University of Amsterdam

Bachelor Thesis

The Salience of Stylistics and Stylistic Features for Podcast Listening

An Exploratory User Study

Media & Information (Honours Program)

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand podcasts in terms of the multimedia dynamics that uniquely characterize them. The research has identified 'style' as a potential factor that might play a role in podcast preference and be used as a framework for characterizing podcasts. To this end, this work asks the question: what is the salience of stylistics for podcast listening? This is a qualitative user study, grounded in an exploratory approach. Through observations gathered from a focus group, the objective of the study is to understand what stylistics, if any, influence podcast listening with regard to individual preferences. Frequent podcast listeners evaluated a sample of ten podcasts based on the podcast's stylistic properties. The results of the focus group show that podcast listeners care about diverse stylistics and to varying degrees. Most of the participants preferred podcasts which deliver their content through a conversational style and maintain a high degree of musicality; use background sounds and production effects; maintain an informal attitude and have a well-established introduction. The use of advertisements was another important factor but attracted only negative attitudes. Individual user differences become apparent with regard to attitudes about the people featured in the podcast; the use of energy; styles of audience engagement; qualities regarding the speakers voice; and the overall technical execution. The importance of those features is discussed in the light of other research outputs regarding podcast understanding. The study concludes by offering guidelines for further research in this area.

Keywords: Spoken Audio; Podcasts; Podcast Features; Stylistics; Stylistic Features; User Study

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1. Introduction

Spoken audio media is being increasingly published and consumed via the internet. Music and radio content is among the highest grossing, with podcasts catching up rapidly in a short amount of time (Newman 2019). Since 2014 to 2019, podcast listening has grown by 122% (Newman 2019) and this number is only being accelerated in the past two years (Newman 2021). As of 2020, there are approximately 100 million monthly podcast listeners, with its revenue predicted to increase to a rapid 3.5 billion in the next years (Newman 2021). This increase in popularity has also sparked the interests of commercial companies which can be seen in recent acquisitions.

For example, Spotify – one of the most popular on-demand music streaming platforms – is acquiring professional podcast production companies and closing deals with individual podcast producers to feature on its platform (Steele 2021). Google has also launched Google Podcasts and are investing heavily into features on the platform that promote accessibility and sociality, such as the ability to search for podcasts based on what is said in an episode (Steele 2021). Apple, the company which is often credited to contribute to the development of the term podcast, is enjoying large profits from it since 2012 (Overbeek 2016).

From a technical perspective, a podcast is defined as spoken audio media which is published on the internet and delivered to a user's device via a feed and to which the user can subscribe to (Bottomley 2015). This format allows it to be easily producible and does not require an extensive technical background. These low barriers to entry are contributing to an increase supply since new podcast shows are being produced on a daily basis (Newman & Gallo 2020). R. Berry (2015) highlights how the mediums low regulations, coupled with the features of the internet, allow the medium to take no pre-determined format. In other words, there is no definition to what type or style a podcast must adopt to. Podcasts can be in the form of narrative story telling or educational content; they can be improvised or scripted; talk shows, interviews, monologues, or a conversation. They can also be professionally produced such as by news organizations or by a group of friends just featuring a chat. In addition, most podcasts make use of a variety of creative production techniques, music, and sound effects. While this success has been described as 'the rise and rise of podcasting' (Brooks 2020, 1), podcasts are faced with issues regarding access and discoverability (Besser 2010; Berry 2015; Jones et al. 2021).

In order to access things, we need to be able to describe them in meaningful ways. However, research on the characteristics that shape podcast preferences is incredibly scarce. R. Jones et al. (2021) reviewed the current state of literature regarding podcasts and argues that an understanding of what podcast qualities shape audience preference can be used to enrich podcast metadata, which could

potentially improve podcast search results. Current approaches to understanding podcasts are primarily based on the topic of the spoken content within a podcast, but as Drew Dunne et al. (2019) put it: "such approaches ignore the vocal, musical and paralinguistic features that uniquely characterize this medium" (1).

Podcasts, as other forms of entertainment media, may exhibit aesthetic and stylistic qualities – factors, other than the topic of the spoken content, that might mediate and influence the listening experience. However, there is almost no research regarding what features podcast might exhibit and how they might influence preference (Jones et al. 2021). Those factors are within the context of this researched framed as 'stylistic features'. Since podcasts have many use cases - including education, entertainment and escapism (Markman & Sawyer 2014) - the stylistic qualities of a podcast might be important factors shaping content preference, since this is also the case for consumption of other auditory media.

The role of stylistics in podcast listening is currently an unexplored research area. This could add additional arguments or inspire other research to understand what matters to media consuming audiences. Podcast creators could also benefit from it since they will know what features and factors correspond with user preferences. This is especially relevant given that there is an "ongoing race to building a podcast recommendation system" (Owens 2019). Hence, expending on our understanding on what matters to an audience in terms of podcasts means it could provide potential guidelines to build more user centric system. Given all of that, the primary research question of this work has been formulated as: *What is the salience of stylistics for podcast listening?*

The present study addresses the challenge of understanding what influences the podcast listening experience, other than the topic of the spoken content. This study is also motivated to understand those features from a user perspective. Hence contributing to our understanding of how and why individuals engage with one media object over the other. In order to do so, this work is divided into distinct stages, all relating to the phenomenon of podcast stylistics as a whole.

Chapter 1 synthesizes various literature regarding podcasting in order to contextualize the importance of podcasts within the current media landscape. All literature has been selected with regard to the main research question. Doing so allows for an open interpretation of what features podcasts afford. Since this study emphasizes understanding podcast appeal from a user perspective, literature on what motivates podcast consumption is also reviewed.

To position the notion of 'style' within the context of the present study, this chapter also presents different conceptualizations of the phenomenon from the perspective of different disciplines. In addition, it asks the sub-question *to what extent can podcasts be considered as having stylistic properties?* The Chapter concludes with a discussion of the reviewed literature and answers what the

role of podcasts is within the current media landscape; and to what extent can podcasts be considered as stylistic. The gap in the literature is also highlighted.

Chapter 3 details the methodology used to answer the sub-question: *What stylistic features, if any, are important for podcast listening with regard to user preferences?* To this end, a research study was designed which makes use of observations gathered from a focus group. Given the understudied state of stylistic qualities within spoken media, this study gathers responses from frequent podcast listeners to identify what stylistic feature are important to the individual listener. The participant responses are exploratory analysed in order to find similarities and differences and to assess the degree to which stylistics matter. The results are presented in the form of a descriptive narrative, followed by a descriptive quantitative analysis of the features that got mentioned. Those results are presented in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 5 the contents of the participant responses are inductively coded in order to relate the responses to broader stylistic categories and dimensions. This is then qualitatively analysed. The impact and salience of those stylistics in podcasts are then discussed in light of the literature reviewed and positioned within a broader context.

2. Podcasts & Style

This chapter presents and analyses literature and related work regarding podcasting. The chapter is organised in sections. In order to contextualize podcasts within the current media landscape, the first section (2.1. Podcast-ing) presents different conceptualizations of podcasts and the increasing challenges that this nascent medium poses. This makes establishing what a podcast *style* is challenging. Hence, a general framework is introduced that provides a general anatomy of a podcast.

Since the present study emphasizes a user-centric approach, the sub-section '2.1.1. Motivations for Podcast Use' reviews previous work on podcast audience understanding and the motivations that users have for listening to podcasts. In addition, the goals and ways in which users engage in podcast searching behaviour is also addressed in the second sub-section '2.1.2. Podcast Search Goals'.

Section 2 (2.2. Style & Features) pays attention to the notion of 'style' and 'stylistics' which can currently not be found within literature regarding podcasts. Hence, in order to establish what style amounts to and how it can be applied to podcasts, literature on music and sound studies is underlined. Within this section, a framework is introduced which can be used to map podcast features that could

potentially exhibit different stylistic properties. Finally, the last section (2.3. Discussion: Literature) restates the conclusions and relations between the reviewed literature.

2.1. Podcast(ing)

The term "Podcasting" got popularized in the early 2000s and it derived from Apple's computer device, the iPod, and the term "broadcast". Podcasting allows for previously downloaded audio content to be stored in a digital format, to which the user of the iPod could listen to any time. From a technological perspective, S. Crofts et al. (2005) highlight the relation that podcasting has with blogging, since podcasts are often referred to as "audio blogs" (1). Both blogging and podcasting is characterized by the technological infrastructure of the RSS feed, which is used to 'push' content updates to the subscribed user.

Others define podcasts with regard to the obvious relation with radio broadcasting (Overbeek 2016). Podcasts can also make use of creative production techniques and they imply seriality by their core design. In addition, podcasts can be used to broadcast news as well as for fictional audio programs (Drew 2017). However, as Larson et al. (2010) put forward, podcasts differ from radio in three aspects. Podcasts are generally seen as more personal since they target a specific audience and engage in niche topics, whereas radio content is often aimed at a mass audience. Podcast content is often made with the intent of being reusable since they are made available for download for a longer period of time. This also allows for 'time shifting' – the possibility to listen to the content anytime and anywhere, which Crofts et al. (2005) have described as one of its most important features. Finally, the creation of podcasts requires no specialized equipment, hence it has low barriers to entry and faces less issues with regulations. Furthermore, podcasts can be seen as an evolution of radio since the medium tries to overcome the dissatisfactions of traditional radio, namely, the use of repetitive advertisements and generic programming. Hence, podcasting presents a departure from "mass broadcasting to on–demand personalized media" (Crofts et al. 2005, 1). Jones et al. (2021) note that the convergences between different media features, coupled with the technological affordances of the internet, make identifying a static podcast format or style exceedingly difficult.

However, to understand the general form of podcasts, L. Bowie (2012) discusses usability heuristics highlighting the mediums key components. The author argues that podcasts, in general, share a medium-specific layout in terms of how the various multimedia dynamics are structured. Hence, the anatomy of a podcast consists of 8 principles: "theme music, intro, musical and other transitions, bed. music, main body, visuals and outro" (4). "Theme music" refers to signature musical pieces that set the mood for the theme that is to be discussed within the podcast. "Intro" refers to the

first 30 seconds in which a podcast needs to grab the user's attention, outlining the overview of the episode. "Musical & other transitions" refer to sounds and subtle "noises" that are present in the background of the podcast and are commonly used to signify a transition within an episode. "Bed Music" is short for background music which are subtle musical pieces that accompany the spoken content. "The Main Body" is the central happening within a podcast, which can be interviews, debates, discussions, chats, (non)fictional narrative stories etc. "Visuals" are seen as a complementary addition to the spoken content which is a far less common form than purely audio-based podcasts. "Outro" refers to the conclusion the podcaster makes at the end. Those are narrated as a summary of the episode, a call for audience engagement and details of the next episode. The author argues that a synergetic use of those properties enables a podcast to be effective and efficient to the user and foster appeal.

The appeal that podcasts give to the users are further discussed in the next section which reviews literature of the motivations for podcast use.

2.1.1. Motivations for Podcast Use

Since the present study is motivated to understand podcast appeal from a listener perspective, this section discusses literature on podcast audience research. Recent scholarly work has concerned itself with the appeal that podcasts give to internet users (Craig 2021). Literature on this topic is mainly grounded in a Uses & Gratification framework, an approach to study the reasons and ways in which people seek out specific media in order to satisfy specific needs (Chung & Kim, 2016). This approach might account to why people find podcasts as a medium attractive, but it does not explain why some podcasts are preferred over the other, nor does it give us elaborate information on what qualities define podcasts as a distinguished medium.

McClung and Johnson (2010) examine the reasons and motivations among podcast users. As the authors put forward, research has attained to who is using podcasts, but little research has been done on why. Guided by a Uses and Gratification framework, the researchers conducted a survey among 354 podcast fans. Their demographic data reveals that most podcast listening is driven by a younger generation, which is more educated and affluent. The study has found quite general motivators for podcast usage: "entertainment", "time shifting", "library building" and "a social aspect". The later includes fans participating in discourse with other fans of the show, which the author suggests might act as a predictor for heavy podcast usage. Interestingly, the study also concluded that podcast listeners tend to have a very favorable and supportive view towards advertisements and sponsored content within a podcast.

Further motivations for podcast use among college students was explored by Swanson (2012) in order to explore the audiences primary listening choices and opinions. The factors that motivate podcast listening were fun, entertainment and sharing their experience with fellow peers (the social factor), with being able to multitask while listening to them. The participants in the research reported strong genre preferences regarding audio podcast. The way podcast genre is expressed is through the topic that the episodic podcasts discuss. The most popular genre was news and politics, followed by TV, film & pop-culture, Music and Education; with the least popular ones being Kids and family, games and hobbies and health. Being able to multitask while listening to podcasts was another strong motivator, with almost all respondents expressing that they listen to them while studying, cleaning or exercising. Finally, the research participants were asked what their perception on accessibility and technical qualities are. Almost all respondents expressed that finding worthwhile podcasts 'is a big hustle' (Swanson 2019, 12). In addition, all of them expressed that a high technical quality is a motivator for listening to one show and not another.

2.1.2. Podcast Search Goals

Podcasts have also been researched with regard to what goals people have when engaging in podcast search. Given that podcast discovery and retrieval is informed by our understanding of their genres and types, literature belonging to information retrieval could also offer epistemological grounds to better conceptualize them. Research on podcast search is still a relatively scarce field, with Besser et als. (2010) study being among the most extensive ones.

Besser et al. (2010) studied the users search goals and strategies when looking for podcasts and what the impact of those goals are on the design of retrieval systems. Through a qualitative user study, the researchers gather responses from a focus group, a diary study, and contextual interviews in a later podcast search experiment.

When a podcaster creates content and to makes it available, this is usually accompanied by metadata which is used for search engines to match a certain query. Metadata is created by the podcaster at provide information regarding the podcast show on the one hand, and information regarding the individual episodes on the other. An example of podcast metadata are the title and the description of the show or episode. In addition, the spoken content of the podcast can also be indexed. This made possible through automatic speech recognition. This involves a technical process where the spoken content is automatically transcribed into written text. The researchers explore how searching for podcasts based on metadata performs in comparison to search and retrieval based on the transcript of the speech from a podcast. While the later outperforms the former, through a user study, the

researchers note that the podcast search process is heavily influenced by the user's perception of the tools and what categories exist for the podcasts.

The participants within the study expressed that they mainly find podcasts through web browsing or recommendations. The way in which they browse for them is by indexing topic related keywords or the name of the podcast host. Furthermore, the participants expressed that they search for podcasts when in need of personal in-depth information or when looking for entertainment, favoring professional podcasts more than amateur ones. The study also notes that goals in podcast search are sometimes not explicit. The respondents were also asked to reflect on the (im)possibilities of podcast search through different retrieval systems. The study subjects favored search engines which are fast, easy to use and have a good-looking UI. However, they also criticized the search engines for how search categories were defined and made available. The researchers also highlight that comments left on podcasts could yield more accurate search results, but also stress that properties of audio data might expand on this.

While retrieval methods are not tested or evaluated within the context of the current study, the user perspective and responses from this study might be relevant for a later discussion to position the findings within a broader view.

2.2. Style & Features

This section addresses the notion of style and stylistic features and considers the ways in which podcasts can be seen as exhibiting stylistic properties. There is surprisingly little academic consensus on what 'style' means and, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has not been researched within the podcast ecosystem. However, disciplines that are associated with podcasts – sound, music and literature studies – can offer grounds to understand what the salience of style is.

Stylistics derive traditionally from literature studies and linguistics, where attention is paid to the use of rhetoric, grammar, narration, and devices used within speech. Style can also be encountered within the still nascent discipline of media stylistics. While there is no standard definition or format of what 'style' means, it can be broadly defined as the manners in which aspects of text are arranged and affect meaning (Duskeva 2011). The use of stylistic devices was already explored in podcasts by R. Nee et al. (2021).

Rhetoric and stylistic devices are commonly used to establish how individual style influence the way in which content is conveyed. In the work "Podcasting the Pandemic", R. Nee et al. (2021) explores what storytelling formats can be found in pandemic-related podcasts, and how those practices shift journalistic norms. As the author puts forward, podcasting has become a cheap and

effective tool for news organization to communicate with their audience through daily news updates. This affords creating content without a big budget. However, elements that are common to narrative storytelling have to potential to influence the listening experience and the perception of the presented content. Through an extensive literature review, the authors establish a code book to identify story telling devices: "voice, character development, scene setting, dialogue and dramatic tension" (1). The researcher performs a qualitative content analysis of 40 podcast episodes and labels each episode worth regards to the use of storytelling devices. Their conclusion is that those devices were used in all but one podcast, with the majority from the sample also using a higher degree of editing and production techniques. This was especially more common within popular podcasts. The authors conclude that the use of such stylistic devices influence the delivery of the content and the sentiment in which an episode is perceived.

While R. Nee et al. (2021) dealt with podcasts stylistic properties that might also be inferred through text, the current study is primary concerned with audio-based features. This is because 'textual' stylistic properties can be inferred through linguistic methods and speech transcripts, but 'non-textual' properties have had little to no research attention. Hence, as emphasized in the introduction, understanding the vocal, musical and other auditory features might expand on the stylistic typology.

The importance of auditory features is especially relevant within music and sound studies (Moore 2001). To understand the meaning of 'style' it might be beneficial to compare it with the term 'genre'. Genre and style are one of the ways in which we organize objects based on their shared qualities. However, both terms have also got no strong defined academic consensus. Genre is a term for categorical discourse, and it refers to the classification of musical objects based on shared key characteristics (Moore 2001). However, those characteristics are commonly more general and broadly defined. Style refers to the details of those characteristics which most commonly vary between the individual objects. Hence, we can understand style as a particular way in which something is executed, as evident through the different details that characterize the object, in this case, audio media.

Examples of features from those fields include rhythm, timbre, acusticness, lexical features and pitch (Brubaker 2020). Those features can usually be ranked on a pre-defined scale in order to make empirical inferences about the stylistic or aesthetic properties of music media. Ultimately, when more pieces of music share certain patterns with regard to those features, they can be grouped together into a genre.

For example, Georgieva and Keneshiro (2018) explored the similarities and differences of audio features within certain music genres. They take the case of pop-music and found that songs in this genre share same features regarding danceability, loudness and valance. All those features can be

ranked on a pre-defined scale. Danceability refers to the degree to which a song is suitable for dancing. Loudness determines the magnitude of the audio and valance refers to how positive something sounds. Valance can be inferred through speech for example, or through instrumental qualities. Similarities between the characteristics of those features can be found within the most popular music in the pop genre. Ultimately, features as such can act as predictors for assessing music popularity as well as factors that shape individual music preference (Georgieva and Keneshiro 2018).

To summarize, the term 'style' has no specific definition, other than a particular way in which something is executed as evident through different qualities of the medium's features. To understand how podcasts might exhibit stylistic aspects as such, the following section turns to features that other literature has identified within podcasts.

2.2.1. Podcast Surface Features

Larson et al. (2010) tackled the issues of establish content-independent podcasting features that can be used to predict podcast preference. The researchers focus on the affordances that podcasts offer for education, in terms of its informational content, and how that affects appeal. The authors present "PodCred" - a conceptual framework to assess and analyze a podcasts engagement and success rate. Lerson et al. (2010) argue that podcasts have 'surface features' (1) that can be used as predictors for podcast popularity. Their framework is based on an extensive literature review and the outcomes of rigorous analysis of surveyed podcast listening guidelines. The framework has very strong grounds for reproducibility as well as the potential to be automatically indexed. The authors argue that podcast characteristics can be framed within the following 4 categories: "The content" - how faithful a podcast is to its topic and what supports its credibility. For example: Opinions, citing sources, references to events etc. "The individual podcaster - refers to the qualities of the narrator and his or her performance, such as: is fluent, speech speed, diction, shows emotion, affiliations and shows incentive. "The Context" of a podcast relates to the manner in which the podcaster interacts with the listeners, either addressing them during the show or responding to comments via platform features. "The technical execution" refers to the podcasts production qualities, namely: thematic opening jingle, background music, sound effects, editing effect and audio recording quality.

Given that podcasts are characterized by individuality and can come in many different formats, this can lead to a great variability between how the discussed podcast features might be executed. Thereby exhibiting stylistic properties.

2.2.2. Non-textual Podcast Features

A work that resembles the current study is by Dunne et al (2019) where the authors explore how podcast content modelling can be enhanced by paying attention to the vocal, musical and conversational properties. The conducted study is interdisciplinary in nature and combines approaches and theories from the humanities as well as computer science. Together with Larson et al. () this is one of the only studies looking into content-independent features for characterizing podcasts.

Similar to the present study, Dunne et al. (2019) argue that prior work on categorizing podcasts is primarily based on *what* is said, instead of *how*. The researchers collected a set of roughly 850.000 user reviews and comments regarding 2500 podcasts on Apples iTunes platform. Those reviews were then quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. First, word frequencies were counted in all the reviews in order to find the top adjectives which reflect the user's attitude towards the podcast show. The analysis found that "funny", "entertaining" and "hilarious" were among the most frequent mentions. Dunne et al. (2019) note that those adjectives can be related to broader dimensions, relating the aforementioned adjectives to a dimension of "humorousness" to "seriousness". The authors note that those can be indexed within a podcast using low-level audio features and label the podcasts on a scale of how "funny" or "serious" they are. Similar to Larson et al. (2010) the authors emphasize that those ranking are primarily subjective in nature, depending on the individual end user. However, Dunne et al. (2019) continued with an experiment to classify and predict such non-textual features and found that most of them correlate with (un)popularity. For example, podcasts ranking high on a scale for energy correlate positively with popularity prediction, whereas the use of a complex vocabulary correlates negatively with popularity.

Some of the arguments are contrasted by Moris (2021) who takes the case of podcasting to illustrate how metrics used for recommendation and retrieval pose problems for discoverability and measurability. Data-points such as ranking and charts are 'one of several means that podcasters, scammers, marketers, and users employ to engineer discoverability of audio content' (1). He argues that the monetization of podcasts has moved it away from its independent origin. This is because platforms, such as apple podcasts and Spotify, employ algorithms to feature the content. Hence, content producers are engaging in activities that will push their shows to the user. Metrics are, however, not organic or reflective of reality. This, coupled with producers that tweak their strategies in order to stand out to the algorithm, can be seen as manipulating the position of a podcast in search options. The authors conclude by arguing that we need to make better systems to accurately access cultural content.

The present study aims to overcome such limitations and does not take the risk of using use-generated online data for the characterization of podcasts. This research emphasizes a user-centric approach in order to map the stylistic characteristic of podcasts as perceived by the listener.

2.3. Discussion: Literature

This section addresses the relation between the reviewed literature and summarizes the key findings. In addition, it addresses the gap and suggests a research design. To do so, it emphasizes what the role and state of podcasting is within the current media landscape; and answer the question to what extent can we understand podcasts as exhibiting stylistic properties?

While podcasts were traditionally seen as an emerging format that came from audio blogging and radio, the format evolved over the years into a more unique and disruptive medium. While speech is at the core of this format, its relations and convergences with radio allow the format to be multi-dynamic. Research regarding motivations for podcast use is also broad, focusing on what the affordances and appeal of podcasts as a medium is, but little to no research has addressed what motivators for (non)listening with regard to individual podcast shows. Besser et al. (2010). Expanded on this by looking into what reasons people have to engage in podcast search and in what ways this is done. Podcast users engage in podcast search when they are looking for information or entertainment, favoring professional podcasts over amateur ones.

The ways in which we understand podcasts is also the way in which we store and access them. There is a need to expand on this understanding since both Besser et al. (2010) and Swanson (2012) note that finding and accessing podcasts is an issue for the users. Similar to music, style might be an important factor that moderates the podcast listening experience and could be used to enhance search and retrieval. While style and stylistics derive from studies that are concerned with the meaning of text, they can also be applied to the acoustic side of media. This is a common approach within music studies, where style is defined as the characteristics of the individual differences between auditory objects. The properties of those characteristics can be inferred through audio features such as rhythm, valance, instrumentals, or loudness (Georgieva & Keneshiro 2018; Burbaker 2020). Podcasts also contain certain features that have the potential to exhibit individual variances and therefore be considered stylistic. Larson et al. (2010) have broadly categorized those features in categories relating to the podcaster, the content of the podcast, the podcast context and the technical execution. A notable effort in researching non-textual features was made by Dunne et al. (2019), who emphasized the correlation between non-textual features and podcast popularity.

Given the understudied stage of features that have the potential influence listening, the present study addresses the challenges of exploring what style-based features might be important for podcast users. Therefore, a research study was designed to make empirical inferences. This is detailed in the following chapter.

3. Podcast Style and User Preference

The objective of this chapter is to detail the methodology and approach used to answer the questions: What stylistic features, if any, are important for podcast listening with regard to individual preference? To this end, a mixed method approach was used to answer the stated question. A qualitative user study was designed in the form of observations and responses gathered from a focus group. The methodology is based on J. Pickard book "Research Methods in Information" (2013). The use of a focus group was motivated by the absence of literature and theories on the subject matter as well as to gather a deeper understanding of the influence that stylistic factors have on the individual podcast listener.

Seven subjects have been recruited to participate in the focus group research. The goal was to have a number of frequent and diverse podcast listeners evaluate a varied podcast sample, based on the podcast's stylistic qualities. The podcast sample consisted of 10 podcast episodes. Each of the participants listened to each of the podcast episodes and wrote observations, in the form of notes, emphasizing what they like and dislike about the podcasts in the sample. Limitations of this approach are acknowledged, in that the results of this study might not be generalized to a wider population without a more extensive quantitative analysis. However, this is an exploratory study that aims to provide a basis for further hypothesizing and does not attempt to make inferences regarding a wider population.

The following section details the participant recruitment procedure and their demographics. The second section describes the setting and goals of the focus group. In addition, material and tools used are discussed. The way in which a podcast sample was gathered is presented in the third section. The fourth section presents a descriptive account of the procedure and illustrates what the tasks of the focus group looked like. The final section addresses the analysis conducted.

3.1. Participant Selection

For the focus group, participants have been gathered by snow-ball sampling – when study participants provide personal referrals to recruit subjects for the study (Pickard 2013). The following criteria has been applied when selecting participants is a frequent podcast listener, listens to a wider range of podcast shows, communicates in English, has general IT knowledge and is between the ages of 20 - 30. Being IT literate was a criterion since the workshop was carried out in an online setting, this will be explained later. Incorporating and age group in the sample was motivated by the fact that most of the podcast's listeners are a younger generation. This resulted in total of 7 participants who also anonymously participated in a small demographic questionnaire. Their demographics can be seen in table 1.

Participant nr.	Age	Gender	Nationality	Background	Listening frequency	Preferred Genre
1	26	Female	Dutch	Medicine	Monthly	News
2	22	Female	German	Media	Monthly	Entertainment
3	23	Female	Dutch	Medicine	Weekly	News
4	23	Male	Latvia	Computer Sc	Daily	Comedy
5	27	Male	Portugal	Sociology	Weekly	Technology
6	26	Male	Dutch	Hospitality	Weekly	Pop-culture
7	25	Male	German	Retail	Monthly	Health

Table 1: Participant Demographics

As illustrated in table 1, the participants are 20 – 27 years old, with 4 of them being male and 3 female. The countries of origin are the Netherlands, Germany, Latvia and Portugal. Their professional background includes computer science, medicine, media, sociology, retail management and hospitality. Podcast listening varied in the sample, with least listening being once a month and

most frequent daily. The participants also listen to a varied number of podcast genres, from news and entertainment to technology and health.

3.2. Focus Group: setting, tasks and goals

Due to the pandemic cause by the novel COVID-19 virus, the focus group research was carried out in an online setting. The use of technical tools and materials used were inspired by Martikainen (2020) study on stylistics and speech media. While this is not a peer-reviewed source (therefore not part of the conceptual framework), it is currently the only available research that resembles the present study and that discusses possibilities for user research during a time of national lockdown.

Zoom has been used to engage with the participants because its features allow video and voice interaction for a group of people. Choosing Zoom was also motivated by the fact that every participant in the call can share their screen to interact with the shared content. At the beginning of the meeting, the participants have been briefed on the goals of this research and their tasks. A transcript of this briefing and the agenda layout is available in *Appendix A*. The participants have been given an explanation and examples of what audio features and stylistic elements are, highlighting that they should ignore the general topic of the podcast, i.e. It does not matter *what* is discussed, but *how* (Dunne et al., 2019). They have been instructed to listen to a number of podcasts which were previously uploaded to a Google Drive folder. The folder contained 10 podcast episodes, with each of them being named with a random number, in order to prevent potential bias. While listening, the participants could take breaks or go back and forward through a podcast. Furthermore, the participants have been instructed to create a Miro account (www.miro.com, 2021). This is an online environment which features collaboration between a group of people. Using the online software, the participants could write down observations in the form of notes, tables or lists for features that they observe in each podcast episodes. They have been instructed to distinguish between positive and negative features, i.e., features and the qualities they like and dislike. Before the evaluation process started, the group was shown a list of features as they are currently identified by other literature, namely: Larson et. Al. (2010); Dunne et al. (2019); and Georgieva & Keneshiro (2018). The features are evident in table 2 and displayed in no particular order.

Sound effects	Speech	Conversational style	Engaging with Audience	Ways of Talking	Intro music
Multiple people	Fluency	Sentence Complexity	Mood	Advertisements Emotion	Background music
Discussions	Speech rate	Vocabulary	Timbre	Sponsored content	Atmospheric sounds
Commentaries	Articulation	Use of smile	Pitch	Vocabulary Complexity	Tone Humor
Energy	Conversational form	Incentives	Rhythm	Accent	Laughter

Table 2: Podcast features as identified by literature

The participants were presented with the content from table 2 to serve as a guideline on what to assess within the podcasts. While the table presents some features that might be indicative of style, the participants were encouraged to go beyond the table and identify other features. Hence, this table only served as an example to explain what features this study is looking for.

3.3. Podcast Sample

The podcasts for this workshop were selected by the researcher. This was deemed the appropriate method, instead of letting participants chose their own podcast to bring and analyze. This is because the current research hypothesizes that popular podcasts have shared stylistic features and high production quality, i.e., motivators for listening. The goal of this research is to have a sample that is as varied in terms of stylistic and aesthetic qualities. Therefore, podcasts were selected by paying attention to the diversity of podcasts in terms of genre and topic, as identified by Swanson (2019). The podcast episodes were listened to by the researcher and selected based on how different they sound from one another. Aspects that were taken into account during the selection procedure were: the

number of people, sound and production effects, use of music and overall presentation. The selected episodes are presented in table 3. A link to the podcast sample can also be found in *Appendix B*.

Name Number	Publisher	Show	Episode	Genre
12	The New York Times	The Daily	Joe Manchin's Motivations	News & Politics
17	Charlamange The God & Andrew Schulz	The Brilliant Idiots	The Sweet Invisible	News & Politics
26	The Official	The Official Podcast	The YouTube Outlaw	Entertainment & Comedy
33	Spotify Studios	Mom's Basement	The Dream Drama	Popular Culture
39	Joe Rogan	The Joe Rogan Experience	Rick Doblin	Entertainment
41	Ted	TED Talks Daily	Climate Change Will Displace Millions	Educational
55	Motivationly	Motivational Speeches	Secrets successful people know about time management	Health
68	Katie Wells	The Wellness Mama Podcast	Aviva Room on Hormone Intelligence	Health
77	Stephen West	Philosophize This!	On Media pt. 2 - Marshall McLuhan	Education
81	McAfee	Hackable?	Gone Phishin	Technology

Table 3: Podcast Sample

3.4. Focus Group: Walkthrough

This section offers further details on the procedure of the focus group and illustrates examples of the responses. The agenda and a transcript of the focus group can be found in. The gathering started with an informal 'meet and great' in the first few minutes. The participants were then briefed regarding the details and objectives of this study. The objective was to find out what stylistics are important for their listening experience. It was highly emphasized that their individual and genuine opinions are of interest for this study. The participants were briefed on what stylistic features are, followed by a discussion in which the participants could recall such features from previous experience. After a confirmation has been made that their tasks are clear, the participants went to the Google Drive folder which contained the podcast sample. They could listen to the podcasts in any particular order. Given that some podcasts were very long, a minimum listening time per podcast has been set to 15 minutes. The participants could also navigate back and forth through the episodes if they felt the need to. The study subjects listened to the podcasts in private while making the observations in the online environment Mori. After the first 30 minutes, the participants and the researcher met up to discuss their current responses. This was also done so that the researcher could assess if the participants are indeed writing observations regarding stylistics and separating them based on preference. All of the responses were clear and well written. The participants wrote them in a way that they mentioned the feature of a podcast, followed by what they like or dislike about it. An example of what this looked like is evident in figure 1.
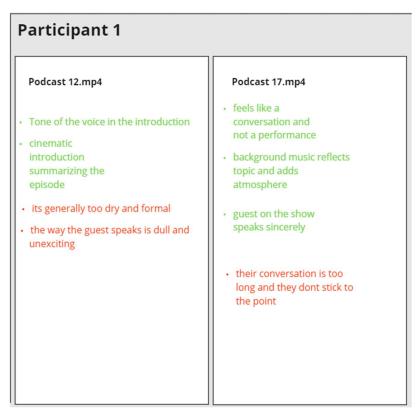
Figure 1: Notes / Observations made by participant 1

Figure 1 is a screenshot of some of the responses from one of the participants for two respective podcasts. Columns were created where the participant wrote down the number (name) of the podcast, followed by the related stylistic observations. The text in green shows what the user liked about the podcast in terms of style, with red indicating what the participant disliked. Each participant did this for each of the 10 podcasts respectively. This process took roughly 2.5 hours, including time for breaks. After all of the participants finished listening to the podcasts and wrote down their observations, the experiences and notes taken were then discussed as a group. This resulted in a total of 199 participant responses in the form of written notes, with each note being one bullet point as illustrated in figure 1. Each note was then a unit of analysis for this study.

3.5. Analysis

The analysis of the participants notes is grounded in an exploratory approach. The aim is to understand what podcast features are important for podcast listening with regard to the individual user preferences. The participant responses have been qualitatively analyzed in Mori and re-written into a descriptive narrative for each participant. This highlights the similarities and differences between the participant responses. The observations from Mori were then exported into Excel. Afterwards, the

participant responses were inductively grouped into general categories based on the feature and topic that they mention. This is then quantitatively analyzed. Finally, the responses are re-coded into broader categories which reflect the different styles and impacts of those features on the podcast listening experience. The following chapter presents the results of the focus group.

4. Results

This chapter presents the results from the focus group. Section 1 details the per-participant responses, while section 2 groups them into categories in order to identify stylistic features. Those two sections together answer the question: What stylistic features, if any, are important for podcast listening with regard to individual preferences?

4.1. Participant POV

This section first shares the experience of the focus group in a descriptive way, adopting a per participant point of view. The participant generated notes were written into a descriptive narrative form, accompanied by quotes. Hence, this section shines light on the individual experiences that the subjects had while evaluating podcasts based on their stylistic features. This is an essential step before any inferences about the importance of stylistics can be made. This is because the observations regarding one feature might be heavily skewed towards one participant only. Hence, it is important to exploratory assess the variability before the participant notes can be quantitatively analyzed.

The presentation of the results is aided by word clouds, which features the most frequently mentioned words per participant. The word clouds have been constructed using TagCrowd, a free online software used for constructing word clouds based on word frequency. A default 'stopword list' (ranks.nl 2021) has also been used with the purpose of excluding frequently used words that might not add any meaning, e.g. "the", "is", "are" "an" etc. The results per participant are shared in the following sections.

4.1.1. Participant 1:

Figure 2: Word Cloud Responses from Participant 1

Participant 1 made the most varying observations in the participant sample and noted the most number of features. Most of the notes taken related to the way of speaking, the qualities of the voices and the use of music. The participant favored podcasts that 'go straight into conversation' and maintain an informal presentation throughout the show. This is mostly evident in the notes where the participant expresses that podcasts should feel like listening to an authentic and unscripted conversation between the people involved: "I like that it feels like a conversation and less of a performance". Hence, the participant disliked scripted ways of talking, also within the context of a news podcast. P1 also mentions the use of (background) music, saying that it reflects the sentiment of the episode which adds to the overall atmosphere. The participant also mentions vocal qualities, but only when they are unpleasant. Furthermore, the participant also mentions the use of advertisements which he finds irrelevant and 'annoying' within all of the podcasts.

4.1.2. Participant 2:

Figure 3: Word Cloud Responses from Participant 2

Similar to P1, this participant took notes which mostly related to the use of music and the tone of the voice within a podcast. Furthermore, P2 mentions a favorable view towards podcasts that feature 'no acknowledgment of an audience' and dislikes shows that sound like they are scripted and give effort to communicate with the listener. Hence, podcasts that contain 'a natural conversation' are

appealing to this user. The role of music is also liked when it is used to enhance the context of the narrative and disliked when there is no music. In addition, P2 mentioned two times that music which 'sounds like a generic commercial sound sample' ruins the authenticity of a podcast. Similarly, the use of an intro or opening jingle plays a role in setting the mood of the podcast, which according the participant notes have to 'summarize in a cinematic fashion what the podcast is about' and make the show 'feel more energetic'.

4.1.3. Participant 3

Figure 4: Word Cloud Responses from Participant 3

P3 agrees with the former two participants on the role that music has in support of the overall narrative and acts as an atmospheric device. This participant also made the most observation regarding audio and recording quality within the participant sample, expressing that a lower audio quality between two or more people is noticeable and unfavorable. For example, the participant notes how the host of the podcasts uses appropriate equipment, but this only further emphasizes if the guests recording quality is worse. As already seen with P1 & P2, the use of advertisements was disliked as well as certain lexical and pronunciation qualities such as 'the guest speaks too slow' and 'no pause between sentences'. P3 also reflects a dislike towards certain vocal qualities, such as speaking in an 'unnatural voice'. The participant also expressed a favorable view towards hosts of the podcast which are knowledgeable and 'sound happy'.

4.1.4. Participant 4:

Figure 5: Word Cloud Responses from Participant 4

P4 had similar notes and attitudes towards the use of music within the podcasts as the other participants did and agrees with P3 regarding the audio quality. This participant also expressed that focusing on the guest of the podcast show, rather than an audience, makes it 'feel' and sound more original. P4 also mentions 'talking' within a number of observations, which are similar to what other participants mentioned as 'speaking'. However, this was also disliked in one of the podcasts since the participant expressed that there is a lot of overlap between speakers which makes it difficult to follow. This participant emphasizes the use of emotion while conversing. He notes that a 'static voice' makes the podcast sound 'dry' and too formal. Furthermore, the participant also mentions the length of a podcast, which was deemed appropriate for a podcast of 30 minutes, but perceived as dislikeable if longer. In addition, the participant likes when podcasts feature a group dynamic between friends, where emotions, such as laughter and surprise, are evident from the way that people talk.

4.1.5. Participant 5:

Figure 6: Word Cloud Responses from Participant 5

For participant 5 the use of conversational style was also important, favoring a mode of conversing that makes him 'feel like im peeping into a show from the background'. Use of promotional material was again disliked as well as most of the introductory sections of a podcast

show which 'sound like a commercial'. P5 also made remarks regarding the qualities of the speakers such as having charisma and conveying credibility. The participant made the most negative observations regarding a podcast which features 'no multimedia', hence sounding like a 'continuous speech'. The tone of the voice of the speakers had again both like and disliked mentions, with no disliked observations regarding music. This participant also noted the use of language within a podcast, disliking a higher and terminological vocabulary. In addition, P5 notes the use of external audio as adding functionality to the overall story.

4.1.6. Participant 6:

Figure 7: Word Cloud Responses from Participant 6

P6 made similar notes, with voice, music and advertisements being among the most mentioned ones. However, this participant also mentions that way in which the podcaster does not interact with the audience makes her feel like a bystander: 'It is the way they communicate – I want to be part of the conversation and not a spectator'. This is generally different from the attitude that the previous participants had. Scripted shows were also disliked, with improvisational content being more favored. The participant also mentions the use of audience laughter, which contributes to the mood as well as the use of subtle background music. The voices in the podcast were also mentioned, primarily when there is no emotion variance in the pitch of the voice. Furthermore, P6 made notes regarding the use of vocabulary, especially regarding podcast number 81, where the participants expresses a liking towards the use of simple terminology that requires no background knowledge which was deemed 'appropriate especially within the context of a technology podcast'.

4.1.7. Participant 7:

Figure 8: Word Cloud Responses from Participant 7

P7 had a favorable view towards more professionally curated qualities, such as an emphasis on data and facts. This was especially noted during the two news podcasts, where the participants expresses that a more formal aspect suits the context of the show. On the other hand, he also favored more conversational podcasts, but only to a certain extent: 'the way they talk does not feel like they are talking to me directly, but just talking among themselves'. The use of background music was liked for the most part, with two times emphasizing that the music can overpower the speaker and make it difficult to follow. The length of a podcast also played a role, since most of the podcasts were considered too long. Additionally, the participant made a number of notes regarding the overall qualities of the individual podcaster. For example, expressing a lot of opinion and subjectivity was seen as off-putting as well as an attempt to appeal to an audience.

This section presented the participants individual experiences when tasked with evaluating the podcast sample based on stylistics. The notes from the participants were written in the form of a descriptive narrative to make broad inferences regarding individual variations. While there are clear similarities between the responses, there are also stark differences. The similarities are evident in that all of the participant observed features with regard to music and background music, conversational aspects, overall performance and advertisements. However, the attitudes and preferences for those features varies. Differences also become apparent with regard to more niche features. For example, whereas participant 2 favors podcasts that do not acknowledge an audience but feature a chat; participant 6 dislikes that because it makes the user feel uninvolved. The differences can also be seen with regard to how many times a feature gets mentioned. For example, audio quality seems to matter a lot for 2 of the participants, but not for the others. In order to understand features got observed and the degree to which they mattered, the following section groups the responses into general categories and shares the participant-made observations for each category.

4.2. Style & Podcasting Features

In this section, the results and notes from the focus group are shared based on keyword mentions. The participant generated notes were grouped together through an inductive approach to infer what features were the most important. The categories feature both liked and disliked observations. The observations have been counted in each category and their frequencies have been calculated. Those are presented in the form of a table. Those are then quantitatively analyzed while highlighting examples of observations for each category.

When aggregated, a total of 199 notes were taken regarding stylistic features from the podcast sample. 112 of them referred to positive (liked) observations and 87 being negative (disliked). The feature and their frequencies are presented in table 4 and discussed below.

FEATURE	Frequency	# Mentions	Liked	Disliked
Music	12.5%	25	17	8
Conversation	11.5%	23	18	5
Bed. Music	11%	22	16	6
Sounds & Effects	10%	20	13	7
Talking / Speaking	8%	16	7	9
Voices	7%	14	5	9
Advertisements	6.5%	13	0	7
Introduction	6.5%	13	9	4
People	6.5%	13	9	4
Emotion	4.5%	9	6	3
General / Overall	3.5%	7	1	6
Vocabulary	3%	6	3	3
Formality	3%	6	1	5
Audience address	2.5%	5	5	0
Energy	2%	4	3	1
Length	1.5%	3	1	2
Total	**100%**	**199**	**112**	**87**

Table 4: Podcast Features & Frequencies

Table 4 shows the frequencies of the features that participants identified as important. There were 25 notes (12.5%) mentioning the use and quality of *music* within a podcast. Liked observations were counted a total of 17 times, with disliked notes coming up 8 times. Examples include: "music reflects what he's speaking, enhances his story", "music adds such good atmosphere", "music reflects transition", "music slowly fading into background", "use of music sets atmosphere for a health podcast", "music and speech don't feel like 2 separate things", "music complements the speaking", "music is there but its not the main thing". Examples of disliked mentions includes: "music dominates a bit", "no music", "there is little music in the episode which makes it feel shallow", "content is unclear because of the music", "music is too loud", "the music in the intro is a generic commercial sample".

The *conversational aspect* of podcasts was also among the most mentioned features in the sample, mentioned by all of the participants at least once. This was made up of 23 participant notes (11.5%), with 18 of them containing positive observations and 5 negative. Examples include: "I like podcasts just conversing", "conversation is more authentic", "happy conversation", "feels like a genuine conversation and not a performance", "they start straight into casual conversation", "I like that it feels like a conversation between friends". However, some podcasts were also disliked because of certain qualities regarding the details of the conversation: "its less like a conversation and more like TV news", "conversation is not natural", "conversation is too dry", "does not feel like a conversation but a script".

Similarly, the participants also mentioned *background music* as a factor that plays a role in the listening experience. There was a total of 22 notes (11%) for this mention, 16 of them were favorable and 6 were unfavorable. Examples are: "background music reflects topic and sentiment"; "background music reflects what he's speaking enhances his story"; "background music puts the emphasis on what his speaking", "background music has a positive effect"; "use of background sounds makes it feel more lively", "background music is used as a story telling device - sets the theme".

Observations were also noted regarding the use of *sound effects* and *multimedia*. This had 20 mentions (10%) in total, 13 of them were positive and 7 negative. Liked observations are: "sounds reflect the topic", "sound effects support what he is saying and help me visualize it", "sound effects have a good function within the story", "sound effect is a large part in the podcast and it fits well", "multimedia use promotes a good atmosphere", "atmospheric sounds". Use of effects were also disliked by some of the participants when a show sounds too produced or features no editing effects: "production gives it a radio aesthetic (not what I want in a podcast)", "sounds like a TV show", "there are no multimedia dynamics", "lack of background noise makes it sound dull", "it is too silent with no

other sounds or effects except the speaking". Within this context two positive notes were taken regarding the use of *external audio* material: "playing snippets from the news", "playing external audio content to illustrate the theme".

Similarly, *talking* and *speaking* got mentioned 16 times (8%), with 7 liked and 9 disliked observations. Some of the liked mentions are: "the way they speak sounds authentic", "feels like they speak to me directly", "his narration is mesmerizing". The way in which the speaking was also disliked: "the way they talk does not feel like they are talking to me directly, but just talking among themselves", "it's the way they speak. I want to be part of a conversation and not a spectator", "monologue - its very static", "feels like im listening to a speech rather than talking".

Most of the participants also mentioned the voices in a podcast episode. This was mentioned 14 times (7%), with 5 positive and 9 negative observations: "nice tone of voice at the beginning", "voice resonates with a news broadcast style", "melodic voice introducing the podcast". Negative examples are: "one of them has a emotionless voice", "2nd voice is slow", "dull voice".

The use of *Advertisement* and *Sponsored Content* was mentioned a total of 13 times (6.5%) and they were entirely disliked. Some observations from the notes include: "the commercial feels like a parody", "ad – is not naturally integrated", "the sponsored content is too long", "irrelevant ad", "ad feels like a direct sales pitch and takes away from the show", "multiple commercials – makes it annoying".

The *introduction* of a podcast was also mentioned by all participants in a total of 13 times (6.5%). Liked observations amount to 9 mentions and disliked to 4: "intro is very good – they summarize in a cinematic fashion what the podcast is going to be about", "intro is high in energy"; "opening intro with a summary of the episode and music", "intromusic", "intro is less mainstream", "cinematic intro makes a good atmosphere". Introductions were also disliked are: "irrelevant intro"; "intro was official - no jingles so it was more serious"; "introduction sounds like a commercial"; "unauthentic intro – they are trying to hard".

Most of the participants also made observations regarding the *host and people* within a podcast. A total of 13 observations (6.5%) relate to this category, 9 of which are favored and 4 were not. Liked observations mainly related to personal qualities of the people in the podcast: "the hosts are more themselves", "they don't try to create public personas", "they [the podcasters] sound how people would actually react", "the speaker has charisma", "the hosts are more themselves", "hosts know what they are talking about", "she [the podcast host] doesn't try to be appealing but credible". Disliked observations were also made which relate to the speaker's overall personality: "they [the speakers] try to fit into a notion of criticizing", "they want to appeal to an audience", "sounds like they are very subjective", "they try hard to be appealing", "their personalities sound fake".

Notes that mention the use of *emotion* amount to 9 mentions (4.5%), with 6 positive ones: "Expressing happy emotion", "happy hosts", "laughter", "they sound excited", "sounds happy". There were 3 negative ones, all referring to "emotionless speaking".

A total of 6 observations (3%) addressed the use of *terminology and vocabulary*. Positive ones are: "episodes sound technical but his vocabulary is not"; "sentences are simple". A negative example is: "they are using political terminology which makes listening difficult".

Six negative observations (3%) are present which refer to *how formal or serious* a podcast is: "it is too dry and formal", "too formal", "its not very loose but more serious", "it sounds serious", "too official"

The mention *audience* comes up within the notes a total of 5 times (2.5%) from 5 participants, which primarily relates to the way in which the podcaster engages or addresses the audience. Those responses were favoured: "no acknowledgement of an audience", "doesn't feel like they are talking to an audience", "lack of acknowledgement of an audience", "focus on the guest rather than an audience"

Energy comes up in the notes only 4 times (2%), with 3 liked and one disliked observation: "the mood and energy of the podcast is positive", good group dynamic and energy".

Only a few participants mentioned the *length* of a podcast (1.5%). Once in a positive manner and twice in a negative manner expressing that an episode is "too long".

The other 7 notes (3.7%) were related to an *overall* evaluation of an episode. There was only one liked mention, with 6 of them being expressed as disliked: "its a performance (scripted)", "overall bad audio recording", "performance is not as natural", "its less loose", "the differences in recording qualities are noticeable". The positive mention was: "conveying information easily".

This section shared the participant responses with regard to the features that got observed. The responses were grouped together into general categories based on topic. This, together with the previous section (which described the participants individual experiences) answer the question what stylistic podcast features, if any, are important with regard to individual preference?

Music was the most observed feature, attracting more positive responses than negative ones. However, aspects relating to the conversational feature of podcasts had the most liked observations. This was similarly followed by background music, sounds effects and qualities relating to speaking. The feature with the most disliked observations was advertisements. In light of the previous section (4.1. Participant POV), those are also the features that were observed and noted by all of the participants. Hence, it can be said that those features are generally important for podcast listening.

However, the other features that the users observed were related to the Introduction, People, Voices, Emotion, Vocabulary, Formality, Audience address / interaction, Energy and Length. All of those features had both positive and negative observations throughout the sample and the attitudes varied. Hence, those features highlight how preferences and the importance of stylistic features can vary between the individual listeners, and the degree to which they do.

Given that the same feature within a podcast can be liked by one user but disliked by the other; Dunne et al. (2019) argued that this implies dimensionality. Hence, those features could be ranked on a scale with regards to individual preferences. This can be used to make inferences regarding broader podcast characteristics that are moderated through stylistics. Therefore, in the next chapter, the observed features are grouped into broader functional categories / themes and discussed with regard to the literature in chapter 2.

5. The Role and Salience of Stylistics

This section addresses the impact and salience of the identified stylistic features with regard to podcast listening. In the previous section, the participant responses were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed and open coded into general features based on the keyword they mention. This resulted in a total of 16 categories with some overlap. Those categories were then compared one to another in an axial approach. With respect to that, categories were omitted and related to broader themes and encompassing categories. This was done based on the similarities of the features and the observations from the notes. For example, mentions that fall under "speaking", "talking" and "conversation" were grouped together into "Content Delivery Style". This is because the notes that mention talking, speaking or conversation all mention the influence those features have on how the content is delivered. Similarly, the notes that mention the use of music were grouped into 'Musicality', since those observations capture the characteristics of using different musical styles. Table 5 illustrates the coding approach. The coding scheme is also available in *Appendix D.*

Category	Features
Content Delivery style	Conversation; Speaking; Talking; Presentation; Performance
Musicality	Music; Background Music
Bed. Sounds & Effects	Sounds; Background Sounds; Effects; Sound Effects
Introductory Jingle	Introduction; Intromusic; Intro
Commercials	Advertisements; Sponsored Content
Energy & Dynamics	Energy; Mood; Emotion; Speech Rate
The Podcaster(s)	People; the Hosts; the Guests
Audience Interaction	Audience Acknowledgement
Technical Quality	Audio Quality; Production Quality; Recording Quality

Table 5: Stylistic Categories

The categories in table 5 feature characteristics that emerged as important for the podcast listening experience from the participant notes. Those characteristics are moderated by stylistic features. The impact and importance of those categories and features are discussed bellow with regard to literature from chapter 1.

5.1. Content Delivery Style

The overall presentation of a podcast, as evident through ways of speaking, was among the most mentioned observations. The participants generally favored podcasts which are unscripted and feature a conversational style. This was also influenced by how formal or leisure a podcast is. Only one participant disliked when podcasts are just conversing and emphasized that a more planned delivery of content is more efficient. The conversational style was also mentioned by Larson et al. (2010) since most podcasts feature a host and a guest. This is a mode of content delivery which according to most of the participants in this study is an authentic mode of podcasting. There were two podcasts that delivered content via monologue, both attracting different responses. Podcast number 77 was mainly disliked with regard to how the content is narrated by one person reading a script. Podcast

number 41 had the same style of content delivery but was more favored because of other features. Most of the participants agreed that a monologue sounds like listening to a speech rather than podcast.

5.2. Musicality

As emphasized by Dunne et al. (2019) and Larson et al. (2010), the use of music within a podcast is an important predictor for podcast appeal. This was mostly evident regarding podcasts that fall under entertainment media and, as the participants expressed, the use of music can range from pleasant to unpleasant as well as from subtle to explicit. As noted by Dunne et al. (2019) music can act as a predictor of mood and is an important factor for contextual recommendations. For example, users might favor energetic music within the context of one podcast, but more mellow music within another. Hence, music can be assessed based on its overall valance – how 'positive' the audio sounds. The use of music was seen by the participants as being a device for atmosphere setting and should be in support with the tone of the narrative. The participants also remarked how the use of static music can make the podcast show sound monotonous. Hence, they favored music which changes rhythm, pitch and valance throughout the content. Therefore, the overall musicality of a podcast can be assessed as featuring either no music, static music or dynamic.

5.3. Background Sounds and Effects

Bed. Sounds and effects are seen as significant factors within a podcast's overall presentation and the participant responses highlight that the role of sounds and effects is to support the speakers narrative as well as aid in visualizing the content of the podcast. Those responses are in line with R. Nee et als. (2021) findings, where the authors argue that edited production material act as a stylistic device within a podcast show. This has the potential to the communicate the mood and sentiment of the podcast and contributes to "dramatization and character setting" (12). Whereas the use of background sounds and effects was primarily favored by the participants, some of the observations hint that there is a degree to which their use is appropriate. For example, podcasts that use no effects were primarily described as dull, dry and empty, whereas using too much production effects can make it feel like radio, which was disliked because it makes the podcast sound like it tries to appeal to a broader audience.

5.4. Introductory Jingle

The signature introduction or opening jingle of a podcast played a major role in how the participants form a first impression of the podcast show. Larson et al. (2010) also note that this acts as a factor that can predict the overall popularity rate of a podcast. From a broad perspective, the participant responses highlight how the use of a cinematic and well structure upshot of the show adds to the overall engagement level. The intro of a podcast is also observed as having a role for when users engage with podcasts for information seeking behavior. For example, podcast number 12 is in the form of a news broadcast, but it was labeled as being too long since it is around 50 minutes. Hence, the participants highlight that a well-structured introduction summarizes the key take-aways of the news discussed. This is relevant for when users look for daily news updates, which they can find within the first few minutes of the show and then decide if they want to listen to a longer and more elaborate version. Drew (2017) calls this way of summarizing content 'The Quick Burst' (2). Furthermore, Swanson (2012) would argue that a feature as such adds to the podcast efficiency, since it helps the user to receive gratification in a short amount of time.

5.5. Advertisements

The use of advertisements and promotional content was entirely disliked. This is in direct conflict with McClung & Johnsons (2010) hypothesis that podcast listeners have a favorable and tolerant attitude towards the use of sponsored content within podcasts. The participant responses highlight an overall dissatisfaction with how advertisements are integrated and executed within a podcast, saying that commercials are to the most part irrelevant with regard to the content of the podcast. Furthermore, most negative observations were directed towards podcast number 26, which features 3 advertisements. The responses note that this makes the show feel like a sales pitch and takes away from the content. Furthermore, the length of commercials also seemed to play a role. This supports Crofts et als. (2005) argument that podcasting is generally seen as a departure from the dissatisfactions that users had with radio, i.e., the use of irrelevant, generic commercials and programming.

5.6. Vocal Qualities

Observations regarding the tone and qualities of the speaker's voice were shared by all the participants. This category is the most subjective in nature as some participants disliked the voice in 1 podcast, but other participants do not. There were no extra justifications to why other than it does not sound good to the individual listener. However, Burbaker (2020) notes that voice can be assessed based on pitch and valance. This might be indicative of the formality and energy within a podcast. In general, voices that feature a lot of variation were liked, whereas or 'static' levels were disliked. Furthermore, some observations note that female voices, from a younger demographic are more favored (such as in podcast number 33), whereas voices from older individuals were more disliked (such as in podcast number 12). In addition, the participants noted that the 'color' of a voice is pleasant if it expresses a lot of emotion.

5.7. Energy & Dynamics

Energy within a podcast was primarily mentioned with regard to the overall group dynamic within the show. Here, responses were mixed. Podcasts that aggregated the most positive responses within this category were the ones that featured multiple people talking. This is also highlighted by Larson et al. (2010) in their framework, arguing that within educational podcasts, the presence of multiple speakers adds to the overall credibility. This category also has mentions regarding atmosphere setting, which was characterized by the use of laughter within an episode, either from external audio or from the podcasters themselves. R. Nee et al. (2021) emphasized that this contributes to an informative entertainment aesthetic. Dunne et al. (2019) also noted energy as being an important attribute. The author argued that this is indicative through speech rate. For example, the number of words can be divided by the number of seconds or minutes within a podcast, which ca hint towards how 'energetic' the speech is. Speech rate was also mentioned a few times by the participants, noting that speech can be either too fast or slow, influencing the experience.

5.8. The Podcaster(s)

The participant responses suggest that they favor podcasters which are individuals being themselves, rather than actors that act as a talk show host. Furthermore, the attribute of a 'knowledgeable host' (Larson et al. 2010, 380) got also mentioned and has a purpose of communicating the narrative effectively. This was expressed especially for podcast number 39, where the participant described the host as having charisma and originality. The responses also suggest that a

group dynamic is more favored within the context of a podcast, than when podcast feature only one individual.

5.9. Audience Interaction

The way that a podcaster engages with an audience through acknowledgement influences the manner in which the content is presented. Four of the participants preferred podcasts which do not address the listeners but deliver spoken content as a conversation between the individuals involved in the podcast. One of the participants disliked this, saying that it isolates the listener. The other two participants made no observation regarding this and later expressed that it does not matter to them or that it depends on other factors that are not explicit.

5.10. Technical Qualities

The technical quality of a podcast is assessed based on audio and recording quality. This was emphasized by Larson et al. (2010) as a predictor for podcast information credibility. While this was only addressed a few times by a few participants, a high audio and recording quality is generally favored for podcast use. Hence, this quality can be assessed on a scale from low quality to high quality. This was also noted by Swanson (2012) and Besser (2010) who found that participants enjoy more professionally produced podcasts than amateur ones.

5.11. Discussion

This section discusses the results of this chapter and states the contribution of the study and positions the study within a broader context. The main contribution of this study is a framework of podcast characteristics which are moderated through stylistic features. Those characteristics can be summarized in the following categories: Content Delivery Style, Musicality, Background Sounds & Effects, Introductory Jingle, Advertisements, Vocal Qualities, Energy & Dynamics, The Podcaster(s), Audience Interaction and Technical Qualities.

Some of the responses from the participants suggest that audiences have a perception of podcasts as being a unique and independent medium. While the participants acknowledge the inspiration that podcasts draw from other media (such as radio and tv), their responses suggest that

podcasts should not sound like radio but be more conversational. Regarding Bowie (2012) and his anatomy of a podcast, the gathered participant responses show that users can observe and feel about different parts of a podcast in different ways. Those parts are noted by Bowie (2012) as: theme music, intro, musical and other transitions, bed. music, main body, visuals and outro.

While McClung & Johnson (2010) and Swanson (2019) have researched the general motivators that people have for listening to podcasts, the present study emphasizes that certain stylistic and auditory features can also act as motivators for (non)listening. Besser et al. (2010) expands on this by also emphasizing the role of professionally curated qualities. Those features were also observed in this study but also moderated by other features. Furthermore, Besser et als. (2010) and Jones et als. (2021) argument that podcast search and retrieval could be enhanced through different modelling approaches is supported within the context of this study, since most of the stylistic categories could be used to enrich metadata for indexing purposes. This could also have potential for an interesting follow-up study.

These results also contribute to the framework as introduced by Larson et al. (2010) which provides an extensive account of podcast features. Larson et als. (2010) framework encompasses almost all aspects of podcasting, ranging from the reputation of the podcaster to the use of production material. The present study expands on this by researching features that relate to "the podcaster, the content and the technical execution of a podcast", but in more detail and providing further background to what the role of the said features is.

With regard to Dunne et al. (2019) who research non-textual podcasting aspects, the results from the current study emphasize the importance of mood predicting features and supports the authors findings that such features correlate with popularity (as evident through the participants likes and dislikes).

6. Limitations

In this section the limitations of the research are acknowledged. In order to investigate the salience of stylistics in podcast listening, a qualitative user study was conducted in the form of observations gathered form a focus. Frequent podcast listeners were sourced out and tasked to evaluate a sample of podcasts based on the podcast's stylistic qualities. The participant sample consisted of 7 individuals with diverse backgrounds, however, this number is too small to be representative of a wider population of podcast listeners. With regard to the research design, the main threat of a focus group is the conscious or unconscious influence that the researcher has (Pickard

2013). While the participants have been encouraged to write observations regarding any stylistic feature they can identify, the manner in which the participants were briefed about what stylistic features are may have influenced the way in which the participants assessed the podcast sample. In addition, this research did not engage in quantitative analysis in order to assess the statistical significance of the results, but this might be addressed in future research. It is important to note that the stylistics identified within this study were also pre-determined by the sample of podcasts. While attention was paid to select a diverse and varied set of podcasts, there might be other podcasts and genres which might contain different stylistic features.

7. Conclusion & Future Research

Podcasting has gained significant market attention and popularity in the last decade, however, it suffers from limitations in terms of accessibility and discoverability as other forms of spoken. While podcasts have been of academic interest in their early days, the scholarly attention plumed later on. With the format is evolving into its own unique medium, characterized by user generated content and a loyal audience; it is important to understand this medium in terms of its unique dynamics. Podcast as, a form of spoken content media, contain stylistic properties which might be important for podcast preference as well as index and retrieval. Hence, the main question of this work is: What is the salience of stylistics for podcast listening?

To this end, this study first contextualized podcasts within the current media landscape. While podcasts used to be considered as an extension of blogging and radio broadcasting, more recent arguments are that podcasts have evolved into its own unique medium, characterized by low barriers to entry and a lack of regulations. Those conveniences and convergences with other media forms allow podcasts to take various and diverse formats. This poses challenges to our understanding of what forms and styles a podcast can take. Therefore, this study also asked to what extent can we consider podcasts as having stylistic properties?

While the notion of style has not been extensively researched for podcasts, music and sound studies explain the style as details of the characteristics which vary between media objects. Those are commonly accessible through the objects features. A framework was aggregated regarding content-independent podcast features that formed the conceptual framework for this study. Podcasts contain features that relate to the content of the podcast, the podcaster, the context of the podcast and the technical execution. Since podcasting can take different shapes and formats, podcasts can exhibit diverse features that can vary per individual creator, hence exhibiting style. While this provides a broad account of what podcasting features might contain stylistics, this study was motivated to

understand how important those features are for individual podcast listeners. Hence the question, what stylistic features, if any, are important for podcast listening with regard to user preferences?

An exploratory, qualitative user study has been conducted through observations gathered from a focus group. Frequent podcast listeners were recruited in order to evaluate a podcast sample based on the stylistic qualities that the participants find important with regard to their individual preferences. While listening to the podcasts, the participants wrote their responses onto notes which were then qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed.

The analysis reveals that podcast users pay attention to diverse features within the medium. The most important features, which were observed by all the subjects within the study (and the most number of times) are: the use of (background) music, aspects of conversational qualities, the introduction of an episode, characteristics of speaking and the use advertisements. The qualities and styles of those features attracted different attitudes, suggesting that stylistic preferences are subjective in nature and vary per the individual user. This is also evident since features got identified which played an important role for the listening experience for some users, but not for others, such as the characteristics of the people within a podcast, expressing emotions, type of vocabulary, audio quality, formality, ways of interacting with the audience, energy and how long an episode is. All of the mentioned stylistic features reflect different stylistic characteristics that can be encountered within podcasts. Those can be summarized in the following categories: Content Delivery Style, Musicality, Background Sounds & Effects, Introduction / Jingle, Commercials, Vocal Qualities, Energy & Dynamics, The Podcaster(s) and the Technical Execution.

"Content Delivery Style" emphasizes speaking, talking and the presentational styles within a podcast. The most favored style was the conversation which is characterized by a loose attitude and features a casual chat. This was expressed as being the most favorable podcasting style by the focus group participants. The least favorable aspect were podcasts that feature a monologue or a speech. This was the case for 6 out of the 7 participants.

"Musicality" refers to the use of (background) music within a podcast and can be assessed based on how explicit or implicit the music is. Based on the participant responses, it can be concluded that users favor podcasts that contain a rich and varied amount of music, that accompanies the speaker and acts as a thematic device. Whereas almost all musical aspects were favored by the participants, the state of featuring no music in a podcast was generally disliked.

This is followed by the category Background Sounds & Sound Effects. The participants expressed that featuring no sounds in the background or sounds effects that help in illustrating the discussion is generally disliked. The use of no sounds and effects makes an episode feel dull according to the responses but laying too much emphasis on it can lead to the podcast being seen as an attempt to appeal.

The Intro / Jingle characterizes the signature introduction of a podcast. While this can range from cinematic to formal, the observed responses suggest that it is the 'upshot' that matters the most. This refers to the degree of effectiveness of summarizing and broadcasting the content in a short amount of time.

The use of Commercials and Advertisements played a role in the stylistic evaluation, as all of the participants identified it in a negative manner. This primary related to the way in which sponsored content was executed.

Energy and Dynamics are comprised of mood predicting features such as laughter, valance and speech rate. The general use of those features corresponds with favorable preference.

The Podcaster(s) relate to the people involved in the podcast episode. The appearance of multiple people in a podcast is generally more favored than only one host. Within this context, the personalities of the individual people also played a role.

Audience Engagement entails the ways in which the podcast host interacts or acknowledges an audience. The podcasts that had the most positive responses within this context were then ones that feature no acknowledgement of an audience. Finally, the Technical Quality relates to feature such general audio and recording quality.

While the direct influence and precise importance of stylistics cannot be accurately assessed as of yet, the results of this study offer ground for follow-up research. As the individual styles of podcasts are deemed as important to podcast users within this study, this section also calls for further research in this area. As shown, podcasts can have various stylistic feature that can attract different attitudes in terms of preferences. Those features are important for certain podcast characteristics and have the potential to influence podcast appeal. Future studies could explore the extent to which this varies between individual podcast producers. This study did not analyze how the execution of stylistic features varied between podcasts in detail. In addition, the diversity of the attitudes towards certain stylistic features might suggest different user personas.

The salience of stylistics can also be seen in their potential to be automatically indexed. A follow-up study could explore the extent to which can we categorize podcasts based on the identified stylistic categories. This could also be ranked on a subjective scale in order to see if the identified features correlate with popularity.

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Appendices

A. **Focus Group Schedule & Briefing:**
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MCpRo5FLjgTcz9ac7m-9LMOdBeHsHyAnL9T2ZWGC_uY/edit?usp=sharing

B. **Podcast Sample:**
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ClUFauC5lw54kD2w7AXZqMFdxuoDvBRl?usp=sharing

C. **Focus Group – Participant Responses:**
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbpLZGZwlx2UuHuButEsVEPHQPTidsNbgq1INWwgf0A/edit?usp=sharing

D. **Participant Responses Annotated (Code Book):**
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1XFHbT0T2bp3_ehqGtOK4LHPUq5pGtrGtiHOfkjK5PZ4/edit?usp=sharing