It's Time to Podcast: Hype or Here to Stay? A Pre- and Post-pandemic Trend Study

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Abstract

Podcasts represent a significant media trend due to their accessibility, variety of content, and ability to reach niche audiences by offering a personalized listening experience. A scholarly study of podcast usage is critical as it provides insight into changing media consumption patterns. This study integrates Uses and Gratification Theory, which has been applied by many researchers (e.g., Perks et al., 2019; Craig et al. 2021; Chung & Kim 2016), to explore the factors behind podcast usage motivations. Unlike previous ad hoc studies, this research includes two surveys from 2020 and 2024, with 196 and 268 valid responses, uncovering changes in podcast listeners' motivations pre- and post-pandemic. Results show typical podcast users are predominantly young, educated females who prefer comedy podcasts on smartphones. Primary motivations include entertainment, attention, convenience, relaxation, escape, social interaction, and information/education, with attitudes, affinity to the medium, and perceived realism also influencing consumption. Notably, information/education, escape, and social interaction are key predictive factors for podcast usage. The study offers valuable recommendations for media industry practitioners, highlighting podcasts' potential to displace other media through customizable experiences and multitasking opportunities, making listeners feel 'productive' both physically and mentally.

Keywords: Podcast, Education, Information, Uses & Gratification

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Introduction

In the context of the global health crisis precipitated by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the World Wide Web witnessed a surge in usage, with an array of online platforms, including e-commerce sites, virtual conferences, and entertainment portals, experiencing a notable increase in activity (Alexander, 2020; Kuhle, 2020; Barth, 2020). It is therefore unsurprising that there is also a growing demand for podcasts and their diverse content (Otto, 2020). In the United States, the medium has been experiencing a period of significant growth for several years, particularly in comparison to Europe and Germany (Kleinz, 2019). In the United States, podcasts have been a popular medium for several years, with Statista reporting that approximately 55% of Americans have already discovered the medium (Poleshova, 2020). As predicted by Webster (2008) and Verna (2009), the number of listeners has increased by 30% since 2008. A study conducted by the digital association Bitcom has revealed that podcasts are becoming an increasingly significant phenomenon in Germany. In 2018, the proportion of the population who listened to podcasts increased from 14% to 22% compared to 2016. It can thus be posited that one in five Germans utilised podcasts in 2018. In 2019, there was a further increase in the utilisation of this medium within society. The proportion of the German population who listen to podcasts has increased to 26% (Carius, 2018; Klöß & Krösmann, 2019). The 2020 study conducted by the digital association Bitkom indicates a continued and steady increase in the use of podcasts compared to previous years. At the time of writing, one-third of the German population currently utilise the 'new' medium. The most popular topics among podcast listeners in Germany are news (53%) and comedy (44%), according to a study by Klöß and Krösmann (2020).

The term 'podcast' is derived from the combination of two words: 'pod', which is an abbreviation of the term 'play on demand', originally used in reference to Apple's iPod MP3 player, and 'cast', which is the short form of the English word 'broadcast'. In this context, 'broadcast' can be understood to mean either 'transmission' or 'dissemination'. A podcast is a series of discrete episodes, typically in the format of audio files, but also including video files (VODcasts), which are made available for download free of charge via a suitable device, such as a smartphone. The individual episodes can be accessed at any time and from any location, irrespective of the specified broadcast times. This is referred to as a flexible on-demand service, which allows listeners to access the episode at their convenience (Duden, 2020; Gatewood, 2008, p. 91; Harris & Park, 2008, p. 548; Markgraf, 2020; McClung & Johnson, 2010, pp. 83f.; Laing et al., 2006, pp. 514f.; Potter, 2006, p. 64). Despite the notable expansion in the number of podcast listeners, there has been a paucity of systematic research on podcast listening habits (Markman, 2015, p. 240). The existing academic research on podcasts has primarily concentrated on addressing three key areas: firstly, the identification of the demographic profile of podcast users; secondly, an examination of the ways in which podcasts are utilised within business and educational contexts; and thirdly, an investigation into the extent to which individuals consume podcasts. Despite the relatively recent advent of technology, podcasts have had a profound impact on human interaction with media, becoming an integral part of today's world and everyone's environment (McClung & Johnson, 2010, p. 82). As podcasts continue to gain in popularity, it is important to gain an understanding of how they are used. It is essential to analyse the motives behind the use of podcasts, the gratifications associated with them and the attitudes of the respective users towards podcasts. This paper employs the Uses and Gratifications Approach to examine these aspects. The concept of the Uses and Gratifications Approach is employed in media research to elucidate the motives or gratifications that underpin the selection of a preferred medium, as well as the associated behaviour and attitude that inform the decision to direct one's attention

towards that medium (Severin & Tankard, 1986, p. 1ff.). The following section will address the question: *What motives are behind people turning to the podcast medium in Germany?*

Theoretical Framework

The Uses and Gratifications Approach (U&G) is a recipient-centred perspective that views the audience as an active and individual actor (Prokop, 1995). The role of the recipient was originally given little consideration in media research. However, in the 1970s, there was a shift in focus from the question 'What do the media do to people?' to the question 'What do people do with the media?' (Suckfill, 2004; Katz, 1959). Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) developed the theory as a link between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and media use. The theory posits that people use media to satisfy a range of needs, including the seeking of information, entertainment, social interaction and self-identification. The selective selection of content by recipients that aligns with their personal views and needs, coupled with a consistency between expectations and gratifications received, fosters repeated use (Unz et al., 2016). The theory has been applied to new media and technologies, including streaming services and podcasts, where specific gratifications such as entertainment, relaxation and information acquisition are sought (Ruggiero, 2000; Perks et al., 2019). In addition to the theoretical findings already mentioned in the literature with regard to traditional and modern media, there are also some studies that deal with the relatively young and new medium of podcasts. Jham et al. (2007, pp. 278ff.) conducted an analysis of the purpose of podcasts, their use, and their advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, McClung and Johnson (2010, pp. 82–83) examined the motives of podcast users.

Moreover, Mou and Lin (2015, pp. 475ff.) investigated the motivations underlying the adoption of podcasts in relation to socially perceived norms, interpersonal communication, and the theory of planned behaviour. Subsequently, Sundar and Limperos (2013, pp. 504–505) investigated the emergence of new gratifications associated with the advent of new media. Their findings indicate that each technological affordance gives rise to a distinctive set of gratifications. In his work, Domenichini (2018, pp. 46–47) explicitly focused on the use of podcasts in Germany and identified their potential and characteristics as an advertising medium. In their research, Perks, Turner and Tollison (2019, pp. 617–618) developed a benefit and gratification scale with the objective of elucidating the underlying satisfaction associated with the consumption of podcast content. This study differs from its predecessors in that it employs the benefit and gratification approach to examine media use, focusing specifically on podcasts in Germany. The objective is to identify the motives of podcast users and explain the underlying benefits of podcast use, specifically the value-added and gratification effects. Previous studies have primarily concentrated their analyses on the benefits and rewards within the context of traditional mass media. Additionally, studies have been conducted in relation to podcasts. However, the majority of these studies have surveyed non-podcast users and podcast listeners outside of Germany. This study, in contrast, surveys solely German podcast users, or individuals in Germany who express interest in trying podcasts, with the objective of identifying their motives and the benefits they derive from consuming the media content in question. As posited by McClung and Johnson (2010, p. 83), the act of downloading the content in question has already been subjected to analysis. Nevertheless, there has been a paucity of research into the underlying reasons for this phenomenon. The objective of this study is to extend the research conducted by McClung and Johnson (2010, pp. 82ff.) and others. This central research question will be answered based on the information collected and the central approaches of Uses and Gratification Theory as well as the Expectation-Gratification Model (GS/GO Model):

RQ1.0: *What motives are behind people turning to the podcast medium in Germany?*

According to Palmgreen (1984, p. 20ff.) there is a connection between media use behaviour and the underlying motives. In this context, there are other studies that measure media use behaviour in terms of the degree of satisfaction that the audience experiences through use and the extent or duration of use (Rubin, 1981, pp. 529ff; Rubin et al., 1986, pp. 353ff; Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld, 1983, pp. 97ff; Elliot & Quattlebaum, 1979, pp. 61ff). In addition to studies on television and radio consumption, such analyses have also been carried out in relation to newspapers, telephones and the Internet. The result of this research is that the gratification factor and the motives for media use are an influential driver in relation to people's use of different media (Dobos, 1992, p. 29ff.; Finn, 1997, p. 507ff.; Greenberg, 1974, p. 71ff; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000, p. 175ff; Payne et al., 1988, p. 909ff; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979, p. 155ff; Palmgreen et al., 1980, p. 161ff; Palmgreen et al., 1981, p. 451ff). According to Lichtenstein and Rosenfeld (1983, p. 97ff.), because of their different functions, media can project different images that show a mismatch between the choice of degree of need satisfaction and the user's needs. Greenberg (1974, p. 71ff.) found that viewers use media content differently, e.g. watch violent vs. non-violent television programmes, depending on what they are looking for in the medium, i.e. the motives behind its use. This research also found that the use of the medium of television, and the extent to which it is used, has an impact on the perception of reality and affinity of the British children surveyed (Greenberg, 1974, pp. 71ff). In 1979, Rubin followed Greenberg's findings and was also able to demonstrate a positive and significant correlation between most of the motives for watching television and affection for television. In particular, the factors of relaxation, excitement, forgetting, habit, pastime, socialising and learning were positively significant in relation to the degree of affection and the degree of reality of television content (Rubin, 1979, pp. 109ff). Rubin's 1983 study concluded that users of the medium of television who are guided by the underlying motives of entertainment, sociability, habit, pastime, etc., watch more television than people whose motive is to escape from the world (Rubin, 1983, p. 37ff.). This gives rise to the following research questions, which will now be transferred to the podcast medium with the help of existing theoretical findings on traditional media:

RQ1.1: *Which motives influence the intensity of podcast use?*

RQ1.2: *Which motives have an influence on the gratification gained from podcast use?*

RQ1.3: *Which motives have an influence on the benefits derived from the use of podcasts?*

RQ1.4: *What is the relationship between the motives reality, affinity and attitude in connection with the intensity of podcast use and the degree of gratification?*

RQ1.5: *How do the different motives/motive characteristics differ between the test subjects in terms of age and educational level?*

Methodology

Chung and Kim's (2016, p. 13ff.) study explored the motivations for using podcasts in higher education. The researchers interviewed 636 university students. In line with the available literature, 11 factors and a specially created factor (education) were reduced to an appropriate number of factors using principal factor analysis. The result was further analysed using hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis. As a result, Chung and Kim identified six

central motives for podcast use among college students: (1) voyeurism/social interaction/companionship, (2) entertainment/relaxation/attention, (3) education/information, (4) pastime/escape, (5) habit, and (6) convenience. Following on from this study (Chung & Kim, 2016, p. 13ff.), all 12 factors are examined again in the present study as part of a comprehensive multiple linear regression analysis, and the resulting findings are used to advance research on podcast use in Germany.

The design of the questionnaire is based on the research work and motives behind media and especially podcast use by scholars Greenberg (1974), Rubin (1979), Rubin (1981), Bantz (1982), Lichtenstein and Rosenfeld (1983), Rubin (1983), Perse and Rubin (1988) and Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), as well as Scherer and Schlütz (2004), McClung and Johnson (2010), Sundar and Limperos (2013), Chung and Kim (2016) and Perks et al. (2019). The various motives and needs are categorised and presented as motive dimensions and satisfaction typologies. These differ depending on the research question. In his study, Greenberg (1974), on the one hand, focused on the following typologies: relaxation, sociability, information, habit, pastime, self-identification, arousal and escape from everyday life. McQuail et al. (1972, p. 135ff.), on the other hand, focused on pastimes, social relationships, personal identity and environmental control (Schenk, 1987, p. 393-397). The study used an online survey distributed via WhatsApp and Facebook to various universities and podcast-related groups. Both surveys, the pre-pandemic survey and the post-pandemic survey, remained online for ten days. The data were analysed in SPSS with reference to Field (2013) for statistical guidance. In contrast to the previous studies, this study deliberately tried to exclude the dependent variable of usage by changing the wording of the questions and statements within the questionnaire. Instead of the usual statement in the literature *'I use podcasts because they are entertaining'*, the wording of the question was changed to *'Podcasts are entertaining'*. This was done to give the respondent more freedom in answering or judging the facts, without any subconscious influence regarding the individual interpretation of the word 'benefit'. There is also the possibility of a circular definition: *'I use podcasts because they are entertaining. - I use podcasts because they are entertaining'*. Motives should therefore be measured independently of the behaviour to be explained (Langens et al., 2005, p. 70ff.).

The two studies of podcast use, conducted in 2020 and 2024, captured meaningful trends and motivations of podcast listeners. The first study in 2020 included 196 participants, of whom 66.8% were female and 33.2% male, with an average age of 27. The second study in 2024 included 268 participants, also predominantly female (65%) and male (34%), with a slightly higher average age of 28. Both studies were aimed at podcast listeners in Germany and focused on usage behaviour, motives and preferences. The level of education of the participants in both studies was comparable: In the first study, 60.7% had an academic degree; in the second, the distribution was similar at 62%. The proportion of students and freelancers remained consistently high at around 58-60%, followed by permanent employees (around 27-28%). Most respondents were single (over 85%). Moreover, the evening was the preferred time to listen to podcasts (2020: 31%; 2024: 32%), followed by the afternoon (2020: 29%; 2024: 30%). The average number of episodes listened to increased from 6.34 episodes in 2020 to over 7 episodes in 2024, indicating a growing frequency of use. The most popular genres in both years were comedy and society/culture podcasts (both 35.7% in 2020 and 36.2% in 2024). Topics such as education, politics and lifestyle had observable increased demand in 2024, with educational content attracting around 25% of respondents. The smartphone was the main playback device in both studies (2020: 93.9%, 2024: 95.1%), while PCs/laptops and tablets were used much less frequently. Willingness to pay was limited in

both studies, but the proportion of those who would pay for podcasts increased from 26.5% in 2022 to just over 30% in 2024. Satisfaction with the German podcast offering remained stable, with 75% of participants in the first study and 77% in the second saying they were satisfied.

The motives of entertainment, social interaction, relaxation and escaping from everyday life emerged as the main motives for podcast use. In 2024, the proportion of respondents using podcasts for educational and informational reasons increased, which may be due to the growing variety of content and the increasing popularity of educational formats. Community and habit played a minor role in both years but were moderately relevant for specific community formats. The 7-point Likert scale showed consistent results in measuring the motivational factors mentioned, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 for almost all motives recorded. The reliable consistency of the factors confirms the relevance of the identified motives and their importance for podcast use. The high acceptance of smartphones as the main device for podcast use was striking in both studies, underlining the flexibility and mobile consumption behaviour of listeners. In summary, the results of both studies show that podcast usage in Germany is developing in a direction where flexible, mobile and educational formats are increasingly in demand. Both studies show that podcasts are not only used for entertainment, but increasingly for social interaction and information transfer.

Using multiple regression analyses to investigate the relationship between motivational factors such as entertainment, social interaction, escape from everyday life and the combined factor education/learning/information on the intensity of podcast use as well as perceived satisfaction and benefits. The analysis showed that affinity and attitude had a significant positive influence on the intensity of use. However, the combined factor education/learning/information had a negative effect on intensity in both studies, suggesting that podcasts are primarily used for entertainment purposes. The factors social interaction, escape from everyday life and education/learning/information were found to be significant in terms of perceived satisfaction and benefits. In the second study from 2024, the motive of education/learning/information was even more pronounced and was the most important predictor of benefit creation, underlining the increasing importance of podcasts as an educational medium. Here, perceived satisfaction and benefits increased significantly the more educational content the podcast provided. A further influence of the variables educational level and age on the intensity of use could not be proven significantly, but age had a negative effect on the motives entertainment and escape from everyday life. These results confirm the relevance of education, social interaction and escape as central motives for podcast use, with educational content becoming increasingly important.

Conclusion

The present study corroborates the findings of previous research, confirming the presence of all the motives identified therein in the context of podcast use. The primary motives were found to be entertainment, social interaction, education/learning/information, affinity and attitude. Regarding the motive of education and information, this study yields a contrasting result when considered in the context of podcasts, in comparison to studies on other media. This motive appears to be a significant factor with a central function in podcasts. Considering the findings of this study and the motives identified, it is possible to discern both similarities and differences between podcasts, television and YouTube. The results of the podcast study and Rubin's (1983, pp. 37ff.) study of motives associated with television differ. In the case of the television study, for instance, the strongest correlation was identified between the motives

of pastime/habit and community. In contrast, the podcast study identified a correlation between the factors of pastime and escape from everyday life. In addition to the aforementioned factors, convenience also plays a pivotal role in media consumption. Prior research has identified similarities in the consumption of podcast and YouTube content (Chung & Kim, 2016, pp. 25ff.; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009, pp. 317ff.). To illustrate, the ease of access afforded by the context of media use serves to increase the degree of need satisfaction that is triggered in the user. In the context of podcasts, ease of access can be considered a distinctive motive, offering users a specific benefit and level of satisfaction. This aligns with the established characteristics of traditional media. In contrast with the findings of Chung and Kim (2016, pp. 25ff.) and Haridakis and Hanson (2009, pp. 317ff.), the convenience motive was not identified as a significant factor in this study. However, it is obvious that podcasts can be used not only for educational and informational purposes, but also to cover a broad area that has been little researched. Depending on personal background and mental state, they are thus used to satisfy human needs.

Liechtenstein and Rosenfeld (1983, p. 37ff.) found that the motives of entertainment, information and pastime had moderately large regression coefficients with the level of satisfaction with television. In the present study, however, the factors attitude, affinity and education/learning/information were mainly responsible for the increase in the level of satisfaction. The findings on the motives of attitude and affinity bring with them another important consideration for theory and practice. Both factors are significant predictors of the dependent variables intensity of podcast use, gratification and utility. According to Rubin (1983, p. 37ff.), one's inner attitude and affinity towards a (new) medium or media use contribute significantly to adaptation in this context, be it, for example, turning to the podcast medium or in the sense of media use to achieve satisfaction of a general nature. Accordingly, the intensity of use would also increase based on positive attitudes and affinity. Regarding the factors of attitude and affinity, podcasts show clear differences compared to the medium of television. Consequently, all that is needed to increase TV consumption are media-savvy users. Depending on the type of media, attitudes and behaviours, as well as the motives for attention related to use and satisfaction, lead to specific and unique interactions between people and the medium. For podcasts to appeal to the widest possible audience, their development should focus primarily on educational and informational motives, social interaction components, as well as leisure, entertainment and escape factors. Depending on the nature of the target audience's main motive, these components should form the main part of a podcast.

According to the literature reviewed, all twelve factors are relevant to answering *Research Question 1.0: What motives are behind people turning to the podcast medium in Germany?* applicable. However, the reliability test utilising Cronbach's alpha excluded the factors habit and community, in addition to individual items. Considering these findings, the primary motivations behind podcast consumption can be distilled into the following categories: entertainment, attention/excitement, relaxation, education/learning/information, convenience, voyeurism, social interaction, pastime and escape from everyday life. This result may be surprising, given that the media itself consistently elicits similar or analogous needs in its audience, while simultaneously offering a means of gratification for those needs. Nevertheless, in comparison to traditional media, podcasts exhibit only slight differences in terms of the motivational factors under examination. Due to the arbitrariness of the utility and gratification approach, many motives can be created ad libitum, so that not a rigid but a creative approach will lead to further progress in this area, also by changing the framework of the interviewees and the questionnaire layout.

RQ 1.0: What motives are behind people turning to the podcast medium in Germany?
The main motives for using podcasts are entertainment, attention, relaxation, education, convenience, voyeurism, social interaction, pastime and escape from everyday life. The results show a slight deviation from traditional media, which indicates the flexibility of the Uses and Gratifications Approach.

RQ 1.1: Which motives influence the intensity of podcast use?
Education/learning/information showed a negative influence on the intensity of use, as informative content is perceived as less entertaining. In contrast, affinity and attitude towards the platform have a positive influence on usage and encourage more intensive engagement with the medium.

RQ 1.2: What motives influence the gratification gained from podcast use?
Social interaction, escape from everyday life and education/learning/information increase the satisfaction experienced. Education/learning/information provides a form of security that contributes to increased satisfaction among users.

RQ 1.3: Which motives have an influence on the creation of benefits when using podcasts?
The motives of social interaction, escape from everyday life and education/learning/information correlate positively with benefits as they address basic social and personal needs.

RQ 1.4: What is the relationship between the motives reality, affinity and attitude in connection with the intensity of podcast use and the degree of gratification?
Affinity and attitude towards the platform have a positive effect on intensity of use and satisfaction, while the motive reality shows no significant effect. High affinity and positive attitude increase both frequency of use and satisfaction.

RQ 1.5: How do the various motives/motive characteristics differ between the test subjects in terms of age and educational level?
The level of education does not significantly influence the use, but a higher level of education could promote openness to new media. Age correlates negatively with the motive of entertainment and positively with the decreasing need to escape from everyday life, suggesting that the need to escape from reality decreases with age.

One of the limitations of this study is that the respondents are quite young and have an above-average level of education. Secondly, the sample, which was recruited via Facebook groups and WhatsApp, does not reflect the German population as a whole and the statistically significant independent variables explain only a small proportion of the total variance. Furthermore, due to the nature of the study, it was not possible to control environmental factors when conducting the survey. This means that it cannot be ruled out that respondents may have been under stress and therefore not concentrating when completing the questionnaires, and this may have influenced the results. This study also did not investigate podcast use in the context of multitasking and edutainment, which are becoming increasingly important factors in today's fast-paced world. The use of the Uses and Gratifications Approach has also been criticised for its theoretical weakness (Elliot, 1974, p. 249ff.). The arbitrariness of applying this theory to every possible medium is denounced, an unwavering combination of all media use behaviours and needs. According to Rubin (2009, p. 165ff.), there is a lack of clear statements in the context of usage studies of current media. This could be because the same measurement tools as for traditional media are consistently used, in a

slightly different way, to analyse benefits and satisfaction in relation to new media. This suggests that the same or similar gratifications are analysed and ultimately found for new media as for traditional media (Sundar & Limperos, 2013, pp. 504ff; Unz et al., 2016, p. 22).

Based on the limitations of this work, the following implications arise for practice and for further research on podcast use in Germany. For example, more balanced groups of participants in terms of age, gender and education could be surveyed, which might allow other motives and satisfactions associated with podcast use to be observed. The results of this research in relation to the motive of education/learning/information also provide scope for further studies within the education and learning sector. More detailed research could lead to podcasts being used as a central means of educational support in Germany soon. Further research should also be carried out in edutainment and multitasking in Germany in connection with the use of podcasts as a medium, as entertainment during boring compulsory tasks is becoming increasingly important today. In the context of the criticism of the U&G Approach as a basic theory, future research could take more distance from literature to find new, yet unknown motives in connection with the use of modern media. Similarly, consistent findings in motive identification would mitigate criticisms and support its use as a basis for further research. In addition, the area of podcasts and podcast use is still relatively under-researched in Germany, so this work can serve as a central building block for further, more detailed analysis. Due to the delayed penetration of the German market with podcasts compared to the US, this market can be expected to grow strongly over the next few years. Podcasts and their reach, as well as their diverse and mobile applications, including support for education, as a tool for disseminating up-to-date information or simply to pass the time on the way to work, will grow from a niche to a mass medium of central economic importance. More and more companies, including music streaming providers such as Spotify, are recognising the flourishing sector and will invest large sums of capital in its future expansion (Becker, 2016).

In conclusion, the motives of education/learning/information, social interaction and escape from everyday life as well as the factors of affinity and attitude play a decisive role in the use of podcasts. Above all, education/learning/information is important for podcast listeners to satisfy their need for up-to-date information and content for further education and training. This shows that podcasts can be used as a suitable tool in the education sector and thus contribute to modernised learning. In addition to this motive, the second key factor is social interaction, which is ingrained in human nature and is addressed by every type of media. Whether it is exchanging information and content with other people or simply consuming it together. However, without a sufficiently high affinity and positive attitude towards the podcast medium, it is relatively unlikely that people will turn to the media content in question, so these two factors form the basis for podcast use in this study.

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