023).
- **Customer Loyalty:** The sustained commitment of customers to a brand, driven by satisfaction, perceived value, and emotional connection. Loyal customers are more likely to engage repeatedly and recommend services, making loyalty crucial for long-term success (Cuong & Long, 2020; Gajardo, 2018; Krebs & Lischka, 2019).
- **Journalism Innovation:** The ability of news organizations to adapt and innovate in response to changes in the media landscape, particularly in terms of products, processes, and services. Journalism innovation involves using creative skills to develop new solutions that add value to both the audience and the media organization (García-Avilés et al., 2018).

## 1.6. Methodology overview

This study employed a pragmatic research philosophy, incorporating interpretivism to balance practical outcomes and explore member experiences within The Village Ukraine's membership program. A single-case study design focused on the program, supplemented by insights from interviews with two other media outlets.

A mixed-methods approach combined quantitative data (platform analytics) and qualitative insights (in-depth interviews, questionnaires) to analyze the program's performance. Customer Journey Mapping and a Kano-inspired strategy were employed to identify key user challenges and direct service design refinements.

The research involved 133 participants, ensuring a comprehensive view of the membership experience while adhering to ethical standards for data protection and transparency.

## 1.7. Scope and limitations

This study focuses on applying service design principles to improve membership programs, with a specific emphasis on The Village Ukraine. The analysis encompasses key areas of the membership program, including user engagement, member retention, revenue generation, and overall user experience. By exploring service design interventions, the research aims to identify strategies that can enhance these areas, particularly in the challenging context of operating during a crisis.

However, the study has several limitations. One significant limitation is the reliance on self-reported data from interviews and surveys, which can introduce bias due to subjective perceptions or recall inaccuracies. To address this, the study employs triangulation by incorporating multiple data sources, such as platform analytics and objective performance metrics, to cross-verify findings and enhance validity.

Another limitation lies in the generalizability of the results. While the findings provide valuable insights for newsrooms navigating similar crises, the unique circumstances of The Village Ukraine's wartime environment may limit the applicability of the results to other media organizations in different contexts. Further research across various settings would be necessary to broaden the understanding of service design's impact on membership programs.

Lastly, the timeframe of the study is limited to five months, which may not capture the long-term effects of service design interventions on membership dynamics. Future research should consider extending the observation period to evaluate sustained outcomes.

### **1.8. Justification for the study**

As traditional revenue streams for newsrooms continue to decline, this study explores the potential role of service design in improving membership programs. While not a complete solution, the research offers insights that could help news organizations adapt their strategies and engage members more effectively. The findings aim to provide practical guidance that can support newsrooms in navigating financial challenges and maintaining quality journalism.

### **1.9. Rationale for the chosen topic**

This topic stems from my experience as the Head of Membership at a Ukrainian newsroom, The Village Ukraine, during the war. Facing the urgent need to adapt revenue models in such a challenging environment has given me a clear view of the difficulties news organizations

encounter in times of crisis. This experience led me to investigate how service design could play a role in transforming membership programs.

The war has highlighted the importance of developing strategies that can withstand severe disruptions, especially in the media sector, where traditional revenue sources are increasingly unreliable. My involvement in this process has shown me the practical potential of service design to not only sustain but also improve membership programs in the most difficult circumstances. This research reflects both my professional insights and a broader effort to support journalism during critical times.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Historical context of reader revenue models**

The transition from traditional to digital revenue models in the media industry has been a complex and challenging process. Historically, media organizations relied heavily on advertising revenues and print subscriptions as their primary sources of income. However, the advent of the internet and digital technologies in the late 20th century significantly disrupted these established models. Krumsvik (2012) highlights the challenges news organizations faced in adapting their traditional revenue models, which were reliant on readers and advertisers, to the rapidly evolving digital landscape (as cited in Barland, 2013). This disruption necessitated the development of new revenue strategies that better aligned with the demands of the digital age.

As technological advancements continued and social dynamics shifted, the business models of news organizations had to evolve. Advertising revenues alone became insufficient to sustain media companies, leading to the diversification of income streams. Media outlets began incorporating additional sources of revenue, such as branded content, online commerce, additional products and services, institutional grants and subsidies, and direct donations from individuals (Olsen, Kalsnes and Barland, 2021; Vara-Miguel et al., 2023).

According to Vara-Miguel et al. (2023), media organizations increasingly turned to online reader payments, particularly through subscriptions and memberships. This strategy has gained considerable attention from both industry leaders and scholars. The adoption of paywalls represents a critical shift from traditional advertising models to one that emphasizes reader-generated revenue.

### **2.2. Types of revenue models**

While the historical context explains the shift from ad-based models, exploring the different reader revenue models adopted by media outlets is crucial for understanding how service design principles can be applied to enhance and refine these models for better audience engagement and satisfaction.

Amid digital transformation, media organizations have explored various reader revenue models to ensure financial sustainability. These models include subscriptions, donations, and hybrid approaches that integrate multiple revenue streams. Subscriptions, once limited to straightforward

print-based offerings, have evolved into digital and bundled packages that provide access to premium content and products across various platforms.

The membership model of digital-only media outlet eldiario.es exemplifies a successful approach to digital revenue generation. According to the assistant editor, readers "pay not just to read the news or to break the paywall, but to be part of the media, to support journalism with social values" (García-Avilés et al., 2018, p. 10). This strategy goes beyond transactional interactions, cultivating a deeper connection with the audience that translates into sustained financial support and loyalty. While advertising continues to be the primary revenue stream for eldiario.es, the financial contributions from its 15,000 members have significantly enhanced the outlet's editorial independence. This model illustrates the critical role membership programs can play—not only as a supplementary revenue source but as a key driver of editorial freedom and sustainability.

User payments, subscriptions, and memberships represent broad categories of financial contributions made in exchange for access to content or other benefits. These contributions can take several forms (Vara-Miguel et al., 2023):

- **Paying for Digital Units:** Users pay for specific content, such as individual articles, issues, or full access for a day.
- **Simple Subscriptions:** Regular payments (monthly, quarterly, or annually) that provide ongoing access to content, including websites, apps, and digital editions.
- **Combined Subscriptions:** Payments that bundle online access with a print edition, such as a daily or weekly newspaper.
- **Bundled Subscriptions:** Access to news content offered alongside other services, such as internet access or pay television.
- **Membership of a Community of Users or Readers:** Unlike subscriptions, which primarily provide content access, memberships are relational. Users contribute financially to support a media organization's mission and values. Membership often includes benefits like early access to content, the ability to comment, or other community-focused perks, while content typically remains freely accessible to non-members.

These varied models not only generate revenue but also offer media organizations ways to connect with their audiences on a deeper level, as we will explore through case studies next.

These monetization strategies highlight the diverse and adaptive approaches media organizations employ to navigate the complexities of the digital era, balancing user needs with sustainable revenue generation. It is worth noting that **paywalls and memberships are more common among specialized media (52.6%) than generalist outlets (47.4%)** (Vara-Miguel et al., 2023).

### **2.3. Challenges in reader revenue**

Understanding these models is crucial, but there are significant barriers that media outlets face in convincing audiences to pay for content. Convincing audiences to pay for digital news remains a significant challenge. The willingness to pay for online news remains relatively low in many regions. Newman and Robertson (2023) found that, on average, only 17% of users across 20 countries currently pay for online news—a figure that has not seen significant improvement in recent years. The demographics of paying subscribers tend to skew towards older, wealthier, and more educated individuals who have a strong interest in news and politics. While some subscribers are motivated by the desire for higher-quality news, a premium experience, or the opportunity to support independent journalism, many others are deterred by the perceived high costs and the ongoing "price puzzle" that publishers need to solve to attract and retain subscribers in today's challenging economic climate.

### **2.4. Case studies**

#### **2.4.1. Key lessons from case studies on reader revenue in newsrooms**

Given the challenges outlined above, studying how other media outlets have successfully implemented reader revenue models provides critical and context-specific insights into their efficacy. This section presents a detailed examination of case studies focusing on reader revenue models, particularly subscription and membership programs, as implemented by various media organizations. These case studies, based on my interviews with representatives of two media outlets which were published on The Fix website, offer nuanced insights into strategies for sustainable revenue generation and audience engagement within the digital media landscape.

**Slovak media outlet Denník N**



Denník N, a prominent digital news outlet in Slovakia, has successfully implemented a subscription model, amassing 70,000 paid subscribers. The following key lessons can be drawn from Denník N's approach (The Fix Media, 2024):

- **Quality journalism as a subscriber magnet.** The success of Denník N is fundamentally rooted in its consistent commitment to high-quality journalism. As Veronika Munk, Director of Innovation and New Markets, observes, "Our main metrics are subscriptions. Our content is valuable and influential enough that 70,000 readers decide to pay for it." (The Fix Media, 2024, para. 6). This emphasizes the inextricable link between journalistic quality and revenue generation, demonstrating that maintaining rigorous editorial standards is essential to attracting and sustaining a paying subscriber base.
- **Leveraging technological innovation.** Denník N developed an open-source reader engagement and monetization platform known as REMP. Initially designed to control article access and monitor subscriber conversions, REMP has evolved to include tools such as Mailer for newsletter management, Campaign for subscription banner creation, and Beam for audience segmentation. These technological innovations enable publishers to track reader behavior and more effectively monetize their audiences.
- **Data-driven strategic decisions.** Denník N has established a specialized team comprising data analysts, product developers, and a digital director. This team is tasked with monitoring key metrics, subscription health, churn rates, and segment performance, ensuring that strategic decisions are anchored in robust data analytics, thereby allowing for continuous optimization of revenue strategies.
- **Print edition as a strategic marketing tool.** By publishing a print newspaper five days a week, Denník N extends its reach into diverse communities, catering to both digital and traditional readers. The print edition, which adapts website content, is also available to digital subscribers, bridging distinct audience demographics and enhancing the brand's presence.
- **Emphasizing agile, iterative processes.** Denník N prioritizes small, rapid changes over large, cumbersome projects. For example, if a new feature, such as a front-page button, fails to meet expectations, it is promptly removed.

**South African media outlet Daily Maverick**

Daily Maverick, an independent online news outlet in South Africa, has developed a successful membership program that has attracted over 24,000 members. The key insights from Daily Maverick's experience include (The Fix Media, 2023):

- **Diversifying revenue streams.** Daily Maverick's membership program has played a crucial role in diversifying its revenue streams, thereby fortifying its relationship with readers. The outlet's income is derived from a mix of advertising, grants, and membership, with membership contributions accounting for 30% of total revenue, thus underscoring the importance of revenue diversification for financial sustainability.
- **Prioritizing member engagement over perks.** While Daily Maverick's e-commerce division offers benefits such as flash sales and discounts, the most valued component of the membership is the behind-the-scenes newsletter. As Fran Beighton, General Manager of Reader Revenue, explains, "Benefits are not so popular because our members pay to keep us free for everyone" (The Fix Media, 2023, para. 6), highlighting that mission-driven engagement is a more effective tool for member retention than material perks.
- **Dedicated member engagement resources.** Daily Maverick has allocated specific resources to reader engagement activities, including newsletters and targeted marketing campaigns. Beighton emphasizes, "You don't need the whole team to launch membership. Someone dedicated to engaging with members is enough to drive reader revenue," (The Fix Media, 2023, para. 8), illustrating the importance of focused, resource-efficient engagement strategies.
- **Communicating the impact of journalism.** Beighton stresses the significance of communicating the tangible societal impact of journalism to members. For instance, one email to members highlighted an investigation that prevented the South African government from sponsoring a UK football club during a severe economic crisis, demonstrating the direct value of their contributions.
- **Building emotional connections.** Beighton points to the importance of fostering emotional connections with the audience. "We try to keep our communication alive, make our audience smile or giggle," she explains (The Fix Media, 2023, para. 12). This emphasizes the value of emotional resonance in sustaining member engagement and loyalty.

- **Managing churn rate.** Beighton underscores the importance of churn rate management. “Your churn rate is the most essential metric. It is always much more difficult to acquire a new member than retain one,” she notes (The Fix Media, 2023, para. 15). Proactive churn management is therefore key to membership sustainability.
- **Proactive member retention strategies.** Daily Maverick employs targeted measures to address potential membership attrition, such as sending regular reminders for updating payment details when credit cards expire. This strategy has successfully retained 10,000 members who might otherwise have been lost.
- **Learning from other subscription models.** Beighton suggests that effective strategies for growing reader revenue can be gleaned from various sources, including other news sites and subscription services like MasterClass. For instance, they adopted a Q&A email format from a learning platform to better explain their membership program and improve reader conversion rates.

While neither newsroom explicitly follows service design methodology, both exemplify its principles by focusing on iterative value creation, adapting quickly to audience feedback, and emphasizing agile adjustments over large-scale, complex projects to improve engagement and drive revenue.

The case studies of Denník N (The Fix Media, 2024) and Daily Maverick (The Fix Media, 2023) illustrate contrasting approaches to developing successful reader revenue models in digital media.

Denník N (The Fix Media, 2024) employs a freemium subscription model, offering free short news to attract traffic, with in-depth articles placed behind a paywall. This approach is rooted in converting casual readers into paying subscribers by leveraging the appeal of exclusive content.

Daily Maverick (The Fix Media, 2023), on the other hand, follows a membership model, rooted in the belief that quality journalism should remain free and accessible to all. Rejecting the paywall strategy, they rely on their membership program to build deeper emotional connections with their audience, offering perks like access to a behind-the-scenes newsletter, ad-free browsing, discounts on events, and early access to tickets.

These cases underscore that while high-quality journalism and technological innovation are critical, the choice between a subscription or membership model fundamentally reshapes how media organizations engage their audiences and secure financial stability.

## 2.5. Fundamentals of service design and service innovation

Recent scholarly discussions emphasize the growing importance of service innovation (SI) and service design (SD) across various sectors, including private enterprises, public institutions, and non-profit organizations (Mäkijärvi, Montonen & Eriksson, 2024). Drawing from diverse disciplines such as management, marketing, design, and social sciences, these concepts provide a comprehensive approach to understanding how innovation and design can help create and improve services. In their study on service design as an innovation approach in technology startups, Kustrak Korper et al., (2020) discuss how service design is widely regarded as an innovation approach that can facilitate the development of value propositions, building upon the foundational work of Ostrom, Parasuraman, Bowen, Patrício, and Voss (2015). They explore how service design leverages design principles and tools to identify new possibilities for ongoing value co-creation among customers, service providers, and other relevant actors within the service system, a concept initially developed by Patrício, Fisk, Falcão e Cunha, and Constantine (2011). Furthermore, service design integrates human-centered, collaborative, and aesthetic design principles with a multi-actor, interactive process of value creation, as discussed by Karpen, Gemser, and Calabretta (2017). Therefore, it is particularly suitable for innovating complex service systems where value propositions are central, an idea supported by Teixeira et al. (2017) and Wetter-Edman et al. (2014).

The concept of service innovation emerged in the early 1980s alongside a broader shift from product-oriented business models to service-oriented strategies. This shift was driven by the need for industries, including manufacturing, to offer product-related services, thereby opening new avenues for value creation (Mäkijärvi, Montonen & Eriksson, 2021). Initially, service innovation was understood within an economic framework, integrating elements of manufacturing and service theories to produce new product-service combinations. Over time, however, it has expanded to encompass a broader range of activities, including business model innovation, social offerings, and organizational transformation.

Service design also gained traction during this period, originally conceptualized as a practical tool—exemplified by the Service Blueprint—focused on ensuring service quality within organizations. Early applications of service design aimed to improve existing services, particularly in customer interactions and service environments (Mäkijärvi, Montonen & Eriksson, 2024). Today, service design is recognized not only as a theoretical framework but also as a

practical discipline that brings ideas to life through creative, human-centered, and iterative methods.

For startups and small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the way services are designed can significantly impact their survival and growth. Effective service design removes barriers to purchase, adoption, and use, which can be critical for these businesses. When linked to service science, it can increase the survival rate of startups and boost the growth of SMEs, ultimately creating value for both participants and society as a whole (Coutts, 2024).

However, to fully realize its potential, service design must be seen as a continuous process—a mindset that permeates all levels of an organization. Treating service design as a one-time project can lead to superficial solutions that are difficult to implement effectively. A more integrated approach, considering the broader service ecosystem, is necessary for achieving impactful and transformative change (Mäkijärvi, Montonen & Eriksson, 2024).

For SMEs, the benefits of service design are tangible. It can reduce the time and cost associated with acquiring new users, enhance customer retention by increasing switching costs, and manage business risks more effectively (Coutts, 2024). In highly competitive markets, the design of a service can offer a sustainable competitive advantage, especially as competing on product features alone becomes increasingly challenging.

In the media sector, service design has a potential to be a powerful tool for fostering innovation. García-Avilés et al. (2021, p. 3) describe journalism innovation as "the capacity to react to changes in products, processes, and services through the use of creative skills that allow a problem or need to be identified, and to solve it through a solution that results in the introduction of something new that adds value to customers and to the media organization." This understanding of innovation aligns closely with the principles of service design, which prioritize human-centered, iterative processes to develop solutions that effectively address user needs.

Service design is an essential tool for organizations seeking to innovate and transform their services. Its emphasis on understanding users, collaborating with stakeholders, and iteratively refining ideas makes it particularly well-suited to the challenges of today's service-oriented economy.

## 2.6. Service design and customer satisfaction

In the context of the media industry, customer value co-creation—a concept integral to service design—has emerged as a powerful tool for improving customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Research on emerging markets highlights that "customer value co-creation not only leads to improvements in innovation and identifying customer needs, but also it increases the level of customer loyalty and satisfaction" (Moise et al., 2020, as cited in Kamali et al., 2021, p. 7). This process is inherently collaborative, involving synchronicity and mutual effort between the organization and its users, which creates value both materially and symbolically (Kamali et al., 2021).

The shift from Goods-Dominant Logic (GDL) to Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) has further reinforced the role of customers as co-creators of value (Kamali et al., 2021). In the media sector, this paradigm shift has prompted organizations to adopt new strategic approaches that prioritize customer participation in value creation, thereby aligning services more closely with user needs (Kamali et al., 2021). For example, news media users who engage in co-creation activities are more likely to experience a high level of value, leading to positive behavioral tendencies such as increased loyalty and satisfaction (Kamali et al., 2021).

Customer satisfaction, in turn, leads to enhanced opportunities for reusing news media and garnering positive recommendations for the organization. Thus, customer satisfaction is a key trigger for customer loyalty (Kamali et al., 2021).

In the media landscape, loyalty is not merely transactional but is deeply tied to the emotional connection users have with news organizations. Studies have shown that loyal audiences provide sustained attention, which translates into profitable engagement metrics such as clicks, time spent, and shares (Gajardo and Costera Meijer, 2023). This loyalty is further enhanced when news organizations demonstrate adaptability to user needs, editorial transparency, and social commitment, making them perceived allies in navigating daily life (Gajardo and Costera Meijer, 2023).

However, the literature suggests that the benefits of loyalty could be maximized if news organizations more effectively communicated their needs and the value they derive from loyal audiences (Gajardo and Costera Meijer, 2023). This underscores the critical role of service design

in not only creating value through co-creation but also in fostering a deeper understanding and alignment between media organizations and their audiences.

## **2.7. Theoretical models**

### **2.7.1. Customer Journey Mapping**

The customer journey typically encompasses the process customers undergo before, during, and after engaging with a product or service, involving a series of touchpoints (Reitsamer and Becker, 2024). As Ostrom et al. (2021) emphasize, understanding the complete customer experience is critical for business practitioners (Reitsamer and Becker, 2024). Focusing on the entire journey rather than isolated interactions offers organizations a competitive advantage, leading to increased revenue and reduced customer churn (Reitsamer and Becker, 2024).

Positive experiences throughout the journey are a key source of competitive advantage (Kranzbühler et al., 2018, as cited in Reitsamer & Becker, 2024). The remembered experience influences customers' attitudes, evaluations, and future behaviors (Gold et al., 2017, as cited in Reitsamer and Becker, 2024).

Based on my experience from the industry, for media organizations with membership programs, customer journey mapping (CJM) provides a strategic framework to visualize how users interact with content and services. This comprehensive understanding of customer experiences allows organizations to implement interventions that can smooth transitions, resolve friction points, and create memorable experiences.

### **2.7.2. Kano Model**

The Kano Model, developed by Noriaki Kano and his team in 1984, offers a foundational framework for categorizing and prioritizing customer needs, helping organizations systematically enhance customer satisfaction (Ishak et al., 2020). This model is particularly useful in determining which attributes are most influential in meeting customer satisfaction when designing products or services.

The model categorizes customer needs into six types:

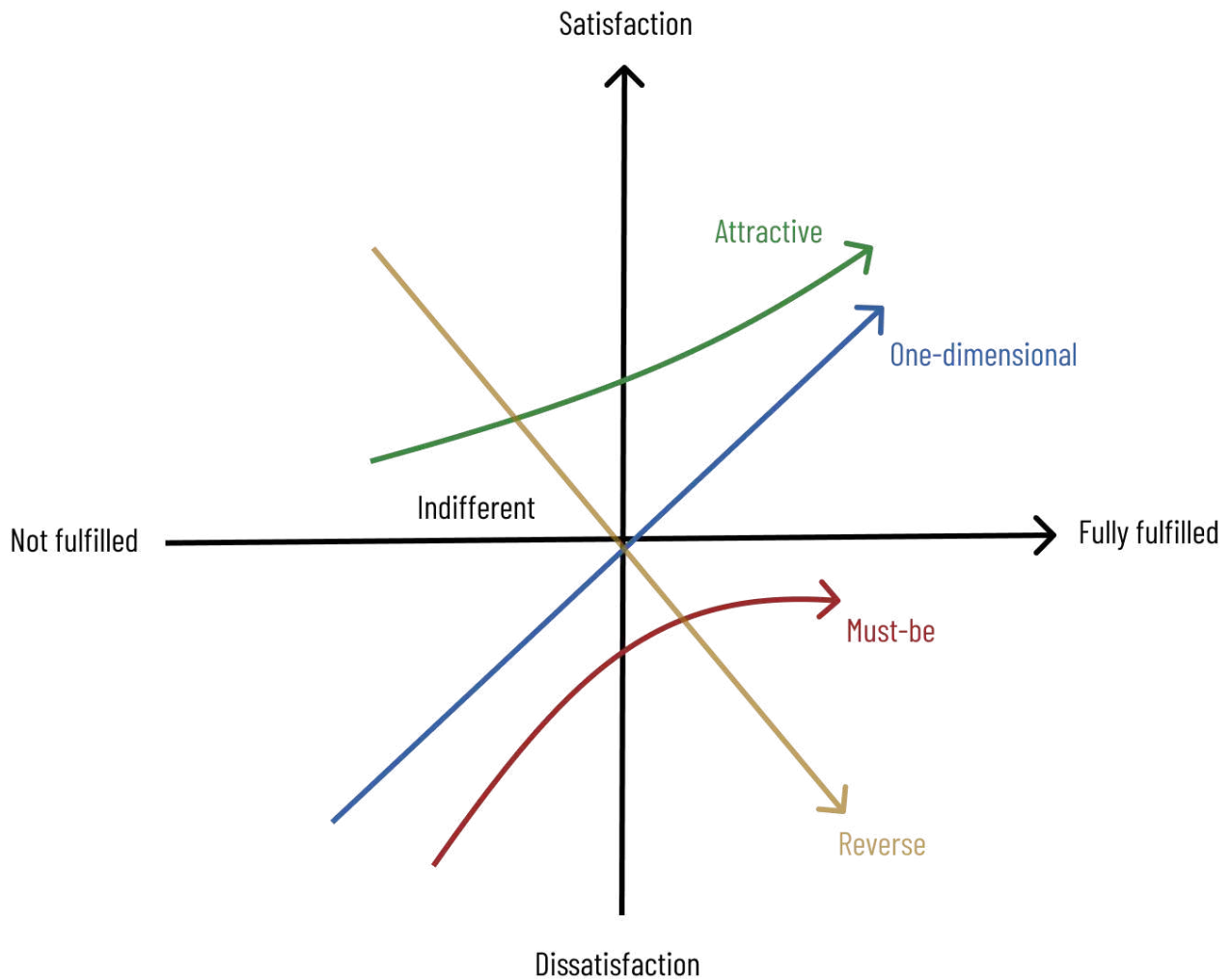


Figure 1. Modified Kano Model (based on Ishak et al., 2021)

- **Must-be (M):** Essential features that customers expect; their absence causes dissatisfaction, but their presence doesn't increase satisfaction.
- **One-dimensional (O):** Features that, when fulfilled, directly increase satisfaction; these are typically expected by customers.
- **Attractive (A):** Unexpected features that delight customers when present but don't cause dissatisfaction if absent.
- **Indifferent (I):** Features that neither enhance nor reduce satisfaction, often irrelevant to the customer experience.
- **Reverse (R):** Features that, if present, actually reduce customer satisfaction, as they conflict with customer expectations.
- **Questionable (Q):** Ambiguous features that may indicate misunderstandings or miscommunication during data collection.



The strategic use of the Kano Model in media organizations allows for effective prioritization of features that shape the user experience. According to Ishak et al. (2020), focusing on Must-be attributes—requirements that customers do not explicitly express but expect as a baseline—helps organizations to prevent dissatisfaction by ensuring these fundamental needs are met. In contrast, One-dimensional attributes, which are directly stated by customers, provide a clear path for enhancing satisfaction in a linear manner: the better these needs are fulfilled, the more satisfied the customers become.

The Kano Model also emphasizes that while meeting basic needs prevents dissatisfaction, significant gains in customer satisfaction come from exceeding expectations with Attractive attributes (Ishak et al., 2020). This insight is particularly valuable for media organizations striving to innovate and stand out.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research philosophy**

In this study, a pragmatic research philosophy was employed as the primary framework, with elements of interpretivism integrated to address both the practical and experiential dimensions of the membership program at The Village Ukraine. Pragmatism emphasizes the importance of practical consequences in research findings (Saunders & Tosey, 2013). Goldkuhl (2012) highlighted that "Experimentation in the world is pivotal. The researcher is participating in practice in order to explore – through personal actions or close observations of others' actions – the effects and success of different tactics" (p. 141). In this context, pragmatism was particularly useful in identifying service design interventions to enhance member engagement and retention, focusing on results that could drive local improvements and generate constructive knowledge applicable to general practice.

However, a purely pragmatic approach would not have been sufficient to fully capture the complexity of the members' experiences and perspectives within the community. Thus, interpretivism was incorporated to explore subjective experiences, particularly through qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews. Goldkuhl (2012) noted, "The aim of all interpretive research is to understand how members of a social group, through their participation in social processes, enact their particular realities and endow them with meaning, and to show how these meanings, beliefs, and intentions of the members help to constitute their actions" (p. 138).

In interpretivism, data collection and analysis typically involve qualitative data from in-depth investigations with small samples (Saunders & Tosey, 2013). Through qualitative data collection, such as in-depth interviews, the study adopted an empathetic stance, seeking to interpret the experiences of community members.

By combining pragmatism and interpretivism, the study was able to bridge practical outcomes with an in-depth understanding of the podcast listeners' and program members' experiences. This hybrid approach allowed us to focus on real-world applications while being mindful of individual perspectives, ensuring both relevance and depth. By blending pragmatism and interpretivism, the study explored the measurable potential of service design interventions and the personal

experiences of program members within the existing membership program, offering a comprehensive view of how their insights guided the improvements.

### **3.2. Single-case study design**

This study employs a single-case study design with embedded units, focusing on The Village Ukraine's membership program. According to Creswell (2013, as cited in Gustafsson, 2017, p. 2), "the case study method explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information... and reports a case description and case themes."

In this research, we have chosen a single-case study with embedded units. Gustafsson (2017) explains that "the researcher can choose to make a single case study with embedded units. This means that the researcher is able to explore the case with the ability to analyze the data within the case analysis, between the case analyses, and make a cross-case analysis" (p. 4). Our main case is The Village Ukraine's membership program, and the embedded units are additional interviews with two other media outlets to learn about their reader revenue models. This approach allows us to analyze data within the main case and compare it with other cases, enriching our understanding. Comparative analysis is further discussed as a key analytical approach in the next section.

Dyer and Wilkins (1991, as cited in Gustafsson, 2017, p. 3) argue that "single case studies are better than multiple cases because a single case study produces extra and better theory." Gustafsson (2017) also notes that "the more case studies a scientific article has, the less observation time the writer has studied the case studies," highlighting the depth that can be achieved with a focused approach (p. 3).

Choosing the case study method suits our research because the topic is broad and highly complex, with limited existing theory, and the context is very important. According to Dul and Hak (2008, as cited in Ebneyamini and Moghadam, 2018, p. 4), "most of the authors consider case study research as a useful research strategy when the topic is broad and highly complex, when there is not a lot of theory available, and when 'context' is very important."

Furthermore, Ebneyamini and Moghadam (2018) state that "choosing a research strategy or methodology depends on three things (Yin, 2014): research question, the extent of control the

researcher has over actual behavioral events, and the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events" (p. 3). The single-case study design thus aligns with our research question: "How can service design interventions strategically improve user engagement, experience, and revenue generation within wartime newsroom membership programs?" This focus on contemporary events and limited control over behavioral factors makes the case study method particularly appropriate.

Stake (1995, as cited in Gustafsson, 2017, p. 7) writes that "the researcher has a vision about the understanding of the case study for the readers. This includes that the readers can understand the findings so well that they can implement the study in their own situation."

The single-case study design is particularly useful here as it allows for a detailed analysis of the membership program while integrating comparative insights from other outlets, strengthening the study's ability to assess both specific and generalizable findings.

The research and interventions were conducted over a five-month period, from February to June 2024, within a broader timeline of June 2023 to June 2024, to allow for planning, preparation, and follow-up activities.

### **3.3. Research setting and participants**

The primary research setting for this study is The Village Ukraine, a media outlet that has faced significant challenges and undergone substantial transformations due to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. As the Head of Membership at The Village Ukraine, I bring direct insights into the membership program and am well-positioned to conduct this study. This dual role as researcher and program manager allows for a unique combination of practical involvement and academic rigor.

The research involved **a total of 133 participants** across various data collection methods, including in-depth interviews, surveys, and polls. Four in-depth interviews were conducted with members of The Village Ukraine's membership program, providing qualitative insights into member needs and preferences. Surveys provided further quantitative data: a welcome survey was completed by 10 new members, and an exit survey gathered responses from 67 participants, helping to identify reasons for cancellations. A poll on the potential launch of a book club was also conducted with 52 participants.

No workshops or additional group activities were conducted. However, the embedded interviews with two other media outlets allowed us to compare their membership strategies, enriching the data from The Village Ukraine.

### 3.4. Mixed methods research

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research, known as **Mixed Methods Research (MMR)**, was employed to gather comprehensive insights into The Village Ukraine's membership program. MMR is defined as "the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Timans, Wouters, & Heilbron, 2019, p. 206, citing Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p. 123).

MMR has gained popularity in social and behavioral sciences due to the increasing complexity of research problems and the broader acceptance of qualitative research as a valid form of inquiry, even among traditionally quantitative researchers. Additionally, there has been a growing need among qualitative researchers to generalize their findings (Timans, Wouters, & Heilbron, 2019).

**Quantitative research** involves systematic investigations using numerical data, often collected through closed-ended questions and analyzed statistically. These methods are typically used to test hypotheses or verify theories when processing large datasets, providing objective and measurable results (Basias & Pollalis, 2018). In contrast, **qualitative research** focuses on interpreting concepts and phenomena through techniques such as open-ended questions and in-depth interviews. It is often chosen for exploring new research areas or answering research questions related to "what," "how," "when," and "where," providing an understanding of the nature and complexity of the phenomenon under consideration (Basias & Pollalis, 2018).

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively assess The Village Ukraine's membership program, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data:

- **Quantitative data** from platform analytics, such as subscriber numbers, revenue, and engagement, offered measurable insights into the program's performance.
- **Qualitative data** from surveys and in-depth interviews captured members' experiences, preferences, and challenges, providing a deeper understanding of user behavior.

This integration of methods allowed for a balanced evaluation, combining objective performance metrics with contextual user insights, leading to actionable, data-driven recommendations for improving member engagement and satisfaction.

### 3.4.1. Questionnaires

To collect quantitative data on Patreon members' satisfaction and preferences, we utilized existing automated questionnaires available on the Patreon platform:

- **Exit questionnaires** captured reasons for membership cancellations, offering insights for potential improvements.
- **Welcome questionnaires** gathered initial feedback from new members about their expectations.

A questionnaire is essentially a tool designed to collect and record information on specific issues of interest. It serves as an efficient means to assess behaviors, attitudes, sentiments, opinions, and intentions of a large number of individuals more economically and rapidly than other methods (Mahapatra et al., 2024). Although we did not design these questionnaires ourselves, we reviewed them to ensure they adhered to established questionnaire design principles. We confirmed that the questions were clear, concise, and free from bias or technical jargon. Each question was directly related to our research objectives, and the standardized format facilitated consistent responses and efficient data analysis (Taherdoost, 2022).

Using these automated questionnaires offered several benefits. They allowed us to efficiently collect data from a large number of Patreon members, and their integration within the platform made it convenient for respondents. However, we recognized some limitations, such as the inability to modify the questionnaires if we identified issues like ambiguous wording or potential misunderstandings. Despite this, by thoroughly reviewing the questionnaires against best practice guidelines, we aimed to mitigate these drawbacks.

### 3.4.2. Data sources

Comprehensive analytics data were collected from multiple platforms to provide objective measures of the membership program's performance. This data included:

- **Patreon:** Exit questionnaires, welcome questionnaires, engagement metrics, earnings, paid members, and cancellations.
- **Buy Me a Coffee:** One-time donations/supporters data, members data, payout history, and comments under donations.
- **Spotify:** Poll results, gender and age demographics.
- **Apple Podcasts:** Sales data, subscriber data, trends in demographics and subscriptions.
- **YouTube Sponsorships:** Subscribers data, revenue data, gender, age, and location demographics.

The integration of multiple data sources ensured that the findings were well-rounded and reflective of the diverse ways members engaged with the program across various platforms.

### 3.4.3. Customer Journey Mapping

In this study, Customer Journey Mapping (CJM) was employed to gain a deeper understanding of the member experience in The Village Ukraine's membership program. By mapping out each phase of a member's journey—from initial engagement to ongoing participation—CJM identified critical touchpoints, potential friction points, and opportunities to enhance the overall user experience.

The application of CJM here aligns with Rosenbaum et al. (2016), who emphasize its role as a strategic tool for visualizing customer interactions with a service organization throughout the entire purchase process. By visualizing the entire user experience, I was able to identify critical service touchpoints and pinpoint areas where service innovation could be implemented. This aligns with research findings that emphasize CJM's role in fostering service innovation by clearly identifying customer touchpoints and facilitating cross-functional team collaboration (Rosenbaum et al., 2016).

Over the past five years, CJM has been increasingly adopted across various industries, from private businesses to government agencies. This widespread use highlights its growing importance as a tool for understanding how customers interact with a business (Ortbal, Frazzette, & Mehta, 2016). In this study, I used CJM to identify both friction points and moments of delight in member interactions, reinforcing prior research that demonstrates CJM's ability to help organizations connect more effectively with their audiences. This approach provided a deeper

understanding of how members interacted with the program, guiding the identification of targeted interventions to improve member satisfaction.

#### **3.4.4. Integration of the Kano-inspired approach**

This research employed a Kano-inspired approach to prioritize and categorize member needs in The Village Ukraine's membership program. Insights from in-depth interviews and questionnaires led to the adaptation of key concepts from the Kano Model, enabling a clear distinction between Must-have, Performance, and Excitement attributes. This framework provided a better understanding of which program elements were essential to members and which could significantly enhance their overall experience.

The approach was particularly useful in differentiating between basic features that members expect (e.g., consistent content delivery) and those that could drive engagement and delight (e.g., bonus or exclusive content). It also helped in focusing on improvements that would have the greatest impact on member satisfaction.

Building on Bilgili, Erciř, and Ünal's (2011) findings, which emphasize the powerful effect of Excitement attributes in exceeding customer expectations, the research designed interventions aimed at these high-value areas. Feedback from interviews and questionnaires shaped strategic decisions, guiding efforts to enhance engagement within the constraints of financial and technical resources. The Kano-inspired framework also assisted in navigating trade-offs, ensuring that interventions balanced feasibility with maximizing member satisfaction.

#### **3.4.5. Semi-Structured interviews**

In-depth interviews are a qualitative research method used to gain insights into participants' life experiences, opinions, dreams, fears, and hopes (Knott et al., 2022). These interviews provide a deeper understanding of service interactions and help validate hypotheses by capturing members' unique perspectives. Mahr, Lievens, and Blazevic (2014, as cited in Trischler et al., 2018) emphasize that customer involvement is fundamental to the service design process, as their experiential knowledge of usage patterns and latent needs serves as a critical catalyst for innovation and the successful development of new services.



Interviews can be structured, unstructured, or semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews are typically organized around a topic guide outlining a series of broad topics, usually ranging from three to five. Each topic contains a set of questions that guide the conversation between the researcher and the participant (Knott et al., 2022).

In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed, offering flexibility by following a topic guide while allowing space for spontaneous participant responses. This method facilitates an in-depth exploration of the subject while maintaining enough structure to ensure key areas are addressed. Four in-depth interviews were conducted with selected members, focusing on:

- Member needs and preferences.
- Pain points and areas for improvement.
- Perceptions of the value provided by the membership program.
- Preferences for content and engagement formats.

The insights gained from these interviews were instrumental in understanding the emotional and practical aspects of the member experience, which quantitative data alone could not capture. Through this analysis, recurring themes were identified, providing actionable insights that directly informed interventions to enhance the membership program.

### 3.5. Data analysis

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within the membership program, this study employed multiple analysis methods, including **thematic analysis**, **cross-case analysis**, **Customer Journey Mapping (CJM)**, and a **Kano-inspired framework**. Each method was carefully chosen to provide unique insights into the quantitative and qualitative data collected, thereby offering a multidimensional perspective on the membership experience.

**Thematic analysis** was used to identify recurring patterns and themes within the qualitative data, particularly from interview transcripts. As noted by Knott et al. (2022), thematic analysis is not merely a process of extracting information but one of actively constructing meaning from the data. Following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis in this study aimed to uncover key themes such as member motivations, challenges, and perceptions of value. This method allowed for the identification of patterns that shaped a rich narrative of participant experiences and informed the development of targeted interventions. Themes that

emerged included motivations for joining, barriers to continued engagement, and perceived program benefits, all of which played a critical role in shaping the strategic recommendations.

**Cross-case analysis** was employed to systematically compare the membership strategies of The Village Ukraine and Daily Maverick. This approach, drawing on Stake's (2006) methodology, facilitated the identification of both commonalities and distinctions between the two cases. By focusing on patterns of data-driven engagement and member personalization, the cross-case analysis provided a robust framework for understanding the differential approaches of both organizations and offered broader insights into effective membership strategies in the digital media landscape. This method ensured that the analysis was not limited to a single context, but rather reflected the wider applicability of the study's findings.

**Customer Journey Mapping (CJM)** offered a visual and structured approach to analyzing the membership experience, focusing on the various touchpoints in a member's journey. CJM, as described by Rosenbaum et al. (2016), highlights critical moments in the user experience and identifies friction points that could hinder member satisfaction and engagement. By mapping each phase of a member's interaction with the program—from initial awareness to sustained engagement—this tool allowed for a more precise identification of service design improvements. CJM was instrumental in pinpointing areas where enhancements could streamline member interaction, such as onboarding processes and the provision of exclusive content.

**The Kano-inspired framework** was used to prioritize member needs by categorizing them into Must-have, Performance, and Excitement attributes (Bilgili, Erciş, & Ünal, 2011). This framework enabled the study to distinguish between essential features that meet basic expectations and those that can significantly enhance member satisfaction and engagement. The Kano analysis was particularly useful in identifying high-impact areas for improvement, such as the integration of exclusive member benefits, which are likely to increase both engagement and retention.

Together, these analysis methods provided a rich, multidimensional understanding of both the quantitative trends and qualitative experiences of the membership program's participants.

**Thematic analysis** offered insights into the subjective experiences of members, while **cross-case analysis** enabled a comparative perspective that contextualized these insights within a broader

framework. **Customer Journey Mapping** highlighted the critical touchpoints that shape the member experience, and the **Kano-inspired framework** guided the prioritization of program enhancements based on member satisfaction drivers. This integration of methods ensured that the study addressed both practical outcomes and the deeper, subjective experiences of the membership program, leading to actionable recommendations for improvement.

### **3.6. Ethical considerations**

This research adheres to the ethical principles outlined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2023), focusing on confidentiality, data protection, and transparency.

**Confidentiality and anonymity.** Verbal approval was granted by the CEO of The Village Ukraine to use data from internal interviews, surveys, and polls. However, formal written consent from individual participants could not be obtained due to logistical constraints. In line with the principle of respect, all internal data has been anonymized to protect participant privacy, ensuring that no identifying information will be disclosed in the findings.

**Data protection.** The researcher has sole access to the internal data, which is securely stored in compliance with data protection regulations. No misuse of the data will occur, and the integrity of participant contributions is safeguarded.

**Transparency.** In alignment with the principles of honesty and accountability, the research process and findings will be reported accurately and with integrity. A summary of the research outcomes will be made available to the company and participants upon request.

Although formal consent was not obtained for the in-depth interviews, this research adheres to ethical guidelines to ensure participant confidentiality, data security, and transparency throughout the process.

## 4. CASE STUDY

### 4.1. Overview of The Village Ukraine

The Village Ukraine is a leading city-centric media outlet deeply embedded in the fabric of urban life in Kyiv. It is known for its comprehensive coverage of cultural events, local businesses, and lifestyle trends, with a monthly user base of approximately 1 million unique visitors. Serving as a go-to resource for the city's inhabitants, The Village Ukraine offers a diverse range of content from entertainment and food recommendations to critical updates on infrastructure and public safety—particularly vital during the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Under the editorial leadership of Yaroslav Druziuk, The Village Ukraine has proactively adapted to the evolving needs of its audience. The outlet continues to cover the creative and cultural sectors, which are vital to Kyiv's identity, while also addressing the harsh realities brought about by the war. This duality in its content strategy—balancing lifestyle coverage with essential survival information, such as the location of bomb shelters and updates on the war's impact on urban life—demonstrates the outlet's agility and responsiveness.

The Village Ukraine's commitment to editorial independence is a cornerstone of its identity. Since its establishment in 2017, the outlet has operated without the influence of oligarchic interests, relying instead on a business model heavily based on advertising revenue, particularly through native advertising. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 disrupted the local advertising market, nearly eliminating this revenue stream and forcing the organization to seek alternative sources of financial support (The Fix Media, 2023).

As of July 2023, The Village Ukraine's digital presence is expansive, with significant followings across various social media platforms:

- Website: ~1 million unique users per month.
- Instagram: 226,000 followers.
- Facebook: 154,000 followers.
- Telegram: ~115,000 total subscribers across various channels.
- TikTok: 30,000 followers.
- Twitter: 14,000 followers.

The audience is predominantly aged 18-44, with a strong female majority and a significant portion accessing content via mobile devices—demographic insights crucial for tailoring content and membership offerings to meet the specific needs and preferences of the audience.

#### **4.2. Overview of The Village Ukraine’s podcast “In Simple Words”**

The "In Simple Words" podcast exemplifies a strategic and multifaceted approach to monetization within the evolving Ukrainian media landscape. As the Ukrainian podcast market experienced significant growth post-2019, The Village Ukraine positioned itself as a leading voice. By October 2023, the podcast had reached 50,000 listeners per episode, nearly 100,000 plays per episode, and a total of 3 million listens, making it one of the most popular podcasts in Ukraine (The Fix Media, 2023).

##### **Key revenue streams:**

- **Book sales:** Over 40,000 copies sold, deepening the connection between the podcast and its audience, while simultaneously reaching a wider audience and building significant brand awareness.
- **Membership program:** Cultivated a recurring revenue stream from more than 400 members across platforms like Patreon and Buy Me a Coffee.
- **Sponsorships and donor support:** Adapted to wartime challenges by shifting from traditional sponsorships to donor support.
- **Merchandise:** Introduced limited-edition branded merchandise, generating additional revenue.

These diverse revenue streams underscore the importance of avoiding over-reliance on any single source of income, particularly within the context of Ukraine's unpredictable and volatile environment.

#### **4.3. Overview of the “In Simple Words” membership program**

In response to the challenges posed by the war, The Village Ukraine's reader revenue model evolved to become a cornerstone of the organization’s vision for financial diversification and long-term sustainability. The overreliance on advertising revenue prior to the invasion exposed significant vulnerabilities in the business model. This experience underscored the importance of

devoting more attention and effort to the membership program, leading to a decision to adopt a more strategic and systematic approach.

In March 2023, The Village Ukraine appointed a dedicated Head of Membership—myself—to lead the development and enhancement of the membership program. At that time, Patreon was the sole monetization platform being used for member subscriptions. Over the following year, I expanded the program by launching membership options on additional monetization platforms, including Buy Me a Coffee, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube, thereby broadening the program's reach and creating more sustainable revenue streams.

### Comparative analysis of monetization platforms

To evaluate the effectiveness of these strategic interventions, I conducted a comparative analysis of the various monetization platforms used to manage subscriptions and donations:

*Table 1. Empirical review of monetization platforms*

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Primary features</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Limitations</b>
<b>Patreon</b>	Subscription tiers, community posts, direct messaging, integration with Discord and Spotify, advanced analytics, welcome and exit surveys, yearly subscription, targeted offers to selected fans, free member upgrade offers, discount codes	Facilitates consistent revenue generation through tiered subscription models; provides robust tools for community engagement and audience interaction; includes automated growth features	Higher platform fees (ranging from 5-12% depending on service tier) and additional payment processing costs can significantly reduce net earnings; frequent declined payments, particularly in lower tiers
<b>Buy Me a Coffee</b>	One-time donations, recurring memberships, supporter messages, shop feature, website buttons, widget, and QR codes generator	Offers a straightforward and accessible platform with a flat 5% fee structure, enabling both recurring memberships and one-time contributions; among the	While the 5% platform fee is competitive, the addition of standard payment processing fees (approximately 2.9% + \$0.30 per transaction) still impacts overall revenue

		lowest commission rates available	
<b>Apple Podcasts</b>	Subscription model, yearly subscription, exclusive content, trial period, banner for subscription promotion, advanced analytics, enhanced visibility through Apple’s promotional campaigns and featured rankings	Provides direct access to a substantial podcast listener base; advanced analytics and promotional tools enhance audience targeting; lower churn rates among annual subscribers	Retains 30% of first-year subscription revenue (decreasing to 15% in subsequent years); moderate conversion rates from free trials; limited flexibility in content bundling and pricing; significant reliance on the Apple ecosystem for audience reach
<b>Spotify</b>	Polls, Spotify for Podcasters analytics	Promotes high levels of listener engagement through interactive features like polls; offers detailed demographic and behavioral analytics to inform content strategy	Direct monetization is restricted due to payment processing limitations for Ukrainian users; lacks integrated e-commerce functionalities, limiting revenue diversification
<b>YouTube</b>	Tiered sponsorship levels, exclusive content access, Super Chat and Super Stickers, integration with YouTube Shop, special badges, exclusive emojis, buttons on main channel page and under videos for additional promotion of subscriptions	Capitalizes on YouTube’s extensive user base for audience engagement and offers multiple promotional touchpoints for subscriptions	Limited engagement at higher sponsorship tiers; imposes a 30% platform fee

This comparative analysis, based on my direct experience from June 2023 to June 2024, highlights the successes and challenges encountered across the different platforms.

Key findings from the assessment include:

- **Patreon** continues to be a reliable revenue source, despite challenges with high fees and payment declines, which contribute to churn.
- **Apple Podcasts** has emerged as the most promising platform for growth, particularly due to its annual subscription model, though conversion from trials remains a challenge.
- **Buy Me a Coffee** serves as a simpler, lower-cost alternative, quickly gaining popularity but struggling with member retention.
- **YouTube Sponsorships**, still in early stages, show potential, particularly in mid-tier sponsorships.

In the subsequent chapters, a more in-depth analysis of each platform's performance will be provided.

### 4.3.1. Patreon

Patreon provides a sustainable income model for creators, fostering ongoing relationships with their audiences. Unlike traditional crowdfunding platforms, which typically support one-off projects, Patreon fosters ongoing relationships between creators and their audiences, establishing a sustainable financial ecosystem for creative work. This section examines the mechanisms of patron engagement, payment stability, and retention on Patreon, using generalized insights to elucidate strategies that enhance financial sustainability and deepen the patron-creator relationship.

*Note: Due to the commercial sensitivity of the data, the following analysis focuses on generalized insights, trends, and lessons learned rather than specific data points, based on my experience working as Head of Membership at a Ukrainian media outlet and its podcast on mental health.*

#### **Section 1: Patron contribution patterns and tier analysis**

##### **Contribution tiers**

The data reveals significant patterns in how patrons choose to engage financially with creators. The "Lover" tier, priced at \$5 per month, is notably the most popular, yet it also exhibits a higher frequency of declined payments, raising questions about the financial stability of patrons at this level. Conversely, patrons contributing at higher tiers, such as the "Appreciator" (\$10 per month) and "Admirer" (\$20 per month), demonstrate more consistent payment behaviors, indicating a stronger financial commitment.



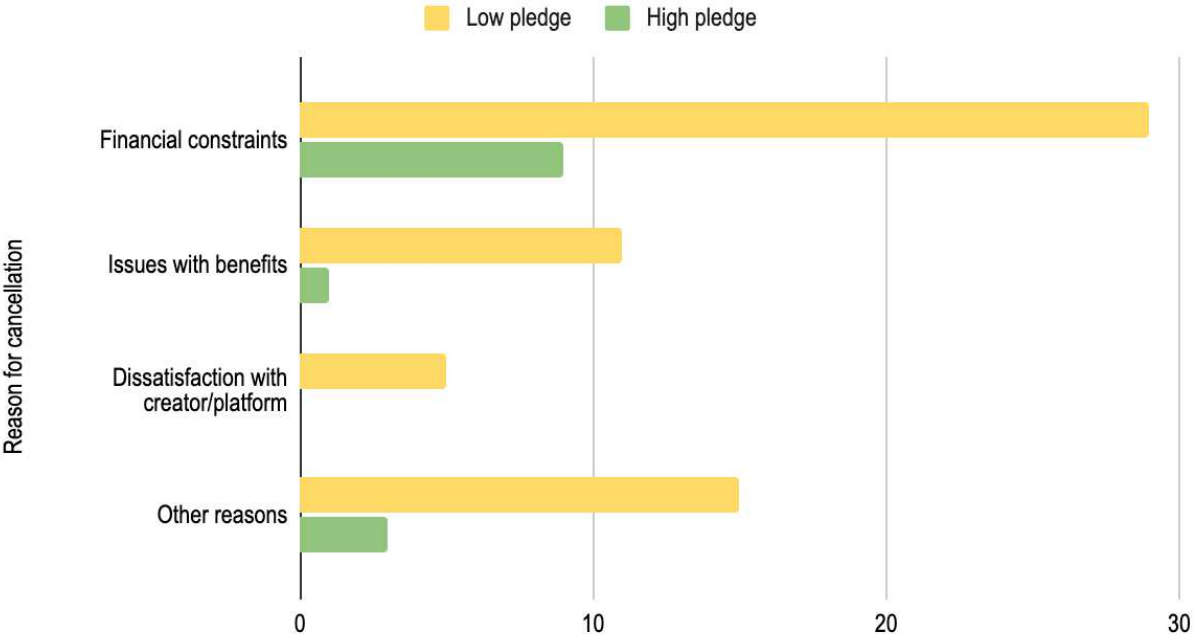
Survey insights conducted from March to June 2024 support these findings, showing that 80% of new members selected the "Lover" tier, reflecting its alignment with member expectations in terms of affordability and benefits. However, participation in the "Appreciator" and "Admirer" tiers remains modest, at 16.7% and 1.7%, respectively. This distribution suggests a potential mismatch between the perceived value and pricing of higher tiers, indicating an opportunity to refine the benefits offered at these levels to better match patron expectations.

**Financial impact of tiers**

The dependence on lower-tier patrons presents a dual-edged sword. While lower tiers provide broad accessibility, they also introduce financial volatility due to the higher incidence of payment declines. In contrast, patrons at higher tiers, though fewer in number, contribute more significantly to the financial stability of the creator.

Survey insights reveal that approximately 59% of patrons who canceled their subscriptions cited financial constraints as the primary reason, highlighting the economic vulnerability of lower-tier memberships, particularly in times of financial uncertainty. These insights suggest that strengthening mid- to high-tier offerings could help mitigate churn and contribute to greater financial stability.

**Reasons for membership cancellations**



*Figure 2. Reasons for membership cancellations based on exit questionnaires*

## **Section 2: Payment frequency and retention**

Monthly payments remain the predominant choice among patrons, consistent with standard subscription models. However, the introduction of annual subscriptions in May 2024 marks a strategic development. While annual plans are still gaining traction, they offer potential advantages, including reduced payment disruption frequency and longer-term patron commitment. Preliminary data indicates that annual subscribers exhibit lower churn rates, suggesting that this model could be essential for creators seeking financial stability.

The dataset underscores the critical distinction between active patrons and those whose payments are frequently declined. Declined payments are a primary driver of churn, particularly among patrons in lower tiers.

Survey data also reveals that approximately 11% of patrons canceled their subscriptions after receiving a specific benefit, indicating that for some, the relationship with the creator is viewed transactionally. Addressing this requires creators to offer ongoing value beyond the initial benefit, such as continuous rewards, to encourage long-term patronage.

## **Section 3: Declined payments and patron stability**

Declined payments pose a significant threat to the financial viability of creators on Patreon. The analysis indicates that this issue is more pronounced among patrons at the "Lover" tier, suggesting a correlation between financial instability and lower contribution levels.

Survey insights further reveal that approximately 8% of exit survey respondents indicated that a perceived lack of creator activity influenced their decision to cancel. This finding highlights the importance of consistent content delivery and active engagement in sustaining patron satisfaction and minimizing payment declines.

Automated reminders for patrons to update their payment information could reduce the incidence of declined payments. Additionally, personalized outreach to patrons with declined payments could help recover lost contributions and strengthen the overall patron-creator relationship.

## **Section 4: Patron engagement and platform utilization**

While financial contributions are essential, they are not the sole indicators of a successful patron-creator relationship. Engagement metrics, such as participation in community platforms

like Discord or member-only chats on Telegram, are equally important in fostering a loyal patron base. Incorporating community engagement strategies could enhance both retention and overall patron satisfaction.

Survey insights reveal that while 60% of new members are primarily motivated by exclusive content, 20% join for community interaction. This indicates that fostering a sense of community is as crucial as providing exclusive content. Encouraging patron interaction through platforms like Discord or Telegram could therefore be a strategy in enhancing the overall membership experience.

### Membership drivers by tier

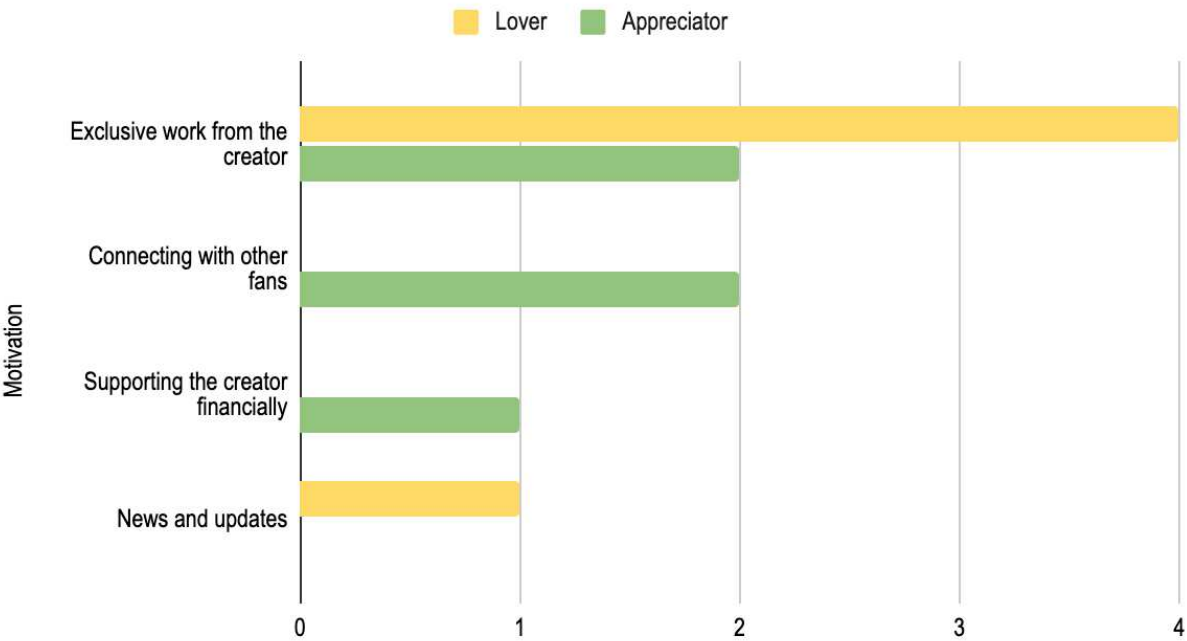


Figure 3. Tier-based analysis of membership motivations from welcome questionnaires

### Building a community

Creating a strong sense of community among patrons is vital for sustained engagement. Regular updates, exclusive content, and direct communication channels can enhance the patron experience. These efforts not only support retention but also promote word-of-mouth growth, potentially attracting new patrons. Engagement initiatives could include interactive events, Q&A sessions, or behind-the-scenes content, all designed to deepen the connection between creators and their patrons.

## **Conclusion**

The insights derived from Patreon data and survey responses provide a nuanced understanding of the financial and engagement dynamics within subscription platforms. To achieve long-term sustainability, creators should focus on strategies that minimize payment declines, encourage higher-tier contributions, and foster a deeper sense of community. The introduction of annual subscriptions offers a promising avenue for enhancing both retention and revenue stability.

### **4.3.2. Buy me a coffee**

Buy Me a Coffee offers creators a streamlined way to generate income through a mix of recurring memberships and one-time donations. This platform is particularly useful for creators seeking a balance between consistent revenue and flexible, spontaneous contributions from their audience. This section delves into the performance of Buy Me a Coffee, analyzing trends in one-time donations, memberships, qualitative feedback from supporters, and overall revenue patterns. The insights gathered here are based on real-world data, highlighting key strategies and potential areas for growth.

#### **Section 1: One-time donations analysis**

One-time donations via Buy Me a Coffee represent a significant form of support, reflecting the immediate appreciation and engagement of the audience. The majority of one-time donations consist of small, frequent contributions, indicating that the low entry barrier is effective in encouraging support from a broad audience base. The correlation between content releases and spikes in one-time donations suggests that relevant content directly influences the level of audience engagement and financial support.

While the amounts per transaction are small, the cumulative impact is notable. Encouraging repeat one-time donations could enhance revenue growth through this channel.

#### **Section 2: Membership analysis**

Recurring memberships on Buy Me a Coffee provide a foundational revenue stream, though they come with their own set of challenges.

The \$5 per month tier is the most popular, accounting for approximately 68.29% of all active subscriptions, indicating its appeal to a broad audience while still contributing meaningfully to

overall revenue. Despite its popularity, there is a notable churn rate of 34.15%, with several members canceling their subscriptions within a few months. This underscores the importance of ongoing engagement and value delivery to maintain long-term subscribers.

Active memberships contribute to a steady monthly income, but the potential for revenue growth could be enhanced by reducing churn and increasing the perceived value of memberships.

### **Section 3: Qualitative feedback from one-time donations**

The comments left by supporters alongside their one-time donations provide valuable qualitative insights into the motivations and values of the audience.

Many comments highlight the deep personal impact of the content, with supporters expressing gratitude for the inspiration and emotional support provided by the podcasts. For instance, comments such as "Your podcast has saved and helped me countless times" reflect the meaningful connections that listeners feel.

Cultural relevance is also a recurring theme, with some supporters expressing their appreciation for high-quality content in Ukrainian, highlighting the importance of culturally relevant material in a digital world dominated by English.

### **Section 4: Revenue trends**

The data reveals a steady increase in revenue across the analyzed months, with significant peaks aligning with periods of heightened engagement, such as new content releases. This upward trend underscores the positive impact of both one-time donations and recurring memberships in driving financial growth.

### **Conclusion**

Buy Me a Coffee has proven to be a valuable platform for creators, offering a balanced mix of spontaneous one-time donations and reliable recurring memberships. Strategic content releases have been shown to lead to significant spikes in donations, emphasizing the importance of delivering timely, relevant content. The \$5 per month membership tier stands out as the most popular, reflecting its strong appeal; however, there is potential to further enhance member retention by consistently delivering value. Feedback from listeners also highlights the critical role of native language content, such as Ukrainian, in fostering a connection with the audience.

### **4.3.3. Apple Podcasts**

Apple Podcasts has become an essential platform for monetizing exclusive content. Recognizing its importance—especially given that a significant portion of the podcast's audience listens through Apple Podcasts—a subscription model was launched in March 2024. This analysis explores the effectiveness of this subscription, focusing on user engagement patterns, conversion rates, revenue trends, and retention strategies. The insights presented here are based on real-world data and are intended to guide strategic decisions to optimize the monetization process.

#### **Section 1: Subscription patterns analysis**

The launch of the Apple Podcasts subscription model has shown promising results, with nearly 70% of subscribers choosing monthly plans. This preference highlights the importance of offering flexible subscription options, as many users prefer the ability to commit with minimal risk and the ease of canceling if necessary.

While less popular, yearly subscriptions still account for a meaningful segment of the audience, likely driven by the 24% discount that encourages longer-term commitments. The distribution between monthly and yearly subscriptions offers a deeper understanding of audience preferences, suggesting that while a good portion of users value the cost savings associated with a yearly subscription, the majority prioritize the flexibility of smaller, recurring payments.

#### **Section 2: Conversion and retention analysis**

With a conversion rate of 49%, there is room for improvement, as slightly more than half of users who start a free trial do not convert to paid subscriptions. This drop-off could be due to several factors, including potential friction during the payment process, an unclear or insufficient value proposition during the trial period, or the availability of competitive free content.

Retention is another key challenge, particularly in converting free trial users to paying subscribers. To mitigate this, it's essential to enhance the user experience during the trial phase, ensuring that the value of subscribing is compelling and clearly communicated.

#### **Section 3: Revenue trends**

The revenue trends analysis shows a consistent growth trajectory, with monthly subscriptions contributing the most to the overall income. This steady increase in revenue reflects the effectiveness of the subscription model in generating a reliable and ongoing revenue stream.

However, the data also indicates a need to improve the conversion rate from free trials to paid subscriptions and to address the relatively high rate of cancellations.

## **Conclusion**

Apple Podcasts has proven to be a vital platform for monetizing exclusive podcast content, particularly for an audience that values the flexibility offered by subscription models. The analysis demonstrates the subscription model's success in driving revenue growth while also identifying key areas for improvement, particularly in conversion and retention strategies.

### **4.3.4. Spotify**

Spotify has become an essential platform for podcast distribution. Although direct monetization through Spotify is currently not possible due to restrictions on Stripe payments for Ukrainians, the platform continues to be vital for content delivery. Notably, Patreon members can listen to special and exclusive content via Spotify. This section explores user demographics, poll insights, and overall audience engagement on Spotify.

#### **Section 1: Audience demographics**

Understanding the demographics of the Spotify audience provides valuable insights into how content can be tailored to better meet listeners' needs. The data reveals that a significant 69% of the audience identifies as female, while 21.8% are male, with the remaining percentage either not specified or identifying as non-binary. This strong female majority suggests that the podcast should continue focusing on topics that resonate particularly well with women.

When analyzing the age distribution, the largest segment of listeners falls within the 28-34 age range, representing 32.4% of the audience. This is followed by those aged 23-27 at 25.7%, and the 35-44 age group at 19.9%. These age groups indicate that the podcast is connecting with young adults navigating significant life transitions, such as career development, personal growth, and relationship building, in the context of the ongoing war.

#### **Section 2: Poll insights and audience interaction**

Polls on Spotify have become a key tool for understanding listener engagement and preferences. They provide direct feedback and reveal the topics that most resonate with the audience.

High engagement polls are related to mental health and daily well-being. For example, a poll asking what helps listeners stay present and mindful drew 120 responses, with a substantial 66.7% citing "nature and fresh air" as their primary sources of mindfulness.

Moderate engagement polls on broader psychological themes also see solid engagement, though slightly lower than the top topics. For instance, a poll asking whether listeners believe that productivity is essential to feeling valued attracted 122 responses, with 40.2% agreeing.

This tool can also be helpful in identifying potential for member-only content that might draw more potential members, as it highlights the specific areas where listeners are most engaged and interested.

### **Section 3: Audience engagement and strategic recommendations**

The varying levels of engagement across different polls provide significant insights into what topics resonate most with the audience. High engagement in mental health and well-being polls suggests that listeners are particularly interested in content that offers practical advice and insights into managing daily life challenges. This aligns with the demographic data showing that the podcast appeals to younger adults who may be navigating significant life transitions.

Moderate engagement in polls related to broader psychological themes indicates that while these topics are of interest, they may require more targeted content or framing to fully capture the audience's attention.

### **Conclusion**

The poll data from Spotify provides valuable insights into audience preferences and engagement. By examining these trends, creators can better align their content with listener interests, making future episodes more relevant and impactful. Additionally, this data highlights opportunities to create member-exclusive content, which could attract new subscribers and deepen community engagement.

#### **4.3.5. YouTube**

The YouTube Sponsorship program offers three tiers: a basic level (approximately \$5 USD), a mid-level option (approximately \$9 USD), and a higher tier (approximately \$22 USD). Since its launch, the majority of new sponsors have opted for the basic tier, which is the most affordable and accessible. A smaller portion of users chose the mid-tier option, while no users subscribed to



the highest tier. This suggests that while there is clear interest in supporting the content, the perceived value of the highest tier may not yet align with audience expectations or may cater to a niche audience that hasn't been fully reached.

### **Section 1: Retention and churn**

During the initial months, the sponsorship program saw a net increase in active sponsors. However, there were also instances of cancellations and non-renewals, primarily within the basic tier. This pattern may indicate that while the lower tier is attractive for initial sign-ups, maintaining long-term engagement at this level may require additional value or incentives. The mid-tier option had better retention, which could be attributed to the perceived higher value or exclusive content associated with this level.

The total revenue generated from YouTube Sponsorships in the analyzed period was modest, reflecting the early stages of this initiative. The revenue per transaction aligns with the lower-tier subscriptions, indicating that the majority of supporters are contributing at the most affordable level. This suggests potential for growth as the program becomes more established and the audience becomes more familiar with the benefits of higher-tier memberships.

### **Section 2: Audience demographics**

The YouTube channel attracts a diverse audience, with the most engaged viewers falling within the 25-34 and 35-44 age brackets. These age groups are consistent with those observed on other platforms like Spotify, indicating that the content resonates strongly with young adults who are likely navigating significant life transitions.

The majority of the channel's viewers are based in Ukraine, which accounts for the largest share of views and watch time. This is followed by smaller but significant audiences in Poland, Germany, and the United States. The geographic distribution suggests a strong domestic following, with additional interest from the Ukrainian diaspora.

### **Section 3: Sponsorship engagement and revenue dynamics**

Since the launch of YouTube Sponsorships, the platform has seen steady growth in the number of active sponsors. The data indicates that while the program is still in its infancy, there is clear interest from the audience in supporting the content directly on YouTube, particularly through the lower-tier options.

The revenue generated from YouTube Sponsorships during the initial period primarily comes from the lower-tier membership. This tier's popularity suggests that the audience is comfortable with this level of commitment, though there is potential to encourage higher-tier subscriptions through enhanced benefits or exclusive content offerings.

## **Conclusion**

The YouTube Sponsorship program, launched in May 2024, has successfully tapped into the channel's existing subscriber base, offering an accessible way for supporters to contribute without needing to navigate unfamiliar platforms. The early data shows a strong preference for the lower-tier sponsorship, reflecting the audience's comfort with this level of commitment. While the program is still in its early stages, the steady growth in sponsors and revenue suggests a solid foundation for future expansion.

### **4.3.6. In-depth interviews analysis**

This section synthesizes insights from a series of in-depth interviews conducted with members of The Village Ukraine's podcast community. The goal was to explore the needs, preferences, and pain points of the listeners while testing specific hypotheses related to the membership program and the perceived value of its bonuses. While the sample size of four interviews limits the generalizability of these findings, the depth of insight gained from each interview provides a nuanced understanding of the core experiences of highly engaged listeners.

#### **Process and methodology**

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each interview was carefully structured to focus on key areas influencing the listener experience. The interviews aimed to understand how and why listeners engage with the podcast, what motivates them to support it financially, and how they perceive the value of the content and associated bonuses. Despite the limited sample size, the interviews were rich in detail, revealing consistent themes that align closely with our research hypotheses.

The thematic analysis process began with transcribing the interviews, followed by coding the data to identify recurring topics and patterns. For example, responses such as "I find value in applying the insights directly to my life" were coded as "Practical value," which then contributed

to the broader theme of “Content Quality.” Similar codes were then organized into overarching themes, allowing for a more cohesive understanding of participant perspectives. This method enabled a systematic and nuanced interpretation of the feedback, clearly highlighting the aspects of the podcast that resonated with listeners as well as areas where the membership experience could be further refined.

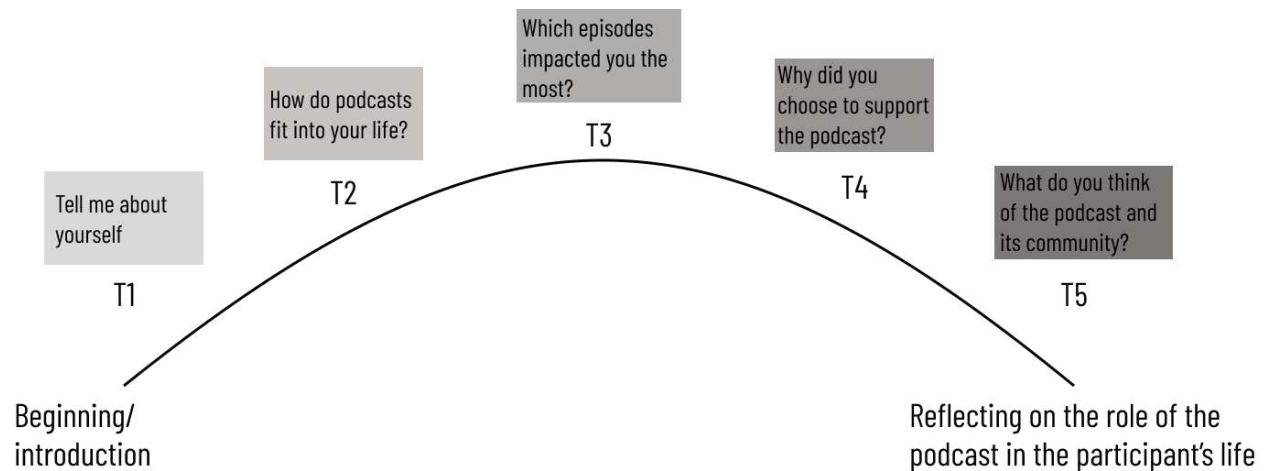


Figure 4. Core topics for semi-structured interviews with podcast members

### Key hypotheses tested:

1. **Content over bonuses:** Listeners are more likely to donate for high-quality content than for additional bonuses.
2. **Special episodes vs. online events:** Most listeners prefer additional special episodes rather than attending online events due to general online fatigue.
3. **Valuable bonuses:** Special episodes are perceived as the most valuable bonuses for community members.

### Key findings and recommendations

#### High-quality content as the primary driver of support

The analysis of interview data suggests that listeners place the highest value on the practical, high-quality content the podcast delivers. For many, the podcast serves as a reliable source of support and personal growth. One listener shared, "I subscribed to Patreon because Mark [the

host] kept reminding us episode after episode" (n1). These insights informed the decision to maintain consistent communication about membership benefits.

Listeners also expressed a desire for more in-depth content. One listener noted, "I wish the episodes were longer so I could listen to the conversations for a longer time" (n2). This feedback directly led to the decision to launch bonus episodes—short fragments up to 10 minutes long for community members—that didn't make it into the main episode.

### **Guest preferences and content engagement**

The interviewees expressed a strong preference for Ukrainian scientists as future guests, whose grounded, relatable discussions were particularly well-received. These guests were praised for their ability to discuss complex topics in an accessible manner, making them popular among listeners.

### **Addressing content gaps and balancing emotional impact**

A significant theme that emerged was the need for more content addressing sensitive topics like grief, psychological resilience, and cultural attitudes toward death. However, some listeners find war-related content emotionally challenging, especially when they have personal connections to it. As one participant shared, "There is so much talk about the war, and it's hard because the war is everywhere, and my relatives are fighting, so I couldn't listen to some episodes due to the emotional aspect" (n3). This underscores the importance of balancing emotionally heavy content with lighter, more practical topics, ensuring that the podcast remains a supportive space without overwhelming its audience.

### **Enhancing listener interaction and engagement**

The interviews provided several recommendations for improving listener engagement:

- **Interactive opportunities:** Listeners suggested offering more interactive elements, such as allowing patrons to submit questions for upcoming episodes.
- **Resource lists:** Some listeners mentioned the difficulty of capturing recommendations during activities like jogging, making it hard to find them later. This led to the decision to create curated lists of recommendations for each episode in PDF format, available to the community.

### **Special episodes vs. online events**

The analysis confirmed that while listeners place high value on special episodes, there is less enthusiasm for additional online events, likely due to widespread online fatigue. However, an exception emerged: participants expressed a keen interest in joining a book club connected to the podcast. To explore this further, a poll was conducted, revealing that 69% of respondents (from a total of 52 participants) were interested in such an initiative. This interest in a book club suggests an opportunity for selective, content-driven activities that align with listeners' needs for deeper connections and meaningful content.

### **Conclusion**

The in-depth interviews, though limited in scope, provided valuable insights into the core needs and preferences of The Village Ukraine's podcast community. The thematic analysis allowed for a structured exploration of key themes, offering a clear understanding of the primary motivations and challenges faced by the listeners. The feedback reinforced that high-quality, practical content is the key motivator for listener support, highlighting the importance of consistently delivering and communicating this value. While there's a clear preference for special episodes over online events, the interest in a book club reveals an opportunity for targeted, content-driven engagement strategies.

## **4.4. Daily Maverick: case study**

### **4.4.1. Cross-case analysis**

This section employs a cross-case analysis approach, as described by Stake (2006), to compare the membership programs of The Village Ukraine and Daily Maverick. Cross-case analysis enables the study to systematically explore the similarities and differences between cases while remaining cognizant of their unique contexts. This method is particularly well-suited for generating general insights that can be applied to other digital media organizations, even though each case may exhibit distinct characteristics.

### **4.4.2. Comparative analysis process**

The cross-case analysis followed a structured process, balancing the detailed particularities of each case with broader generalizations. The analysis began with an in-depth exploration of each organization's approach to membership growth. Daily Maverick's emphasis on data-driven

strategies and automation was contrasted with The Village Ukraine's more community-centered, hands-on approach. Data from qualitative sources, including an interview with Daily Maverick's Membership Manager, as well as quantitative metrics from The Village Ukraine, were analyzed to identify key themes.

The method of **categorical aggregation** (Stake, 1995) was used to collect multiple instances of recurring patterns and group them into categories, allowing the study to identify significant themes and draw conclusions. Through this process, commonalities—such as the emphasis on personalized engagement—were identified, alongside key differences, such as Daily Maverick's reliance on automation tools compared to The Village Ukraine's focus on direct interaction. The synthesis of these patterns aimed to derive broader insights into membership strategies that extend beyond the specific contexts of the cases.

The analysis also addressed the **case-quintain dilemma** (Stake, 2006), which describes the challenge of shifting from the detailed particularization of individual cases to more general insights applicable to a broader phenomenon—in this case, sustainable membership models in digital media. By examining both commonalities and distinctions, the study aimed to move from a detailed understanding of each organization's practices to generalized propositions that can inform membership strategies for other digital media organizations.

#### 4.4.3. Findings and general insights

The comparative analysis provided several key insights that offer guidance for developing membership strategies.

**Data integration as a growth strategy.** The analysis revealed that robust data analytics play a pivotal role in membership success. Daily Maverick's data-driven strategy, supported by a dedicated team, contrasts with The Village Ukraine's nascent efforts in data use. This suggests that strengthening data capabilities can provide a pathway for growth in organizations that are still in the early stages of developing data practices.

**Balancing automation and personalization.** Both cases highlighted the importance of tailored member engagement. However, while Daily Maverick relied on automation for personalization, The Village Ukraine focused on direct interactions with members. The findings suggest that a

hybrid approach—combining automation with personal connections—could enhance engagement while allowing for scalability.

**Resource management and strategic investment.** Resource constraints influenced the strategies of both organizations. Daily Maverick’s investment in scalable tools allowed it to maintain operational efficiency, while The Village Ukraine leveraged its existing community strengths. The analysis indicates that strategic investment in data tools and platforms—such as Sailthru or SQL databases—could enhance membership acquisition and retention even in resource-limited contexts. Moreover, an emphasis on experimentation and iterative testing was found to be essential for refining membership strategies.

The application of cross-case analysis provided a structured understanding of the membership models used by Daily Maverick and The Village Ukraine. By balancing the need for particularization with generalization, this study identified several critical factors for sustaining membership programs, including data-driven growth, personalized engagement, iterative experimentation, and strategic resource management. While Daily Maverick’s automated approach offers scalability, The Village Ukraine’s focus on community-driven engagement underscores the lasting value of direct member relationships.

## **4.5. Optimizing membership program with service design**

### **4.5.1. Current state: Customer Journey Map**

Customer journey mapping is a tool used to understand and enhance the user experience. For The Village Ukraine’s podcast membership program, the journey maps below detail both the current state of the listener experience and the future state following strategic improvements.

This map highlights the current state of the podcast’s membership program and identifies specific growth opportunities that emerged during my tenure.

Table 2. Current Customer Journey Map

Stage	Actions	Emotional state	Touchpoints	Pain points	Opportunities
<b>Awareness</b>	Discovers membership via social media, word-of-mouth, description under episodes	Curious	Social media, podcast descriptions, CTA	Lack of visibility	Increase visibility
<b>Consideration</b>	Encounters unclear benefits	Uncertain	Social media, podcast episodes	Vague messaging	Simplify messaging, focus on value
<b>Decision</b>	Struggles with subscription complexity	Hesitant	Patreon page	Unfamiliar platforms	Simplify subscription options
<b>Onboarding</b>	Experiences minimalistic onboarding	Overwhelmed	Patreon, pinned posts	Lacks personalized onboarding	Develop structured onboarding
<b>Engagement</b>	Sporadic engagement, no co-creation	Disconnected	Occasional posts, limited member content	No engagement strategy	Create engagement strategy
<b>Retention</b>	Receives reminders from Patreon, struggles to retain interest	Frustrated	Renewal reminders	Lack of continuous value delivery	Retention strategies for continuous engagement

Table 2 presents the **Current Customer Journey Map**, providing an overview of the membership experience at The Village Ukraine across six key stages: Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Onboarding, Engagement, and Retention. The table outlines the actions taken by



members, their emotional states, key touchpoints, pain points, and potential opportunities for improvement at each stage of the journey.

In the **Awareness stage**, members typically discover the membership through social media, word-of-mouth, or descriptions under podcast episodes. At this point, they feel curious but encounter a **lack of visibility**, representing an opportunity to increase the program's reach and visibility.

During the **Consideration stage**, unclear benefits create uncertainty for potential members. This stage involves **vague messaging** across social media and podcast episodes, which can be addressed by simplifying the messaging and focusing more explicitly on the value of membership.

In the **Decision stage**, the complexity of subscription processes, particularly on unfamiliar platforms, leaves potential members feeling hesitant. The **pain point** here is the subscription process itself, and a key opportunity lies in simplifying subscription options to improve user confidence.

The **Onboarding stage** reveals that the minimalistic onboarding approach can overwhelm new members. This stage is a critical touchpoint where more structured onboarding could alleviate this discomfort and enhance the early membership experience.

In the **Engagement stage**, sporadic member interaction and a lack of co-creation lead to a sense of disconnection. The absence of a structured engagement strategy is a significant pain point, offering a clear opportunity to create a more consistent and participatory engagement approach for members.

Finally, in the **Retention stage**, members receive renewal reminders but struggle to maintain interest due to a lack of continuous value delivery. To combat this **frustration**, a retention strategy focused on delivering ongoing value could greatly improve long-term membership satisfaction and commitment.

This customer journey map highlights critical areas for intervention, offering actionable insights for enhancing the overall membership experience by addressing key pain points and optimizing each stage.

#### 4.5.2. Prioritizing features using a Kano-inspired approach

A Kano-inspired approach was utilized to systematically categorize and prioritize features in The Village Ukraine's podcast membership program, based on their potential impact on member satisfaction. Informed by insights from in-depth interviews and questionnaires, this framework adapted key elements of the Kano Model to distinguish between Must-have, Performance, and Excitement attributes. It served as a practical method for testing hypotheses developed during the research phase, helping to identify features that offered the most significant value to the audience.

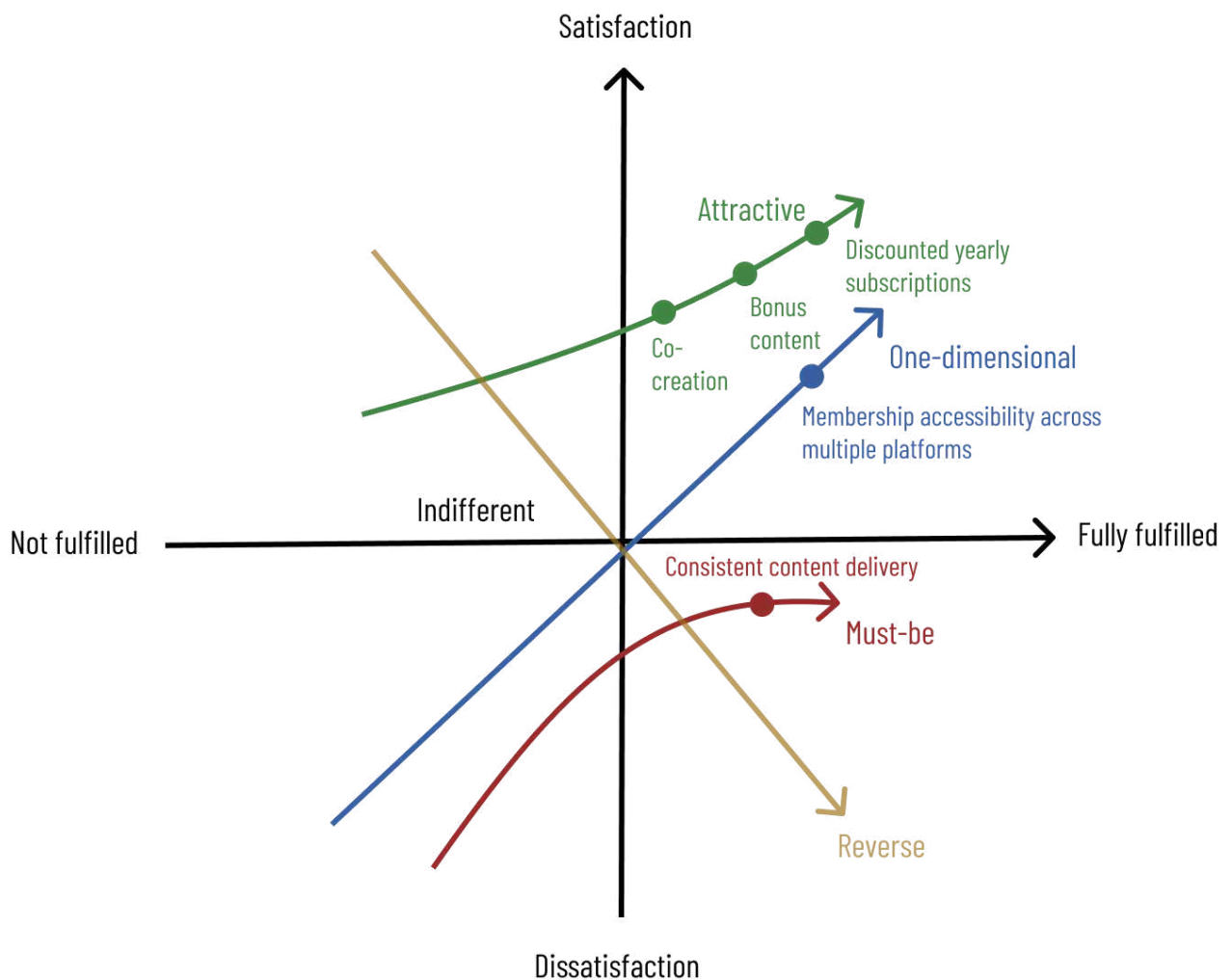


Figure 5. Visual representation of Kano-inspired feature categorization

This approach highlighted the critical importance of essential features such as consistent content delivery. While fundamental, consistent release schedules were crucial for members. Irregular

content distribution was linked to cancellations, indicating that this Must-have attribute, if unmet, led to dissatisfaction.

The analysis also underscored the significance of membership accessibility across multiple platforms. Ease of access via Buy Me a Coffee, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube directly correlated with increased subscriptions across all platforms. Although expected by members, ensuring seamless accessibility enhanced their likelihood of continued engagement and reduced frustration, classifying it as a Performance attribute.

Exploration of Excitement attributes, such as discounted yearly subscriptions, revealed that financial incentives encouraged longer-term commitments and reduced churn. Providing bonus content—unexpected, exclusive materials—delighted members, enhancing their perception of value and engagement. Introducing co-creation opportunities, like enabling members to contribute stories or pose questions to podcast guests, added a participatory dimension, building deeper emotional investment with the podcast.

Conversely, features like the introduction of a book club were categorized as indifferent during the research phase. While some members appreciated this addition, it did not generate widespread enthusiasm or significantly influence overall satisfaction. Testing confirmed that it appealed to a niche audience but did not warrant prioritization.

In summary, the Kano-inspired framework was instrumental in testing and validating hypotheses regarding the value of different features. It ensured The Village Ukraine’s membership program met core needs while adding features that boosted engagement within financial and technical limits.

**4.5.3. Future Customer Journey Map**

This map reflects the strategic improvements made during my tenure, illustrating the positive impact on the listener experience and identifying further opportunities for growth.

*Table 3. Future Customer Journey Map*

Stage	Actions	Emotional state	Touchpoints	Pain points	Opportunities
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<b>Awareness</b>	Discovers membership via Apple Podcasts, YouTube, social media, word-of-mouth, description under episodes	Informed	Apple Podcasts, YouTube, social media, podcast descriptions, CTA	Visibility is better, but lacks engagement drivers	Use more engaging CTAs and teaser content to draw attention to membership benefits
<b>Consideration</b>	Evaluates membership through clear, benefit-focused messaging	Reassured, confident	Special episode titles, exclusive content previews	Messaging is clearer but needs ongoing updates	Use A/B testing to improve messaging
<b>Decision</b>	Navigates simplified subscription options with clear incentives (3-day trials, yearly discounts)	Motivated	Patreon, Apple Podcasts, Buy Me a Coffee, YouTube	Subscription process is clearer but could still be simplified in terms of tiers and value proposition	Further streamline subscription flow
<b>Onboarding</b>	Engages with a clearer onboarding process, though it lacks full personalization	Confused	Default onboarding on Apple Podcasts, Patreon, Buy Me a Coffee, YouTube	Onboarding is better but needs more tailored guidance	Develop a personalized, step-by-step onboarding

<b>Engagement</b>	Participates in exclusive content creation, polls, book clubs, and co-creation activities	Engaged	Posts, polls, book clubs, direct engagement with hosts and community manager	Engagement is improving, but consistency is needed	Introduce more member-centered initiatives
<b>Retention</b>	Faces churn despite better communication and engagement efforts	Loyal, but cautious	Exclusive content	Retention has improved, but more testing of the value proposition and overall member experience is needed	Develop tailored retention strategies

Table 3 outlines the **Future Customer Journey Map**, presenting an enhanced membership experience at The Village Ukraine across six stages: Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Onboarding, Engagement, and Retention. Each stage details the expected actions, emotional states, touchpoints, pain points, and potential opportunities for further improvement.

In the **Awareness stage**, members discover the membership through a wider range of channels, including Apple Podcasts, YouTube, and social media, which creates a more informed emotional state. While visibility has improved, there remains an opportunity to use more engaging CTAs and teaser content to draw attention to membership benefits and drive deeper engagement.

During the **Consideration stage**, potential members now evaluate the membership through clear, benefit-focused messaging, which instills confidence. However, the messaging requires continual refinement to stay relevant, and the opportunity exists to leverage A/B testing to optimize the clarity and impact of the content.

In the **Decision stage**, members feel motivated by simplified subscription options and incentives, such as 3-day trials and yearly discounts. Although the subscription process has improved, further

streamlining of tiers and the value proposition could enhance the overall ease and appeal of signing up.

The **Onboarding stage** demonstrates clearer guidance, yet some confusion persists due to a lack of personalization. While onboarding is now more structured, there is a key opportunity to develop a tailored, step-by-step onboarding process that provides personalized guidance.

In the **Engagement stage**, members participate in activities like content creation, polls, and book clubs, leading to a deeper sense of connection. However, engagement remains inconsistent. Introducing more member-centered initiatives—such as co-creation opportunities, ongoing member feedback, and user-generated content—tailored to their preferences and addressing pain points could enhance overall member satisfaction.

Finally, in the **Retention stage**, despite improved communication and engagement efforts, high churn persists. This shows the need to further test and improve the value proposition, while introducing more varied retention strategies to maintain long-term member engagement.

This future journey map highlights ongoing opportunities to refine and personalize the membership experience, focusing on deeper engagement and more consistent value delivery across all touchpoints.

**4.5.4. Impact of strategic interventions**

*Table 4. Strategic interventions and their outcomes*

Area	Before	After	Outcomes
<b>Awareness</b>	Users discovered the podcast membership through general social media posts.	Targeted visibility across multiple platforms, including Apple Podcasts and YouTube.	Broader platform presence and more refined messaging.
<b>Consideration</b>	Unclear value proposition.	Well-structured, clear messaging that communicates benefits.	Improved clarity in messaging.

<b>Decision</b>	Unsystematic benefit delivery, irregular posting, and reliance on a single subscription platform (Patreon).	Simplified subscription options across multiple platforms, including yearly subscriptions with discounts on Patreon and Apple Podcasts, and one-time donations via Buy Me a Coffee.	Streamlined decision-making process with clearer incentives.
<b>Onboarding</b>	Users could only join through Patreon, with a basic onboarding process.	Users can now join through additional platforms like Apple Podcasts, Buy Me a Coffee, and YouTube, though the onboarding process remains standard for each platform.	Expanded platform options, but the onboarding process hasn't been enhanced and remains consistent with each platform's default setup.
<b>Engagement</b>	Sporadic engagement; limited community participation.	Increased participation through exclusive posts, polls, book clubs, and co-creation opportunities, such as integrating members' experiences and stories.	More consistent engagement and structured community activities.
<b>Retention</b>	High churn rates due to lack of continuous value delivery.	Continuous effort in value communication and retention strategies, such as exclusive content, member-only updates, and engagement initiatives.	Efforts made to address retention challenges.
<b>Monetization (Patreon)</b>	Heavily reliant on lower-tier "Lover" membership, with high payment declines.	Introduction of annual subscriptions and periodic releases of member-only content.	Lower churn rates for annual subscribers, with ongoing

			challenges in lower-tier stability.
<b>Monetization (Buy Me a Coffee)</b>	Steady revenue from the \$5/month tier, but notable churn rate.	Periodic releases of member-only content.	Maintained steady revenue, with a need for improved retention.
<b>Monetization (Apple Podcasts)</b>	Launched subscription model, facing challenges in conversion and retention.	Introduction of monthly and yearly subscriptions with discounts and periodic releases of member-only content.	Observed revenue growth, with ongoing work on improving conversion and retention rates.
<b>Monetization (YouTube)</b>	Early stages of the sponsorship program, generating modest revenue with a preference for lower-tier sponsorships.	Growth in the number of sponsors, with better retention in mid-tier sponsorships, supported by periodic releases of member-only content.	Established a foundation for future expansion of the sponsorship program.
<b>Content</b>	High-quality, practical content driving support; demand for more in-depth content.	Launched systematic bonus and exclusive episodes for members, with increased opportunities for member involvement in decision-making through polls.	Continued focus on delivering high-quality content with additional member-exclusive offerings.
<b>Community engagement</b>	Limited interaction, with a preference for practical content over emotionally heavy topics.	Introduction of additional engagement elements, such as recommendation lists following episodes and a book club initiative.	Expanded community engagement activities with new interactive elements.

Table 4 summarizes the **Strategic interventions and outcomes**, highlighting key improvements in The Village Ukraine’s membership program.



In the **Awareness** phase, membership discovery shifted from general social media posts to targeted visibility across platforms like Apple Podcasts and YouTube, enhancing platform presence and refining messaging.

During **Consideration**, the previously unclear value proposition was replaced with clear, benefit-focused messaging, improving communication of the program's value.

In **Decision-making**, subscription options were simplified across multiple platforms, including yearly discounts on Patreon and Apple Podcasts, streamlining the process and providing clearer incentives.

**Onboarding** expanded to include multiple platforms, but the process remains standard, lacking personalization.

In the **Engagement** phase, sporadic participation was replaced with more consistent involvement through exclusive posts, polls, book clubs, and co-creation activities, increasing community engagement.

For **Retention**, high churn rates led to the introduction of continuous value delivery through exclusive content and member-only updates, though challenges remain.

**Monetization** saw improvements across platforms. Patreon introduced annual subscriptions and exclusive content, stabilizing retention but still facing issues with lower-tier memberships. Buy Me a Coffee maintained steady revenue despite churn, mitigated by periodic member-only content. Apple Podcasts saw revenue growth through monthly and yearly subscriptions with exclusive content, improving conversion and retention. YouTube's sponsorship program expanded, with better retention in mid-tier sponsorships, providing a solid base for future growth.

Regarding **Content**, member demands for in-depth material were met with exclusive episodes and increased member involvement.

Finally, **Community engagement** grew from limited interaction to more dynamic participation, with new initiatives like recommendation lists and a book club expanding overall engagement.

#### **4.5.5. Optimizing internal processes for membership program management**

To strengthen the operational foundation of the "In Simple Words" podcast membership program, I introduced two key internal tools: a structured checklist for community managers and a comprehensive onboarding system hosted on Notion. These tools were designed to enhance workflow efficiency and ensure that new team members can seamlessly integrate into the community management role.

##### **Community manager checklist**

The community manager's checklist serves as a foundational tool, providing a clear sequence of tasks essential for managing and engaging the podcast's membership. It includes responsibilities such as coordinating announcements, preparing exclusive content, publishing across multiple platforms, collaborating with other team members, and collecting and analyzing audience feedback. Although operational in nature, these steps reduce complexity and streamline workflows. The systematic guidance of the checklist helps community managers avoid confusion and ensures they start their role with clarity and confidence.

##### **Notion onboarding system**

The onboarding system, hosted on Notion, was developed to offer new community managers an intuitive, all-in-one resource for understanding the intricacies of their role. This platform consolidates key information, including an introduction to the community, platform access instructions, detailed guidelines for each platform, algorithms for routine tasks, and troubleshooting support for technical issues. The resource simplifies the onboarding process, helping new managers gain confidence in their roles and reducing barriers to effective performance.

##### **Impact on community management**

The introduction of the checklist has streamlined daily operations, ensuring timely content delivery and reducing the risk of missed tasks. Similarly, the onboarding system has shortened the time required for new managers to acclimate, enabling them to engage with the community more rapidly and meaningfully.

## **5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1. Service design's role in enhancing membership programs**

The integration of service design methods, such as Customer Journey Mapping and a Kano-inspired approach, within The Village Ukraine's membership program uncovered opportunities for improving both user experience and revenue growth. Although traditionally used in product development, a Kano-inspired framework was effective within service design processes to help prioritize features that either delight users or address dissatisfaction. Notably, this approach highlighted key pain points—such as subscription complexity and unclear value propositions—allowing the team to prioritize interventions that directly aligned with user expectations.

The most impactful intervention was simplifying the membership onboarding process by offering more familiar platforms such as Apple Podcasts and Buy Me a Coffee. These changes reduced user friction, leading to a measurable increase in subscriptions and revenue. Customer Journey Mapping (CJM) helped identify where users experienced confusion or hesitancy, especially during the onboarding and retention phases, prompting strategic shifts in communication and engagement. These interventions are consistent with the broader understanding of service design as a tool for facilitating co-creation of value, enabling organizations to not only improve service delivery but also build ongoing value through human-centered processes (Kustrak Korper et al., 2020).

### **5.2. Platform diversification and its impact on revenue**

The decision to diversify the membership program across multiple monetization platforms—Patreon, Buy Me a Coffee, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube—improved The Village Ukraine's financial stability by mitigating over-reliance on a single revenue stream. This strategy catered to a wide range of audience preferences, which directly translated into an increase in membership sign-ups. For instance, within just four months, Apple Podcasts alone contributed approximately 9% of total membership revenue, highlighting the rapid and positive impact of platform diversification on overall financial sustainability.

This diversification also responded to users' need for platform flexibility. While Patreon retained its loyal member base due to its tiered model and community features, Apple Podcasts' seamless

integration with users' existing habits made it a valuable addition. This aligns with broader trends in media organizations that diversify revenue sources to include direct donations, branded content, and merchandise (Vara-Miguel et al., 2023). The case of The Village Ukraine demonstrates that diversification not only stabilizes revenue but also enhances user experience by offering more relevant options for engagement.

### **5.3. Challenges and limitations of service design in crisis contexts**

The implementation of service design at The Village Ukraine was constrained by the ongoing war, which presented significant challenges. A major limitation was the **instability of resources**, including funding and personnel, as the displacement of staff reduced opportunities for in-person collaboration, a core component of service design.

**Security concerns** also influenced decision-making. Initiatives requiring high member involvement, such as events or in-person engagements, were deemed unsafe, leading to a reliance on **digital-only** engagement strategies, which limited deeper community interaction.

**The urgent need for real-time adjustments** further restricted the iterative processes central to service design. Rapid decisions were necessary to address revenue stability and member retention, prompting the team to implement **simplified solutions**, such as streamlining onboarding processes, rather than conducting extended user research.

**Psychological stress and uncertainty** among both staff and users also influenced the prioritization of interventions. Given these constraints, The Village Ukraine focused on **low-effort, high-impact interventions**, such as improving communication clarity and introducing flexible subscription models, to address immediate needs. This aligns with Coutts (2024), who noted that even partial implementation of service design can lead to significant performance improvements, especially in dynamic or resource-constrained environments.

In conclusion, the wartime context required The Village Ukraine to prioritize pragmatic, short-term solutions over comprehensive, user-centered service design processes. While these interventions led to positive short-term outcomes, their long-term sustainability remains uncertain.

### **5.4. Implications for media organizations and the future of journalism**

The application of service design in media organizations offers a transformative approach for shifting from traditional ad-based revenue models to reader-supported frameworks. By focusing on user needs, optimizing the user experience, and directly engaging audiences, service design creates stronger, more resilient membership programs. The Village Ukraine's experience underscores how service design facilitates deeper audience connections, contributing to both financial sustainability and enhanced user satisfaction.

This process of value co-creation aligns with the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), which emphasizes that customers are active co-creators of value (Kamali et al., 2021). By incorporating users into the value creation process, media organizations can build more sustainable business models that closely reflect audience needs and preferences. This shift is particularly relevant as more media organizations explore reader revenue models in response to declining advertising income.

### **5.5. Comparative effectiveness of monetization platforms**

The Village Ukraine's diversified approach to monetization revealed varying levels of success across platforms. Patreon remained a steady revenue source due to its tiered membership model and community features; however, occasional payment declines impacted overall revenue consistency. Apple Podcasts, on the other hand, benefited from its integration with users' existing habits, offering a streamlined subscription process that saw significant growth in just a few months.

These findings align with strategies employed by organizations like Daily Maverick (The Fix Media, 2023) and Denník N (The Fix Media, 2024), which use data-driven approaches to refine reader revenue models. For The Village Ukraine, hiring a dedicated data team to better track platform performance could lead to more refined strategies in the future. Both Daily Maverick and Denník N demonstrate the importance of continuous experimentation and adaptation to user needs, a principle that should be integral to The Village Ukraine's strategic planning.

### **4.6 Impact of community engagement on retention**

Community-driven elements, such as polls, book clubs, and opportunities for members to contribute to content creation, increased overall member engagement within The Village

Ukraine's membership program. However, retention challenges persisted, particularly at the lower membership tiers. This suggests that while community engagement fosters loyalty, it must be supported by consistent value delivery—such as exclusive content or discounts—to incentivize long-term membership.

This observation aligns with Khajeheian & Friedrichsen (2017), who found that news media users involved in co-creation activities experience higher levels of value, leading to greater loyalty and satisfaction. Moving forward, The Village Ukraine may need to experiment further with value-based incentives—especially for lower-tier members—to improve retention.

### **5.6. The role of service design in addressing user pain points**

Service design interventions played a key role in identifying and addressing critical pain points in The Village Ukraine's membership program. The most notable success came from simplifying the subscription process, which reduced user friction and directly led to higher conversion rates. Improvements in the communication of membership benefits, particularly through clearer messaging during onboarding, also reduced early churn.

This finding reinforces the value of proactive, human-centered approaches within service design, aligning with Mäkijärvi, Montonen & Eriksson (2024), who argue that anticipating user friction points is critical to ensuring seamless service experiences. By focusing on the areas where users were most likely to drop off, The Village Ukraine was able to implement targeted interventions that improved both user satisfaction and program effectiveness.

### **5.7. Learning from other case studies: Daily Maverick and Denník N**

The comparative analysis of Daily Maverick (The Fix Media, 2023) and Denník N (The Fix Media, 2024) highlighted several key lessons for The Village Ukraine. Both organizations demonstrated the value of a data-driven, iterative approach to growing reader revenue models. Daily Maverick's success in transforming over 30% of its revenue into member-driven support emphasized the importance of continuous experimentation, a strategy that could benefit The Village Ukraine.

For The Village Ukraine, embedding a culture of experimentation is critical. Although resource limitations prevented comprehensive experimentation during this study, future efforts should

focus on small, iterative changes to optimize the membership program in response to user feedback. Continuous improvement, driven by data and experimentation, will be essential to ensuring the long-term success of The Village Ukraine’s reader revenue model.

### **5.8. Recommendations for future research**

While this study provides valuable insights into the application of service design within a wartime context, the findings are specific to a single case study in Ukraine—a region undergoing significant disruption. Future research should explore how these strategies apply in more stable environments, as the impact of service design interventions might differ across varying contexts.

Moreover, further exploration into the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning in automating and personalizing membership experiences could yield important findings. Given the rapidly changing media landscape, future studies could also examine how service design can be applied as an ongoing, iterative process, rather than a one-time project, offering media organizations lessons on maintaining engagement in the long term.

### **5.9. Practical recommendations for media outlets**

To enhance the effectiveness of membership programs, media organizations should **adopt a human-centered service design approach**, focusing on identifying and resolving user pain points. Techniques such as Customer Journey Mapping are particularly effective in highlighting areas of friction within the membership process, allowing organizations to refine specific aspects of the user experience. The experience of The Village Ukraine demonstrates that applying service design principles can lead to higher user satisfaction, which in turn fosters revenue growth.

In addition to service design, **adopting an agile and iterative development approach** is crucial. Instead of large-scale overhauls, media outlets should focus on making incremental improvements based on continuous user feedback and data analysis. The success of organizations like Daily Maverick, which relies on rapid, data-driven adjustments to optimize its membership offerings, highlights the importance of small, consistent enhancements in maintaining user engagement and relevance.

**Diversifying revenue streams** is another key strategy for reducing financial vulnerability. The expansion of The Village Ukraine’s membership offerings across multiple platforms—such as

Patreon, Buy Me a Coffee, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube—enabled the organization to reach a wider audience and secure financial stability. Media organizations should similarly explore diversifying their platform presence to expand their audience and create a more stable revenue base.

Moreover, **data-driven decision-making** is fundamental to optimizing membership programs. Regularly monitoring key performance indicators—such as retention, acquisition, and churn rates—enables media organizations to make informed, strategic adjustments. Establishing a **dedicated data team**, as demonstrated by Daily Maverick and Denník N, ensures that reader revenue strategies are grounded in actionable insights, leading to more effective program optimization.

Finally, **clear and consistent communication of the membership value proposition** is essential for acquiring and retaining members. The Village Ukraine’s success in simplifying subscription options and refining the messaging around membership benefits significantly contributed to attracting members. Media organizations should emphasize transparency and clarity throughout the onboarding process to ensure that members fully understand the benefits of their membership. **A structured, step-by-step onboarding process**, as exemplified by Daily Maverick’s success, can streamline the new member experience, reduce confusion, and communicate the value proposition more effectively, ultimately fostering long-term retention and loyalty.



## 6. CONCLUSION

This thesis investigated the strategic application of service design principles, particularly Customer Journey Mapping and a Kano-inspired framework, to enhance The Village Ukraine's membership program amidst the disruptions caused by the Russian invasion. While the number of subscribers and overall revenue grew, a high churn rate presented challenges, leaving the program's financial position relatively unchanged after a year. However, given the extreme external factors, maintaining revenue levels comparable to the pre-war period can be viewed as a notable success in itself.

The main research question guiding this study was: How can service design interventions strategically improve user engagement, experience, and revenue generation within wartime newsroom membership programs?

The research identified key areas where service design interventions led to improvements in member engagement and satisfaction. Simplified onboarding processes and expanded platform accessibility helped reduce friction, contributing to the program's ability to attract new subscribers despite the difficult circumstances. Though the high churn rate moderated the financial gains, the fact that revenue was preserved demonstrates the resilience of the program and its value to a core group of members.

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to the broader discourse on membership-based revenue models in times of crisis. It illustrates that human-centered design, when strategically applied, can mitigate some of the negative effects of external disruptions, such as war. Service design emerges as a flexible, adaptive approach that can sustain member engagement and financial stability, even when long-term retention proves difficult.

For media organizations operating in similar contexts, this research underscores the importance of platform flexibility and ongoing data-driven adjustments to maintain a strong membership base. While churn is inevitable under crisis conditions, the ability to retain core members and sustain revenue offers a significant indication of program health and resilience. Moderate yet consistent improvements to the member experience can help counterbalance external pressures, making incremental gains meaningful.

Though the study presents positive outcomes, it also acknowledges limitations related to resource constraints and the unpredictable nature of crisis-driven environments. Future research could explore how service design can be applied to further reduce churn and enhance long-term retention, potentially integrating emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence to personalize member experiences. In a rapidly changing digital landscape, continuous evolution of membership offerings will remain critical for building sustainable revenue models and building deeper relationships between media organizations and their audiences.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: In-depth interviews and research design

#### Introduction:

This appendix provides a detailed account of the research design and summarized insights derived from in-depth interviews conducted with members of The Village Ukraine's podcast community. The primary objective of these interviews was to explore the core needs, preferences, and pain points of the community members, while also testing specific hypotheses related to the membership program and the perceived value of exclusive content and bonuses.

#### Research design:

- **Objective 1:** Understand the needs, preferences, and challenges (pain points) of The Village Ukraine's podcast community members.
- **Objective 2:** Test hypotheses related to the membership program and the value of offered bonuses.

#### Hypotheses tested:

1. **Content over bonuses:** Listeners are more likely to donate for high-quality content than for additional bonuses.
2. **Special episodes vs. online events:** Most listeners prefer additional special episodes rather than attending online events, due to general online fatigue.
3. **Valuable bonuses:** Special episodes are perceived as the most valuable bonuses for community members.

#### Methodology:

- **In-depth interviews:** Four interviews were conducted with highly engaged community members.
- **Feedback analysis:** Comments were analyzed from various platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, Patreon, and Buy Me a Coffee.
- **Analytics:** Data from dashboard analytics and platform insights on Patreon and Buy Me a Coffee were reviewed.

### **Interview structure and key questions:**

The in-depth interviews followed a structured approach to collect qualitative data about listener experiences and to test the proposed hypotheses. The key questions included:

- Personal background: Tell us a little about yourself.
- Podcast engagement: How have podcasts become part of your life?
- Listening habits: Where and under what conditions do you usually listen to podcasts?
- Emotional engagement: Which topics or episodes of our podcast have impacted you the most and why?
- Motivation for support: Why did you decide to support our podcast financially?
- Subscription continuation: Why do you maintain your subscription on Patreon or Buy Me a Coffee?
- Improvement areas: What would you like to see improved in the podcast (topics, format, audio quality, etc.)?
- Podcast drop-off: Can you recall an episode that you didn't finish? Why did you lose interest?
- General impressions: What are your overall thoughts about the podcast and its community of listeners?
- Impact of the podcast: How has the podcast influenced your mood, mindset, or life in general?

### **Research timeline:**

- November 27 - December 1: Preparation and planning.
- December 4 - December 13: Conducting in-depth interviews.
- December 13 - December 15: Feedback analysis and data collection from platforms.
- December 18 - December 22: Preparing the results, summarizing insights, and creating recommendations.

### **Key findings from in-depth interviews:**

1. **High-quality content as the primary driver of support**
  - **Insight:** The majority of listeners valued the podcast for its high-quality, practical content rather than the additional bonuses.



- **Recommendation:** Prioritize delivering consistent, high-quality episodes over offering too many bonuses, while still providing exclusive member benefits to those who seek additional content.
2. **Preference for special episodes over online events**
- **Insight:** The interviews confirmed that listeners highly value special member-only podcast episodes, but there is less enthusiasm for additional online events due to widespread online fatigue. However, participants expressed interest in joining a podcast-related book club, with a follow-up poll showing 69% support for this initiative.
  - **Recommendation:** Continue offering special episodes to maintain listener engagement, while reducing general online events to avoid fatigue. Explore focused initiatives such as a book club to increase community-driven interaction.
3. **Value of exclusive content**
- **Insight:** Special episodes were highly valued by the community, with listeners expressing a desire for more exclusive content, such as extended interviews or behind-the-scenes material.
  - **Recommendation:** Offer a greater variety of exclusive content to cater to listeners' preferences for in-depth and exclusive material.
4. **Emotional impact and content balance**
- **Insight:** Some listeners found war-related content emotionally challenging, while others appreciated sensitive topics like grief and psychological resilience. There was also a strong preference for practical content that offers solutions to everyday challenges.
  - **Recommendation:** Balance emotionally intense episodes with lighter, practical topics to ensure the podcast remains supportive without overwhelming listeners. Focus on content that helps audiences navigate personal challenges.
5. **Enhancing listener interaction and engagement**
- **Insight:** Listeners expressed interest in more interactive features, such as submitting questions for the host or participating in community-driven initiatives like a book club.
  - **Recommendation:** Implement more interactive elements, such as listener-submitted questions or topic suggestions, to enhance engagement.

Introduce community-driven initiatives like a book club to foster deeper connections within the audience.

### **Analysis of hypotheses:**

- **Content over bonuses:**
  - **Confirmed.** Listeners primarily support the podcast for its high-quality content rather than for additional perks or bonuses.
- **Special episodes vs. online events:**
  - **Partly confirmed.** While most listeners preferred special episodes, they showed interest in selective online engagement, such as a book club.
- **Valuable bonuses:**
  - **Confirmed.** The most appreciated bonuses were special episodes and exclusive content, which resonated more with listeners than other types of perks.

### **Limitations:**

This research faced several limitations that may affect the generalizability of the findings. The small sample size of four highly engaged community members introduces potential bias, and the short time frame limited the depth of data collection and analysis. Additionally, the lack of recorded interviews may have resulted in the loss of nuanced insights, and the study focused primarily on qualitative data from a narrow range of platforms. Expanding the sample size, using more diverse data sources, and incorporating quantitative methods would improve the robustness of future research.

### **Conclusion:**

The in-depth interviews, although limited in scope, provided valuable insights into the needs and preferences of The Village Ukraine's podcast community. The findings revealed that high-quality content is the primary driver of support, while exclusive episodes and focused community engagement initiatives are highly valued. Opportunities exist to improve interaction through additional community-driven features and to balance emotional and practical content.

This appendix offers a deeper understanding of the community's preferences, with actionable recommendations for improving the podcast's membership program. Further research with a larger sample size would provide more comprehensive insights to refine these findings.

## Appendix B: Community manager checklist and Notion onboarding system

### Introduction:

This appendix includes examples of the Community Manager checklist designed to streamline daily operations, along with a screenshot of the onboarding system developed in Notion.

### Checklist: How does the Community Manager work with the podcast?

Important: The podcast is released biweekly, every Thursday.

#### What to do before releasing a new episode

- Publish an announcement** in the member-only Telegram chat about the upcoming guest and collect questions from the community.
- Forward the questions** to the podcast host if relevant.
- Coordinate with the host** regarding the questions and announce a request for stories (voice notes) from the community on a specific topic to be integrated into the episode.
- Collect community responses**, transcribe, and edit them down to 1-1.5 minutes, then pass them on to the editor for inclusion.
- Select a segment** for inclusion in the member-exclusive bonus content and mark it in the editing document.
- Draft the integration script** for promoting membership within the podcast.
- Record the membership integrations** and hand them over to the editor.

#### On the day of episode release

- Prepare and post an announcement** about the new episode and perks for members in the member-only Telegram chat.
- Publish the episode announcement** in the YouTube Community section.
- Create and publish a poll** related to the episode on Spotify.
- Assign to designer:** Prepare visuals for the bonus content, both in Ukrainian and English, for YouTube and Apple Podcasts.
- Publish glossary/recommendations** across platforms:
  - Patreon

- Buy Me a Coffee
- YouTube
- Publish the bonus content:**
  - Agree on the title and description with the podcast host.
  - Publish on:
    - Patreon
    - Buy Me a Coffee
    - YouTube
    - Apple Podcasts
- Publish the episode in English on:**
  - Patreon
  - Buy Me a Coffee
  - YouTube
  - Apple Podcasts
- Pin a comment on YouTube** directing listeners to access the English version by joining the community.

#### **After the episode is published**

- Review feedback** on the episode to understand listener concerns and preferences.
- Respond to subscription-related comments**, such as inquiries about where to listen to the episode in English.
- Manually post comments** about the episode on Spotify.