KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry Vol. 14. No. 2. (2026) • 45–68.
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.of.44

ARTICLE

Is Listening Enough?

Podcast Categories, Listening Practices and Parasocial Interaction

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This study examines the associations between podcast-category selection, listening practices, and podcast-related parasocial engagement among 340 listeners. Parasocial engagement was measured with an eight-item podcast-context adaptation of the Parasocial Interaction Scale. A two-model hierarchical multiple linear regression estimated associations for interview/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, personal development, and comedy/talk category selection with an adapted PSI score; Model 2 also included listening frequency, listening duration, gender, age group, and education. In addition, the open-ended responses of the survey were inspected through an exploratory Sentence-BERT analysis that combined cosine similarity, k-means clustering, and human theme labelling with illustrative quotations. Interview/guest-based selection was positively associated with the adapted PSI score in both models. Narrative/storytelling selection was

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Article received on 15 June 2026. Article accepted on 1 September 2026.
Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Funding: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.
Data availability statement: The de-identified participant-level dataset is not publicly available because the consent procedure did not include public data sharing. Aggregated data and analysis outputs may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical considerations.

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significant only before adjustment, while personal development and comedy/talk selection were not significant. Listening frequency showed a modest positive association; duration and demographic variables did not. The text analysis yielded four provisional themes and suggested only partial semantic proximity across theme centroids. We consider that component to be exploratory rather than confirmatory. Taken as a whole, the results offer a cautious, association-based account of podcast-related parasocial engagement in which theoretically familiar ideas such as the host's presence, conversational exchange, and narrative continuity remain in an interpretative rather than a causal role.

Keywords: podcasting, parasocial interaction, podcast categories, listening frequency, host–listener relationship, mediated intimacy

Introduction

Podcasting has recently emerged as a prominent form of digital audio media, fostering a more democratic landscape for individual narratives and increased user participation. The widespread adoption of mobile technologies and personalised recommendation systems on digital platforms has positioned podcasts as a key vehicle for both the dissemination of information and for emotional connection (Llinares et al., 2018). Compared to traditional media, podcasts offer listeners a more intimate, one-on-one communication experience. This heightened sense of intimacy has renewed interest in the concept of parasocial interaction (PSI), an intense but one-way emotional relationship between listener and host (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002). While initially explored in the context of visual media like television (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), the digital era, particularly with the rise of podcasts, has seen a resurgence of this interaction through auditory intimacy and personal closeness (Berry, 2016; Lindgren, 2016). The listener's direct engagement with a voice through headphones eliminates physical distance, fostering a feeling of 'togetherness' and transforming the podcast host into a perceived 'close friend' (Bilchi, 2025).

The emotional impact of podcasts varies across formats and communicative structures. Prior research suggests that conversational, narrative, and humour-oriented podcast categories may facilitate identification and emotional closeness, whereas news- or information-oriented categories may encourage more cognitive and distanced relationships (Perks et al., 2019). However, such differences cannot be fully explained through genre categories alone. Rather, PSI appears to be shaped by structural and relational features such as host centrality, narrative continuity, conversational engagement, and mediated intimacy. Accordingly, this study examines whether differences across podcast formats can be interpreted in relation to their communicative and narrative characteristics. Furthermore, listeners' motivations for engaging with podcasts significantly influence PSI levels. The Uses and Gratifications approach posits that individuals consume media not only for information but also to fulfil emotional needs, seek escape, and foster social belonging (Katz et al., 1973). In the context of podcasts, these motivations often revolve around sincerity, relaxation, information acquisition, and a sense of community (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). The strength of the parasocial bond, therefore,

depends not only on content type but also on the relational dynamics embedded within podcast formats and listeners' emotional orientations.

In the digital age, algorithmic content recommendations have amplified these relationships. Platforms like Spotify, YouTube, and Apple Podcasts analyse user behaviour to shape listening habits, thus influencing individual media experiences through algorithmic selectivity (Napoli, 2019). This creates a dual dynamic in which user bonds in digital environments are formed both organically and algorithmically, a concept highlighted by Serttaş et al. (2025) as 'synthetic social alienation'. Therefore, PSI today can be considered to be not just a psychological process but a socio-technical phenomenon shaped by AI-supported media infrastructures as well.

This study rests primarily on a quantitative survey design. Podcast-related parasocial engagement is measured with an eight-item podcast-context adaptation of the Parasocial Interaction Scale. A secondary, exploratory layer uses multilingual Sentence-BERT embeddings, cosine similarity, and human thematic labelling to describe patterning in the open-ended responses (Reimers & Gurevych, 2019).

Against this background, we ask whether podcast-category selection and listening practices are associated with differences in the adapted PSI score. We also pose a more provisional question about semantic patterning in the open-ended responses. Ideas such as recurring host presence, conversational exchange, and narrative continuity help us interpret the associations, but they were not measured directly and are not treated as tested mechanisms.

Literature review: Parasocial interaction theory, podcasts and listener motivations

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the concept of PSI to describe the illusion of conversational give-and-take that media users may experience with a media persona during media exposure. On the other hand, the concept of parasocial relationship (PSR) refers to a process of ongoing attachment that develops as a result of prolonged exposure to media content (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Contemporary scholarship distinguishes PSI which refers to an episode-specific, interaction-like experience occurring during media use, whereas PSR denotes a more enduring one-sided relational orientation that can persist beyond a particular episode or exposure. Similarly, emotional attachment refers to the affective closeness or intensity associated with a media figure, while host-liking represents a favourable evaluation that does not necessarily involve either an interaction-like experience or an enduring relationship. Identification is also conceptually distinct because it involves temporarily adopting the media figure's perspective, goals, or identity rather than relating to the figure as a separate social other. Although these constructs may be empirically associated, they should not be treated as interchangeable (Cohen, 2001; Dibble et al., 2016).

Early studies that built on Horton and Wohl's work, have demonstrated the strengthening of media personas, particularly through television news and news anchors. For instance, Levy (1979) found that news anchors' use of everyday language and direct address fostered a sense of closeness with viewers. Brown (2015), conversely, defines media personas as archetypal figures representing real people within the audience's cognitive and social world, emphasising

their role in triggering parasocial bonds through interactive techniques. The empirical measurement of these bonds was significantly advanced by the development of the Parasocial Interaction Scale (Rubin et al., 1985), which paved the way for studies examining the relationships between media use, emotional satisfaction, and loneliness (Wang et al., 2008). However, subsequent measurement research has indicated that conventional PSI-scale items may capture short- or long-term host-liking and more enduring relational orientations in addition to momentary parasocial interaction (Dibble et al., 2016). This methodological distinction is particularly relevant to the present study, as the adapted podcast-context measure includes items reflecting both interaction-like perceptions and more enduring relational responses.

In contrast to communication studies that portray audiences as passive recipients, the Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that individuals actively select media content to fulfil their specific needs (Katz et al., 1973). This approach is particularly valuable in understanding user-controlled, asynchronous, and customisable media formats like podcasts. Defined as a new generation of media formats, podcasts can cultivate more intimate relationships with listeners due to their low production costs, independence from time and place, and auditory nature (Berry, 2006; Crofts et al., 2005). This auditory structure, as Euritt (2022) argues, is central to the formation of podcast intimacy, as it enables a form of affective proximity that is less dependent on visual representation and more rooted in voice, tone, and repetition.

Research on podcast publishing generally falls into three main categories. The first focuses on the historical development, economic structure, and platformisation of podcasts, addressing issues such as advertising, sponsorship, and algorithmic visibility (Yücel, 2020; Adler Berg, 2022). The second concentrates on production practices and narrator identity, highlighting podcasting's potential for freedom of expression, community building, and the amplification of alternative voices (Markman, 2012; Millette, 2011). The third examines the educational, journalistic, and cultural transmission functions of podcasts, exploring the social impacts of this medium (Bulut, 2022; Sancar, 2024).

Recent studies indicate that the repetitive and intimate narrative structure of podcasts strengthens parasocial bonds with listeners. The narrator's voice, speaking tempo, and personal narrative style can create a sense of 'close friendship' and trust, increasing programme loyalty and emotional attachment (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021; Marx et al., 2021). Furthermore, genre-specific research suggests that podcasts centred on conversation, humour, and storytelling are particularly effective at triggering PSI (Boling & Hull, 2018; Pavelko & Myrick, 2020). This affective attachment should also be understood within the broader framework of 'affective economies' (Banet-Weiser, 2018), where emotional engagement becomes a key currency in digital media environments. In this sense, parasocial bonds are not merely psychological outcomes but are embedded in systems that circulate visibility, attention, and value through affective investment. Conceptualised as more than mere situational phenomena, parasocial relationships are differentiated from constructs like identification by their enduring nature. Whereas most forms of character engagement are localised to the moment of exposure, PSRs foster a sustained psychological presence that exerts a continuous influence over the consumer's world-view and conduct, irrespective of active media engagement (Breves & van Berlo, 2026; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

The literature on podcast listening motivations reveals a multi-layered structure that influences listener behaviour, one in which functional motivations (time-space flexibility and portability), content-based motivations (information acquisition, entertainment, and storytelling), and relational motivations (closeness to the host and sense of community) operate in concert (Perks & Turner, 2019; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Research indicates that the relational dimension is not simply a secondary effect but a structural element that sustains the overall listening experience. While situational engagement during episodes fosters momentary PSI (Horton & Wohl, 1956), the continuity of narrative structures and sound aesthetics transforms these experiences into enduring PSR. Consequently, parasociality in podcasting cannot be reduced to an isolated psychological by-product; rather, it functions as a hybrid relational form shaped by the intersection of individual emotional engagement and platform-driven visibility structures (van Dijck, 2013). By uniquely combining technical flexibility, affective intimacy, and platform-based circulation within the digital media landscape, podcasts operate through the interplay of parasocial dynamics, podcast intimacy (Euritt, 2022), and affective economies (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This positions podcasting as a critical site for rethinking parasociality not merely as an individual psychological phenomenon, but as a socio-technical and affective formation embedded in contemporary media systems.

Differences across media types in parasocial relationships

Traditional mass media fosters relatively low-interactive PSR within a programme-centred structure. Viewers typically lack direct contact with media figures, and the immediate experience of PSI is strictly confined to the duration of the broadcast. In this context, enduring relationships rely more on habit, repetition, and representational stability than on ongoing personal continuity (Perse & Rubin, 1989). While television characters or news anchors can create long-term familiarity over time, these relationships remain largely one-sided and lack direct feedback mechanisms.

Digital platforms – understood as socio-technical ecosystems structured by datafication, algorithmic governance and platform logics (van Dijck, 2013) – have not only intensified these parasocial relationships but also transformed them into more interactive and continuous experiences. On platforms like social media, YouTube, and podcasts, the relationships between content creators and users have evolved into a semi-interactive form through comments, likes, direct messages, and live streams. These new media environments produce a hybrid structure where momentary PSI and enduring PSR intertwine (Bizjak Zabukovec & Faganel, 2024; Cunov, 2025). The sharing of daily life by content creators, particularly on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, strengthens the viewer's sense of 'backstage access', thus deepening parasocial intimacy (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Within this framework, parasocial dynamics become increasingly shaped by platform affordances, where algorithmic recommendation systems sustain visibility and continuity, reinforcing repeated exposure and deepening emotional attachment. Within this broader digital ecosystem, streaming platforms and social media content are restructuring parasocial relationships through algorithmic visibility and affective labour. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, in the digital popularity economy, visibility

is inseparable from affective performance. Content creators are compelled to continuously produce authenticity, intimacy, and emotional accessibility as forms of labour.

In this context, parasocial relationships are not only sustained through audience perception but are actively produced and managed as part of platform-driven visibility economies. Podcast media, however, occupies a unique position within this platform-driven landscape. Unlike visual-heavy platforms, the absence of visual cues, the directness of sound, and the individual listening experience via headphones create a distinct sense of intimacy between listener and host. While operating within the same visibility economies, research indicates that podcast listeners form stronger parasocial bonds with hosts, based on trust, sincerity, and emotional openness (McHugh, 2016; Bond, 2018). This demonstrates that parasocial relationships in podcasting are shaped not only by the algorithmic visibility of the media figure, but fundamentally by the narrative style, sound aesthetics, and communicative tone of the medium.

Hypotheses and research questions

Drawing on the discussion above, we advance the following hypotheses and research questions. H1 and H2, together with RQ1, map onto variables collected in the survey. RQ2 concerns the open-ended material and is kept deliberately provisional.

Podcasts are commonly categorised by genre; however, genre labels alone may not fully account for variations in parasocial interaction. Podcast categories may differ in communicative tendencies such as conversational exchange, recurring host presence, narrative continuity, humour, and personal disclosure. These tendencies may contribute to perceptions of mediated intimacy and relational closeness. Nevertheless, because these communicative features were not directly measured in the present study, they are used only as theoretically informed concepts for interpreting the observed associations between podcast-category selection and the adapted PSI score. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> **H1:** Selection of interview/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, and comedy/talk podcast categories is positively associated with the adapted PSI score, after accounting for selection of the other focal podcast categories.

Parasocial engagement may also be associated with patterns of podcast use. Repeated encounters with the same podcast host may be related to greater familiarity and perceived relational continuity. Because podcast listening is often incorporated into everyday routines, listening frequency may be more strongly associated with the adapted PSI score than the duration of individual listening sessions. Accordingly, the following hypothesis and research question are proposed:

> **H2:** Podcast listening frequency is positively associated with the adapted PSI score.
> **RQ1:** What is the relationship between daily podcast listening duration and the adapted PSI score?

We also include an exploratory computational reading of the open-ended answers in order to describe semantic proximity and recurring themes. In this questionnaire, the open-ended item asked respondents to name the podcast they listened to most often; the short Turkish replies to that item form the corpus. Because the analysis is descriptive rather than confirmatory, we formulate it as a research question:

> **RQ2:** When participants' open-ended responses are examined with Sentence-BERT embeddings, clustering, and human thematic labelling, to what extent do they show semantic proximity and recurring themes?

Methodology

This study adopts a primarily quantitative survey design to examine associations between podcast-category selection, listening practices, demographic characteristics, and the adapted PSI score. An exploratory computational text-analysis component was additionally used to examine semantic patterning in participants' open-ended naming of their most frequently listened-to podcasts and to contextualise the listening referents that preceded the adapted PSI items.

Measurement instrument and variables

The primary measurement instrument used in this study was an eight-item podcast-context measure based on the Parasocial Interaction Scale originally developed by Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985). In adapting the instrument to the podcast-listening context, the study drew on both the conceptual content of the original scale and the Turkish podcast-oriented adaptation proposed by Özkan Sev (2024). The items were shortened and contextually reformulated to refer specifically to podcast hosts, podcast episodes, and audio-based listening experiences.

The survey was developed and administered in Turkish. Because the instrument used in the present study was adapted directly in Turkish rather than produced through an item-by-item translation of an English questionnaire, no forward-translation or back-translation procedure was conducted. The English translations presented in the Appendix were prepared by the authors solely for reporting purposes and were not administered to participants. The Appendix presents the complete Turkish items, their English translations, response anchors, and factor loadings.

Participants responded to the eight items using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. No items were reverse-coded. The composite score was calculated by averaging the eight item scores, with higher scores indicating stronger podcast-related parasocial engagement. The internal consistency of the scale was assessed using the final study sample and was found to be high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). The resulting composite score was used as the dependent variable in all analyses. Throughout the manuscript, the term adapted PSI score refers to this eight-item composite measure. Because the items

encompass both interaction-like perceptions and more enduring relational responses, the score is interpreted as a broad indicator of podcast-related parasocial engagement rather than as an exclusive measure of momentary parasocial interaction.

Immediately before completing the adapted PSI items, participants were asked to name the podcast they listened to most frequently. The subsequent items referred to 'the podcast host' and 'this podcast'. This question order was intended to orient participants toward the specific podcast and host they listened to most frequently rather than toward podcast listening in general.

Podcast categories were measured using a multiple-response question asking participants to indicate the podcast types they listened to most frequently. Participants could select one or more of six original response options: chat/guest-based, informational (documentary, research, or educational), comedy/talk, personal development, narrative/storytelling, and news/current affairs. Each response option was coded as a separate binary variable (0 = not selected, 1 = selected).

The inferential analysis included four original category indicators: chat/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, personal development, and comedy/talk. Consistent with H1, the interview/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, and comedy/talk categories were treated as the primary theoretically motivated predictors, whereas personal development was retained in the model as an additional covariate to account for potential variation in podcast-category preferences. For consistency of terminology, the chat/guest-based and comedy/talk categories are reported throughout the manuscript as interview/guest-based and comedy/talk, respectively. Narrative/storytelling and personal development retain their original meanings. No participant response was altered or reassigned from one category to another. Accordingly, these variables should be interpreted as broad self-reported podcast-category indicators rather than as direct measures of structural or communicative characteristics.

The informational and news/current-affairs response options were not included in the inferential model and were not treated as reference categories. These options primarily reflected topical or functional orientations, whereas the focal category indicators were more directly aligned with the communicative presentation tendencies examined in the study. Accordingly, H1 was specified only for the interview/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, and comedy/talk categories. Because participants could select more than one response option, the analysed category indicators represented overlapping rather than mutually exclusive groups.

The remaining independent variables included listening frequency, daily listening duration, and demographic characteristics (age, gender, and education). Listening frequency ran from 1 = rarely to 5 = daily. Just before the adapted PSI items, participants named the podcast they listened to most often. That prompt was meant to give the later ratings a concrete referent. Still, because category selection allowed more than one answer and the PSI wording did not lock every item to a single podcast, some slippage in referent remains possible; we note this as a limitation. The same open-ended name field supplied the corpus for the exploratory embedding analysis. Since the item asked for a title or show name rather than a free account of parasocial experience, the computational themes speak to named referents only.

Validity and reliability of the adapted measure

The internal structure and reliability of the eight-item podcast-context measure were evaluated using the final study sample (N = 340). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure indicated a high level of sampling adequacy (KMO = .905), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant, $\chi^2(28) = 1585.60$, $p < .001$. These results indicated that the inter-item correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis.

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted using principal axis factoring. The number of factors to retain was evaluated through inspection of the initial eigenvalues. The first eigenvalue was 4.92, whereas the second eigenvalue was 0.76. Only the first factor had an eigenvalue greater than 1.00, suggesting a one-factor solution. Following principal axis extraction, the retained factor accounted for approximately 56.1% of the variance in the item set.

All eight items loaded positively and substantially on the retained factor, with factor loadings ranging from .684 to .825. No item was removed from the measure. The complete list of the original Turkish survey items, their English translations prepared for reporting purposes, and their individual factor loadings is presented in the Appendix.

The internal consistency of the measure was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficient was alpha = .91, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Taken together, the exploratory factor analysis and reliability results support the use of the eight items as a single composite measure within the present sample. However, because the study did not administer separate criterion scales for parasocial relationship, host liking, identification, or emotional attachment, internal consistency and unidimensionality should not be read as complete discriminant validity. Accordingly, the composite is interpreted as a broad indicator of podcast-related parasocial engagement.

Nevertheless, the observed one-factor structure should not be interpreted as demonstrating that the measure is empirically distinct from related constructs such as parasocial relationship, emotional attachment, identification, or host liking. Some items reflect interaction-like perceptions experienced in relation to the host, whereas others capture more enduring relational responses, such as perceived friendship, interest in the host's personal life, and excitement about new episodes. The one-factor solution therefore indicates that the items functioned as a coherent composite measure in the present sample, but it does not establish discriminant validity among these conceptually related dimensions. Accordingly, the resulting composite score is interpreted as a broad indicator of podcast-related parasocial engagement rather than as an exclusive measure of momentary parasocial interaction.

Sample and data collection

The study sample consisted of 340 participants (N = 340) who completed an online survey designed to examine PSI in podcast listening contexts. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, with the aim of including individuals who had prior experience in podcast listening and who exhibited varying levels of engagement with podcast content.

Data were collected between 25 May and 1 June 2025 through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. Given the exploratory nature of the study, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who had prior podcast-listening experience and represented varying levels of engagement with podcast content. The survey was distributed through multiple channels, including university student networks and online podcast communities. This strategy increases relevance to digitally active young listeners but limits population representativeness; findings should not be generalised to all podcast audiences.

Participation in the study required prior experience with podcast listening. Rather than imposing a strict frequency threshold, the study intentionally included participants with different levels of podcast consumption to capture variation in parasocial interaction across listening practices. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive examination of PSI in relation to both frequent and occasional listeners.

Participants reported their age through an open-ended question, which was subsequently categorised for analytical purposes. The sample primarily consisted of young adults aged between 18 and 33. This age profile is broadly consistent with previous survey evidence indicating that podcast use tends to be more prevalent among younger adults than among older age groups (Shearer et al., 2023; Edison Research, 2024). This demographic focus enhances the analytical relevance of the study in examining parasocial interaction within contemporary podcast audiences.

Although the sample was not randomly selected, purposive sampling enabled the inclusion of participants with heterogeneous listening practices across different podcast categories, including interview/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, personal development, and comedy/talk podcasts.

Ethics, informed consent and data protection

The study received ethical approval from the ethics committee of Istanbul Atlas University under approval number 25-41 on 16 May 2025. Before beginning the survey, participants were presented with an information statement explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the types of data collected, the intended use of the data, and their right to discontinue participation before submitting the questionnaire. Participants provided informed consent electronically by selecting a consent option before accessing the survey questions. Furthermore, data were collected through Google Forms. The form was configured not to collect participants' names, email addresses, or other directly identifying information. Participants were not required to sign into a Google account. Internet Protocol addresses and other potentially identifying metadata were not accessed, downloaded, or included in the analytical dataset. The dataset was exported from Google Forms and stored in password-protected institutional storage accessible only to the research team. Survey responses were used exclusively for research purposes and were analysed in aggregated or anonymised form.

Data analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 29.0 and Python 3.13 with the statsmodels 0.14.6 package. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarise participants' demographic characteristics, podcast-listening practices, and the distribution of the adapted PSI score.

The adapted PSI score was treated as approximately normally distributed. Its skewness and kurtosis values were .186 and −.808, respectively, and visual inspection of the Q-Q plot indicated no substantial deviation from normality. Although formal normality tests were statistically significant, these results were interpreted cautiously because of their sensitivity in larger samples.

A two-model hierarchical multiple linear regression was conducted with the adapted PSI score as the dependent variable. Model 1 simultaneously included four binary podcast-category indicators-interview/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, personal development, and comedy/talk-coded as 0 = not selected and 1 = selected. Because participants could select multiple categories, these indicators represented overlapping rather than mutually exclusive groups. Model 2 additionally included listening frequency, listening duration, gender, age group, and education level. Categorical covariates were entered using dummy variables. Model fit was evaluated using the omnibus F test, R^2, adjusted R^2, ΔR^2, and the F-change test. Unstandardised and standardised regression coefficients, 95% confidence intervals, and p values were reported for the predictors. Because category indicators were overlapping rather than mutually exclusive, each coefficient is interpreted as the association for selecting that category while accounting for selection of the other focal categories. Multicollinearity among the four category indicators was low in diagnostic checks (all variance inflation factors < 1.20). Given the modest model R-squared values expected for broad self-report category indicators, statistically significant coefficients are interpreted as small associations rather than as strong explanatory effects.

Means and standard deviations of the adapted PSI score were additionally presented for participants selecting each podcast category. Because the categories overlapped, these values were interpreted descriptively rather than as independent-group comparisons. Spearman's rank-order correlations were used to test H2 and address RQ1 by examining the bivariate associations of listening frequency and daily listening duration with the adapted PSI score. Their adjusted associations were additionally evaluated in Model 2 of the hierarchical regression.

As a supplementary analysis, one-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine unadjusted differences in the adapted PSI score across gender, age group, and education level. Levene's tests were used to assess homogeneity of variance, and eta-squared values were reported as effect-size estimates.

The open-ended responses were analysed in an exploratory way. Responses were written in Turkish. After empty and non-informative replies were set aside (for example, *'yok,' 'bilmiyorum,'* or *'en çok dinlediğim yok'*), 229 of the 340 submissions remained. Mean length in the retained set was about 3.07 words (median = 2.0). The text was lightly normalised – trimmed, with repeated spaces collapsed and lowercasing applied for duplicate checks – but not stemmed, and stopwords were not removed. Exact duplicates were collapsed (182 unique strings). Near-duplicates at cosine similarity of 0.92 or higher were then grouped, which

left 164 representations for clustering. Each representation was encoded with paraphrase-multilingual-MiniLM-L12-v2 (Reimers & Gurevych, 2019), a multilingual model suited to short Turkish texts. Embeddings were L2-normalised and compared with cosine similarity. We used k-means (k = 4; random_state = 42; n_init = 20) after checking cosine silhouette values for k = 2 through 5; those values stayed modest (roughly 0.14–0.20), so the clusters are best read as provisional groupings. Labels were assigned in two human coding passes that inspected titles near each centroid as well as additional sampled cases; where the two passes diverged, we kept the more cautious, descriptive label. No generative language model was used to invent themes. Mean pairwise cosine similarity among the four centroids (M = 0.57, SD = 0.15, range = 0.40–0.83) is reported only as a descriptive summary and is read alongside the labelled themes and quotations. One boundary matters for interpretation: the open-ended item asked for the name of the most frequently listened-to podcast, so the themes speak to named listening referents rather than to free-written accounts of parasocial feeling. The procedure does not validate the adapted PSI scale and does not, on its own, establish category-specific semantic regimes.

Results

The analyses were based on 340 valid responses. The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample indicate that it was predominantly composed of young adults. Participants aged 21–26 constituted the largest age group (51.5%), followed by those aged 18–20 (30.6%) and 27–33 (17.9%). Age was initially collected through an open-ended question and subsequently grouped into three intervals for descriptive presentation and group-based statistical analyses.

In terms of gender distribution, 67.1% of participants identified as female and 29.7% as male. The remaining 3.2% selected either another gender category or the option indicating that they preferred not to disclose their gender. Most participants were students (62.4%). With respect to educational attainment, 44.7% reported an undergraduate-level education and 42.1% were high school graduates. The remaining participants reported associate (4.7%), master's (7.1%), or doctoral-level education (1.5%). Overall, the sample was predominantly young, female, and student-based.

The descriptive findings indicate that podcast listening was generally occasional rather than routine. A substantial proportion of participants reported listening to podcasts rarely (38.2%) or a few times per month (22.1%). A further 11.2% reported listening approximately once a week, while 20.9% listened a few times per week and 7.6% listened daily. Thus, although the sample included listeners with varying levels of podcast use, frequent podcast listening was comparatively uncommon.

Daily listening duration was also relatively limited. Most participants (72.6%) reported listening to podcasts for 0–30 minutes per day, while longer daily listening durations were substantially less common. Taken together, these descriptive characteristics indicate that the sample predominantly consisted of occasional and relatively short-duration podcast listeners. This listening profile should be considered when interpreting the subsequent analyses of the associations between listening practices, self-reported podcast-category selection, and the adapted PSI score.

Associations between podcast-category selection and the adapted PSI score

To test H1, a two-model hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. In Model 1, four overlapping podcast-category indicators interview/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, personal development, and comedy/talk were entered simultaneously as binary predictors. Interview/guest-based, narrative/storytelling, and comedy/talk represented the theoretically motivated predictors specified in H1, whereas personal development was included as an additional control predictor. Because participants could select more than one category, the indicators represented overlapping rather than mutually exclusive groups. The coefficients therefore estimate the unique association of each category with the adapted PSI score while accounting for participants' selection of the other focal categories.

Model 1 was statistically significant, $F(4, 335) = 6.65$, $p < .001$, and explained 7.4% of the variance in the adapted PSI score ($R^2 = .074$, adjusted $R^2 = .063$). Interview/guest-based podcast selection was positively associated with the adapted PSI score ($B = .393$, $\beta = .192$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.173, .614]). Narrative/storytelling selection was also positively associated with the score, although the association was comparatively smaller ($B = .257$, $\beta = .113$, $p = .034$, 95% CI [.020, .493]). Personal development and comedy/talk selection were not statistically significant predictors in Model 1 (Table 1).

Model 2 additionally included listening frequency, daily listening duration, gender, age group, and education level. The fully adjusted model was statistically significant, $F(17, 322) = 2.29$, $p = .003$, and accounted for 10.8% of the variance in the adapted PSI score ($R^2 = .108$, adjusted $R^2 = .061$). However, the addition of the listening-practice and demographic variables did not significantly improve the model, $\Delta R^2 = .034$, F-change$(13, 322) = 0.96$, $p = .495$.

After adjustment, interview/guest-based podcast selection remained positively associated with the adapted PSI score ($B = .377$, $\beta = .184$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.154, .600]). By contrast, the association for narrative/storytelling selection was attenuated and was no longer statistically significant ($B = .197$, $\beta = .087$, $p = .117$, 95% CI [–.049, .443]). Personal development and comedy/talk selection also remained nonsignificant. Among the adjustment variables, only listening frequency was positively associated with the adapted PSI score ($B = .111$, $\beta = .150$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [.021, .201]); this association is examined further in the section addressing H2.

On this basis, H1 receives only partial support. Interview/guest-based selection retained a positive association with the adapted PSI score in both models. Narrative/storytelling selection mattered before adjustment but not after it, and comedy/talk selection was not significant in either model. The models themselves explain a limited share of variance (Model 1 R^2 = .074; Model 2 R^2 = .108), which fits what one would expect from broad self-report category indicators. Because the design is cross-sectional, the coefficients should be read as associations, not as evidence that choosing a given category produces stronger parasocial engagement.

Table 1:
Associations between podcast-category selection and the adapted PSI score

Predictor	Model 1 B [95% CI]	β	*p*	Model 2 B [95% CI]	β	*p*
Interview/ guest-based	.393 [.173, .614]	.192	< .001	.377 [.154, .600]	.184	< .001
Narrative/ storytelling	.257 [.020, .493]	.113	.034	.197 [−.049, .443]	.087	.117
Personal development	.200 [−.017, .417]	.096	.071	.130 [−.106, .365]	.063	.279
Comedy/talk	.173 [−.053, .400]	.082	.133	.116 [−.118, .349]	.055	.330
Listening frequency	–	–	–	.111 [.021, .201]	.150	.016
Duration: 30–60 minutes	–	–	–	.154 [−.142, .450]	.061	.308
Duration: 1–2 hours	–	–	–	.027 [−.453, .508]	.006	.911
Duration: More than 2 hours	–	–	–	−.131 [−1.047, .784]	−.016	.778
R^2	.074			.108		
Adjusted R^2	.063			.061		
Model F	$F(4, 335) = 6.65, p < .001$			$F(17, 322) = 2.29, p = .003$		
ΔR^2	–			.034		
F change	–			$F(13, 322) = .96, p = .495$		

Notes: N = 340. Model 1 included the four overlapping podcast-category indicators. Model 2 additionally included listening frequency, listening duration, gender, age group, and education level. Demographic coefficients are not displayed for conciseness; none were statistically significant. Podcast-category indicators were coded as 0 = not selected and 1 = selected. Listening frequency was coded from 1 = rarely to 5 = daily. The reference category for listening duration was 0–30 minutes. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; β = standardised regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Descriptive patterns across podcast categories

To support the interpretation of H1, adapted PSI scores were descriptively examined among participants who selected each podcast category. Because participants could select more than one category, the category groups overlapped and were neither mutually exclusive nor

statistically independent. Accordingly, Table 2 presents descriptive statistics only and does not provide additional tests of between-group differences.

Descriptively, participants selecting narrative/storytelling podcasts had the highest mean adapted PSI score (M = 3.17), followed by those selecting interview/guest-based (M = 3.13), comedy/talk (M = 3.11), and personal development podcasts (M = 3.02).

These differences in category mean they should be interpreted cautiously. The adjusted regression analysis showed that only interview/guest-based podcast selection remained significantly associated with the adapted PSI score after listening-practice and demographic variables were included. Moreover, communicative characteristics potentially associated with these categories, such as narrative continuity, conversational exchange, and recurring host presence, were not directly measured. The descriptive means therefore should not be interpreted as evidence that particular category characteristics independently produce stronger parasocial engagement.

Table 2:
Descriptive adapted PSI scores among podcast-category selectors

Podcast category	n	Mean adapted PSI score	SD
Narrative/storytelling	94	3.17	0.96
Interview/guest-based	194	3.13	0.99
Comedy-talk	124	3.11	1.06
Personal development	134	3.02	0.98

Note: Participants could select more than one podcast category; the category groups therefore overlap and the sample sizes do not sum to the total sample size.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Listening frequency, listening duration and the adapted PSI score

To test H2 and address RQ1, Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis was conducted to examine the associations between podcast listening frequency, daily listening duration, and the adapted PSI score.

As presented in Table 3, listening frequency showed a weak but statistically significant positive association with the adapted PSI score ($r_s = .201, p < .001$). Because listening frequency was coded from 1 = rarely to 5 = daily, this finding indicates that more frequent podcast listening was associated with higher adapted PSI scores. Accordingly, H2 was supported.

Daily listening duration was not significantly associated with the adapted PSI score ($r_s = .099, p = .069$). Thus, in response to RQ1, no statistically significant association was observed between daily listening duration and the adapted PSI score. These bivariate findings were consistent with the fully adjusted regression model, in which listening frequency remained a significant predictor, whereas listening duration did not.

Because the study used cross-sectional data, the causal direction of the association between listening frequency and the adapted PSI score cannot be determined. More frequent

listening may contribute to stronger parasocial engagement, but individuals experiencing stronger parasocial engagement may also listen to podcasts more frequently.

Table 3:
Spearman correlations between listening practices and the adapted PSI score

Variables	1	2	3
1. Adapted PSI score	1		
2. Listening frequency	.201***	1	
3. Daily listening duration	.099	.406***	1

Notes: N = 340. Listening frequency was coded from 1 = rarely to 5 = daily; higher scores therefore indicate more frequent listening. r_s = Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient. All tests were two-tailed. ***p < .001. Daily listening duration was coded ordinally from 1 = 0–30 minutes to 4 = more than 2 hours.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Supplementary analysis of demographic differences in the adapted PSI score

As a supplementary analysis, one-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine whether the adapted PSI score differed across gender, age group, and education level. Gender included four categories: female, male, other, and prefer not to say. Levene's tests were nonsignificant for all analyses ($p > .05$), indicating no evidence of a violation of the homogeneity-of-variance assumption.

No statistically significant differences in the adapted PSI score were observed across gender, $F(3, 336) = 0.423$, $p = .736$, $\eta^2 = .004$; age group, $F(2, 337) = 0.238$, $p = .788$, $\eta^2 = .001$; or education level, $F(4, 335) = 0.289$, $p = .885$, $\eta^2 = .003$. The effect sizes were very small. These supplementary findings were consistent with the fully adjusted regression model, in which the demographic variables were not statistically significant predictors of the adapted PSI score.

Because some gender categories contained relatively few participants, the findings concerning gender should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 4:
Summary of one-way ANOVAs for demographic differences in the adapted PSI score

Variable	Categories (k)	df (between, within)	F	p	η^2
Gender	4	(3, 336)	0.423	.736	.004
Age group	3	(2, 337)	0.238	.788	.001
Education level	5	(4, 335)	0.289	.885	.003

Note: N = 340. Gender included female, male, other, and prefer not to say. Levene's tests were nonsignificant for all analyses ($p > .05$), indicating no evidence of a violation of the homogeneity-of-variance assumption. These analyses were supplementary and were not linked to a separate hypothesis or research question.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Exploratory analysis of open-ended responses (RQ2)

RQ2 was examined with the Sentence-BERT procedure outlined above. We present this part of the study as exploratory. Respondents had been asked to name the podcast they listened to most often, so the corpus consists of short Turkish titles and host or show names rather than extended personal narratives.

Of 340 submissions, 229 name responses remained after exclusions. Deduplication reduced the set to 182 unique strings, and near-duplicate collapse at cosine ≥ 0.92 left 164 representations for clustering. Average length was 3.07 words (median = 2.0).

We retained a four-cluster solution for reporting (cosine silhouette for k = 4 = 0.144; values for k = 2–5 were similarly modest). Pairwise cosine similarities among the four centroids were M = 0.57 (SD = 0.15), ranging from 0.40 to 0.83. In practical terms, the themes sit near one another without collapsing into a single pattern.

Table 5:
Human-labelled themes from open-ended podcast-name responses

Theme	n	Representative examples
1. Conversational, narrative and reflective titles	70	*Hikaye; Dinler Tarihi; kafaya takmama sanatı*
2. News and current-affairs media titles	10	*Kanal d haber; Cumhuriyet Gazetesi - olaylar ve görüşler; bbc news*
3. Explicit podcast-franchise titles	23	*Genel sesler podcast; Podcastia maceraları; Kalt'ın Podcasti*
4. Short host- or show-name referents	61	*Spor; Erlik; Bekir Develi*

After computational grouping, responses were human-labelled into the following themes:

- Theme 1: conversational, narrative, and reflective titles (n = 70). Many titles pointed toward story, talk, or everyday reflection, the kinds of framing often linked to relational listening. Examples include *'Hikaye'* (Story), *'Dinler Tarihi'* (History of Religion), and 'kafaya takmama sanatı' (The Art of Not Overthinking).
- Theme 2: News and current-affairs media titles (n = 10). Here respondents named news outlets or current-affairs programmes. Examples include *'Kanal d haber', 'Cumhuriyet Gazetesi - olaylar ve görüşler',* and 'bbc news'.
- Theme 3: Explicit podcast-franchise titles (n = 23). These titles either contain the word 'podcast' or clearly mark a named series. The grouping is partly lexical, so we treated it as a naming pattern rather than a deep content theme. Examples include *'Genel sesler podcast', 'Podcastia maceraları',* and *'Kalt'ın Podcasti'.*
- Theme 4: Short host- or show-name referents (n = 61). Many answers were brief host or show names, which suggests that listeners often anchored the later PSI items to a person or brand. Examples include *'Spor', 'Erlik',* and *'Bekir Develi'.*

In answer to RQ2, the open-ended material shows partial semantic proximity across four human-labelled themes, each illustrated with participant examples. Separation among clusters is modest, so we keep the reading cautious. Because respondents supplied podcast names, the themes describe motifs in those named referents; they should not be stretched into a full account of parasocial emotion or host attachment. Neither did we stratify the similarity analysis by podcast category. For that reason, we do not take cosine similarity as evidence that parasocial experience is 'collectively structured', and we read the computational layer as context for, rather than confirmation of, the regression results.

Discussion

On this evidence broad category labels do only limited explanatory work. Interview/guest-based selection continued to be positively associated with the adapted PSI score, yet the association was modest and the other category indicators did not hold as cleanly after adjustment. A fair reading is that parasocial engagement may hinge less on the category label itself than on relational qualities that vary inside those labels, which are qualities we did not measure directly.

The sustained association observed for interview/guest-based podcasts may be interpreted in relation to the interpersonal qualities of podcast listening. The auditory intimacy of podcasts, together with recurring voices and conversational exchange, can foster familiarity and perceived closeness between hosts and listeners (Berry, 2016; Lindgren, 2016; Schlütz & Hedder, 2021). However, because host continuity, conversational style, and perceived intimacy were not directly measured, these explanations should be treated as theoretical interpretations rather than demonstrated mechanisms.

The loss of significance for narrative/storytelling selection after adjustment further demonstrates that descriptive category differences do not necessarily represent independent format effects. Although narrative and storytelling-oriented podcasts are commonly associated with continuity, emotional involvement, and personal voice (Lindgren, 2016; McHugh, 2016), broad category indicators may not adequately capture the specific communicative features through which parasocial engagement develops.

Listening frequency showed a small positive association with the adapted PSI score, whereas daily listening duration did not. This pattern is consistent with the view that regular and repeated exposure may support familiarity and perceived relational continuity (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Perse & Rubin, 1989). Podcast research similarly indicates that relational motivations, including closeness to hosts and a sense of connection, operate alongside informational and entertainment-oriented motivations (Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design does not establish whether frequent listening strengthens parasocial engagement or whether more parasocially engaged listeners choose to listen more often.

The limited explanatory power of the regression models suggests that important relational factors were not captured by the study. Perceived authenticity, host self-disclosure, conversational style, listener motivation, identification with the host, and continuity of host

presence may provide more precise explanations than broad category indicators. Future research should therefore measure these characteristics directly.

The Sentence-BERT work remains exploratory. It pointed to partial proximity among four labelled themes (centroid pairwise cosine M = 0.57) and supplied quotations for each. Similarity scores capture closeness among short replies – in this case, podcast names – and therefore neither show that parasocial experience is collectively patterned nor replace a fuller qualitative reading of listener narratives (Reimers & Gurevych, 2019). The firmer empirical claims of the paper are those from the hierarchical regression.

There are several limits then to what can be claimed: the adapted PSI score mixes more momentary, interaction-like items with more enduring relational ones, and we did not collect separate discriminant measures. Category choices could overlap, while the PSI block was oriented toward a named favourite podcast, so the link between category selection and the rated referent is imperfect. Explained variance is modest; even stable coefficients are small associations. The sample leans toward young and student-based and was gathered quickly online, which narrows external validity. The cross-sectional design also leaves open whether frequent listening deepens parasocial engagement or whether already engaged listeners simply listen more. Further research would benefit from more diverse samples, a single shared podcast/host referent across measures, direct indicators of communicative format features, and – where researchers want stronger text claims – open-ended narrative prompts with independent coding.

Conclusion

This study examined the associations between podcast-category selection, listening practices, and podcast-related parasocial engagement. Interview/guest-based podcast selection was positively associated with the adapted PSI score in both regression models, whereas the association for narrative/storytelling selection did not remain significant after adjustment. Personal development and comedy/talk selection were not significant predictors. H1 was therefore partially supported. Listening frequency was positively associated with the adapted PSI score, supporting H2, while daily listening duration was not significantly associated with the score, which addresses RQ1. No significant differences were observed across gender, age, or education.

RQ2 was addressed through an exploratory Sentence-BERT analysis that reported human-labelled themes and quotations. The pattern suggested partial semantic proximity and four recurring motifs, but we keep that reading tentative. The study's firmer conclusions come from the regression associations and stop short of causal claims about unmeasured communicative mechanisms.

In practical terms, the paper offers a transparent survey analysis of category selection and listening practices, set alongside a carefully bounded exploratory reading of open-ended names. We have tried throughout to separate what the data shows from what theory renders plausible. Useful next steps include measuring host self-disclosure, conversational style, narrative continuity, perceived authenticity, and listener motivation more directly;

sampling beyond student-heavy networks; and, when narrative text is available, pairing computational grouping with independent thematic coding.

Appendix

Adapted Parasocial Interaction Scale Items

The questionnaire was administered in Turkish. Participants evaluated each item using a five-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. The English translations are provided for reporting purposes only and were not administered to participants. Factor loadings were obtained from the exploratory factor analysis conducted on the final study sample (N = 340).

Table 1:
Original Turkish survey items, English translations and factor loadings

Item	Original Turkish survey item	English translation	Factor loading
1	*Podcast sunucusunu tanıdığım biri gibi hissediyorum.*	I feel as though the podcast host is someone I know.	.782
2	*Sunucu konuşurken doğrudan bana sesleniyormuş gibi hissediyorum.*	When the host speaks, I feel as though they are speaking directly to me.	.741
3	*Sunucunun fikirlerine değer veriyorum.*	I value the host's opinions.	.717
4	*Podcast sunucusunu gerçek bir arkadaş gibi görüyorum.*	I regard the podcast host as a real friend.	.825
5	*Sunucunun kişisel yaşamı hakkında daha fazla bilgi edinmek isterim.*	I would like to learn more about the host's personal life.	.716
6	*Sunucuyla bir bağ hissettiğim için bu podcasti tercih ediyorum.*	I prefer this podcast because I feel a connection with the host.	.787
7	*Yeni bir bölüm çıktığında heyecanlanıyorum.*	I feel excited when a new episode is released.	.731
8	*Podcast bittiğinde sanki bir sohbetten ayrılmışım gibi hissediyorum.*	When the podcast ends, I feel as though I have left a conversation.	.684

Notes: Response anchors were 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree. No items were reverse-coded. Factor loadings are based on a one-factor exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with the final study sample (N = 340). The eight-item measure demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). Higher scores indicate stronger podcast-related parasocial engagement. The composite score was calculated by averaging the eight items.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

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