Sub-Study II

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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%

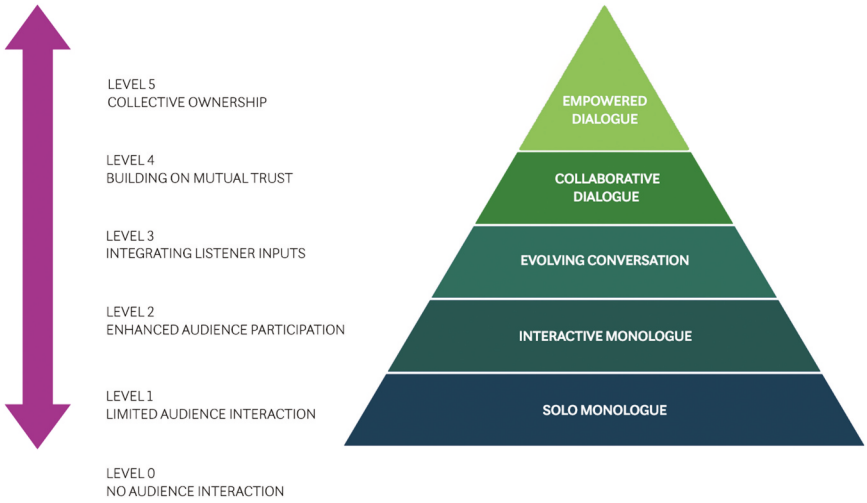


Figure 1. Social Podcasting Model of Participation.

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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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