Examining the Motives and Gratifications of Podcast Users in the MENA Region

Thouraya Snoussi[1], Nourah Ahmed Al-Hooti[2], Anas Yousef Moh'd Masamreh[3]

Abstract

This research examines the needs and satisfactions achieved from podcast use in the MENA region recently. Results from a mixed methods approach indicate that podcast users exhibit diverse motivations and gratifications, highlighting the evolving nature of podcasting as a multifaceted medium that meets a wide range of individual needs. Whether serving as a source of information, entertainment, self-development or cultural communication, podcasts have successfully established themselves within the MENA media landscape, and their influence is expected to continue to grow in the coming years. This research provides valuable insights for content creators, media professionals, and advertisers seeking to engage with this dynamic and expanding audience.

Keywords: *Podcast; MENA, listening, gratifications, multitasking, self-development*

1. Introduction

In a region where mobile penetration is reaching great heights, the trend to move towards digital audio content (podcasts) is ever-increasing. From very few amateur podcasts in 2008 to substantial high-end productions by media powerhouses since 2020, podcasting has seen a major shift in the MENA region. It is not unnatural for podcasts to spread rapidly, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, because users in the region have realized the need that podcasts satisfy. It is a medium that can be consumed while performing other tasks – thus providing entertainment and/or education without the sense of wasting time. By understanding the uses and motives of podcast listeners in the MENA region, the study hopes to provide a basis for developing this new-old medium. It aims to provide a deep understanding of the podcast users in the MENA region in hopes of better serving them by podcast creators; the authors believe that this study can elicit usage characteristics among users in the MENA region, identify what makes MENA Podcasts attractive from the users' point of view, and point out the flaws, if any, of the MENA podcast in terms of form and content.

The authors intend to conduct a thorough literature review on podcasts in the region, aiming to identify any existing gaps and define the research questions. This will be followed by a detailed presentation of the methodology, theoretical framework, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

[1] University of Sharjah, Email: tsnoussi@sharjah.ac.ae, Orcid Id: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6457-2265
[2] University of Kalba, Email: nalhooti@sharjah.ac.ae
[3] University of Sharjah, Email: u20105256@sharjah.ac.ae

2. Literature Review

This section will focus on elucidating the concept of podcasts and delving into prior research concerning the burgeoning industry and diverse audiences of podcasting within the MENA region.

2.1 Concept of Podcast

Podcasts are arguably a medium located at the subtle intersection of digital and non-digital media (Espada, 2018, p. 3), which is a combination of downloadable, serialized digital audio files available through subscription. On top of their advantage of being able to download songs and shows, iPods endorsed the appearance of this new medium (Potter, 2006; Rainsbury & McDonnell, 2006; Mathieu, 2007; Harris & Park, 2008) since 2004 as media records dispersed online and played on computers and portable devices (Jham et al. 2008); it was declared the word of the year by the New Oxford American Dictionary in 2005. The process of downloading podcasts as well as developing podcasts is known as podcasting (Berry, 2006); the technology was developed in part, by former MTV VJ Mark Curry, who shaped a program utilizing Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds to recognize and automatically carry MP3 files to his computer (Goldberg, 2004); it has been commonly baptized «internet radio» in the beginning (Hammersley, 2004; Gallego, 2010). A podcast format can comprise audio or video, leading to the emergence of video podcasts or vodcasts, like the vlog format.

In the last years, entire academic articles have been dedicated to examining the potentials of podcasting that distinguish it from related media (Berry, 2016; Meserko, 2015); their characteristics were then highlighted as a technology that allows users to time-shift and place-shift content; by subscribing to feeds, users are also able to spontaneously download new podcasts as they become obtainable (Potter, 2006; McClung & Johnson, 2010); podcasts give consumers the ability to control how and when content is consumed. The command includes the aptitude to play, pause, and rewind a podcast at will through individuals' devices (Berry, 2016), which makes podcasting more often listened to via the closeness of headsets. A podcast can be a one-time serial production where new "episodes" are regularly released. Thus, podcasts, as well as the mobile devices they're used on, are altering the way people interact with media. (McClung & Johnson, 2010).

These features are valuable when applying podcasts to many fields, such as education, especially at a time when distance learning and online learning are becoming increasingly prevalent even though some scholars are still reticent in this regard, such as Skiba (2006), who stated some challenges related to lack of well-designed content for academic purposes, difficulties with licensing agreements from commercial resources. What should be emphasized is the diversified content available via podcasts like newscasts, foreign language lessons, audio/video staffing flyers, meeting and conference minutes, cultural archives, and sporting events stories. For these peculiarities, the production of podcasts has rapidly spread; podcasting software guides like iPodder ensured the rise of podcasting's appeal. iTunes caught up then to transporting podcasts (Sandoval, 2005). The mainstream media has joined in, as well as commercial radio stations (Menduni, 2007) and non-media establishments like NASA and the Pentagon (Demopoulos, 2006). This contributed to the expansion of the range of uses among the public, who have become aware of the positives of the podcasts summarized by Burns (2007) in their online availability, ease of use, ability to allow on-demand usage, and the low cost of producing them, which avoids the need to pass costs on to users and leads to free subscriptions in many cases.

2.2 Mena Region Podcasts: Growing Industry

Like global trends, podcasting in the MENA region is also gaining more and more reputation and is being used by many. This section will deal with the growing podcasting industry in the MENA region. Admittedly, in the Arab region, podcasting has a long way to go, but researchers and industry insiders favor its growth in the region. Khattab (2017) notes that there is "good and accelerating growth" in Arabic podcasts in areas such as tech, sports, arts, and investment (p. 131). Ramsey G. Tesdell, CEO of Sowt – a Jordan-based podcasting network specializing in producing audio content in Arabic - also believes that podcasting production in the region is increasing and that this is due to greater demand for podcasts – "everyone wants podcasts," he declares (Tesdell, 2021).

The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia seem to be the leaders of this growth, as most of the online conversation around podcasts in the Middle East originates in these two countries (Arab News, 2020). The third position belongs to Egypt (Khattab, 2017, p. 131).

The UAE has 1.3 million regular podcast listeners, 16% of adults (Podcasting and UAE, 2019). In Saudi 35 million (Alarabiya.net, 2021), 15% of the population listens more than once weekly (Podcasting and Saudi Arabia, 2020). In Saudi Arabia, women seem to be leading podcast listeners, as 20% of women are regular podcast listeners compared to 10% of men (Podcasting and Saudi Arabia, 2020). In the UAE, Finyal Media has recently partnered with MIS Gulf, a central media agency in the region, to bring podcast media offerings to brands across the region and drive the growth of the podcasting sector. Making Finyal Media the first regional podcast network to have media agency representation. Not only has podcasting been a fast-growing market in the UAE, but it is gaining support at an institutional level. Shamma Al Mazrui, UAE Minister of State for Youth Affairs, who inaugurated the recently-held Arab Youth Podcast Platform, said in her opening speech, "We keep working to give the Arab youth new interactive forums to launch their innovative ideas and to express their aspirations and ambitions and to show their creativity" (Al Sayed, 2020).

2.3 Trends in Listening to Podcasts

This section reviews podcast appropriation and use by audiences. Podcasting in recent years has developed a rich transmedia architecture not only because of its cross-platform nature but also because of designing experiences conducive to user engagement, sharing, and co-creation. Garcia-Martin (2020) has mentioned three aspects that podcast audiences are related to: The features inherent in the medium, the user's reception and consumption practices, and the media literacy of content creators. She argues that digital media are not, by default, spaces that guarantee significant hands-on actions or an increased level of engagement but that both dimensions should be stimulated by the design of interactive user experiences. As it emerges as a "new audio culture" (Llinares, Fox, & Berry, 2018, p. 4), podcasting will cultivate different listening styles for other formats. However, podcast listeners face new challenges as they have to make a calculated decision about precisely what they are listening to, thus crafting their desired listening mode in advance. Along the same lines, Douglas (1999) shows that the on-demand logic of a podcast cannot, nor does it seek to generate the same collective feeling that forms among people who tune in to the same radio program simultaneously. Alternatively, Llinares et al. (2018, p. 2) assert that podcasts cultivate an informal, personal, and even intimate relationship with their listeners in a way that "generates a deep sense of connection." Several authors have raised the relationship between podcast hosts and listeners (Bottomley, 2015; Markman, 2012; McHugh, 2016; Salvati, 2015). Edison Research (2018) declared that Americans most often listen to podcasts outside

their homes (16% of the time in the car, 12% at work, 4% at the gym, and 10% elsewhere), But then again, 48% of them still prefer listening at home.

Meanwhile, according to Spotify, podcast listening doubled on weekdays, suggesting a link between podcasting and work (Levine & Kupferman, 2017). Tussey (2018) also closely links contemporary mobility with listening to podcasts. Over the years, the increasing consumption of podcasts over the years has released a very active space for social and cultural interaction (Wrather, 2016, p. 44; Berry, 2016); this specific medium has rapidly grown into a global cultural phenomenon (Samuel-Azran et al., 2019). Edison Research (2019) concluded that 32% of Americans listen to podcasts. According to EGM (2017), the rate of podcast listeners in Spain is more modest at 350 thousand listeners, 1.2% of Internet users.

Regarding the motivations behind listening to podcasts, McClung (2001) identified social integration and entertainment, while Kaye & Johnson (2002) acknowledged direction, observation, entertainment, and social utility. Ferguson, Greer, and Reardon (2008) acknowledged six gratifications associated with MP3 players: Boredom, stimulation, entertainment, relaxation/escape, and loneliness. Bussart, Daggett, & Gibson (2007) found that younger audiences prefer listening to most audio content via MP3 players and streaming media. Other research investigated the trends in listening to podcasts in the MENA region; a report by podcast network AMAEYA, a UAE-based podcast network Media, points out that there isn't much data available to us on listenership behavior in the region and how it compares to global trends (State of the Industry, 2019). Similarly, Samuel-Arzan's remarks stipulate that few studies looked at podcast adoption patterns outside the United States (2018). The report by AMAEYA Media (2019), which is based on a survey of more than 500 podcast users, asserts that 42% of respondents use Apple Podcast, and 26% use Spotify - Comparatively, less than 4% of respondents browsed Anghami, the only regional streaming service.

It has to be added that three main themes emerged in the 2020 Amaeya Media report: The majority of users preferred listening to entertainment-related content (50 %), then self-help and inspirational content (36 %), news and current affairs (8%), business content (4%), and pandemic-related content (2%).
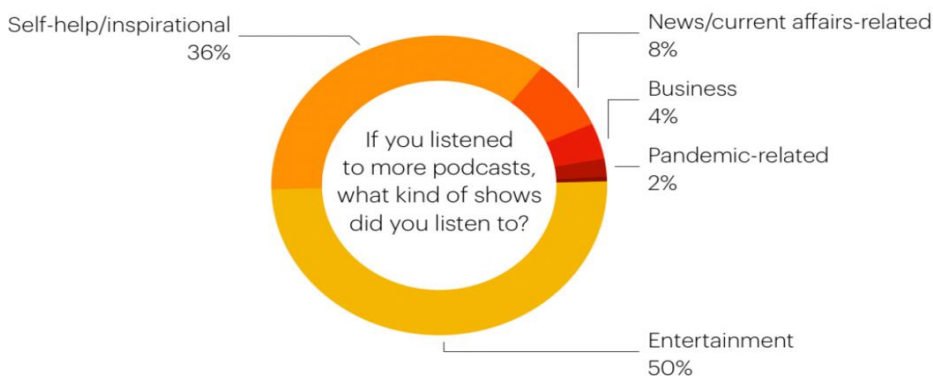

Fig.1: Podcast Listenership and Interests 2020 (Ref. State of Podcasting in Mena in 2020 | Arab News. Amaeya Media https://www.arabnews.com/node/1809551/Media.

Kurdish Studies

Another survey conducted by Khattab (2017) among 400 young Egyptians found that the two main motivations for using podcasts are access to information and social interaction; Samuel-Azran et al. (2018) also confirm that the top uses for podcasts are acquiring new knowledge and sharing information with friends. These findings are comparable with findings in the United States, as the principal reason for listening to podcasts is to "learn new things" (Statista, 2021).

To sum up, previous studies focus primarily on defining the phenomenon of podcasting; many have addressed the concept of listening that has changed since podcasts became popular. Some authors were concerned about the technology side, while others tried to investigate more about the content; numerous listening experiences have been explored in many world regions, including the Middle East and North Africa. The researchers also focused on listening motives and habits mainly through quantitative studies based on questionnaires. This research attempts to monitor developments in podcasting uses in the MENA region based on mixed approaches (quantitative and qualitative) to delve into podcast needs and saturation achieved over the past two years: 2021 and 2022.

This study includes three research questions.

RQ1: *How do listeners in the MENA region use podcasts? (Habits and particularities of use)*

RQ2: *What are the motivations for using Podcasts in the MENA region?*

Q3: *To what extent have the gratifications been achieved from using podcasts region in the Mena?*

As for the theoretical background, this study is guided by the Uses and gratification theory. Additionally. to its use in research on traditional media, the uses and gratification approach has been extensively reused in research dealing with audience interaction with virtual space and new media (McClung & Johnson, 2010; Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996). Scholars such as Papacarissi and Rubin (2000) have used the U&G approach to explore why individuals use different media, including new media technologies and applications related to the Internet. Some researchers have used this approach to investigate who downloads podcasts and why. This theory will guide this study to attempt to answer the same question in a particular context: the MENA region.

3. Material and Method

The authors believe a mixed method (survey and semi-structured interviews) is adequate for accurate results.

A survey was designed and distributed via Google Forms to podcast users in the MENA region. The link was posted to all 12 social media podcast groups based in the area (11 on Facebook and one (1) on Instagram) from 1-4-2022 to 1-7-2022. A number of 150 listeners volunteered to answer the survey questions. Consent was obtained for experimentation with human subjects volunteering in this paper.

3.1 Survey Sample Composition

The data sample includes 64% female respondents and 36% males. Regarding the age group, 20-24 was the top group, with 48% of participants belonging to it, followed by 25-29 years (20%) and 35 and more (15%).

Fig1. Survey Sample Composition.

Most of those who listen to podcasts in the sample have at least some university-level education; around half of the respondents are undergraduate students, 24% are at postgraduate level, and 21% are graduate level. Most respondents were in humanities and social sciences (67%), and 26% were in science and technology majors. Only 7% were in medical and health sciences. For the occupation, the top respondents to the questionnaire were students (64%), followed by employees (23%) and unemployed individuals (7%).

It has to be added that the highest percentage of respondents have a monthly income of less than AED 3,000 (47%), followed by AED 3,000 to 6,000 (19%). Conversely, only 5% of respondents have a monthly household of AED 30,000 or more**.**

3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Due to the limited number of those who answered the questionnaire, as well as to deepen the research results, a qualitative analysis was conducted based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 podcast listeners and producers among youth in the MENA region from 1-7-2022 to 30-8-2022. Fifteen of these interviews were done remotely via video conferencing, two were done via instant messaging, and one was done in person. Interview participants were recruited from authors 'personal connections among podcast listeners and podcast fan communities on the instant messaging application Telegram; In fact, the app. Telegram includes a community of podcasters and podcast fans from all over the Arab world. One of the authors is a member of this community, which is why it was easy for him to send out a general message to the group explaining the study topic and asking interested people to contact him; he also mentioned to those who volunteered to participate that the data will be used for research purposes only and got their consent to conduct the interview, record it and use it in the study.

The interview sample included 11 females and seven males. Ten are Emirati, three are Saudi, two are Qatari, one is Tunisian, one is Palestinian, and one is Yemeni. Participants are government employees (4), independent of the video and digital media industry (6), graduate students (5), and freshmen (3). As for the medium, ten interviews were conducted online via Zoom, five via Teams, two via Telegram, and one in person. It should be added that the duration of the interviews ranged between 8:30 and 27 minutes. Thus, the average time for all interviews was about 17:30 minutes. Two interviews were conducted via text messages (Telegram) and were about 1,000 words long.

Interviews in English via MS Teams were automatically transcribed and then reviewed by authors for errors. At the same time, those conducted via Zoom in English were transcribed with the help of the online transcription tool Otter.ai. The interviews conducted in Arabic were manually transcribed into English. After the individual interviews were transcribed, all transcripts were combined into a one-word, 74-page document. Then, the data was analyzed with the help of the analysis tool Atlas. Ti. Then, an objective analysis of the data was performed.

4. Results

4.1 The Habits and Particularities of Podcast Use in the MENA Region (RQ1)

Regarding listening habits, the questionnaire investigated frequency and duration of listening per week, the period respondents have been using podcasts, the reasons for attending the first time, and the platform or application used to listen to podcasts. In the meantime, the data gathered from interviewees was mainly based on questions related to the way respondents discovered podcasting, the leading platforms they use, and the level of attention given while listening to podcasts.

The qualitative themes are chosen to give more precise details and complement the questionnaire results about the conditions of discovery of the podcast, the listening contexts, and the degree of integration with the content.

Concerning the survey's findings, the data shows that more than half of the respondents (55%) listen to podcasts once or less a week, 33% listen 2 to 4 times a week, and only 12% listen more than four times a week.
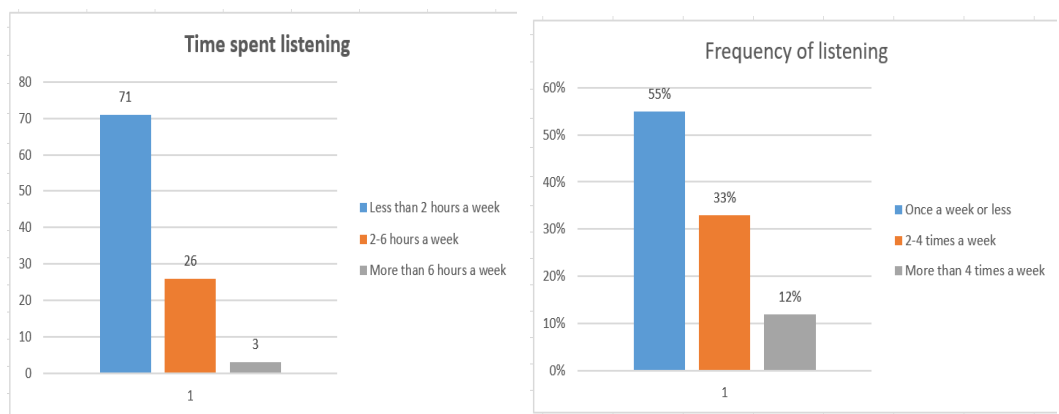

Fig 2: Survey Sample Listening Time & Frequency.

Similarly, most respondents (71%) listen for less than 2 hours a week, and 26% listen between 2 to 6 hours a week. The percentage of those who listen for more than 6 hours is almost negligible (3%).
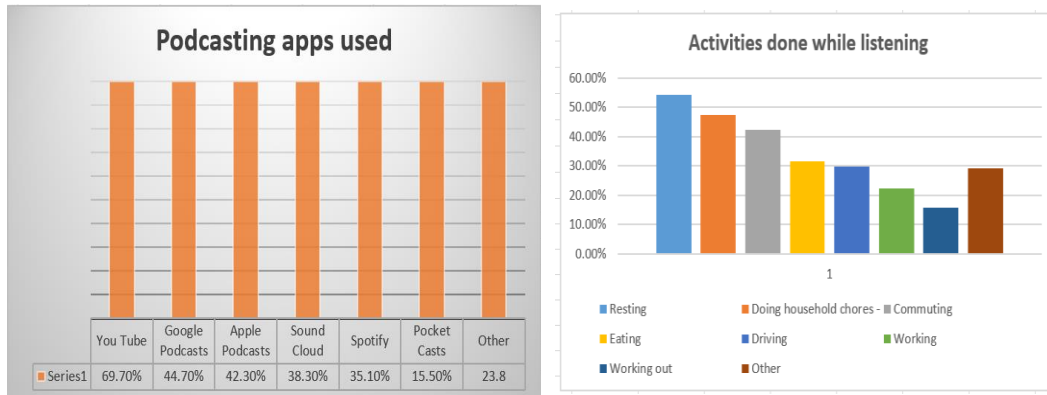

Fig3: Apps Used and Activities are Done While Listening.

Concerning the applications used to listen to podcasts, YouTube appears at the top with 69.70%, followed by Google Podcasts (44.70%), Apple podcasts (42.30%), Soundcloud (38.30%), and Spotify (35.10%). As for the activities done while listening, survey respondents seem to listen to podcasts the most while resting (54%), doing household chores (47.30%), Communicating (42.40%), and eating or driving (31.50% & 30%).

As for the interview's findings, participants discovered podcasts either by suggestions of their podcasting app, recommendations by peers, by exploring podcast websites, or by being introduced to other shows by shows they are consuming. A female participant from Saudi Arabia cites the Arabic Guide to Podcast website as a place where she finds podcasts. Moreover, participants use various platforms to consume podcasts, such as Google Podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, YouTube, and Apple Podcasts.

To some, YouTube is a go-to because, as a media industry professional says, "The easiest one. I open YouTube and type the podcast, and it comes." And for what used to be an issue in the past, participants can play episodes using YouTube Premium offline while the screen of their smart device is off.

How and why do the habits of podcast users vary?

Although the habits of podcast listeners are not very dissimilar, the authors did find some distinctive differences in how users consume podcasts in terms of attention, platforms on which users consume podcasts (difficult vs easy to listen to), and preference for audio-only versus video.

4.1.1 Attention

Regarding the attention given to podcasts consumed, participants in the in-depth interviews described whether they listen to podcasts as a separate, standalone activity or as an activity coupled with other tasks or daily activities. Generally, most participants seemed to prefer to consume podcasts while doing something. The things that participants do while listening include commuting, working, and doing house chores.

4.1.2 Multitasking VS Independent Activity

The authors note some distinct differences in how respondents use podcasts. Regarding follow-up style, listening and/or watching podcasts appears to be an independent activity for some. A media graduate explained, "I usually listen to podcasts attentively, so I won't do other assignments when I'm listening...I usually feel like I'm directly interacting with it, so I don't feel like doing anything else, just following it until it's over."

Similarly, a marketing student asserted, " I can't multitask on this kind of thing... Either I focus on the podcast, or I turn it off". Another respondent from the video industry explained that she can't watch while doing something else because she prefers to stream video.

An Emirate female said, "It would feel like I'm directly interacting with the podcast or the person, so I wouldn't feel like doing something else." The same goes for a Qatari male who cannot multitask; he can "either focus on the podcast or would not put it on." A male fresh student declared that he would listen to podcasts without doing other things under a condition: "Rarely... unless it's a very, very interesting podcast or a guest that I'm very interested in learning about."

Meanwhile, many participants asserted that they listen to podcasts while doing other tasks, claiming that it didn't make sense to devote themselves to podcasts. Podcast consumption for them is usually a secondary activity to a task that does not require much mental and cognitive engagement.

Participants' tasks range from cleaning the house, doing laundry, washing dishes, editing videos, designing on a computer, riding in a car, and general commuting. An Emirati graduate student at the University of Sharjah (UOS) explained that it's easier for her to multitask, especially since her lifestyle is fast. It is "great comfort and good company," a female Saudi government employee explained. Similarly, a male freshman from UOS argued that he wanted to feel like someone was with him while doing his daily tasks. One UAE freelancer noted, "I listen to podcasts while editing a video at work, in the kitchen while preparing food, on a long car ride, or playing sports... I like to feel like someone is with me... to have a buddy... That's why I love podcasts."

It must be added that even though participants can manage to consume podcasts while doing other things, they cannot be too complicated if the task demands one's attention. The complexity of the podcast is a factor in whether participants consume it while doing other tasks. In the case of straightforward podcast content that does not include much information or intellectual discussions, participants prefer it when doing other functions over more complex podcasts that deal with topics that require some mental energy to comprehend. "When driving, I would listen to programs about advice, preaching, remembrance... not scientific programs," a female Qatari argued.

4.1.3 Difficult Vs. Easy Podcasts to Listen to

Even though participants can consume podcasts while doing other things, these podcasts cannot be too complicated if the task demands one's attention. The complexity of the podcast is a factor in whether participants consume it while doing other tasks. If a podcast does not include intellectual discussions, participants prefer it when doing other tasks over more complex podcasts that deal with topics that require some mental energy to comprehend. "When driving, I would listen to programs about advice, preaching, and remembrance. Not scientific programs," Eman tells us.

4.1.4 Audio Vs. Video

Another way participants' habits varied was whether they consumed podcasts in audio format or video format. Some participants prefer to finish the audio content alone, and others like the video version of podcasts. Each has their rationale for their preference. Some participants seemed to only consume podcasts in audio format; a Tunisian female explained that "even if it was video, I don't watch it but only listen. I don't think there's something that I need to watch." An Emirati male revealed: "I'm more of an audio person. I can hear the expressions in the person's voice." He added: "What's the purpose of watching someone talking while sitting in front of you with the mic? I don't get the point."

Other participants seemed to prefer video when it was possible for them to view it this way. A female Yemeni living in the UAE likes seeing the podcast program presenter and their guests when available. A female Saudi added that she wants to "follow the voice and image and to examine the guests' body language while telling their stories." A Palestinian male living in the UAE mentioned the same point, explaining that he wants to see people's expressions and gestures to get the most information.

4.2 Listening Motives and Preferences (RQ2)

This section includes the results of the survey on the reasons survey participants started listening to podcasts for the first time, as well as motivations for continuing to listen to podcasts after discovering them. The authors believe that the reasons why respondents listen to it the first time may change or evolve. More detailed motives were exposed during the interviews. The results are summarized in the Table below.

Regarding the survey findings, Data shows that the top reasons respondents started listening to the podcast were discovering through music streaming apps (44%), followed by recommendations by others (30%), and reading about it in the news (26%). Curiosity seems to be behind survey respondents starting to listen.
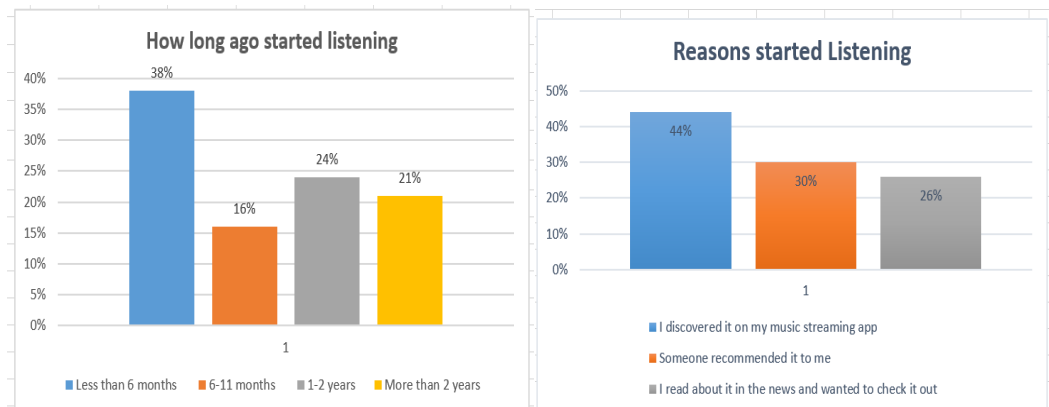

Fig4: Figure 4. Reasons for and Duration of Initiation of Listening.

Furthermore, survey data show that most respondents are new podcast listeners (38% for less than six months, 16% for six to eleven months); those listening for one to two years constitute 24% of the survey' sample, while podcast listeners for more than two years are only 21%.
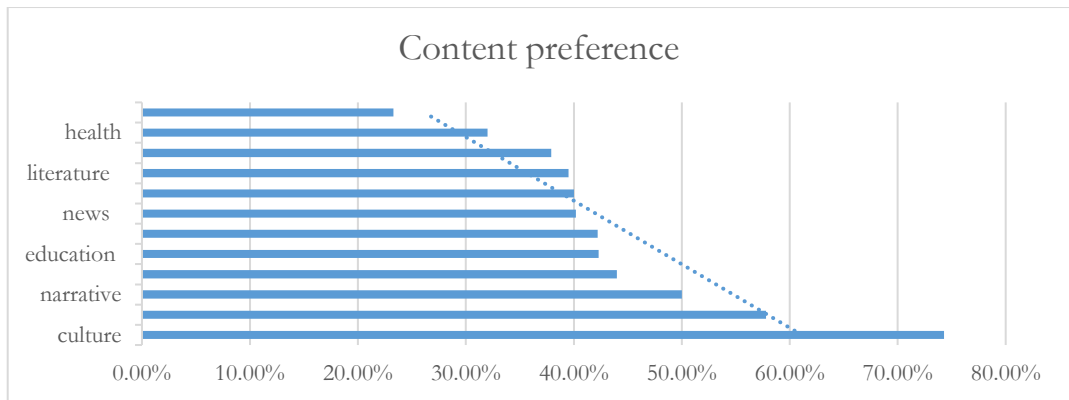
Fig5. Content Preference of the Survey's Sample.

According to survey data, cultural content holds the most preferred topic among respondents, with 74.3% saying they usually or always like it. Cultural content is not followed by general content (57.8%) and narrative content (50%). What is evident from the results is that respondents have a range of diverse preferences, where we see topics like science, news, history, education, and music were all preferred by 40 and 44% of respondents. Even the topics that respondents least prefer are not an insignificant percentage, ranging from 23 to 39%.

Moreover, the motives for listening to podcasts lay on 'educating myself' (71.1%), followed by 'entertaining myself' (66.1%) and curiosity (51.6%). The authors believe this is a significant finding that reflects podcasting as a means of spreading culture and promoting education. It attracts a particular type of listener who is not primarily seeking to be entertained (see Table A. 2).

As for the interview findings, participants have expressed six main motives for listening to podcasts: Getting all kinds of Knowledge, including educational and cultural content for self-development purposes, entertainment, keeping company, and distraction.

4.2.1 Getting all Kinds of Knowledge and Self-Development

A recurrent theme in podcasts is getting new knowledge and information. Participants use podcasts to learn more about topics they are interested in, such as psychology, politics, literature, language, and history.

Some participants are "hungry for information," a male participant from UAE said; he believes that podcasts provide a different kind of detailed information, providing insights that cannot be produced with the same depth in other media types. Similarly, a Palestinian male added "People are too lazy to read; that's why they listen." A female participant from Qatar uses podcasts to gain an extra perspective about matters in which she has prior interests. A male Qatari asserted that he always gains satisfaction through the knowledge he gets via podcasts. A female Tunisian participant declared that she consumes podcasts to improve her English language as a third language after the Arabic and French languages. The same participant added that she usually listens to a Tunisian content creator called "Injah" [which means Succeed in Arabic], which pushes her to do other things like studying or work.

4.2.2 Entertainment

Another recurrent theme in the use of podcasts is entertainment. Several participants have claimed they enjoy listening to podcasts to have fun and pursue their hobby. As she mentioned, an Emirate female appeared fascinated by music tracks through podcasts she couldn't find

elsewhere. A female Qatari declared preferring topics on popular game Dungeons and Dragons and true crime, as well as topics about real success stories of people showing how they start their businesses, for example. Several participants declared they listen to podcasts to complement their fandom about certain shows or games. A male Emirate clarified, "I am enthusiastic about playing [video] games; I'm a gamer. I listen to podcasts that talk about the industry." Another participant from Saudi Arabia spoke of his fascination with podcasts about WWE wrestling. A Qatari male respondent added that he listens to podcasts about UFC mixed martial arts.

4.2.3 Keeping Company

Some participants declared listening to podcasts to keep them company in moments of loneliness. A female Emirate used the Arabic word 'Mo'nis' to describe podcasts, someone who holds one's company. A male participant from Saudi Arabia also declared that he usually enjoys the company of podcasts and feels like he's part of a conversation, which is one of the reasons he likes to listen to podcasts.

4.2.4 Distraction (Background Noise)

A few participants use podcasts as a distraction or background noise. A female respondent from Yemen spoke about her experience: "I'm an overthinker personally. If I keep listening to my thoughts, I start thinking of useless things to think about now. So instead of listening to these thoughts, I would rather listen to podcasts."

A participant from Saudi Arabia mentioned that he usually enjoys listening to episodes he used to listen to before. "I've had podcasts that I've listened to over ten times. I know exactly what they're going to talk about. But it's nice to have background noise," he explained.

4.3 Achieved Gratifications from Using Mena Podcasts (RQ3)

This section is dedicated to investigating the level of satisfaction of survey and interview respondents with the use of podcasts. Thus, evaluate the podcast experience in the region and identify the essential opportunities it presents to the public and the challenges it faces.

According to the survey findings, **t**he level of satisfaction related to the use of podcasts for the respondents cannot be neglected. The results are summarized as follows:
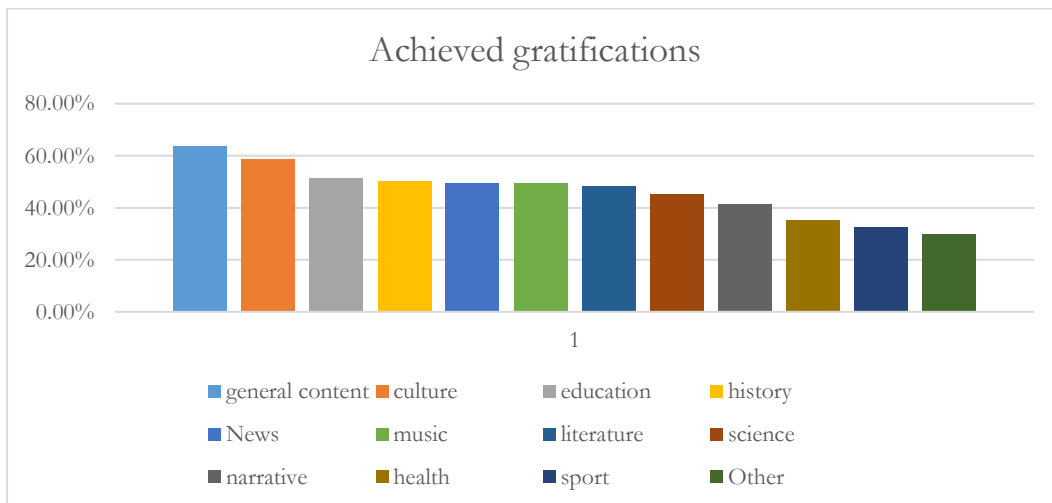

Fig6. Achieved Gratifications of the Listeners.

The data indicates that podcasts dedicated to general content achieved the most excellent satisfaction among the respondents, with a rate of 63.6%. As for the specialized content, the sample expressed satisfaction with culture 58.5%, education 51.3%, and history-related topics 50%.

These results are significant as they refer to the role played by podcasts in the MENA region as tools primarily used for intellectual formation more than entertainment or passing time.

Data extracted from interviews confirm that participants generally seem satisfied with podcasts and are getting the things they listen for. The gratifications mentioned by participants include cultural, educational, and entertainment content.

One female participant from UAE even benefited from ideas from a podcast that helped her with her schoolwork; she recounted how she gets new information and insights from a podcast about autism: "I guess you could say it gives you perspective because you don't understand what people like that go through - you have to understand more. They also teach you new things."

Nevertheless, some interviewees highlighted instances in which podcast listeners do not get the desired gratifications. One female participant from Qatar talked about what prevents achieving fulfillment for her: "What can prevent me from being completely satisfied is a loss of focus for one reason or another, such as falling into a monotony due to the excessive length of some cultural contents."

Another Emirati participant added, "Podcasts dedicated to scientific and academic content require special focus and note-taking, which is stressful at times and leads to an aversion to some well-furnished content."

Another participant from Saudi Arabia expressed his disappointment with some of the podcasts not meeting his expectations: "Often, I'd start a podcast, listen for five minutes, and then turn it off! Because the guest is superficial and unsure of the topic being discussed, and sometimes the conversation veers off in a way I'm not interested in, or because the topic of the episode I'm not excited about."

5. Discussion

Listening to podcasts seems to be a new and irregular activity for the participants from the MENA region, as more than half of the respondents declared that they listen to podcasts once or less per week, with almost 40% mentioning that they started listening six months or less.

In the same vein, Khattab (2017) notes that podcasting in the Arab region is still long-standing, but researchers and industry insiders favor its growth in the area. In an interview in Gulf Business (2021), Leila Hamadeh, co-founder and CEO at 'Final Media' announced that the Middle East may soon lead the world in podcasts; she added that considering the buzz around podcasts in the Arab world, podcasts are quickly becoming one of the most trusted mediums for people to consume content within the region.

Regarding the applications used to listen to podcasts, YouTube appears at the top, followed by Google and Apple podcasts. These findings are comparable to those of Dessouki et al. (2023), who concluded that podcasts in Egypt are frequently listened to either through a friend or YouTube; they added that Apple podcasts were seen as the platform with the broadest array

of options. In the same vein, the AMAEYA Media (2019) report, which is based on a survey of 500 podcast users in the Middle East and North Africa region, confirms that 42% of respondents use Apple Podcast, 26% use Spotify, and less than 4% of respondents are on Anghami, the only regional streaming service.

Moreover, some distinctive differences were noted in how users consume podcasts in terms of attention, preference for audio-only versus video, and the different platforms on which users consume podcasts. Moreover, the respondents were divided on how they listen to podcasts; some assert that they usually listen attentively, so they cannot do other things while listening because listening needs focus. This part of the participants considers listening to an independent activity as their most interest is the cultural content; they listen to podcasts to get more knowledge and to ensure self-development. In the meantime, the other part asserts listening to podcasts while doing other tasks is a 'great comfort and good company.' Podcast consumption for them is usually a secondary activity to a task that does not require much mental and cognitive engagement. It has to be highlighted that the complexity of the podcast content is a factor in whether participants consume it while doing other tasks or not.

These results are significant because they show a considerable evolution in how audiences in the Middle East and North Africa use podcasts. Three years ago, the audience seemed hostile because podcasts are claimed to be usually consumed in a negative way (Arab News, 2020). The MENA Podcasts Report in 2020 states that most people do this while multitasking; people listen to podcasts while doing housework. Data findings suggest a trend towards listening as an independent and focused activity aimed at self-development. The role played by podcasts in 2022 looks relatively different compared to 2020.

Another way participants' habits of use varied was whether they consumed podcasts more in audio, video format, or equally in both formats. Many interviewees affirm that the audio format is the best way to use podcasts, as listeners can understand messages through tones and strokes. Participants consider sound as an integral means of communication. This is reminiscent of what Marshall McLuhan said about radio, describing it as a hot medium that captures the listener's attention and engages him in the communication process. Therefore, some respondents say that they feel the podcaster's voice accompanying and talking to them, generating the need for interaction.

Nevertheless, some participants prefer the video format as they are more interested in watching podcast guests' expressions and gestures while speaking to get the most information from them. What is noticeable here is that the tendency of the video is not for the sake of the image, effects, or decoration but rather to focus on the small details in the body language of the presenter or the guests. Podcast listeners in this study made a deliberate decision about what they were listening to, thus crafting their desired listening mode in advance, and chose to look for content that enhanced their intellectual level. This makes podcasts a tributary of culture and education, unlike radio, which mainly offers entertainment content to attract the audience. This aligns with Llinares, Fox, and Berry (2018), who consider podcasts a "new audio culture" that will cultivate different listening styles for other formats. In the meantime, Douglas (1999) argues that the on-demand logic of a podcast cannot generate the same collective feeling that forms among people who tune in to the same radio program at the same time.

Concerning the listening motives and preferences, data show that cultural content is the most preferred topic amongst respondents, followed by general and narrative content. What is evident from the results is that respondents have a range of diverse favorites in

terms of cultural content that they all admire. The motives for listening to podcasts lay on 'educating myself' followed by 'entertaining myself' and satisfying curiosity. The authors believe this is once again a significant finding that reflects podcasting as a means of spreading culture and promoting education. It attracts a particular type of listeners who are not primarily seeking to be entertained. Participants use podcasts to learn more about topics they are interested in, such as psychology, politics, literature, language, and history, to gain more knowledge and self-development. The type of entertainment users seek in podcasts is primarily related to music and games. A minority use podcasts as a way of distraction or background noise.

It should be noted that the obtained results are relatively different from what was reached in the 2020 Amaeya Media Report: it confirmed that most users prefer listening to content related to entertainment (50%), then self-help and inspiring content (36%), then news and affairs. Ongoing (8%). This means that the trend of the sample in terms of uses has reversed from that of the sample in 2020, as cognitive utilitarian uses and building self-capabilities excelled, while entertainment-related needs retreated to second place.

The authors believe that this indicates the type of podcast audience that seems more oriented towards self-development and, therefore, has chosen podcasts as a kind of radio on demand to upgrade their knowledge and skills and thus develop their personality. Samuel-Azran et al. (2018) also confirmed that the top uses for podcasts are acquiring new knowledge and sharing information with friends. Findings in the United States identified the top reason for listening to podcasts as to "learn new things" (Statista, 2021). In the same vein, Chung and Kim (2016) found that college students from Midwestern universities (USA) expressed six motivations for using podcasts, illustrating student integration for interpersonal, enjoyment of life, convenience, and educational purposes.

As for the gratifications from using MENA Podcasts, the data indicates that podcasts dedicated to general content achieved the best level of satisfaction among the respondents; as for the specialized content, the cultural and educational content remains on top. These findings are slightly different from what was published in Arab News (2020), where the report on podcast audience states that listeners were primarily satisfied with entertainment-related content followed by self-help and inspirational content, with only 8 percent interested in news and current affairs. In a Western context, Chung and Kim (2016) found that college students report higher satiation levels when using podcasts for entertainment, relaxation, excitement, education, information, and convenience.

Nonetheless, according to findings, gratification from listening to podcasts isn't entirely guaranteed for the participants from the MENA region; some drawbacks were mentioned as limits that hinder their complete satisfaction, such as the limited intellectual level of some invited speakers who seem unsure of the topic under discussion as well as the monotony the listener may feel while following some long episodes dealing with topics of no interest to the listeners.

Dessouki et al., while exploring Egyptian podcasts as an alternative medium challenging social taboo in Egypt, concluded that podcasts specializing in cinema and art lack the immersive experience offered by films and consistency in terms of production, which means that podcasts in the region are still making strides towards high quality.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, podcast users in the MENA region have diverse motives and gratifications, demonstrating that podcasts have evolved into a multifaceted medium that fulfills a wide range of individual needs. Whether as a source of information, entertainment, self-expression, or cultural connection, podcasts have successfully carved out a niche in the media landscape of the MENA region, and their influence is expected to grow in the coming years. This research provides valuable insights for content creators, media professionals, and advertisers seeking to engage with this dynamic and expanding audience.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts.

Funding

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies are not used in the writing process.

References

1. Arab News, New report explores state of podcasting in MENA in 2020. Retrievable from https://www.arabnews.com/node/1809551/media
2. Berry, R. (2016). Part of the establishment: Reflecting on 10 years of podcasting as an audio medium. Convergence, 22 (6), 661–671. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516632105
3. Berry R (2016) Podcasting: Considering the evolution of the medium and its association with the word 'radio'. The Radio Journal International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media 14(1): 7-22.
4. Burns, T.M. (2007). The forecast for podcasts: sunny skies but not necessarily with clear visibility. Neurology; 68:E19
5. Chung, M. Y., & Kim, H. S. (2016). College students' motivations for using podcasts. Journal of Media Literacy Education 7(3), 13 – 28.
6. Demopoulos, T. (2006). What no one ever tells you about blogging and podcasting: Real-life advice from 101 people who successfully leverage the power of the blogosphere. Chicago: Dearborn.
7. Dessouki, A., Samir, H., Maguid, S.A. & George, S. (2023). Pushing Censorship Boundaries: Exploring Egyptian Podcasts as an Alternative Medium Challenging Social Taboos in Egypt. Journal of International Business Research and Marketing, 7(4), 7-17.
8. Douglas, S. (1999). Listening in: Radio and the American imagination. New York, NY: Random. Edison Research. (2018). The podcast consumer 2018. Retrieved from http://www.edisonresearch.com/podcast-consumer-2018/
9. Edison Research. (2019). The Infinite Dial 2019. http://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Infinite-Dial-2019-PDF-1.pdf
10. EGM. (2017). 1ª ola EGM : el consumo de podcasts en España representa el 1,6% de la escucha total de radio. https://www.aimc.es/a1mc-c0nt3nt/uploads/2017/05/170419_egm_2017ola1.pdf

11. Espada, A. E. (2018). Nuevos modelos radiofónicos: Las redes de podcast en Argentina: Producción, distribución y comercialización de la radio on demand. Question, 1(59), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.24215/16696581e081

12. Ferguson, D. A., Greer, C. F., & Reardon, M. E. (2007). Uses and gratifications of MP3 players by college students: Are iPods more popular than radio? Journal of Radio & Audio Media, 14(2), 102–121

13. Gallego, J. I. (2010). Podcasting: distribución de contenidos sonoros y nuevas formas de negocio en la empresa radiofónica española (Tesis doctoral). Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid. https://eprints.ucm.es/11205/1/T32070.pdf

14. García- Marín, D. (2020). Mapping the factors that determine engagement in podcasting: design from the users and podcasters 'experience. Communication & Society, 33(2), 49-63.

15. Goldberg, A. (2004, December 8). The people's radio. The Independent, p. 11. Menduni, E. (2007). Four steps in innovative radio broadcasting: From QuickTime to podcasting. The Radio Journal, 5(1), 9–18.

16. GULF BUSINESS (2021). Why podcasts are winning in the Arab world. 17 Mai. Retrievable from https://gulfbusiness.com

17. Hammersley, B. (12 de febrero de 2004). Audible revolution. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/feb/12/broadcasting.digitalmedia

18. Harris, H., & Park, S. (2008). Educational usages of podcasting. British Journal of Educational Technology, 39(3), 548–551.

19. Jham, B. C., Duraes, G. V., Strassler, H. E., Sensi, L. G. (2008). Joining the Podcast Revolution. Journal of Dental Education. (72)3. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.552.3579&rep=rep1&type=pdf

20. Kaye, B. K., & Johnson, T. J. (2002). Online and in the know: Uses and gratifications of the web for political Information. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 46(1), 54.

21. Lee and Ryu ottomley, A. J. (2015). Podcasting, Welcome to Night Vale, and the revival of radio drama. Journal of Radio & Audio Media, 22(2), 179–189. doi:10.1080/19376529.2015.1083370

22. Levine, D., & Kupferman, J. (2017). Data reveals podcasts are workday-friendly. Retrieved from https://insights.spotify.com/br/2017/10/23/podcast-data-workday/

23. Llinares, D., Fox, N., & Berry, R. (2018). Introduction: Podcasting and podcasts— Parameters of a new aural culture. In D. Llinares, N. Fox, & R. Berry (Eds.), Podcasting (pp. 1–13). Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

24. Lundström, M. & Lundström, T. P. (2021) Podcast ethnography, International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 24:3, 289-299. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1778221

25. Markman, K. M. (2012). Doing radio, making friends, and having fun: Exploring the motivations of independent audio podcasters. New Media & Society, 14(4), 547–565. doi:10.1177/ 1461444811420848

26. Mathieu, J. (2007). Blogs, podcasts, and wikis: The new names in information dissemination. J Am Diet Association; 107:553–5.

27. McHugh, S. (2016). How podcasting is changing the audio storytelling genre. Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media, 14(1), 65–82.

28. McClung, S. and Johnson, K. (2010) Examining the Motives of Podcast Users, Journal of Radio & Audio Media, 17:1, 82-95, DOI: 10.1080/19376521003719391

29. McClung, S. (2001). College radio station web sites: Perceptions of value and use. Journalism & Mass Communication Educator, 56(1), 62–73.

30. Meserko V (2015) The pursuit of authenticity on Marc Maron's WTF podcast Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies 29(6): 796–810.
31. Newhagen, J., & Rafaeli, S. (1996). Why communication researchers should study the Internet: A dialogue. Journal of Communications, 46(1), 4–13.
32. Papacharissi, Z., & Rubin, A. M. (2000). Predictors of Internet use. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 44(2), 175–196.
33. Potter, D. (2006). Ipod, you pod, we all pod. American Journalism Review, 28(1), 64.
34. Rainsbury, J.W., McDonnell, S.M. (2006). Podcasts: an educational revolution in the making? J R Soc Med; 99:481–2.
35. Salvati, A. J. (2015). Podcasting the past: Hardcore history, fandom, and DIY histories. Journal of Radio & Audio Media, 22(2), 231–239. doi:10.1080/19376529.2015.1083375
36. Samuel-Azran, T., Laor, T., & Tal, D. (2019). Who listens to podcasts, and why? The Israeli case. Online Information Review, 43(4), 482–495. https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-04-2017-0119
37. Sandoval, G. (2005, July 2). Help for podcast listeners. The Record, p. F1.
38. Skiba, DJ. (2006). The 2005 word of the year: podcast. Nurs Educ Perspect; 27:54–5.
39. Tussey, E. (2018). The procrastination economy: The big business of downtime. New York, NY: NYU Press.
40. Wrather K (2016) Making 'maximum fun' for fans: Examining podcast listener participation online. The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media 14(1): 43–63. DOI: 10.1386/rjao.14.1.43_1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS_enclosure

Appendices

Table A. 1. Interview Sample Composition.

#	Gender	Residence	Medium	Duration	Language
1	Female	Qatar	MS Teams	19 min	English
2	Male	Palestine	Zoom	22 min	English
3	Female	Tunisia	Zoom	14 min	Arabic
4	Female	UAE	MS Teams	21 min	Arabic
5	Male	Saudi	Zoom	21 min	English
6	Male	UAE	Zoom	27 min	Arabic
7	Male	UAE	Zoom	20:40 min	English
8	Male	UAE	Zoom	13 min	Arabic
9	Male	Qatar	Zoom	15 min	Arabic
10	Female	UAE	MS Teams	11 min	English
11	Female	UAE	MS Teams	14 min	English
12	Male	UAE	in-person	8:30 min	English
13	Female	UAE	Zoom	23 min	Arabic
14	Female	UAE	Zoom		Arabic
15	Female	Saudi	Telegram	1000 words	Arabic
16	Female	Saudi	Zoom	17:20 min	Arabic
17	Female	UAE	MS Teams	12:50 min	English
18	Female	Yemen	Telegram		Arabic

Table A. 2: Motives of Listening.

Motives for listening	%
Educating myself	71.1%
Entertain myself	66.1%
Curiosity	51.6%
Pass time	45.4%
Learn how to furnish a podcast (I will launch mine soon)	33.6%
Follow the latest music trends	29%
No reason	26.7%
Follow the latest fashion trends	25.7%
Other	24.2%