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To cite this article: Lene Heiselberg & Iben Have (2023): Host Qualities: Conceptualising Listeners' Expectations for Podcast Hosts, Journalism Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2023.2178245](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2178245)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2178245>



Published online: 14 Feb 2023.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Host Qualities: Conceptualising Listeners' Expectations for Podcast Hosts

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ABSTRACT

This article empirically identifies and conceptualises listener expectations of podcast hosts based on a general and open research question concerning which expectations podcast listeners have for podcast hosts. From an explorative empirical study of 20 online focus group interviews with Danish radio- and podcast listeners, the article concludes that the expectations of podcast hosts are grouped into three categories: knowledge, storytelling, and parasocial relationship. The three categories have underlying themes: some are distinct expectations for podcast hosts; others are of a more general character. Additionally, the study contributes to a better understanding of the inherent qualities of podcasts as a medium and provides useful knowledge for podcast producers about user preferences.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 June 2022
Accepted 2 February 2023

KEYWORDS

Journalism; podcast; podcast host; streaming; audio media; on demand

Introduction

In recent years, the distribution of audio media has undergone rapid changes from push to pull, broadcast to podcast, and heavy to lightweight technology. These changes have influenced listening situations, practices, expectations, and content, and have afforded new conceptualisations of the role and style of the host. Podcasts have become an influential medium, and in 2021, 31% of survey respondents across 20 countries, reported having listened to a podcast in the last month (Newman et al. 2021). Scholars have studied the popularity of podcasts, highlighting the high levels of intimacy, sociality, and flexibility afforded by podcast listening (Berry 2016; Tobin and Guadagno 2022). Furthermore, the research concludes that podcasting has become a “modern-day radio with a wide variety of news, information, interviews, and stories, both fact and fiction, to select and listen to on demand” (Tobin and Guadagno 2022, 1).

Podcast hosts play an important role in the success of the medium. They are not only responsible for *what* is being said (the semantic level of linguistic meaning), but also for *how* it is being said (vocal expressions, affective and social meaning) and research shows that podcast listeners develop a strong social attachment to their favourite programmes and their hosts (Chan-Olmsted and Wang 2022). The right host, with the right voice and

personality, has developed as the beacon that enables a podcast to gain attention and impact in a well-filled, unregulated podcast market (Berg 2021; Berry 2016). However, we still do not know what listeners expect from podcast hosts. Hence, the main objective of this article is to empirically identify and conceptualise the qualities of a podcast host from a listener's perspective based on the general and open research question: What expectations do podcast listeners have for podcast hosts?

This study focuses on expectations for podcast hosts in general terms; therefore, in the following section, we outline the most common conceptualisations of podcasts to establish a frame from which the participants' answers can be reflected. Hereupon, we provide an overview of the existing research of podcast user practices, motivations, and experiences. Based on existing research, the theory will constitute a framework for the following analytical part, with a special focus on concepts such as sociability, mood-regulation, storytelling, and information. Hereafter, we present the empirical study divided into the following sections: method, analysis, and discussion, and the article ends with our conclusions.

Studies of podcasts, especially empirical studies of podcast users, are often associated with and compared to radio. Discussions on the relationship between radio and podcasts are present in almost all academic literature on podcasts so far (e.g., Berry 2016; Llinares, Fox, and Berry 2015; Saabye 2020). However, in recent academic literature, there is a tendency for radio to receive less and less attention, which signifies that the podcast is being established as a medium detached from its ancestor. In particular, when it comes to everyday use, the two media show different characteristics (Menduni 2007; Saabye 2020). In this article, we follow that tendency and deliberately refrain from a comparative study of podcasts and radio hosts. However, participants make comparisons on their own initiative, and therefore, we can point out distinct qualities of podcast hosts compared to radio hosts.

Conceptions of Podcasts

Inquiring podcast users for their expectations of podcast hosts naturally gives our study a prospective perspective based on participants' previous and present knowledge and experience of podcasts. We, therefore, outline the ruling conceptions and imaginations of podcasts to frame the answers the participants gave.

Historically, the podcast was born out of a democratic open-source mentality similar to the Internet. Nobody owns the podcast (Berry 2006, 146), and for anyone with something at heart, the podcast was and still is a cheap, simple medium for communication to a large audience, mostly to a smaller group of like-minded people (Berry 2006, 151). The status and prevalence of podcasts changed in 2014 with the widespread popularity of the series "Serial" produced by *This American Life*. This marked the beginning of what has been called the second age of podcasts (Bonini 2015), where podcasts became more professionalised alongside the growing market. Podcasts developed into mainstream medium as a niche.

Podcast is first and foremost referring to a distribution form where digital audio files are available on-demand via the Internet. However, podcasts are also used as a term for a specific audio medium different from other audio media such as radio, audiobooks, and music, although these media are also distributed (podcasted) as digital audio files on-

demand. Podcasts are usually defined as a pull-medium, but the RSS-function used when subscribing to a channel or serial also includes a push-function sending notifications of new accessible files or automatically downloading them to the receiver's personal digital devices.

One might expect that a change in distribution from radio waves to analog FM- or digital DAB-radio receivers towards RSS-feeds sent to digital devices does not make a big difference in the content. However, the changes in user patterns following the changes in distribution in relation to spoken audio media are significant, and the users' practices and expectations indirectly affect the content of podcasts, including the role and style of the host.

When a podcast is considered, it might include both institutionalised podcasts produced in affiliation with a private or public institution (often a media institution), and more autonomous and independent podcasts with small or no budgets (Berg 2021; Mill-ette 2011). Thus, some podcasts are produced by a team of experienced professionals with access to high-quality equipment, and some are one-person low-budget productions recorded on a smartphone with no editing or postproduction in general. A range of genres—some narratively serialised and some anthological—can today be identified in podcast production, including conversational, narrative nonfiction, hybrids, and scripted fiction. Nonfiction podcasts include everything from news podcasts to true-crime story-telling and chit-chatting about a topic of personal interest. Some podcasts only communicate through spoken words while others are edited sound productions using a tight dramaturgic form, and include music and sound effects (see Berg 2021, 117, for an elaborate literary review on nonfiction and fictional storytelling in podcasts).

Reflecting on the approach in the empirical study presented in this article, we address the "podcast" in general terms knowing full well that the participants could refer to all kinds of podcasts. However, we expect that they will think of nonfiction formats since they are typically host run. In the podcast niche of audio storytelling, there is consensus that the American narrative style, described variously as "hand-held", "spoon-fed" and "host-driven", is exerting a strong influence globally and undermining the popularity of the older "European" or poetic style of crafted audio feature (McHugh 2016). In American narrative style podcasts, the podcast host is the central dramaturgic element which functions as an intermediary between the programme and listeners. Like television talk shows (Bruun 2017) nonfiction, non-news podcasts are to a great extent, the podcast host's programme and what Bruun in relation to television talk shows calls the "world" of the host.

Studies of Podcast Use

In the growing field of podcast studies, user studies are still rare, especially qualitative studies. The studies mentioned in this section are among the few examples of thorough academic empirical investigations of podcast use and users which can provide us with solid empirical knowledge of podcast user practices, motivations, and experiences.

From a quantitative uses and gratifications (U&G) perspective, McClung and Johnson (2010) identified five reasons people use podcasts: entertainment, timeshifting, library building, advertising, and social aspects. Based on another U&G study of podcast listeners, Perks and Turner (2018) concluded that multitasking was the primary motivation for listening to podcasts. Perks, Turner and Tollison presented what they call a Scale of

Podcast Uses and Gratification, which is categorised into four motivating factors for listening to podcasts: controlling edutainment, storytelling transportation, social engagement, and multitasking (Perks, Turner, and Tollison 2019). The first comprehensive examination of podcast users, including host aspects, was conducted by Chan-Olmsted and Wang (2022). In this large-scale survey, they found that subscribers to podcasts developed a strong attachment to their favourite programmes and their hosts. Closest to the interests of the present study is Schlütz & Hedder's survey of German podcast listeners' parasocial relationships with podcast hosts. The study concludes: "The more the host showed parasocial interaction behaviour (showing an interest in the listeners and sharing details about his or her own life) and the more unpredictable, authentic, and competent s/he was being perceived, the more extensive was the parasocial relationship" (Schlütz and Hedder 2021, 9).

A study of podcast users using only qualitative methods was Sigrid Nielsen Saabye's Ph.D. dissertation (2020). She found that actively assessing and selecting specific content results in an obligation towards the selected content as the listener commits to paying attention to it and engaging with it over a longer period. This obligation includes hosts. Listeners experience the presence of people speaking in the podcast episodes and consider them as acquaintances and friends. The participants in Saabye's study used podcast episodes as an instrument to provide an extra dimension to their everyday lives in the form of knowledge, insight, perspectives, and mediated (para)social relations. In addition, Saabye found that the participants used podcasts as a tool for regulating their mood and state of mind in particular situations, and for optimising daily life as it enables the podcast listeners to be mentally active while also completing practical, tedious tasks.

A weakness in most of the studies mentioned here is that none of them are interested in podcast content, although the content clearly influences how and why podcasts are used. Similar to Schlütz and Hedder the present study focuses on both users and content, but the content perspective is narrowed down to an isolated but important part of the content: the host.

What we see in these existing studies of podcast use is the domination of a quantitative U&G approach towards motivations for listening to podcasts. Except for Schlütz and Hedder, these studies do not pay special attention to the host, but offer some general categories to understand why people listen to podcasts in general: social issues, mood regulation, information, cognitive value, entertainment, engagement in stories, multitasking, and control. In the following section theoretical elaborations around these categories are discussed.

The Host as Provider of Sociability, Mood, Stories, and Information

By focusing on audience expectations for podcast hosts, we believe that our empirical study adds deeper insight into the categories of motivation for listening to podcasts found in existing studies. Although the present study is not a U&G study interested in motivations and gratifications as most of the studies accounted for above, we expect that the main reasons for listening to podcasts are closely related to expectations of podcast hosts, which are naturally anchored in the individual's already existing experience of podcasts and hosts. Expectations can be defined as a set of internalised standards of behaviour for oneself and others (Biddle 1979). Audience expectations can be normative

and prescriptive, but they also depend on what affects the audience members personally and on their lived experiences (Schrøder 2019). In this study, we do not consider the impact of various identity strands; instead, we study podcast audience representatives, that is, our participants as a whole, and focus on the expectations that they agree on across identity strands.

In all the studies mentioned in the section above, the *social issues* category was significant. The most interesting aspect in relation to our study is the parasocial connection to the host and the experience of the host as an acquaintance or friend. A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship people form with a media figure or celebrity (Hartmann 2017). It was originally introduced in relation to television by Horton and Wohl (1956/1997). They used the term to describe a special communicative relationship between the programme type and its viewers, a relationship that differs in degree but not in type from genuine personal relationships between people.

When people listen to podcasts, they have a voice speaking directly to them through their headphones, which produces effects of presence and intimacy and gives the listener a sense of present social company—a feeling of casual “parasocial” company and comfort (Horton and Wohl 1997). Listening to podcasts substitutes and extends (in time and space) the face-to-face activity of listening to someone talking to you in public or private. The ability to invite listeners into a parasocial relationship is a key quality of podcast hosts, and as Pavelko and Myrick (2020) have argued podcast users’ parasocial relationships and identification with hosts predict how much users perceive themselves as benefiting from the programmes socially and mentally.

As Schlütz and Hedder (2021) show, the podcast host is expected to share personal accounts with listeners. This expectation is rooted in the way listeners consider the podcast host to be a kind of friend. To strike a balance in friendship, both parties must be willing to share, and consequently, the listener expects podcast hosts to let the listener into their personal space.

German sociologist Georg Simmel uses the term sociability to describe this kind of intimacy-creating mode of address and atmosphere of togetherness between people in real life. In a mediated context, the term has been used to describe, for instance, the social relation between talk show hosts and their audiences (Bruun 2017). Simmel describes the phenomenon of sociability as “a special sociological structure”. It is based on the need to join other people for the sake of unity (Simmel 1910). However, he also states that personal things like “character, mood, and fate—have no place in it [ed: sociability/socialising]. It is tactless to bring in personal humor [sic!], good or ill, excitement and depression, the light and shadow of one’s inner life” (Simmel 1910, 131). However, media and podcast cultures have pushed these borders of accepted personal and intimate media content significantly. The sociability of podcasts and the parasocial relationship between the host and listener certainly include humour, sorrow, excitement, and deeply personal thoughts, which have developed to be a core characteristic of the medium.

The human voice is central to the experience of a parasocial relationship and to create the experience of social and intimate presence and being in good company, which has also been described in relation to both radio (Scannell 1996) and digital audiobooks (Have and Stougaard Pedersen 2016, 2020). Audio media, especially if you listen to them through headphones, have some unique qualities that do not relate to what is

being said, but how it is being said—acoustic, emotional, and social qualities (Klausen and Have 2019). By nature, the voice is relational (Cavarero 2012), and with a voice speaking directly into your head, listening to podcasts can afford “[a] media-enabled feeling of “really being there” with someone else, over a physical distance” (Senft 2008, 56).

The human voice is also central to the use of podcasts, as *mood-regulation* is also an important quality in listening to podcasts mentioned in both Perks and Turner’s (2018) and Saabye’s (2020) studies, and to a large extent, is also affected by the style and expression of the host. It is well known in studies of flow radio that it impacts the well-being of listeners and is used for mood-regulation (Hendy 2000). On the supply side of radio, this means that content is adapted to the time of the day to comply with listener expectations (Scannell 2005). On the demand side of radio, this is important, since some listeners consciously or subconsciously listen to radio to shift their mood, create an appropriate atmosphere, and/or feel better (Heiselberg 2005). Further, studies of digital audiobooks show that, next to literate content, the mood established by the style and voice of the narrator is an important factor in the experience and evaluation of audiobooks (Have and Stougaard Pedersen 2016, 2019, 2020). Radio hosts are expected to express or convey a mood that matches a typical mood at a particular time of the day.

As described in the section on the conceptions of podcasts, it is a medium containing both journalistic news, nonfiction over subjective, personal confessions to fictional storytelling. However, the subjective mode of expression dominates the general language of podcast episodes. Dowling (2019) stresses that podcasts have evolved away from the clipped and truncated proverbial inverted pyramid, which isolates the story’s most important information to the first lines. He argues that *storytelling* has become a prominent characteristic of many modern podcasts and besides many podcasts, also in the journalistic genre, draw on fictional narratives. Furthermore, he argues that even though many podcasts are scripted, carefully edited, and have roots directly in the practice of journalism, they have “adopted a structure associated with documentary cinema and the novel, especially by way of narrative voice” (Dowling 2019, 205). Consequently, critics argue that the transformation of nonfiction content into dramatic subjective narratives compromises journalistic standards and ethics, and can be misleading (Dowling 2019). Therefore, it is still relevant to address this genre discussion in relation to how podcasts meet listeners’ need for information and consider what role the host plays in this regard.

Multitasking is the most consistent motivation for podcast use in these studies, but, not at first, relevant to the role of the host. However, because multitasking is closely connected to mood regulation the hosts play a role in this regard. It is convenient to use podcasts while doing other things, particularly as a positive boost when doing boring chores. Perks and Turner use the term mood-balancing to describe the coupling of instantly gratifying “want” activities like podcast listening with engagement in a “should” activity like cleaning, commuting. Put simply, podcast listening makes the boring more enjoyable, and the style of the host is an important element in reaching the right mood balance in specific situations, for instance through the ability to engage the listener in a story or to create an appropriate mood (see also Have 2023).

The need for *information* is also one of the most important reasons for listening to podcasts, and U&G studies have revealed that podcasts and podcast hosts provide listeners with informational gratifications (McClung and Johnson 2010; Perks and Turner 2018). In relation to this category, the host plays the role of a messenger that delivers

information. However, in the moderate paraphrasing of Marshall McLuhan's famous statement "The medium is the message" (1994/1964), the host is not just a messenger, but also an important part of the message itself.

In the following sections, we present an empirical study on Danish podcast listeners' expectations of podcast hosts. This study will help investigate how the host is reflected in relation to the motivating factors for listening to podcasts. The theoretical elaboration of the key motivations presented in this section defines a background of reflection for the analysis and for discussing the analytical findings.

Research Design and Methods

Case Selection

Denmark is a small Nordic country at the digital forefront. In 2020, 30% of the population listened to podcasts weekly (Niegel and Kidde 2022). Due to the proliferation of podcasts in Denmark, it is a highly relevant geographical location to study advanced listener expectations for podcast hosts, and thus we consider this case an "intensity case" which has an inspirational character (Neergaard 2015). As the results of this study rely on a Danish case using Danish participants, they cannot be generalised to a world-wide population; instead, it is eligible to generalise the results to theory (Yin 2012).

Sampling

This article uses data from an internal research project on listener expectations for radio and podcast hosts developed and conducted by The Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) and the first author (Heiselberg) in 2021. The interest of DR, Denmark's public broadcasting corporation, to conduct this study is based on the changes in the market for audio media products in recent years. As a public service media institution with a long history of radio and TV-production, DR, like many other similar institutions worldwide, has realised that they need to qualify and rearm their streaming products to be able to keep up with the development of the market for audio content.

The DR project consists of a series of semi-structured qualitative focus group interviews. In this study, we limit ourselves to analyse only parts of the data originating from two questions on podcast hosts: 1: What should a podcast host be able to? and 2: Is there a difference in what a host needs to be able to do well on flow radio and in podcasts? These two main questions were fixed, but interviewers improvised clarifying and probing follow-up questions to explore meanings and areas of interest that emerged (Camfield 2014).

The recruitment was professionally conducted by the recruiting company Wilke A/S through their online panel. The sample in our study includes 89 radio/podcast listeners from four DR radio channels (P1, P2, P3, P4). The participants partook in groups of four or five which resulted in 20 group interviews. The participants were recruited based on a purposive participant selection strategy. The inclusion criteria were that participants as a minimum listened to a P1–P4 weekly and listened to podcasts monthly. This means that the participants are familiar with both radio and podcast hosts which enables them to compare, if they need to.

Regarding the role of the interviewees, our research question calls for representative interview participants (Harrits, Pedersen, and Halkier 2010, 200), i.e., that the participants contribute with their perception of a phenomenon (listener expectations for podcast hosts). As recommended by Weiss (1995), a varied selection of interviewees consisting of a variation in age and an approximately 50/50 distribution between female and male participants was ensured to secure diverse perceptions. Due to the limited sample size, these differences in background variables are not used in the phase of analysis, but to compose a varied selection of representatives. The interviews were conducted by the first author (Heiselberg) ($n = 6$) and two assistants ($n = 3/11$), and participants received a monetary incentive.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The semi-structured qualitative focus group interviews had a duration of one hour each and were conducted on the video conferencing platform Zoom, in Q1 2021. The online focus group interviews were conducted according to the OVRI method, and the methodological recommendations made by Heiselberg and Stepinska (2022). Heiselberg & Stepinska recommend fewer participants in OVRI, and thus the groups had 4–5 participants. The focus group was chosen because participants stimulate each other, and because they are less costly than individual interviews. All interviews were audio-visually recorded with the consent of the participants, and an intelligent verbatim transcription was conducted (McMullin 2021). All data collection procedures complied with data protection requirements (GDPR).

The process of coding and analysis involved constant comparison between data and analysis and allowing categories to emerge from the data themselves (Corbin and Strauss 1990). An initial open coding and the subsequent integration of concepts into categories was undertaken by the first author, whereas the labelling of the concepts was done in collaboration with the second author. This endeavour continued until the point of thematic saturation was determined, and new data no longer changed the coding manual. Finally, a data display (see Table 1) was developed to portray the key results of the analyses (Dey 1993).

Analysis

The systematic qualitative coding and categorising of the interview data found three overarching categories of listener expectations for podcast hosts: knowledge, storytelling

Table 1. Data display—qualities of listeners' expectations for podcast hosts.

Knowledge	Storytelling	Parasocial relationship
Subject area expertise	Clear and vigorous voice	Attractive personality
Curiosity	Well-prepared	Engaged and passionate
Target group insight	Flow creation	Self-disclosure
	Slower tempo	Everyday language
	Attract and retain attention	Non-time dependent mood
	Focused and attentive style of communication	
	Dramaturgy	
	Quick and clear WHY	

and parasocial relationship (see Table 1). The analysis is structured according to these three slightly overlapping aspects of listeners' expectations for podcast hosts:

Knowledge

In relation to the category of host knowledge, three subcategories were found in data: subject area expertise, curiosity, and target group insight. First, like Saabye (2020), we find a theme in the qualitative data material dealing with various kinds of knowledge as a key characteristic to possess for a good podcast host, since this is a direct way for listeners to access informational gratifications. According to the participants, the podcast hosts do not need to possess deep *subject area expertise* themselves, but it is a prerequisite to have some subject area expertise, because otherwise the podcast host will appear unprepared. The second subcategory is *curiosity*. Participants acknowledge that host interest in or curiosity about a subject area can be enough to full fill audiences' information needs, especially if the host acts as a proxy for the audience getting to know more about a specific subject area:

The host must have specific knowledge or draw in someone who has specific knowledge on the subject. ... As long as the interest is there, it's good. (Male, 51 years old)¹

Reflecting on the knowledge category, makes it relevant to compare radio and podcast hosts. Radio hosts who are anchors on thematic programmes related to a particular field, for example, music, politics, or sports are journalistic experts within their fields. Podcast hosts can also be experts, but, as the analysis shows, they do not necessarily need to be well-educated experts; often it is sufficient to have first-hand practical experience that people want to hear about and not least a strong interest or even passion for the topic. This entails that even non-fiction podcasts become more subjective modes of expression.

The third subcategory of knowledge is *insight into the world of the target group*. The participants expect a podcast host to be one with the audience and understand their way of life, as well as what is currently running through their minds. Through deep insight into the target group, the listeners expect the podcast host to be capable of delivering highly relevant content:

When I listen to podcasts, I expect that they say something which is relevant to me. (Male, 20 years old)

This aspect of listener expectation does not come as a surprise since the consumption of podcasts takes place in the listeners' individual intimate sphere at home or on the go. Therefore, according to the listeners, the podcast host must display awareness of their way of life in a broad sense, i.e., their interests, sense of humour, knowledge level, and structure of their daily life to be allowed into their intimate sphere. Since podcasts are usually conceptualised as a pull medium, the opposite point is also a possibility: if the podcast listeners do not feel that the host has an empathetic approach to them, then it might be problematic for the podcast host, since the listeners might start looking for a better match. In relation to these analytical findings, it is fair to ask whether the themes in the knowledge category are specific for expectations to podcast hosts, or if this is something hosts on all other media must also possess. Based on the analysis,

our interpretation is that specifically the audience expectation about target group insight is more pronounced for podcasts than what is found in research on hosts on, for example, TV and radio (e.g., Bruun 2017; Have 2018).

Storytelling

When the participants express their expectations for the podcast hosts, they address basic skills, such as a *clear and vigorous voice* and *flow creation skills*. According to the participants, these basic communicative skills should be used to keep listeners engaged and avoid irritating breaks in a flow. The participants expect the podcast hosts to be more *focused and attentive* in their communicative style than radio hosts in general. Here participants make the comparison to radio hosts on their own initiative, indicating that this theme is salient for podcast hosts:

The communication [from the podcast host] needs to be more focused, and the host needs to be more ready for action, I need to be drawn in by the host's communication in a podcast, a lot more than if I am in the car listening to regular radio. (Female, 17 years old)

As this participant explains, the podcast host must be focused and attentive, because this is the only way to engage the listener, which, according to participants, is key for podcast hosts. This point makes sense, since there is typically no music, jingles, or other features to attract attention, as we know it from radio. Therefore, the participants state that much of the job to be done rests on the level of communication and voice of the podcast host.

The participants refer to skills regarding journalistic craft, as techniques required to compose and perform podcasts. They are concerned with several different aspects, including being well-prepared, mastering dramaturgy, flow creation, tempo, attention attracting and retaining, and presenting a WHY quickly and precisely. Even though they acknowledge that there is sometimes an entire production team behind the podcast host, they still seem to assume and expect that the podcast host can master these skills and technical and dramaturgical craftsmanship in general.

Regarding the *level of preparation*, the participants are very explicit in articulating their expectations:

In podcasts they can edit, they need to be well prepared in a podcast, it can be recorded in advance. They cannot just play a record to fill the time. An extra degree of preparation ... (Male, 54 years old)

Furthermore, the participants emphasise that the podcast host must be able to master the structural aspect when presenting content:

The podcast also needs to be structured, because it is annoying if one jumps around among many topics. There you want a story from start to finish. In addition, it requires the host to be able to describe a particular story. There is more storytelling in a podcast than in flow radio. (Male, 26 years old)

As is evident in the quote, the participants also expect an ability to create a comprehensive and meaningful structure for the podcast listeners, with the participants specifically concerned with the podcast hosts' ability to craft a compelling story by using *dramaturgy* and storytelling. The expectations of the participants are in line with Dowling (2019) who argues that podcasts have evolved away from the inverted

pyramid and that storytelling has become a prominent characteristic of many modern podcasts and have roots directly in documentaries and novels. Thus, as Dowling (2019) also finds, the participants in this study clearly point out, that they expect storytelling and dramaturgical considerations and skills from the podcast hosts, and they think that there is nothing inherently wrong with using fictional and other compelling narrative devices to draw in and retain an audience. Of course, this is a balancing act which increases the demand and duty of the journalist or content provider to seek truth and provide a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues—while remaining subjective. Naturally, this point mainly applies to non-news podcast genres.

Another subcategory in the category of storytelling is the tempo with which the podcast is delivered by the podcast host which, according to participants, is expected to be slower than the tempo set by a flow radio host:

On the radio I appreciate high tempo and high energy levels. Whereas in a podcast I appreciate a slower tempo, maybe because I like narrative podcasts. They are slower and more in depth. (Female, 18 years old)

As stated by this participant, the *slower tempo* is a positive consequence of the time dedicated by the podcast and its host to the narrative and to in-depth journalism, since it takes time to report with close attention and depth. This expectation of slowness has also been noted by Dowling (2019) as he states that the podcast can be perceived as an antidote to high-speed communication and a refreshing deep dive.

The final subcategory of storytelling is to *attract and retain attention*. If the host is not able to get going quickly and draw listeners into the world of the podcast, the participants in this study claim that they will lose interest:

[The podcast host] must be able to retain the listeners' attention. This can be done by being passionate about the subject. You must be able to feel the energy ... The podcast must start quickly and present the topic quickly, otherwise I lose interest. (Female, 18 years old)

This also implies a capability to swiftly inform listeners about the podcast's *WHY*, e.g., by providing a short and precise product declaration and establishing a contract with the listener:

It is a great advantage if the podcast host clearly defines the podcast from the beginning, so that you know what you will be listening to. I want to know what the podcast is about. (Female, 20 years old)

When the podcast host has successfully attracted the attention of the listener and provided a short and precise *WHY*, participants expect that the podcast host delivers a common thread through a single episode or a series of episodes. Once again, this is often something which is taken care of by producers, but the participants tend to believe that the podcast host has at least some responsibility as well.

Parasocial Relationship

When the participants refer to expectations regarding a parasocial relationship between podcast host and listener, they talk about both the host's personality, personal style, and self-disclosure (a willingness to share personal accounts) along with engagement and passion.

Regarding the personality, participants stress that it is important for the podcast host to possess a pleasant and *attractive personality* which is audible through the voice and language use:

“The podcast host has to be really engaged and focused on the topic, because the listener actively chose to listen to this particular programme. You can listen to podcasts at various times during the day and listening to one requires more focus, and I need to feel drawn to the host.” (Female, 19 years old)

Since the podcast listener regards the host as an acquaintance or friend, we assume that similarity and identification are important issues in that relationship. The expectation of target group insight from the host is yet another aspect of the establishment of the parasocial relationship, since participants expect that podcast hosts should use *everyday language* and slang similar to the target group’s everyday language; here we assume that the participants are referring to non-news genres.

Furthermore, it is of great concern to the participants that the podcast host is engaged and passionate, similar to what is expected of radio and TV hosts (Bruun 2017; Have 2018):

A podcast host must be passionate about the topic of the programme, I need to feel that energy. (Male, 51 years old)

Engagement and passion are prerequisites for establishing a connection between podcast hosts and listeners, but our interpretation is that there is a notable difference in the expectations regarding the personality of the podcast host. The participants state that it is important for podcast hosts to be generous with their personality, and participants take comfort in podcast hosts who *self-disclose* by showing vulnerability, authenticity, and humour, and who share their own point of view:

I expect the podcast host to ... speak their own opinion and tell personal anecdotes. A podcast is still very stylish and edited, but in my opinion the host can still be subjective and personal. (Female, 40 years old)

Consequently, a podcast host’s ability to convey a pleasant identifiable personality and establish a parasocial relationship is a very important ingredient to being a successful podcast host, and in our interpretation also more important for podcast hosts than for radio and TV hosts.

According to our participants, and in contrast to Simmel’s notion of sociability, podcast hosts are allowed to self-disclose to establish an emotional relationship, at least in non-news genres which we expect the participants are referring to. This is an important finding in our study specific to podcast hosts. It displays how the changes in user patterns in relation to podcasts and other audio media in recent times may affect the content (including the role and style of the podcast host) in the conception of the podcast as a specific medium. Podcast listening is a more private and isolated activity than listening to the radio, and therefore it invites more intimate and friendship-like communication from the host.

Both Saabye (2020) and Perks and Turner (2018) conclude that podcasts are used for mood regulation, and our participants also touch upon this theme. Instead of describing how podcasts are used for mood regulation in general, the participants in our study explain their expectations for the mood conveyed by the host. They expect that the mood of the podcast host should be constant and not necessarily reflect the time of day:

They must be really good at setting a mood, because when you drive to work in the morning, they have to know what the mood is like, people are tired and have to go to work. If you hear it at 4 in the afternoon, then you are not in that mood anymore. Therefore, they need to be able to set a mood so that one can hear it at any time. (Male, 17 years old)

This expectation contrasts with that of a radio host, who is expected to express or convey a mood that matches the typical mood at that particular time of the day. For instance, a host is often in a festive mood during late Friday afternoon slots. In summary, this analytical result is in line with Heiselberg (2005), Have and Stougaard Pedersen (2016), Perks and Turner (2018), and Saabye (2020), who stress the importance of mood generation when users listen to audio content, as listeners use the soundtrack to regulate their mood and state of mind in particular situations. The unique listener expectation for podcast hosts can be coined as a *non-time-dependent mood*.

Table 2 aggregates and visually displays our interpretation of specific qualities that, according to participants, are most prominent for podcast hosts to possess.

The expectations for podcast hosts are not surprisingly largely the same as the expectations for flow radio hosts. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish between specific qualities that are more prominent for podcast hosts. These distinct expectations for podcast hosts are: increased target group insight, a focused and attentive style of communication, an ability to retain listener attention both at the beginning of and during the programme, better prepared than flow radio hosts, more actively making use of dramaturgy than radio hosts, and applying a slower tempo to the programme than radio hosts would normally do, and quickly presenting a clear WHY. Furthermore, the podcast host’s ability to deliver a non-time-dependent mood and establish a close, intimate, and friendship-like parasocial relationship via self-disclosure with the listener.

Discussion: The Messenger Matters

The general categories of motivation found in the existing studies of podcast use are reflected in the expectations for the host. Most obvious is the category of parasocial relationship in which the qualities of the host are essential. The establishment of such a relationship, and the character it takes depend solely on the host. The category is more compound and complex than displayed in Table 1, and does also include qualities from the two other columns like target group insight, voice, attentive style of communicative, attention-attraction, etc. The ability to create a parasocial relation might be the

Table 2. Data display—specific qualities for podcast hosts.

Knowledge	Storytelling	Parasocial relationship
Subject area expertise	Clear and vigorous voice	Attractive personality
Curiosity	Well-prepared	Engaged and passionate
Target group insight	Flow creation	Self-disclosure
	Slower tempo	Everyday language
	Attract and retain attention	Non-time-dependent mood
	Focused and attentive style of communication	
	Dramaturgy	
	Quick and clear WHY	

most important quality of a podcast host, as also suggested by Schlütz and Hedder (2021). Even though our participants did not mention it, the host is also important in obtaining the perfect mood-balancing between chores and podcast listening in specific situations.

The podcast host creating parasocial relationships with listeners comes with both possibilities and responsibilities, because these relationships can have persuasive effects on listeners (Schlütz and Hedder 2021; Tukachinsky, Walter, and Saucier 2020). In entertainment and narrative persuasion research, a model called The Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model (EORM) (Moyer-Gusé 2008) articulates the role of parasocial relationship in persuasion. In short, EORM posits that people sometimes perceive mediated characters as friends, idols, influencers, or mentors whose guidance they welcome and rely on. As Tukachinsky, Walter, and Saucier (2020) state, building on theories of persuasion and social learning, a parasocial relationship with a media character, such as a podcast host providing a persuasive message, is “expected to reduce reactance to persuasive attempts, diminish counterarguing against the message, and ultimately result in greater compliance” (876). Since listeners expect a parasocial relationship with the podcast host, this close link between parasocial relationships and persuasion makes podcasts and the podcast host a strong tool to inform, entertain, and educate people. Most of the time, this is a great advantage of the medium and its host, but the ability to persuade listeners also comes with great responsibility. Because podcasting has a low entry barrier (Berry 2016), everyone with a microphone and some basic editing software can act as a host. In addition, many podcasts are autonomous and independent without gatekeepers (Berg 2021) which makes it possible to spread mis- and disinformation more easily, as there is no one to oversee potential factual, legal, and ethical problems in a podcast. This also applies to hosts who aim to exploit the medium knowingly or unknowingly for mis- and disinformation, propaganda, conspiracy theories, extremist viewpoints, or anti-democratic information. This means that even when a podcast host provides mis- and disinformation, a parasocial relationship between the audience and the host will decrease the counterargument against the message. Social media platforms have met the demands of decreasing mis- and disinformation, but this far podcasting has avoided significant scrutiny, despite the massive scale of the podcast market. *The Joe Rogan Experience* is a podcast with approximately 11 million listeners hosted by the American comedian Joe Rogan. Rogan questioned the risks of COVID-19 vaccines for young people and was massively criticised. Therefore, he rectified this statement. However, the retraction of the statement may not be sufficient, as there remains a correlation between listeners of the Joe Rogan Experience and vaccine hesitance (Wirtschafter 2021). The spread of mis- and disinformation via podcasts is a problem that requires both infrastructure-level changes and content moderation strategies and policies. As Wirtschafter (2021) underline podcast “distributors largely rely on the “crowd” to identify objectionable content, but the process for reporting this material as a listener is not straightforward” (Policy implication section). She continues by pointing to Apple’s podcasting app, where listeners can only report concerns about a limited number of experiences, none of which include mis- and disinformation. Unfortunately, the same can be said about Spotify, who provides no obvious way for listeners to report concerns about specific episodes. Consequently, podcast hosts must be aware of the persuasive power, and so must editors, podcast distributors, legislators, politicians, and podcast audiences.

In the studies on podcast use presented above, the need for information or engagement in a story was also the main reason for listening to podcasts. In contrast to parasocial relationships, these two categories refer to the content more than the host. However, although, we did not specifically deal with the content in our study, it is important to emphasise that the messenger matters and cannot be detached from listeners' need for information and entertainment as motivating factors for listening to podcasts. However, in this study, the general categories "need for information" and "engagement in stories" are naturally translated to "knowledge" and "storytelling" as skills of the host, because users benefit from a knowledgeable and curious host who can inform/tell you a story in an engaging way using internal (voice, personality, passion) and external (dramaturgy, editing, language) communicative skills.

In radio broadcasting, the content and moods are adapted to the time of the day, season, and everyday situations of the listeners: Tuning into a new day with morning music shows, driving home from work in the afternoon listening to news magazines, or enjoying a classical concert late Sunday evening. Since podcasting is an on-demand medium for individual use, it is important that the mood and style of communication match any given time and place that the listener might be in—what we coin *non-time-dependent mood*. Instead of the flow radio host trying to match the situation of the listener, it is the podcast listeners who must tune into the mood of the specific podcast and choose a podcast fitting the time, place, and activity of the individual listener. This releases podcast hosts from the ties of the clock, which account for many radio shows, such as musical clock shows, which are strictly organised around regular time announcements generating a kind of "stopwatch aesthetics" (Russo 2013, 194). On the other hand, a podcast requires a solid and identifiable style and mood that listeners recognise and are comfortable with. The expectation of a non-time-dependent mood is related to the practice of multitasking, which several studies, as described earlier, underline as a primary motivation for listening to podcasts. For instance, Perks, Turner, and Tollison (2019) argue that the podcast listeners mood-balance the "want" activities with boring "should" activities. With the right balance between an engaging podcast and not too cognitively demanding chores, the listener can get in a state of flow, forgetting time and space. As argued in Have (2023), the experience of mood-balanced multitasking therefore has some similarities with Hungarian American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's term "flow". Csikszentmihalyi describes an attractive state of mind that generates a feeling of meaningfulness (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Flow occurs when we can direct our full attention to a task that matches our abilities in a balance of stimuli, routine, and challenge and experience no resistance in what we do, experience, and think. Cleaning the house or running on a treadmill would normally result in boredom if we put all our attention into that task; however, if we listen to a podcast, we can add a layer of cognitive input to the non-demanding activity, resulting in a perfect total flow of stimuli (Have 2023).

Regarding the limitations of the study, it is important to acknowledge that the genres of the podcasts were not defined. Since we do not ask the respondents which kind of podcast genre and host they have in mind in their answers, we are not able to comment on what kind of podcasts their expectations are formed by and directed towards. Since the supply of podcasts is very diverse across languages, institutional affiliations, and genres, this is a limitation of the study, enabling us to conclude only on a general level. Future research should ask participants to differentiate between hosts of

different podcast genres. Another limitation of this study and many others on podcast listening is that it applies the U&G paradigm, asking people who listen to podcasts to discuss or rate their motivation for listening. First, this approach assumes that people are aware of their motivations and expectations; second, it tends not to tap into deeper psychological needs. Therefore, future research should assess broader dispositional factors and examine whether they predict media usage.

Conclusion

This article empirically identifies and conceptualises characteristics of a podcast host from a listener perspective based on the general and open research question: What expectations do podcast listeners have for podcast hosts? The data used in this explorative study were from 20 online group interviews with Danish radio- and podcast listeners. Asking for user expectations gives the study a prospective perspective based on participants' present knowledge and experience of podcasts, which in our study appears to be dominated by nonfiction storytelling and chatting. The expectations for podcast hosts are not surprisingly largely the same as the expectations for any other studio host. However, the results show that it is possible to distinguish the specific qualities that are most prominent for podcast hosts to possess and why. In short, these distinct expectations for podcast hosts are: increased target group insight, a focused and attentive style of communication, an ability to retain listener attention both at the beginning of and during the programme, better prepared than flow radio hosts, more actively making use of dramaturgy than radio hosts, and applying a slower tempo to the programme than radio hosts would normally do, and quickly presenting a clear WHY. Furthermore, we found expectations regarding podcast hosts' ability to deliver a non-time-dependent mood and establish a close intimate and friendship-like parasocial relationship via self-disclosure with the listener.

Apart from this overview of the more specific listener expectations for podcast hosts, the analysis contributes to a better understanding of expectations for media hosts in general, and the inherent qualities of podcasts as a medium. Furthermore, it provides insights to podcast producers about user preferences for podcast hosts in general at a specific time (2021) and in specific geographical and media cultural environments (Denmark).

Taking the general character of this study into account, it does, however, contribute to more specific empirical-based knowledge about perceptions and ideas of a podcast host that might be useful for future podcast studies as well as podcast productions, both of which are expected to grow in the years to come.

Note

1. All quotes have been translated from Danish to English by the authors.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to two departments within The Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), DR Værter and DR Medier. We appreciate their input while conceptualising the

research project on hosts, and their willingness to allow us to reuse the data from the research project in an academic context. Besides, we would like to thank the journalism research group at The University of Southern Denmark for valuable feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript.

Disclosure Statement

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

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