Sub-Study III

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

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ABSTRACT

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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understanding of how listeners become attached to podcasts and their communities can help create more personalized audio experiences and tools that support the forming community.

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

Defining Listening in the Podcast Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meaningful Listener Experience and Sense of Community

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

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

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

Theoretical Framework

Podcasts as communities of practice

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

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

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

Asynchronous audio communities

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

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

Zone of proximal development and scaffolding

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

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

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

Methodology

Grounded theory

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

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

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

Purposive sampling and open coding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

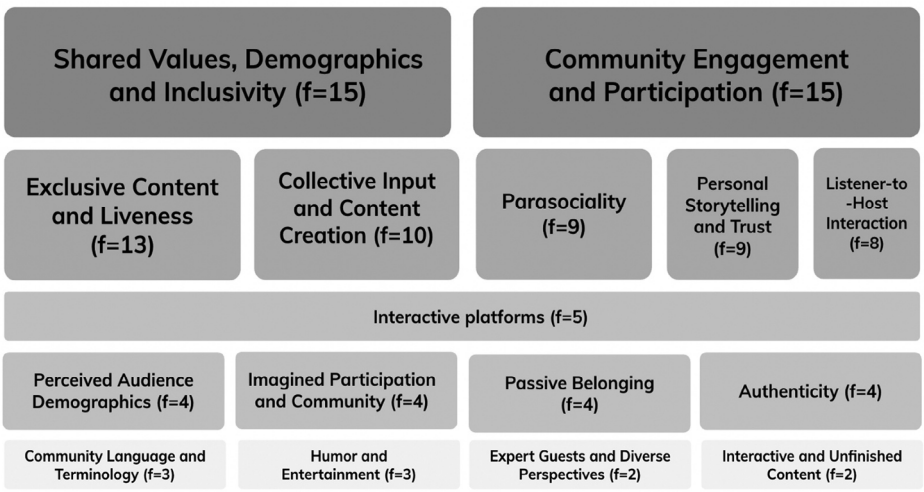


Figure 1. Open coding. 16 themes sorted according to the frequency of occurrence (f). Numbers in parentheses indicate the frequency count for each theme.

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

Axial coding

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

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

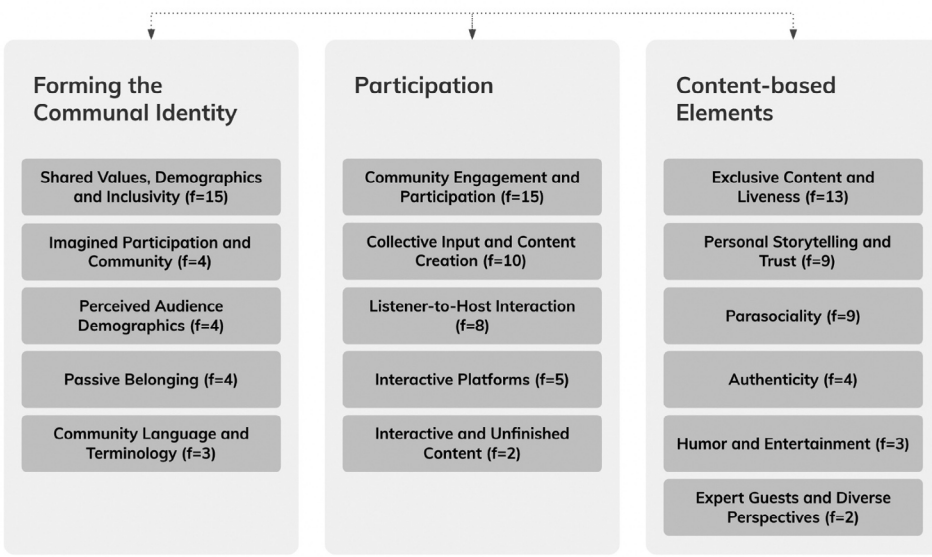


Figure 2. Axial coding. Forming three categories from 16 themes.

Axial coding — data analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Selective Coding

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

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

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

Constructing a Model – Reciprocal Community Building

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

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

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

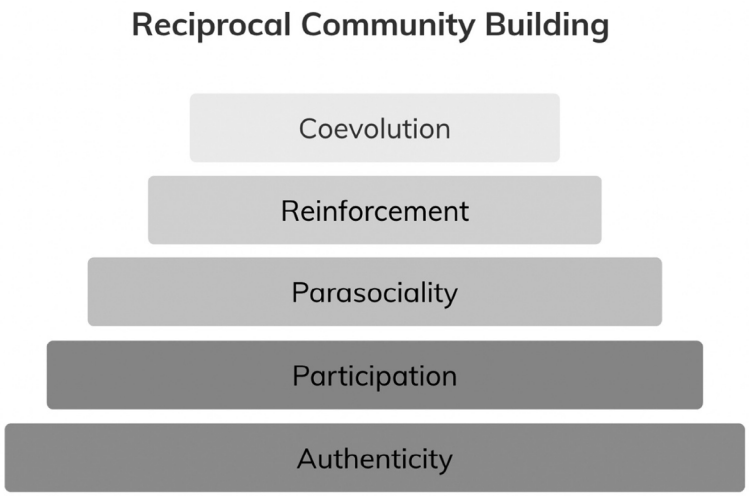


Figure 4. Reciprocal Community Building model.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evaluation and Limitations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion and Conclusion

Theoretical integration with communities of practice

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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