



Podcast Technological Adoption: Motivations and Characteristics of Listeners and Non-Listeners

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Introduction

Though 44% of Americans have listened to a podcast (Podcast Insights, 2018), listenership has not reached a mainstream consumption level compared to television, film, or written content. As podcasters strive to gain listeners, the biggest potential growth sector consists of people who do not yet listen to podcasts at all. This study examines the characteristics and habits of current podcast listeners and tries to identify what caused them to first adopt the habit of listening. For non-listeners the study tries to find what barriers to entry prevent them from becoming regular or occasional podcast listeners, and what techniques may lead to them getting started. By identifying what demographic or behavioral patterns are present in listeners and non-listeners, the podcast industry can develop techniques for appealing to a wider audience.

Method

One hundred and forty-four participants completed the study (73 males, 70 females, and one "other"). The majority of participants (47.9%) were aged between 25-34. Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. All were in the United States. Most participants had completed a four-year degree (45.1%) and were employed full-time (65.3%). An online survey was used to collect data for one day in November 2018. The survey contained between 96-81 questions depending on the participant's answers and was divided into four sections: technology and interests, commute and belongings, podcasts, either listener or non-listener questions, and demographics. The first section, technology and interests, assessed participants using the Technology Adoption Propensity (TAP) index created by Ratchford and Barnhart (2012) and determined their personal interests. An example question from this section was "in general, how much do you care about following, learning about, or discussing these topics?" with choices based on the iTunes categories of podcasts. The majority of questions were answered via a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The remaining questions used 7-point Likert scales, 4-point Likert scales, multiple choice, and open-ended text.

Results

Analysis revealed that 75.1% of participants have listened to podcasts more than once in their lifetime. These participants were classified as "listeners" and the other 28.5% classified as "non-listeners" for further analysis.

A composite named TAP Score was created using Ratchford & Barnhart's Technology Adoption Propensity Index (2012). This composite had good internal reliability ($\alpha = .87$). A composite, named Pod Categories, was created using the participants' expressed level of interest in the 16 categories of podcasts from Apple Podcasts, although not presented to them as such. The composite had very good internal reliability ($\alpha = .90$). A series of independent sample *t*-tests determined that the following characteristics did not differ significantly between listeners and non-listeners: age, $t(142) = -.35, p = .726$; commute length, $t(126) = 1.27, p = .207$; education level, $t(133) = .89, p = .376$; TAP score, $t(142) = .41, p = .683$; or Pod Categories score, $t(142) = .29, p = .770$. Chi-square tests were used to determine that the difference between listeners and non-listeners in the following characteristics were also not statistically significant: gender, $\chi^2(2) = .40, p = .818$; smart phone ownership, $\chi^2(1) = .11, p = .739$; smart home device ownership, $\chi^2(2) = 4.65, p = .10$, and living with children in the household, $\chi^2(1) = .09, p = .768$.

Non-listeners

Non-listeners were asked to rate their level of agreement with a number of possible reasons why they don't listen to podcasts. A series of one-sample *t*-tests showed the non-listeners' responses differed significantly from the neutral midpoint (3.0, "neither agree or disagree") for the following: significant disagreement with the statement "I don't have the necessary technology to listen to podcasts" ($M = 2.46, SD = 1.25$), $t(40) = -2.76, p = .009$; significant disagreement with "I don't have good enough headphones or speakers to listen to podcasts" ($M = 2.49, SD = 1.36$), $t(40) = -2.41, p = .021$; and significant agreement with "I'd prefer something with visuals (video) than audio-only podcasts" ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.25$), $t(40) = 2.50, p = .016$. Significant positive correlations were found for future intent to listen to podcasts and amount of suggestions from others for both listening to podcasts in general ($r = .56, p < .001$) and for specific podcasts ($r = .56, p < .001$). People who get lots of suggestions want to listen more.

Listeners

Most of the listeners do so several times a week (31.1%), and first started listening to podcasts within the last year (18.1%) or the last 2-3 years (17.4%). A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to determine which service listeners use most often to listen to podcasts. The results of pairing the top two options indicated that listeners use YouTube Podcasts ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.41$) significantly more than Apple Podcasts ($M = 2.80, SD = 1.52$), $t(100) = -2.33, p = .022$.

Listeners were asked to rate the importance of a number of factors on their decision to start listening to podcasts. Searching for more content on a particular topic ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.24$) was the only factor they felt was significantly more important than the midpoint (3.0, neutral), $t(97) = 2.86, p = .005$. A one-way repeated ANOVA showed that listeners believe certain factors had a significant level of importance in getting them to listen to podcasts for the first time, $F(6.90, 669.65) = 3.31, p = .002$. Mauchly's test of sphericity showed that this assumption was not met $\chi^2(35) = 94.03, p < .001$. Therefore degrees of freedom were corrected using Huynh-Feldt estimates of sphericity ($\epsilon = .86$). Searching for content on a particular topic was the most important ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.24$). Post-hoc comparisons utilizing the Bonferroni correction indicated that looking for topical content was significantly more important than a celebrity they like starting a podcast ($p = .046$) and a friend starting a podcast ($p = .014$).



Discussion

This study showed no identifiable differences in listeners and non-listeners. Now in 2018, perhaps the idea of podcasts and variety of topics is wide enough that everyone can enjoy them. The TAP Score of the listeners and non-listeners did not prove to be a significant factor. Additionally, non-listeners significantly disagreed with the notion that they do not have the technological skills or hardware necessary to listen to podcasts. Podcasts have moved beyond being a "techie" or internet-only phenomenon and are considered mainstream entertainment. Listener status also was not linked to the types of things people were interested in when connected to the categories of podcasts available. This obsolescence of all these factors shows that everyone is now part of the potential podcast listenership. Non-listeners do not have a lack of access, but they have not been motivated enough yet. The excuse they agreed most with was that they prefer visual media. The listener's preference for listening (and watching?) podcasts on YouTube also shows a desire for more visual content or accompaniment.

Some listeners indicated that they have watched podcasts with accompanying video or graphics, or sought out podcast transcripts. The correlation between receiving recommendations and a desire for non-listeners to convert shows the social peer pressure aspects of media consumption. Current listeners also acknowledged that they had received recommendations and given them to others as well. The most important factor that the current listeners remembered was searching for more information on a topic they to know more about. Content production and variety may have a much bigger role than anything podcasters can do as far as promotion.

Recommendations

Many podcasters and industry professionals may be surprised by the participants' preference for visuals, even to accompany existing audio content. To get a bigger audience, the podcast industry should invest more resources in accompanying visuals, even if it is just a background image for a YouTube video. YouTube is such an important application for internet users that they are using it for things, like podcasts, that are not even being presented in their optimal or intended form. Personal peer recommendations continue to be a very important factor in listening intent and conversion. Podcasts place a heavy focus on soliciting Apple Podcast reviews in an attempt to game their algorithm and appear on their front page or higher up in search results. Perhaps instead they should ask their listeners and fans to reach out to someone they know personally and recommend the podcast or ask them to listen. Rather than depending on platform limitations, ad buys, and star ratings, content creators can subvert these institutions and reach consumers directly through peer networks. Podcasts need to be available and relevant for when the next future listener goes searching for more content on a topic they like.

References

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