

Parasocial Intimacy, Change, and Nostalgia in Podcast Listener Reviews

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Abstract

As the medium of podcasting reaches maturity, exploring the evolving nature of parasocial intimacy, nostalgia, and change is crucial. With the podcasting industry increasingly focused on financial viability, listener loyalty and nostalgia are critical components in podcast audience studies. Listener reviews are an integral part of this research. This study enriches podcast audience studies by investigating the connection between the parasocial relationships of trust and intimacy listeners develop with show hosts and nostalgic reactions to show changes. Using automated semantic network analysis of over 12,000 podcast reviews for two of the longest-running and best-regarded US podcasts, this study has confirmed the pivotal role of the show host and content in developing and maintaining the parasocial rapport of intimacy and trust with listeners. It also revealed that changes in the show’s host(s) or content trigger nostalgic reactions, which can be positive or negative. These findings have significant implications for long-lived podcasts as they approach the stage when host or content changes become inevitable, thereby underscoring this study’s practical relevance and importance for the podcasting industry.

Keywords

change; intimacy; listener reviews; nostalgia; parasocial relationships; podcast hosts; podcasting; podcast reviews; trust

1. Introduction

As an industry, podcasting has just passed its 20th anniversary, with minimal technological changes beyond the ubiquity of listening devices and platforms (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020) since Apple added podcasting to the list of offerings available through the iTunes platform in 2005. By June 2024, almost 100 million Americans aged 12 or older listened to an average of eight episodes per week (Edison Research, 2024). Over 4 million

podcasts were registered worldwide by August 2024, though fewer than half had produced five or more episodes and only a handful of shows have released weekly episodes for over 20 years, with millions of weekly downloads worldwide (Podcast Index, n.d.).

To study changes in the listener–host–show parasocial dynamics, show longevity and regularity of creative production were essential. Therefore, two US shows were chosen for this study because they are some of the longest-running, weekly, and best-regarded podcasts: *This American Life* (TAL) and *Radiolab* (RL). Numerous industry awards recognized the quality of content and production, and weekly listening audiences have placed them in the top rankings for nearly 20 years. Both shows emerged from non-profit organizations, strove to exemplify the golden standards of audio journalism, and relied heavily on listener donations to fund the substantial production costs. Both shows have millions of downloads from listeners who avidly return each week for another dose of their favorite hosts and stories. The size and recurrence of their audiences offer a testament to the longevity of a cultural product and their ability to attract and retain listeners (Brinson & Lemon, 2023; Heiselberg & Have, 2023; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022).

This study explores the idea that listener reviews can serve as a proxy for analyzing the rapport of intimacy and trust between podcast listeners and show hosts and listener reactions to shows changing hosts or content. First, it seeks confirmation that the host and content serve as anchors in the positioning and perception of intimacy and trust listeners establish with a podcast show. It then explores the impact of changes in the show hosts or content on nostalgic notes in listener narratives, thus expanding podcast audience studies to identify markers and triggers of change in listener experiences and expectations. For podcast practitioners and researchers, understanding nostalgia as listener-initiated communication rather than as a marketing tactic could offer valuable insights into the planning and execution of inevitable show transitions.

2. Literature Review

The explosive growth in the number of available podcast shows, genres, languages, and narrative forms makes it challenging to gain deeper insights into the needs, wants, and motivations of audiences around the world—despite the unique consumption characteristics of this medium (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022). An extensive body of research has documented how listening to podcasts in preferred genres helps audiences fulfill intellectual, emotional, and social needs during regular times and periods of crisis—primarily through the emergence of parasocial dynamics between the podcast hosts and the listener community (Boling et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2023; Heiselberg & Have, 2023; Lotun et al., 2024; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). In time, listening to a beloved podcast host becomes more than a scheduled audio experience, and it transitions into a parasocial relationship, complete with quasi-social interactions in which listeners engage fully, deliberately, and completely aware of its mediated nature (Brinson & Lemon, 2023; Schlütz & Hedder, 2022). Since we no longer question the existence of parasocial relationships with podcast hosts, it is time to explore their dynamic nature and how listeners perceive and react to change in their favorite shows.

2.1. Listener Reviews and Audience Studies

Listener reviews have recently become the focus of audience studies as a proxy for audience engagement (Hamilton & Barber, 2022; Johnson et al., 2024; Van Driel, 2022) or to interrogate platform algorithms for

podcast ranking and promotion (Wade Morris, 2021). Hamilton and Barber (2022) found that listener comments expressed manifestations of engagement clustered around key subjects (e.g., dance music), social aspects such as connecting with celebrities and other fans, and the routines and experience of listening to their favorite podcasts.

In 2021, Wade Morris used data from podcast ratings and rankings to explore and emphasize the cultural challenges associated with the industrialization of podcasting, revealing the infrastructural politics that allow for relatively unknown and smaller-audience podcasts to achieve chart status. Ongoing research by Johnson et al. (2024) found that listener reviews reveal and shape dialectical tensions in the positionality of podcast hosts, narratives, and audiences. Whether conceptualized as audience engagement or as an amateur critique of cultural goods, the analysis of ratings and reviews invites more profound questions about the narratives of intentionality, agency, and performativity of culture (Vilceanu & Soto-Vásquez, 2023) within the context of listeners' experience and expectations.

2.2. Trust and Intimacy in Parasocial Relationships With Podcast Hosts

Relationships between listeners and show hosts develop in complex frameworks involving emotions, self-reflexivity, and transparency (Lindgren, 2016). Furthermore, listenership loyalty depends on perceptions of authenticity and quality of show host content (Perks & Turner, 2019). Recent research found that consuming familiar media, such as television or podcasting shows, can help complement the emotional benefits of interacting with real-life social networks (Lotun et al., 2024).

The end of a parasocial relationship is known as a parasocial breakup, which could be initiated by the show (final season or writing out a beloved character) or by audience members who feel the show no longer meets their social, cognitive, or emotional needs (Ellithorpe & Brookes, 2018). Listeners grieve the loss of their parasocial relationships with media hosts and characters just like they process real-life relationships (Boling et al., 2021; Vilceanu & Soto-Vásquez, 2023).

Most shows encourage the formation and growth of listener communities by acknowledging listener comments and reviews on dedicated platforms, sharing personal information and experiences, inserting themselves as unlikely heroes or dummies in the story, and addressing listeners as if they were contributing to the conversation. This helps hosts establish themselves as a recurrent presence in the listeners' lives and routines (McClung & Johnson, 2010) and heightens connections between hosts and listeners, especially during times of crisis, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Robson, 2021).

Whether authentic or performative, host-centered intimacy facilitates listeners' exploration of their identity, values, and aspirations. Over time, hosts and their guests become part of parasocial networks of quasi-friends, welcomed by listeners into their private space and time (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). The right combination of emotion and personality in the host evokes amplifies or diminishes attachment, trust, and intimacy (Valette-Florence & Valette-Florence, 2020). It also influences listeners' willingness to subscribe, follow, purchase, and donate (Ford & Merchant, 2010) and to listen or respond to host-narrated advertisements (Bonk & Kubinski, 2023; Vilceanu et al., 2021).

2.3. Change, Nostalgia, and the Podcasting Ecosystem

This study flips the concept of nostalgia from its commonly accepted use as a marketing tactic to a lens of interpreting listener-initiated communication with their favorite shows and hosts. Intentional use of nostalgia is one of the marketing tactics used to create memorable experiences and establish emotional ties with listeners, users, or consumers, thus nurturing loyalty (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019; Pichierri, 2023). In the broader context of consumer–brand relationships, the strength of the attachment consumers feel toward a brand is a critical determinant of their willingness to support a brand or a cultural product financially (Ford & Merchant, 2010; Zhang & Tao, 2022). Nostalgia tethers real or imagined memories of contextual, interpersonal, family, or individual past experiences through mental or sensory triggers (Juhl et al., 2020). It nurtures the expectation of similar experiences in future encounters (Hidayati, 2021), especially in consuming cultural products with limited sensory experience, such as audio media (Douglas, 2013).

Dramatic changes in real life can significantly impact our interaction with imagined or parasocial realities. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic and its severe and imposed self-isolation, podcasts helped listeners increase their self-resilience and emotional solidarity (Márquez Rodríguez, 2024; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). Similarly, multi-player online games such as *Animal Crossing* provided an escape to a peaceful and joyous dreamland with easily shared narratives (Zhu, 2021), both individual and collective. In consumer behavior research, resilience and solidarity strengthened nostalgia to reconcile a changing reality with past experiences or current perceptions of a shared past (Dai et al., 2024), evoking positive or negative nostalgic reactions (Khoshghadam et al., 2019).

Positive nostalgia is an acknowledgment of change as a necessary component of life, while maintaining a healthy appreciation for the past and actively engaging in the preservation of ideal versions and stories of the past through consumption, donations, and other forms of support (Ford & Merchant, 2010; Hartmann & Brunk, 2019). A strong attachment to the original version of a branded product or content may trigger negative nostalgic experiences when the brand owners deploy rejuvenation campaigns (Shields & Johnson, 2016) and requests to resurrect the original brand promise. It may also result in disengagement or abandonment when consumers feel that brands' cultural discourses no longer meet their needs and expectations (Diniz & Suarez, 2018; Gilal et al., 2020). This might present a significant challenge in the podcasting ecosystem.

The podcasting industry is increasingly vying for financial viability; most podcast shows require monetary support through advertising, crowdfunding, or other monetizing tactics to cover production and distribution costs (Rowles & Rogers, 2019; Sullivan, 2019). Podcast creators, producers, and platforms experience a whirlwind of investments, exits, mergers, and acquisitions on par with the rest of the media industry (Delfau, 2019). Intense efforts—and debates—compare and combine models, techniques, and algorithms that align podcast production with traditional media production regarding budgets, profits, and intellectual property (Sullivan, 2019).

The technology of podcasts has changed minimally in the past twenty years beyond the various tiers of quality and power available in different price brackets for producers, distributors, and listeners. Content genres have also registered minimal disruption in the type of storytelling and interaction—though obviously, some genres and shows have registered explosive growth due to the exceptional combination of skills and opportunities mastered by runaway success stories such as the true crime genre or *The Joe Rogan Experience* show.

Embracing the audio and video presence has allowed podcasts to capture a broader audience, expanding beyond podcast distribution platforms and into social media currently preferred by the younger audience, such as YouTube and TikTok. The additional characteristics of higher levels of education and disposable income of today's podcast audiences and producers made it possible to activate a desire for listeners to support their favorite podcast shows through subscriptions, patronage, or participation in other monetizing tactics, such as purchasing show merchandise, tickets to live in-person show episodes and events, or access to bonus content (Spotify, 2024a).

Good shows are hard to find, and the loss or deterioration of good listening experiences feels, in parasocial networks, like the loss of good friends (Vilceanu & Soto-Vásquez, 2023). How would changes enacted by podcasts trigger or reflect any changes in the rapport of trust and intimacy listeners express in their reviews?

2.4. TAL and RL

When Apple launched its podcasting distribution platform in 2006, RL was a newly launched show. In contrast, TAL already had over a decade of content, history, and connections with listeners through its public radio presence. Throughout their decades of existence, the identity and reputation of both shows rested firmly on their respective hosts, who told the story; in many ways, they are the story and experience listeners seek in every episode (Brinson & Lemon, 2023).

TAL, hosted by Ira Glass, was previously called *Your Radio Playhouse*, co-founded with Torey Malaya in 1995 and renamed to its current title in 1996. Glass always had guest producers in charge of one or more acts aired during each episode. The stories have always been “personal...with funny moments, big feelings, and surprising plot twists” (Apple Podcasts, n.d.-a, para. 1). The show was recognized within the broader media industry with awards and cameo or sarcastic features in other major entertainment productions such *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Onion*, and *Orange is the New Black*. Beginning in 2016, Glass has enacted significant changes in the content of TAL while maintaining the overall production style.

RL ran with its original host team, Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, from its official launch in 2005 through 2020. During this time, RL steadily produced weekly episodes and won several prestigious awards for the quality of their work. A new team took over RL when the original hosts retired (Krulwich in February 2020 and Abumrad in January 2022). While new hosts Lulu Miller and Latif Nasser (re)invented their new team core, the sound and content of RL changed dramatically, though the show still anchored on “deep questions...science, legal history” and, possibly, “the home of someone halfway across the world” (Apple Podcasts, n.d.-b, para. 1).

For most of the study period, both shows consistently ranked in the top 100 podcasting US charts regarding audience size and loyalty, with millions of listeners eagerly waiting to access each new episode (Chartable, n.d.; Spotify, 2024b). Each show has distinctive narrative and soundscape structures and has earned industry awards for its content and production quality. Both have also run highly successful models to fund production through listener donations and subscription models. Most importantly, they both professed to uphold the highest standards for journalistic production and “intimate, personal reporting” (Glass, n.d., para. 2) and serve as gateway podcasts, a term describing shows discovered by listeners who are new to podcasting, try an episode recommended by a friend or another media outlet, fall in love with a show, and then become avid consumers of podcasts (Quah, 2022).

The format and history of these two shows make them ideal for exploring nostalgia, intimacy, and trust in the parasocial relationships listeners form with their favorite podcasts and how they change over time. This study used listener reviews to explore the following research questions:

RQ1. How did listener reviews portray parasocial intimacy and trust with the show hosts?

RQ2. What did listeners like most about their favorite shows?

RQ3. What nostalgic reactions did listeners express to shows changing hosts or content?

3. Methods

The dataset for this study includes over 12,000 listener reviews for RL and TAL, posted between May 2006 (when Apple Podcasts first opened the platform to collect listener reviews for the podcasts it carried) and August 2023. Listener reviews were evenly distributed between RL ($N = 5,910$) and TAL ($N = 6,195$).

Reviews were scraped from one of the largest podcast analytics websites (<https://chartable.com/podcasts>; before Spotify refocused the company and this site became unavailable in December 2024). As is typical for research using listener review comments, the dataset captured each post's title, body, and metadata (username, date, country). A computer-assisted semantic network analysis package that combines natural language processing and discourse analysis (Doerfel, 1998; T-Lab, n.d.) was employed to discern thematic changes and narratives throughout the dataset, along with essential variables such as the show name, keywords, and chronological markers.

This text analysis method sees words as floating signifiers (Monsees, 2023) within complex networks, meaning that the presence or absence of words or phrases in chunks of text (in this case, each review) helps researchers identify and interpret narrative themes and key concepts. For the first step, all words were inventoried into an active content-bearing vocabulary of words retained for analyzing frequency, network positioning, and strength of associations within word clusters. Non-content-bearing words such as pronouns, articles, adverbs, prepositions, and numbers were excluded from the active vocabulary. High-frequency and low-relevance words such as year, week, month, and episode were also excluded from the analysis.

Cluster analysis identified groups of words that tended to co-occur within reviews, and narrative themes were teased out of the most meaningful words (chi-square, $p < 0.05$ within the cluster). The semantic network analysis was conducted for the entire dataset, and each thematic cluster included reviews from both shows. An attempt was made to associate each cluster with a predominant show and address each research question as in-depth as possible (Tables 1–4). Exemplary quotes were selected to help the reader understand the clusters and narrative themes.

4. Findings

This study found that hosts function as critical anchors for the rapport of parasocial intimacy and trust listeners develop with their favorite podcast shows. Furthermore, the reasons listeners list for liking their shows stem from the same three functions generally associated with podcast listening: optimal alignment

between the show’s premise and listeners’ needs for companionship, learning, and entertainment. Finally, significant changes in the show’s host or content may trigger strong nostalgic reactions, resulting in listeners deciding to remain loyal or terminate their relationship with the show.

Seven semantic clusters broke down the entire dataset based on keywords anchoring narrative themes focused on show hosts, characteristics, and listener reactions to show changes. Overall, listener reviews described their relationship with show hosts and praised or criticized them for their voices, personalities, or on-set dynamics (CL1–2); recommended them for a good listening experience (CL3–6); or complained when they felt the shows changed too much from their original premise (CL-7).

4.1. Parasocial Intimacy and Trust With the Podcast Hosts

For both shows, listeners mentioned the hosts by their first names, expecting the hosts or other listeners to read these reviews as conversational pieces. Trust and intimacy pervaded listener comments in positive and negative reviews, thus acknowledging the immensely influential role they attributed to the host (see Table 1 for top-ranking keywords in each cluster).

Table 1. Host clusters (% of reviews included in the cluster).

Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)	Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)
1. RL hosts (11.6%)			2. TAL hosts (21.74%)		
Jad	1,541.41	356 (73.4%)	IRA	1,298.72	649 (77.1%)
Robert	1,497.59	344 (73.6%)	TAL	916.26	986 (54.3%)
Science/s	1,209.76	445 (54%)	Look/s/ed/ing	876.01	460 (75.2%)
Radiolab	884.47	718 (35.3%)	Glass	869.16	370 (84.2%)
Sound/s/ed/ing	451.36	219 (46.1%)	Forward	819.45	357 (83.2%)
Krulwich	213.41	51 (71.8%)	Life	377.64	379 (56%)
Love/d/s/ing	183.76	731 (20.8%)	American/s	278.57	215 (62.6%)
Abumrad	122.00	31 (68.8%)	Download/s/ed/ing	112.77	150 (50.5%)
Latif	112.94	45 (51.7%)	Old/er/est	108.89	242 (51.8%)
Effects	81.09	47 (41.9%)	App/s	86.56	89 (55.6%)
Mind/s	68.86	86 (29.6%)	Monday	77.11	46 (70.7%)
Wonder/s/ed/ing	63.10	50 (35.9%)	Laugh/s/ed/ing	74.25	110 (48.6%)
Music	53.42	60 (30.9%)	Cry/es/ed/ing	68.94	93 (50.2%)
Lulu	49.32	18 (54.5%)	Sunday	49.74	37 (63.7%)

4.1.1. RL Hosts

RL spent its first 15 years immersing the audience in science topics anchored in society rather than covering social issues. Listeners loved the original host team, Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, who created a wonderful science-based listening experience. Audiences raved about their voices and interpersonal dynamics and learned to expect elaborate soundscapes: “The chemistry between Jad and Robert was so charming and Jad’s musical ear was a huge part of the shows personality” (RL, November 2022). Reviewers addressed the dynamic between hosts, or between hosts and their guests, as an integral component of the show’s draw: “The dialogue makes the show. Jad is the believer; Robert is the skeptic. Jad is the curious

student; Robert is the experienced teacher. Jad convinces you that the topic is fun; Robert convinces you that it's true" (RL, April 2014).

Listeners often felt like learning was conducted through "intimate storytelling" (RL, October 2015), and it was "always a wonderful surprise" (RL, December 2013), best enjoyed while "you curl up somewhere" (RL, December 2013). For avid listeners, each RL episode feels like being "back home with trusted friends who have another great story to share" (RL, November 2019). In everyday life, some listeners who incorporated RL into their work commute "actually started to look forward to getting stuck in traffic!!" (RL, April 2013). All this changed when a new team began hosting RL, with insights to be discussed in the section detailing negative nostalgia.

4.1.2. TAL Host

For TAL, host Ira Glass had listeners looking forward to each new episode with "stories...true reflections of the daily lives of ordinary Americans, but told with an insight that causes me to think, not just passively listen" (TAL, November 2012). Listening was always an emotional experience, "sometimes funny, sometimes heartbreaking, but always compelling" (TAL, February 2008), and "the stories and the storytellers are like old friends" (TAL, July 2022).

As seen in previous studies on the importance listeners place on the podcast hosts' voice and personality reviews, the popularity of TAL is inextricably linked with Ira Glass: "Forever my jam. I love Ira's voice and the way he carries himself. The stories are incredible to listen to" (TAL, May 2020). It is the voice listeners invited into their lives and rituals: "Ira's voice solidly gets me through a cranky Monday morning" (TAL, May 2020) and "oh, my God, I've lusted after that man for the last 10 years BECAUSE of his voice!...the show...routinely touches every one of my emotional buttons" (TAL, February 2007).

Interestingly, liking the host's voice could be an acquired taste: "For the newly initiated TAL devotee, once you get used to his annoying voice, you will learn to love him and his show. I am a big fan" (TAL, November 2006). Occasionally, new listeners were put off by the host's voice and decided "that [one episode] was enough" (TAL, March 2007) or expressed emerging sexism and bias: "The voice of the girl who narrates is highly annoying" (TAL, September 2020), and "the female narrator...has to go" (TAL, May 2021), due to vocal fry they found "too distracting" (TAL, April 2019).

4.1.3. Companionship, Entertainment, and Learning

Previous podcast studies have found that podcasts typically fulfill listeners' needs for companionship, entertainment, and learning. Analyzing listener reviews of podcasts confirmed these observations (see Table 2).

One of the most exciting findings emerged from CL-6 and CL-3, where listener reviews identified the essence of each show and how it stood out among all the other podcasts on their regular rotation. Responding to the shows' premises, RL listeners praised the awesome, fascinating, educational, and entertaining content delivered by hosts who felt like friends. TAL listeners fell under the spell of the stories spun in ways that made them think, connect emotionally, and feel less alone.

Table 2. Needs and expectations (% of reviews included in the cluster).

Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)	Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)
6. RL: Educational (13%)			3. TAL: Great stories (15.1%)		
Interest/s/ed/ing	1,304.58	751 (41.2%)	Great/er/est	7,783.83	1,946 (70.8%)
Entertain/s/ed/ing	1,130.84	423 (52.8%)	Story/ies	413.84	736 (26.9%)
Learn/s/ed/ing	554.90	313 (47.6%)	Tell/s/ing/told	251.46	227 (35%)
Informative	515.64	214 (49.7%)	Keep-up	117.43	74 (41.5%)
Fascinate/s/ed/ing	351.96	205 (41.2%)	Work/s/ed/ing	94.73	178 (26.5%)
Engage/s/d/ing	250.73	130 (43.9%)	Job	58.24	56 (34.1%)
Fun	200.26	124 (40%)	Interest/s/ ed/ing	50.99	353 (19.3%)
Subject/s	158.46	102 (39.2%)	Lot/s	47.04	25 (45.4%)
Awesome	124.09	135 (30.8%)	Content/s	44.37	136 (23%)
Educational	110.74	62 (42.1%)	Storytelling	23.10	80 (22.4%)
Thought-provoking	81.91	79 (32.5%)	Guy/s	20.27	75 (22%)

The companionship function is evident in the strength of the habit of engaging in a comfortable rapport with the show host during listeners' most private times: "Best show ever to take your mind off everything bothering you at the end of the day! I set my sleep timer to 30 minutes before bed and Ira's smooth voice and storytelling lulls me to sleep" (TAL, August 2020). Trust in a parasocial relationship goes beyond faithful listening toward engaging in a conversation with the host. This review exemplifies a sentiment frequently encountered in listener reviews for the RL: "The only people I would trust with my own story. If I had a story that I cared more deeply about than anything else in the world, I would want it to be told by *Radiolab*" (RL, January 2016).

The learning function is also essential to the rapport of trust listeners established with the show host, as shown in this post that sounds typical for making this point:

I really can't begin to explain how much *Radiolab* has, in a sense, changed my life! Dramatic, I guess, but it's true. Jad and Robert effortlessly show exactly how fascinating science is—something I have somehow failed to notice for the past 22 years of my life. (RL, October 2009)

Learning is not just passive listening but also sharing knowledge gained from a podcast into someone's physical world: "Amazing show. I love listening....I find great joy in sharing the things I learn from....Jad and Robert" (RL, October 2009). The show's strongest characteristic of relaying science topics impartially was often remarked upon: "Listening to *Radiolab*, you will just end up learning about anything and everything...and wanting more!! I like that they don't feed a point of view." (RL, January 2017). In the ultimate compliment, "this show has changed my life...made me realize how awesome science is" (RL, March 2013), "never repetitive, usually current, and great to listen to" (RL, April 2016).

Entertainment was often directly associated with learning. For example, the terms informative and funny (or synonyms thereof) co-occurred frequently, especially in positive reviews that also mentioned keywords such as excellent, interesting, amazing, and other terms of praise, "even when I don't necessarily agree with the subject" (RL, January 2016). TAL listeners also found ways to express their appreciation for the fun learning

opportunities in reviews like this: “This show is why they invented radio. Ira Glass should win the Nobel Peace Prize—and maybe the prize for chemistry as well, just to prove that he is better than Henry Kissinger” (TAL, October 2006).

4.2. Favorite Podcasts

While the show hosts are the entry point into the podcast, their consistent performance helps listeners establish long-term relationships with the shows. For these two shows, what propelled them to the status of brilliant or incredible (key phrases in RL reviews) or favorite listen of all time (key phrase in TAL reviews) is the way these hosts created content that met the gold standards of radio, now available on listeners’ schedule (see Table 3 below for keyword statistics in their clusters).

Table 3. Favorite podcasts (% of reviews included in the cluster).

Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)	Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)
4. RL: Simply amazing (7.4%)			5. TAL: Best radio (22.37%)		
Amaze/s/ed/ing	4,019.79	616 (55.4%)	Best	3,740.79	1,761 (67%)
Simply	1,764.88	193 (73.1%)	Radio	1,044.47	711 (55.9%)
Best	154.68	346 (13.1%)	Podcast/s	769.17	2,263 (36%)
Brilliant	124.70	69 (23.7%)	Favorite	621.64	510 (51.4%)
Incredible	80.23	46 (23.3%)	Hand/s	137.10	80 (60.6%)
Truly	73.62	43 (23.1%)	Listen/s/ed/ing	106.58	1,069 (26.2%)
Recommend/s/ed/ing	63.62	63 (17.8%)	All-time	105.37	73 (55.7%)
Gold-standard	52.03	24 (26.3%)	Program/s	104.92	188 (38.3%)
Radio	50.61	154 (12.1%)	Public	90.17	85 (48.5%)
Cease/d/s	43.99	10 (41.6%)	NPR	72.27	125 (38.8%)
Highly	38.88	38 (18%)	Easily	59.51	37 (58.7%)
Podcast	32.42	450 (9.06%)	Subscribe/d/ing	54.27	75 (41.8%)
Outstanding	29.81	21 (21%)	Absolute	51.61	53 (46.9%)

4.2.1. RL

Consistency in the performance and productions of the original host team was often acknowledged in endearing, favorable terms such as “ear candy” (RL, October 2006) and “sonic journey” (RL, June 2007) that accompanied the learning experience loaded with excitement, music, and theater (RL, April 2016). Gratitude was expressed to the show hosts, along with listeners confessing their previous or continued financial support for the show and asking others to do the same (RL, April 2012).

One of the significant themes in listener reviews (CL-4) was “think, laugh, and learn...go deep into complex topics...and how these topics matter” (RL, November 2008). One of the key phrases was “thought-provoking” ($N = 152$ throughout the entire study period). Listening to RL made them “feel smarter and sound smarter...entertained and informed by two witty, clever and funny hosts” (RL, July 2012). Some of the most enthusiastic reviews mentioned RL’s “phenomenal presentation methods, brilliant research and soul-searching depth of storytelling” (RL, March 2018). For heavy listeners of podcasts, RL stands out for its

“variety of very interesting topics...tackled from very unique angles” (RL, April 2013). The unique soundscape became a trademark of RL, courtesy of Jad Abumrad’s “pure genius” (RL, August 2011). It was intensely recognizable, even though not everyone liked it: “I understand how some don’t take to the engineered sound effects and production, but the content is thought provoking every time” (RL, August 2010).

4.2.2. TAL

Throughout the decades, Ira Glass’s talent for storytelling won listeners’ attention and enthusiasm with his “genius, wit, insatiable questioning” (TAL, March 2023). The playhouse format, with several different acts bundled in each episode, worked well for avid listeners. The vivid portraits and sensitive reporting made TAL an amazing show (TAL, March 2015), which some perceived as the equivalent of “reality radio” (TAL, January 2010). As with RL, one of the biggest wins in the technological developments affecting podcasts was listeners’ experiencing the freedom of their podcast episodes in the privacy of their car or study at any time, not just when the show aired on public radio on Saturday evenings (TAL, September 2009).

4.3. Nostalgia

As expected from the literature review of nostalgia and consumer behavior, references to the past elicited and expressed listeners’ reactions to show changes. For this study, we focused on positive and negative nostalgia as indicators of experiences and intentions that strengthened or weakened listeners’ loyalty to a show they previously or still loved. For both shows, positive nostalgic reactions connected a recent listening experience to how a podcast helped listeners connect with positive personal experiences or accomplishments and the needs and expectations the podcast successfully met. Negative nostalgia, however, appeared as the shows evolved in ways some listeners thought signaled a departure from the original premise, meaning the shows no longer fulfilled their needs.

With new teams hosting an established show (RL) or original hosts making substantial changes in the show’s content (TAL), nostalgia is inevitable, though not consistently negative. The parameters of listeners’ long-term relationship of trust and intimacy with the show and host might change, or listeners might choose to adapt to a new stage in the life of their favorite show or drop the show and seek another listening experience. The phrases “used to” and “I miss” occurred 166 times in the reviews for each show, but mostly appeared alongside positive statements such as “I decay as a human being if I miss an episode” (TAL, June 2016) and:

I miss Jad and Robert so much. I’m sure I’ll get used to the new hosts and this is certainly no criticism of them, they do a fine job and I still love the show, but I do miss Jad and Robert....So I enjoy the reruns. (RL, July 2022)

4.4. Positive Nostalgia

Positive nostalgic reactions were often connected to intentions or recommendations to subscribe, acknowledgments for the hosts’ talent and work well done, and expressions of pure enjoyment. The comments indicative of positive nostalgia were not captured in a separate cluster since they mostly appeared interspersed with the favorite podcast reviews.

Examples of positive nostalgia include the projection of future memories onto the continued experience of listening to a favorite show, such as:

I can't wait for each Sunday, when I pour a glass of wine and Ira helps me clean my house or work in my garden, depending on the season. We laugh and cry and make memories. The next season, when I'm in a certain spot, I'll remember a portion of a podcast year after year. (TAL, January 2017)

Beyond encouraging other listeners to include a favorite podcast in their routines, some reviews positioned RL as “one of the best things the world is coming up with....The artfulness of the production alone blows my mind....Feels like you're listening to a radio station from another, more advanced world” (RL, March 2012).

What differentiates positive nostalgia from negative nostalgia is listeners' ability to see that their show was not perfect or to express wishfulness for a different topic or approach without detracting from it still being their favorite show. For example, some episodes were unsatisfactory, such as “the last one of 2016. But overall, this is the best podcast ever!” (RL, January 2017) or “I wish fewer episodes were about modern problems and cultures, but...this is definitely the best podcast I've ever discovered” (RL, February 2020). Most importantly, positive nostalgic reviews combined with comments on the quality of the show's content and production showed good omens for the financial future of the show: “It's such a good product that I'm willing to pay” (RL, October 2009). A strong rapport with the show host and content, where the listener is happy to share their satisfaction, is a good premise for continued support: “Made me 8% smarter. I love this podcast so much and I share it with everyone I know. This podcast is filled with interesting human stories, compelling facts and just damn good entertaining content. You have to subscribe.” (RL, June 2016)

4.5. Negative Nostalgia: Used to Be Good

The incidence of the phrase “used to be good” (or great, or awesome) increased substantially each year after 2016 for both shows. Negative nostalgia manifested into calls for change reversal by asking for a return to the topics covered in the show's good times, bringing back the founding hosts—or both. For RL, listeners complained about “missing the old science content” (RL, April 2019), and by the end of the study period, the disconnect was so severe that they often said they “no longer have time for this podcast” (RL, December 2022).

Some reviews indicated dissatisfaction with changes preceded breaking up with the show: “I'm done. Used to be a good show. But now it's all a liberal agenda” (TAL, March 2017). For TAL, incongruence with listeners' attitudes and beliefs is seen as a personal affront bordering on irreconcilable differences, such as when episodes touched on abortion (pro-choice, 2016) or race (White parents, 2020). For RL, changing from science-based to political commentary signaled the end of an era (Quah, 2022, para. 1).

The overall semantic network analysis identified a separate cluster centered on the phrase “used to be good” (see Table 4). The most frequently mentioned issues were introducing political topics or liberal bias and the term vocal fry, indicative of inauthentic voices (pitched abnormally low).

Table 4. Negative nostalgia (% of reviews included in the cluster).

Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)
7. Used to be good (8.8%)		
Good	2,782.95	609 (53.6%)
Politics/al	1,059.68	292 (50.8%)
Used_to	729.17	263 (38.5%)
Liberal/s	696.22	116 (65.9%)
Bias/es/ed	511.75	98 (59.3%)
Agenda/s	357.09	62 (63.9%)
Vocal	212.80	54 (48.6%)
Fry/ing	181.83	49 (46.6%)
White	163.78	42 (48.2%)
Left/y	161.56	69 (34.8%)
Bad	124.11	51 (35.6%)

4.5.1. RL

Over time, RL continued to explore science. However, it gradually grew its scope to cover politics, society, and other human stories, which triggered negative nostalgic comments from long-term listeners: “What happened? Radiolab, where did you go? You used to be about science and really interesting aspects of the world. Now it’s just stories and feelings. It should be called RadioFeelings now. Are you trying to be TAL? Booooooo” (RL, June 2015).

The transition period (2020–2022) and the years immediately after Jared Abumrad and Robert Krulwich left RL triggered a significant disconnect between the listeners’ needs, carefully nurtured by the original hosts, and the new hosts’ style, dynamics, and focus on social issues rather than science topics. Long-time listeners found it challenging to adopt the new hosts into their listening habits and family of parasocial friends. They felt as if their favorite hosts had dumped them into new hands incapable of sustaining the relationship and felt this breakup like “a huge blow” (RL, June 2021). They also criticized the new hosts’ lack of artistry and science, replaced by “contrived sound effects and forced reactions” (RL, May 2023) and “too many reruns” (RL, February 2023).

Post-2022, many reviews were brutal in their description of the new hosts: “dialogue [is] zany and silly, combined with the supremely naïve questions” (RL, July 2023), they “act more like little kids at summer camp” (RL, March 2022), their “new tone...has no or very little whimsy” (RL, August 2022), and they “don’t have much chemistry together, which makes them an odd couple for co-hosting” (RL, January 2022). Worst of all, under the new team, RL “sounds like any generic podcast [after it lost] the science angle” (RL, November 2022) and was relegated to “background noise” (RL, September 2023).

The show continued to gain new listeners through relentless promotion across the NPR networks and podcast platforms. However, many old-time listeners abandoned the show:

This was the first podcast I subscribed to. And now I am unsubscribing. I'm sad. This was such a good show. Then Robert left. Then Jad. Everything Jad does is excellent. Except teach his replacements how to make a good show. (RL, March 2023)

Numerous listeners stopped subscribing and donating and encouraged others to do the same—the podcast equivalent of *boycotting*: “This podcast used to be soooo good. After Robert left, the science, curiosity and humor left with him and was followed by episode after episode of biased political stories. Time to unsubscribe and find another gem” (RL, February 2021).

4.5.2. TAL

TAL experienced some moments when the tensions between storytelling, fact-based journalism, and liberal improvisation were revealed as “significant fabrications” were identified in Mike Daisey’s story about an Apple factory in China (Peralta, 2012, para. 1) or in Stephen Glass episodes about working as a phone psychic (Specter, 2012, para. 1). While these events might have been catastrophic in a print publication, they helped TAL strengthen its reputation among loyal listeners: “Great show, stop whining. Ira Glass and the cast and crew of TAL do not lie. Mike Daisey does” (TAL, March 2012). Overall, listeners’ reviews for TAL continued to be overwhelmingly positive: “Eye-opening, intreating [sic], funny, fantastic journalism and storytelling....It has sweetened every Monday for me since I have discovered TAL” (TAL, April 2018), “time flies when I listen to your stories” (TAL, April 2018), and “top notch. Not a single episode has disappointed. Very well done!” (TAL, December 2019).

However, when Ira Glass began to express his philosophical and religious beliefs, some listeners were so unhappy with his “blatantly anti-Christian agenda. Not anti-Muslim, anti-Buddhist, anti-Hindu, or anti-anything-else; just anti-Christian,” they deleted all the TAL episodes from their iPod (TAL, February 2011). Soon after that, TAL episodes covering anti-LGBT groups or deriding vegans also drew negative comments from listeners who “like TAL, or at least...liked TAL” (TAL, December 2012). Increasing numbers mentioned they would rather listen to older episodes than the new ones: “I used to really love this program but in a passive aggressive way they are becoming divisive” (TAL, April 2010).

By July 2023, many listeners signaled their intention to break up with the show because of irreconcilable differences between the show’s original premise—real or perceived—and their attitudes and beliefs, such as in this review: “Gotta Go. I’ve loved this show for over 25 years, but it’s time to unsubscribe. The stink of bias is hard to ignore, and the agenda feels extreme” (TAL, July 2023) and a frequently expressed perception that the new show is focused on “advocacy for extreme ideologies and racial identity politics” (TAL, February 2020).

5. Conclusion and Discussion

To summarize, this is not a comparative study but an exploratory study using two exemplary shows to address important research questions about the relationship between listeners, hosts, and change. This study found that listener reviews are an excellent place to investigate parasocial dynamics and expressions of nostalgia accompanying podcast show changes. Previous findings about the needs and gratifications audiences associated with podcast listening were confirmed by analyzing listener reviews: The favorite podcasts provide a listening experience that combines emotional and intellectual connections with people

they enjoy spending time with. New findings emphasized the importance of show continuity and, when change is inevitable, understanding, tracking, and managing listener nostalgia to ensure the show's longevity.

This is the first audience research study to point out the importance of understanding and managing change in the needs and expectations of listeners and content creators, an essential function in the production and distribution of cultural products. Podcast hosts are more than show stand-ins: They grow interested in and disenchanted with topics and presentation styles and eventually may want to move on. Long-term listeners are also individuals whose opinions and interests change over time.

When TAL introduced more liberal topics, many old-time listeners searched for new shows they felt were closer aligned to their emotional, intellectual, and entertainment needs. The exodus of listeners was significant, though not crippling. When RL changed the host team, a transition period of about two years saw founding host Krulwich working with new hosts Miller and Nasser, while old-time listeners bypassed new episodes in favor of listening to the archives. For both shows, listeners who stayed accepted the reality that the shows had changed, as did their rapport with the hosts. Nostalgic reactions reflected and influenced the trust and intimacy previously established with the show hosts.

More importantly, this study found that most listeners see the founding host diversifying the content or directions as minor and inevitable changes, treated as fixable mistakes or growing pains. In contrast, most listeners see the show's original host(s) departure as a significant, irreversible change, treated as a break of the brand promise and a legitimate reason to discontinue their relationship with the show brand.

6. Limitations and Future Research

As researchers and practitioners, we categorize podcasting as a different medium with specific affordances and implications for the communication industries and fields. More research is needed to bridge radio and podcasts from listeners' perspectives. Do listeners see podcasting as a form of, or completely different from radio? Or is the ubiquity of digital delivery for all media making these differences irrelevant to listeners?

One finding that emerged organically from the data analysis, without having been the focus of any research question, is that in their reviews, listeners consider RL and TAL to be radio shows. To most long-time listeners, the term podcasting refers simply to the platform allowing them to access these radio shows whenever and wherever it is convenient—not a new medium or anything more complicated:

Hip Hip Hooray! At long last, *TAL* for the iPod. This is a wonderful, wonderful show. My only problem now is what to do with all the time I used to spend complaining about *TAL* not being available as a podcast. (TAL, October 2006)

One limitation of this study is the absence of an intention to explore listener reviews relating to the additional functions of podcasting introduced to each show: video releases, live events, and other opportunities for listeners to meet the show hosts in person. This observation may speak more to the introverted persona of these shows: Science and intimate stories are best enjoyed as solitary experiences, with the knowledge that others out there also enjoy them in chosen solitude. It should, however, be further investigated as the podcasting industry and audiences continue to grow and diversify.

A second limitation of this study emerged from the nature of the two shows chosen for the analysis: both promised and delivered a form of journalism consistent with the NPR networks and standards. Another direction for future research should focus on the triggers for listener discontent and determine if they are quasi-universal (departure from the show's premise) or specific to a genre or mode of delivery. This dataset found that introducing political topics into a show primarily focused on science (RL) or human-interest stories (TAL) was just one of the changes. However, it triggered significant reactions in listeners' reviews and immediate accusations of bias, propagandistic agendas, and lack of professionalism for both shows, resulting in an exodus of listeners.

With the podcast audiences growing larger and younger, the expectations might be different. This younger podcast audience does not demand traditional journalism, might not appreciate the NPR style, and might present different patterns of parasocial dynamics or overall needs and expectations from their podcasts (Craig et al., 2021; Paris, 2023; Soto, 2023). Perhaps the younger audiences present a higher tolerance for change. More experimental research is needed to determine the best strategies to transition shows when significant changes are inevitable regarding the hosts or the content.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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