PODCASTS FOR MINDFULNESS: A PATH TO YOUTH MENTAL WELLBEING

Kashish Singh, Dr. Pragati Paul

PhD Scholar, AJK Mass Communication Research Centre,
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi
kashishsingh.w@gmail.com

Senior Assistant Professor, AJK Mass Communication Research Centre,
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India
Corresponding author : pbhalla@jmi.ac.in

Abstract

Podcast listening among Indian youth has increased significantly in the post-Covid era, as has discourse on mental health. Podcasts are audio-based new media that have shown the potential to facilitate storytelling and engage listeners into effective communication. The introduction of Web 2.0 in the late 1990s resulted in an increase in access and usage of new media technologies. New media interventions in the emerging media paradigm have the potential to bring up stigmatized conversations related to mental health and foster mindfulness amongst individuals. Mindfulness requires intrapersonal communication wherein an individual seeks self-awareness to work towards their mental wellbeing. Podcasting's increasing appeal has the potential to improve listeners' mental health by providing an atmosphere for freedom of expression, learning, and motivation. The study aims to explore the affective nature of an aural medium like a podcast that serves the listeners with a sensorial experience of listening and imagining that can also act as sound therapy to facilitate mindfulness. The research will be carried out using content analysis of selected podcasts that feature content promoting mindfulness. The study will focus on the narrative text of selected podcasts. The qualitative study used focus group discussions with postgraduate media students selected through a purposive sample of participants who listen to podcasts to keep their mental health in check. The discussion consisted of conversations to understand the various genres of podcasts and shows that the listeners listen to, their motivations, interests, and attitudes behind the listeners seeking the help of an audio based new media technology for mindfulness. The findings of the research laid out potential benefits of the affective and sensorial nature of the medium and challenges of the podcast format to seek mental wellbeing in self-isolation.

Keywords: mental wellbeing, mindfulness, podcast, sound therapy

INTRODUCTION

Lower levels of mental well-being are more likely to occur in those with mental health issues like depression, and anxiety. Therefore, due to the interconnectedness of the body and mind, poor mental health can also affect physical health (WHO, 2022). Mental health issues are a widespread and escalating concern on a global scale. Mental health of youth is a key indicator of progress toward SDG targets (UNICEF, 2023). Regrettably, a significant proportion of youngsters suffering from mental illness refrain from seeking treatment for their conditions because of the biases and social stigma associated with it. Therefore, various interventions are being employed to educate and empower the youth about mental wellness using new media extensions. Podcast listening among Indian youth has increased significantly in the post- Covid era, as has discourse on mental health. Mindfulness for stress management has been recognized as a technique that has demonstrated potential to achieve mental health stability. According to Kabat-Zinn (2005), mindfulness is a practice that involves training one's attention to increase awareness of the present moment while letting go of any preoccupation with ideas about the past and future. Mindfulness requires intrapersonal communication wherein an individual seeks self-awareness to work towards their mental wellbeing. Pursuing mindfulness becomes challenging in the age of new media, characterized by the dominance of short video content, leading to a diminished capacity for sustained focus among users. Thus, the smartphone has become an analogous extension of the human hand.

In the midst of an overcrowded intervention to treat mental health, there is therapy through sound. The practice of using sound for healing is thought to have originated in ancient Greece, where music was employed as a therapeutic method to treat mental problems. New media like podcasts are emerging tools to heal through the power of sound and music (Leonard, 2008).

Audio files that are published digitally and released in episodes at regular intervals and made available for download to portable media players are known as podcasts. Apple's discontinued portable music device, the iPod, served as the inspiration for its nomenclature. The term "Pod" is a reference to the iPod, but "cast" is a suffix that is an abbreviation for broadcasting (Samuel-Azran et al., 2019). The evolution of podcasting commenced in the early 2000s, and the name 'podcast' was invented in February 2004 by Ben Hammersley in an article

published in The Guardian. Apps and websites like Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, and countless more are commonly used to listen to podcasts. Podcasts might appear as interviews, casual conversations, intellectual discussions, narratives, and several other formats. Furthermore, podcasts can include a wide variety of soundtracks and sound effects (Martikainen et al., 2022).

Podcasts transcend simple audio recordings that possess the ability to convert ordinary moments into chances for education, empowerment, and mindfulness (Chauhan & Pandey, 2023). Though podcasts cannot be considered a substitute for therapy, they offer practical coping mechanisms that can be readily integrated into one's daily life for immediate enhancement. Thus, the study aims to explore the affective nature of an aural medium like a podcast to facilitate mindfulness.

JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

The transition from traditional media to online content has been supported by the emergence of Web 2.0 and user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Such a transition led to the fading away of the aural medium and the rise of the visual medium. While there has been extensive research on general internet content consumption, there is currently a dearth of research specifically focused on podcasts. Given the increasing popularity of podcasts among youth and the vast number of consumers who listen to them, it is crucial to gain a more comprehensive grasp of this phenomenon. According to Rachna & Mishra (2023) over 75% of the Indian youth engaged with podcasts in the prior year. According to the research, one of the main reasons why young people like podcasts is that they help them with their quest for personal growth. The majority of podcasting research conducted so far categorize the medium as being closely associated with concepts of accessibility and democratic principles. Most existing scholarship related to podcasting tends to focus exclusively on how the medium aids in providing factual information to the listeners, overlooking the roller coaster ride of emotions and physical affective changes that a listener goes through while listening to a podcast. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct such a study to explore how an aural new media like a podcast can be considered for promoting mental health amongst youth.

OBJECTIVES

1. To understand how an aural medium like a podcast has the ability to facilitate mindfulness
2. To reflect on the experiences of the listeners seeking the help of an audio-based new media technology for mindfulness
3. To examine the benefits and challenges of the affective and sensorial nature of the podcast format to seek mental wellbeing

METHODOLOGY

As the study's overarching goal is to gain insight into how podcast listeners consume content, the research is qualitative and interpretive. To gain knowledge about youth's experiences and habits of consuming podcasts for attaining mindfulness, the researcher conducted focus group discussions with postgraduate media students who consume podcast content on a regular basis. The sample of respondents was selected using a purposive sampling. Content analysis of selected podcasts that feature content promoting mindfulness was carried out. McNamara & Kirakowski (2006) state that media texts are polysemic, meaning they can be perceived differently by different readers, and they strive to understand the audience's perspective. During focus group discussions with a sample of participants, we selected the podcasts based on the most frequently referenced episodes from various genres. The content was analyzed based on the following criteria, which included the study of text, sound, and format.

Table-1: Codes of Content Analysis

Podcast Name	Text	Sound	Format
Daily Calm	Duration- 10 to 20 mins Content Focus - Uses affirmations, visualizations, and mindfulness techniques to address subjects, such as stress, anxiety, and depression meditations Language - English (Formal)	Guided meditation sessions led by a female voice Natural recorded sounds of nature (Flowing river, Chirping of Birds. Instructional tone	Planned Format Guided Imagery Meditation Available on all audio streaming platforms Shareable via social media

The Ranveer Show	Duration - 45 mins to 1 hour Content Focus- Includes conversation with known celebrities, politicians and business personalities about their journeys of success and failures and how they dealt with mental health issues. Language- English, Hindi, Hinglish (Informal Conversation)	Intro and Outro to introduce and close the podcast Ambient Noise to give a natural touch to the conversation Usually it includes the voices of two individuals the host and guest Conversational and Interactive tone	Flexible Format Interview Monologue Available on all audio streaming platforms Shareable via social media
Coach for Mind: The Indian Mental Health Podcast	Duration – 10 mins to 30 mins Content Focus- promotes mental health awareness and well-being, covering topics such as depression, anxiety, relationships, stress, mindfulness, and workplace mental health, along with counseling and psychotherapy insights. Language- English (Informal Conversation)	Informative auditory experience) Usually it includes the voices of two individuals the female host and expert Mr. Lekh Bajaj, a clinical psychologist Conversational and professional tone Sound design is kept minimal, ensuring that the emphasis remains on the content rather than distractions	Consistent sound structure Interview Available on all audio streaming platforms Shareable via social media

The three podcasts whose content analysis was done are Daily Calm Podcast, The Ranveer Show, and Coach for Mind: The Indian Mental Health Podcast. The first one is a podcast that offers guided meditation sessions led by a female voice, providing listeners with instructions and guidance to practice meditation. The duration of the guided meditations ranges from ten to twenty minutes. Their focus lies on utilizing affirmations, visualizations, and mindfulness techniques to address a range of subjects, such as stress, anxiety, and depression meditations. Whereas the second one, which is also known as Beer Biceps, is an interview and conversational platform where the host welcomes accomplished individuals from many domains, such as politicians, film stars, and health professionals, to discuss their mental well-being and life experiences. In addition, the host also records monologues where he shares recommendations regarding mental health practices and different ways of practicing mindfulness. Lastly, Coach for Mind: The Indian Mental Health Podcast, emphasizes the importance of mental health awareness and the enhancement of total mental well-being. The subject matter encompasses depression, anxiety disorders, interpersonal complexities, stress mitigation, mindfulness, personal development, and mental health in the workplace. In addition, the program offers counselling and psychotherapy insights by a professional expert Mr. Lekh Bajaj, a clinical psychologist, presenting techniques to preserve mental well-being. The program addresses pertinent topics such high-functioning anxiety, seasonal affective disorder, and stress management in daily life.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

The researcher conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on the focus group discussion and content analysis. The field notes were integrated with the data for coding and translation, and subsequently analyzed in three categories: A Medium of Sensory Self Care, An Alternative Form of Media and A Tool of Reflexivity & Interactivity.

https://www.gapbodhitaru.org/
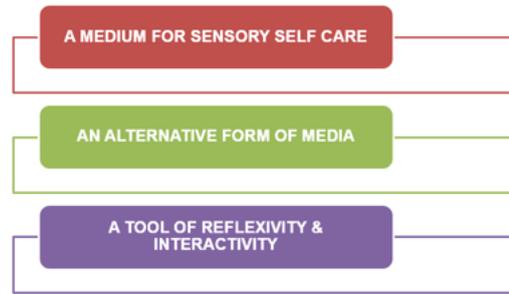
Figure-1: Thematic Analysis Categories

A Medium of Sensory Self Care

The study found out that the recorded ambient sounds of waterfalls and chirping birds took the respondents to another world while they listened to the Daily Calm guided meditation podcast. According to one of the respondents, "I started practicing meditation through a podcast during COVID 19 pandemic that helped me heal in the midst of general uncertainty." Ambient sounds serve as a fundamental element for the practice of mindfulness, assisting individuals in directing their focus to the current moment. By actively attending to the auditory stimuli in their environment, individuals can develop heightened consciousness of their surroundings and their own internal condition, thus nurturing a more profound feeling of being present and practicing mindfulness. The ambient sounds foster a sense of connection with the natural world. Employing arts-based methods in podcast production, namely by incorporating music and soundscapes, significantly amplifies the emotional and sensory engagement for listeners. Through the integration of creative components such as rhythm, melody, and environmental sounds, podcasts have the ability to elicit profound emotional reactions, so augmenting the whole listening experience. These soundscapes help listeners connect with the material on a sensory level, involving the body and emotions in ways that go beyond normal ways of communicating through representation. Rather than only transmitting information, this non-representational sound style encourages listeners to emotionally experience and fully engage with the podcast, therefore immersing them in its ambiance and strengthening their relationship with the topic matter. Through this mode of communication, a deeper personal and emotional involvement is facilitated, so transforming the listener from a mere recipient into an engaged participant in the encounter (Clevenger & Rick, 2021).

Another respondent expressed that podcasts serve as a discreet means of digital self-care, saying, "What I like about podcasts is just being away from a screen." Podcasting only requires listeners to hear through their ear. During the communication process only the ear and brain work together leaving out other sense organs. Podcasting is a private medium that, in contrast to other social media technologies, offers reflective pathways for reaching understandings of selfhood. Thus, it's a new mediumthat can aid an individual to heal themselves by just listening to it alone. Podcasts are a manifestation of Foucault's (1988) "technology of the self," as they promote affective behaviours that aid in the formation and management of self-identity.

An Alternative Form of Media

While discussing the mediated discourse on mental health issues among Indian youth, one of the respondents expressed, "As mental health affects each and every one of us as people and as a society, it is a topic that demands the utmost attention. We require a venue where mental health concerns can be openly discussed in a clear and objective manner to avoid all kinds of stigma against it." In comparison to mainstream media, podcasts offer an alternative form of media whose content is consumed in isolation. Hence, it provides a non-judgemental atmosphere to seek mindfulness (Mehendale, 2022). "Mainstream media fails to be inclusive, and hence they are 'becoming' a representative medium. I find podcasts more credible." as told by another respondent. One can stay at home and listen to a podcast alone without letting others know that they're seeking help from a medium to achieve mindfulness. Written and visual media, such as books or films, enable viewers to maintain a certain degree of detachment from the subject matter, therefore facilitating active engagement with it from a certain distance. Auditory perception, on the other hand, does not provide this distinction. Based on Voegelin's (2010) perspective, sound is characterized by its immediacy and immersion. The listener has no agency in selecting what to hear, as they only perceive what is already there. Audio provides a direct and unadulterated experience, rendering it a more intimate and captivating mode of connection in comparison to other forms of media.

A respondent also recommended inviting real life survivors to tell their stories instead of just inviting experts to give tips as it happens in Ranveer's show or The Coach Mind podcast. However, Bajaj along with his informational content about psychology also tends to share examples of cases from his real life practice, that tends to make the podcast more interactive and relatable. Furthermore, the respondents suggested that guided meditation podcasts should incorporate an expert certification to enhance their credibility, akin to the approach taken by The Coach Mind podcast. Due to its distinctive qualities that cultivate close relationships with listeners, podcasting has become an alternative form of media. Firstly, the feature of on-demand listening enhances the

https://www.gapbodhitaru.org/

personalization of podcasts by enabling consumers to listen at their convenience and desired location, therefore converting the medium into a tailored experience. Furthermore, headphones, which are used by 90% of podcast listeners, enhance this depth of connection by generating a "hyper-intimacy" in which the voice appears to originate from within, rather than from an external origin (Karathanasopoulou, 2023). This experience is further augmented when podcasts are accessible via portable mobile devices, therefore strengthening the intimate bond between the listener and the transmitted material. Collectively, these elements contribute to the intimate, adaptable, and intensely personalised character of podcasting, distinguishing it from conventional media formats.

A Tool of Reflexivity & Interactivity

During the podcast sessions, the participants used sound to establish their connection with time, location, and individuals. The chosen podcast episodes to elicit specific emotions showed significant variation depending on individual preference, the time of day, and the desired mental state. A respondent highlighted that they can access podcast content at any time, as long as they have a smartphone, earphones, and internet access to download and listen to it at their convenience. The option to select offered consumers a sense of tangible ease, instilling in them a greater sense of capability, autonomy, and emotional self-regulation in their daily lives, even while doing other chores. The long duration of podcasts enable extended discussions with self in the form of self-reflection, wherein subjects can be thoroughly analyzed, developed over time, and provide insights into both the speaker and the topic being discussed. Therefore, the structure eliminates the necessity for a definitive, ideological resolution, and instead provides a realm of potentiality in which individuals can identify, establish, or expand upon their own personal perspectives and viewpoints. The discussions taking place on podcasts do not exhibit the fluctuating and tumultuous nature of narrative drama, but rather unfold at a pace that mirrors real-life experiences (Robson, 2023). Therefore, the medium serves as a surrounding background for personal thoughts and reactions, providing listeners with a more subtle way of personalization compared to other digital tools available to us. There also exists an intimate connection between aural media and the listener, irrespective of the nature of the program. This connection emerges from multiple factors. Firstly, the inherent mobility of audio media enables it to effortlessly integrate into individual experiences and environmental settings. Furthermore, the lack of visual components stimulates listeners to actively engage with the material by constructing their own mental representations, therefore enhancing the level of personalization in the experience. Thirdly, the ambient aspect of audio implies that it is not strictly limited, so enabling narratives and sounds to organically integrate into the listener's environment. Finally, audio material is usually ingested on an individual basis, through podcasts, therefore strengthening a direct and personal relationship between the medium and the listener. These characteristics collectively promote a distinctive type of involvement that is both personal and deeply engaging. This can be further understood through the concept of "technological intimacy", wherein it refers to the integration of public and private areas facilitated by technology through different types of mobility, including technological, geographical, psychological, physical, and temporal capabilities. This notion emphasizes the manner in which mobile media erodes the distinctions between the online and offline realms by customizing experiences. This phenomenon generates a stratified perception of place, in which physical and geographical positions are intricately linked with emotional and social bonds facilitated by technologies. Hence, individuals encounter a confluence of material-geographic presence and electronic-social presence, so establishing a close intimacy with their digital surroundings (Hjorth & Lim, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Podcasts aided individuals in discreetly managing and resolving their mental health concerns. Nevertheless, they have sporadically facilitated the dissolution of conventional social connections, similar to other forms of digital communication. Individuals are unable to function without a technological device. Even during their everyday activities, they remain engaged with a podcast or an audiobook. The prevalence of multitasking has increased. Based on the participants' feedback, they are often engaged in solitary podcast listening while performing various tasks such as folding laundry, having a shower, or commuting to work. The medium is classified as "ambient" because of its adaptable and customizable features, which encourage peripheral listening patterns and mirror the increasing tendency of "living in media" rather than simply coexisting with it (Deuze, 2013). It was also discovered that it is crucial to move beyond the notion of media solely as channels for information and instead focus on how intimacy, social connection, and self-determination shape our media consumption patterns. Respondents also voiced apprehensions over the dual nature of using technology as a means to attain mindfulness. One respondent also mentioned that deforestation has caused humanity to look for natural sounds through technology. The use of audio to simulate soothing, natural settings, frequently includes noises such as rain, wind, or forest ambiance to encourage relaxation and mindfulness training. Meditation apps and podcasts utilize soundscapes to replicate the serenity of nature in order to counterbalance the abundant distractions of contemporary existence. By combining meditation and technology, this integration addresses our innate desire for connection with the natural world, providing a digital alternative to the peace that was previously easily

accessible in natural environments. As urbanization expands, the dependence on technology to facilitate and enhance experiences of tranquillity that were once more easily attainable in natural environments also increases. Although this study offers useful insights into the correlation between mindfulness caused by podcasts, it is crucial to recognize its limits. Acknowledging these constraints assists in placing the findings in context and guiding future research endeavours. The sample used in the study is highly homogeneous, which means that the findings may not be applicable to more diverse communities. The majority of participants belonged to a specific age group and had a similar educational background. The study utilized self-report methods to assess, which are intrinsically dependent on individual views. These measurements may be influenced by bias and might not completely reflect objective indicators of well-being. To summarize, this study provides useful insights into the connection between mental wellbeing caused by podcasts. However, the limitations of this study highlight the necessity for additional research to enhance and build upon these findings. One can employ experimental interventions to create and execute, utilizing podcasts as motivational instruments. Conduct a comparative analysis of the well-being outcomes of individuals who interact with motivational podcast content. Subsequent research can overcome these constraints to offer a more thorough comprehension of the intricate relationship between podcast use, mindfulness, and well-being.

REFERENCES

[1] Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2006, pp. 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

[2] Chauhan, Deepa, and Neha Pandey. "Podcast as a Therapy on Motivation, Subjective Happiness and Quality of Life among Young Adults." *Journal for ReAttach Therapy and Developmental Diversities*, vol. 6, no. 9s (2), 2023, pp. 1527-1537.

[3] Clevenger, Seth M., and O. J. Rick. "The Uses of Imperfections: Communicating Affect through the Lo-fi Podcast." *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2021, pp. 323-338.

[4] Deuze, Mark. "Living as a Zombie in Media (Is the Only Way to Survive)." *Matrizes*, vol. 7, no. 2, 6 Dec. 2013, p. 113. https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v7i2p113-129.

[5] Dure, Shreya N. *The Effects of Podcasts on Mental Health Stigma.* ProQuest, City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2020.

[6] Foucault, Michel. "Technologies of the Self." *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, vol. 18, 1988, p. 170.

[7] Hjorth, Larissa, and Sun Sun Lim. "Mobile Intimacy in an Age of Affective Mobile Media." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2012, pp. 477-484.

[8] Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World through Mindfulness.* Hachette UK, 2005.

[9] Kaplan, Andreas M., and Michael Haenlein. "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media." *Business Horizons*, vol. 53, no. 1, Jan. 2010, pp. 59-68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003.

[10] Karathanasopoulou, Evangelia. "Audio within Audio: Story-Telling and the Evocation of Emotion in Podcasting." 2023.

[11] Leonard, Heather. "Use of Podcasting in the Music Therapy Classroom Curriculum: A Survey Study." *Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations*, Florida State University Libraries, 2008.

[12] Martikainen, Katariina, Jan Karlgren, and Khiet Truong. "Exploring Audio-Based Stylistic Variation in Podcasts." *INTERSPEECH*, 2022, pp. 2343-2347.

[13] McNamara, Noel, and Jurek Kirakowski. "Functionality, Usability, and User Experience." *Interactions*, vol. 13, no. 6, Nov. 2006, pp. 26-28. https://doi.org/10.1145/1167948.1167972.

[14] Ollari, Katia. *How Podcasts Became the Radio of the Future: Understanding Factors That Influence Podcast Consumption Among Millennials.* 2020.

[15] Rachna, R., and Monika Mishra. "The Growth of Audio Podcasts as an Emergent Form of Streaming Content Category for Indian Audiences." *AIP Conference Proceedings*, vol. 2523, no. 1, Jan. 2023, AIP Publishing.

[16] Rime, Jessica, Carol Pike, and Tyler Collins. "What Is a Podcast? Considering Innovations in Podcasting through the Six-Tensions Framework." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research Into New Media Technologies*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2 June 2022, pp. 1260-1282. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221104444.

[17] Robson, Michael. *Sound, Self and Crisis: Mapping the Affective Dimensions of Podcast Media.* Doctoral dissertation, Open Access Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington, 2023.

[18] Samuel-Azran, Tal, Tali Laor, and Dana Tal. "Who Listens to Podcasts, and Why?: The Israeli Case." *Online Information Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 12 Aug. 2019, pp. 482-495. https://doi.org/10.1108/oir-04-2017-0119.

[19] Thomas, Erin P. *Sports Podcast Consumption: A Qualitative Media Content Analysis.* 2022.

[20] "Adolescents Statistics." *UNICEF DATA*, 24 Apr. 2023, https://data.unicef.org/topic/adolescents/overview/.

[21] Voegelin, Salome. *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art.* Continuum, 2010.

[22] *World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All.* World Health Organization, 2022, https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240049338.

https://www.gapbodhitaru.org/