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JUSKA WENDLAND

Building Podcast Communities of Practice Through Participation

Multi-Model Framework for Meaningful Listener Experiences, Produsage, and Sense of Community

LAPIN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

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Academic dissertation to be publicly defended with the permission of the Faculty of Education at the University of Lapland in lecture hall B127 on 13th November 2026 at 12:00.

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Supervisors:
Professor Heli Ruokamo, University of Lapland
Docent Mari Maasilta, Tampere University

Pre-examiners:
Professor Sirkku Kotilainen, Tampere University
Professor David García-Marín, Rey Juan Carlos University

Opponent:
Professor Sirkku Kotilainen, Tampere University

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To my dearest family,
and to the Friday night radio enthusiasts.

Abstract

Juska Wendland

Building Podcast Communities of Practice Through Participation: Multi-Model Framework for Meaningful Listener Experiences, Produsage, and Sense of Community

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Podcasts are often considered passive, one-way media consumed in solitude, yet they possess significant community-building potential. While traditional broadcast radio creates participatory culture through synchronous listening, podcasts present a contrasting dynamic: audiences listen asynchronously and individually, making community building more challenging. The formation of podcast communities, despite their growing popularity, remains largely understudied. This dissertation addresses this research gap by examining how participatory culture, audience participation, and meaningful listener experiences contribute to building communities of practice around podcasts.

The research is grounded in social constructivist learning theory, expanding it from traditional media education contexts to asynchronous audio communities. The study integrates participatory culture theory, sense of community theory, and the produsage framework.

The dissertation comprises three sub-studies employing a multimethod approach. Sub-Study I, a systematic literature review (16 articles), identifies six enhancers of sense of community in podcasts: liveness, community size, parasociality, participation intensity, transmediality, and shared intimacy and trust. Sub-Study II, a qualitative analysis of 81 podcasts, develops a five-level Social Podcasting Participation Model, ranging from solo monologue to empowered dialogue and collective ownership.

Sub-Study III, a grounded theory study of 16 listener interviews, produces a five-level Reciprocal Community Building Model: authenticity, participation, parasociality, reinforcement, and coevolution.

The findings reveal that communities of practice emerge when podcast listeners transition from passive consumption to active participation. The three models are synthesized into a multi-model framework demonstrating how participatory culture, meaningful listener experiences, and produsage collectively build communities of practice. The research further defines podcasts as transcommunal media connecting perspectives, language, and values.

This dissertation advances media education and educational sciences research by demonstrating how participation and communities of practice occur in asynchronous environments where traditional participatory models may not apply. It provides practical tools for audio professionals and contributes to audience and listening research by challenging dyadic listening models.

Keywords: podcast, communities of practice, produsage, sense of community, participation, grounded theory, systematic literature review, listener, audience

Tiivistelmä

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Podcasteja pidetään usein passiivisena ja yksisuuntaisena mediana, jota kuunnellaan yksin. Siitä huolimatta niillä on merkittävää potentiaalia yhteisöjen rakentamisessa. Kun perinteiset radiolähetykset luovat osallistuvaa kulttuuria synkronisen kuuntelun kautta, podcastien dynamiikka on päinvastainen: yleisö kuuntelee asynkronisesti ja yksilöllisesti, mikä tekee yhteisöjen muodostumisesta haastavampaa. Huolimatta podcastien kasvavasta suosiosta, niiden yhteisöjä on tutkittu hyvin vähän. Tämä väitöskirja käsittelee tätä tutkimusaukkoa tarkastelemalla miten osallistumisen kulttuuri, yleisön osallistuminen ja merkitykselliset kuuntelijakokemukset podcasteissa edistävät käytäntöyhteisöjen muodostumista.

Tämä väitöskirja pohjautuu sosiokonstruktivistiseen oppimisteoriaan ja laajentaa sitä perinteisestä mediakasvatuksen kontekstista asynkronisiin audioyhteisöihin. Tutkimus yhdistää osallistuvan kulttuurin teorian, yhteisöllisyyden tunteen teorian ja produsage-viitekehyksen.

Väitöskirja koostuu kolmesta osatutkimuksesta ja käyttää monimenetelmällistä lähestymistapaa. Osatutkimus I on systemaattinen kirjallisuuskatsaus (16 artikkelia), joka tunnistaa kuusi yhteisöllisyyden tunteen vahvistajaa podcasteissa: liven tuntu, yhteisön koko, parasosiaalisuus, osallistumisen intensiteetti, transmediaalisuus sekä jaettu intiimiys ja luottamus. Osatutkimuksessa II, joka on 81 podcastin laadullinen analyysi, kehitetään viisitasoinen sosiaalisen podcast-osallistumisen malli,

joka ulottuu yksinpuhelusta voimaannuttavaan dialogiin ja kollektiiviseen omistajuuteen. Osatutkimus III on grounded theory -tutkimus 16 kuuntelijan haastattelusta, joka tuottaa viisiportaisen vastavuoroisen yhteisörakentamisen mallin: autenttisuus, osallistuminen, parasosiaalisuus, vahvistaminen ja yhteiskehitys.

Tulokset osoittavat, että käytäntöyhteisöt syntyvät, kun kuuntelijat siirtyvät passiivisesta kulutuksesta aktiiviseen osallistumiseen. Tutkimus esittelee kolme mallia, jotka yhdistetään monimalliseksi viitekehykseksi. Viitekehys osoittaa, miten osallistuva kulttuuri, merkitykselliset kuuntelukokemukset ja produsage yhdessä rakentavat käytäntöyhteisöjä ja määrittelee podcastit transkommunaalisena mediana, joka yhdistää näkökulmia, kieltä ja arvoja eri yhteisöjen välillä.

Tämä väitöskirja edistää mediakasvatuksen ja kasvatustieteiden tutkimusta osoittamalla miten osallistuminen ja käytäntöyhteisöjen syntyminen tapahtuvat asynkronisissa ympäristöissä, joissa perinteiset osallistumismallit eivät päde. Tutkimus tarjoaa käytännön työkaluja audioalan ammattilaisille ja täydentää myös yleisö- ja kuuntelututkimusta haastamalla dyadiset kuuntelumallit.

Asiasanat: Podcast, käytäntöyhteisöt, produsage, yhteisöllisyyden tunne, osallistuminen, grounded theory, systemaattinen kirjallisuuskatsaus, kuuntelija, yleisö

Acknowledgments

I started this academic endeavor in early 2023 out of curiosity about what was to come: how audio communities might form in the future as the role of broadcast radio is gradually taken over by on-demand formats, such as podcasts. Little did I know then how relevant the results of this research would become, and how they would be implemented, tested, and discussed long before this dissertation was completed in Berlin in spring 2026. This PhD journey has proven true the cliché that academic work can change the course of one's professional life, but none of it would have happened without the help of so many professionals, colleagues, friends, and family members.

My sincere thanks go to my primary supervisor, Professor Heli Ruokamo from the University of Lapland, whose expertise, guidance, and dedication made it possible to keep both the quality and pace of my research high over the years. Similarly, I am deeply grateful to my second supervisor, Docent Mari Maasilta from Tampere University, for sharing her vast knowledge and expertise during our meetings. Her kind yet firm guidance and way of encouraging independent discovery, instead of providing obvious answers, were key to my growth as a researcher. Together, both supervisors created an atmosphere of genuine trust, encouragement, and intellectual freedom that made navigating this doctoral journey truly inspiring.

I would also like to thank my pre-examiners, Professor Sirkku Kotilainen from Tampere University and Professor David García-Marín from Rey Juan Carlos University. Their feedback and suggestions during the final revision helped improve the work in its final stages before publication. In addition, warm thanks go to Professor Sirkku Kotilainen for accepting the invitation to act as the opponent in my doctoral defense.

I am also deeply grateful that the novelty of this PhD work was recognized by the Media Industry Research Foundation and the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation. Two grants from the Media Industry Research Foundation supported the development of Sub-Studies II and III, and the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation's scholarship made full-time research possible dur-

ing the final stages of Sub-Study III and the dissertation. This dissertation was written and completed in Germany at Freie Universität Berlin during the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation scholarship period of 2025–2026. In addition, the University of Lapland's Esko Riepula Grant provided support to finalize the dissertation within the planned timeframe.

And to my dear friends and colleagues, thank you: Tiia Lappalainen and Markku Sipi of the Outo Luonto podcast for building an incredible audio community together; Jasmiini Lappalainen for the inspiration, belief, and support with the social podcasting concept; the RadioDays crew and Peter Niegel in particular for seeing the value in this research; and my European Journalism Fellowship colleagues Juliane Pfordte, Carl Smith, Mohamed Amjahid, Pavel Ruban, Dmitry Antonov, and Svetlana Basharova for their endless feedback and discussions about podcast communities.

Most importantly, this research would never have happened without an incredible group of Friday night radio enthusiasts, both professionals and listeners, whose contributions made the show the most popular on-demand music program among listeners under 45 in 2026 at the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle. Their enthusiasm and participation led me to ask back in 2022 whether building something similar with podcasts would be possible. Their dedication never ceased to amaze me and made so many unlikely things become reality. This research is one of these.

And finally, to my dear family: my love Melanie, who did the most selfless thing by making it possible for me to move to Berlin for a year to finish this research. And my amazing boys Nils and Milo, who are my everything. And also, Mum, and Ari: thank you for all the encouragement, love, and patience.

Helsinki, September 2026
Juska Wendland

List of original articles

The dissertation is based on the following original articles, which will be referred to in the text as Sub-Studies I-III.

Wendland, J. (2026a). Building a better participatory culture and enhancing sense of community in podcasts—Systematic literature review. Journal of Radio & Audio Media, 33(1), 130–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2024.2347609

Wendland, J. (2025). Social podcasting—Levels of podcast audience participation. Journal of Radio & Audio Media. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2025.2460834

Wendland, J. (2026b). Reciprocal community building model for podcasts—Meaningful listener experiences: Grounded theory research. International Journal of Listening. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2026.2660064

Sub-Studies I–III are reproduced with permission from Taylor & Francis. The original articles are attached at the end of this dissertation.

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1. Introduction

While podcasts are often considered a passive, one-way medium typically consumed in solitude, they nonetheless possess significant potential for community building. This research, which consists of three sub-studies, examines podcasts from the perspectives of hosts, individual listeners, and the community as a whole. By introducing a multi-model framework, this dissertation offers new means to understand, build, and further study audio communities around podcasts, and provides both theoretical and practical models for the development of podcast communities. In particular, this study concentrates on podcast communities as *communities of practice*. Communities of practice can be considered groups of people who share a passion for something and learn more about it through regular interaction, as defined by Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023). The podcast communities researched in this study construct knowledge by learning from and with each other through participation.

My professional experience in broadcast radio over the past 18 years has been increasingly community-driven. During this period, I have hosted a two-hour Friday night radio show on Yle. It has become evident that the program benefits significantly from its live audience, and that the sense of liveness enhances the experience for subsequent audio-on-demand listeners as well. As broadcast audio has declined in popularity—particularly among younger generations—podcasts have largely replaced traditional formats. This shift prompted me to consider how community-driven audio might be translated into podcast format and whether there are common denominators between the two, ultimately leading to the focus of this research. Therefore, the majority of the data in this research, particularly in Sub-Studies II and III, relate to Finnish podcasts.

The three sub-studies included in this dissertation are among the first to offer models and frameworks for building podcast communities. Community building through asynchronous listening experiences remains a largely understudied area. Over the past decade, the number of podcasts

has steadily increased (Listen Notes, 2025; Statista, 2024a, 2024b). In spring 2023, when the research plan for this doctoral dissertation was prepared, it was already apparent that major media companies in Finland anticipated the future of audio consumption to trend toward asynchronously accessed content rather than traditional broadcast formats.

In this research, *a podcast* is defined as an audio recording that is consumed, or intended to be consumed, *asynchronously*. Asynchronous media formats allow users to access and interact[1] with content at their own convenience, independent of real-time or simultaneous participation (Williams et al., 1988). Podcasts—the word originally coined in 2004 by journalist Ben Hammersley (Sawyer, 2015)—are asynchronous audio-on-demand audio recordings designed for targeted, often niche audiences (Berry, 2016). The focus throughout the study is on the participatory culture of podcasts. In short, participatory culture is a culture whose members feel their contributions matter and experience social connection (Jenkins, 2009).

This research also mentions both the *audience* and the *listener* on various occasions. It is notable that both the audience and the listener are considered active, selective processors of information, according to Webster's (1998) definition of "audience-as-agent." In this sense, they can be considered synonymous, with the exception that a listener acts and receives information as an individual, while an audience refers to a group. Additionally, in this research, the podcast *host* is the person who runs the show and interacts with the audience, and the *producer* is the person who develops the podcast as a product in the background. The term *user* is not adopted as the primary term for podcast consumers in this research. Following Carpentier's (2015) distinction between interaction and participation, *user* in digital media contexts typically implies technical interaction rather than cultural participation. As Jenkins et al. (2016) noted, participation is not inherent to technology, even though technical interactivity may

1 Throughout this dissertation, "interaction" in the context of Carpentier's (2015) AIP model (see Chapter 2.4) refers specifically to engagement without substantial influence over content. In other contexts (e.g., social interaction), the term is used in its general sense.

be. Podcasts are linear, prerecorded audio formats that listeners cannot manipulate during consumption. While listeners may interact with other platforms, the core podcast content itself remains unalterable during the listening experience. Therefore, *listener* and *audience* more accurately reflect the nature of podcast consumption, positioning it closer to traditional broadcast media than interactive digital platforms.

Live broadcast radio is effective at creating participatory culture through synchronous listening—where listeners experience content at the same time. Podcasts present a contrasting dynamic: audience members listen asynchronously and most often individually, which makes the creation of community, participatory content, and meaningful listener experiences more challenging. Listening experiences can be considered meaningful when listeners transition from mere consumption to active participation, such as creating content, influencing decisions, or feeling a sense of ownership and belonging within the community (Backhaus, 2019; Carpentier, 2015; Malinen, 2015). These challenges, and the dynamics of participatory culture in contexts where community members do not listen to audio content simultaneously, have remained largely understudied.

This research seeks to develop new frameworks and models to address the research question: *How do participatory culture, audience participation, and meaningful listener experiences contribute to the building of communities of practice around podcasts?* The aim is to provide practical and academic knowledge about podcast community building and perspectives from both hosts and listeners.

1.1. Background

This dissertation is positioned in the fields of media education and education sciences, particularly in the areas of social constructivist learning and participatory culture in audio media contexts. The research extends Vygotsky's (1978) and Wenger's (1999) social constructivist learning theory from the traditional educational context to asynchronous media and audio communities. Media education has traditionally concentrated on teach-

ing and learning about media, with media literacy as the outcome. Media education aims to develop both critical understanding and participation (Buckingham, 2013). This research brings a new perspective to media education by examining how participation and co-creation occur in asynchronous audio contexts.

The dissertation is also closely connected to participatory culture research as defined by Jenkins (2006, 2009). In addition, this research contributes knowledge to the fields of audience studies and listening studies. From a media education perspective, this dissertation provides new knowledge about how participation, sense of community, and communities of practice occur in asynchronous audio environments where traditional participatory models may not apply. This focus is relevant given that despite the growing number of podcast listeners both in Finland and globally, the format itself has remained largely unchanged. Most podcasts continue to follow the conventional one-way model, consisting of conversations between a host and a guest, with minimal or no audience participation (Wendland, 2025).

In particular, this dissertation extends social constructivist learning theory (Wenger, 1999) to encompass media communities in which learning and participation happen both asynchronously and in solitude, yet still as meaningful processes. From a media education perspective, this approach provides new knowledge about the conditions under which and the forms in which participation and communities can emerge.

There is no shortage of research on podcasts. The volume of scholarly work reflects the same upward trend observed in podcast listener rates. Podcasts have been examined as educational tools (Aase et al., 2021; Kusumastuti & Supendra, 2021), as a part of teacher education (Chen & Ben-Atar, 2025; King & Watt, 2025), and as a medium for advertising (Bezbaruah & Brahmbhatt, 2023; Tranová & Veneti, 2024). Additionally, uses and gratifications studies have explored the motivations of both listeners and hosts (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2023; Perks et al., 2019; Perks & Turner, 2019; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022), while other research has investigated the social impact of podcasts

(Fox et al., 2020). A similarly diverse scope of research exists concerning broadcast media, particularly community radio. The significance of community radio is emphasized in studies addressing its role in creating a sense of belonging, community building, and communal impact, especially in India and African countries, although not exclusively (Backhaus, 2019; Copeland, 2018; Essel & Govender, 2023; Guo, 2017). Community radio not only facilitates connections among like-minded people but also contributes to social cohesion.

Broadcast audio, despite a decline in prevalence, continues to be examined primarily from a community perspective. In contrast, the rapidly growing podcast medium has received comparatively little attention in this regard. In broadcast audio, audience participation is facilitated by the synchronous nature of listening. The sense of community—a feeling of belonging, mutual importance, and shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to each other (McMillan & Chavis, 1986)—arises from listeners' awareness that others are participating simultaneously. In contrast, the podcast domain presents greater challenges in nurturing communities. Podcast consumption typically occurs in solitude (Rodgers, 2024), and because podcasts are prerecorded, the sense of community is less apparent and the threshold for participation is higher. The perception of listening alongside others and belonging to a group of like-minded individuals does not occur as automatically as it does with broadcast audio.

The contrast between the scarcity of studies on podcast communities and the evident need for such research is particularly pronounced outside the academic sphere. Media organizations worldwide are investing in podcast production; however, based on my experiences at numerous podcast and audio-related conferences, both as a speaker and as an attendee, it is clear that there remains limited understanding of how to engage listeners meaningfully in asynchronous formats. This highlights the significance of the present study: it not only seeks to address the research gap in podcast community studies but also aims to provide practical tools that are applicable beyond the academic context.

1.2. Process of the study

My position as both a practitioner and a researcher shaped the design and direction of this study. The work was conducted independently: I am the sole author of all three published articles. The reasons for this are twofold. First, my professional practice has always consisted primarily of independent, solo work. Second, because this dissertation presents pioneering research in this area, it has been difficult to find other researchers with a similar interest and commitment to collaborate. While my background in community-oriented radio provided valuable context and motivation, I have consistently reflected on and separated my practitioner identity from my academic role. This reflexivity guided my methodological choices and helped ensure that the findings are analytically robust and ethically sound. Therefore, despite having a loyal listener base, it was clear from the outset that neither this show, nor its audience, nor its established practices could be incorporated into the study. Doing so would introduce research bias and undermine the objectivity of the findings. Consequently, the research was directed toward unexplored territory, refraining from using any existing shows or products of mine as its foundation. Whenever my research was mentioned on my radio show, I consistently clarified that although audio participation and communities were being studied, it would be ethically inappropriate to involve this particular community or their contributions in the research.

The research began in spring 2023. The first public presentation of the research plan and the early findings for the first sub-study took place at the ITK conference in Hämeenlinna, Finland, in April 2023. The first sub-study, which was a systematic literature review, provided an overview of current podcast studies and helped shape the direction of the overall research. It also revealed a significant challenge: the limited availability of recent and relevant sources on the subject of podcast communities. This scarcity had both positive and negative implications. On the negative side, very few new relevant publications appeared during the research period between 2023 and 2025. However, the positive impact was more pro-

nounced—publishing results on a topic that was largely understudied yet highly relevant attracted considerable attention both within and outside the academic community.

The first sub-study (I) was accepted and first published online in April 2024 in the *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, where it became the most read article of the year. By February 2026, it had gained over 6,000 views and was included in volume 33, issue 1 (Wendland, 2026a). This sub-study aimed to establish a foundation for further research on podcast communities by identifying research gaps and presenting current knowledge in a clear and accessible format. The systematic literature review produced a Six Enhancers of Sense of Community Model—liveness, community size, parasociality (the sense of relationship listeners develop with hosts), participation intensity, transmediality (storytelling and audience engagement that extends across multiple platforms), and shared intimacy and trust—and illustrated the participatory culture that enables podcast communities to form and thrive.

The first sub-study's popularity may have been largely due to its practical relevance and clear presentation of new knowledge. The model was developed directly in response to industry needs, offering actionable insights on podcast communities—a topic previously overlooked in academic research. By addressing this gap and presenting the findings in an accessible format, the sub-study attracted significant attention from both practitioners and academics. This resonance highlights the importance of research that not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides concrete tools for professionals working with podcasts. Additionally, during the writing process, the original plan for the final sub-study—a prototype of a collaborative podcast—was replaced with an investigation of listening experiences, as there was no shortage of new podcasts but a clear lack of studies on podcast communities.

While Sub-Study I was being published, work on Sub-Study II was already in progress. As part of the doctoral program at the University of Lapland, I took advantage of the opportunity to complete a work practicum by undertaking a study-related internship at Yle, specifically with its Learning

and Interaction Team. As the work was carried out among audio professionals and was highly focused on podcasts, the work practicum period enabled collecting and listening to 81 podcasts to support the research for Sub-Study II. Meanwhile, the findings from the first sub-study generated considerable interest, leading to approximately 20 presentations and lectures delivered at Yle and Humak University of Applied Sciences in Finland, at Future Media Hubs in Belgium, and at Eurosonic in Iceland. The visual model of the six enhancers was straightforward to present and made the concepts easy to understand without any scientific background. The model was also a practical, step-by-step guide for audio professionals, showing which aspects to focus on next in their podcast work.

During the practicum period, the findings that would later be presented in Sub-Study II began to take shape. Although the option to develop a podcast prototype as part of this research was excluded during the preparation of the first sub-study, Yle offered the opportunity to create a community-driven nature podcast. This experience not only enabled practical exploration of community podcasts, but also provided an opportunity to test the Six Enhancers of Sense of Community Model developed in Sub-Study I, as well as the preliminary findings from Sub-Study II with a real audio product and audience. However, this nature podcast was not used as a data source or research tool for this study; its production simply confirmed that the findings were applicable in practice.

Sub-Study II was completed in autumn 2024 and published in February 2025. It introduced the Social Podcasting Participation Model, which presents a framework illustrating five levels of podcast participation, each having a greater impact on the podcast content: solo monologue, interactive monologue, evolving conversation, collaborative dialogue and empowered dialogue. The findings on social podcasting—an audio creation process in which listeners are encouraged to become active creators and contributors, participating in and influencing the podcast content and script rather than remaining passive recipients (Wendland, 2025)—attracted international attention. It led to presentations at the Radio Days conferences in Greece in spring 2025 and Riga in spring 2026 and to sev-

eral European public broadcasting companies via remote sessions. Sub-Study II was also published in the *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, where it ranked among the most read articles of the year, occupying positions one to three during autumn 2025. By February 2026, it had gained over 3,700 views. The sub-study's popularity was likely due to the same factors as Sub-Study I: for audio professionals, it provided a practical and visual tool to assess podcast participation and hosts' actions. The framework clearly illustrated the advantages of involving the audience in the podcast creation process rather than simply creating content for listeners, by collaborating with them.

The third and final sub-study involved 16 interviews conducted in January and February 2025. The resulting sub-study was written and completed during the spring and summer of 2025 and was submitted to the *International Journal of Listening* in August 2025. Sub-Study III focused on the listeners' perspective, examining their meaningful listener experiences within the context of community building. A five-level Reciprocal Community Building Model was developed. It illustrates the listening experiences—authenticity, participation, parasociality, reinforcement, and coevolution—that strengthen the sense of community.

In this dissertation, the three sub-studies complement one another to provide a comprehensive understanding of podcast participation and community building. Sub-Study I establishes the theoretical foundation by identifying the key factors that enhance a sense of community among podcast listeners. Sub-Study II applies these concepts in practice, demonstrating how different levels of audience participation can be structured and facilitated. Sub-Study III further integrates and expands upon these insights into participation, examining how reciprocality influences the listening experience and contributes to the ongoing development of podcast communities. Collectively, these studies progress from theory to practice, offering a visualized framework for the building of podcast communities.

Sub-Study I introduces the Six Enhancers of Sense of Community Model, identifying key factors that strengthen listeners' feeling of belonging, mutual importance, and shared faith that members' needs will be met

through their commitment. Sub-Study II presents a Social Podcasting Participation Model, outlining the progression from passive listening to active co-creation and collective ownership—a feeling that audience members have genuine influence over content and community, creating deeper participation and motivation to participate (Backhaus, 2019)—within podcast communities. Sub-Study III expands upon these insights with the Reciprocal Community Building Model, which describes community building as an evolving, cyclical process through five distinct stages. All models and sub-study findings are further detailed and discussed in Chapter 4.

Taken together, Sub-Studies I–III demonstrate that podcast communities flourish when listeners transition from passive consumption to more meaningful forms of participation and co-creation. The models underscore the significance of authentic content, trust, transmedial interaction, and genuine opportunities for participation, illustrating how these elements collectively contribute to the development of stronger and more dynamic communities within the podcast medium.

1.3. Aims and research question

This dissertation synthesizes three sub-studies on podcast communities. The primary aims of this research are as follows:

- to understand and model podcast community building from the theoretical perspectives of participatory culture and sense of community (Sub-Study I);
- to understand and model podcast community building from the perspective of podcast hosts and producers, as well as to examine how their actions enable participation and user-generated content (Sub-Study II);
- to understand and model podcast community building from the perspective of meaningful listener experiences (Sub-Study III); and

- to provide models and practices for creating more engaging podcast experiences and facilitating more meaningful listener experiences and participation (Sub-Studies I, II, and III).

The findings from the three sub-studies complement one another, providing a holistic view of podcast community building through the models developed.

The main research questions of the sub-studies are formulated in relation to their respective aims:

- What kind of participatory culture enhances a sense of community among podcast audiences? (Sub-Study I)
- What are the levels of audience participation based on produsage principles in social podcasting? (Sub-Study II)
- What kinds of meaningful listener experiences foster podcast community building? (Sub-Study III)

By integrating the research questions and aims of the sub-studies, this dissertation addresses the following overarching research question: *How do participatory culture, audience participation, and meaningful listener experiences contribute to building communities of practice around podcasts?*

2. Theoretical framework

To clarify the theoretical framework of this study and its relevance to podcasts, it is important to first situate this research within its interdisciplinary context. This dissertation bridges media education and educational sciences, while contributing to audience studies, listening research, and participatory culture theory. It expands social constructivist learning theory from traditional educational settings to asynchronous audio communities.

This research is positioned within the field of media education, which examines media participation and civic engagement (Buckingham, 2013; Kotilainen & Rantala, 2009). Media education aims to develop both critical understanding and active participation in society (Buckingham, 2013). This dissertation contributes to media education research by examining how participation and communities of practice emerge in asynchronous audio environments where traditional models of simultaneous engagement may not apply. Within this framework, podcasts are approached as media education environments in which participation occurs both *in* media (through content creation) and *through* media (through community engagement), following Carpentier's (2015) distinction. In podcast communities, hosts function as facilitators and enablers rather than traditional educators. Knowledge construction occurs collaboratively within the community (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1999), with listeners learning from each other while simultaneously experiencing participation in society (Kotilainen, 2009). Such participation is crucial for democratic agency (Kotilainen & Pienimäki, 2019), enabling individuals to have their voices heard in public discourse.

This interdisciplinary approach is essential because podcast communities operate across traditional disciplinary boundaries: they involve educational processes (learning and knowledge construction), media practices (production and consumption), and social dynamics (community building

and participation). The main theoretical frameworks that inform this study are presented in this chapter.

2.1. Communities of practice in podcasts

The main overarching framework of this study is social constructivist learning theory, as developed by Vygotsky (1978) and further expanded by Wenger (1999). Social constructivist learning theory emphasizes learning through social interaction and collaboration—or podcast participation, in the case of this study. Traditionally, this theory is connected to peer- or mentor-driven learning in real time. However, this study extends the scope of the theory beyond teaching-related situations to media-related ones—and more importantly, to asynchronous learning. This creates a link between podcast communities and media education, allowing for the analysis of modern, asynchronous media communities.

Podcast listeners are examined through the lens of this theory as they build knowledge in communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). After receiving information via podcasts, they react, discuss, and build upon this knowledge, keeping it continually evolving. This not only contributes to knowledge construction but also to community building. Wenger's concept of communities of practice refers to groups that share a common interest or passion and seek to improve their practice through ongoing interaction.

Asynchronous activity is not foreign to communities of practice. As with email lists, websites like Reddit, or chat-driven services, learning and participation can happen asynchronously in podcast communities. Furthermore, asynchronous learning can accommodate peers in different time zones (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023), allowing them to build on one another's work, enabling round-the-clock participation. This study extends these perspectives to a more audio-driven media landscape.

Communities of practice are characterized by three key dimensions (Wenger, 1999):

1. **mutual engagement**—the process through which listeners form bonds with other community members and develop dedication to the collective;
2. **joint enterprise**—the collaborative development of both community structure and content, which evolve simultaneously; and
3. **shared repertoire**—the emergence of distinctive language, references, and communication patterns unique to the community.

The three key dimensions align with participation in podcast communities. The process of *mutual engagement* is similar to parasociality in podcast communities. Parasociality is a psychological phenomenon in which audience members develop parasocial relationships, or an illusion of intimacy and interaction with media figures, such as podcast hosts, despite the relationship being one-sided and mediated (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This mutual engagement is not limited to interaction between hosts and listeners; listeners can also form bonds with other listening community members and become dedicated to the community. Similarly, Wenger's *joint enterprise* corresponds to podcast community reinforcement, where the community and content start to develop hand in hand as a result of continuous participation. Finally, *shared repertoire* relates to podcast co-evolution, as the community develops its own language and references through continuous improvement of the community. In Sub-Study III, community building was examined from the perspective of these dimensions. These results are discussed and evaluated in Chapter 4.

Participation in podcast communities is a crucial part of becoming a member of a community of practice. It is not limited to simultaneous meetings but is an asynchronous, yet constant, process. Periodicity is more important than frequency; a regular rhythm that fits members' schedules helps maintain continuity (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 102). In the case of podcasts, periodicity aligns with regular release schedules.

A crucial aspect of effective communities of practice is the balance between shared values and diversity, or "heterogeneous commonality" (Donison, 2023). Communities flourish when they sustain shared language,

values, and identities—similar to Wenger's shared repertoire—while also embracing the diverse roles and backgrounds of their members. Such environments promote active participation, empowering members to shape their collective experience (Rodgers, 2024). Wenger (1999) also highlighted the importance of this diversity of perspectives in building effective communities of practice. Although podcasts often attract niche audiences with similar interests (Berry, 2016), maintaining a diversity of perspectives remains vital for meaningful participation within these communities.

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the concept of scaffolding, first introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), build on the foundation of participation and learning processes within communities of practice. These concepts provide a means to measure progression across different levels of podcast participation and to understand how listeners advance within community hierarchies. These processes illustrate how individuals can move from occasional participation toward more central roles as they gain experience and knowledge within the community.

Vygotsky's ZPD represents the gap between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance from more knowledgeable individuals. This concept helps explain why some podcast listeners may not progress to higher levels of community participation and belonging. This is further discussed through the Reciprocal Community Building Model presented in Chapter 4. Because podcast listening is often a solitary activity, the concept of the ZPD highlights the importance of participatory actions by listener peers and hosts in facilitating development and strengthening community bonds.

The concept of scaffolding is particularly relevant for understanding how listeners advance within podcast community hierarchies. Scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976) refers to the support mechanisms provided by hosts and established community members that play a crucial role in shaping listening experiences. Advancement within the listening community's hierarchy—which is a learning process—depends significantly on co-listeners, participants, and hosts. With effective scaffolding, listeners can

navigate gaps between different levels of participation and move upward; conversely, progress may be hindered by insufficient support from hosts who lack motivation or fail to provide instructions or guidance, or from co-listeners who display hostility or indifference toward new members.

In addition, scaffolding—traditionally considered a support mechanism provided by teachers and established peers (Wood et al., 1976)—is extended in this study to include mechanisms that enable community members to become more engaged and active participants. This study shows that these media-related communities of practice can form even when participation happens alone, asynchronously, and *in* the media, not only *through* it. This distinction, coined by Nico Carpentier (2015), guides the research: participants act as content creators working in the media rather than just using it as a channel. Listeners are not mere receivers but participants who form communities and build meaningful listener experiences in an asynchronous media landscape. In contrast to mass media research, in which listeners were seen as collectives, masses, or crowds that gathered for a collective "spectacle" or experience (Baran & Davis, 2014), this study looks at listeners as active members.

2.2. Participatory culture and sense of community in podcasts

While participation is a key element in building and developing communities of practice, both *participatory culture* and *sense of community* must be present to enable and encourage podcast participation (Wendland, 2026a). Participatory culture serves as an umbrella term encompassing all forms of podcast participation. Each podcast community establishes its own norms and rules for active engagement, and definitions of participatory culture can be applied to a range of participatory cultures and analyzed as structures of participation, as suggested by Joe Karaganis (2007). According to Jenkins (2009), culture can be considered participatory if it features the following:

a. relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement;

b. strong support for creating and sharing creations with others;
c. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by more experienced individuals is passed on to novices;
d. members who believe that their contributions matter; and
e. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another, or at the least care what other people think about what they have created.

Although podcasts are often regarded primarily as a technological medium—such as in Berry's (2016) definition of podcasts as asynchronous audio-on-demand programs—it is important to emphasize that participation is not an inherent property of technology, even though technical interactivity (e.g., clicking, commenting, or sharing) may be considered a form of participation (Jenkins et al., 2016). Rather, participation is a property of culture (Jenkins, 2009). "Participation" refers to the cultural practices in which groups collectively and individually make decisions that influence their shared experiences (Jenkins et al., 2016). Kotilainen and Pienimäki (2019) extended this by highlighting the importance of authentic agency—providing young people with genuine opportunities to participate in society through media. This aligns with podcast participation, wherein listeners transition from passive consumption to active co-creation.

The five characteristics outlined by Jenkins underscore that participation is enabled by community, not by technology. Participation involves engaging in shared social practices and emphasizes collective meaning-making and co-creation (Florini, 2017) rather than simply interacting with an online platform or consuming content (Jenkins et al., 2016). It develops around personal interests and passions rather than institutional or commercial motives (Ito, 2013).

With podcasts, participation is often a by-product of listening. In the field of listening, listening research is often viewed through the lens of dyadic interactions—conversations between two people—as illustrated by the International Listening Association's definition (Wolvin, 1988; Worthington & Bodie, 2017, p. 2, Table 1.1). However, there are contexts in

which the roles of speaker and listener are asymmetrical (Imhof, 2010; Itzchakov et al., 2025; Lemay et al., 2023). These asymmetrical roles are particularly characteristic of the podcast format. This study shows that solo, asynchronous listening to podcasts is not passive; rather, it enables communal and participatory actions. This aligns with other listening research, such as the work of Bentley (2000). Nearly three decades ago, she suggested that because we cannot provide feedback, ask questions, or paraphrase in asynchronous conversations, the behaviors we use to indicate listening may be changing.

In listening research, high-quality listening is considered an act that involves caring for others and feeling valued as a partner (Lemay et al., 2023). High-quality listening reflects social motivations and helps listeners navigate complex, asynchronous relationships. Although podcast hosts and listeners cannot interact in real time, high-quality listening is the first step toward participatory actions. It offers the host validation and perceived interest (Itzchakov & Reis, 2023), much like parasociality satisfies social needs (Markman, 2012). This is shown particularly in Sub-Studies I and III.

Even though podcasts are often monologues, listeners' motivations and participation transform listening from passive reception into a communal, relationship-building experience (Lemay et al., 2023). This research contributes to modern listening research by identifying the specific listening experiences that enhance and facilitate high-quality listening.

The definition of high-quality listening resembles the definition of sense of community proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9), according to which a sense of community is "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (as cited in McMillan, 1976). While participation within participatory culture enables communities of practice, a sense of community enables participation. In podcast contexts, this makes a sense of community particularly important.

Furthermore, the concepts of sense of community and belonging connect this research to audience theories. One of the earliest ways that

audiences in a social context were viewed was as a "public." Audiences were seen as collectives, masses, or crowds that gathered for a collective "spectacle" or experience (Baran & Davis, 2014). The audience as a public was observed as a group of people acting individually, but the focus was also placed on the social relationships that emerged from belonging to the audience (Butsch, 2011). This research focuses on exactly these relationships. However, unlike traditional research that looks at the simultaneous use of media (Baran & Davis, 2014), this study examines how podcast listeners come together despite not being simultaneously and views the audience as a group of active individual members. This challenges the traditional concept of an audience gathering as a public to watch a spectacle. This study contributes to traditional audience research and expands perspectives on the different ways of being part of a public.

In addition, sense of community theory, developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), provides valuable insights into the sense of community generated through participation (McMahon, 2014) and the experiences of individuals within a community. Both sense of community and participation are central themes throughout all three sub-studies, enabling the examination of podcast communities and participation from multiple perspectives within a unified theoretical framework. Sense of community theory is particularly useful for this research because it provides a framework for understanding how community bonds form even in asynchronous contexts. While the theory was originally developed for physical communities, its four key elements apply equally to mediated communities where members do not interact simultaneously. This makes it especially relevant for podcast research, where listeners experience content individually and at different times, yet can still develop a strong sense of belonging and connection.

The four key elements of sense of community theory are membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Membership is closely associated with a sense of belonging, wherein individuals experience relatedness within the group. Influence operates in two directions: members have the ability

to affect the group, and the group's actions are significant to its members. Integration and fulfillment of needs align with findings from uses and gratifications studies related to podcasts; this element concerns the extent to which members' needs are met through their participation in the group. Shared emotional connection, the final element, refers to the perception and belief that members have shared experiences together.

It is important to note that no single element alone is sufficient to create a sense of community; all four elements must be present, although their relative importance may vary (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Similar to Jenkins's (2006) concept of participatory culture, the age of this theory does not diminish its relevance to podcast community research, as the focus remains on cultural rather than technological factors.

In addressing the main research question—*How do participatory culture, audience participation, and meaningful listener experiences contribute to the building of communities of practice around podcasts?*—this study focuses on the forms of participation that nurture the growth and strengthening of podcasts' communities of practice. Podcast participation is characterized as interest-driven, emphasizing the role of personal motivation and engagement in community building.

Another overarching theme is the concept of *power* within participatory culture. This topic will be further addressed in Chapter 2.4. According to Carpentier (2011), culture can only be considered truly participatory if its members are acknowledged as possessing a certain degree of power. This perspective aligns with Jenkins's characteristics discussed above, particularly point (d): "Members who believe that their contributions matter."

Collective participation represents participatory culture at its most robust, as it enables all members to feel invested in the outcomes (Jenkins, 2006). Such collective participation is evident in any grassroots community that shares intellectual and emotional commitments. The distribution of power within participatory culture shapes the norms and rules that govern schools, cultural expression, civic life, and work (Jenkins, 2009).

Podcast participation can be considered a form of interest-driven participation, as suggested by Ito (2013). It refers to participation in which

specialized interests bring a social group together. Podcast listening, as an interest-driven activity, fits well within this category. Hosts often perceive themselves as part of a broader community that includes listeners, guests, content providers, and other podcasters (Markman, 2012).

The components of the four elements—membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection—in the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model cannot be established from the outside; as with participatory culture, these must be determined by the community members themselves. Communities define the terms and conditions of participation (Jenkins, 2006). Similarly, companies cannot "create" brand communities; they can only engage with and support existing ones (Jenkins et al., 2013). This perspective aligns with the views of Jenkins (2006) and Carpentier (2011) discussed in Chapter 2.2, emphasizing that members possess the authority to establish the rules of participation.

Sub-Study I introduces six enhancers of sense of community in podcasts:

a. liveness,
b. community size,
c. parasociality,
d. participation intensity,
e. transmediality, and
f. shared intimacy and trust.

These six enhancers are consistent with Jenkins's (2009) concept of participatory culture, as well as with aspects of the four elements outlined in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) sense of community theory, which requires all four elements to be present for a sense of community to exist. The enhancers identified above incorporate aspects of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. The results of Sub-Study I and the Six Enhancers of Sense of Community Model are further explained and discussed in Chapter 4.

2.3. Produsage in podcasts

In this study, podcasts and audience-driven content creation are examined through the lens of *produsage*. This framework, developed by Bruns (2008), offers insights into how users actively participate in both the creation and modification of content. The produsage framework serves as a key tool for analyzing user-generated content and participatory culture.

Bruns' (2008) theory highlights the significance of active consumers by introducing the concept of produsage, which emphasizes that in communities engaged in the collaborative creation and expansion of information and knowledge, the traditional roles of "consumer" and "end user" have become obsolete. The theory describes the ongoing transition from industrial production methods to collaborative, user-driven content creation, in which the user assumes the role of "produser"—a hybrid of user and producer.

For over a decade, the focus of production research has shifted from creative industries to individual creative production, including critical discussions on unpaid work and self-exploitation. These topics align with this study, as it focuses on the communal production—or produsage—of podcasts. The audience is not only a passive receiver but also an active community member and a potential content creator. While this study is not strictly production research, the models developed offer insights and help deepen understanding of communities involving distributed cognition (Caldwell, 2008).

Similarly, this study provides insight into how podcast production ecosystems can be observed. Both Oakley and O'Connor (2015) and Caldwell (2008) emphasized that production research should focus on cultural and communal values rather than solely on economic benefits. They also discuss production ecosystems in which social, cultural, and economic values constantly interact. The findings of this study shed light on these ecosystems and provide examples of the participatory strengths of value-driven communities.

In addition, this study offers insights into the discussion on free labor. While produsage can be seen as exploitative, Hesmondhalgh (2010) argued that this phenomenon is often observed primarily from the perspective of capitalism and unpaid labor. This study contributes to this discussion by showing that participatory actions and produsage can be meaningful and create value outside of capitalist profit.

The produsage framework provides a comprehensive understanding of audience participation methods, particularly within the context of social podcasting explored in Sub-Study II. In this context, the concept of *intercreativity*, introduced by Tim Berners-Lee (2000), is especially relevant. Intercreative environments enable users to collaborate, often within large communities, to develop and expand shared informational resources of mutual interest. This approach shares several similarities with Benkler's (2006) notion of peer production, which is characterized by decentralization and self-selection, reflecting the dynamics of intercreative environments. Rather than solely engaging with existing material, individuals are empowered with the tools necessary for content creation. From this research perspective, the deeper integration of intercreativity into social podcasts transforms listeners into produsers, substantially increasing their level of participation.

Bruns (2013) identified four key principles of produsage, which are considered in this research when defining levels of participation within social podcasts:

1. **Open participation, communal evaluation**—Anyone can contribute to and modify content, which is then assessed and improved by the community.
2. **Fluid heterarchy, ad hoc meritocracy**—Leadership and roles are flexible, determined by the quality and relevance of contributions rather than by predetermined hierarchy.
3. **Unfinished artefacts, continuing process**—Content is always evolving, never finalized, allowing for perpetual updates and improvements by the community.

4. **Common property, individual rewards**—While the created content is owned by the community as a whole, individuals are recognized and rewarded for their contributions.

Bruns (2008) also emphasized the importance of rewards for contributions, as outlined in his fourth principle, *Common Property, Individual Rewards*. This concept aligns closely with the practice of recognizing podcast listeners for their participation. While content is collectively owned, individual creators can still receive personal recognition for their contributions. Such recognition serves as a significant incentive to engage in collaborative projects, as it enhances an individual's reputation both within the community and, in some cases, beyond it. For those active in prominent collaborative communities, this recognition can even lead to tangible real-world benefits. Sub-Study II presents a five-level model of social podcasting participation. This model is grounded in Bruns' produsage framework (2013) and provides practical guidance for podcast creators seeking to involve their audience more effectively in the content creation process. It encourages diverse and deeper forms of participation and promotes the redistribution of power from hosts to the audience through collective ownership. The Social Podcasting Participation Model developed in Sub-Study II visualizes audience participation levels based on produsage principles. Five levels were identified:

1. limited audience interaction,
2. enhanced audience participation,
3. integrating listener inputs,
4. building on mutual trust, and
5. collective ownership.

Sub-Study II also reveals that as participation moves to higher levels within this model, occurrences become increasingly rare; podcasts operating at Levels 4 and 5 remain uncommon. This model and the results of Sub-Study II are further discussed in Chapter 4.

A comparison of the findings from Sub-Study II with the theoretical framework of produsage—specifically Bruns' (2013) four principles—indicates that as podcasts achieve higher levels of participation and audience-driven content creation, they more fully align with these principles. The podcast becomes increasingly open to participation; leadership roles become more fluid, with audience members able to take the lead; content remains unscripted and continuously evolving; and contributors receive recognition for their input.

The process of produsage described above resembles the self-reinforcing loop, which is further discussed in Chapter 2.4. Within the framework of meaningfulness, increased audience participation strengthens connections between hosts and listeners, which in turn encourages further participation. Similarly, in the context of produsage, participation nurtures greater openness and empowers audience members to assume leadership roles. In summary, the findings of both Sub-Study II and Sub-Study III demonstrate that participation tends to generate additional opportunities for participation.

2.4. Meaningful participation and listening experiences in podcasts

In Chapters 2.2. and 2.3, participatory culture and produsage were both framed as crucial to building communities of practice. To elaborate on this further, in this study, participation is conceptualized as a *meaningful experience*. Meaningful participation in media involves audience members having influence over decision-making and content creation (Carpentier, 2015; Pateman, 1970). It is characterized by power-sharing, ownership, and collaborative engagement within the community (Jenkins, 2006). Meaningful participation can be delineated by distinguishing among media access, interaction, and participation, as articulated in Carpentier's (2015) Access–Interaction–Participation (AIP) model. While in the AIP model, *access* to content or users' possibilities for *interaction* with others is crucial, both *access* and *interaction* lack a key element: power. In the AIP mod-

el, *participation* emphasizes the audience's power in the decision-making process, which is also a central element of participatory culture, as noted in Chapter 2.2.

In the AIP model, *interaction* is regarded as a form of engagement, but within a more limited scope. It involves engagement through predefined mechanisms that do not allow for substantial influence over the media content or its production. In contrast, participation denotes that the audience possesses a genuine stake in and influence over the creation and production of content.

Participation serves as an effective means of developing an engaged podcast community and creating meaningful discussions among individuals with shared interests (Florini, 2017; Fox et al., 2020). Beyond its role in decision-making, meaningful participation also manifests through a sense of ownership (Backhaus, 2019). This relationship is reciprocal: participation in podcasts cultivates a sense of ownership, and ownership, in turn, encourages further participation. Kotilainen and Pienimäki (2019) argued that authentic agency—offering real opportunities to publish and participate—builds motivation and trust in competence among at-risk youth. Similarly, in podcast communities, participation creates meaningful listener experiences and strengthens a sense of community.

Sub-Study III seeks to understand how meaningful listener experiences can promote community building and enhance listeners' sense of community. In Sub-Study III, meaningful listener experiences within podcast communities are defined by active listenership and participation. Meaningfulness in listening experiences emerges when listeners shift from consumers to creators (Malinen, 2015), reflecting the concept of *prosumerism*—the hybrid consumer–producer role first conceptualized by Alvin Toffler (Toffler, 1980).

Sub-Study II examines meaningful participation within the context of social podcasting. Sub-Studies II and III suggest that meaningfulness in podcast listening experiences can be characterized by audience content creation and an enhanced sense of community that encourages greater participation. The data from Sub-Study III further reveal a clear recipro-

cal relationship: strong content elements—such as authenticity, expertise, and approachability—establish conditions for meaningful participation, while the thoughtful integration of audience participation increases content relevance and deepens the connections between hosts and listeners. The most successful podcasts generate a feedback loop in which this relationship continuously strengthens over time.

Sub-Study III focuses on meaningful listener experiences that ignite audience commitment, belonging, and participation, thereby creating a sense of community. Five levels of sense of community were identified, each representing increasingly stronger forms of these experiences:

1. Authenticity
2. Participation
3. Parasociality
4. Reinforcement
5. Coevolution

The Reciprocal Community Building Model developed in Sub-Study III indicates that listeners who engage at any of these levels are experiencing meaningful listening—that is, meaningfulness within podcasts—with higher levels offering progressively deeper forms of connection and participation. This model and the results of Sub-Study III are further discussed in Chapter 4.

3. Research methodology—Multi-method research

To provide a holistic overview of the aims, research questions, data collection, and analysis methods across all three sub-studies, the methodology is presented in a comparative format (Table 1), making it easy to observe similarities and differences, as well as the overarching research process.

Methodologically, this research is a multi-method study in which the three sub-studies have been sequentially linked. Their findings have not only been combined in the final synthesis of this dissertation, but the results of the previous sub-studies have directly influenced the design of the subsequent ones. This approach, described as an exploratory sequential design, involves using the initial qualitative results to build new methodological features or tools for the next phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). For instance, the enhancers identified in Sub-Study I were essential to designing the Social Podcasting Participation Model in Sub-Study II.

This integration explains why the phases of this research were not conducted simultaneously; there is a clear methodological dependency between the sub-studies. As per Greene et al. (1989), the underlying purpose of this kind of multi-method design is development, as it seeks to use the results from one method to help develop or inform the other method.

Table 1. Methodologies of sub-studies

Aims and contributions	Research questions	Research methods and data	Data analysis methods	Publication
Sub-Study I: To explore the mechanisms for building a deeper participatory culture around podcasts	What kind of participatory culture enhances a sense of community among podcast audiences?	16 peer-reviewed articles published 2019–2023	Systematic literature review	Refereed international scientific journal: Wendland, J. (2026a). Building a better participatory culture and enhancing sense of community in podcasts—Systematic literature review. Journal of Radio & Audio Media, 33(1), 130–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2024.2347609
Sub-Study II: To explore the evolution of audience participation in podcasts from passive consumption to active participation	What are the levels of audience participation based on produsage principles in social podcasting?	Expert and snowball sampling for an anonymous survey. The data included 112 answers and 81 unique podcasts.	Qualitative data analysis	Refereed international scientific journal: Wendland, J. (2025). Social podcasting—Levels of podcast audience participation. Journal of Radio & Audio Media. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2025.2460834
Sub-Study III: To explore listening experiences that enable and create the community-building process around podcasts	What kinds of meaningful listener experiences foster community building around podcasts?	16 semi-structured listener interviews	Grounded theory	Refereed international scientific journal: Wendland, J. (2026b). Reciprocal community building model for podcasts—Meaningful listener experiences: Grounded theory research. International Journal of Listening. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2026.2660064

3.1. Sub-Study I: Systematic literature review

In Sub-Study I, a systematic literature review (SLR) (Fink, 2010) was conducted to explore the mechanisms for building a more participatory culture around podcasts by identifying and analyzing relevant articles. The SLR method was particularly appropriate for this research, given the limited previous research in this area. The aim of the SLR was to synthesize existing knowledge in order to answer the sub-study research question: *What kind of participatory culture enhances a sense of community among podcast audiences?*

As a transparent and repeatable method, an SLR facilitates the search, collection, extraction, and organization of available data for analytic purposes, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge (Machi & McEvoy, 2022). Additionally, it enables the identification of gaps, contradictions, omissions, and debates within the research topic.

Following the guidelines of Finfgeld-Connett and Johnson (2013), a sufficient number of topically specific and contextually rich peer-reviewed articles were collected to support analysis and interpretation. This approach also enabled pattern recognition within the collected data (Booth et al., 2012). The initial round of article selection included a total of 215 articles, to which exclusion criteria were applied in the subsequent phase.

Sub-Study I followed Fink's (2010) seven-step process for SLRs, organized as follows:

1. selecting research questions,
2. selecting article databases,
3. choosing search terms,
4. applying practical screening criteria,
5. applying methodological screening criteria,
6. conducting the review, and
7. synthesizing the results.

Similarly, Machi and McEvoy's (2022) three principles guided the process, which involved

a. portraying the reality of the information present,
b. accurately ascertaining the quality of the data, and
c. logically forming conclusions.

Literature searches were conducted for peer-reviewed articles published between January 2018 and September 2023[2] across seven scientific databases (Table 2). The databases that were excluded mostly concentrated on a single field of science and/or returned no results in test searches. Ensuring the currency of articles is essential in any media-related study, given the rapid pace of change within the mediascape. The decision to limit the publication timeframe to five years was intended to prevent the inclusion of outdated information, as older articles may lack relevance for this field of research. Furthermore, 65% of the selected articles were published after January 2022, thereby supporting the temporal relevance of the literature review.

Table 2. Databases, search results, and numbers after exclusions

Database	Search results	After exclusions
Proquest	24	6
Ebscohost	46	1
Taylor & Francis Online	53	7
SpringerLink	78	2
SAGE Journals	3	1
ScienceDirect	1	0
Wiley Online Library	10	0
Total	215	17

2 Note that some articles were originally retrieved as advance online publications. Because they were formally published in journal issues while this dissertation was being written, certain references are dated 2024, even though their original citation year was 2023.

The search string was "title(podc*) AND noft(participation) AND noft(podcast)". If the "noft" limitation (meaning "search anywhere except for full text") was not available in the database search option, the search was conducted with the same string but without this limitation. Similarly, if a database search did not accept an asterisk in the search string, the search was conducted with the full word "podcast." Despite being one of the sub-study keywords, the search term "community" was omitted because it resulted in articles that were not about podcast communities or in which the community was not the target of the research.

The searches conducted with the specified inclusion criteria (Table 3) yielded a total of 215 articles. In addition to abstracts, article keywords were used to assess the relevance of each article. Given the broad scope of podcast research, exclusion criteria were applied to narrow the selection and ensure alignment with the research question. Exclusion criteria (Table 3) were necessary to narrow down the number of articles and ensure their relevance to the research question.

Table 3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Scholarly journal	Research about podcast producers and not the audience
Published Jan 2018 to Sep 2023	Research about the pandemic or COVID-19
Written in English	Language other than English
Peer reviewed	Research not audio related despite the word "podcast" in the title/abstract/keywords
Full text available	Research concentrating on increasing podcast use
	Research concentrating on technological innovations
	Research analyzing the process of podcasting
	Research about politics, law and justice, medical and health–related topics, linguistics, social work, journalism, and learning disabilities
	Research constituting a fan study
	Research about the business models of radio and/or podcasts
	Research about campus or local community radio

Podcast production studies were excluded as they do not address the experiences or perceptions of the audience, which are central to understanding how participatory culture impacts their sense of community. Exclusion criteria also included studies about economic and business aspects, distribution, and marketing strategies. A focus on these areas may provide insights into content creation but does not shed light on audience engagement and community building.

Similarly, studies centered on the pandemic may present skewed results due to the unique global circumstances affecting podcast consumption and community engagement during this period. The aim was to understand the broader, more enduring aspects of participatory culture that enhance a sense of community among podcast audiences, beyond the anomalies introduced by the pandemic.

Studies focused on increasing podcast use were also excluded. While understanding factors that increase podcast use can be valuable, such research might not provide direct insights into how participatory culture affects the sense of community among listeners. The focus here is less on the quantitative aspects of usage and more on the qualitative aspects of listener engagement and community experiences. Similarly, technological advancements in podcasting are essential but lie outside the scope of this study, which seeks to understand dynamics of audience participation.

Podcast studies related to politics, law and justice, medical and health-related topics, linguistics, social work, journalism, and learning disabilities tackle significant subjects, but they often focus on the application of podcasts in specific fields, such as medical education, health communication, social work training, or educational support for those with learning disabilities. These specialized uses of podcasts provide valuable insights within their respective domains but do not directly contribute to this SLR's research question.

Finally, excluding studies of local and campus radio ensures that the research remains focused on the broader participatory culture among podcast audiences. The aim is to understand the dynamics within podcast

audiences at large, which might differ significantly from those engaged with locally focused radio content.

The exclusion phase highlighted both the scarcity of studies specifically addressing podcast communities and the prevalence of radio and audio research more generally. The primary challenge was to refine the SLR dataset to include only the most relevant articles. To address this, all remaining articles were assessed for relevance, and those that did not provide insights related to the SLR research question were excluded.

After the exclusion process, 16 articles remained for the analysis. The themes of the 16 articles included the following:

a. motivations for podcast listening (Chou et al., 2023; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022; Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024),
b. a broader examination of several podcast and community studies (Hoydis, 2020),
c. parasociality (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022),
d. podcast subscriptions (Chen & Keng, 2024),
e. host trust and credibility (Brinson & Lemon, 2023),
f. participation and engagement (García-Marín, 2020; García-Marín & Aparici, 2020),
g. transmediality—storytelling and audience engagement that extends across multiple platforms (Baelo-Allué, 2019; García-Marín & Aparici, 2020),
h. podcast uses and gratifications (Perks et al., 2019; Perks & Turner, 2019),
i. commonality, creativity, and collaboration in podcasting (Donison, 2023),
j. engagement in educational podcasts (Besser et al., 2022; McNamara et al., 2024), and
k. intimacy and interactivity in true crime podcasts (Rodgers, 2024).

In accordance with the research question, relevant data were extracted from each article, compiled into an external document, and organized thematically using a digital mind map. Prior to further reflection and analysis,

several key themes emerged from the data, including reasons for listening, uses and gratifications, asynchronicity, participation, trust, parasociality, niche communities, active listening, liveness, transmediality, and individual meaningful experiences. The results of this systematic literature review are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

3.2. Sub-Study II: Survey and qualitative data analysis

For Sub-Study II, a survey targeting audio and media professionals was conducted to address the sub-study research question: *What are the levels of audience participation based on produsage principles in social podcasting?* This approach utilized expert sampling, a technique in which individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about a specific topic are purposefully selected (Flick, 2018; Singh, 2007). One advantage of expert sampling is its propensity to lead to snowball sampling, whereby initial respondents refer to additional potential participants (Iorio, 2004). This approach was especially beneficial in this research, as the author's position at Yle provided direct access to a large network of audio and media professionals. As Gideon (2012) noted, purposive sampling methods, such as expert sampling, are particularly valuable when the researcher is familiar with the characteristics of the target population and aims to include individuals with relevant expertise in the sample.

A brief, anonymous survey was distributed to audio reporters and producers at Yle in January 2024, inviting professionals to identify and nominate participatory podcasts via a web form. The term "participatory" was intentionally left undefined on the form, allowing respondents to interpret it broadly, thus yielding a diverse range of podcasts featuring participatory elements for analysis.

The survey received 112 responses, representing 81 unique podcasts, both international and Finnish. These podcasts were subsequently analyzed within the study's theoretical framework to identify different levels of audience participation. The analysis considered Bruns' (2013) four principles of produsage, as well as key factors such as the presence or absence

of the audience's voice and, crucially, the degree of influence that audience members exerted on podcast content. These principles are discussed in Chapter 2.3. In cases where a podcast's headline indicated a more audience-driven episode (such as Q&A episodes), those episodes were selected for analysis; otherwise, the most recent episode was chosen.

During the analysis of podcast episodes, notes were taken on the presence or absence of the audience's voice and the application of Bruns' principles. This iterative process between the audio content and the theoretical framework was abductive in nature. Given the scarcity of existing studies, concepts, and models related to social podcasting, an abductive approach provided the opportunity to develop new paradigms. In this context, the observations—such as the presence of the audience's voice within podcasts—informed the development of an explanatory hypothesis, the model of participation, as defined by Peirce (1934, 5.171). Abductive reasoning often involves the creation of new concepts that enable novel descriptions of relevant phenomena (Aliseda, 2006). In Sub-Study II, Bruns' principles and theoretical framework facilitated the interpretation of audio observations and the development of a new model to improve the current understanding of social podcasting.

By identifying and comparing similarities in the notes recorded during episode analysis, varying depths of audience participation were revealed. From these observations, five distinct levels of participation were identified in podcasts in which the audience was present. The analyzed podcasts encompassed a wide range of genres, including true crime, entertainment, music journalism, news and politics, life hacks, and finance. Most episodes ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour in length, although the sample also included short-form podcasts (approximately 15 minutes) and episodes exceeding 3 hours. The 81 analyzed podcasts featured content in both Finnish and English.

After analyzing each podcast and comparing the patterns observed, five clear levels of audience participation were established. The episodes

were then ranked from 0 to 5 based on the degree of audience participation and presence in each episode, using Bruns's four principles of produsage as a reference: Can anyone contribute and modify the content? What are the audience roles? Is the content in constant process? Is the created content owned by the community? Categorizing each podcast into a single level was challenging, as the degree of participation could vary even within an individual episode. In such cases, the highest level of participation achieved in the episode was recorded. The differences required to transition between participation levels are generally minor, often involving subtle changes in tone or in the approach to audience inclusion.

Given the subtlety of these categorization nuances, presenting the results as percentages (Table 4) is vital for illustrating the relative rarity of higher levels of participation.

Table 4. Percentage of podcasts at each level of audience participation

Level	Percentage of podcasts
5	5%
4	5%
3	7%
2	11%
1	23%
0	48%

After ranking each podcast according to its level of audience participation, similarities among podcasts within the same level were analyzed. This comparative analysis informed the development of a five-level Social Podcasting Participation Model, designed to answer the research question: *What are the levels of audience participation based on produsage principles in social podcasting?* The results of this analysis, along with the proposed model, are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

3.3. Sub-Study III: Grounded theory

Sub-Study III employed grounded theory to investigate how podcast messages and host communication are interpreted and understood by listeners, addressing the sub-study research question: *What kinds of meaningful listener experiences foster podcast community building?* Sixteen semi-structured listener interviews were conducted and then analyzed using grounded theory from the perspective of community building.

Grounded theory facilitates the development of theory directly from empirical data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). However, as Charmaz (2014) noted, any theoretical construction is an interpretive portrayal of the phenomenon rather than an exact representation. This methodological approach is particularly suitable for constructing theory grounded in qualitative data—in this case, the 16 semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory emphasizes emergence and encourages researchers to remain open to unforeseen developments within the research setting (Charmaz, 2008). Given the limited existing research on the sense of community from the listeners' perspective, theoretical sensitivity is crucial for identifying significant phenomena within the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In Sub-Study III, an evolved Straussian version of grounded theory is applied, as presented in Table 5 by Chun Tie et al. (2019, p. 5), based on Birks and Mills (2011).

Table 5. Comparison of grounded theory coding terminology as presented by Chun Tie et al. (2019, p. 5) based on Birks and Mills (2011)

Grounded theory genre	**Coding terminology**		
	Initial	Intermediate	Advanced
Traditional	Open coding	Selective coding	Theoretical coding
Evolved	**Open coding**	**Axial coding**	**Selective coding**
Constructivist	Initial coding	Focused coding	Theoretical coding

Each of the three methodological genres of grounded theory—traditional, evolved, and constructivist—represents a distinct variant of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original approach. The traditional genre aims to generate a conceptual theory that accounts for patterns of behavior that are relevant for those involved. In contrast, the constructivist genre focuses on co-constructing experiences and meanings with participants. This sub-study applies the evolved genre, which concentrates on the subjective meanings that people attach to behaviors based on their personal beliefs and perceptions of truth (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Since the data in this sub-study consist of interviews, the focus on subjective meanings in participants' descriptions of community and participatory actions makes the evolved genre particularly relevant to the research objectives.

According to structural descriptions of the evolved Straussian grounded theory process by Charmaz (2014), Birks and Mills (2011), Chun Tie et al. (2019), and Corbin and Strauss (2007), the process can be divided into four stages: open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and theory building. The theory built through this process will answer the research question and will be a substantive theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as it concentrates on one subject only (sense of community in podcasts), has a clear context of 16 interviews, and aims to explain a specific phenomenon (listeners' sense of community).

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in January 2025, focusing on three selected podcasts: "Melkein kaikki perheestä" (Almost Everything About Family), "Olenko perseestä" (Am I the Asshole?), and "Kerhotalo" (The Clubhouse). In 2024, both the "Olenko perseestä" and "Melkein kaikki perheestä" podcasts received between 510,000 and 610,000 starts (Yleisradio, 2025). Listener numbers for "Kerhotalo" are not available, but the size of its online community and its media visibility also suggest that it was among the most-listened-to podcasts in its genre during 2023–2024. In addition to high listener numbers, all three podcasts have particularly active and dedicated audiences who are highly engaged, making them especially relevant for this research.

For each podcast, four to six listeners were selected for interviews. The selection leaned toward participatory, active listeners. The method for this selection was purposive sampling, which Gideon (2012) described as a useful sampling method when the researcher knows the characteristics of the target population and then seeks out specific individuals who have those characteristics to include in the sample. Purposive sampling directs the collection and/or generation of data (Chun Tie et al., 2019). In this case, podcasts known to have a particularly thriving community were selected, and then, among the listener base of those three podcasts, active participants were sought with the help of the producers.

Podcast producers were asked to facilitate connections between the researcher and active listeners of their respective podcasts, using their established relationships with their listener base. For participant recruitment, all three podcast production teams employed dual strategies: using social media platforms to identify potential interviewees while also directly approaching their most engaged listeners, whom they considered ideal candidates for the study.

The data for this research included 16 interviews, each approximately 30 minutes in duration, conducted in Finnish, producing a total of 8 hours of recorded material. All interviews were recorded using Google Meet and transcribed using Amazon Web Services (AWS) Transcribe software, generating 3,500–4,000-word transcripts per interview and totaling over 60,000 words.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature. As the primary aim of the research was to gain insights into participants' individual perspectives rather than to develop a broad understanding of the phenomenon under study, semi-structured interviews can be considered a suitable data collection method (McGrath et al., 2019). Each interview began by asking participants to describe their perceptions of the podcast community to which they belonged. The interviewees typically proceeded to describe their personal connection with the community and their various forms and instances of participation. This approach allowed the conversations to develop organically. The author guided the conversation to collect the

data, but the exact research question was not asked directly, nor were the interviewees led thematically.

Sixteen themes arose from the data, which were then sorted according to their frequency of occurrence (*f*). The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of interviews, out of 16, in which each theme was mentioned (Figure 1).

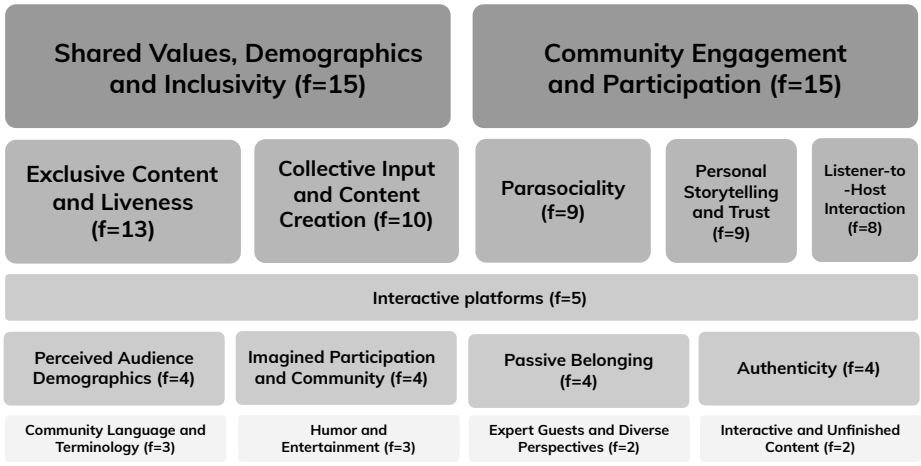


Figure 1. Open coding: 16 themes sorted according to the frequency of occurrence (*f*)

The axial coding phase followed the open coding phase, building upon its results. Through further analysis of the data and the 16 themes identified during open coding, three overarching categories were established to organize these themes (Figure 2).

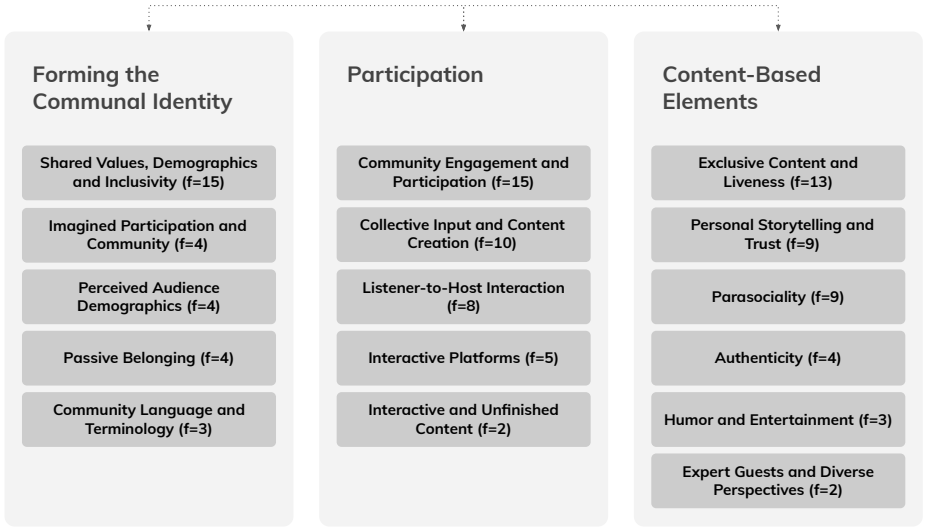


Figure 2. Axial coding: the formation of three categories from 16 themes

Next, axial coding was employed in two ways, as recommended by Birks and Mills (2011): first, to develop distinct categories by connecting related themes, and second, to link these categories to one another. After grouping the 16 themes into three main categories based on their frequency of appearance, the categories were qualitatively cross-analyzed. The interview data were compared across categories using three guiding questions to develop a holistic and interconnected view of the interview data:

1. What is the connection between communal identity and participation?
2. How do content-based elements connect with participation—and vice versa?
3. What is the connection between content-based elements and communal identity?

Following the completion of axial coding, a core category was identified to encapsulate and explain the grounded theory developed in this study.

The core category succinctly captures the central theme of the research (Birks & Mills, 2011). When combined with supporting categories, it forms the backbone of the theoretical framework. The properties and dimensions of each category provide essential detail and nuance to this structure (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

By integrating all three categories—(1) Forming the Communal Identity, (2) Participation, and (3) Content-Based Elements—meaningful listener experiences in podcasts emerge as an evolving process, which can be termed "Reciprocal Community Building" (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Selective coding: the formation of the core category "Reciprocal Community Building"

Reciprocal Community Building incorporates the concept that content-based elements—particularly authenticity and parasociality—enable a feedback loop of participation, which in turn enriches the content and shapes communal identity. This core category is evident throughout the data, including the open and axial coding phases.

Subsequently, a theoretical model was constructed to describe the reciprocal process of forming a sense of community (see Figure 6, Chapter 4.3.1). The data analysis, beginning with the identification of 16 themes during open coding and their organization into the core category through axial coding, provided the foundation for model development. This model illustrates the formation of a sense of community as a reciprocal process in which the three categories—forming communal identity, participation,

and content-based elements—continuously reinforce and reshape one another.

The core category is not a discrete entity, but is composed of its sub-components. In accordance with Corbin and Strauss (2007), each of the three sub-categories was elaborated in terms of its properties and dimensions before being integrated around the core category. These properties and dimensions supply detailed content that gives structure and depth to the core category. Importantly, the core category does not simply aggregate the three sub-categories from the axial coding phase; rather, it explicates their dynamic and reciprocal relationships. Cross-analysis of these properties and dimensions across the sub-categories revealed five distinct levels of meaningful listener experiences, which form the basis of the complete Reciprocal Community Building Model.

This model and the findings of this sub-study are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

4. Results and evaluation of the sub-studies

This chapter provides a holistic overview of the three sub-studies and establishes the foundation for addressing the main research question: *How do participatory culture, audience participation, and meaningful listener experiences contribute to the building of communities of practice around podcasts?* Each sub-study is examined in terms of its research findings, their interconnections, and how they collectively contribute to a coherent understanding of podcast participation. The results, as well as the sub-studies in their entirety, are evaluated to identify potential gaps and opportunities for future research.

4.1. Sub-Study I: Building a better participatory culture and enhancing sense of community in podcasts—Systematic literature review

Wendland, J. (2026a). Building a better participatory culture and enhancing sense of community in podcasts—Systematic literature review. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, *33*(1), 130–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2024.2347609

4.1.1. Overview and results of Sub-Study I

Sub-Study I investigated the mechanisms for cultivating a more inclusive participatory culture in podcasts and other asynchronous audio products, with the objective of strengthening the sense of community among podcast listeners. Additionally, the sub-study aimed to address the information gap in podcast research from the perspective of community building. The research question guiding this sub-study was: *What kind of participatory culture enhances a sense of community among podcast audiences?*

Through the analysis of 16 research articles, a model comprising six interrelated enhancers of sense of community was developed. These en-

hancers identify podcast features that positively influence the sense of community among listeners (Figure 4).

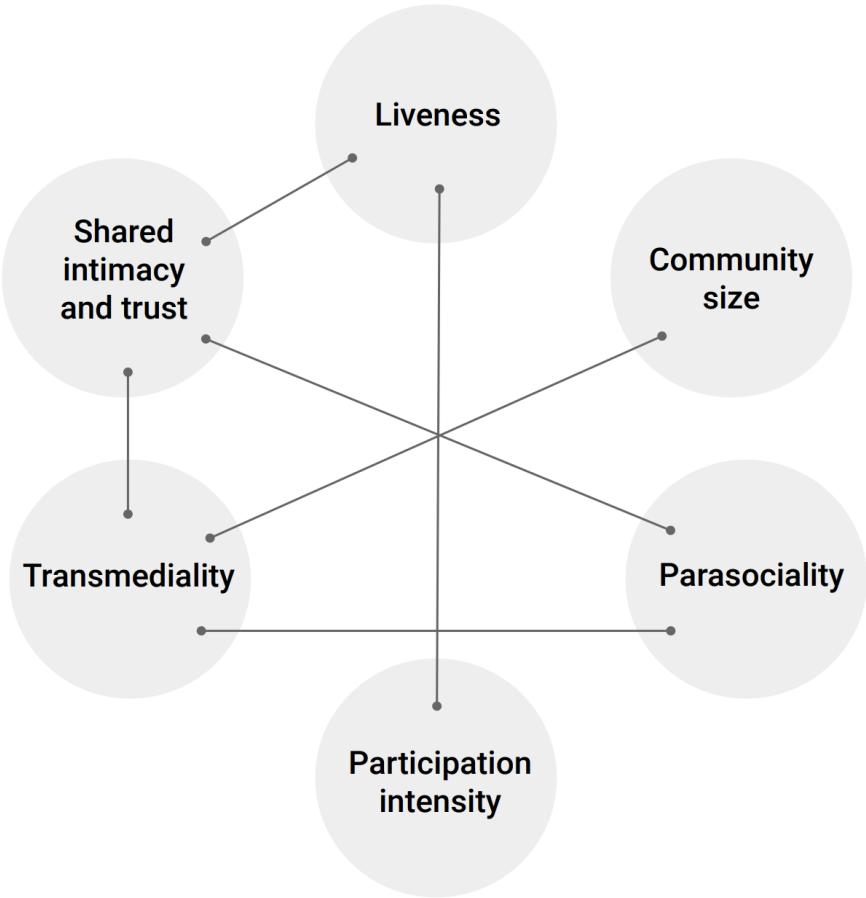


Figure 4. Six Enhancers of Sense of Community Model

The model outlines the characteristics of a functioning podcast community in which participatory culture flourishes. Key elements include liveness, a sufficiently small community size, and parasociality. The model also emphasizes opportunities for intensive participation across transmedial platforms, as well as shared intimacy and trust—a climate of closeness and confidence that can be established both between hosts and listeners

and among listeners themselves. Each of these six enhancers—whether present individually or collectively—contributes to strengthening the sense of community.

The model addresses Sub-Study I's research question by examining each of the six enhancers. The enhancers are also interlinked, as shown in Figure 4. These connections are addressed in the descriptions of the enhancers below.

Liveness: Meaningful participation in podcasts depends on either genuine or simulated liveness. The asynchronous nature of podcasts can diminish opportunities for intensive participation, a finding consistent with Lucas Swiatek's research (as cited in Llinares et al., 2018), which suggests that podcasts are capable of generating a sense of intimacy and trust despite the absence of physical proximity. However, further research is needed to determine whether meaningful participation and a sense of community can be achieved in podcasts lacking any form of liveness.

Community size: Participatory culture is most intense in small communities formed across multiple transmedial platforms. Participation through shared experiences and stories, facilitated by means of collaboration, enhances the sense of community. These findings interlink the size of the community with the concept of transmediality.

Parasociality: The development of a participatory culture that reinforces a sense of community often relies on a central figure, typically the show's host, who becomes the focus of parasocial interactions. Such relationships can be intensified through frequent and extended listening sessions. Parasociality may be further enhanced if the host demonstrates interest in the audience, shares personal information, and is perceived as competent, authentic, and unpredictable (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022). Sub-Study I also connects parasociality with intimacy and trust. Nonetheless, it remains uncertain whether parasociality can develop among listeners themselves if sufficient opportunities for participatory engagement are present. Further research is required to explore whether a community can form through parasociality among members without the ongoing involvement of a host as a catalyst.

Participation intensity: Participation itself should be meaningful, ensuring that listeners and the community derive value from their investment of time and energy. Participation must be actively stimulated, and participatory acts often generate further engagement, creating a feedback loop if nurtured appropriately. Typically, well-chosen topics and elements of liveness spark participation and enhance the sense of community.

Transmediality: Transmedial participatory culture further strengthens podcast communities. Multiple studies included in this review found that transmedial communities promote stronger collective intelligence and facilitate audience-driven narratives. Additionally, external findings support the view that transmediality enhances parasociality (Giles, 2002).

Shared intimacy and trust: Finally, the creation of a sense of shared intimacy within a podcast can enhance the sense of community, even in the absence of explicit participatory acts. Shared intimacy and trust operate independently from the participation bubble but can be amplified by parasociality and asynchronous engagement.

Findings from uses and gratifications studies (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2023; Perks et al., 2019; Perks & Turner, 2019; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022) have indicated that the need to belong or to build communities is not a significant motivator for most podcast listeners. Social and emotional needs appear to play a limited role, although they are influential in shaping even the most popular programs. By integrating these findings with insights on community size, it can be concluded that small communities with intensive participation are vital for podcast development and change, but their needs represent only a small fraction of the overall audience.

From the perspective of the theoretical framework, all six enhancers of the sense of community are consistent with Jenkins's (2009) concept of participatory culture. Podcasts already offer a basis for an expressive, supportive culture of creativity and engagement with collective intelligence, as defined by Jenkins—these three are platform-based features. In contrast, the remaining three enhancers—parasociality, shared intimacy, and meaningful participation—are user- and culture-centered rather than

platform-centered, and are shaped by the culture itself. The mechanisms underlying these features have been defined in the Sub-Study I.

Additionally, these six enhancers align with the four elements of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) sense of community model, which requires the presence of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection to establish a sense of community.

The model developed in Sub-Study I establishes a foundation for answering the main research question of this dissertation from the perspective of community. It delineates the community characteristics necessary for creating participatory culture and a sense of community. Sub-Studies II and III build upon this foundation, extending the analysis to audience participation levels and host actions (Sub-Study II), as well as listener experiences (Sub-Study III).

4.1.2. Evaluation of Sub-Study I

A key strength of this research is its direct practical applicability. The model developed in Sub-Study I has been presented at various international conferences and workshops as both a partial and comprehensive tool for evaluating and improving current and forthcoming podcast products. Its impact beyond the academic sphere has been clear and tangible.

As a scientific publication, Sub-Study I addresses an existing gap in participatory podcast research. By synthesizing recent literature through an SLR, it adopts an approach not previously explored in depth. Although it is the first sub-study in this dissertation, it also establishes the foundation for the subsequent sub-studies by defining key terms and concepts for the entire body of research. Notably, Sub-Study I suggested that the six enhancers identified could be used to construct and refine a scale for measuring the intensity of the sense of community in podcasts, a proposal that was implemented in Sub-Study II to further enrich understanding of participatory culture.

Critically, the scarcity of existing podcast studies means that future research on participatory culture in podcasts may substantially alter the

model or its components. Future studies might place greater emphasis on particular enhancers, introduce new ones, or argue that some are irrelevant or outdated. Due to the limited number of studies available, the article selection criteria for the SLR may have been broader than would be the case in a field with more abundant research. However, it is worth noting that the articles included in the SLR have not been superseded or rendered obsolete by newer studies during the course of this research.

4.2. Sub-Study II: Social podcasting—Levels of podcast audience participation

Wendland, J. (2025). Social podcasting—Levels of podcast audience participation. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2025.2460834

4.2.1. Overview and results of Sub-Study II

Sub-Study II investigated the phenomenon of social podcasting, in which audience participation becomes central to content creation, ranging from passive consumption to active involvement. Social podcasting empowers listeners to contribute creatively, shifting their role from consumers to co-creators. To illustrate this process and the varying levels of participation, the five-level Social Podcasting Participation Model was developed (Figure 5).

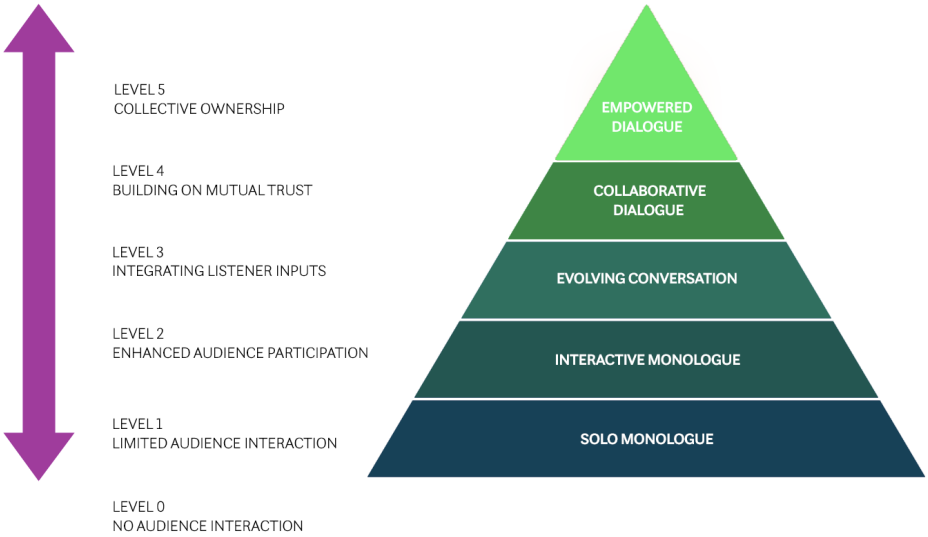


Figure 5. Social Podcasting Participation Model

The analysis of 81 podcasts facilitated an exploration of various levels of podcast participation. When the findings are compared with the theoretical framework of this research—specifically, the four principles of produsage outlined by Bruns (2013)—it becomes apparent that podcasts reaching higher levels of participation more fully align with these principles. At higher levels, podcasts exhibit increased openness to participation; greater fluidity in leadership roles, with audience members able to take the lead; continuously evolving and unscripted content; and recognition or rewards for contributors.

It is worth noting that several podcasts despite having a comment form on Spotify or the option to send Instagram direct messages, did not mention these features in their episodes nor any content that might have been sent to them. The participatory element was often mentioned only in the podcast description text. As a result, these podcasts were classified as Level 0.

Level 1. Solo Monologue: Limited Audience Interaction

From the perspective of audience participation in social podcasting, the term "monologue" refers to a situation in which the host or hosts are speaking. In this context, even when two people are conversing, it is still considered a monologue if the audience's voice is not included. At Level 1, hosts incorporate content from social media sources, which may not have been created by listeners of that particular podcast. The content is used by the hosts to initiate conversation, but the source is generally not mentioned. The focus is entirely on the host(s), with the audience member having no direct relevance to the show.

At Level 1, the way in which hosts use content gathered from various sources can often be described as *idea poaching*. No recognition or reward is given to the content creators, and any calls to actions are aimed at gathering more ideas and content. This approach echoes the term "prosumer," coined by Alvin Toffler (1980). Toffler illustrated a scenario in which the consumer is drawn into the role of the producer to maximize company profits. From the perspective of social podcasting, where the audience's voice holds a significant and powerful role, this scarcely qualifies as participation. However, since the content originates from people other than the hosts, it establishes the base layer of the Social Podcasting Participation Model.

Level 2. Interactive Monologue: Enhanced Audience Participation

At Level 2, podcast hosts read messages and stories sent specifically to their show. These messages are then commented on and discussed, following a format similar to the highly popular Q&A sessions in podcast episodes. In this format, hosts select and read questions directed at them through a form or social media and provide answers during the show.

The distinction from Level 1 is that at Level 2, the content is directly targeted at the show, and audience members are mentioned by name while their contributions are discussed. The most significant indicator of

enhanced audience participation at Level 2 is the inclusion of the audience's voice through voice messages, which accentuates their presence in the show. However, Level 2 still lacks the element of reward. This key aspect of social podcasting, as emphasized by Bruns (2008), serves as a significant motivator for individuals to participate in collaborative efforts. The absence of rewards, particularly in new podcasts, represents a missed opportunity to build a sense of community around the podcast, as presented in Sub-Study I.

Level 3. Evolving Conversation: Integrating Listener Inputs

At Level 3, listener inputs are tightly integrated into the show, transforming the host or hosts' monologue into a dialogue between the host(s) and the listener. This transition requires skill from the host(s), as, due to the asynchronous nature of podcasts, the listener is most likely not present at the moment of recording.

The transition to dialogue may occur in Q&A episodes of podcasts where one of the hosts directly addresses the person asking the question, creating a personal bond between the host and the listener. While the topic itself is general in nature, it is approached as a dialogue. While this dialogue may seem one-sided, the more skillfully the host can interpret and frame it from various perspectives while maintaining verbal contact with the content provider—even though they are not present—the more effectively the provider is integrated into the show. Furthermore, the challenge of the listener's absence is overcome within the framework set by the questioner, with the host(s) bringing emotion, empathy, and compassion to the discussion. In this way, power is gradually transferred to the listener.

To further integrate listener inputs at Level 3, incorporating a voice message from the listener can bring the interaction even closer to a real dialogue, thereby emphasizing a reward: by sending in a single 30-second voice message, the audience member can reframe an entire 10–15-minute segment of the show.

Level 4. Collaborative Dialogue: Building on Mutual Trust

Advancing beyond Level 3 typically requires additional time and effort. Once dialogue and reward mechanisms are established, the audience needs time to build trust in the host(s). In the podcasts examined in this research, this often occurred through discussions of more intimate topics. Shared intimacy and trust are key elements in enhancing the sense of community among podcast audiences (Wendland, 2026a), and acts of self-revelation make listeners feel as though they are part of a private conversation (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022). Once a relationship of trust is established, an increasing number of audience members feel encouraged to take personal risks.

At Level 4, most, if not all, of the podcast content relies on listener contributions, and the dialogue with listeners becomes increasingly collaborative. Beyond merely providing content, listeners can also influence the tone of the podcast. Typically, at this stage, transmedial communities begin to form, which leads to increased contributions. By fostering a vibrant participatory culture, the podcast begins to evolve into a transcommunal medium (Wendland, 2026a). Hosting a podcast at Level 4 usually indicates that the hosts are willing and daring to engage in more nuanced dialogue, address concerns, and even provoke verbal conflicts with the content provided, as in the example above. This, in turn, induces a stronger shared emotional connection among listeners, further strengthening the sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Level 5. Empowered Dialogue: Collective Ownership

The essential requirement for reaching the highest level of the Social Podcasting Participation Model, Level 5, is that the structure and script of the podcast are designed to evolve in response to listeners' contributions. This approach exemplifies *produsage* as described by Bruns: "Participants both comment on and critique one another's works; they collaborate on creative projects both by pooling together their individual contributions to

form a composite whole, and by directly editing, rearranging, and remixing the material already provided by others" (Bruns, 2008, p. 229). For a Level 5 podcast to function effectively, it relies on listener contributions. The listeners add something that the host likely could not, and through their experiences and expertise, the content of the podcast undergoes a transformation and takes on new forms. This emphasizes the power of the listeners and fosters a sense of co-ownership. The podcast no longer belongs solely to the host; it also belongs to its listeners. The listener has become a *produser*.

Despite these participatory characteristics, the analysis revealed that podcasts occupying the upper tiers of the Social Podcasting Participation Model are uncommon; the majority of podcasts (48%) are situated at Level 0, with no audience interaction. Level 5, which represents collective ownership—podcasts that cannot exist without listener input—is particularly rare, with only 5% of the podcasts examined reaching this level.

While Sub-Study I focused on community characteristics, Sub-Study II examined podcasts from the perspective of hosts. The resulting model serves as a practical tool for audio professionals and content creators, as well as a visualization of participation that is currently unique in the field. Since its introduction, the findings have been presented to radio stations and podcast groups, providing a roadmap for audio content creators to navigate and enhance audience participation.

Sub-Study II further illuminated the landscape of social podcasting and audience-driven audio creation by visualizing a spectrum of audience participation, ranging from minimal interaction to collective ownership. The analysis of 81 podcasts revealed that genuine participatory acts remain scarce, with many podcasts failing to progress beyond basic forms of interaction. These findings are consistent with the discussions in Sub-Studies I and III regarding listeners' willingness to participate. Uses and gratifications studies (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2023; Perks et al., 2019; Perks & Turner, 2019; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022) indicate that social interaction, sense of belonging, participation, and community building do not emerge as significant motiva-

tors for most listeners. The majority of listeners prefer not to participate. However, those who do choose to participate constitute a valuable asset, contributing not only to a podcast's success but also to the vitality of the entire listening community (McClung & Johnson, 2010; McGregor, 2019; Ritter & Cho, 2009).

Sub-Study II highlights the potential for podcasts to nurture community through participatory models and collaborative content creation. The findings underscore a significant opportunity for podcasts to evolve toward more interactive and participatory formats, thereby promoting deeper communal participation and transforming listeners from passive consumers into active co-creators and produsers.

4.2.2. Evaluation of Sub-Study II

From a non-academic perspective, the findings of Sub-Study II have demonstrated significant practical relevance. The model has been employed not only to evaluate existing podcast products, but also, in at least one instance, as a roadmap for creating a new nature podcast format with the explicit aim of achieving Level 5—Collective Ownership. By applying the frameworks developed in Sub-Studies I and II, this podcast successfully reached the highest level of the Social Podcasting Participation Model and established a robust, reciprocal content-creation community among its audience.

Practical models, such as that presented in Sub-Study II, have the potential to accelerate the development of audience-driven podcasts, particularly if more podcast producers become interested in pursuing higher levels of participation. The adoption of appropriate tools and knowledge is essential for this shift, underscoring the importance of the practical implications of Sub-Study II. As argued in the sub-study, this transformation could have an impact on podcasting comparable to the television industry's adoption of transmedial storytelling techniques, which reinvented television as an "engagement medium" (Delwiche & Henderson, 2012).

A critical consideration regarding Sub-Study II and its outcomes is the potential influence of cultural differences on participation. Since the 81 podcasts were identified through a survey distributed to Finnish audio professionals, it is possible that the cultural listening habits of the respondents affected the selection of podcasts included in the study. If these professionals predominantly engage in passive listening and participation is not a central aspect of their podcast consumption, the survey responses may have favored podcasts with relatively limited audience participation. Administering the same questionnaire in a different cultural context could yield a set of podcasts occupying higher levels of participation (Levels 3–5) more frequently than those identified in this research. This highlights not only the need for future international research on the subject but also exposes the limitations inherent in this model as the first of its kind, much like the model in Sub-Study I. Consequently, these models and findings remain particularly open to discussion and critique.

It is plausible that future research could lead to the development of subsequent models, potentially rendering the current five-level structure obsolete, or introducing new levels as podcasting practices evolve. For instance, a Level 6 could emerge, and the higher levels may become more populated as participatory podcasting grows. Furthermore, there may be forms of participation that have not yet been encountered or conceptualized. As the author, I encourage continued research on this topic and recommend expanding the model to encompass stages and forms of participation that may develop in the future.

4.3. Sub-Study III: Reciprocal community building model for podcasts—Meaningful listener experiences: Grounded theory research

Wendland, J. (2026b). Reciprocal community building model for podcasts—Meaningful listener experiences: Grounded theory research. *International Journal of Listening*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2026.2660064

4.3.1. Overview and results of Sub-Study III

The third and final sub-study approached the sense of community and participation from the perspective of the listeners. Through semi-structured interviews and a grounded theory approach, the Reciprocal Community Building Model (Figure 6) was constructed. The model is a hierarchical representation of learning processes, social interactions, and identity formation within podcast communities. As listeners ascend through this model, they gain access to increasingly communal and immersive experiences, acquiring producer agency to shape their participation and contribute to the community's shared knowledge and practices.

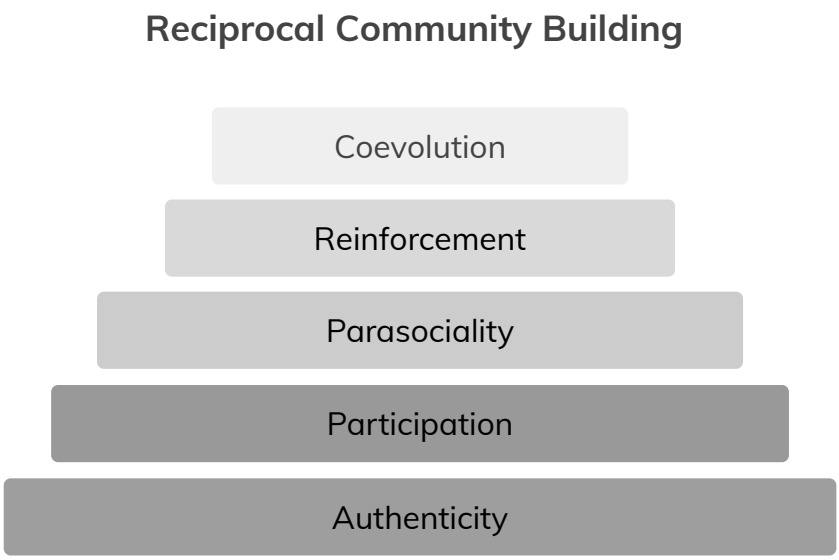


Figure 6. Reciprocal Community Building Model

Since this research focuses on meaningful listener experiences that foster audience commitment, belonging, and participation—and thereby create a sense of community—the five identified levels—Authenticity, Par-

ticipation, Parasociality, Reinforcement, and Coevolution—reflect increasingly stronger forms of these experiences.

1. **Authenticity**. When listeners experience authentic content, this provides a primary basis for community building, nurtured by trust and identification. This experience is primarily driven by host authenticity, approachability, and genuine interactions. These elements align strongly with the Content-Based Elements subcategory. The trust generated by authenticity, in turn, creates a willingness to engage in the sub-categories of Participation and Forming the Communal Identity, facilitated by identification.

2. **Participation**. Establishing the foundation as described above enables the listeners to engage further. The listener's experiences of participation—such as a sense of ownership, sharing personal stories, and engaging with other community members—begin to build attachment. The Participation subcategory becomes key at this stage as listeners actively interact with the podcast and its community. This engagement is facilitated not only by host authenticity, which originates from the Content-Based Elements subcategory, but also by specific themes within the Participation subcategory itself, such as "listener-to-host interaction." Each participatory action, in turn, strengthens the Forming the Communal Identity subcategory as related themes, such as "shared values" and "community language" become more noticeable.

3. **Parasociality**. When listeners participate, observe others participating, and experience authenticity, this may contribute to the development of parasociality. These listener experiences of parasociality also help listeners begin to recognize a communal identity. The experience of parasociality is strongly linked to the Forming the Communal Identity and Participation sub-categories. Listeners start to see themselves as part of the podcast's target audience and identify with its values. This recognition and connection, in turn, lowers the bar for further participation.

4. **Reinforcement**. When listener participation is acknowledged in the content, these listener experiences strengthen communal identity and encourage deeper participation. For example, listener messages influence podcast scripts, listener-created content is incorporated, and feedback loops are established between episodes. At this level, the dynamic interplay between the three subcategories becomes clear. Listeners' active participation—linked to themes in the Participation subcategory—does not occur in isolation; it is also integrated into the podcast content. This integration is strongly linked to themes within the Content-Based Elements subcategory. This, in turn, strengthens and develops the community itself, as reflected in the Forming the Communal Identity subcategory. This process creates a positive feedback loop, generating listener experiences that lead to Level 5.
5. **Coevolution**. At this final stage, content and community develop through continuous interaction. Listener experiences become symbiotic, and the three sub-categories are in constant and close relationship with one another. Listeners see themselves as community members contributing to ever-evolving content, and their communal identity is very strong. The content changes and adapts to community interests and needs, and community-specific language and references develop. The podcast is no longer just a product but has become a continually evolving community of practice. The Reciprocal Community Building Model can be analyzed through the characteristics and concepts of communities of practice. The three dimensions of communities of practice—mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (see Chapter 2.1)—align with the five levels of the Reciprocal Community Building Model. Specifically, mutual engagement corresponds to the Parasociality level, at which listeners begin to bond with other community members and become dedicated to the collective. Similarly, Wenger's (1999) joint enterprise parallels the Reinforcement level, at which the community and content evolve together. Finally, shared repertoire reflects the Coevolution level, at which the community develops its own language and references.

This correspondence between the Reciprocal Community Building Model and its theoretical framework suggests that listener experiences that are at or above the level of Parasociality (Levels 3–5) indicate membership in a community of practice. Additionally, the Reciprocal Community Building Model extends Wenger's (1999) dimensions by establishing Authenticity (Level 1) and Participation (Level 2) as foundational stages in community-of-practice building. Wenger (1999) does not use the word "authenticity" but mentions inventiveness and personal ways of engaging in practices that resemble podcast hosts' individuality and authenticity. Hosts and listeners do not merely follow prescribed content but also contribute their own personas and improvisations: "Because members produce a practice to deal with what they understand to be their enterprise, their practice as it unfolds belongs to their community in a fundamental sense" (Wenger, 1999, p. 80). Thus, authenticity seems to serve as the cornerstone for community building in podcasts; without it, deeper engagement and shared identity may not flourish. The model illustrates this progressive deepening, with higher levels representing increasingly meaningful listener experiences. Authenticity provides the foundation for community ownership and content co-creation and is critical to the development of participatory and personalized content that evolves collectively and welcomes new participants.

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the ZPD helps explain why certain listeners never advance to higher levels of the model. Scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976)—the support provided by hosts and the community—significantly shapes listener experiences. Both frameworks emphasize the crucial role of listeners and hosts in enabling development, and not all listeners will progress through every level of the model. We can therefore conclude that listeners experiencing any level within this model are having meaningful listener experiences, with higher levels offering deeper forms of connection and participation.

In addition to the findings related to the research question, one of the major findings of this sub-study was that the model also helps explain one of the key questions in the field of podcast participation: why different

listeners experience a sense of community differently. Listeners occupy different positions within this model and also might not want or be able to proceed any further. Depending on their position within the model, their perspective, sense of ownership, and sense of belonging to the community also differ. This finding did not relate to the original research question, but its relevance to the current field of podcast research is so strong that it was included in the results. This explanation also stems from the concept of scaffolding (see Chapter 2.1) and is further discussed in the theoretical framework chapter of Sub-Study III.

However, authenticity appears to serve as the cornerstone for community building in podcasts; without it, the deeper levels of participation and shared identity associated with communities of practice cannot emerge or thrive. Authenticity provides the essential foundation upon which listeners eventually develop a sense of community ownership and engage in content co-creation. The Reciprocal Community Building Model developed in Sub-Study III illustrates this progressive deepening, with higher levels representing increasingly meaningful listener experiences.

4.3.2. Evaluation of Sub-Study III

The findings of Sub-Study III are remarkable in themselves. To the author's knowledge, this study is among the first to research the relationship between listeners' experiences and their sense of community in podcasts and to visualize the processes of the sense of community from the listeners' perspective. The model development process was robust: the patterns visualized in the model were present throughout the grounded theory phases, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. However, the finalized answer to the research question became evident only through the formation of the model. Additionally, the model yielded novel findings, as explained in Chapter 4.3.1.

While it would be tempting to develop a universal theory from this model, it is crucial to remember—as Charmaz (2014) noted—that any theoretical rendering through grounded theory represents an interpretive

portrayal of the phenomenon. While the results can be applied to practice, the model is firmly grounded in this particular set of data. This underscores the importance of further research into podcast listener experiences to refine and expand the Reciprocal Community Building Model into a more universal framework. However, from a practical perspective, the model provides a tool for podcast hosts seeking to evaluate listener experiences and community-building potential. It offers a structured framework for analyzing listener survey responses from a community perspective and enables hosts to better understand their content from their audience's viewpoint. This practical application bridges theoretical insights with industry needs, potentially enhancing the listener-friendliness of podcasts and informing community-development strategies.

The second aspect concerns the fact that this sub-study concentrates exclusively on active and dedicated listeners. This focus is supported by previous research—primarily the findings of Sub-Study I—on which this sub-study builds. Random sampling would likely have included individuals for whom participation was not an important part of their listening experience. However, since this sub-study aims to explore which listener experiences lead to participatory actions and contribute to a sense of community, concentrating on particularly active listeners is justified. Several uses and gratifications studies consistently indicate that most podcast listeners do not wish to participate in or become part of a community (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2023; Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022). When researching podcast participation, including individuals who are not interested in participating is unlikely to produce novel insights. Additionally, Sub-Study III established a connection between meaningful listener experiences, active listenership, and a sense of ownership. Since this research specifically examines listening experiences that contribute to community building, focusing on the engaged minority is methodologically sound. These individuals represent a valuable asset not only to a podcast's success but also to the listening community as a whole (McGregor, 2019).

The sub-study's cultural scope can be seen as a limitation, as interviews were conducted with listeners of three Finnish podcasts. Research involving different nationalities or cultural backgrounds might result in different findings. Similarly, passive listeners, who constitute the majority of podcast audiences, might experience community differently. These limitations present opportunities for future research to expand and refine the Reciprocal Community Building Model into a more comprehensive framework that accounts for multicultural perspectives and varying levels of listener engagement. Another limitation relates to the qualitative research design and the use of semi-structured interviews. While grounded theory offers depth and flexibility, the findings are inherently interpretive and shaped by the researcher's analytical perspective. The relatively small sample size and purposive, nonrandom sampling approach further limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the coding and categorization processes, while systematic, are ultimately subjective and may reflect the researcher's preconceptions even though procedures were followed to ensure theoretical sensitivity and transparency. Finally, the study's reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the potential for recall bias or social desirability bias in participants' responses.

These limitations highlight the need for future research to employ broader sampling strategies, quantitative or mixed methods, and cross-cultural comparisons to further test and refine the Reciprocal Community Building Model.

The findings of Sub-Study III not only advance current understanding of what constitutes a meaningful listener experience but also provide practical insights for podcast creators seeking to create stronger community bonds. In a world that often appears increasingly divided, tools that bring people together through audio media may be more crucial than ever. By identifying the elements that contribute to reciprocal community building in podcasts, this sub-study offers a framework for creating more inclusive, engaging, and community-oriented audio content that can help bridge divides and create spaces for authentic connection.

5. Findings of the sub-studies

The main research question of this study combines three research questions from the sub-studies:

- What kind of participatory culture enhances a sense of community among podcast audiences? (Sub-Study I)
- What are the levels of audience participation based on produsage principles in social podcasting? (Sub-Study II)
- What kinds of meaningful listener experiences foster community building around podcasts? (Sub-Study III)

The main research question was formulated in Chapter 1.3: *How do participatory culture, audience participation, and meaningful listener experiences contribute to the building of communities of practice around podcasts?* To provide a holistic answer to the research question, the findings from the individual sub-studies that address their respective research questions are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Findings of the sub-studies in relation to the main research question

Findings
Sub-Study I **Participation intensity matters:** "Participation intensity" is one of the six key enhancers of a sense of community. Higher intensity, including meaningful and multi-level participation, leads to stronger community ties. **Forms of participation vary:** Participation can be direct (content creation, feedback, transmedial) or indirect (imagined). **Small, collaborative communities thrive:** Intensive participation is most effective in small, collaborative communities. **Transmediality strengthens community:** Multi-platform (transmedial) participation enables more meaningful participation and builds stronger communities. **Shared intimacy and trust:** Intimate and trusting environments, often nurtured by both hosts and listeners, deepen the sense of community. **Intimacy extends beyond host-listener:** Shared intimacy and trust can arise not only between host and listener but also among listeners themselves, deepening communal ties. **Parasociality as a driver:** Parasociality with hosts encourages participation and a sense of belonging.

Findings
Sub-Study II **Flexible and evolving boundaries:** The produsage model enables podcasts to have fluid leadership and membership, supporting cross-community collaboration and content remixing. **Participation is hierarchical:** As demonstrated by Sub-Study II's 5-level model, higher levels of participation represent deeper community involvement. **Listener input shapes content:** When listeners' contributions directly affect the podcast's script or content (Levels 3–5), the sense of community and ownership strengthens. **Recognition and reward matter:** Recognition of audience input and rewarding contributors are key to fostering active participation and building a loyal community. **Most podcasts remain at low participation levels:** Genuine participatory acts are rare; most podcasts do not progress beyond basic interaction, meaning that community development remains limited in these cases. **Collaborative production nurtures community:** At the highest levels, the boundaries between host and audience blur, leading to co-creation, collective ownership, and deeper communal bonds.
Sub-Study III **Reciprocal community building** Community building is described as a reciprocal, evolving process with five levels: authenticity, participation, parasociality, reinforcement, and coevolution. **Authenticity is the foundation:** Authentic content is essential to initiating community building; it enables participation through trust and identification. **Participation strengthens identity:** Listener participation—such as sharing stories, interacting with hosts, or co-creating content—deepens attachment and communal identity. **Parasociality lowers barriers:** Parasociality with hosts and other listeners helps listeners feel part of the community and encourages further participation. **Reinforcement and coevolution:** When listener input is recognized and integrated into content, community bonds are reinforced, leading to ongoing coevolution between content and community. **Not all listeners participate equally:** Listeners move through the model at different rates and depths; not everyone will reach the highest levels, but all meaningful experiences support community development.

All three sub-studies contribute to the main research question: *How do participatory culture, audience participation, and meaningful listener experiences contribute to the building of communities of practice around podcasts?* Each study brings a different perspective to this question. Sub-Study I focuses on the community-enhancement perspective, Sub-Study II on the audience participation perspective, and Sub-Study III on the listeners' experience perspective. Despite these different angles, synthesizing them provides insights that none of the studies could provide separately.

Sub-Study I concludes that different forms and levels of audience participation—from passive listening to active content creation—enhance podcast communities. They do this by building ownership, trust, intimacy, and opportunities for multi-platform participation. The most meaningful community development occurs in small, collaborative settings where participation is intensive and transmedial, and where both hosts and listeners contribute to a shared culture and narrative.

Sub-Study II defines how different forms of participation—from passive listening to collective content ownership—contribute to the development of podcast communities. The more participatory and collaborative the podcast is, the stronger the sense of community becomes among listeners.

Finally, Sub-Study III concludes that participation and meaningful listener experiences create a dynamic, reciprocal process. In this process, experiences of authenticity and recognition support increasingly strong, coevolving podcast communities.

The findings and models of the three sub-studies can be synthesized into a single multi-model framework. This framework captures the process through which active listeners become produsers and shape podcast content while building communities of practice (Figure 7).

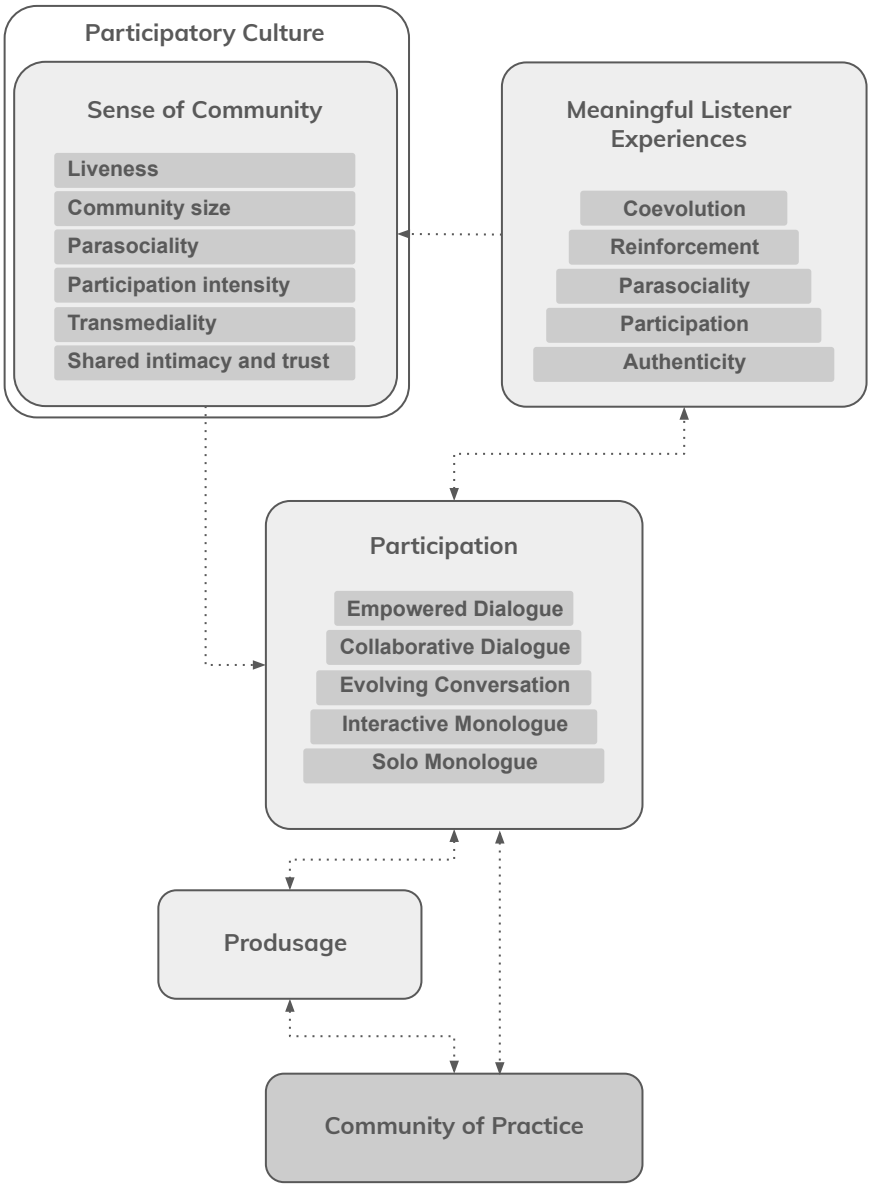


Figure 7. Multi-model framework for building communities of practice around podcasts

This model illustrates the process of building communities of practice around podcasts. It answers the main research question: *How do participatory culture, audience participation, and meaningful listener experiences contribute to the building of communities of practice around podcasts?* The model shows that a participatory culture is necessary for building a sense of community, while a strong sense of community encourages participation in podcasts. From the listeners' perspective, meaningful listener experiences strengthen the sense of community and also affect participation. As the participation process becomes stronger and more audience-driven—through the joint work of hosts and listeners—produsage becomes more dominant, and active members become produsers. Finally, produsage and participation work together to build a community of practice: a listener-driven community in which members create new knowledge through learning processes shaped by the podcast.

Additionally, one of the key findings of this study, concerning why some listeners never advance to actively build and participate in communities—as reflected in their progression to higher levels of the Reciprocal Community Building Model—is connected to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the ZPD. The concept emphasizes the crucial role of listeners and hosts in enabling development, and while the roles vary, not all listeners will progress through every level of the model. Similarly, scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976)—here, the support provided by hosts and the community—significantly shapes listening experiences and influences listeners' position in the model. If peer-related support is not available, advancing becomes more challenging. Scaffolding in podcast communities is multi-directional: hosts provide guidance and structure, while established community members and co-listeners offer peer support, mentorship, and social validation. The absence of either—whether through host neglect or community hostility—can prevent listeners from advancing through the levels of the Reciprocal Community Building Model. This also explains why Figure 7 should be interpreted as a process rather than a list of requirements. Progressing from one section to another does not require fulfilling all the enhancers of a sense of community or experiencing all the meaningful

listener experiences. Listeners will adapt to different roles and affect the building of communities of practice with different intensities.

This research connects its findings to Wenger's (1999) communities of practice and helps expand the theory to audio-related communities. As can be seen in Figure 7, sense of community, meaningful listener experiences and participation connect podcast communities with the theory of communities of practice. Mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire—the three key dimensions of communities of practice—are present throughout the figure, contributing to the development of the community. In addition, Sub-Study III findings suggest that listening experiences related to Levels 3–5 in the Reciprocal Community Building Model, namely Parasociality, Reinforcement, and Coevolution, indicate membership in a community of practice. In addition, the Reciprocal Community Building Model extends Wenger's dimensions by establishing Authenticity (Level 1) and Participation (Level 2) as foundational for community-of-practice building.

Wenger (1999) does not use the word "authenticity" but mentions inventiveness and personal ways of engaging in practices, which resemble podcast hosts' individuality and authenticity. Hosts and listeners do not merely follow prescribed content but also contribute their own personas and improvisations: "Because members produce a practice to deal with what they understand to be their enterprise, their practice as it unfolds belongs to their community in a fundamental sense" (Wenger, 1999, p. 80). Thus, authenticity seems to serve as the cornerstone for communities of practice in podcasts; without it, deeper participation and shared identity cannot flourish.

The role of parasociality in Figure 7 is also notable. This study helps extend the scientific discussion regarding parasociality. Sub-Study I claims that parasociality is a key feature of community building and the listener–host relationship. In Sub-Study II, parasociality is evident at the lower levels of social podcasting; for many listeners, community appears as a one-sided relationship with the host rather than through active participation. Finally, Sub-Study III claims that parasociality is key to deepening

the sense of community and is an integral part of community building. This aligns with the findings of Schlütz and Hedder (2022), who suggested that parasociality offers a straightforward way to fulfill social needs when direct access to other listeners is unavailable. It also connects parasociality with the theory of communities of practice, which is discussed further below. The findings from the sub-studies regarding parasociality as part of community building help broaden the understanding of parasociality in the context of media education, specifically from the perspectives of media identity and media literacy. In particular, the findings on community building can be combined with research on the parasocial effects of influencers and celebrities on their followers (Bond, 2018; Breves et al., 2021; Chinchilla & Kim, 2025; Chung & Cho, 2017; Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Paravati et al., 2024). Additionally, parasociality measurement tools (Dibble et al., 2016) can be coupled with the Social Podcasting Participation Model from Sub-Study II.

Figure 7 also highlights the communal, participatory, and meaningful dimensions of podcast listening. While some studies have noted that monologic listening—such as that associated with podcasts—is central to creating and maintaining relationships (Dreher, 2017; Lemay et al., 2023), podcasts have not been extensively explored in traditional listener studies. These findings challenge the traditional dyadic approach to listening. Traditionally, listener studies have focused largely on dyadic interactions—communication between two people. Even one of the most widely cited definitions, from the International Listening Association, states that listening is a process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. However, some studies have highlighted the asymmetric roles of speaker and listener (Imhof, 2010; Itzchakov et al., 2025; Lemay et al., 2023). Most notably, Purdy (1991) observed that communication can no longer be dominated solely by the speaker; instead, listening must become central to community formation. These views apply to podcasting, and the findings of this research can help expand this body of knowledge.

According to this research and as shown in Figure 7, a meaningful listener experience can also occur in an asynchronous and monologic audio environment, provided the listener experiences authenticity, communality, and opportunities to participate. These listening experiences—particularly authenticity and its role in community building—are significant for modern listener studies. The findings help shift the focus of listener studies toward listening experiences and communality in asynchronous and monologic listening environments.

It is important to note that while Figure 7 focuses on active participation, dedicated participants, and collective ownership, several key findings also highlight the importance of passive listening. This observation is rooted in Carpentier's AIP model, introduced in Chapter 2.4, which identifies access—or simply being present with a product—as the first step toward co-creation. These findings emphasize the significance of passive listeners, who often constitute the majority of podcast audiences. They also help expand listener studies and advance the understanding of asymmetrical listening in the context of audio communities. This leads to the conclusion that participation can also be passive, as highlighted in Sub-Study I. This limited form of participation is further supported by Sub-Study II's finding that most podcasts remain at low levels of audience involvement, and by Sub-Study III's observation that not all listeners engage equally. These patterns are consistent across all three sub-studies.

Notably, a key connection across these sub-studies is that a small group of dedicated participants generates much of the meaning and value associated with a podcast. This is not a new finding in fan studies. As Nancy Baym (2018) notes, most listeners are not "fans," and most fans are relatively low-key, being more likely to lurk than to perform. This aligns with the theory of communities of practice, as lower levels of meaningful listener experiences enable a sense of community but not yet full participation. This means that passive listeners still follow, learn, and construct new knowledge as potential members of communities of practice, even if they do not produce new content.

A key finding of this research is that the significance of a podcast does not correlate with its total number of listeners. This insight has practical implications, as many media organizations tend to evaluate podcasts primarily by audience size rather than by their significance or impact. Shirky (2008) called this the *width-versus-depth* tradeoff: as a community grows larger, it becomes more loosely woven.

While the transmediality of podcasts enables communication across platforms—as described in Sub-Study I—transcommunality similarly crosses the boundaries of different communities. Sub-Study I describes podcasts as a "transcommunal medium" for the first time in the related literature, a finding that the subsequent sub-studies build upon. Figure 7 not only illustrates the building of one particular community of practice but also demonstrates that any number of communities can be built around one podcast. The concept of podcasts being a transcommunal medium merges perspectives and experiences across different communities, enabling collaboration and shared narratives. This means that podcasts can connect communities beyond their original boundaries, allowing for new forms of collective participation.

From a practical perspective, this is one of the key findings of this study. As shown in Sub-Study II, communal features tend to be nonexistent or, at best, superficial in most podcasts. Podcast producers often view communities merely as a "feature"—a confined space on dedicated platforms used to produce predefined content.

This perspective is not only narrow but also downplays the potential of podcast communities. At their best, they can merge insights and perspectives from individuals who might never interact otherwise, reaching beyond the limits of any single community. Podcasts have the ability to build communities *between* communities, merging and shaping content, meanings, and messages across them.

Beyond their core models, all three sub-studies highlight that podcasts can act as transcommunal media, where participatory cultures, transmedial participation, and collective intelligence allow communities to extend beyond traditional boundaries. This supports the concept of landscapes of

practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014), which describes knowledge, practices, and meanings moving across and between multiple communities.

The participatory models and community-building practices identified in these studies show that podcast communities rarely exist in isolation. The various levels of participation and community described in the Social Podcasting Participation Model reflect how podcast audiences draw on experiences and practices from other communities—whether other podcasts, social media groups, or real-life networks. This contributes to a dynamic, interconnected landscape of practice.

Intimacy, trust, and shared language can develop not only between hosts and listeners but also among listeners themselves, creating new forms of belonging and collaboration. These dynamics enable podcasts to merge multiple communities, facilitate shared narratives, and continuously evolve through reciprocal participation.

6. Discussion

6.1. Conclusion and discussion of the research results

This research has provided new insights into podcast community creation and the development of reciprocal content creation within the context of asynchronous audio. The results of the three sub-studies not only introduce models that hold value for both academic research and practical content creation but also lay the groundwork for future studies. This highlights the dual purpose of the study: to address significant gaps in podcast community research while also equipping professional audio content creators with practical tools for everyday use.

From a practical perspective, tools for evaluating and measuring podcast communities are scarce. These three models serve as straightforward assets for developing any podcast toward a more communal approach. Their visual nature makes them particularly accessible for practical use. Podcast professionals do not need to master the underlying theories in order to understand or apply these models to improve the communities around their products.

In addition to answering the primary research questions, the studies generated further valuable insights, such as why different listeners experience a sense of community in diverse ways—a topic explored in Chapter 4.3.1. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 5, podcasts function as a transcommunal medium, supporting collaboration and the exchange of perspectives across multiple communities.

The findings of this dissertation resonate with Kotilainen and Pienimäki's (2019) Inclusive Media Education Model, which emphasizes safe spaces, caring interaction, trust in competence, creative media-making, and authentic agency. While their model focuses on at-risk youth in educational settings, this research extends similar principles to podcast communities, demonstrating that authentic participation and meaning-

ful experiences are equally crucial for building communities of practice in asynchronous audio environments.

The results also highlighted the importance of meaningful listener experiences. As discussed in Chapters 4.1.1 and 4.3.2, podcasts often serve primarily as background audio, and most users do not feel a strong need to belong or build communities. Nevertheless, the emergence of meaningfulness in listening is a key factor in supporting community building and participation. These meaningful listener experiences are reciprocal in nature—facilitating such experiences encourages participation, which in turn enhances the meaningfulness of listening experiences during audio content consumption. The findings from both Sub-Studies II and III indicate that meaningfulness in podcast listening can be characterized by audience content creation and an elevated sense of community, both of which contribute to increased participation.

All three sub-studies collectively establish a framework for understanding participation and community building within the podcast context for the first time in the related literature. An enhanced sense of community, explored in Sub-Study I and discussed in Chapter 4.1.1, along with audience-driven content creation, examined in Sub-Study II and discussed in Chapter 4.2.1, both serve as key perspectives for defining meaningful listener experiences. These sub-studies complement one another: Sub-Study I identifies the factors that contribute to an enhanced sense of community; Sub-Study II provides examples of progressively stronger levels of audience-driven content creation; and Sub-Study III explores the experiences that make listening meaningful. The meaningful listener experiences identified in Sub-Study III foster increased participation, which in turn contributes to higher levels of audience content creation (Sub-Study II) and a stronger sense of community (Sub-Study I).

As I have presented the sub-studies at various conferences and to multiple media organizations, one question often arises: “Should all podcasts be participatory?” Although this question was not directly addressed in the sub-studies, its frequent appearance during public presentations highlights an important consideration: the findings of this research are expect-

ed to have practical implications. There is a tendency to interpret these results as a straightforward guide, offering simple yes-or-no answers to the question of how podcasts should be produced in the future. Such a desire for clear guidance is understandable, particularly as most content creators face challenges in this area. To address the question succinctly: No, not all podcasts need to be participatory; however, participatory features can enhance meaningful listening experiences.

To elaborate, Sub-Study I demonstrated that the participatory culture of podcasts is composed of multiple elements, which can vary significantly depending on the podcast's topic, the history of its community, and the host's skillset. Notably, the most significant participatory features often emerge within the smallest communities. Sub-Study II found that although participatory aspects are clearly beneficial for fostering audience relationships, most podcasts do not take advantage of these opportunities and tend to remain at low levels of audience involvement. Finally, by applying the theory of scaffolding in Sub-Study III, it became apparent that participatory acts in podcasts are reciprocal in nature, requiring support structures from both the community and the host. It is entirely possible that these structures are perceived differently by individual listeners, which may explain why some podcasts do not appear participatory even when all the elements are present.

6.2. Evaluation of the study

Given the current scarcity of academic research on podcast communities, this study has provided a strong foundation for future scholarship. Each sub-study has introduced a new model that remains open to further academic development, while already demonstrating potential practical value for media practice and audio professionals. Additionally, this dissertation has synthesized the findings of the sub-studies, raising topics beyond the proposed models. These areas, such as transcommunality and the significance of passive listenership, may warrant attention in future research on this subject. Having the opportunity to test these insights and models in

real podcast productions has yielded valuable practical feedback on their applicability and robustness. While practical evaluation is not always integrated into academic research, applying these findings and models as guidelines—in both podcast productions and broadcast radio—has demonstrated their usefulness for making community building more visible and potentially more measurable.

Moreover, receiving comments and criticism during numerous presentations has been especially helpful in clarifying and communicating key points for this dissertation summary, as well as in articulating and defending the research, its methodologies, and its frameworks.

It is important to note that none of the models were tested in practice during their initial development, as this could have influenced the academic process. Practical testing took place only after the sub-studies had been peer-reviewed and published.

6.3. Ethical considerations

This research and all its sub-studies followed the ethical guidelines established by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) in its publication *The Ethical Principles of Research With Human Participants and Ethical Review in the Human Sciences in Finland* (2023). All interviews and collected data were anonymized, and all interviewees were adults. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw their consent or request withdrawal of their data at any point during the study without consequences.

The data were handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The interview files and all research data were stored solely on the author's hard drive and were accessible only to the author. File names were anonymized (e.g., Person 1, Person 2). No personal data were processed, as the GDPR defines personal data as any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person.

In the interviews for Sub-Study III, the only identifying characteristic was each interviewee's connection to their primary podcast. Before col-

lecting the data for Sub-Study II and recording the interviews for Sub-Study III, the procedures regarding anonymity were explained to all participants.

All text in this dissertation has been written by the author, but the grammar has been checked by language models to ensure grammatical and structural accuracy. AI guidelines provided by the University of Lapland have been followed. Any corrections have been made manually.

6.4. Future directions

As this research is, in many respects, the first of its kind, it offers numerous opportunities for future studies. In the evaluation of each sub-study (Chapters 4.1.2, 4.2.2, and 4.3.2), future research directions were briefly considered. The systematic literature review in Sub-Study I proposed that the six enhancers identified could be used to construct a scale for measuring the intensity of the sense of community in podcasts, which was subsequently developed further in Sub-Study II through the development of the Social Podcasting Participation Model. Sub-Study II then suggested further research to expand the model and to test its applicability in culturally diverse contexts. It also noted that the models in Sub-Studies I and II primarily examine podcasts from the perspective of producers and hosts, highlighting the value of adopting the audience's perspective to explore how participatory practices affect them—a focus adopted in Sub-Study III. While Sub-Study III began to address these questions, future research would benefit from a deeper investigation into what motivates listeners to actively contribute to social podcasts and the barriers to participation they encounter.

As two of the three sub-studies draw primarily on Finnish listeners and podcasts, refining these models would require more culturally and linguistically diverse samples of listeners and podcast products. During the course of writing this dissertation, it became apparent that there is a significant number of participatory podcasts in Russian. This observation

highlights both the opportunities for and the necessity of testing these models beyond Finnish- and English-speaking audiences.

Additionally, expanding the interviews to include podcast hosts could offer valuable insights and explanations for certain listening experiences, as well as shed light on the intentionality behind community building. It would be important to explore whether podcast communities are typically built accidentally or organically, or whether there is always a deliberate intention to build them. If intentional, investigating the motives of hosts would be a meaningful focus for future research, providing insight into whether their efforts are driven by financial incentives, curiosity, or perhaps a desire to serve the common good. These insights could either validate or challenge the findings related to listening experiences in Sub-Study III by offering an alternative perspective.

Another issue that warrants future investigation is the phenomenon of fake or rehearsed participation. Recorded participatory acts that are either fabricated—or potentially generated by artificial intelligence—could be employed to create a false sense of community around a podcast. The perceived benefits of having a thriving community may encourage podcast producers to adopt such shortcuts rather than investing in genuine, organic community building. The extent and impact of these practices remain unknown and unexamined, representing a promising avenue for future research to expand upon the findings of this study.

Furthermore, an issue that was only briefly addressed in Sub-Study II is audience exploitation. This practice—also referred to as "idea poaching"—remains largely understudied in podcast contexts even though it is discussed in relation to the idea of prosumerism (Bruns, 2013; Toffler, 1980). Sub-Study II indicated that most podcasts do not feature the audience's voice, yet some of these podcasts were still categorized as "participatory." It remains unclear whether this means that many podcasts collect ideas, thoughts, and opinions from their audience but present them without attribution to the original sources. As discussed in Sub-Study II, this approach can be classified as *pseudo-participation*, or even interpassivity (Taylor, 2013)—from the outside, it appears that the audience has the

power to influence the content, but since no reward is given to individuals who suggest topics, the act aligns more closely with idea poaching than with genuine participation.

Expanding the research to also examine the darker aspects of podcast participation would provide valuable insights and help refine existing models. Moreover, such inquiry would support the broader aim of this research: to better understand the conditions under which collaborative audio content can be created in ways that support connection and community rather than contributing to further separation.

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Juska Wendland

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Building a Better Participatory Culture and Enhancing Sense of Community in Podcasts – Systematic Literature Review

Juska Wendland

ABSTRACT

This article studies the mechanisms for building a better participatory culture around podcasts and narrows the information gap among the podcast studies from the perspective of a sense of community. The research question is "What kind of participatory culture enhances a sense of community among the audiences of podcasts?

A model of six enhancers of sense of community was developed. The research draws practical implications from this model and concludes that a participatory culture that embraces liveness, works in small communities, includes parasociality, provides opportunities for meaningful participation on transmedial platforms, and builds on shared intimacy will enhance a sense of community.

This systematic literature review (SLR) explores mechanisms to build a more inclusive participatory culture around podcasts and other asynchronous audio products, aiming to strengthen the sense of community among podcast listeners.

While there has been limited research on podcast communities (Markman, 2015), the size of the industry and the interest of media houses underline the need for such studies. This SLR builds upon recent research on podcast participation and addresses the research question "What kind of participatory culture enhances a sense of community among the audiences of podcasts?"

Since the term "podcast" was coined in 2004 by journalist Ben Hammersley (In Pod We Trust, 2015), both its definition and the surrounding industry have evolved significantly.

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In the early 2000s, the term "podcast" was used to describe an audio information distribution method, its origin stemming from the combination of "iPod" and "broadcast." Two decades later, it has evolved into a broad term encompassing audio-on-demand programs and shows. Despite this etymological shift, after 20 years, podcasts still maintain their original aim of reaching a targeted, often niche (Berry, 2016) audience. From this perspective, it is evident that the development of podcasts during the past 20 years has mostly been nontechnological; rather, it has concentrated on creating a better user experience for the listener (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020). Modern podcasts blend the intimacy of radio with the portability and personalization of digital media (Wrather, 2016). They also have eliminated the geographical and hierarchical barriers natural in traditional public forums, where educated individuals once needed to share the same physical location to listen to others (Donison, 2022).

It is predicted that the number of global podcast listeners will exceed half a billion in 2024 (eMarketer, 2021), and podcast listening has grown 2–4% points annually since 2013 (Perks et al., 2019). However, despite understanding the extent of podcast consumption, insights into the motives, methods, and levels of usage remain limited (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022).

Today, many shows can only be found on audio-on-demand platforms, and despite the wide variety of content, from true crime to talk shows and music programs, they are also called podcasts. Free from the constraints of time, podcasts enable listeners to tune in from anywhere, potentially enhancing the level of immersion (Florini, 2015; Wright, 2022). They are less regulated than their radio counterparts and can be compared to other *microcontent*, such as blog posts and images, from the perspective of spreadability (Baelo-Allué, 2019).

This study aims to bridge the information gap in the relatively few studies on podcast listeners, focusing particularly on the aspects of participatory culture and sense of community. Podcasts are a target of multidisciplinary research, often integrating perspectives from social sciences, health sciences, education, and media studies. Recent podcast research has primarily focused on content analysis (Cardell & Douglas, 2022; Hardey & James, 2022), the production processes of podcasting (Berk et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2021), the role of podcasts during the COVID-19 pandemic (Law-Penrose, 2021), podcasts as educational material (Aase et al., 2021; Kusumastuti & Supendra, 2021), and podcasts as advertising tools (Bezbaruah & Brahmbhatt, 2023; Tranová & Veneti, 2022). Market research can often give demographic insight into who podcast listeners are, there remains a scarcity of up-to-date knowledge on how—and more critically, why—people use podcasts (Perks et al., 2019). Thus, this SLR addresses the observation made by Markman (2015) already a decade ago: broad and systematic research on podcast participation and communities remains rare.

Podcasts as a Participatory Medium

While podcasts are similar to radio, in that they both provide an auditory experience, popular podcasts do not try to copy the format of broadcast radio but rely on niche content and a participatory user experience (Berry, 2016). This also provides a space for opposing views, challenging the notion of an "echo-chamber" often associated with mainstream media (Vrikki & Malik, 2019). In parallel, multiple studies have identified that podcasts can serve as critical public spaces, emphasizing and self-representing the interests of racial and ethnic communities. These studies, including those by Florini (2015, 2017), Vrikki and Malik (2019), and Fox et al. (2020), highlight how podcasts allow for identification and learning opportunities online while also encouraging creative production.

Similar to the established radio industry, podcasting can be seen as a "bypass" technology, just as blogging is to mainstream print media (Dearman & Galloway, 2005). Podcasts are more than just a mobile, on-demand extension of radio (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022).

Due to podcasts' asynchronous format, the connection with the audience is very different from live radio interaction. Enhancing a sense of community is often more difficult because the listeners are not simultaneously present. Here, podcasts take a step beyond simple *interaction*—a communication process in which participants have control over their mutual discourse—and into *asynchroneity*, which allows the sending and receiving of messages at a time convenient for the individual user. This asynchroneity is ubiquitous in podcasting, as is *demassification*, which is the user's ability to decide on what portions of the media to consume, which deepens their engagement and sense of connection with the material (Wright, 2022). Defined by Williams et al. (1988), these three terms also guide the perspective of this research; that is, podcasts are seen as interactive, demassified, and asynchronous.

Using an interactive, demassified, and asynchronous medium requires active participation from the audience. This participation can be both *in* and *through* the media. Participation through the media deals with participation in public debate and communicating through a particular medium. Participation in the media refers to two main aspects: (a) content-related participation, which means participation in the production of media, and (b) structural participation, which means in-media decision-making (Carpentier, 2007). This study considers participation *in* the media—and even more accurately, content-related participation.

In this SLR, participation is seen as a meaningful experience. Meaningful participation can be defined by distinguishing media access, interaction, and participation, as in the AIP model (Carpentier, 2015). In this model, the term "participation" underlines the audience's power in the decision-making

process. It serves as a natural method for developing an engaged community and encouraging meaningful discussions among individuals with similar interests (Florini, 2017; Fox et al., 2020). In addition to decision-making, meaningfulness also manifests through the feeling of ownership (Backhaus, 2019) and vice versa, in that participation creates a sense of ownership and ownership creates more participation. In a 2009 study, BBC message board users verbalized this meaningful, in-media, sense-of-ownership-enhancing participation, saying: "They see themselves as an audience that at least occasionally can exert influence over the creators of their programs, and therefore, to a limited extent, they are a part of the creative team" (Klein, 2009, p. 22).

Participation Theory and Communities

To answer its research question, a study needs to be set within a framework upon which the findings can be built and supported (Grant & Osanloo, 2015). This study is guided by *participatory culture* as the key concept and by *sense of community theory* as the main theory.

Participatory culture was defined by Jenkins (2009) to mean a culture with the following characteristics:

(a) Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement;
(b) Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others;
(c) Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by more experienced individuals is passed on to novices;
(d) Members who believe that their contributions matter; and
(e) Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another or at the least care what other people think about what they have created

Despite the definition being about 15 years old, its validity has stood the test of time because it does not rely on technological innovations but on culture itself. Interactivity is a property of the technology (Jenkins, 2006), while participation is a property of the culture (Jenkins, 2009). It is the community that provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation (Jenkins, 2009), not the technology or the platform. Participation is about being part of shared social practices; it is about collective meaning-making and co-creation (Florini, 2017), not just engaging with an online platform or piece of content (Jenkins et al., 2016).

It is also important to clarify that there is no singular participatory culture; rather, it is an umbrella term that covers participation in all its forms. Every community has its own set of rules for being an active participant, and all definitions of participatory culture can be applied to various cultures of

participation and analyzed as structures of participation, as suggested by Joe Karaganis (2007). "Participation" refers to the properties of a culture, where groups collectively and individually make decisions that impact on their shared experiences (Jenkins et al., 2016).

In addition, participatory cultures should not be seen as having absolute value for any community. In the era of social media, not all forms of participation are equally meaningful or empowering (Jenkins et al., 2016) because, for example, several businesses and organizations may seek financial gain from participation.

However, as Spurgeon et al. (2009) claimed, participatory culture cannot be built in the absence of pre-determined stakeholder agendas, meaning that there are always investments included when participatory culture thrives. This is particularly visible with the goal of social media platforms to turn participation into user-generated content (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Mizuaki Ito (2013) built on this and claimed that despite these stakeholder agendas, participatory culture often develops around (niche) personal interests and passions, rather than around institutional or commercial motives. Hosts sense that they are part of a community of listeners, guests, content providers, and other podcasters (Markman, 2012). This can also be seen on other platforms, such as YouTube, where even entrepreneurial vloggers are regular participants in different communities and discussions (Burgess & Green, 2009). This interest-driven participation introduced by Ito (2013) refers to participation where specialized interests bring a social group together, and podcast listening as an interest-driven activity falls perfectly under this category.

Despite the variety of participatory cultures, it is the use of power that unites them. The participation that happens within various communities leads to the participants deploying new kinds of power (Jenkins, 2006). Carpentier (2011) also acknowledged this, stating that we can only truly call it participation if the listeners are recognized as holding a certain amount of power. Collective participation makes everyone feel like they have a stake in the outcome (Jenkins, 2006). This collective participation is true within any grassroots community that shares intellectual and emotional investment. This power within participatory culture shapes the rules by which schools, cultural expression, civic life, and work operate (Jenkins, 2009). These communities define the terms by which they are allowed to participate (Jenkins, 2006), and it is the *how* that is interesting for this study. It is all about how podcast participatory culture is being built, not *if*.

In addition to the concept of participatory culture, the sense of community theory by McMillan and Chavis (1986) helps to answer the research question. The theory aims to understand the sense of community created by participation (McMahon, in Rospigliosi & Greener, 2014) that individuals experience within a community. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9) defined

sense of community as a "feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (as cited in McMillan, 1976).

The McMillan and Chavis (1986) model defines a sense of community with four key elements, namely membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. *Membership* relates strongly to a sense of belonging, with a member feeling relatedness in the group. *Influence* works in two ways; that is, a member has influence to make a difference to the group and the group's actions matter to the member. *Integration and fulfillment of needs* can be combined with many studies on the uses and gratifications of podcasts; the element is about the member's needs being met while being part of the group. *Shared emotional connection* is the final element, referring to the thought of and belief in sharing similar experiences together.

It is important to note that no element is the main cause for a sense of community; however, all four elements must be present, albeit with varying importance (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Similar to Jenkins's (2006) concept, the age of the theory does not hinder its potential within podcast community research. After all, the focus is not technological but cultural.

As mentioned earlier, there is no universal sense of community because there is no universal participatory culture. The term has been accepted to describe *the strength of bonding among community members*, although Kloos and Duffy (2012) argued that it is contextual and varies in different cultures and communities. They pointed out that this variety of definitions illustrates the strengths and limitations of the concept. Despite these arguments, the Sense of Community Index, which was developed in 1986 and revised in 2008, sets a path to a more standardized direction and provides a tool for quantitative studies to measure and compare different levels of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Despite the arguments on the definition of sense of community, we can agree that the ingredients of the four elements of the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model cannot be set from the outside; as with participatory culture, this needs to be done by the community members themselves. Similarly, as much as they would like, companies cannot "create" brand communities; rather, they can only court existing communities (Jenkins et al., 2013). This also connects with Jenkins's (2006) and Carpentier's (2011) views introduced above, in that members have the power to set the rules of participation. In addition, they have the power to build a strong community by defining the four elements by themselves. Therefore, from the perspective of the theoretical framework, this research concentrates on the participatory culture defined by Jenkins (2006) and on the sense of community defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986).

Methodology

To analytically approach the research question, this study utilized a systematic literature review to find and identify relevant articles. SLR is a transparent and repeatable method that helps to search, collect, extract, and organize available data for analytic purposes and provides a comprehensive understanding of knowledge about the research topic (Machi, 2022). This understanding includes not only a legitimate response to the research question but also the gaps, contradictions, omissions, and debates that were discovered during the process (Machi, 2022). In this research, the SLR method appears to be particularly solid, since the research question has scarcely been studied.

While the lack of studies clearly presents a research gap, it might also jeopardize the utilization of SLR. To gather the data, there should be sufficient topically specific and contextually rich research reports to fully support analysis, interpretation, and synthesis across studies (Finfgeld-Connett & Johnson, 2013). Similarly, as qualitative synthesis relies heavily on pattern recognition (Booth et al., 2012), these research reports must have enough similarities beyond their main subject.

Luckily, podcasts in general have been studied since the early 2000s, providing plenty of articles and data for this SLR. However, "more is better" is not necessarily the most methodologically sound perspective (Finfgeld-Connett & Johnson, 2013); rather, it is a good start before applying the exclusion criteria.

Fink (2010) introduced a seven-step task map for conducting SLRs, ordered in the following way: selecting research questions; selecting article databases; choosing search terms; applying practical screening criteria; applying methodological screening criteria; conducting the review; and synthesizing the results. Structurally similar to these seven steps, Machi's (2022) three principles provide a guide for (a) portraying the reality of the information present; (b) accurately ascertaining the quality of the data; and (c) logically forming conclusions. The structure of this SLR follows both the seven-step task map and the three principles.

Search and Data Analysis

Searches were performed for peer-reviewed articles published between January 2018 and September 2023 on seven scientific databases (ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library) (Table 1). The databases that were left mostly concentrated on a single field of science and/or returned no results from test searches.

Table 1 Databases

Database	Search results	After exclusions
ProQuest	24	6
Ebscohost	46	1
Taylor & Francis Online	53	7
SpringerLink	78	1
SAGE Journals	3	1
ScienceDirect	1	0
Wiley Online Library	10	0
Total	215	16

Table 2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Scholarly journal	Research about podcast producers and not the audience
Published Jan 2018 – Sep 2023	Research about the pandemic or COVID-19
Written in English	Language other than English
Peer reviewed	Research not audio related, despite the word "podcast" in the title/abstract/keywords
Full text available	Research concentrating on increasing podcast use
	Research concentrating on technological innovations
	Research analyzing the process of podcasting
	Research about politics, law and justice, medical and health–related topics, linguistics, social work, journalism, and learning disabilities
	Research being a fan study
	Research about the business models of radio and/or podcasts
	Research about campus or local community radio

The search string was "title(podc*) AND noft(participation) AND noft(podcast)." If the "noft" limitation (meaning "search anywhere except for full text") was not available in the database search option, the search was conducted with the same string but without limitations. Similarly, if a database search did not accept an asterisk in the search string, the search was conducted with the full word "podcast." Despite being one of the article keywords, the search term "community" was left out because it resulted in articles that were not about the podcast community or those in which the community was not the target of the research.

In addition to the search string, the search had inclusion and exclusion criteria, as shown in Table 2.

Searches with the inclusion criteria mentioned in Table 2 returned a total of 215 articles. In addition to article abstracts, article keywords were also used to estimate the relevance of articles.

Exclusion Criteria

Given the wide range of studies on podcasts, exclusion criteria were necessary to narrow down the number of articles and ensure their relevance to the research question.

Podcast production studies were excluded as they do not address the experiences or perceptions of the audience, which is central to understanding how participatory culture impacts their sense of community. Exclusion criteria also included studies about economic and business aspects, distribution, and marketing strategies. The focus on these may provide insights into content creation but does not shed light on audience engagement and community formation.

Similarly, studies centered around the pandemic may present skewed results due to the unique global circumstances affecting podcast consumption and community engagement during this period. The aim is to understand the broader, more enduring aspects of participatory culture that enhance community sense among podcast audiences, beyond the anomalies introduced by the pandemic.

The studies about increasing podcast use were also excluded. While understanding factors that increase podcast use can be valuable, this research might not provide direct insights into how participatory culture affects community among listeners. The focus here is less on the quantitative aspect of usage and more on qualitative aspects of listener engagement and community feeling.

Similarly, technological advancements in podcasting are essential but lie outside the scope of this study, which seeks to understand dynamics of participation among audiences.

The podcast studies related to politics, law and justice, medical and health-related topics, linguistics, social work, journalism, and learning disabilities tackle significant subjects, but they often focus on the application of podcasts in specific fields such as medical education, health communication, social work training, or educational support for those with learning disabilities. These specialized uses of podcasts provide valuable insights within their respective domains but do not directly contribute to this SLR's research question.

Finally, excluding studies of local and campus radios ensures that the research remains focused on the broader participatory culture among podcast audiences. The aim is to understand the dynamics within podcast audiences at large, which might differ significantly from those engaged with locally focused radio content.

Most importantly, each article was manually reviewed and if the article did not provide insights to the research question of this SLR, it was excluded.

After the exclusion criteria were manually applied (Table 2), 16 articles remained for this research (Table 1). The currentness of articles in any technology-related study is crucial. The reason for limiting the publishing timeframe of research literature to five years goes in line with the pace of changes in the mediascape. To prevent outdated information, the relevance of articles much older than five years would be questioned in this particular

Table 3 Years of Publication

Year	ProQuest	EBSCOhost	Taylor & Francis	SpringerLink	Sage	Total
2023			1			1
2022	2		5	1	1	9
2021						0
2020	3					3
2019	1	1	1			3
2018						0

field of research. Despite these limitation criteria, the relevant articles included in this study were at most four years old. Also, 65% of all the selected articles were published after January 2022, guaranteeing the relevancy of this literature review from the perspective of temporality (Table 3).

The themes of the 16 articles included motivations for podcast listening (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2022; Tobin et al., 2022), a broader look into several podcast and community studies (Hoydis, 2020), parasociality (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022), podcast subscriptions (Chen & Keng, 2023), host trust and credibility (Brinson & Lemon, 2022) participation and engagement (García-Marín, 2020; García-Marín & Aparici, 2020), transmediality (Baelo-Allué, 2019; García-Marín & Aparici, 2020), podcast uses and gratifications (Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019), commonality, creativity, and collaboration in podcasting (Donison, 2022), engagement in educational podcasts (Besser et al., 2022; McNamara et al., 2022) and intimacy and interactivity in true crime podcasts (Rodgers, 2022).

Following the research question, relevant data were extracted from each of the articles, placed in an external document, and sorted thematically on a digital mindmap. Prior to the reflection and analysis, several key themes emerged from the data: Reasons for listening, uses and gratifications results, asynchronicity, participation, trust, parasocial relationships, niche communities, active listening, liveness, transmedia, and individual, meaningful experiences.

Finfgeld-Connett (2014) noted that reflective memoing and diagramming in this way are highly important and that the findings should be integrated, interpreted, and synthesized across studies to guarantee knowledge development. Reflecting on and synthesizing the data against the theoretical framework was performed after the data collection and review. Content analysis was used as the methodological framework for the data analysis, since it is considered to be a useful tool for knowledge building and theory generation when data are by nature highly organized and contextualized (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014).

Analysis of the Articles

The objective of this review was to analyze the articles chosen for this study to answer the research question. The following six enhancers of sense of community were found in the analyzed articles:

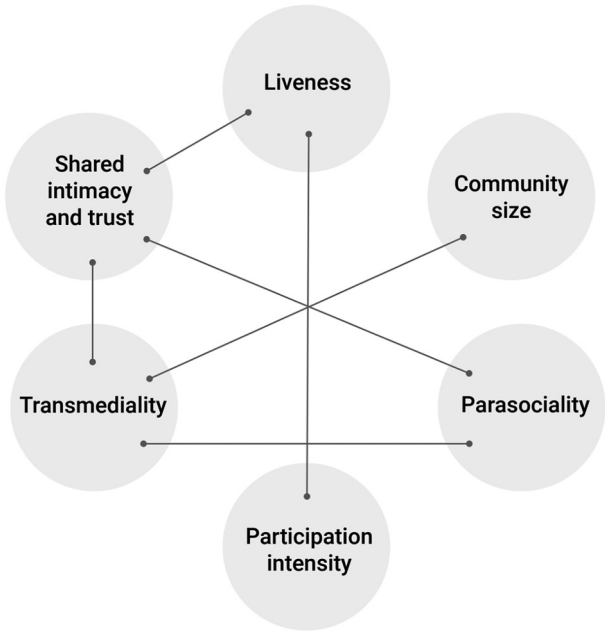


Figure 1 Six Enhancers of Sense of Community

(a) Liveness
(b) Community size
(c) Parasociality
(d) Participation intensity
(e) Transmediality
(f) Shared intimacy and trust

The relations of these six enhancers were analyzed to gain a clear image of the current knowledge of the research topic. They are interlinked, that is; no single one answers the research question, but by combining the knowledge of all six, the answer can be synthesized (Figure 1).

Liveness

To spark participation, the audio needs to be live or simulate liveness (García-Marín, 2020). This supports the finding that even asynchronous engagement with fellow listeners reduces the solitary listening experience of podcasts (Perks et al., 2019). Although the listening activity may be solitary, the culture of the podcast medium is still interactive (Rodgers, 2022). Podcast hosts have created ways of communicating with their listeners that most often precedes and follows podcast listening (Perks & Turner,

2019), engaging with and giving visibility to fans (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022). Despite this "strange experience of 'liveness'" (Hoydis, 2020), most often in scripted content, García-Marín (2020) argued that the asynchrony of podcasting has a negative effect on participation.

Community Size

Communities in which members share their own language, values, and identities, despite their different roles and backgrounds, and find motivation and power to shape the community itself (Rodgers, 2022) are particularly open for stronger participation. This is also known as *heterogeneous commonality* (Donison, 2022). However, this often requires podcasts to be thematically linked to the community (García-Marín, 2020), as is the case with fan and tech podcasts (e.g. Marvel or Apple). Also, shared experiences, stories, and common language within communities are crucial for a sense of community (McNamara et al., 2022; Rodgers, 2022).

Establishing such a podcast community usually happens on multiple platforms (Donison, 2022), but to retain intensive and meaningful participation, the community needs to fulfill two criteria; that is, it needs to be working collaboratively (Donison, 2022) and also limited in size (García-Marín, 2020). Limiting the community size of popular podcasts can be both difficult and counterintuitive, but it often results in meaningful interaction between community members (García-Marín, 2020).

It is also crucial to understand that community size does not correlate with the popularity of a podcast and that most listeners do not want to participate. According to the uses and gratifications studies of six articles (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2022; Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019; Tobin et al., 2022), social interaction, sense of/need for belonging, participation, and community building did not appear as significant factors for gratification. These results underline the insignificance of participation for listeners, compared to entertainment, education, and multitasking (Perks et al., 2019). The mobility of podcasts has enabled participants to listen to content on the go and to multitask, but it has simultaneously hindered listeners' ability to co-experience (Chen & Keng, 2023). Among the main gratifications listed in the studies of Perks and Turner (2019) and Perks et al. (2019) is the ability to multitask while listening. Similarly, in Tobin et al. (2022) study, most participants listened to podcasts while engaging in other activities at home. These results underline the insignificance of participation to listeners, compared to entertainment, education, and multitasking (Perks et al., 2019). The mobility of podcasts enables participants to listen to content on the go and to multitask but simultaneously hinders listeners' ability to co-experience (Chen & Keng, 2023).

To sum it up, social or emotional needs, such as the *need to belong* or *social interaction with other listeners of the community*, do not seem to be the main gratifications for most podcast listeners. Participation is driven more by parasociality, not by the need to belong to a community (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022).

Parasociality

Parasocial relationships, meaning the illusion of engagement that audience members experience toward figures in the media (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956), often develop through simple interactions with the podcast host (i.e., *parasocial interaction*) (Brinson & Lemon, 2022). Creating a parasocial relationship between the hosts and listeners is connected to a sense of community, identification with the podcaster, and trust (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chen & Keng, 2023; Perks & Turner, 2019). It is worth noting that people with an existing and higher sense of community do not seek to listen to podcasts (Tobin et al., 2022); indeed, that sense needs to be sparked within podcasts. This can be achieved not only by enabling extended listening sessions and the frequency of listening (Tobin et al., 2022) but, more importantly, through the host's actions and characteristics (Perks & Turner, 2019). Also, in the absence of a parasocial relationship, people were shown to be less trusting of the host and possibly the ad content of the podcast (Brinson & Lemon, 2022).

Participation Intensity

The character and ways of participation in the studied articles varied. Increased participation was detected in shows with timeless topics and a technical character, while specialized topics with no long tail triggered less participation (García-Marín, 2020). Featuring listener feedback and engagement encouraged more participation among true crime podcasts (Rodgers, 2022) and the *Black Canadian Content Creators* podcast (Donison, 2022), which in return could promote the development of group identification (Chen & Keng, 2023). Perks and Turner (2019) pointed out how some participatory acts do not even show up to the hosts, such as participatory responses where listeners pretend to be part of a conversation despite being alone in their car. Donison (2022) also made a case for how even listening can be a participatory act.

In the best case scenario, the participatory potential of podcasts can be embraced, such as in the true crime podcasts that Rodgers (2022) studied. The audience created meaning with their participation (Baelo-Allué, 2019); they actively created spaces for listener voices, responded to criticism, and co-created sets of ideas around women, victimization, and true crime. The

worst case can be illustrated by the shows that García-Marín and Aparici (2020) studied, where, despite their variety, transmedial content was rarely included.

It is worth remembering, however, that digital media do not ensure participatory actions by default, but participation needs to be stimulated (García-Marín, 2020). Repeated calls to action (Donison, 2022) and featuring user-generated content (Rodgers, 2022) work as catalysts for deeper and more meaningful participation. Finally, because each listener is different, their ways of participating may vary. Some listeners are involved superficially, and some in a very dedicated way (García-Marín, 2020). Therefore, hosts need to ensure opportunities for participation on multiple levels. For this, even though it was developed to measure participation within transmedia podcasts, García-Marín's (2020) five-level participation chart can be used also to benchmark the ways audiences participate.

Transmediality

Transmediality on podcasts is when the listener becomes a user and when the storytelling experience is shared with others in a knowledge space that promotes collaboration and conversation, and whose borders are difficult to establish as digital thresholds are crossed (Baelo-Allué, 2019). Podcasts provide an aural experience, but to communicate with the host or even get together with other listeners who possess the same interests, goals, or needs (Chen & Keng, 2023; Perks et al., 2019), the easiest way seems to be accessing transmedial platforms.

Whereas podcast or radio narratives are most often fixed and host-driven, transmedial platforms offer a whole participatory ecosystem (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020). In this ecosystem, the narrative becomes audience and community-driven (Baelo-Allué, 2019) through stimulated participation (García-Marín, 2020). Community-shaped narrative seems like a good idea as long as this user-generated content is really used to make a difference on the show. In the best-case scenario, transmedial narrative extensions can construct an atmosphere of intimacy and confidence, which are essential for stimulating more user engagement (Chen & Keng, 2023). In the worst case, as García-Marín and Aparici (2020) suggested, transmedial content makes any possible interaction on the show sound staged. There is no dialogue and no two-way communication, only a lack of empowerment. The lack of two-way communication can also raise concerns of gatekeeping, that is, if certain perspectives or voices are being excluded from the audience (McNamara et al., 2022).

Transmediality frees stories from the limitations of medium-specific fixed narration and makes knowledge more accessible to all members of the community. Also, the host's availability in a variety of digital spaces underscores the community aspect (Donison, 2022). It enhances the capacity of the

audience, who can build on the story through collective intelligence. Communities become formed to participate and engage with transmedial narratives (Baelo-Allué, 2019).

While social media are used to increase interaction with the audience and create a podcast community culture (Chen & Keng, 2023), transmediality does not necessarily need to happen on social media. However, podcasters should consider their own websites as independent transmedial platforms to dodge algorithms, intrusion, and data mining (Donison, 2022).

To engage transmediality from the perspective of the research question of this study, Baelo-Allué (2019) article on the *Serial* podcast confirmed everything synthesized above. In *Serial's* case, a multisensory experience offering possibilities for participation on multiple platforms enhances the community around it.

When multisensory transmediality provides us tools for true two-way participation, which is used in podcasts to connect many-to-many rather than one-to-many, and provide listeners tools for collective intelligence to shape the narrative (Hoydis, 2020), why remain in the old one-way and one-to-many models?

Shared Intimacy and Trust

When the host shares intimate details or personal content on a show, it not only increases parasociality (Perks & Turner, 2019); this act of self-revelation also makes the listeners feel as if they are part of a private conversation (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022). As a medium, podcasts have proven to be remarkably successful in building this kind of shared sense of intimacy and closeness (Hoydis, 2020) and a feeling of solicitousness (Perks & Turner, 2019). Intimacy can also foster connections between diverse populations, acting as a "bridging medium" to create communities (Hoydis, 2020).

When researching strategies to enhance a sense of community among fandom, out of Castaño and Hurtado's (2022) list of five strategies, four were directly related to intimacy and/or trust. Their study platform was YouTube, but since many podcasts are also on YouTube and their strategies apply to both aural and visual platforms, the results can also be considered valid for this research. Creating a climate of closeness and confidence not only increases parasociality but also participation (García-Marín, 2020). This also functions vice-versa; the lack of parasociality lessens trust (Brinson & Lemon, 2022).

We can also talk about *hyper-intimacy* in podcasts (Rodgers, 2022) in a similar way to how we used to talk in the 1990s about hypertext, linking, and navigating information in a non-linear manner. Similarly, hyper-intimacy allows podcast listeners to reflect their personal experiences,

connections, and emotions, while in transmedial spaces, communities help to see these experiences in a larger context.

In this literature review, *trust* appears as one of the main factors in preserving the desire to maintain a relationship and reinforcing a sense of intimacy. The same pattern also appears in other articles outside of this research (Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001; Guo, 2017; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rosales, 2013), although it is impossible to theoretically pin down the terms of shared intimacy or authenticity (Hoydis, 2020).

Practically speaking, there can be too much intimacy. Revealing intimate details on a show to create a sense of intimacy or trust can quickly go off course, in the same way as when a politician's love life is inappropriately exposed (Arvidsson, 2013).

From the perspective of the research question, shared intimacy feels like a shortcut. Perhaps the experience of an intimate podcast is all one needs for a sense of community (Perks & Turner, 2019), and no participation is needed (unless listening is counted as a participatory act). However, as discussed above, shared intimacy also drives participation, albeit indirectly through building engagement and parasociality.

Directions for Future Research

This SLR has investigated the types of participatory culture that enhance a sense of community among listeners. It not only identifies clear directions for future research based on the gaps found in the current literature but also explains how the six enhancers are interlinked.

Meaningful participation in podcasts relies on either true or simulated liveness. The asynchronous nature of podcasts has a negative effect on participation. The asynchronous nature of podcasts negatively affects participation, aligning with Lucas Swiatek's findings (Llinares et al., 2018) that podcasts can generate a sense of intimacy despite the absence of physical closeness. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to determine whether meaningful participation and a sense of community can be achieved in podcasts lacking any element of liveness.

Participatory culture is most intensive in small communities formed across multiple, transmedial platforms. Participation through shared experiences and stories, facilitated by means of collaboration, enhances the sense of community. These findings interlink the size of the community with the concept of transmediality.

The development of a participatory culture that enhances a sense of community often relies on a key figure, typically the show's host, who becomes the focus of parasocial interactions. Such parasocial relationships can be enhanced through enabling frequent and extended listening sessions. Furthermore, parasociality can be increased if the host shows an interest in

the listeners, shares personal information, and is seen as competent, authentic, and unpredictable (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022). This SLR also connects parasociality with a sense of intimacy and trust. However, it remains uncertain whether parasocial relationships can also develop among listeners if there are sufficient opportunities for participatory engagement. In essence, further research is required to explore whether a community can form through parasocial relationships among its members without the continuous involvement of a host as the catalyst.

The participation itself should be meaningful. It should ensure that the investment of time and energy into participatory activities brings valuable returns to the listener and/or community. Participation must be stimulated, but participatory acts usually create more participation. It is a feedback loop if nurtured correctly. Usually, correctly selected topics and liveness spark participation and increase the sense of community.

The findings from uses and gratifications studies underline that the need to belong or build communities is not significant among listeners. Social or emotional needs do not seem to be relevant factors for podcast listeners, even though they play a big role in shaping even the most popular shows. By combining the uses and gratifications findings with the findings on community size, we can conclude that small communities with intensive participation are crucial for development and change but that these members and their needs represent only a small fraction of the overall audience.

The transmedial participatory culture of a podcast enhances the community around it. Multiple articles in this study concluded that a transmedial community can provide stronger collective intelligence and audience-driven narratives. Also, outside of this study, the findings support that transmediality drives the strength of parasocial relationships (Giles, 2002).

If a podcast can create a sense of shared intimacy, it will enhance the sense of community. However, no participatory acts are necessarily needed for this. The sense of shared intimacy operates independently from the participation bubble, but it can be increased with parasociality and even asynchronous engagement.

From the perspective of the theoretical framework, the six enhancers of sense of community align with Jenkins's (2009) participatory culture concept. Podcasts already offer a base for an expressive, supportive culture of creativity and engagement with collective intelligence, as defined by Jenkins —those three are platform-based features. However, another three from Jenkins's (2009) concept, parasociality, shared intimacy, and meaningful participation, are user- and culture-centered, not platform-centered features. They are defined by the culture, and the mechanisms have been defined in this SLR. Also, these six enhancers align with four elements of the D. W. McMillan and Chavis (1986) model. The model requires all four to be present for a sense of community. We can agree that the conclusion above

includes elements of *membership, influence, fulfillment of needs*, and *shared emotional connection.*

The findings of this SLR further pave the way for subsequent research. Utilizing the six enhancers identified in this study to construct and refine a scale for measuring the intensity of the sense of community in podcasts could enable more extensive quantitative research. This approach not only enriches our understanding of participatory culture within this medium but also sets the stage for pioneering studies that can explore the nuanced dynamics of community engagement in the digital age.

Conclusions

This SLR investigated participatory culture from the perspective of liveness, community size, parasociality, participation intensity, transmediality, and shared intimacy and trust. Based on its findings, it can be concluded that sense of community can be enhanced by a kind of participatory culture that

- embraces liveness;
- works in small enough communities;
- includes parasocial relationships;
- provides opportunities for meaningful participatory acts on transmedial platforms;
- does not try to force everyone to participate; and
- builds on shared intimacy and trust.

These conclusions also build upon (McGregor, 2019) statement that podcasts that grasp participatory opportunities for listener engagement are usually the most successful.

Several practical implications can be drawn from the research findings. First, podcast teams should release shows regularly with occasional extended episodes to enhance parasociality. Second, if one is willing to increase participation through content choices, show topics should be chosen accordingly and be tied to current events and a simulation of liveness. Third, several online platforms should be used to enable engagement and possible community building. Fourth, even the smallest communities and/or conversations should be embraced. Those are potentially the most intensive. Fifth, most people who like podcasts do not want to be part of the community. Answering people's need to belong is not a feasible approach to podcast making. Sixth, sharing intimate moments and embracing audience members who do the same can be a powerful catalyst for community building through parasociality and transmediality.

In light of these findings, it becomes evident that podcasts with a vibrant participatory culture can also be defined as a *transcommunal medium*. This

merges insights and perspectives from individuals who might never interact otherwise and, via transmedial participation, reaches beyond the limits of any one community. It encourages collaboration, shared experiences, and a sense of closeness among various groups or communities. Consequently, podcasts serve as powerful catalysts for enhancing a global sense of community, demonstrating their unique ability to unite different voices in a shared narrative space.

Limitations

The sample size is a limitation of this SLR. Since "participation" is a changing and flexible term with several approaches, expanding the articles' age criteria from 5 to 10 years might have provided a broader view of participatory culture. Additionally, articles analyzed that used the words "engagement" and "participation" either as synonyms or in contexts different from those in this study could have led to misunderstandings. These issues were clarified and fact-checked during the analysis phase.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Juska Wendland is a radio professional at Finnish National Broadcasting Company Yle and a new media lecturer at the Omnia vocational school in Espoo, Finland. His research interests and creative work focus on audience participation and new interactive methods in podcast and audio production.

ORCID

Juska Wendland http://orcid.org/0009-0008-4826-6242

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Juska Wendland

ABSTRACT

This research investigates social podcasting, focusing on the evolution of audience participation from passive consumption to active participation. Unlike traditional podcasts, social podcasting empowers listeners to contribute creatively, transforming them from consumers to co-creators. The research question "What are the levels of audience participation on the basis of produsage principles in social podcasting?" is addressed by developing a five-level model of participation. Analysis of 81 podcasts reveals that genuine participatory acts remain scarce, with many podcasts not progressing beyond basic interaction. The study highlights the potential for podcasts to foster community through participatory models and collaborative content creation.

Over the past 15 years, the evolution of podcasting has been primarily cultural rather than technological (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020). The true innovators in the realm of audio have been the content creators, not those developing the platforms. Listening to podcasts is often considered a solitary experience (Rodgers, 2022), which highlights its lack of the interactive and participatory aspects found in live radio. It remains relatively uncommon for podcasts to challenge the constraints of this traditionally one-way medium, as this research will also demonstrate. A possible reason for this may be a lack of demand, as uses and gratifications studies indicate that participation, social interaction, and community building do not appear as significant factors for listener gratification (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2022; Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022). However, other studies show that social aspects are crucial to the success of independent podcasts (McClung & Johnson, 2010; Ritter & Cho, 2009), and

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successful podcasts often leverage various forms of engagement to connect with their audiences (McGregor, 2019).

In this study, podcasts are defined as audio recordings consumed asynchronously. Unlike live radio broadcasts, podcast audiences are not expected to be simultaneously present. This presents challenges in both audience participation and in creating and maintaining a sense of community. Both aspects are discussed in a systematic literature review by Wendland (2024).

This research focuses on *social podcasting* and develops a model to illustrate the potential for audience participation. Contrary to the traditional one-way model, where podcasts typically focus on the host and guest, social podcasting reverses this approach. In this new paradigm, listeners and fans are not just passive recipients of content; rather, they are encouraged to become active creators and contributors to the podcasting experience. In other words, social podcasting can be described as an audio creation process in which the audience participates and contributes to the creative process in one way or another.

The active audience participation, granting the power to contribute to and change the podcast content, benefits both content creators and listeners. It not only eliminates the scripted nature of the podcast and provides fresh content but also strengthens the sense of community among the audience (Wendland, 2024).

This article explores podcasts and podcast segments that are created with audience members and addresses the research question, "What are the levels of audience participation on the basis of produsage principles in social podcasting?"

What is Social Podcasting?

Ten to twenty years ago, audience participation in media was viewed through the lens of communication democratization (Vatikiotis, 2004)—challenging large media companies and fostering a bottom-up mode of communication that impacts public consciousness (Meadows et al., 2009). With social podcasting, the aim is not necessarily to challenge the status quo but to encourage audience contribution and innovate participation methods to create entertaining, often unscripted content with and from the contributions. The methods of participation can vary, but this article focuses on the depth of participation and explores the different levels of participation in social podcasting.

Although this article concentrates on participatory and social podcasting, it is crucial to differentiate this from concepts such as participatory radio, which is typically understood as radio shows co-produced with a specific group of people (Manyozo, 2007; Ravenscroft, 2022). In these shows, participation occurs during the

production process, not through the show itself. In contrast, this article defines social podcasts as shows that invite listeners to contribute in ways that have the potential to alter the content and/or script of the episode(s).

This research focuses on podcasts as asynchronous audio products, excluding synchronous technologies or live-streamed podcasts, even though liveness has been shown to increase participation (García-Marín, 2020). The live podcasting aspect has been addressed by Florini (2015) and more recently by Taylor (2023).

In this article participation on transmedial platforms is considered part of social podcasting only if listener-generated content is included in the audio and influences the script. Online discussions sparked by the podcast do not meet the criteria for social podcasting unless they circle back to impact the podcast's content on upcoming episodes. While many podcasts generate online conversations, social podcasting specifically involves audience-created content that alters the script.

In social podcasting, participation is conceptualized following Carpentier's (2015) AIP model (access-interaction-participation) in which meaningful participation can be defined by distinguishing media access, interaction, and participation. In this model participation includes co-deciding on and with the content, granting decision-making power to the audience. Carpentier's concept of power is closely tied to the concept of participation, similar to Pateman's (1970) definition of *full participation*. Pateman defines full participation as a process which ensures that each member of a decision-making body has equal power to influence decision outcomes. Similarly, in social podcasting, each listener is empowered to co-determine the script. The topic of meaningful, full participation could also be explored from the angle of content control, as discussed by McMillan (2002), or even democracy, which Carpentier (2015) considers an effort to maximize participation. However, because social podcasting emphasizes the audience's sense of community and meaningful participation, Carpentier's AIP model and Pateman's concept of full participation serve as appropriate guides.

This article will introduce a model of levels of audience participation in social podcasting. The model aims to demonstrate what maximized participation in podcasts could look like, examining the possibilities for participation when the power, traditionally held by the hosts, is partially or fully transferred to the audience members. While similar participation charts have been published, most notably a five-level participation chart by García-Marín and Aparici (2020) which explored participation within transmedia podcasts, this model of levels of audience participation in social podcasting emphasizes audience relevancy and the interaction between hosts and listeners.

While Henry Jenkins (2003) described media convergence and its impact on broadcast radio, the innovations in podcasting have primarily been related to content, not technology (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020). Although Jenkins emphasizes that the first demand consumers make in a participatory culture is the right to participate in the creation and distribution of media narratives, especially entertainment-related podcasts have largely remained in a top-down model for the past 20 years. As a result, from a participatory perspective, many podcasts more closely resemble protected, consumption-only corporate products rather than community-driven fan creations. Naturally, there are also notable exceptions, ranging from research-related (Cook, 2020) to community-building (Florini, 2015; Fox et al., 2020) to educational podcasts (Law-Penrose, 2021), such as those that feature community-created content or content created for the community.

Recently, technological innovations have emerged that aim to rethink podcasting as a medium. Applications such as *SOLVV* and *Callin* (both discontinued in 2024) or podcasting platforms like *heard.fm* and *soundbran.ch* have sought to streamline not only production but also participation. Similarly, the *Clubhouse* app, which launched in 2020 as a synchronous audio communication app, rebranded itself in autumn 2023 as an asynchronous messaging tool. While liveness has traditionally enhanced the sense of community in audio products (García-Marín, 2020), these innovations offer new opportunities to stimulate participation of varying depths within asynchronous audio products.

Although podcasting has been relatively understudied, a specific research gap exists concerning social podcasting. To the author's knowledge, no individual studies have been conducted on the levels of social podcasting where the content is intended to change through listener involvement. This lack of studies highlights a research gap that this research aims to fill. Furthermore, when the audience becomes an active co-creator of content, there must be opportunities for participation at various levels. This is particularly important given that most audience members do not wish to participate, as indicated by many podcast uses and gratification studies (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2022; Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022). To accommodate the interests of the minority who do wish to participate, an understanding of multi-level participation is essential. This also applies to ethnic minorities, as they have stronger motivations to participate, ranging from challenging social norms to seeking cultural representation (Florini, 2015; Fox et al., 2020). This article aims to address the previously mentioned research gap.

Framework of Produsage

In this article the concept of social podcasts will be observed from the perspective of *produsage*. This framework, developed by Axel Bruns (2008), provides insights into how users actively engage in both creating and modifying content. The produsage framework serves as a crucial instrument for analyzing user-generated content and participatory culture.

In short, Bruns' theory discusses the meaning of active consumer and introduces the concept of produsage (Bruns, 2008) which underscores that in communities involved in the collaborative creation and expansion of information and knowledge, the roles traditionally known as "consumer" and "end user" have become obsolete. It presents the current transition from industrial production methods to collaborative, user-driven content creation in which the user becomes a *produser*, a hybrid of user and producer.

Given that this research focuses on examining various levels of audience participation in podcasts, employing the produsage framework can offer a comprehensive understanding of audience participation methods. In this context, the term *intercreativity*, coined by Tim Berners-Lee (2000), underscores the research perspective. In intercreative environments, users collaborate, often in large communities, to develop and expand shared informational resources of mutual interest. This bears several similarities to Benkler's (2006) concept of *peer production*, which is characterized as decentralized and self-selected—mirroring actions in intercreative environments. Instead of merely engaging with the existing material, individuals empower themselves with the tools necessary for content creation. From this research perspective, the deeper integration of intercreativity into social podcasts transforms listeners into produsers, significantly elevating their level of participation.

Bruns (2013) outlines four principles of produsage, which will be considered in this research when defining the levels of participation within social podcasts.

(1) Open Participation, Communal Evaluation — Anyone can contribute to and modify content, which is then assessed and improved by the community.
(2) Fluid Heterarchy, Ad Hoc Meritocracy — Leadership and roles are flexible, determined by the quality and relevance of contributions rather than by predetermined hierarchy.
(3) Unfinished Artefacts, Continuing Process — Content is always evolving, never final, allowing for perpetual updates and improvements by the community.

(4) Common Property, Individual Rewards — While the created content is owned by the community as a whole, individuals are recognized and rewarded for their contributions.

The concept of collaborative production and usage in music and sound remains relatively underrecognized, largely due to ongoing controversies surrounding digital and online music, as well as the commercial music industry's forceful actions against what it deems copyright piracy. Although there are exceptions, such as *CCMixter*—a produsage community music site that promotes remix culture licensed under Creative Commons—the scarcity of examples highlights the research gap. However, this characteristic of remixability also applies to social podcasts, wherein users "remix" the content through their participation, steering it in their preferred direction. This represents consumption as a networked practice as well as using power as full participants (Jenkins, 2006), as opposed to merely personalized consumption, effectively linking Bruns's concept of produsage with Jenkins' convergence culture.

In this research, *interaction* and *participation* are defined as per Nico Carpentier's outline in his AIP model (Carpentier, 2015). Interaction is viewed as a form of engagement, albeit within a more constrained scope. It signifies engagement through predefined mechanisms that do not permit substantial influence over the media content or its production process. On the other hand, participation implies that the audience holds a genuine stake and influence in the creation and production of the content.

Bruns (2008) also emphasizes the importance of rewards for contributions, as mentioned in his fourth principle. This aligns perfectly with the idea of rewarding podcast listeners for their participation. Although content is owned communally, creators can still receive personal recognition for their contributions. This recognition serves as a powerful incentive for individuals to engage in collaborative projects, as it enhances their reputation both within and potentially beyond the community. For those active in well-known collaborative communities, such recognition can even translate into real-world benefits.

By applying Bruns' theory to our research question, this research aims to investigate how social podcasts facilitate broader public participation in the podcasting world, essentially democratizing the production and consumption of this content.

Methodology

To explore the research question, "What are the levels of audience participation on the basis of produsage principles in social podcasting?," a survey targeting audio and media professionals was conducted. This method, known as expert

sampling, utilizes a technique whereby a group of information-rich individuals (Flick, 2018) with expertise on a specific topic are selected (Singh, 2007). An advantage of this method is its tendency to lead to snowball sampling, in which respondents refer to another set of potential respondents (Iorio, 2004). This approach proved particularly beneficial for this research, given the author's role at the Finnish National Broadcaster Yle, which provided direct access to numerous audio and media professionals. Similarly, Gideon (2012) highlights that purposive sampling, such as expert sampling, is especially valuable when the researcher is aware of the target population's characteristics and seeks to include individuals who possess those characteristics in the sample.

The brief anonymous survey, sent to Finnish National Broadcaster Yle audio reporters and producers in January 2024 invited professionals to identify and name participatory podcasts to the author via a web form. The term *"participatory"* was not further defined on the form, allowing for a wide range of interpretations. This approach resulted in a broader spectrum of podcasts featuring participatory acts for analysis.

The survey received 112 responses, featuring 81 unique podcasts, both international and Finnish. These podcasts were then subjected to further analysis against the theoretical framework to identify various levels of participation. During this analysis, Bruns' (2013) four principles of produsage as well as key factors such as the presence or absence of the audience's voice, and crucially, the influence of audience members in relation to the podcast content, were examined. Unless the headline indicated a more audience-driven episode (such as Q&A episodes or similar), the most recent episode of each podcast was chosen.

As the episodes were listened to, notes were taken on the presence or absence of the audience's voice and the application of Bruns' principles. This dialogue between the audio content and the theoretical framework is abductive in nature. Given the lack of studies, concepts and models regarding social podcasting, an abductive explanation provides opportunities for creating new paradigms. In this process, the observations (the audience's voice in the podcasts) guide the formation of an explanatory hypothesis (the model of participation) as defined by Peirce (1934, 5.171). This abductive explanation often involves the creation of new concepts that allow for a new description of the relevant phenomena (Aliseda, 2006). In this research, Bruns' principles and the theoretical framework help us interpret the audio observations and form a new model—a concept to better understand social podcasting. By identifying and comparing similarities in the notes taken while listening to the episodes, varying depths of participation can be revealed. From these similarities, five levels of participation were identified in the podcasts where the audience was present.

Analysis of the Podcasts

The analyzed podcasts covered a variety of genres, ranging from true crime to entertainment, music journalism to news and politics, and life hacks to finance. Most episodes were 45 minutes to 1 hour long, but both short-form podcasts (about 15 minutes) and episodes over 3 hours were included. The 81 podcasts analyzed included both Finnish and English-speaking content (see Appendix: List of 81 analyzed podcasts, episodes and the participation levels).

After analyzing each podcast and comparing the similarities, five distinct levels of audience participation were identified. The episodes were then ranked from 1 to 5 based on the level of audience participation and presence in each episode. This was done by comparing the participation to Bruns' four principles of produsage as introduced earlier. It is challenging to categorize each podcast into just one specific level, as the level of participation can vary even within a single episode. In such cases, the highest level reached in the podcast was reported. The changes needed to transition between different levels of participation are minor and usually require only a change in tone of voice or a different approach to how audience inclusion is conceptualized. As the categorization nuances are very small, presenting the numbers as percentages (Table 1) plays a crucial role in illustrating the rarity of the upper levels.

After ranking each of these podcasts according to audience participation, the similarities among podcasts within the same level were analyzed. Through the analysis of these similarities and to answer the research question "What are the levels of audience participation on the basis of produsage principles in social podcasting?," a five-level model of Social Podcasting participation was developed (Figure 1). This model assists podcast creators in more effectively involving their audience in the content creation process, inspiring different and deeper forms of participation, and encouraging the redistribution of power from the hosts to the audience in the form of collective ownership.

It is worth noting that several podcasts, despite having a comment form on Spotify or the option to send Instagram direct messages, did not

Table 1. Percentage of Podcasts on Each Level of Audience Participation.

Level	Percentage of podcasts
5	5%
4	5%
3	7%
2	11%
1	23%
0	48%

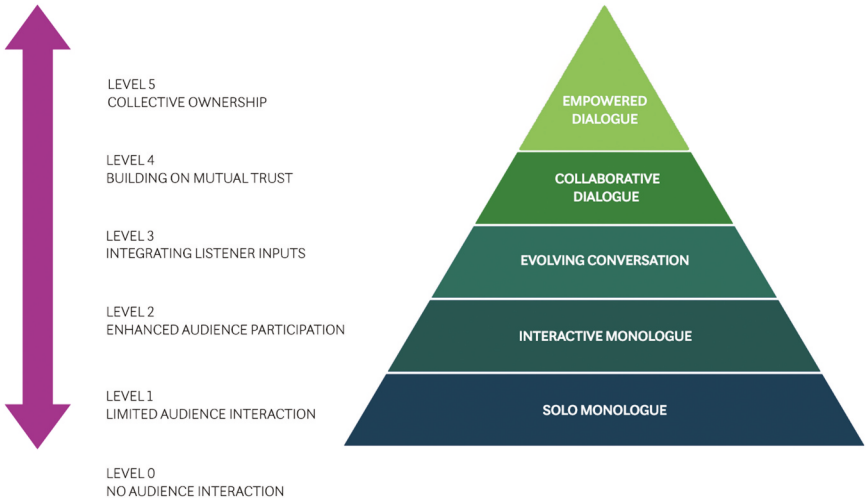


Figure 1. Social Podcasting Model of Participation.

mention these features in their episodes nor any content that might have been sent to them. The participatory element was often only mentioned in the podcast description text. As a result, these podcasts were classified as Level 0.

The model is considered hierarchical, meaning that each level also includes and/or complements the features of the lower ones. Similarly, as the podcast levels up, its features become increasingly social and participatory.

When these 81 podcasts were analyzed, the key takeaway is that participatory acts and truly social podcasts are still very rare. Majority of the engagement in podcasts is limited to contact forms or Instagram direct messages and about half of the podcasts are at Level 0 (Figure 1). That means that many responders considered participation just as an ability to reach out to the hosts—i.e. if you can contact them, that is participation. This underlines the low bar for audio participation in the current podcast-sphere.

Level 1. *Solo Monologue: Limited Audience Interaction*

"Alright guys, we're going to wrap things up. Here we go: "AITA (Am I The Asshole) for hitting on my classmate's mom? I, 17 M, have a classmate. I wouldn't really call her a friend, but we live in the same neighborhood. Stacy, 17F, she's cute, but her mom, 42F, is . . . wow. I've never seen a woman like this. Let's just say she's got it going on. I have a small lawn mowing business, and when I did their lawn, she came out with just her towel to tell me I missed a spot. I mean, come on, that's a clear sign she's into me, right?. . ." "

– Am I The Asshole Podcast

From the perspective of audience participation in social podcasting, the term "monologue" refers to a situation where the host or hosts are speaking. In this context even if two people are conversing, it is still considered a monologue if the audience's voice is not included. At Level 1, hosts incorporate content from social media sources, which may not have been created by listeners of that particular podcast. The content is used by the hosts to initiate conversation, but the source is most likely not mentioned. The focus is entirely on the host(s), with the audience member having no direct relevance to the show.

This approach was demonstrated in a popular podcast *Am I The Asshole* where the hosts read aloud Reddit/web stories about true life events and then discuss whether they would have acted similarly. Neither the source nor the writer is mentioned, and the conversation is designed to stay between the hosts. The inclusion of the audience or the content writer is nonexistent.

At Level 1, the way hosts use content gathered from various sources can often be described as idea poaching. No recognition or reward is given to the content creators, and any call-to-actions are aimed at gathering more ideas and content. This approach echoes the term "prosumer," coined by Alvin Toffler (1980). Toffler illustrates a scenario where the consumer is drawn into the role of the producer to maximize the company's profits. From the perspective of social podcasts, where the audience's voice holds a significant and powerful role, this scarcely qualifies as participation. However, since the content originates from people other than the hosts, it establishes the base layer of the Social Podcasting Model.

Level 1 is particularly evident in podcast calls-to-actions such as: "What topic would you like us to cover? Send us a direct message via . . . ." Beyond audience exploitation and the embrace of prosumerism, this approach can be classified as pseudo-participation, or even interpassivity (Taylor, 2012)—from the outside, it appears that the audience has the power to influence the content, but since no reward is given to individuals who suggest topics, the act aligns more closely with idea poaching than with genuine participation. By giving more consideration to the listeners and contributors, it is possible to elevate the participation level toward *Interactive Monologue*.

Level 2. *Interactive Monologue: Enhanced Audience Participation*

"[Speaker 1]

Wonderful. Shall we jump straight into the questions? Let's do that because not much has happened in the past half hour that we need to recount.

[Speaker 2]

Hey, in the last episode we talked a bit about the influencer's work, although no one probably likes that term. I think there was an interesting question about how you choose your collaboration partners. The writer wished influencers would be more open about this topic in general, and wrote it would be nice if you two could discuss it. She also mentioned that she has felt a bit disappointed

with some influencers. For example, some have said they don't want to promote fast fashion . . .

[Speaker 1]

Let me read her question: 'I myself have been disappointed with some influencers who have spoken out against fast fashion but then ended up collaborating with fast fashion brands.

The paycheck was probably so high that it was hard to say no. I think if influencers were more open with their followers about their criteria, it would be easier to support them.'

That's a really good question. Let's start with two questions about influencers since they clearly generate interest. Actually, I think "influencer" is a good term.

At the same time, it does come with a huge responsibility . . . "

- Bella Table podcast

At Level 2, podcast hosts read messages and stories sent specifically to their show. These messages are then commented on and discussed, following a format similar to the highly popular Q/A sessions in podcast episodes. In this format, hosts select and read questions directed at them through a form or social media and provide answers during the show.

The distinction from Level 1 is that at Level 2, the content is directly targeted at the show, and audience members are mentioned by name while their contributions are discussed. The most significant indicator of enhanced audience participation at Level 2 is the inclusion of the audience's voice through voice messages, which accentuates their presence in the show.

The risk at Level 2 arises when hosts focus exclusively on the questions or on each other's responses, effectively excluding the question provider from the conversation. This issue became apparent in a popular food podcast *Bella Table*, where participation was primarily limited to remarks such as "This [audience] question is very interesting." Meanwhile, the listener who contributed to the question was left out of the discussion.

Compared to Level 1, where idea poaching is more pronounced, Level 2 still lacks the element of reward. This key aspect of social podcasting, as emphasized by Bruns (2008), serves as a significant motivator for individuals to participate in collaborative efforts. The absence of rewards, particularly in new podcasts, represents a missed opportunity to build a sense of community around the podcast (Wendland, 2024).

"[Speaker 1]

All right, all right, what's next? What do we got next? Next is Harper. Here we go:

[Voice message]

What's up, boys? Me and my buddy Rami are connoisseurs of hypotheticals and "would you rather" scenarios, so pardon the format of this delivery. Here's the hypothetical:

You have the opportunity to meet your soulmate, but on the condition that before you meet the other person, you have to fully consume an entire tree, roots and all, or a whole baby. With the added condition that whichever you do not eat, your soulmate has to eat the other. You can take as long as you want to eat whichever you choose, but you do not get to meet one another until both of you have finished.

[Speaker 2]

Whoa.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, but what kind of drugs do you have to be on to come up with that question?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, what sort of deep fucking K-hole do you have to be down, swirling around at the bottom of the fucking toilet bowl, to be?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, for me, it's a question of which one is more fun to eat . . . ."

- Chuckle Sandwich podcast

Moving toward Level 3 involves naming the contributor and taking a stance in relation to the person who asked the question or provided the content. This approach was exemplified in a popular comedy podcast *Chuckle Sandwich* where the hosts acknowledged that the question was asked by a listener named "Harper" and directed their reaction specifically to that person. While this method might not seem intuitive since the person in question isn't present, it represents the first step in making a podcast truly social and granting listeners the power to influence the direction of the podcast script with their contributions.

Level 3. Evolving Conversation: Integrating Listener Inputs

"[Speaker 1]

Give me a listener problem, and I'll solve it in a minute.

[Speaker 2] [Reads a message]

"I have no motivation for school, I should soon find a high school, and even though I want to raise my GPA, I just can't. Schoolwork stresses me out, I just can't."

So, it's basically a school issue.

[Speaker 1]

Wait a minute, was he going to high school or already in high school?

[Speaker 2]

Going, should find a high school.

[Speaker 1]

Well. . . I was about to give pretty harsh advice . . . Welcome to working life then, if school annoys you.

And. . . No, I mean. . . At this point, I'd say it's worth making a deal with the issue. Since unfortunately, you have to go through school, I'd say it's about changing your attitude towards it. I do believe that school annoys everyone. You are not alone with this problem. But my advice is to make a deal with it. Actually, making a deal with it is advice that applies to almost all life problems . . . "

- Mikä keissi?

At Level 3, listener inputs are tightly integrated into the show, transforming the host(s)' monologue into a dialogue between the host(s) and the listener. This transition requires skill from the host, as, due to the asynchronous nature of podcasts, the listener is most likely not present at the moment of recording.

The transition to dialogue becomes evident in a Q/A episode of a popular Finnish youth podcast *Mikä Keissi?*, where one of the hosts directly addresses the person asking the question, creating a personal bond between the host and the listener. The discussed topic—studying and going to school—is common, yet it is approached as a dialogue. While this dialogue may seem one-sided, the more skillfully the host can interpret and frame it from various perspectives while maintaining verbal contact with the content provider—even though he/she is not present—the more effectively the provider is integrated into the show. Furthermore, this common issue is addressed within the framework set by the questioner, with the hosts bringing emotion, empathy, and compassion to the discussion. In this way, power is gradually transferred to the listener.

To further enhance Level 3, incorporating a voice message from the listener would bring the interaction even closer to a real dialogue, thereby emphasizing the reward: by sending in a single 30 second voice message, the audience member can reframe an entire 10–15 minute segment of the show.

Level 4. Collaborative Dialogue: Building on Mutual Trust

"[Speaker 1] [Reads a message]

"We were on a trip with the family and in-laws.They had gotten snacks for the kids, but for the adults – none. I got terribly hangry and stormed off like a martyr to find a snack for myself. I – as an adult – had not taken care of my own snacks. How much of an ass am I," asks Peppi.

[Speaker 2]

At this stage, Peppi, if you're still embarrassed by this situation and it bothers you, there won't be any gentle sympathy or understanding from here, because I must say, if there's something I really hate or have a strong opinion about, it's hanger. And even though I'm usually pretty chill about things, hanger is not one of them. I can't understand how an adult can't take care of their own eating, and then somehow turns it into everyone else's problem. It's like if I went on a trip with friends, and suddenly I'm like "Ugh, I've

crapped my pants," and then I'm like, "This is now your problem. Clean my ass because I didn't make it to the toilet."

So now it's all on you . . . ""

- Olenko Perseestä

Advancing beyond Level 3 typically requires additional time and effort. Once dialogue and reward mechanisms are established, the audience needs time to build trust with the hosts. In the podcasts examined in this research, this often occurred through discussions on more intimate topics. Shared intimacy and trust are key elements in enhancing the sense of community among podcast audiences (Wendland, 2024), and such acts of self-revelation make listeners feel as though they are part of a private conversation (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022). Once a relationship of trust is established, an increasing number of audience members feel encouraged to put themselves on the line.

At Level 4, most, if not all, of the podcast content relies on listener contributions, and the dialogue with listeners becomes increasingly collaborative. Beyond merely providing content, listeners can also influence the tone of voice of the podcast. Typically, at this stage, transmedial communities begin to form, which leads to more contributions. Through fostering a vibrant participatory culture, the podcast starts to evolve into a transcommunal medium (Wendland, 2024). Hosting a podcast at Level 4 of the social podcasting model usually indicates that the hosts are willing and daring to engage in more nuanced dialogue, address concerns, and even provoke verbal conflicts with the content provided as in the example above. This, in turn, ignites a stronger shared emotional connection among listeners, further strengthening the sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Level 5. Empowered Dialogue: Collective Ownership

"[Speaker 1]

I suddenly found myself in a situation where, while investigating the fate of the missing boys, I went through wild theories ranging from organ trafficking to a hired killer and a serial murderer. Listeners began sending me tips, which led to an unexpected hunt to find a violent guard.

[Voice message]

"I hope you guys understand that if he wanted to do something to you right now, you would be at his mercy.""

- M/S Mystery

The essential requirement for reaching the highest level of the social podcasting model, Level 5, is that the structure and script of the podcast are intended to evolve through the listeners' contributions. This approach exemplifies produsage as described by Bruns: "Participants both comment on and critique one another's works; they collaborate on creative projects both by pooling together their individual contributions to form a composite whole, and by directly editing, rearranging,

and remixing the material already provided by others" (Bruns, 2008, p. 229).

For a Level 5 podcast to function effectively, it relies on these contributions. The listeners add something that the host likely could not, and through their experiences and expertise, the content of the podcast undergoes transformation and takes on new forms. This emphasizes the power of the listeners and fosters a sense of co-ownership. The podcast no longer solely belongs to the host; it also belongs to its listeners.

"[SPEAKER 1, ANTTI, READS THE QUESTION]

'Dear Antti,

I am a tired mother of a small baby, and here with my perineum torn, I think that you surely can solve my problem. My baby sleeps well through the night, but I wake up every night alone, staying awake for two to three hours, during which time I manage to go through the most embarrassing moments of my life. All the most humiliating mishaps of my life, from drunken antics during my student years to the accidental pooping during childbirth, flash before my eyes, and I can't stop the show. Then, in the meantime, I worry about, among other things, my relative who is at risk of social exclusion and the fact that my cat has worms. Why is my boss such a jerk? Could I go smear some shit on his skis while I'm awake? Life at night, alone and sleepless, is absolutely dreadful. If I can't sleep, how can I make my nights more bearable? Help, Antti.'

[SPEAKER 1, ANTTI, ANSWERS]

I wanted to give you a nickname of "Perineum Torn," but I can't do that right now.

So, you are now, of course, "Exhausted Torn."

And, my answer is obviously "audio." When you listen to someone else's speech, at first, if your own thoughts are very loud, it might take a while to calm down, but you get used to it.

Year after year, I have fallen more in love with the sound, specifically the creator's voice . . . "

- Auta Antti

Even though the Auta Antti podcast follows a familiar Q&A format, the host's approach emphasizes building trust and humor with the audience. The host places active members on a pedestal and engages with them through direct dialogue. Additionally, each featured listener receives a tongue-in-cheek nickname, making them more memorable and highlighting their importance in co-creating the episode.

All Level 5 podcasts identified in this research featured listener contributions playing a significant role in shaping the episode and even the whole upcoming season. Specifically, in a true crime podcast *M/S Mystery*, audience contributions were included to aid in further solving the case. The promise made throughout the season was that the listeners' contributions would make the next season possible.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

This research has explored various levels of podcast participation. Comparing the findings to the theoretical framework, and more accurately, to the four principles of produsage by Bruns (2013), it appears that the higher level the podcast reaches, the more holistically it aligns with the four principles: The podcast becomes more and more open to participation, the leadership roles become more fluid and audience members can take the lead, the content remains unscripted and evolving and the contributors are being rewarded.

Despite these participatory characteristics, it has become evident that the higher one climbs on the Social Podcasting model of participation, the fewer examples there are, with most podcasts situated at Level 0 with no audience interaction in them.

However, as the landscape of podcast content rapidly evolves, an increasing number of podcast producers may be interested in aiming for higher levels, provided they are equipped with the right tools and knowledge. This shift could transform podcasting in a manner similar to the television industry's adoption of transmedia storytelling techniques, which reinvented it as an "engagement medium" (Delwiche & Henderson, 2012).

It is also plausible that a Level 6 of this model could emerge in the future, with the higher levels becoming inhabited by more podcasts. A valuable research topic would be to look into the future and expand the model into stages that do not yet exist. It is also possible that there are forms of participation that we have not yet encountered.

This research has examined podcasts from the perspective of producers and hosts. Another valuable research angle would involve investigating social podcasts from the audience's perspective. Interesting points of inquiry could include exploring how social podcasting practices influence audience engagement and the willingness to participate, compared to traditional podcasting models. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to investigate what motivates listeners to actively contribute to social podcasts and identify the barriers to their participation. Furthermore, issues such as fake or rehearsed participation and audience exploitation, including idea poaching and the expectation of free content creation, are negative aspects of social podcasting that deserve attention in future research.

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the nuanced landscape of social podcasting, revealing a spectrum of audience participation that extends from minimal interaction to collective ownership. The analysis of 81 podcasts through the lens of the Social Podcasting model showcases a predominant clustering at the lower levels of participation, with genuine co-creation and influence on content remaining rare. This underlies a significant potential for podcasts to evolve toward more interactive and participatory formats,

potentially fostering deeper communal participation and transforming listeners from passive consumers to active co-creators.

The introduction of a model categorizing five levels of participation serves as a roadmap for podcast creators to navigate and enhance audience participation. As the medium of podcasting continues to mature, the exploration of uncharted territories of participation and a deeper understanding of audience perspectives on social podcasting emerge as potential areas for future research. These endeavors could not only democratize content creation further but also enrich the podcasting ecosystem, making it a more vibrant, inclusive, and participatory space.

Limitations

A potential limitation of this research is the possible impact of cultural differences on participation. If the listening habits of Finnish audio professionals are mainly passive, and participation does not play a major role, the responses to this research's questionnaire might favor podcasts with relatively little true participation. The same questionnaire administered in a different cultural setting could result in a set of podcasts that would occupy levels 3–5 more than those identified in this study.

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Notes on contributor

Juska Wendland is a radio professional at Finnish National Broadcasting Company Yle and a new media lecturer at the Omnia vocational school in Espoo, Finland. His research interests and creative work focus on audience participation and new interactive methods in podcast and audio production.

ORCID

Juska Wendland http://orcid.org/0009-0008-4826-6242

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Appendix

List of 81 analyzed podcasts, episodes and the participation levels

Aikalisä/Roope Salminen
E36
Level:0
Am I the asshole?
E553
Level:1
Antin koulumatka podcast
S3E20
Level:0
Antin palautepalvelu
S3E33
Level:4
Antti Holman oopperajuhlat
E9
Level:3
Arvaa mitä!
S6E3
Level:0
Auta Antti! -podcast
Episode name:"Menneisyys ja nykyisyys"
Level:5
Bella Table
E167, E168
Level:2
BFF Podi
Episode name:"Totuus vai teq**la (feat. Pinkku Pinsku ja Sonja Aiello)"
Level:0
Castle Super Beast
E251
Level:1
Chuckle Sandwich
Episode name:"Unlawful 'Would You Rather' Questions"
Level:2
Conan O'Brien Needs A Friend
Episode name:"Blueberry Jam"
Level:5
Darknet Diaries
E140
Level:0
Dear Shirly & Arttu
E16
Level:2
Emma Karasjoki: Miksei kukaan kertonut?
E40
Level:0
Faijat podcast
Episode name:"Opas vauvan kanssa harrastamiseen"

Level:0
Gaala-podcast
E37
Level:0
Gogin kantabaari
Episode name:"Käärijä & Paula Noronen"
Level:0
Gossipmongers
Episode name:"The Eternal Wanker and Stick Dick Paul"
Level:1
Hate cast
E49 (removed)
Level:2
Hei Baby
E108
Level:1
Hospital Podcast
E495, E496
Level:1
Hsanapodcast
Episode name:"Kuumalla linjalla uuteen vuoteen"
Level:3
I Don't Like Mondays
E47
Level:1
Iltapäiväkahvit
Episode name:"Vivi ja Olga vastaa - Q&A"
Level:1
Inttistoorit
S4E1
Level:2
Isoi Juttui
Episode name:"Piti päästä sanomaan"
Level:0
Jaa, ei, tyhjiä, poissa
Episode name:"Stubb-leivoksia kansalle uuden presidentin kunniaksi!"
Level:0
Julia Thurén: Melkein kaikki rahasta
E12
Level:2
Kaarle Hurtig - Keskusteluohjelma
E80
Level:1
Kalju Corner
E89
Level:1
Kasper & Mikko - Suomen Suosituin Podcast
E241
Level:0

Kaukonen cast
Episode name:"Kaikki Suomen Drift Masterista 2024"
Level:0
Kaverin puolesta kyselen
S14E9
Level:2
Kerhotalo
E49, E127
Level:1
Kimanttia
E18
Level:0
Kinokupponen
E9
Level:0
Kolme käännekohtaa
E95
Level:0
Koodarikuiskaajan podcast
E66
Level:0
Krouppicast
E43
Level:0
Kuraläppä
E168
Level:0
Kysymyskulma
E6
Level:1
M/S Mystery
S2E1
Level:5
Melkein kaikki perheestä
Episode name:"Kaikki mokaa vanhemmuuden kuitenkin – ihan hyvin sä vedät!"
Level:1
Mikä keissi?
Episode name:"Ratkaistaan kuulijoiden ongelmia, pt 2"
Level:3
Mimmit sijoittaa
S1E6
Level:2
Mystery hour
Episode name:"What makes stuff sticky"
Level:5
Olenko perseestä
Episode name:"Väärin ymmärretty lomaromanssi ja muut lomaperseilyt"
Level:4
Ologies with Alie Ward
E40

Level:0
Onks OK?
E15
Level:3
Politiikkaradio - Puheet päreiksi
Episode name:"Eurovaalien tulos: Miksi oikeistojytkyn sijaan tärähti Li Andersson -vyöry?"
Level:2
PPP Podcast
E171
Level:4
Puurojengi
E60
Level:1
Päivystävät dosentit
Episode name:"Miksi koko ajan väsyttää?"
Level:4
Rahapodi
E361
Level:1
Räjäytyskuva
S4E1
Level:0
Salamanisku
E1
Level:0
Sana on vapaa
Episode name:"Omien rajojen opettelu"
Level:0
Seitsemän Kukkulan Podcast
S1E10
Level:0
Sick and Wrong
E928
Level:0
Sidetracked
Episode name:"Grammys Debried, Dua Lipa, Footvall Chants and UMG vs TikTok"
Level:0
Siitä on vaikea puhua
E109
Level:0
Sijoituskästi
E156
Level:0
Sometimes Funny Always Awkward
Episode name:"Cut Out Toxic Friends"
Level:1
Sähköautomiehet
E202

Level:0
Tabuc äst
Episode name:"Kuuntelijoiden parhaat yhden illan jutut osa 2"
Level:1
Taskula&Trishin
E26
Level:1
Tech meme ride home
Episode name:"Do we need ChatGPT in our cars"
Level:0
Terapeutti-Ville
E7
Level:3
Terapiassa-podcast
Episode name:"Mitä jos jään kriisiin jumiin?"
Level:1
The Boys
Episode name:"En muista kysyneeni"
Level:0
The Girls Bathroom
Episode name:"Boy Talk: His WHAT was in my mouth?!"
Level:0
The Tiny Meat Gang Podcast
E327
Level:0
The Weekly Planet
E514
Level:1
Tiedetrippi
S9E5
Level:0
Tuplakääk
E130
Level:0
Urheilucast
E607
Level:0
Uutispodcast
Episode name:"Syyhy on esimerkki isommasta uhasta, jossa lääkkeet menettävät tehoaan"
Level:3
Uutisraportti podcast
Episode name:"Saarikko out, Kaja Kallas, Windows95man IN"
Level:0
Yhden yön juttuja
S8E3
Level:0
ZM's Fletch, Vaughan & Hayley
Episode name:"Big Pod – April 18, 2024"
Level:0

Sub-Study III

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Juska Wendland

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Reciprocal Community Building Model for Podcasts — Meaningful Listener Experiences: Grounded Theory Research

Juska Wendland

Faculty of Education, University of Lapland

ABSTRACT

This study answers the research question, "What kinds of meaningful listener experiences foster community building of podcasts?" using a grounded theory approach. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with listeners of three popular Finnish podcasts known for their active communities. Using a grounded theory approach, a five-level Reciprocal Community Building model was developed, explaining community formation as an evolving process: Authenticity, Participation, Parasociality, Reinforcement, and Coevolution. This model addresses a research gap regarding the largely understudied transition of podcast listeners from observers to contributors. The findings suggest that authentic content serves as the essential foundation for community formation, while meaningful listener experiences across these levels represent different depths of involvement. The model offers insights for podcast creators seeking to foster stronger listener communities. Importantly, building on Vygotsky's and Wenger's theories, this research highlights how learning, participation, and identity-building take place within podcast communities – extending educational research to new, media-based environments.

Introduction

At the end of each year, the podcast industry boasts its growth numbers – both podcast listenership in the US and the number of podcasts worldwide increased by approximately 10% from 2023 to 2024. In the US, listeners rose from 68.85 million in 2023 to 76.38 million in 2024 (Statista, 2024b), while the total number of podcasts increased from 3.2 to 3.5 million (Notes, 2025; Statista, 2024a). Sweden saw a 20% rise in podcast usage in just one year, while Finnish usage grew by 10% (Ljung, 2025; Yleisradio, 2025). Despite the growth, the format has remained much unchanged. The majority of podcasts still maintain the traditional one-way model – a host and guest talking – lacking the audience's voice (Wendland, 2025).

Several Uses & Gratifications (U&G) studies (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2022; Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022) have examined listeners' motives for podcast listening. According to those, most podcast listeners do not wish to participate or be part of the community, but their input is valuable for both podcast's success and the listening community (McGregor, 2019). Although we understand which podcast features enhance the sense of community (Wendland, 2024) and participation depth (Wendland, 2025), these are mostly based on content perspective, while the actual listener experience is often overlooked.

Audio media, including community radio (Copeland, 2018; Essel & Govender, 2023) and personal podcasts (Euritt, 2022; Moe, 2021), is mainly a medium of emotion, intimacy and connection. Deeper

CONTACT Juska Wendland juska.wendland@gmail.com University of Lapland, Kappelinpiha 6 a 25, 00600 Helsinki, Finland
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understanding of how listeners become attached to podcasts and their communities can help create more personalized audio experiences and tools that support the forming community.

Despite understanding listeners' motives, none of the earlier studies directly address the listener experiences nor their impact on community building. Online community research has focused on other groups, such as breast cancer patients (Rodgers & Chen, 2005) and Wikipedia users (Bryant et al., 2005). However, the transition of podcast listeners from observers to contributors remains understudied. This research seeks to address that gap by conducting 16 semi-structured interviews to answer: "What kinds of meaningful listener experiences foster the community building of podcasts?"

Defining Listening in the Podcast Context

As this study focuses on podcast listeners and their experiences, it is essential to define listening in this context. Listener studies are increasingly important due to the rise of asynchronous audio consumption. Sheila Bentley (2000) already suggested that, as we can no longer provide feedback, ask questions, or paraphrase in asynchronous conversations, the behaviors we use to indicate listening may be changing. Without synchronous interaction, understanding listener experiences is crucial for creating meaningful audio content.

There is no universally accepted definition of listening. Based on comprehensive reviews of how listening has been defined over the past century (Wolvin & with Internet Archive, 1988; Worthington & Bodie, 2017, p. 2, Table 1.1), definitions can be categorized into affective, behavioral, and cognitive processes. One of the most widely cited definitions comes from the International Listening Association: listening is a process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.

As the International Listening Association definition illustrates, listening is often viewed through the lens of dyadic interactions – conversations between two people. However, there are also contexts in which the roles of speaker and listener are asymmetrical (Imhof, 2010; Itzchakov et al., 2025; Lemay et al., 2023). Such asymmetrical roles are particularly characteristic of the podcast format.

While there is a need to address the ways technology influences listening (Itzchakov & Reis, 2023), podcasts have not been extensively explored in traditional listening studies. Podcast listening is typically linear and monologic, similar to watching television (Janusik, 2010), yet research shows it is not passive (Chou et al., 2022; Llinares et al., 2018; Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019; Ritter & Cho, 2009; Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2023; Wendland, 2024). Instead, monologic listening is central in creating and maintaining relationships (Dreher, 2017; Lemay et al., 2023).

While researching listening motivations, podcast research often references Uses and Gratifications studies; however, listening studies typically examine these motivations through Wolvin and Coakley's taxonomy (Wolvin & with Internet Archive, 1988), which identifies four motivations: comprehensive listening, critical listening, appreciative listening, and therapeutic listening. However, this study focuses particularly on social and relational motivations. As Michael Purdy (1991) argued, communication can no longer be dominated solely by the speaker; instead, listening must become central to community formation. Although podcast listening is often a solitary, shared experiences and prosociality it fosters lay the groundwork for community building and engagement (Lemay et al., 2023).

This study thus focuses on high-quality listening, which involves caring for others and being valued as a partner (Lemay et al., 2023). High-quality listening demonstrates prosocial motivations and helps navigate complex, asynchronous relationships.

Although podcast hosts and listeners cannot interact in real time, high-quality listening is the first step toward interaction, offering the host validation and perceived interest (Itzchakov & Reis, 2023), much like parasocial relationships satisfy social needs (Markman, 2012). Listening fosters communal relationships by signaling prosocial intent and partnership (Donison, 2022).

Although podcasts are usually monologues, listeners' motivations and engagement transform listening from passive reception to a communal, relationship-building experience (Lemay et al.,

2023). This study aims to identify the specific listener experiences that enhance and facilitate high-quality listening.

Meaningful Listener Experience and Sense of Community

Building on the definition of high-quality listening, this research defines *meaningful* listener experience in podcast communities through active listenership and participation. They emerge when listeners transform from mere consumers to creators (Malinen, 2015) – a manifestation of prosumerism, the hybrid consumer-producer role first conceptualized by Alvin Toffler (1980). Previous research has explored this phenomenon in social podcasting context (Wendland, 2025). These studies suggest that meaningfulness in podcast listening can be defined through audience content creation and a heightened sense of community that fosters increased participation.

Meaningfulness can also be productively examined through Carpentier's (2015) of access, interaction, and participation (AIP), which provides a valuable framework by distinguishing between these three progressive levels of audience engagement with media. The model emphasizes that true participation occurs when audiences influence decision-making processes. Beyond decision-making, meaningfulness manifests through a sense of ownership (Backhaus, 2019), creating a virtuous cycle: participation fosters ownership, which in turn encourages deeper participation.

Since meaningfulness can be defined through a heightened sense of community, fostering community building requires that members experience a sense of community themselves. This research interprets a *sense of community* in line with the theory proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). As shown in Wendland's systematic literature review (SLR) (2024), participation and sense of community are interlinked. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9) define the sense of community as a "feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." In Wendland's SLR (2024) it is further explained that establishing such a podcast community, which embodies a sense of community, typically occurs across multiple platforms (Donison, 2022). However, to remain intensive and meaningful to its members, the community must meet two criteria: it should operate collaboratively (Donison, 2022) and remain limited in size (García-Marín, 2020). To summarize, this research concentrates on listener experiences that ignite the audience's commitment, sense of belonging, and participation, thereby fostering a sense of community.

Theoretical Framework

Podcasts as communities of practice

While listening is recognized as a fundamental element in the formation of communities, the focus of this research is not on the individual cognitive processes of listening, but on participation, communal interaction, and the learning processes that support community development. For this reason, a framework rooted in educational research – specifically the communities of practice concept – was chosen, as it captures the dynamic, collective, and evolving nature of communal learning and participation among podcast listeners, rather than centering solely on the act of listening.

This research will therefore examine active podcast listeners and their communities through the lens of socioconstructivist learning theory, as developed by Vygotsky (1978) and expanded by Wenger (1999). Central to this approach is Wenger's concept of "communities of practice," defined as groups who share a common interest or passion and learn to improve their practice through regular interaction. These communities are characterized by three key dimensions: 1) Mutual engagement, the process through which listeners form bonds with other community members and develop dedication to the collective; 2) Joint enterprise, the collaborative development of both community structure and content, evolving simultaneously and; 3) Shared repertoire, the emergence of distinctive language, references, and communication patterns unique to the community.

Communities exhibiting "heterogeneous commonality" (Donison, 2022) thrive when they maintain shared language, values, and identities while embracing members' diverse roles and backgrounds. Such environments encourage active participation, with members feeling empowered to shape their collective experience (Rodgers, 2022). Wenger (1999) emphasizes that this diversity of perspectives is fundamental to forming effective communities of practice. Although podcasts typically attract niche audiences with similar interests (Berry, 2016), maintaining perspective diversity remains crucial for meaningful engagement within these communities.

Asynchronous audio communities

In this study, podcasts are examined specifically as asynchronous audio products. The ability of podcasts to allow listeners to tune in anytime and anywhere may enrich the listener experience (Florini, 2015; Wright, 2022), which is particularly relevant to this research. Due to the focus on asynchronous audio, findings related to live podcasting and/or audio broadcasting are excluded from this study. As asynchronous media, the strengths and challenges of podcasts in creating and fostering communities are largely understudied, and therefore the research question focuses on audio experiences that make synchronously disconnected people feel connected.

Researching listener experiences from the perspective of a sense of community is also intriguing in terms of participation. Wendland's model of social podcasting (2025) claims that the highest-ranked social podcasts include open participation and empower the audience to influence the content. However, that model and research were developed from the perspective of producers and hosts. Thus, this research takes the listeners' perspective to understand how meaningful listener experiences can foster community building and listeners' sense of community.

Zone of proximal development and scaffolding

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides a framework for constructing a model of listener experiences and measuring progression between different levels of engagement. The ZPD represents the gap between what learners can accomplish independently versus what they can achieve with guidance from more knowledgeable individuals. This concept helps explain why some listeners may not advance to higher levels of community participation and belonging. Since podcast listening is often a solitary experience, the ZPD emphasizes the importance of participatory actions by listener peers and hosts in facilitating development and strengthening community bonds.

The concept of scaffolding, first introduced by Wood et al. (1976) in "The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving," is particularly relevant to understanding how listeners progress through community hierarchies. This support mechanism from hosts and established community members plays a crucial role in shaping listener experiences. Advancement through the listening community's hierarchy – itself a learning process – depends critically on co-listeners, participants, and hosts. With effective scaffolding, listeners can successfully navigate gaps between engagement levels and advance upward. Conversely, progression may stall due to insufficient support from hosts lacking motivation, instructions, or guidance or from co-listeners exhibiting hostility or indifference toward new community members.

This research aims to develop a hierarchical model representing learning processes, social interactions, and identity formation within podcast communities. As listeners ascend through this model, they gain access to increasingly communal and immersive experiences where they possess greater agency to shape their engagement and contribute to the community's shared knowledge and practices.

Methodology

Grounded theory

In this research grounded theory will be utilized to explore how podcast messages and communication are interpreted and understood by their audience, addressing the research question. Grounded theory enables the development of theory directly from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), however as Charmaz (2014) points out, any theoretical rendering is an interpretive portrayal of the phenomenon, not an exact one. Grounded theory can be used for the purpose of constructing theory grounded in data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), the data being 16 semi-structured interviews. Approaching this qualitative data through grounded theory is particularly useful as grounded theory relies on emergence, expecting researchers to remain open to what happens in their research setting (Charmaz, 2008). Since there is very few research about the sense of community – especially from the listeners' perspective – theoretical sensitivity ensures the identification of significant phenomena in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this research, an evolved Straussian version of grounded theory is applied, as presented in Table 1 by Chun Tie et al. (2019, p. 5) based on Birks and Mills (2011).

Each of the three methodological genres of grounded theory – traditional, evolved, and constructivist – represents a distinct variant of Glaser and Strauss's original approach. The traditional genre aims to generate a conceptual theory that accounts for patterns of behavior that are relevant for those involved. In contrast, the constructivist genre focuses on co-constructing experiences and meanings with participants. This research applies the evolved genre, which concentrates on the subjective meanings people attach to behaviors based on their personal beliefs and perceptions of truth (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Since the data in this study consist of interviews, the focus on subjective meanings in participants' descriptions of community and participatory actions makes the evolved genre particularly relevant to the research objectives.

According to structural descriptions of evolved Straussian grounded theory process by Charmaz (2014), Birks and Mills (2011), Chun Tie et al. (2019) and Corbin and Strauss (2007), the process can be divided into four stages: Open Coding, Axial Coding, Selective Coding and Theory Building. The theory built through this process will answer the research question and will be a substantive theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as it concentrates on one subject only (sense of community in podcasts), has a clear context of 16 interviews and aims to explain a specific phenomenon (listeners' sense of community).

Purposive sampling and open coding

To cover a broad spectrum of participatory podcasting while examining listeners' experiences, three popular and community-driven Finnish podcasts were purposefully selected: "Melkein kaikki perheestä" (Almost Everything About Family), "Olenko perseestä" (Am I the Asshole?), and "Kerhotalo" (The Clubhouse). Each podcast is known for its active and engaged community and represents a distinct audience profile: "Melkein kaikki perheestä" targets young parents, "Olenko perseestä" appeals to young adults in general, and "Kerhotalo" resonates with minority group representatives and politically left-leaning individuals. Four to six active listeners from each podcast

TABLE 1. Comparison of grounded theory coding terminology as presented by Chun Tie et al. (2019, p. 5) based on Birks and Mills (2011).

Grounded theory genre	Coding Terminology		
	Initial	Intermediate	Advanced
Traditional	Open coding	Selective coding	Theoretical coding
Evolved	**Open coding**	**Axial coding**	**Selective coding**
Constructivist	Initial coding	Focused coding	Theoretical coding

were recruited, totaling sixteen participants. Podcast producers assisted in identifying and contacting interviewees, either through direct outreach to engaged community members or by posting calls for participation on social media. Although differing in approach and audience, interviewing listeners from each podcast was expected to reveal common themes and provide insights into the research question; similarities in meaningful listener experiences would offer valuable answers.

"Olenko Perseestä" is a Finnish adaptation of the popular "Am I The Asshole" (AITA) podcast. While the original AITA podcast draws examples from the Reddit subreddit r/AmItheAsshole, the Finnish version relies on listener stories and contributions. The hosts' approach to including and rewarding listeners on the show and their online interaction is exemplary. The listener numbers have been high and the show is a benchmark for social podcasting. *Link: https://areena.yle.fi/1-65705675*

"Kerhotalo," hosted by Laura Haimila and Emmi Nuorgam, is a highly popular Finnish podcast. What distinguishes their listener base is one of the most active Discord communities among Finnish podcasts. This platform not only makes participation seemingly effortless but also enables direct interaction between listeners, reducing the hosts' role as intermediaries. *Link: https://www.supla.fi/podcast/kerhotalo-haimila-nuorgam*

"Melkein kaikki perheestä" exemplifies a theme-driven podcast. Focusing on parenthood and family-related themes, this popular podcast has successfully united young mothers, pregnant women, nurses, and other professionals into a cohesive listening community where the sense of belonging appears particularly strong. *Link: https://areena.yle.fi/1-66243681*

These three podcasts complement each other in conducting research about the sense of community in podcasts and the perception of community from listeners' perspectives. "Olenko perseestä" provides insight into a highly participatory podcast format, "Kerhotalo" offers perspectives on transmedial community engagement through its Discord server, and "Melkein kaikki perheestä" exemplifies a community united by similar values. During the interviews other podcasts were mentioned as examples, too.

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in January 2025, focusing on the three selected podcasts: "Olenko perseestä," "Kerhotalo," and "Melkein kaikki perheestä." In 2024, both "Olenko perseestä" and "Melkein kaikki perheestä" podcasts received between 510,000 and 610,000 starts (Yleisradio, 2025). Listener numbers for "Kerhotalo" are not available, but the size of its online community and its media visibility suggest also that it is among the most listened-to podcasts in its genre during 2023–2024. In addition to high listener numbers, all three podcasts have particularly active and dedicated audiences who are highly engaged, making them especially relevant for this research.

For each podcast four to six listeners were selected for interviews. The selection leaned toward participatory, active listeners. The method for this selection was purposive sampling which Gideon (2012) describes as a useful sampling method if the researcher knows the characteristics of the target population and then seeks out specific individuals who have those characteristics to include in the sample. Purposive sampling directs the collection and/or generation of data (Chun Tie et al., 2019): In this case podcasts known to have a particularly thriving community were selected and then among the listener base of those three podcasts active participants were sought with the help of the producers.

Podcast producers were asked to help connections between the researcher and active listeners of their respective podcasts, using their established relationships with their listener base. For participant recruitment, all three podcast production teams employed dual strategies: using social media platforms to identify potential interviewees while also directly approaching their most engaged listeners whom they considered ideal candidates for the study.

The data of this research included 16 interviews, each approximately 30 minutes in duration, in Finnish language, producing a total of 8 hours of recorded material. All interviews were recorded using Google Meet and transcribed using Amazon Web Services (AWS) Transcribe software, generating 3,500–4,000 word transcripts per interview and totaling over 60,000 words.

The interviews were semi-structured in their nature. As the research's primary aim is to gain insight into participants' individual perspectives rather than developing a broad understanding of the

phenomenon under study, semi-structured interviews can be considered a good data collecting method (McGrath et al., 2019). Each interview began by asking participants to describe their perception of the podcast community they belonged to. The interviewees typically proceeded to describe their personal connection with the community and their various forms and instances of participation. This approach naturally guided the conversations organically. The author guided the conversation to collect the data, but the exact research question was not asked directly nor were the interviewees led thematically.

16 themes arose from the data which were then sorted according to their frequency of occurrence (*f*). Numbers in parentheses indicate in how many interviews out of 16 each theme was mentioned. (Figure 1)

Writing memos – as strongly suggested by Birks and Mills (2011)—throughout the coding phase served as a way of capturing ideas in progress and in process (Charmaz, 2014). This had a particularly important role in structuring the observations in the data. During the open coding phase all community related quotes were gathered in a new text file and labeled accordingly. All 16 interviews were transcribed and analyzed alongside the memos to identify recurring themes in the responses. The coding strategy included going through each interview and writing a short description and/or quote to a memo each time the interviewee mentioned the community in any way. These memos were then combined to recognize repeating themes or patterns. After the quotes and descriptions were thematically categorized, each theme was named to describe its contents.

Specifically, meaningful listener experiences were noted in memos when they emerged as particularly significant. These experiences typically surfaced during interviews as listeners described their engagement from the perspective of participation or influencing the podcast content.

From the beginning of the first interview, theoretical sampling was initiated as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2007): As the first set of data was collected, analysis began immediately. This analysis led to the identification of themes and concepts, which in turn generated additional questions. These new questions and potential themes prompted further data collection. This repeated process continued until data saturation was reached – that is, the point at which no new themes emerged from the interviews. This approach shaped the conduct of the semi-structured interviews, allowing for new questions to be posed to interviewees as the conceptual understanding of the overall subject deepened.

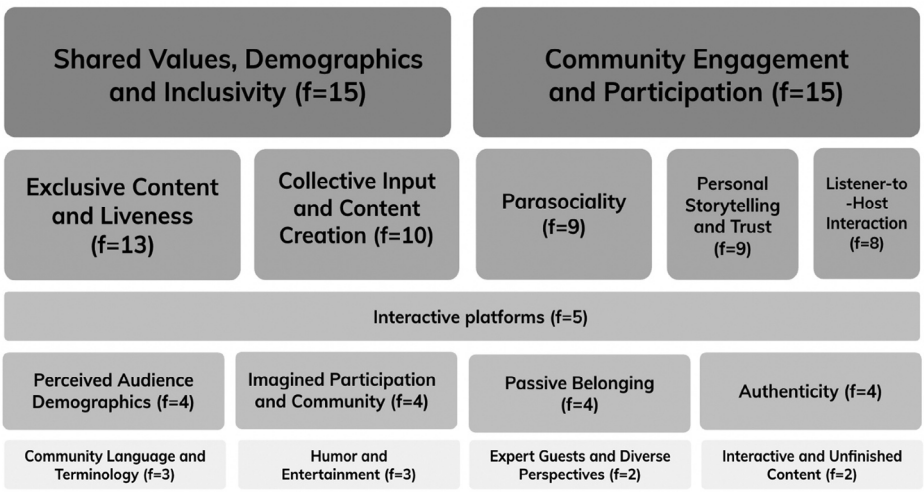


Figure 1. Open coding. 16 themes sorted according to the frequency of occurrence (f). Numbers in parentheses indicate the frequency count for each theme.

Through this analysis-interview loop rough interpretations could be done by examining all potential theoretical explanations of the data. This then enabled the return to the field to collect additional data, which again allowed the author to verify and refine the thematical frameworks as suggested by Charmaz (2014). As the data analysis reached the final interviews of the sixteen, no new themes arose but the interviews rather just added content to the existing ones. As grounded theory expects theoretical saturation, it can be concluded to have happened as no new themes arose toward the end of the open coding.

Axial coding

To move toward forming a coherent theory to answer the research question, axial coding was implemented. Axial coding builds on the open coding phase. Where open coding fractures the data, axial coding begins to transform basic data into more abstract concepts allowing the theory to emerge from the data (Birks & Mills, 2011; Chun Tie et al., 2019). In this research axial coding was used to identify relationships between these sixteen themes and form more holistic structures from them (Figure 2). By further analyzing the data and the 16 themes formed during open coding, three categories arose under which each theme could be located.

This research employs axial coding in two ways, as suggested by Birks and Mills (2011): firstly, to develop fully individual categories by connecting themes as done above and, secondly, to link categories together as described next. After combining the themes into three main categories by the frequency of their appearance, the categories were then qualitatively cross-analyzed. The interview data was compared across the categories by asking three questions: 1) What is the connection between communal identity and participation (A – B)? 2) How do content-based elements connect with participation – and vice-versa (B – C)? 3) What is the connection between content-based elements and communal identity (A – C)?

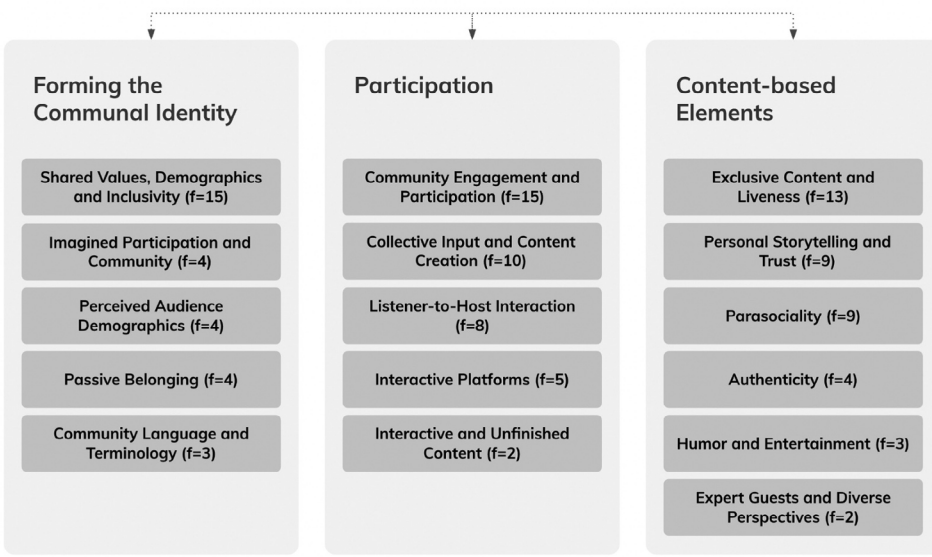


Figure 2. Axial coding. Forming three categories from 16 themes.

Axial coding — data analysis

All direct quotations from interviewees in this section are translations from the original Finnish. For additional quotations, see Appendix 1.

What is the connection between communal identity and participation (A–B)

From the perspective of interviews it appears that communal identity strengthens participation and vice versa. The communal identity is built around the shared experience of making mistakes and being willing to acknowledge them. As listeners contribute their stories and perspectives, they actively shape the community's narrative and shared values.

> [. . .]I mentioned that I belong to a certain parent community when I listen to it. I wouldn't necessarily have had this kind of perspective or thought before, but now that I'm a parent, I share this and I'm constantly craving to hear what others think about this, how they comment on it, and what kind of experiences they have. [. . .]- Interviewee #3 - Melkein kaikki perheestä

The interviews also exemplify how shared values encourage participation. This seems to happen both ways – as listeners contribute stories and receive positive feedback, their connection to the community deepens. When listeners participate even passively, they begin to identify as part of a community. The community values authenticity and vulnerability, which creates a safe space for listeners to share their personal stories. The Olenko perseestä hosts' practice of asking permission and offering anonymity options shows respect for contributors, which likely encourages more participation and strengthens community bonds.

However, interview data also seems to indicate that some listeners maintain distance from the community, considering themselves not part of the "core audience," suggesting that participation doesn't necessarily require full identification with the communal identity. It is also worth noting that a strong community can both include and exclude: The interviews with "Kerhotalo" listeners showed how specific community language can create a stronger identity but might also make some feel like outsiders.

How do content-based elements connect with participation – and vice-versa (B–C)

According to the interviews, there appears to be a reciprocal relationship between content and participation. Strong content elements (authenticity, expert perspectives, host approachability) seem to create the conditions for participation, while thoughtful integration of audience participation can enhance content relevance and deepen the connection between hosts and listeners. However, strong expert content might reduce desire for community interaction but increase interest in direct interaction with those experts.

> I suppose [becoming a moderator] has been some kind of activity question. For example, this most recent addition to the moderator team was someone who, even before becoming a moderator, created a lot of community, organized watch parties, and very actively built this kind of culture there themselves. I guess it came about that way.- Interviewee #11 - Kerhotalo & Streaming Things

One interviewee mentioned a deeper parasocial connection, feeling like she's already participating in the conversation: *"I have talked there many times, because I always answer those questions in my head."* This suggests that hosts who create authentic, conversational content foster stronger parasocial relationships that make listeners more comfortable interacting.

Another interviewee emphasized the authenticity of the stories, which creates a foundation for participation. Authenticity as a content element builds credibility, which in turn encourages others to participate. The interviewee had sent several stories to the podcast but also contemplated the boundaries of openness. Trust is essential for participation. Although the interviewee didn't strongly feel that they belong to a community, they still recognized the existence of the community and participated actively. This suggests that the content itself can encourage participation, even when the sense of community is less pronounced.

It is also worth highlighting that status and recognition motivate deeper participation: The discussion about moderators reveals an informal hierarchy where active contributors gain recognition and status, which likely motivates continued and increased participation, but also works the other way around.

The interviews suggest that the most successful podcast communities create a virtuous cycle: authentic, personal content encourages participation; participation is acknowledged and incorporated into content; this acknowledgment encourages deeper participation; and deeper participation creates stronger community bonds that keep listeners engaged over time.

The interviews reveal a clear reciprocal relationship where strong content elements (authenticity, expertise, approachability) create conditions for meaningful participation, while thoughtful integration of audience participation enhances content relevance and deepens connections between hosts and listeners. The most successful podcasts create a loop where this relationship continually strengthens over time.

What is the connection between content-based elements and communal identity (A–C)

Interviews revealed how community language becomes incorporated into content: The use of specific terminology like "*kerholaiset*" – colloquial expression of Kerhotalo podcast listeners – demonstrates how community identity can become embedded in the podcast's content and presentation style. Podcast creators may shape their content based on feedback from the most active community members, which may not represent the broader listener base.

One interviewee's (#7) comment *"I feel that you can always jump into Julia's vibe, and I don't really miss out on anything. And such a funny thought comes to mind that she wouldn't be offended if I don't listen to it right away"* well summarizes their bidirectional relationship. This demonstrates how both content elements – openness, authencity, accessibility – and perceived non-exclusive, non-demanding communal identity connect with each other and form a cohesive experience. Similarly, one interviewee explained how podcast hosts have become her "friends" who keep her company during journeys. This parasocial relationship is a central part of the listener's experienced sense of community, even though the interaction is one-directional.

> And specifically, in my opinion, podcast listeners are also interested in what other podcast listeners think, and I think that should be done much more. [. . .]
>
> In my opinion, it's like in a British podcast called "The High Low" that I listened to. There were two female journalists, and they sometimes did this thing where there was a discussion topic the previous week, then they asked for feedback from the audience, and then they read those audience feedbacks.
>
> [. . .] That's the direction that will come in the next five years. It's something new that hasn't been there so far, and I think it should be done much more. Because specifically then, of course it hooks you if I've now gotten my two minutes on this platform that I value, that this person whom I respect acknowledges me and my thoughts, so of course I'm loyal to it then.- Interviewee #7 - Melkein kaikki perheestä

Despite interviewee's (#7) insightful comment about good content affecting the need to hear more, it is worth noting that the interviews did not provide as much explicit evidence about community identity (Category A) affecting the content-based elements (Category C) compared to how content-based elements affect community identity. This itself is interesting – it suggests that listeners may be more aware of how content shapes their sense of community than how they collectively influence the content. Interviewees might also be more passive community members who are not actively involved in influencing the content, but rather enjoy the content as it is. The latter seems unlikely in the case of this research as all interviewees were chosen by their active listenership.

Analysis also revealed that the frequency of mentions alone doesn't capture the causal relationships between the categories. It became apparent especially with content-based elements (Category C) which



Figure 3. Selective coding. Forming the core category "Reciprocal Community Building".

were mentioned less frequently than communal identity elements (Category A), but the analysis of all interviews revealed that content-based elements such as authenticity specifically play a foundational role in enabling the entire community-building process.

Selective Coding

After axial coding was finished, a core category that encapsulates and explains the grounded theory was formed. The core category captures the study's central theme in simple language (Birks & Mills, 2011). When combined with supporting categories, it forms the theoretical framework's backbone. Each category's properties and dimensions enhance this structure by providing necessary detail and nuance (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

When integrating all three categories 1) Forming the communal identity, 2) Participation, and 3) Content-based elements, the meaningful listener experiences in podcasts appear as an evolving process that can be termed "Reciprocal Community Building" (Figure 3).

Reciprocal Community Building contains the idea that content-based elements – especially authenticity and parasociality – enable the feedback-loop of participation which in return enriches the content and builds and forms the communal identity. This core category is clearly visible throughout the data: In the examples of the axial coding phase, one interviewee (#11) described the reciprocal cycle in which the community produces content for the podcast which has an effect on communal identity and encourages deeper participation. Another interviewee (#12) brought up that the connection to the hosts and their values creates safety and acknowledgment in return. And finally, one interviewee (#7) predicted that the future of podcasts might be in this sort of reciprocality – that listeners could interact with the content provided by other listeners.

Constructing a Model – Reciprocal Community Building

The core category "Reciprocal Community Building" and its sub-categories "Forming the communal identity," "Participation" and "Content-based elements" give an opportunity to build a theoretical model which describes the reciprocal process of sense of community formation (Figure 4).

The data analysis from the Open Coding section where the first 16 categories were identified and then further organized in the Axial Coding section to form the core category of Reciprocal Community Building provides the tools for the model building. This model describes the forming of the sense of community as a reciprocal process and how these three categories continuously reinforce and reshape each other.

The core category is not a single separate entity, but is constructed from its sub-parts. Following Corbin and Strauss (2007), each of the three sub-categories was developed in terms of its properties

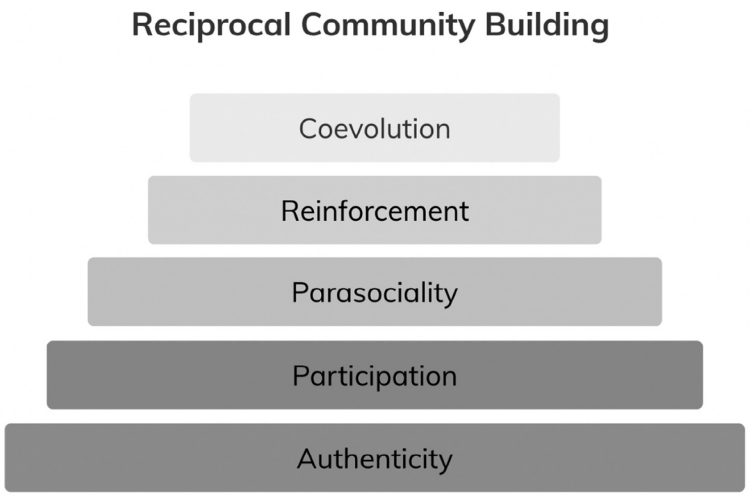


Figure 4. Reciprocal Community Building model.

and dimensions before being integrated around the core category. These properties and dimensions provide the detailed content that fills out the structure of the core category. Crucially, the core category does not merely combine the three sub-categories from the axial coding phase; rather, it explains their dynamic and reciprocal relationships. The cross-analysis of these properties and dimensions across the three sub-categories revealed five distinct levels of meaningful listener experiences, which formed the basis for the complete Reciprocal Community Building model.

Even though the level names of 1–3—Authenticity, Participation, Parasociality – are similar to the theme and sub-category names from the selective and axial coding phases, each level actually represents the combined effect and dynamics of multiple sub-categories. Each level builds upon the experiences and conditions established in the previous ones, illustrating increasingly complex and integrated relationships between these meaningful listener experiences. The model shows a process where these elements connect and mutually strengthen each other.

The model describes the development of the sense of community and community building in podcasts. It can also be validated by going back to the data: The theoretical scheme should be able to explain most of the cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Not only does it do that, it also explains one of the key questions in the field of podcast participation: why different listeners experience the sense of community differently. The listeners are in different parts of this model and also might not want or be able to proceed any further.

Since this research focuses on meaningful listener experiences that ignite audience commitment, belonging, and participation – and thereby foster a sense of community – the five identified levels reflect increasingly stronger forms of these experiences.

(1) Authenticity. When listeners experience authentic content, it forms a primary basis for community building, fostered by trust and identification. This experience is primarily driven by host authenticity, approachability, and genuine interactions. These elements align strongly with the "Content-based elements" sub-category. The trust generated by authenticity, in turn, fosters a willingness for "Participation" and "Forming the communal identity," facilitated by identification.
(2) Participation. Establishing the foundation as described above enables the listeners to engage further. These listener experiences of participation – such as a sense of ownership, sharing personal stories, and engaging with other community members – start to build attachment. The

"Participation" sub-category becomes key at this stage as listeners actively interact with the podcast and its community. This engagement is facilitated not only by the host authenticity – originating from the "Content-based elements" sub-category – but also by specific themes within the "Participation" sub-category itself, such as "Listener-to-host interaction." Each participatory action, in turn, strengthens the "Forming the communal identity" category as related themes like "Shared values" and "Community language" become more noticeable.

(3) Parasociality. When listeners participate, observe others participating, and experience authenticity, this can foster parasocial relationships. These listener experiences of parasocial relationships also help listeners begin to recognize a communal identity. The experience of parasociality is strongly linked to the "Forming the communal identity" and "Participation" sub-categories. Listeners start to see themselves as part of the podcast's target audience and connect with its values. This recognition and connection, in turn, lowers the bar for their further participation.

(4) Reinforcement. When listener participation is acknowledged in the content, these listener experiences strengthen communal identity and encourage deeper engagement. For example, listener messages influence podcast scripts, listener-created content is incorporated, and feedback loops are established between episodes.

At this level, the dynamic interplay between the three sub-categories becomes clear. Listeners' active participation – linked to themes in the "Participation" sub-category – is not just happening; it is also integrated into the podcast content. This integration is strongly linked to themes within the '"Content-based elements" sub-category. This, in turn, strengthens and develops the community itself, as reflected in the"Forming the communal identity" sub-category. This process creates a positive feedback loop, generating listener experiences that lead to level 5.

5. Coevolution. Finally, at this stage, content and community develop through continuous interaction. Listener experiences become symbiotic, and the three sub-categories are in a constant and close relationship with each other. Listeners see themselves as community members contributing to ever-evolving content, and their communal identity is very strong. The content changes and adapts to community interests and needs, and community-specific language and references develop. The podcast is no longer just a product but has become a community of practice that is constantly evolving.

Reciprocal Community Building model also answers the Sub-study III research question "What kinds of meaningful listener experiences foster community building of podcasts?" The experiences from authenticity on the first level of the model to co-creating the content and forming the community specific language on the fifth level describe in detail the relevant listener experiences in context of the research question. Additionally, these findings also help to fill the research gap of lack of studies of podcast listeners' transition from observers to contributors.

Evaluation and Limitations

The trustworthiness of the research findings can be evaluated by examining both data saturation and the consistency across different phases of the grounded theory building process. The data for this research consisted of 16 transcribed interviews, totaling over 60,000 words. However, data saturation cannot be determined merely by the volume of data. Instead, theoretical sampling, as recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2007), was employed during the interview phase to monitor saturation. This methodological approach allowed the interview phase to conclude when no new themes emerged, indicating that theoretical saturation had been achieved.

Consistency was observed throughout the different phases of analysis. Although the main answer to the research question became evident in the final phase – the development of the Reciprocal Community Building model – similar patterns were also present during the earlier Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Selective Coding phases. Nevertheless, as Charmaz (2014) notes, any theoretical rendering through Grounded Theory represents an interpretive portrayal of the phenomenon. This

underscores the importance of further research into podcast listener experiences to refine and expand the Reciprocal Community Building model.

The decision to focus exclusively on active and dedicated listeners rather than employing random sampling is justified by several Uses and Gratifications (U&G) studies previously referenced in this study. These studies consistently indicate that most podcast listeners do not wish to participate in or become part of the community (Castaño & Hurtado, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Chou et al., 2022; Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022). In addition, this study has previously established a connection between meaningful listener experiences, active listenership, and sense of ownership. Since this research concentrates specifically on listener experiences that foster community building, focusing on the engaged minority is methodologically sound, as these individuals represent a valuable asset not only to a podcast's success but also to the entire listening community (McGregor, 2019).

One limitation can be the study's cultural scope, as interviews were conducted with listeners of three Finnish podcasts. Research involving different nationalities or cultural backgrounds might result in different findings. Similarly, passive listeners, who constitute the majority of podcast audiences, might experience community differently. These limitations present opportunities for future research to expand and refine the Reciprocal Community Building model into a more comprehensive framework that accounts for multicultural perspectives and varying levels of dedication among listeners.

Another limitation relates to the qualitative research design and the use of semi-structured interviews. While grounded theory offers depth and flexibility, the findings are inherently interpretive and shaped by the researcher's analytical lens. The relatively small sample size and purposive, nonrandom sampling approach further limit generalizability. Furthermore, the coding and categorization processes, while systematic, are ultimately subjective and may reflect the researcher's preconceptions, even though procedures were followed to ensure theoretical sensitivity and transparency. Finally, the study's reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the potential for recall bias or social desirability bias in participants' responses.

These limitations highlight the need for future research employing broader sampling strategies, quantitative or mixed methods, and cross-cultural comparisons to further test and refine the Reciprocal Community Building model.

This research followed established ethical guidelines throughout the process. All interviews were anonymized, with the only identifying characteristics being each interviewee's connection to their primary podcast. Before recording each interview, participants were explicitly informed about anonymity provisions and asked for their consent. Also, the theoretical framework did not guide the interview situation or the interview questions; instead, it was employed only at a later stage for structuring interpretations and theory building.

Discussion and Conclusion

Theoretical integration with communities of practice

As this study's grounded theory methodology is based on Vygotsky's (1978) socioconstructivist learning theory and Wenger's (1999) communities of practice concept, the Reciprocal Community Building model can be observed through these frameworks. The three dimensions of communities of practice – mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire – share similarities with the Reciprocal Community Building model. Mutual engagement resembles the level of Parasociality in which the listeners start to bond with other listening community members and become dedicated to the community. Similarly, Wenger's Joint enterprise has common features with the level of Reinforcement where the community and content start to develop hand in hand. Finally, Shared repertoire resembles the level of Coevolution as the community develops its own language and references.

The findings suggest that listener experiences above Parasociality (Levels 3–5) indicate membership in a Community of Practice. Additionally, the Reciprocal Community Building model extends Wenger's dimensions by establishing Authenticity (Level 1) and Participation (Level 2) as foundational for Community of Practice formation. Wenger (1999) does not use the word authenticity but mentions inventiveness and personal ways to engage in practices which resemble podcast hosts' individuality and authenticity. The hosts and listeners do not merely follow prescribed content but include their own persona and improvisation: "Because members produce a practice to deal with what they understand to be their enterprise, their practice as it unfolds belongs to their community in a fundamental sense" (Wenger, 1999, p. 80). Thus, authenticity seems to serve as the cornerstone for community building in podcasts; without it, deeper engagement and shared identity cannot flourish. The model illustrates this progressive deepening, with higher levels representing increasingly meaningful listener experiences. Authenticity provides the foundation for community ownership and content co-creation and proves critical for participatory and personalized content that evolves collectively and welcomes new participants.

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept helps explain why certain listeners never advance to higher levels of the model. Both frameworks emphasize the crucial role of listeners and hosts in enabling development, and not all listeners will progress through every level of the model. Scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976) – the support from hosts and the community – significantly shapes listener experiences. We can therefore conclude that listeners experiencing any level within this model are undergoing meaningful listener experiences, with higher levels offering deeper connection and participation.

Comparing the model with axial coding categories, an interesting pattern emerges: foundational elements (especially authenticity from Category C) were mentioned less frequently in interviews. This is not problematic; rather, it suggests these elements are taken as given by regular listeners and active participants. For such members, initial conditions enabling participation may no longer be consciously considered, while advanced aspects remain more prominent. This insight opens possibilities for further research.

Conclusion

This study extends the connection between listening research and community studies by demonstrating how meaningful listener experiences contribute to the development of podcast communities. By placing the listener at the center of analysis, the research offers new insights into listener-centered perspectives – an approach already envisioned by Purdy (1991), who argued that listening should be central to community formation rather than communication remaining speaker-dominated. The findings highlight that active and engaged listening is not only essential for individual understanding, but also serves as a foundation for communal relationships and collective meaning-making.

Beyond academic contributions, the model provides practical utility for podcast creators seeking to evaluate listener experiences and community-building potential. It offers a structured framework for analyzing listener survey responses from a community perspective and enables producers to better understand their content from their audience's viewpoint. This practical application bridges theoretical insights with industry needs, potentially enhancing listener-friendliness of podcasts and community development strategies.

To the author's knowledge, this article is among the first to research the relationship between listeners' experiences and sense of community in podcasts. The findings not only advance our understanding of what constitutes a meaningful listener experience, but also provide practical insights for podcast creators seeking to foster stronger community bonds. In a world that often feels increasingly divided, tools that bring people together through audio media may be more crucial than ever. By identifying the elements that contribute to reciprocal community building in podcasts, this research

offers a framework for creating more inclusive, engaging, and community-oriented audio content that can bridge divides and create spaces for authentic connection.

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ORCID

Juska Wendland http://orcid.org/0009-0008-4826-6242

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