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Recommended Citation

Soto-Vasquez, Arthur D.; Vilceanu, Olga; and Johnson, Kristine, "“Just Hanging with my Friends”: U.S. Latina/o/x’s Perspectives on Parasocial Relationships in Podcast Listening during COVID-19" (2022). *Association of Marketing Theory and Practice Proceedings 2022*. 21.
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“Just hanging with my friends”: U.S. Latina/o/x’s perspectives on parasocial relationships in podcast listening during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

There is a need to delve into major subgroups among Latina/o/xs and identify emerging patterns in their understanding and consumption of new media. This study used six small-group interviews to explore the fluidity of parasocial dynamics with podcasts in the context of young Latina/o/x podcast listeners experiencing the COVID-19 lockdown. The conceptual acronym EASY (Engaged Experience, Accessible Authenticity, Socialization in Solitude, and Youth and YouTube) was developed to interpret pandemic listening amount Latina/o/x podcast users.

Keywords: *podcast advertising, parasocial interaction, crosscultural marketing, audience engagement*

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is a strong need to delve into major subgroups among Latina/o/xs and identify emerging patterns in their understanding and consumption of new media. This study used six small-group interviews to explore the fluidity of parasocial dynamics with podcasts in the context of young Latina/o/x podcast listeners experiencing the COVID-19 quarantine and subsequent return to work and school in-person, while their life changed in major ways. The authors carefully read and annotated the small-group transcripts and then conferred to reach agreement on emerging thematic categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

The current literature is increasingly focused on the parasocial nature of dynamics, relationships, and emotional connections listeners develop with their favorite podcasts. Within the framework of audio journalism, Lindgren (2016) focused on the ways in which hosts use emotions, self-reflexivity, and transparency to build personalized experiences with their listeners. Functioning at the intersection of media characters, real people, and tellers of stories both real and fictional, podcast hosts establish emphatic links (Shackleford, 2021) with audiences where one-sided relationships provide nonetheless real benefits to listeners.

Enjoyment of the podcast listening experience is often anchored in a combination of entertainment, escapism, and information or learning (Craig et al., 2021). The podcast listening experience often results in the perception of hosts as conversational partners in parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956 and Liebers & Schramm, 2019) or quasi-friends within the community built or felt around a show spanning multiple episodes or seasons in parasocial relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987 and Dibble et al., 2016). The fact that many of the

popular podcast hosts can be accessed on audio platforms as well as video platforms (primarily YouTube) adds to the perception of shared experiences (Vickery & Ventrano, 2021), a concept previously explored in studies of engagement affordances through vlogs and Instagram (Khamis et al., 2016).

The communitary aspect of podcast listening is also evident in the intense (or at least sustained) conversations some of the podcast hosts maintain via Twitter (Perks & Turner, 2018). While there was no singular pandemic experience in the United States, Black or African-American and Latina/o/x people were disproportionately harmed during the pandemic (Ford et al., 2020), primarily due to “structural racism, limited access to healthcare, comorbidities, the labor market, and geographical factors” (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2020, p. 421). According to a recent study from the Pew Research Center, at least half of all U.S. Latina/o/xs know a family member or close friend who was hospitalized or died of COVID-19, as well as having someone in their household, including themselves, take a pay cut or lose a job during the pandemic (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2021).

Our preliminary findings show participants’ podcast listening habits and experiences reflected an overall increase in media consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic consistent with industry research reports (Adgate, 2020). The word “easy” showed up frequently in participants’ description of the ways and reasons they enjoyed podcast listening—even though they often ascribed it different meanings. As an acronym for emerging thematic categories, EASY stands for Engaged Experience, Accessibility and Authenticity, Solitude and Socialization, and Youth and YouTube.

This study brought up important insights and challenges regarding the marketing implications for the growing population of Latina/o/x podcast listeners. Primarily, the podcast industry, hosts, and affiliated brands should build more awareness of the public/private tensions, the role and perceptions of monetary gain for podcast hosts, and consequently should check in the assumptions built as research about the Latina/o/x audience accumulates. In conclusion, the podcasting industry and brands interested in advertising via podcasts should instead use such insights to create even more opportunities for podcasts to emerge for every genre, story, and taste out there. Promoting a small number of partnered podcasts and hosts might be more important for brands, than securing large numbers of advertisement slots in easily skippable segments (Vilceanu et al., 2021). Instead of focusing on what Latina/o/xs should want, brands should continue to use the basics of advertising and promotion, by appealing to listeners’ genuine needs—finding companionship, escape, and entertainment in an easily accessible format, with the bonus of closing the loop via buys or donations to show support for their favorite hosts.

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