The Role of Podcasts on Digital Communication

Abstract

Purpose - In the last decade, Podcasts have become a fundamental digital communication platform worldwide. However, the evolution of this medium has not yet been proven relevant in the Portuguese context, as only a few studies were found about this subject. The purpose of this investigation is to assess the main motivations for Podcast usage, the gratifications fulfilled by using this media platform and the determinant factors for the success of this platform.

Design/methodology/approach - This study used two types of design: an exploratory design, that aimed to develop and clarify concepts and ideas related to digital media consumption and podcasts, through the review of the most recent literature and a semi-structured interview providing relevant qualitative data, and a descriptive design research, through an online survey using a non-probabilistic by convenience sample of 246 respondents.

Findings - The main reasons for podcast success are the fact that it works both as a source of knowledge and relaxation and it allows multitasking and portability.

Research limitations/implications – The degree of generalization of the results can be pointed out, due to the size and sampling method, as well to the fact that it is an occasional study.

Originality/value – This study examines the gratifications fulfilled from the use of Podcasts, the factors behind podcasts adoption, and the factors that contribute to their recommendation.

Keywords Digital Communication, Podcast, Consumer, Portugal, Uses, Gratifications

Paper type Research Paper

Introduction and objectives

An explosion of access to a huge proportion of world's population, both in terms of technology and in many other crucial areas (Pinker, 2018; Rosling, 2019), had profound consequences to digital consumption (Deloitte, 2019, 2020; Edison Research, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a; Reuters, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b). Among all media platforms, there is one, in which genuine and fluid conversations between hosts and guests are most common: the podcast.

Outside the US, only now does this platform started to get appropriated attention. There is a notorious and relevant growth of podcasts, its consumer numbers and notoriety (Reuters, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b; Edison Research, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a; Brooke, 2017; The Nielsen Company, 2017, 2018). The pandemic brought an even stronger demand for subscription/on-demand formats of consumption (Watson, 2020a; Statista Research Department, 2020; Gough, 2020; Tankovska, 2020a) being podcast one of them (Tankovska, 2020b; Watson, 2020b; Coppola, 2020). Only very recently did podcasts started to be mentioned in digital news reports in the Portuguese context (Reuters, 2018, 2019b, 2020b).

This research aims to better understand the main motivations behind podcast usage, to assess the determinant factors for its choice as a media platform for information and entertainment consumption and the likeliness of recommendation by its users, particularly in a time, where there is a clear demand for distance learning and on-demand types of services (Watson, 2020a; Statista Research Department, 2020; Gough, 2020; Tankovska, 2020a), including podcasts (Tankovska, 2020b; Watson, 2020b; Coppola, 2020).

Literature Review

There is few research about how new ways for information and entertainment consumption influence perceptions and subsequent consumer behavior. Communication theories in the 1930s and 1940s portrayed a passive consumer, strongly modulated but the media. Digital communication era consumers are now more demanding and with increased buying power. They are also more social and in constant web connection (Lambin, 2000; McCormick, 2016; Rosling, 2019). Therefore, theories that emanate from the argument that the media have only a limited effect on consumer behavior, can better explain the reason for consumption habits in the digital age.

The main argument behind the Uses and Gratification Theory dictates that the media's value is measured by the costumers' gratifications it fulfils, emanating from the premise that consumers,

proactively and deliberately, consume information and entertainment, for the sole purpose of satisfying needs (Katz *et al.*, 1973). According to Blumler (1979), the five main psychological consumers' needs that the media satisfy are: cognitive needs, like the awareness of having access to varied information; affective needs, related to consumer attitudes and beliefs; integrative needs, related to the need for the consumer to strengthen their confidence and self-esteem; strengthening social contact, with friends, family, and society; and the need for leisure time. Likewise, McQuail (2010) states that consumers use the media to address five needs: the need to collect information and learn; need for individual identification and validation; pure entertainment needs; needs to strengthen social contact; and need for leisure time.

More recent studies demonstrate the usefulness of this theory for a better understanding of new digital media consumers' behavior (Fu and Hsu, 2019), as well as podcasts consumers' behavior (Azran *et al.* 2019). Similar needs seem to be satisfied by the usage of different information or entertainment platforms, such as chat programs and social networks (Leung, 2001, 2013) or even as new streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv (Gros *et al.* 2017; Sjöblom and Hamari, 2016).

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) also seems to explain the "illusion of intimacy" created between the public and the host of the service in use (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Although the person mediating the content is often unaware of the consumers' existence, the consumer can sometimes believe, feel and act as if this were true. Stever and Lawson (2013) argue that PSI is the appropriate way to explain the relationship between digital media celebrities and their fans. Lessel *et al.* (2017) offers comparisons between a chat section on a website, a stream, or comments section of a *YouTube* channel and the support of a cheerleader to a sports team. Even though real contact is impossible between the consumer and the celebrity/host/presenter, as these "meetings take place", an "illusion of intimacy" increases.

These transformations, accompanied by an increasing ease of access to technologically developed products, takes importance away from the mass traditional media and created more and better means of individual consumption (Reuters, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b). Rosling *et al.* (2019) show that 91 percent of the world population now lives in countries with medium and high incomes, being these most countries in the global market. It is extremely important to recognize facts about the world today, as they demonstrate that there are about 5 billion potential consumers that can easily be ignored if we continue to think of them as "poor". Between 1980 and 2017, Internet usage rose by 48 percent and the number of people with mobile phones rose by 65 percent (Rosling *et al.*, 2019). According to Reuters' 2020 digital news report, most countries already have internet penetration rates above 80 percent (Reuters, 2020a).

A digital medium that both provides information and entertainment is the podcast. Podcasts are digital files, of audio or video content, which, as a main characteristic, present the fact that they are accessible at any time, either through internet access or through previous storage on some device. They can then be considered a form of on-demand radio. This media platform has continuously proven its success (Mogg, 2013; Brooke, 2017; Edison Research, 2017; Armstrong, 2020). Just in 2020 Spotify reports reveal an annual increase of 200 percent in the hours of Podcast transmission (Armstrong, 2020), even prior to the exclusive partnership with Spotify by "The Joe Rogan Experience", one of the most loyal and engaged fan-based podcasts ever (Spotify, 2020; BBC, 2020a).

The now widespread usage of smartphones allows for an almost immediate access to all types of podcasts, that with an omnipresence of broadband internet, opens new opportunities for educator's dissemination of quality information at a very low cost (Zacharis, 2012; Younger,

2011; VanMeter *et al.*, 2019). There is also a clear demand for high quality information and slow, unedited formats that provide the opportunity for new learning (Watson, 2020c).

Gay *et al.* (2007) demonstrate that the main reason for listening to a podcast is the search for knowledge and access to intellectually challenging content. Fietze (2010) demonstrates that podcasts can also serve as effective learning tools for students. There are also sources that demonstrate the use of this platform for pure entertainment (Chadha *et al.*, 2012; McClung and Johnson, 2010). US Studies show a consumer who reveals a high desire to acquire knowledge, as well as relaxation and entertainment (Edison Research, 2019).

As mentioned before, in the Portuguese context, this medium was largely ignored until very recently. Until 2019, the Portuguese Reuters Digital Report, did not even mention the word podcast. But nowadays, Portugal follows the trend. The 2020 Portugal's Reuters Digital News Report shows an increase by 4 percentual points in podcasts consumption in the last year alone, making it a 38 percent of all respondents, with 40 percent of all Portuguese respondents had accessed a podcast in the previous week (Reuters, 2020b).

Methodology

This study aims to understand the main motivations and bonuses related to Podcast selection as the means for information and entertainment consumption.

An exploratory design was used, as a semi-structured interview was conducted to Podtail.com creator, being this one of the first websites that allowed free access to podcasts from all over the world.

The research also assumed a descriptive design as primary data was collected through an online survey, disseminated between the period of May 11 and June 1, 2020, through social networks and email, providing 246 valid responses. Through the usage of SPSS and Excel, statistical analyzes were performed including a principal component factor analysis (PCFA) and multiple linear regression analysis (MLR).

Results and discussion

The interviewee mentioned important podcast characteristics, namely the possibility of multitasking (*"Currently, in 2020, the impact of podcasts is huge. (…) Anything that does not require your full attention could be accompanied by listening to a podcast.)*, whilst mentioning possible limitations (*"One drawback of a medium that does not require your full attention is that information might be lost if the consumer is distracted."*). It was also mentioned that podcast' themes evolution seems to follow patterns, previously identified in other media (*"(…) Just like in television and movies Comedy was an early theme along with News. In recent years more in-depth content has become popular with True Crime being the most obvious trend (…)"* and that (*"(…) Only in recent years have big media companies started taking interest in the medium with Spotify probably being the biggest player, investing hundreds of millions (…)."*

From the 246 valid responses to the online questionnaire, 88.6 percent know what a podcast is, and 46.3 percent are consumers. The 2020 Infinite Dial demonstrates that 75 percent of the American population knows what a Podcast is, and that 55 percent use them (Edison Research, 2020a) and the Portuguese 2020 Reuters report shows 38 percent of Portuguese sample access a Podcast at least once in previous month (Reuters, 2020b). Subsequently, the question that allowed to filter those who were regular consumers of Podcasts, showed that 52.6 percent of the respondents listened to four or more podcasts in the last two months, restricting the sample to 60 users considered regular. The focus on these more regular consumers allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the most considered podcast themes and the main motivations

and gratifications behind podcast usage, by ranking factors from Very Important (4) to Not Important (1).

"Entertainment/Comedy" is the most sought-after podcast' theme by the sample (61.7%) while many Portuguese literature sources, that rank order themes demand, ignore this theme (Reuters 2019b, 2020b). The interviewee mentioned exactly this topic as the first to be successful in various media, followed by "The News", that came in second, with 41.7% of respondents considering it. Subsequently, "Music", "Society" and "Art and Culture" with 41.7%, 40% and 38.3% of responses, respectively. "The News" is highly demonstrated as the most sought-after theme in recent studies (Reuters, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b). Some specific topics are also mentioned, such as motor racing and software development. The recent hit "True Crime" was also mentioned.

Concerning the reasons for choosing podcasts, the fact that podcasts "Increase knowledge" ($\bar{x}$ =3.4) and their "Presenters/hosts" ($\bar{x}$=3.4) are indicated as main motivations, as both factors are always considered, which, in part, corroborates the data presented by Watson (2020c). The fact that they are used to learn new things is also highlighted in Edison 2019 and in 2nd place in Reuters 2019. (Edison Research, 2019; Reuters, 2019a).

Portability ($\bar{x}$=3.0) appears immediately afterwards as one of the main reasons. Options related to multitasking ("I can do other things while listening" ($\bar{x}$=2.8) and "I can listen while I'm at the computer" ($\bar{x}$=2.7) and the on-demand factor ("I can download and (...)"($\bar{x}$=2.6)) are also mentioned. These are also the reasons commonly referred in the consulted literature, as the example of page 61 of the 2019 Reuters Digital Medium Report (Reuters, 2019a). Still, the fact that podcasts keep you company ($\bar{x}$=2.6) and allow you to relax ($\bar{x}$=2.7) [Figure 1].
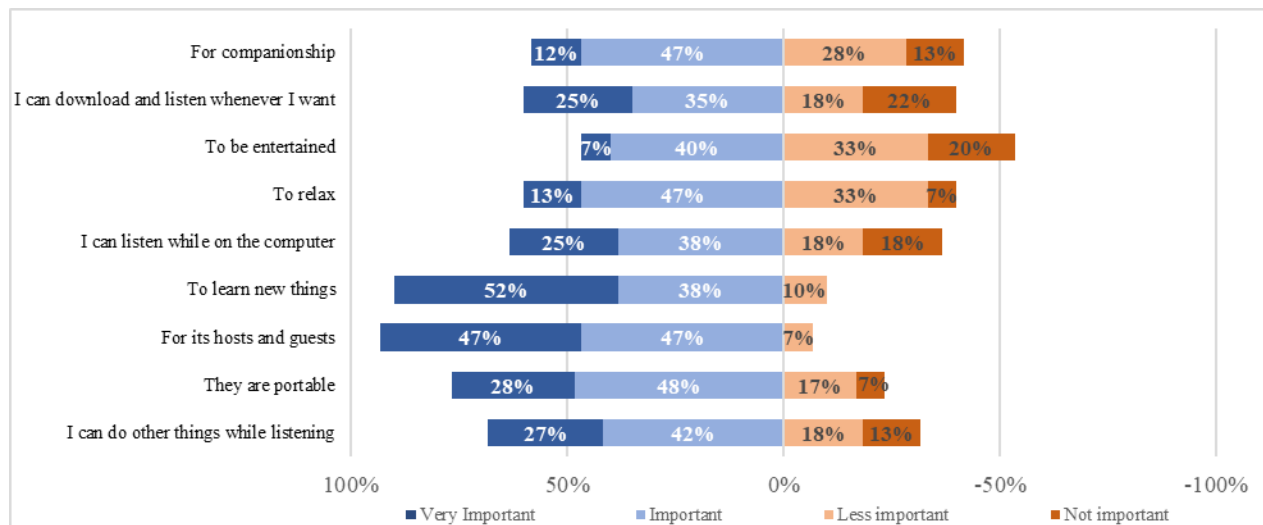

Figure 1. Reasons for choosing podcasts as a means for information and entertainment

Consumer needs fulfilled by podcast listening, being information, social empowerment, or entertainment related (McQuail, 2010), represent a clear alternative to other options. Also, the trust attributed to podcast participants, resulting from the reduction of social distance, increased perception of trust, generosity, intelligence, and consequent humanization, creating the "illusion of intimacy" mentioned by Fu and Hsu (2019) are strong arguments for the use of this medium (Kallinen and Ravaja, 2007; Charness and Gneezy, 2008; Schroeder and Epley, 2015), mentioned e.g., in the fact that podcasts serve for companionship.

As for the considered factors for podcast choosing over other platforms, they are directly related to its participants and content [Figure 2]. "Theme" is clearly the most prominent option (¶=3.6). The "Presenter/host" is also very considered (¶=3.5). The option "Through advertising suggestion" (¶=1.6) is not considered by most of the respondents. The "Duration/Podcast length" (¶=2.4) seems to be somewhat influential. We will see through PCFA and MLR that this factor negatively affects the likelihood of a podcast recommendation.
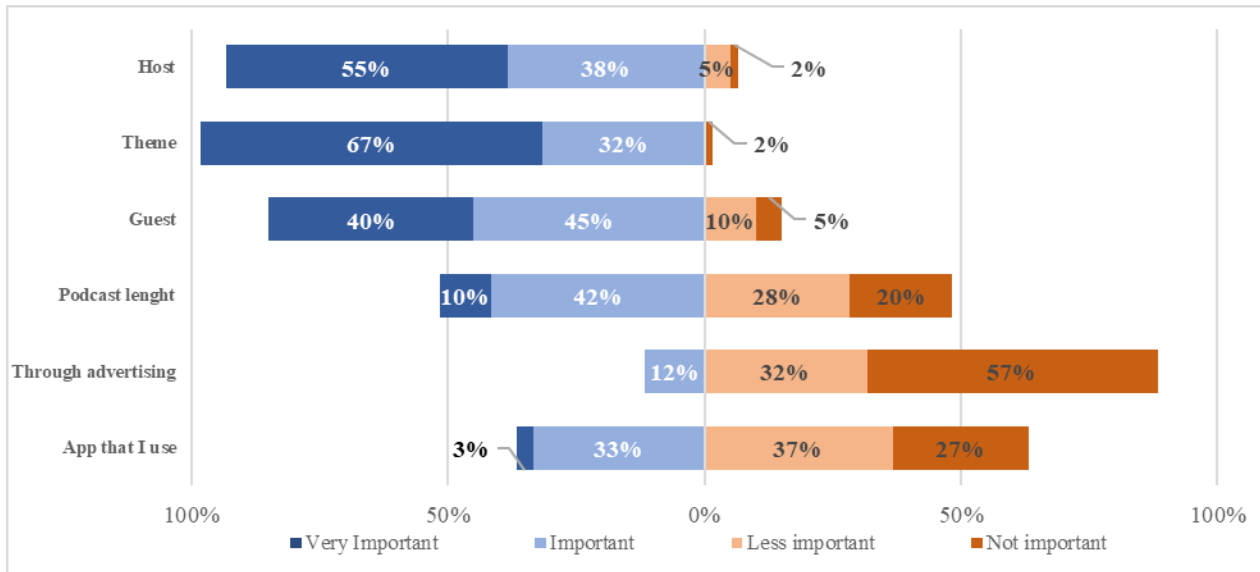

Figure 2. Reasons for choosing a particular podcast

All the 15 factors previously presented were entered in a PCFA that revealed the existence of five explanatory components with Eigenvalues greater than 1. Collectively, the five factors accounted for 65 percent of the variance. To create a more detailed and simpler to interpret structure, the main components coefficients were rotated, using the Varimax method.

To specify each component, another table (I) was made, in which these 5 components are named and the factors that compose them are listed. It was complex to properly define some of the components, since the items that compose them have no clear connection between them [Table]. However, so that a subsequent multiple linear regression is possible, factors were grouped, using the probability of recommending podcasts as the dependent variable and the PCFA-generated components as independent variables.

Table I. Principal components definition

Comp.	Definition	Factors included
1	Themes and participants	Host; Guest(s); Themes
2	Entertained/Companionship	Keeps me busy/entertained; for companionship
3	App and length	Length; App; Through Advertising Suggestion
4	Multitasking & Portability	I can do other things while listening; portability; I can listen while on the computer;
5	Knowledge and Relaxation	Learn new things; to relax

On a scale of 0 to 10, when asked about the probability of recommending podcasts to someone, the average response value was 7.77. The values of 0, 1 and 2 were not selected by any

respondent. Table II presents the results of the multiple linear regression performed, using the Probability of Recommendation as a dependent variable and as independent variables the components generated by the PCFA.

Table I. Linear Regression

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Standard Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	7,767	,212		36,551	,000
Themes and participants	,024	,214	,012	,113	,911
Entertained/Companionship	,127	,214	,061	,594	,555
App and length	-,390	,214	-,187	-1,821	,074
Multitasking & Portability	,498	,214	,239	2,325	,024
Knowledge & Relaxation	1,206	,214	,578	5,629	,000

a. Dependent Variable: Probability of recommending podcasts

The data shows that two components have relevant levels of significance (Sig <0.05) on the variable dependent on the recommendation of podcasts: Multitasking & Portability and Knowledge & Relaxation.
As it is possible to observe in Table III, through the value of R square, the probability of recommending a Podcast is explained in 43 percent by the 5 components created.

Table III. Linear regression

Model	R	R squared	Adjusted R squared	Std. Error of Estimate
1	,656ᵃ	,430	,377	1,646

a. Predictors: (Constant), REGR factor score   5 for analysis 1, REGR factor score 4 for analysis 1, REGR factor score   3 for analysis 1, REGR factor score   2 for analysis 1, REGR factor score   1 for analysis 1

The probability starts at 7.767 and, subsequently, the component "Multitasking and portability" and particularly the component "Knowledge and relaxation", are those that justify the significant increase in the recommendation of this medium. Thus, it is possible to define the following line equation: Podcast Recommendation = 7.767 + 1.206 * Knowledge and Relaxation + 0.498 * Multitasking and Portability.

Discussion and conclusion
The main motivations for Podcast usage are the fact that "Increase knowledge/to learn new things" and the participants involved as well as their portability and multitasking possibility. The fact that they keep company and allow for relaxation are also mentioned factors.
Podcast length seem to negatively influence recommendation probability. Programs that are less extensive than the current average, close to 50 minutes (Cridland, 2020), might be more successful.
Undoubtedly, the fact that podcasts are a digital media platform that enables "Knowledge and relaxation" and that allows "Multitasking and portability" are both the advantages and determining factors for its success.
Podcasts are an increasingly comprehensive medium, leaving behind the idea of a niche medium. Any potential consumer looking for an alternative to traditional means of communication should consider the use of podcasts, both for obtaining information and entertainment.

The intrinsic characteristics of podcasts seem to provide an opportunity to acquire information and knowledge that is quite exclusive, by facilitating access to topics and actors previously inaccessible. Also, its on-demand characteristics, and the consequent portability, allow access in almost any place or situation, even if the intention is to relax.

Recommendations

With the even more widespread appearance of the mobile internet, namely with the widening of 5G, it is pertinent to assume that smartphones and its associated means for information and entertainment consumption will not lose power in the near future.

Podcasts' visibility continues to increase, becoming less and less a niche medium, demonstrating, in several studies, considerable adoption rates, specially on the last 3 to 1 years.

The main recommendation for the success of any podcast is to focus on the fact that it enhances knowledge and/or allows relaxation. These are the components that have proven to be decisive for its recommendation as a medium, as well as multitasking and portability. Shorter podcasts, as well as innovations for easier access and trivialization of information and entertainment consumption might boost adoption rates to even higher numbers.

A more comprehensive and periodic questionnaire distribution work is recommended for future studies, with an investigation focused only on podcast consumers, may bring relevant conclusions that could foment investments by different organizations in this still maturing platform.

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