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David García-Marín
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4575-1911
dgmarin@hum.uc3m.es
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

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Mapping the factors that determine engagement in podcasting: design from the users and podcasters'experience

Abstract

The current media ecosystem offers enormous participatory possibilities to media audiences that, in this way, have the opportunity to engage in the co-creation of media discourse in ways unknown during the 20th century. Following the marketing 2.0 theories, the creation of attractive user experiences is considered as one of the aspects that the media increasingly take into consideration in order to get profitable content. The aim of this research is to detect the factors that influence engagement in podcasting, a digital and interactive medium that, due to its transmedia and mostly amateur nature, develops dynamics of permanent connection between media creators and listeners. By conducting a total of 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews with pioneers of the medium, podcasters and listeners, a total of 13 factors that determine user engagement were identified. These factors are integrated in three groups: medium-centered (technology, asynchrony, topics, genres and formats, and podcast subcommunity's size), user-centered (participatory culture, consumption situation and number of subscriptions, knowledge on the topic and about the podcast subcommunity, their own relevance in the podcastphere, and the perceived relevance about their participation), and podcaster-centered (skills, attitude and tone). These factors maintain relations of interoperability that build a grammar of engagement of the medium. This study provides some clues that can be exploited by commercial media that are opting for podcasting in order to build innovative experiences of interaction with their users with the purpose of increasing their audiences.

Keywords
Podcasting, user experience, engagement, participation, digital media, marketing, audience.

1. Introduction

The possibilities for audience participation and engagement have been reinforced with the advent of digital and interactive Web 2.0 tools and the appearance of social media. The different approaches of Gillmor (2004), Benkler (2006), Rheingold (2000), Shirky (2010), Castells (2012), Jenkins, Ford and Green (2015) and Jenkins, Ito and Boyd (2016) emphasize the communicative empowerment acquired by citizens. At the same time, they defend the decentralization of the media narratives, now also in the hands of the public. The media

paradigm of the 20th century conceived the flow of information from a clearly unidirectional perspective. It presented a false communication model, since for the existence of a real and true communication process it is necessary the active and creative participation of several senders that, in a horizontal interaction, put in common a shared message from a dialogic process characterized by non-hierarchical relations (Kaplún, 1998). In this model, senders participate in the communicative act in equal conditions, under democratic principles far from the massive and vertical communication that characterizes the traditional and analog media. Cloutier's *emirec* (sender-receiver) theory (1973) defends that all the actors involved in the communicative process are active senders. For this reason, the participation and engagement of individuals "formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006) with their favorite media and cultural products is fundamental in the generation of these democratic, non-hierarchical and horizontal communicative processes.

In connection with this idea, the present study is framed in the new perspectives of the appropriation and use of media production technologies by audiences and publics. Within this framework and in order to situate our research, it is fundamental to analyze the concept of transmedia storytelling. Since its first uses, the adjective 'transmedia' has been linked to the production of narrative universes made up of different stories distributed in various platforms and media where engagement is an essential element, as users adopt a leading, central and participatory role (Jenkins, 2009). In this sense, independent podcasting, the object of study in this paper, has in recent years developed a clear transmedia texture not only because of its multiplatform nature, but also on the grounds of the design of experiences that are favorable to engagement, participation and co-creation on the user's side.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. *The concept of engagement*

Despite the existence of several theoretical approaches to the concept of audience engagement, our notion is aligned with the proposal of Askwith (2007), given the proximity of his study to the objectives and design of our research. This author categorizes the concept as the addition of the user's behaviors, attitudes and desires in relation to the consumption of media content, their participation in activities and interactions, their identification with aspects of the content/product, and the motivations or desires linked to all the previously mentioned aspects. Based on this definition, Askwith conducted a study on the design of connective experiences between users and television products from the field of transmedia narrative by defining different touchpoints provided by producers to involve their audiences in diverse ways and with different levels of engagement.

Regarding the television audiences, Fiske (1987) proposes three differentiated levels of textuality, from which different models of engagement derive. On the one hand, the primary texts, referred to the programs themselves; on the other hand, the secondary texts, which are those that proliferate in a derived way from the primary ones, such as reviews, magazines created by fans and promotional material; and finally, the tertiary texts, connected to the discussion and interpretation generated by viewers about the TV show. The consumption of these texts, from primary to tertiary, reflects a level of upward engagement.

On the other hand, McQuail (1987) states that user engagement with media texts can contribute to the achievement of a wide range of functions: obtaining perspectives on the circumstances of others, identifying with others and generating feelings of belonging to a group, as well as finding certain points in common in search of conversation and social interaction. According to Delgado and Munuera-Alemán (2001), trust is a key factor in the development of a lasting desire to maintain a relationship, so that those users who manifest connections based on trust towards the media they consume tend to become loyal followers. From the media literacy perspective, engagement is linked to the ability of users to

understand the messages conveyed by the media and their skills in order to meaningfully participate in the development of the stories. Jenkins (2006) places these skills at the centre of the paradigm shift that is taking place in the current media sphere, which is undergoing a process of redefinition as a result of the arrival of new communication technologies and the subsequent new sensibilities around the Web 2.0.

Without overlooking the importance of these approaches to the study of engagement, it is from the field of marketing that this concept has gained the most attention, by valuing the engagement and meaningful participation of consumers to nurture the connection with brands (Tapscott, 2009). In this sense, prosumption (Toffler, 1980) would be a key element to understand the new logics of marketing in the 21st century (Aparici & García-Marín, 2018; Tapscott, Ticoll & Lowy, 2001; Friedman, 2005), focused on the creation of innovative user experiences based on the replacement of traditional processes of promotion and advertising with dynamics of communication and dialog between corporations and users. The second generation of web applications allows digital media to implement innovative forms of communication and co-creation (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). In prosumption and digital marketing, strategies such as crowdsourcing are essential to achieve consumer involvement and emotional engagement (Aitamurto, 2013; Marchionni, 2013). Sokolova (2012) describes several exemplary cases of the construction of powerful participatory user experiences in the media where the intrusive model in which media and major companies decide what the public's opinion should be is replaced by the model of participation in which the subjects are part of the corporations' life. These participatory dynamics, located online, are exploited from digital marketing as strategies to know users in a deeper manner by tracking their consumption and navigation patterns on the Web, which are considered to be crucial for the commercial success of major corporations (Ryan & Jones, 2009).

Two common elements emerge from the confluence of all these theories. On the one hand, not only is the concept of engagement complex, but also its definition requires a multiplicity of indicators that go beyond a single form of behavior or action. On the other hand, these views reflect, in different ways, the connection between engagement and the user participatory action through the production of their own texts that expand, complement, enrich, contradict and, ultimately, manifest different perspectives on the stories that the media offer.

2.2. *Podcasting in Spain*

On October 18th, 2004, radio journalist José Antonio Gelado became the first Spanish podcaster after an intense period of experimentation and research based on the work that the pioneers of the medium had developed in the United States for several months. The first stages of the medium in Spain were characterized by the experimental nature of productions and the technical difficulties arising from the absence of repositories to host and discover shows; as well as the need to manually build the RSS syndication feeds, essential for automatic subscription (García-Marín, 2019). At the same time, in Spain an important grassroots movement flourished, whose members carried out their programs in home studios and where the participatory and collaborative culture was one of its fundamental features. This essence still remains intact in the current Spanish independent podcastphere, where learning is established on a peer-to-peer basis, from veterans to novices.

Over the last decade, several authors (Sellas, 2011; Gallego, 2010; Markman, 2011; Millette, 2011; McHugh, 2016; Cordeiro, 2010, 2012; Bonini, 2015; Berry, 2018; Bonet & Sellas, 2019) have addressed the study of this medium. The common element of their research lies in the definition of the podcast under its own identity principles. As it happened in traditional and other digital media, podcasting gathers elements and practices from other media so as to construct their own identity. Its main remediations can be found in the adoption of the language of radio, the serialization and the inverse chronological distribution that it copies

from the blogs, the content organization in the window and multi-screen format characteristic of computers, the development of on-stage and live performances (with high level of interaction) similar to theatre plays, and the avatarization of the shows' identity (aspect inherited from the social networks).

From the narrative side, podcasting is a medium governed by processes of communicative and hypermedia convergence since distributing content in different media languages interconnected by hypertext. These contents, sometimes, offer different information to the one presented in the main medium (the podcast in audio format), located in different platforms, even beyond digital ones, in the physical world. This expansion of differentiated content in multiple media gives the podcast an undeniably transmedia character, which implies the design of attractive user experiences to promote the participation and engagement of fans and users in different spaces (virtual and non-digital). These designs can even achieve performative participation involving the physical interaction of the listener with the space described in the shows (Wilson, 2018). These potential levels of interaction between media and user, along with the multiplatform hybridization of the medium, facilitate the development of a new media, transpodcast (García-Marín, 2017) which, in an analogous way to Martínez-Costa's (2015) concept of transradio (transmedia radio), is configured as a medium based on the creation of podcasts as a central product that extends its narrative to other digital and analog platforms (Wrather, 2016), offering differentiated content, as well as renewed possibilities of engagement and participation to its users.

Traditional media, especially large radio stations, have in recent years opted for the production of podcasts. The new consumer habits, characterized by ubiquity and mobility, lead the traditional radio stations to produce native podcasts (the creation of shows initially designed for this medium), in order to "expand their audio repositories on the Web with exclusive, differential and competitive products" (Pérez-Alaejos, Pedrero-Esteban & Leoz Aizpuru, 2018), based on the hybridization between journalism, art, comedy, drama, education, and the documentary genres. Nevertheless, the Spanish podcastphere is mostly nourished by media projects designed by amateur creators, independent from the major media corporations. Due to the existence of a greater number of non-professional podcasts in the Spanish context, a characteristic aspect also in other European countries such as the United Kingdom (Spinelli & Dann, 2019), these grassroots productions constitute the object of study of our research.

3. Hypothesis and objectives

This paper is focused on independent and amateur podcasting owing to three main reasons. On the one hand, this type of projects tends to blur the barriers that the professional media impose when it comes to opening up spaces for user interaction and participation. Likewise, it is considered that the digital nature of this medium apparently facilitates the development of such spaces of participation. Finally, its transmedia character gives it greater possibilities of generating powerful strategies so as to achieve user engagement.

The main hypothesis of our research focuses on the existence of numerous factors that determine the grammar of engagement and participation in podcasting, which requires a deep analysis of consumer interaction in order to generate attractive user experiences. In connection with this hypothesis, the objectives of our work are:

1. Identify the determinant factors and biases with respect to user engagement in podcasting.
2. Discover the podcasters and listeners' perceptions about the influence (whether empowering or limiting) of these factors in the generation of attractive user experiences that could result in greater engagement with the medium.

Both objectives aim to map the elements that determine the podcast user engagement in the terms defined by Askwith (2007); that is, to shed light on the factors that activate the participation, interaction and identification of listeners with the different contents that podcasting offers.

4. Methodology

In order to achieve the research objectives, an eminently qualitative study was carried out, based on semi-structured and in-depth interviews with a total of 17 key informants. The in-depth interview is a technique for obtaining information about the beliefs and/or experiences of a subject on a given topic. The election of this data collection method can be justified due to the need to discover complex issues in which the knowledge of experts (in our case, users and podcasters) is required for the understanding of a given phenomenon (Corbetta, 2007), where the discourse and meanings produced by the actors involved are privileged (Sánchez Silva, 2005). The interviewees were divided into the following categories: pioneers of the medium and representatives of national podcasting associations (five interviewees), podcasters (five interviewees) and listeners (seven interviewees). The criteria for selecting the podcasters participating in the research were their relevance and visibility in the community and the production of podcasts with frequent updates (daily, weekly or bi-weekly). The listeners were chosen by applying simple random sampling using the Telegram Podkas Community, which brings together around 200 podcasting enthusiasts. This platform served as a channel of contact with them.

The participants in the interviews were:

- José Antonio Gelado: first Spanish podcaster.
- Daniel Aragay: one of the pioneers of podcasting in Spain.
- Sebas Oliva: founder and first president of the Spanish Podcast Association (2010).
- Agustín Palmeiro: president of the Spanish Podcast Association in 2017 and 2018.
- Raúl de la Puente: vice-president of the Spanish Podcast Listeners Association (Asespod).
- Eduardo Nordman: podcaster, author of several comedy shows and about philosophy.
- Dumakae: podcaster specialized in series and television, winner of several national awards.
- Tamara León: producer of shows about political and social current affairs.
- Blanca Santamaría: podcaster in the talk show *Por qué Podcast*, with several national awards.
- Francisco Portillo: author of the humorous podcast *Condenados*, winner of numerous awards (Best Comedy Podcast in 2012 and 2013, and Best Podcast Episode in 2013).

The names of the seven listeners interviewed will not be included, as they have been guaranteed anonymity when the results of this research are published. Please note that in the results section, no speech fragments from all the 17 subjects interviewed may be presented for two reasons: the absence of significant speeches for the objectives of this research, and the limitations on the length of the article. The information produced from the interviews was processed, coded and operationalized with the specific software for the analysis of qualitative data, MAXQDA. Tables 1 and 2 incorporate a summary of the aspects addressed in the interview scripts used to guide the conversations with both the podcast creators and users. In order to establish the different aspects to be considered, the central elements of the definition of engagement proposed by Askwith (2007) mentioned in the first section of this work were taken into account in all the interviews.

Table 1: Dimensions and topics included in the qualitative interviews applied to podcast producers.

INTRODUCTION/ GENERAL DATA	DIMENSION 1. ENGAGEMENT	DIMENSION 2. CO-CREATION
Number of podcasts currently produced	Role that, in general, listeners play in podcasting	Decision on the topics to be addressed in shows. Degree of user participation.
First contact with podcasting	Participatory character of podcasting	Strategies and platforms used to involve users in the podcast co-production.
Reasons to produce podcasts	Strategies to promote/improve engagement	Degree of relevance of user-generated content in the program's narrative
Objectives of podcast production	Most used platforms/media to promote engagement	
	Most effective platforms/media to promote engagement	
	Type of participation achieved in each platform/media	
	Dialogic/interactive possibilities between creators and users	
	Factors that enhance engagement	
	Limiting factors of engagement	

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2: Dimensions and topics included in the qualitative interviews applied to podcast users.

DIMENSION 1.USER CHARACTERISTICS	DIMENSION 2. HOW PODCASTING IS READ	DIMENSION 3. ENGAGEMENT	DIMENSION 4. CO-CREATION
Number of followed podcasts	Usual entry platform	Role that, in general, listeners play in podcasting	Possible forms of content co-production
First contact with podcasting	Consumed media/platforms	Barriers to participation/engagement	Real experiences as a co-producer/co-creator
Reasons for consumption	Importance of multi-platform narrative extensions	Participation/engagement enablers	
Consumption situations		Relationship between community size and potential for meaningful engagement	
Most relevant aspects of podcasting		Relationship between professionalization of podcasting and possibilities of meaningful engagement	
Interaction with creators and other users			

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Analysis of results

According to the research results, a total of 13 factors that influence user and fan engagement in podcasting were detected. Regarding the discourse produced by the interviewed subjects, these factors are integrated in three groups: medium-centered, user-centered and podcaster-centered. In the first group, technology, asynchrony, topics, genres and formats, and the volume of the show sub-community and the podcastphere are included. The user-centered factors are connected to participatory culture, consumption situation and the number of podcasts subscribed to, knowledge of the topics and the podcast sub-community, production and/or relevance in the podcastphere, and the perceived relevance of the participatory act. The third group (focused on podcasters), is constituted by the skills and tone of the podcast creators when producing their shows. The following subsections are dedicated to the analysis of each of these factors.

5.1. *Medium-centered factors*

5.1.1. Technology

The interviews conducted with users and podcasters show the existence of a technological bias that makes participation in podcasting difficult. The consumption of podcasts is mainly carried out from specific smartphone apps (podcatchers) that, in general, do not facilitate the addition of comments in any media language at the same time as listening. The interviewed users state that they tend to participate at the moment of listening to podcasts, avoiding the procrastination of the participatory act. However, the interface design of these apps relegates the user to an exclusively passive role: from the configuration of podcatchers a traditional listening role is predisposed, clearly radio-style: unidirectional, hierarchical, vertical and one-to-many. Several of the interviewees demand the existence of a greater number of apps that allow the possibility of incorporating user contributions from the podcatcher itself, in order to avoid having to resort to the computer to access web platforms for podcasts or the shows' blogs in order to exercise such participation. In this sense, the iVoox smartphone app is the only one that allows this addition of content, unlike iTunes (and its podcatcher Podcasts), which is configured as a service designed for the consumption and data collection with the purpose of building its podcast charts and rankings, by only allowing the user to rate the podcast in general and write a review about the project, denying the possibility of commenting episode by episode. This participation through comments per episode is possible in iVoox, whose design facilitates a greater bidirectionality between users and podcasters and, therefore, a greater engagement.

> I listen to podcasts by using Overcast, but you can't comment on anything, and of course you have to go outside to leave a comment, look for their Twitter account or go to Facebook... I would like that in the same application that you listen to, you could comment there. I miss an app that combines both. That there you can create a forum to talk, comment and interact even with other listeners. (Interviewed user 4).

> There is one thing about podcatchers that I think they should work more. They should give you the opportunity to comment the different episodes. There are times when you want to comment on something and you don't get that chance, so you end up leaving it. (Interviewed user 3).

Likewise, users and podcasters state that the fact of discovering new shows –as well as the medium itself– requires a greater proactive character than is necessary to discover and operate in traditional media. For example, access to radio content implies fewer operations and the need for less technological literacy than content discovery in podcasting, where a complete user experience involves the previous download of a podcatcher (the higher quality ones are even paid, so it is necessary to enter a bank account linked to the smartphone app stores), the search for programs by name or topic, the subscription to such shows, the

constant updating of such application, as well as the habit of listening to audio content on the smartphone or any digital device. Although certain concerns about this technological barrier were expressed, it is believed that it will be overcome over time, when ordinary citizens acquire higher digital competences.

5.1.2. Asynchrony

By definition, podcasting has an asynchronous character that determines that content consumption is made on a deferred basis, after its publication. As previously mentioned, the participatory acts in this medium tend to be carried out at the time of listening, but what happens when there is a large time lapse between the publication of an episode and its consumption? In general, engagement when a content has been published much earlier is less attractive to podcast users, so the production of participatory acts in live shows is considered far more interesting. Therefore, it can be argued that the defining asynchrony of podcasting has a negative effect on participation and that live programs encourage interaction in a deeper manner, generating a closer relationship between user and podcaster. This meaningful and live participation is established thanks to the existence of interfaces that allow listening and participation simultaneously –Spreaker is the most used in Spain for this purpose–, while a podcast is broadcast online by streaming. This aspect once again outlines the significance of interface designs in promoting engagement and meaningful co-creation in digital media.

> I think [asynchrony] is a barrier in the sense that when the podcast has been out for a long time and you're listening to it today... It might make you lose interest in commenting on it, because it's no longer up to date. (Interviewed user 7).

> Podcasts like *La Liga* and others that work this way have a lot of feedback at the time of their live broadcast because they are there, the listener is on the chat page listening and commenting. It's another kind of product; live product, even if it's a podcast and can be downloaded afterwards. I think it has a more powerful feedback than the previously recorded product. (Dumakae).

5.1.3. Topics

In podcasting there is an obvious topic-based bias when it comes to facilitating the participation of users and fans. According to the interviews conducted, it was observed that certain topics arouse more interest than others so that users generate their own content and offer their opinions. Not only does this factor operate from the general thematic side of podcasts, but also the specific topics of each episode of a given show generate differences in the level of engagement, so it is possible to find episodes of a podcast widely discussed and commented by its followers while others go completely unnoticed. In general, the community perceives that very specialized topics and those that have an early expiration date trigger less participation among users. In contrast, timeless topics (for instance, mystery podcasts or shows about history) are among those that generate the most interaction within communities of followers. In the same vein, a high level of participation was detected in the case of programs with technical character where doubts and/or questions made to the podcaster by its followers are very frequent.

> Those that are technical generate more feedback due to the questions and doubts and also create a fairly fluid communication between the podcast and the user. (Francisco Portillo).

Finally, those podcasts whose themes are linked to the action of previously existing affinity and practice communities tend to feed a richer interaction in this medium. For example, shows dedicated to technology brands like Apple or cult series inherit the high level of online participation that was previously established around the fan communities connected to these popular culture products.

For example, in the *Agent Cooper's Files* podcast, as it analyzes a cult series that is *Twin Peaks*, there is a previous community that has joined this and, therefore, there are many people hooked. (Eduardo Nordman).

5.1.4. Genres and formats

Despite not being one of the most clearly evidenced factors, interviewees established great differences in the interaction between users and programs when comparing those podcasts that bet on the talk show genre with those that are based on the monologue from a single podcaster. Talk shows tend to encourage participation in a more fluid manner because they are configured as a kind of meeting of friends that generates a perception of closeness with the follower. On the contrary, certain formats, such as fiction podcasts, are related to less participatory processes as they are built under rigid scripted structures where listeners have little chance to intervene.

Normally, when podcasts include several hosts, you have the perception that you have a group of friends there and you are less reluctant to write to them. There are other podcasts that, if made by one person, may generate cooler and more distant attitudes. (Francisco Portillo).

Of course, if you base it on a script, the participation is cancelled, it stays outside. (Dumakae).

Note that major fiction professional podcasts are able to achieve great number of downloads and enormous popularity, but this connection between user and show is mainly established under unidirectional and radio-style logics.

5.1.5. Volume of the podcastphere and the program sub-community. Tension amplitude/depth

To explain this factor we turn to what we could define as the "growth paradox," which determines that as the volume of a practice or affinity community increases, its members are perceived as less close to each other and to the creators of the narrative world around them. This happens with the notable growth that the Spanish podcastphere has experienced since its beginning in 2004. The enormous number of programs available today leads the enthusiasts of the medium to divide their attention between a growing number of projects. In the early years, the connection between followers and podcasters was characterized by the depth, closeness and warmth of their interactions due to the small quantity of existing programs. As the number of projects and followers has multiplied, the relation model between users and creators has gained in breadth while losing in intensity.

This is the case with radio. They ask for feedback and have so many listeners that it overflows. The same thing is happening in podcasts. You feel that if you send a comment you have one chance in a thousand that it will be read. (Dumakae).

At the same time, if users perceive that numerous followers have already shown their opinion about a certain aspect of the project, they might retract their participatory action because they have nothing original or interesting to contribute in contrast to what was previously commented. In addition, vast communities of followers tend to make podcaster less approachable, since it is impossible for them to deeply interact with a large number of followers, thus establishing one-way and one-to-many logics in the communication model when users appreciate that their participation will not be taken into account (an aspect that will be addressed later).

I recognize that there are some podcasts that I would comment more, but you get into the post and there are two hundred comments, so I don't write anything because I see that they have enough. (Interviewed user 1).

> Before it was more intense, I think it is something changing over time. And it's also true that now there are many more podcasts and it's already more complicated to pay attention to the whole community. (Interviewed user 1).

5.2. *User-centered factors*

5.2.1. Participatory culture

Users participating in the study were concerned about the trend towards content consumption under the unidirectional, hierarchical and predominantly passive radio model that characterizes analog radio, although certain radio shows count on the presence of the listener's voice in the construction of stories through more participatory structures. According to the discourse produced by interviewees, many podcasting enthusiasts were once usual radio listeners and therefore remain accustomed to the communication model of the pre-digital era. These users are prone to place themselves in the comfort zone the mass media have built up over decades for the receiver of their messages and continue to reproduce the patterns of radio consumption when they come into contact with podcasting and its transmedia extensions, ignoring the calls for participatory action from the podcaster's side.

> Most of us culturally come from a medium like radio, where participation was very limited. And of course, in traditional radio listeners are not used to being encouraged to participate. I think that culturally there will be a change because young people are much more used to being more participatory. (Interviewed user 5).

5.2.2. Consumption situation and number of podcasts followed

This variable is closely linked to the synchronic factor previously analyzed. In podcasting, participatory acts are usually carried out at the moment of consumption of the medium, which is why the availability of tools for listening to podcasts that allow the user to intervene in the narrative of the program is so important. However, even with such tools, participatory acts could be limited when the content consumption takes place in spaces, moments and contexts where interaction is impossible (for example, when listening to podcasts while driving, at work or while carrying out domestic activities that make it difficult to handle technological devices). Nevertheless, this factor may not be as decisive as the number of shows to which the user is subscribed. Sometimes, the desired participatory acts that cannot be performed at a given time may be postponed if the user only follows and listens to a single show. In that case, participation would be performed at a later point in time.

> The first factor that influences [on engagement] is the place where you listen to it. If over the day the only podcast you listen to is on the way to work and back, you have time to listen to only one or two. In that case, it won't cause you so much harm if you can't participate at that time; you know that, during the day, you can comment on them because you only listen to those podcasts. (Francisco Portillo).

5.2.3. Knowledge of the podcast topic

Certain users, either on the grounds of their professional profile or because they are enthusiastic about specific topics, become real experts in the subjects covered by a given program. The knowledge that the follower of a program has regarding the usual content of such show triggers the meaningful participation and co-creation within such project, a dynamic that, although interesting, is practically impossible to find in traditional media. In the Spanish independent podcastphere, it is common that certain podcasters invite followers and fans who are experts in a specific field related to their podcast topics to produce a particular episode. Sometimes, these collaborations go from being occasional to permanent and the follower becomes, by right, podcaster and co-presenter of the show.

5.2.4. Knowledge of the podcast sub-community

The level of knowledge and integration in the sub-community that each podcast weaves from its activity is also considered an influential factor in the different degrees of users and fans' participation. The users' connection with podcasts and the interactions they trigger with them are not monolithic, but each user penetrates the communities in a different way; some in a superficial manner, while others are able to get involved in a more dedicated way, thus generating different layers of connectivity that feed different strategies and levels of participation.

> The degree of engagement in the community of a podcast may be a barrier in the sense that if you are not very involved when participating in social networks, watching YouTube content, etc., you tend to participate less because you feel less integrated into that world. (Interviewed user 2).

5.2.5. Production and/or relevance in the podcastphere

Certain podcasting enthusiasts, without being strictly podcast creators, have achieved special relevance and visibility within the podcast community due to their activity in promoting the medium itself. These figures are considered to be significant voices whose opinion tends to be heard and respected. They can be defined as opinion leaders who are invited to debates, round tables and discussions on the state of the art in podcasting events. These leaders are usually behind projects promoting podcasting, such as the blog *La Podcastfera* by Raúl de la Puente or the Spanish Podcast Listeners Association, Asespod. In the same way that they are invited to special events on podcasting, these relevant figures have more opportunities to access to shows –especially those whose topic is podcasting, that is metapodcasting programs– so that they can participate by means of horizontal co-creation models along with the usual hosts of such podcasts.

> Normally, the participation we have in our podcast is from people very involved in the community, in podcasting, as podcast listeners. (Tamara León).

> When we invite people to our podcast, we try to always invite people who are known by the community. (Blanca Santamaría).

This same logic operates when the user is also a podcast creator: a podcaster has more options to be invited to third party programs than a user who does not contribute to the community by making any program and therefore has a lower degree of popularity and visibility in the community. This establishes an evident bias of engagement located in the user popularity/relevance/production through their activity in the podcastphere.

> It is true that I am invited to many podcasts. They know I'm also a podcaster, so sometimes they call me to participate with them. (Interviewed user 7).

5.2.6. Perceived relevance of participatory acts

Just as podcasters venture into their media work in order to be heard, user participatory actions aim to have some impact or influence on the podcast's narrative, on the podcaster's attitude or on the community's discourse with regard to the main discussion topics that generate conversations among its members. Relevant participation activates engagement. The perception that one's opinion is taken into account is a powerful catalyst for new participatory acts, so that users who previously observed that their actions were useful will reinforce their engagement with their favorite programs.

> Having a section dedicated to comments is essential in getting more feedback. It generates it; that is, if you, as a fan, know that there is a possibility that you will be read or heard, you will be more willing to participate. (Eduardo Nordman).

> The more a listener is included, mentioned and commented in a podcast, the more the same or another person feels like commenting because they will then listen to their comment on the podcast. (Dumakae).

5.3. *Podcaster-centered factors*

5.3.1. Ability and attitude

The last set of factors that impact on engagement in this medium is based on the podcast creator, the podcaster, their skills and the ways they develop their media action. Surprisingly, the factors related to the podcaster's abilities and attitudes were not a substantial part of the discourse produced by the interviewed subjects, who focused mostly on the medium and the user as the backbone of user engagement.

In general, the simplicity in the way of communicating and the construction of a climate of closeness and confidence that crosses the whole transmedia project, not only the podcast itself but also all its narrative extensions, are essential to stimulate user engagement. Apart from designing effective strategies that facilitate the immersion of subjects in the communicative dynamics of the project, proximity and narrative simplicity in the presentation of contents are the keys to fostering the connection with followers.

> If the podcaster is closer, there may be people who want to interact with him. (Interviewed user 5).

> When the host uses very technical jargon, listeners are not very motivated to talk with them. (Interviewed user 4).

> One key is to make a personalized message; that advertising is not recorded, for example. Addressing the listener directly gets more feedback. (Eduardo Nordman).

5.3.2. Tone

When analyzing the medium-centered factors, two relevant elements, such as topics and formats, were mentioned. A different aspect is tone, which can be considered as an element that has a greater relationship with the podcaster than with the medium itself. We could define it as the general communicative texture that podcasters give to their stories; that is, the way in which they are elaborated and communicated. Tone should not be confused with the perspective from which podcasters approach their podcast's topics (their points of view) or with the format, which has to do with the structure of the program from which contents are narrated. Tone would be more related to the podcasters' general attitude towards the topic of their projects and the way –relaxed, academic, humorous, pedagogical, etc.– of presenting it. Certain tones make some complex and/or unfamiliar topics that are usually addressed by podcasters much more accessible, friendly and easily understandable. The comprehension of the message is fundamental for the generation of participatory acts; therefore, in coherence with the privilege of simplicity and closeness referred in the previous point, programs with light, happy and personal tones facilitate user interaction, no matter how complex the topic approached by the podcast is.

> There are podcasts on difficult subjects, such as science, which are made very enjoyable. This is the case of *La Buhardilla*. This show made me understand things in a very simple way, and of course it made me want to ask them more and have more trust. I felt like I was with friends, despite being totally ignorant on many subjects. There are tones that invite and there are tones that don't. (Interviewed user 1).

6. Conclusions

Despite the limitations of the methodology used due to the sample size, which makes it difficult to extrapolate these results to the whole Spanish podcastsphere, this research provides an initial map of the determinant factors of engagement in podcasting. As previously explained, audience engagement with the media is configured as a multifactorial dimension

which, in the case of podcasting, is linked to three aspects: the medium's inherent characteristics, the user's reception and consumption habits, and the creators' media literacy. Our study points out that digital media are not, by default, spaces that ensure significant participatory actions by users or a high level of engagement within their communities, but both dimensions must be stimulated from the design of interactive user experiences. In the same way that each medium develops its own language to produce contents, as well as protocols for their distribution, the interaction between medium and user is established on the basis of specific participation languages constructed by signs that give form to a grammar of engagement. These signs are configured as elements that, depending on their use, can activate or limit user engagement. Although widely established in the study of linguistics, the notion of grammar can also be applied to non-textual and non-verbal languages (for example, certain media languages such as that used by the comic strip establish conventions commonly accepted by producers and readers when generating meanings); so that, extrapolating Scolari's (2018) concept of "grammar of interaction," we can also speak of the existence of a grammar of engagement, whose components interact with each other, establishing clear relations of interoperability, as showed at several examples in our research.

Technology and the possibility of listening to live podcasts (synchronous consumption) are two factors that affect each other; so if there is such consumption –note that synchronous consumption is an enabler for meaningful participation in this medium– it is because the user has the technological resources necessary to carry it out and because such resources are easily manageable according to their level of technological competence.

Technology and technological literacy also have obvious effects: the more complex a technology is, the higher and more complete the technological competence of the user must be to understand it, making it difficult to manage, and therefore limiting, the subsequent production of participatory actions. Under this logic, technological complexity and community size also interact: the greater the technical difficulty (and therefore the greater the need for technological competence), the smaller the size of the community linked to a medium, so there will be greater potential for meaningful interaction between community members who manage to acquire the skills necessary to understand the logics of such medium. This last situation perfectly reflects the model that was established in the early years of podcasting, when a technology unknown to the general public due to its complexity at that moment generated a very reduced first community of enthusiasts where the interaction between users and creators was closer, more effective and more significant.

As a final example, note that consumption situations and technology also establish mutual relationships. Listening to podcasts on the move is possible thanks to the development of smartphones and podcatchers and, conversely, the demand for consuming this medium in mobile listening situations has generated an entire industry around the creation of specific podcast apps for smartphones.

The conditions that define user experiences in the media are not established under static logics but evolve over time. The strategies that can work today as triggers for engagement in a medium may not be effective in the future. For instance, it is worth noting how the size of the podcastphere has influenced the way in which users relate to podcasts, going from an initial stage of sending audio emails (at a time when the community had a low volume of participants) to the current absolute absence of this type of audio message in order to favor other less significant modes of connection and with less capacity for co-creation –textual contributions on social networks– as the medium has gained in popularity and the size of the podcastphere has increased. In this way, a process of co-evolution has been generated between the medium and the user in which both parties have affected each other.

Finally, we do appreciate that this map of the factors that determine engagement in independent and amateur podcasting is a useful instrument that can help in the production of audio-based professional shows that bet on user experiences with a high degree of

participation, engagement and interaction, an aspect that can undoubtedly result in greater commercial success of these programs.

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