Sub-Study I

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

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Journal of Radio & Audio Media

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/hjrs20

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To cite this article: Juska Wendland (30 Apr 2024): Building a Better Participatory Culture and Enhancing Sense of Community in Podcasts – Systematic Literature Review, Journal of Radio & Audio Media, DOI: 10.1080/19376529.2024.2347609

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2024.2347609

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Published online: 30 Apr 2024.

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JOURNAL OF RADIO & AUDIO MEDIA
https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2024.2347609

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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:

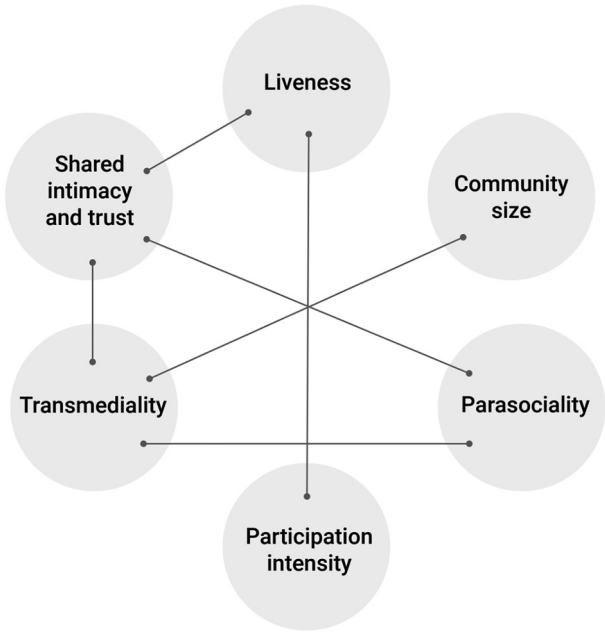


Figure 1 Six Enhancers of Sense of Community

(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.

Disclosure Statement

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

Notes on Contributor

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