

From Knowledge Exchange to Brand Engagement: The Strategic Use of Podcasts in Sports Management – A Case Study of the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025

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This article examines the strategic deployment of podcasting as a communication and marketing tool in the context of major sporting events. Using a single-case study design grounded in participatory observation and secondary data analysis of Spotify analytics, we investigate the "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast," created in preparation for the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025. Our central research question asks: how can podcasting serve simultaneously as an educational platform and a marketing channel for a major international sporting event? Drawing on parasocial interaction theory, uses and gratifications theory, and content marketing frameworks, we analyze production processes, content strategy, and audience reception metrics. Our findings confirm that a funnel-based content strategy achieves measurable international audience reach across diverse demographics while delivering genuine educational value. We conclude by examining how emerging AI technologies may transform podcasting's role in sports communication.

Keywords: podcasting, sports communication, event marketing, content marketing, sports management, parasocial interaction, uses and gratifications

Introduction

The landscape of sports communication has undergone profound transformation in the digital age, with new media formats continuously reshaping how organizations engage with stakeholders, fans, and the broader public. Among these emerging formats, podcasting has established itself as a particularly versatile and influential medium, combining the intimacy of radio with the convenience of on-demand digital content. As of 2024, podcasting has achieved remarkable global penetration, with the United States alone accounting for 129.9 million monthly listeners, representing 37.4% of the population. In Germany, where major sporting events continue to play a significant cultural and economic role, 22.1 million monthly users (26.3% of the population) engage with podcast content regularly (Gohil, 2025).

This article examines the strategic deployment of podcasting as a communication tool for major sporting events through the case of the podcast series "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast," realized in cooperation with the organizers of the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025. The FISU World University Games, the world's second largest multi-sport event after the Olympic Games,

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presented unique communication challenges and opportunities. Rather than creating conventional promotional content focused directly on the event, the podcast employed a "funnel strategy," using academic expert discussions on broader sports management themes to attract and engage an interested audience while gradually directing attention toward the Rhine-Ruhr Games.

This study is guided by the following central research question: How can podcasting be strategically employed as both an educational tool and a marketing channel in the context of a major international sporting event? From this research question, we derive the following hypothesis: A podcast series applying a funnel-based content strategy can achieve measurable international audience reach and engagement while simultaneously fulfilling educational and marketing objectives for a major sporting event.

The analysis is grounded theoretically in parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Dibble et al., 2016; Mayer et al., 2024), uses and gratifications theory (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022), and content marketing frameworks (Rowles & Rogers, 2019). These frameworks together explain why audiences develop sustained engagement with podcast content and how organizations can leverage this engagement for dual educational and promotional purposes.

This case study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital sports communication by providing empirical insights into podcast production, content strategy, and audience reception in the specific context of event management. It further addresses practical considerations of resource allocation, technical implementation, and international collaboration. Finally, it considers future trajectories for sports podcasting, particularly the implications of artificial intelligence technologies that are rapidly transforming content creation and distribution.

Podcasting

Definition

Podcasting refers to audio or audio-visual content with a serial character that is distributed online and can be subscribed to via RSS feeds (Linares et al., 2018; Rime et al., 2022). This definition encompasses several key characteristics distinguishing podcasts from other audio formats. First, the serial nature creates continuity and encourages ongoing audience engagement. Second, online distribution enables global reach without traditional broadcasting infrastructure. Third, RSS subscription functionality allows listeners to automatically receive new episodes, fostering regular consumption patterns.

Reception is possible across all device classes, from desktop computers to tablets, but podcasting has proven particularly successful on mobile devices, enabling consumption during commuting, exercise, domestic tasks, and other activities. This flexibility represents one of podcasting's primary advantages: listeners can engage with content without time or space restrictions (Hebbel-Seeger, 2010).

Genesis and Terminology

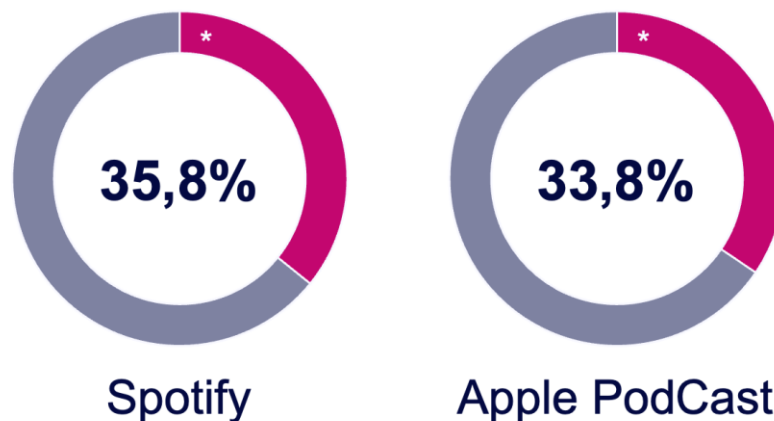
While podcast-like concepts have existed since the audio tutorial movement and the era of portable cassette players like the Sony Walkman (Palenque, 2016), the contemporary term derives from Apple's "iPod," a mobile audio device launched in 2001. This etymology reflects the medium's roots in the early 2000s convergence of portable digital audio technology and broadband internet distribution.

The technological developments that have increasingly trivialized the recording and processing of podcasts - accelerated further by artificial intelligence tools - combined with their potentially global reach in online communication, have fostered both an ever-expanding and increasingly diversified supply of content and corresponding growth in demand (McKenzie, 2019; Rime et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2025). McKenzie's (2019) analysis of global science podcast production from 2004 to 2018 documented exponential growth in both the number of podcasts and total episode output, a trend that has only intensified in subsequent years.

The Contemporary Podcasting Ecosystem

The current podcasting landscape is characterized by several dominant platforms, with Spotify commanding 35.8% of the global market share and Apple Podcasts accounting for 33.8% (Gohil, 2025). This near duopoly has significant implications for content creators, who must optimize their distribution strategies to ensure visibility on these primary platforms while also maintaining presence on alternative services such as Amazon Music and various specialized platforms (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Podcast Platforms preferred by listeners Globally in 2024 (illustration based on Gohil, 2025)

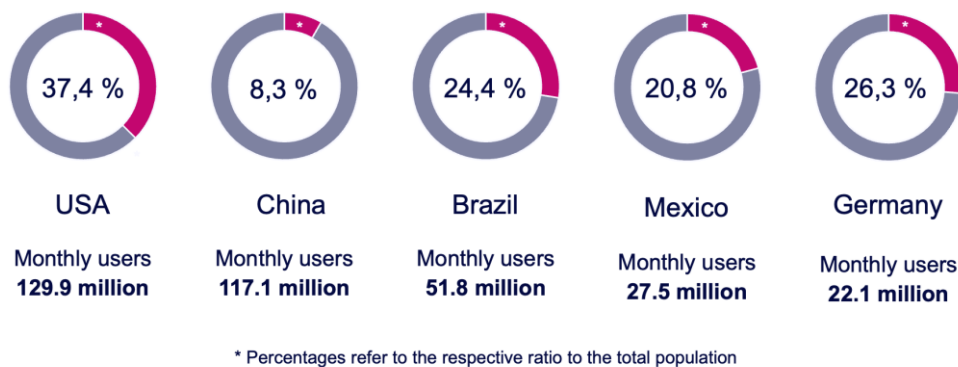


* Percentage share of the total of all platforms used for podcast consumption worldwide

Geographic distribution of podcast consumption reveals interesting patterns. While the United States leads in absolute numbers, markets like Brazil (51.8 million monthly users, 24.4% of population) and Mexico (27.5 million monthly users,

20.8% of population) show impressive penetration rates. In China, despite lower percentage penetration (8.3%), the absolute number of 117.1 million monthly users represents the second-largest national audience globally (Gohil, 2025). These patterns suggest that podcasting has achieved genuinely global reach while maintaining strong regional variations in adoption rates and consumption patterns (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Podcast listeners by Country in 2024 (illustration based on Gohil, 2025)



Reception and Communication Goals

The Multifunctionality of Podcasting

Podcasting serves diverse purposes for both creators and audiences, a multiplicity that contributes to its growing adoption across sectors. From the reception perspective, podcasts fulfill needs ranging from pure entertainment to educational learning, with many successful shows occupying hybrid spaces of edutainment and infotainment. From the communication perspective, organizations employ podcasts for education, information dissemination, marketing, brand building, and increasingly for cross-selling and audience conversion: "Podcasts have become the most used digital marketing tool that has emerged in recent years, and brings the brand and the public together" (Samur, 2021).

Geoghegan and Klass (2007) captured this multifunctionality eloquently: "Podcasting is not simply a new way to distribute audio recordings; it's a form of expression, interaction, and community building" (p. 167). This observation, made relatively early in podcasting's mainstream adoption, has proven prescient. Contemporary podcasting indeed functions as more than a distribution channel; it creates spaces for identity formation, community connection, and sustained engagement between creators and audiences.

Contemporary podcasting indeed functions as more than a distribution channel; it creates spaces for identity formation, community connection, and sustained engagement between creators and audiences. This multifunctionality is central to understanding why podcasting represents an attractive tool for sports event organizations seeking to achieve simultaneous educational and marketing objectives.

Newman & Cherubini (2025) also highlight the rapidly growing importance of podcasting in the field of journalism. They observe that the "shift to audio and video

consumption” is accelerating and that there is an increasing “focus on audience-facing format transformations”. Their survey of media professionals in 51 countries shows that “more media companies plan to integrate audio (read articles, audio summaries, and podcasts) into their websites and apps”. One reason for this is that “podcasts tend to drive loyalty”. This underscores the importance of podcast journalism in the field of marketing as well (Dowling, 2024).

In the marketing domain, podcasts have emerged as what Samur (2021) describes as "the most used digital marketing tool that has emerged in recent years, and brings the brand and the public together" (p. 550). This assertion reflects podcasting's unique positioning in the digital marketing mix: unlike interruptive advertising, podcasts offer invited content that audiences actively choose to consume, often during extended time periods that allow for deep message processing.

Podcasting as an Educational Tool

The educational applications of podcasting have received substantial scholarly attention, with research identifying several mechanisms through which podcasts enhance learning outcomes (Drew, 2017). Crucially, podcasts allow listeners to proceed at their own pace and to receive content repeatedly, a key prerequisite for strengthening self-regulation and self-efficacy (Erabo et al., 2024). This temporal flexibility addresses a fundamental challenge in education: learners vary considerably in the time and repetition they require to master new concepts (Hebbel-Seeger, 2021).

Research by Biber and Heidorn (2021) suggests that podcast consumption in combination with light exercise promotes retention, pointing to the medium's compatibility with active lifestyles. This finding has particular relevance for sports-related content, where audiences may naturally integrate listening with physical activity. Enriquez et al. (2023) emphasize that podcast-based learning "empowers students to take ownership of their own learning" (p. 898), highlighting the medium's potential for fostering learner autonomy and motivation.

Two examples of integrating podcasts into a sports management class (Rockhill et al., 2019) and a sports communication class (Slater & White, 2024) demonstrate the importance of this communication tool in what is called educational learning. In both cases, with connecting theory to practice students showed significant learning successes, better practical skills in sports media and increased motivation through the integration of podcasting into their lessons and projects.

Limitations and Challenges in Educational Podcasting

Despite these advantages, scholarly literature also identifies important limitations. Unlike written texts, podcasts typically lack visible citations and references in the spoken word, potentially making it more difficult for learners to evaluate source quality and evidence strength. Furthermore, podcasts often lack the rigorous quality assurance mechanisms associated with traditional educational materials, such as peer review processes or editorial oversight (Shaw et al., 2025).

Accessibility concerns represent another significant challenge. Research by Chelsey (2021) and Mohale (2024) documents how podcasts frequently fail to provide

transcripts, audio descriptions, or other accessibility features, potentially excluding audiences with hearing impairments or those who prefer text-based formats. Studies also suggest that podcasting may contribute to digital divide phenomena, with differential access and engagement patterns related to technological literacy, internet access, and device availability (Kakhki et al., 2025; Galily et al., 2024).

Podcasting for Marketing and Brand Building

In the marketing sphere, podcasts function as ideal-typical content marketing tools. They enable direct connection to target audiences without intermediaries, promote brand awareness, convey brand values and credibility, and support customer loyalty (Beck et al., 2022; Mayer et al., 2024; Whipple et al., 2022; Lögberg & Wahlqvist, 2020). These characteristics position podcasting as an integral component of the contemporary digital communication mix (Rowles & Rogers, 2019).

The parasocial relationships that develop between podcast hosts and regular listeners represent a particularly valuable marketing asset (Sun & Li, 2026). Rooted in parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), this phenomenon describes how listeners develop feelings of intimacy, trust, and connection with hosts despite the mediated, one-directional nature of the communication. Research by Vilceanu (2025) and Mayer et al. (2024) confirms that listeners perceive podcast recommendations and endorsements as coming from trusted sources rather than commercial interests, even when they rationally understand the commercial nature of the content. This dynamic creates opportunities for influence and persuasion that differ qualitatively from traditional advertising relationships.

Target group loyalty in podcasting tends to be remarkably strong (Rohden et al., 2023), with regular listeners often consuming entire episode catalogs and maintaining engagement over extended periods. From a uses and gratifications perspective (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022; for an overview see Ruggiero, 2000), audiences actively seek out podcast content to satisfy needs including learning, entertainment, companionship, and identity reinforcement; motivations that align well with the dual educational-marketing objectives of sports event communication.

Bob & Swart (2010) characterize the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025 as a “special event” that will be broadcast on international and national television, reaching an international as well as national and regional audience. This distinguishes the student games from the significantly larger mega events. “There are a range of legacies associated with sport events that include economic, social, political, tourism, infrastructural and sport impacts. There is a tendency to focus on the economic and infrastructural impacts and social legacies are often neglected” (Bob & Swart, 2010). They identify and describe five different forms of legacies: sporting, urban, infrastructural, economic, and social. Similarly, Thomson et al. (2013) attribute a “local and global nature of legacy” to sport event legacies. They state that there is “a range of legacies ... for the host city, region, country, and event owners through the hosting of a sport event.” This highlights the importance of podcasting as a tool for the legacy of mid-sized sporting events.

Theoretical Framework Summary

Taken together, three theoretical frameworks provide the analytical lens for this study. Parasocial interaction theory explains how sustained audience engagement and trust develop through podcast host–listener relationships, creating conditions for effective marketing influence. Uses and gratifications theory accounts for the diverse motivational orientations of podcast audiences, explaining why listeners engage with content combining educational and promotional purposes. Content marketing theory, specifically the funnel approach (Rowles & Rogers, 2019), provides the strategic rationale for providing genuine value on broad themes rather than narrow promotional messaging, gradually directing audience attention toward a specific organizational goal. These frameworks collectively generate the hypothesis tested in this case: that a podcast series grounded in the funnel content strategy can simultaneously achieve educational impact and marketing reach.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018) to investigate the strategic deployment of podcasting in the context of the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025. The case study approach is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research question and the unique contextual features of the Rhine-Ruhr podcast project, which do not lend themselves to experimental or survey-based designs.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: How can podcasting be strategically employed as both an educational tool and a marketing channel in the context of a major international sporting event? The corresponding hypothesis posits that a podcast series applying a funnel-based content strategy achieves measurable international reach and engagement while simultaneously fulfilling educational and marketing objectives.

Data were drawn from two primary sources. First, audience analytics generated by the Spotify for Podcasters platform were collected across the full publication period, spanning February to July 2025. These analytics provided quantitative measures of listener numbers, geographic distribution, demographic characteristics (age, gender), device usage, and platform preferences. While Spotify data represent only one distribution platform, Spotify's position as the dominant global podcast platform (35.8% market share; Gohil, 2025) makes it the most representative single-source indicator of audience behavior. A limitation of this approach is that listener data from Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, and other platforms were not systematically captured, meaning total audience figures are likely conservative estimates.

Second, production documentation maintained by the authors throughout the podcast series provided detailed insight into workflow, resource requirements, guest selection, and strategic decision-making. Given that the authors served as both the podcast producers and the researchers conducting this analysis, this constitutes a form of participatory observation; a recognized approach in media and communication studies for obtaining insider knowledge of production processes (Schlütz & Hedder,

2022). A reflexive awareness of the potential for observer bias is maintained throughout the analysis.

The descriptive-analytical method employed follows established practice in case study research: descriptive statistics characterize the audience reception data, while qualitative interpretation connects observed patterns to the theoretical frameworks introduced in Section 3. Secondary data analysis of existing podcast industry statistics (Gohil, 2025) contextualizes the case within broader market trends. The study makes no claim to statistical generalizability; instead, it aims for analytical generalization using the Rhine-Ruhr case to develop and refine theoretical propositions about podcasting as a strategic communication tool in sports event management.

Content Creation

Balancing Technical and Accessible Content

Creating effective podcast content requires careful attention to multiple dimensions of quality and audience engagement. Research by Rehmann et al. (2024) emphasizes that "to attract a wider audience, content must be presented to balance technical aspects with real-life examples to which listeners can relate" (p. 1). This balance proves particularly important when addressing topics involving specialized knowledge, as is common in academic and professional sports management contexts.

Authenticity, concrete contextual integration, and personal connection through storytelling represent core success variables in podcast creation. These elements work synergistically: authenticity establishes credibility and trust, contextual integration ensures relevance and applicability, and storytelling creates emotional engagement and memorability. Expert discussions represent an ideal format for achieving this balance, particularly when experts can articulate specialized knowledge in accessible language while connecting abstract concepts to concrete experiences.

Targeting and Positioning Strategy

Effective podcast strategy requires clear decisions about target audiences and positioning. The funnel approach employed in the Rhine-Ruhr 2025 podcast project represents one such strategic option: rather than creating content exclusively for those already interested in the specific event, the podcast addressed broader topics relevant to sports management, event organization, sustainability, and communication. This approach aimed to attract audiences with general interests in these domains and gradually direct their attention toward the specific target event.

This strategy reflects a foundational principle of content marketing theory (Rowles & Rogers, 2019): provide genuine value that serves listeners' interests independent of any single event, thereby building goodwill, establishing authority, and creating familiarity with the organizing institution and its values. The expectation, grounded in uses and gratifications theory, is that audiences actively seeking educational content on sports management will develop positive associations with

the organizing institution — associations that then translate into awareness of and interest in the event itself.

On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast

Project Genesis and Strategic Objectives

The "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast" emerged as an extension of an international lecture series conducted during the winter term 2024/2025 as a joined project of Macromedia University of Applied Sciences in Germany and the organizers of the 2025 FISU Summer Games, which brought together students and colleagues from around the world for discussions on various aspects of sports management and major sporting events. The lecture series format involved expert presentations followed by question-and-answer sessions, creating rich discussions that revealed both academic insights and practical considerations.

Selected speakers from these lectures were subsequently invited to participate in podcast episodes on the same topics, allowing for deeper exploration of themes introduced in the academic context. This connection between formal educational programming and public-facing podcast content created synergies: the lecture series provided a natural recruiting pipeline for expert guests with proven ability to engage audiences, while the podcast extended the reach and lifespan of ideas beyond the original student audience.

The podcast title, "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025," carried literal and metaphorical significance. Literally, it positioned the series as providing guidance on the final stretch of the journey toward the Games' opening. Metaphorically, it suggested forward movement, preparation, and anticipation. The content was deliberately designed to address both sports management professionals and the general sports-interested public, examining various aspects of organization, communication, and implementation of major sporting events.

Critically, the podcast did not focus directly on the FISU World University Games in general or the Rhine-Ruhr Games specifically. Instead, it addressed broader themes and questions relevant to anyone interested in major sporting events: sustainability practices, communication strategies, regional impacts, event legacy, and future trends. This indirect approach reflected a sophisticated understanding of content marketing principles: provide genuine value rather than promotional messaging, and audiences will develop positive associations with the organizing institution.

Dual Functionality: Learning Tool and Marketing Channel

The podcast was conceived from the outset as serving dual purposes simultaneously: functioning as a flexible, contemporary learning tool and as an effective marketing channel. This duality shaped content decisions, production approaches, and distribution strategies, aligning with the theoretical framework presented in Section 3.

As a learning tool, the podcast aimed to provide accessible insights into sports management challenges and innovations, making academic expertise available to practitioners and interested publics. As a marketing channel, it sought to build awareness of and anticipation for the FISU World University Games 2025, develop a community of interested stakeholders, and establish positive associations with the organizing institutions. The funnel strategy meant that marketing objectives were pursued indirectly through value provision rather than through explicit promotional messaging; a distinction that, from a parasocial interaction perspective, is critical for maintaining audience trust and engagement.

Production Details and Publication Schedule

The podcast series comprised ten episodes released over approximately four months. A trailer was released on February 6, 2025, serving to introduce the series concept and encourage subscriptions. The first full episode went online on March 10, 2025, establishing a publication rhythm of approximately fourteen days between episodes. The final episode was published on July 14, 2025, two days before the Games' opening, providing maximum recency and building immediate anticipatory engagement.

Distribution was implemented across multiple major platforms, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Amazon Music. This multi-platform approach ensured accessibility regardless of listeners' preferred podcast consumption method and aligned with best practices for maximizing reach (Rowles & Rogers, 2019).

Technical Implementation and Workflow

The production process employed contemporary tools designed to facilitate international collaboration and high-quality output. Recording occurred in a decentralized manner, with participants joining from various global locations. PodCastle.ai, an online podcast and VoIP tool that captures separate audio tracks for each speaker, was used for recording. This technical approach proved essential for subsequent editing, as it allowed individual audio optimization, noise reduction, and level balancing that would be impossible with a mixed recording.

Local editing employed Adobe Audition, professional audio software providing comprehensive capabilities for refining recorded material. Post-production processes included removing verbal stumbles, balancing audio levels, adding introductory and concluding segments, and implementing sonic branding elements that created consistent identity across episodes.

Resource Requirements and Time Investment

Detailed tracking of time investment provided insights into the resource requirements for podcast production at this level of quality. On average, each episode required approximately 90 minutes of preparation time (guest acquisition, briefing, and questionnaire development), 60 minutes of recording, and 150 minutes of post-production editing, the most time-intensive phase. In total, each episode represented

approximately five hours of work for the core production team, amounting to roughly 50 hours of direct production time across ten episodes, not including strategic planning, platform management, promotion, and assessment activities. These figures provide valuable benchmarking information for organizations considering similar initiatives.

Content Strategy: Expert Guests and Topic Selection

The podcast featured experts from around the world discussing various topics related to major sporting events. Guest selection prioritized individuals who combined academic expertise with practical experience and demonstrated communication skills. The international composition of guests served multiple purposes: it reflected the global nature of major sporting events, it provided diverse perspectives on common challenges, and it created networks of engagement across geographic boundaries.

Topics addressed throughout the series included sustainability practices in event management, communication strategies for complex stakeholder environments, regional economic and social impacts, event legacy planning, and emerging trends in sports organization. This breadth allowed the podcast to appeal to varied audience interests while maintaining coherent focus on major sporting events as a unifying theme.

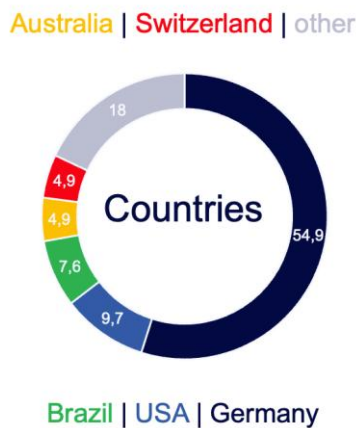
The conversational interview format enabled exploration of nuance and complexity that would be difficult to achieve in written formats constrained by length or in presentation formats constrained by time. Guests could develop extended arguments, provide detailed examples, and respond to probing questions that elicited deeper insights.

Audience Reception and Engagement

Geographic Distribution

Reception data collected primarily from Spotify analytics revealed interesting patterns of audience distribution and engagement. Geographically, the podcast attracted listeners from multiple countries, with the top three being Germany, the United States, and Brazil. Additional listeners came from Australia, Switzerland, and various other nations, reflecting genuinely international reach despite the German context of the Rhine-Ruhr Games (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Listeners of the Rhine-Ruhr Podcast by Country (in percent)



The strong Brazilian presence in listenership was particularly noteworthy, potentially reflecting Brazil's status as a major podcast market (24.4% of the population as monthly podcast users; Gohil, 2025) as well as connections through academic networks and international sports communities. The German audience represented the most obvious primary target demographic given the domestic location of the Games, while the American audience likely reflected both general interest in sports management topics and specific connections through the academic lecture series.

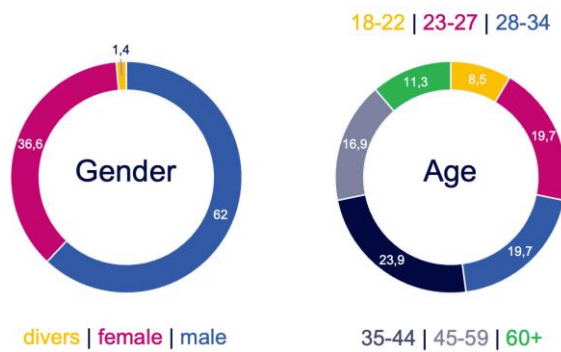
This geographic diversity validates both the internationalization strategy embedded in the podcast design and the funnel content approach. By addressing universal themes in major sporting event management rather than focusing narrowly on local specificities, the content achieved relevance across national boundaries — a finding consistent with content marketing theory's prediction that value-driven content outperforms promotional content in attracting broad, engaged audiences (Rowles & Rogers, 2019).

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic analysis revealed interesting patterns in listener composition. By gender, the audience skewed male, though female listeners and those identified as diverse were also present (Fig. 4). This gender distribution reflects broader patterns in sports media consumption while also suggesting opportunities for more intentional outreach to underrepresented groups in future iterations.

The age distribution showed concentration in the middle-age cohorts, though the presence of younger listeners (groups 18–22 and 23–27) is encouraging from an educational perspective, indicating that the podcast successfully reached students who might benefit from academic expertise in sports management. The three subsequent cohorts (28–34, 35–44, and 45–59) likely included sports management professionals and engaged sports fans with sophisticated interests. From a uses and gratifications perspective (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022), this distribution suggests the podcast satisfied both informational-educational needs (younger cohorts) and professional development needs (mid-career cohorts), confirming the dual functionality central to our hypothesis.

Figure 4. Listeners of the Rhine-Ruhr Podcast by Gender and Age (in percent)

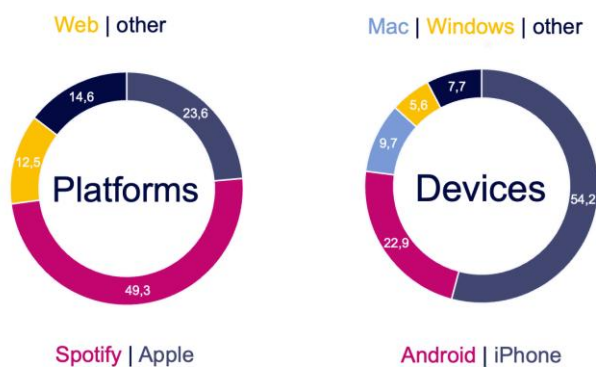


Device and Platform Usage

Analysis of listening devices revealed that mobile devices dominated consumption patterns: iPhones and Android devices together accounted for the majority of listening, with Mac and Windows computers representing desktop consumption. Some listeners accessed the podcast through smart speakers, reflecting the growing integration of podcast content into home audio ecosystems (Figure 5). This device distribution confirmed the importance of mobile optimization and validated podcasting's positioning as content for consumption during commuting, exercise, and other activities outside traditional desk-bound media contexts, consistent with Hebbel-Seeger's (2010) early observation about the medium's flexibility.

Platform distribution showed Spotify as the dominant access point, with Apple Podcasts second, followed by web-based listening via browser. Amazon Music and other audio platforms together accounted for less than 15% of listening. This pattern aligned with broader industry trends (Gohil, 2025) and validated the multi-platform distribution strategy, while also highlighting Spotify's position as the critical platform for maximizing reach. The strong correlation between global platform market share data and the distribution observed in this case further contextualizes the podcast's audience within established patterns of podcast consumption.

Figure 5. Listeners of the Rhine-Ruhr podcast by platforms and devices (in percent)



Discussion

Hypothesis Assessment

The findings support the central hypothesis of this study: the Rhine-Ruhr podcast, designed around a funnel content strategy, achieved measurable international audience reach across three continents while simultaneously fulfilling educational and marketing objectives. Audience data from Spotify confirm international reach spanning Germany, the Americas, and the broader global podcast-listening public. The demographic distribution - spanning student-age to professional cohorts - confirms dual-functional uptake consistent with uses and gratifications theory. The absence of direct promotional content did not prevent audience building; on the contrary, the provision of substantive expert discussions appears to have sustained the engagement necessary for the parasocial relationships that make podcast marketing effective.

Podcasting as Strategic Communication Infrastructure

The Rhine-Ruhr 2025 case demonstrates that podcasting can function as effective strategic communication infrastructure for major sporting events when content strategy, production quality, and distribution are carefully considered. The funnel approach of providing valuable content on broader themes rather than narrow promotional messaging proved effective for building awareness and interest. Audiences increasingly resist overt marketing but respond positively to content providing genuine insights, education, or entertainment value (Rohden et al., 2023). By positioning the organizing institution as a knowledge hub and thought leader rather than simply a promoter, the podcast created opportunities for positive association and trust-building, mechanisms central to parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Mayer et al., 2024).

The international reach achievable through podcast distribution creates opportunities for engaging global audiences at relatively low cost. For events with international participation and interest, such as university sports competitions bringing together students from around the world, this efficiency has particular value. The Rhine-Ruhr case demonstrates that even a modest, decentralized production operation can achieve an international listener base when content is strategically designed for broad relevance.

Educational Value and Knowledge Mobilization

The dual functionality of the Rhine-Ruhr podcast, as both marketing channel and educational tool, suggests that sports organizations might benefit from reconceiving communication initiatives as knowledge mobilization efforts like classes in educational learning benefit from podcasting (Rockhill et al., 2019; Slater & White, 2024). Rather than treating communication as merely transmitting promotional messages, organizations can position themselves as facilitators of learning about sports management, sustainability, community impact, and related themes. This approach is consistent with uses and gratifications theory, which identifies learning and information acquisition as

primary motivations for podcast consumption (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022): by meeting these audience motivations, the podcast generated sustained engagement that made parasocial relationships - and thus indirect marketing influence - possible.

For university sporting events in particular, this educational positioning aligns naturally with institutional missions. Universities are fundamentally educational institutions, and major sporting events they host provide opportunities to demonstrate this identity to public audiences. Podcasts that bring academic expertise to general audiences embody the knowledge mobilization aspirations increasingly emphasized in higher education, suggesting that this communication format may be especially well-suited to the FISU context.

Resource Considerations and Sustainability

The resource requirements documented in the Rhine-Ruhr case - approximately five hours of core production time per episode - suggest that high-quality podcasting is achievable for organizations with modest dedicated capacity. Compared to video production, traditional media advertising, or large-scale promotional campaigns, podcasting represents relatively efficient use of resources. However, the sustained effort required across a multi-episode series should not be underestimated: producing ten episodes over four months required not only direct production time but also ongoing strategic planning, guest coordination across international time zones, platform management, and promotional activity.

The decentralized production approach enabled by tools such as PodCastle.ai makes international collaboration feasible without requiring travel or co-location; an important advantage for events committed to environmental sustainability, such as the FISU World University Games. Podcasting's relatively low resource intensity compared to many other communication formats thus represents a meaningful alignment with sustainability commitments.

Community Building and Event Legacy

Beyond immediate marketing and educational objectives, the Rhine-Ruhr podcast aimed to contribute to community building and event legacy (Bob & Swart, 2010). The community dimension reflects podcasting's potential to connect dispersed individuals around shared interests, creating networks of engagement that persist beyond individual episodes or even entire series.

Regular podcast listeners often develop affinity not only with hosts but also with fellow audience members, particularly when podcasts create opportunities for listener interaction through social media, live events, or other engagement mechanisms (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022). While the Rhine-Ruhr podcast did not extensively pursue these interactive dimensions (Wendland, 2025), future iterations might explore more systematic community cultivation.

The importance of podcasting as a legacy element has become particularly clear for a "special event" like the Rhine-Ruhr Games. This confirms the assessments found in the literature (Bob & Swart, 2010; Thomson et al., 2013). The legacy dimension, the lasting impacts of an event beyond its immediate occurrence, represents an

increasingly important consideration in major sporting event planning. Podcasting creates enduring digital content that continues to be discoverable and consumable long after the event concludes. Unlike traditional media coverage that is ephemeral or event-focused promotional materials that lose relevance post-event, podcast episodes on substantive themes maintain value indefinitely. This enduring presence contributes to sustained awareness and ongoing association between the organizing institution and thoughtful sports management practice.

The Impact of AI on Future Podcast Production

Emerging Technologies and Production Transformation

The podcasting landscape is currently undergoing rapid transformation driven by artificial intelligence technologies. Text-to-speech tools, AI-assisted recording and editing software, and comprehensive generative AI platforms like Google's NotebookLM are massively expanding the possible uses of podcasts while simultaneously reducing production barriers and resource requirements. In the Rhine-Ruhr production workflow itself, AI already played a role through PodCastle.ai's AI-assisted audio processing, foreshadowing deeper integration in future projects.

These technologies introduce both opportunities and challenges for sports communication professionals. On the opportunity side, AI tools could enable more frequent content creation, automated translation and localization for international audiences, personalized content variations for different listener segments, and rapid response to developing stories or emerging topics. Production time requirements that currently represent barriers to entry, the approximately five hours per episode documented in this case, could be substantially reduced, potentially democratizing access to podcasting as a communication tool. Initial research suggests that traditionally disadvantaged groups, including those marginalized by gender, age, or religion, might particularly benefit from AI-enabled podcasting tools (Galily et al., 2024).

Authenticity, Trust, and the Limits of AI-Mediated Production

However, these technological developments raise important questions about authenticity, quality, and the specific value propositions of podcasting, concerns that connect directly to the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Much of podcasting's marketing effectiveness, as explained by parasocial interaction theory, derives from its perceived authenticity: listeners develop feelings of intimacy and trust with hosts as real individuals. If AI-generated or heavily AI-mediated content becomes prevalent, audiences may perceive artificiality and lose the very trust that makes parasocial influence possible (Mayer et al., 2024; Vilceanu, 2025).

Quality considerations also merit attention. While AI tools reduce production time, they do not automatically ensure substantive content, insightful analysis, or compelling narrative. The danger exists that lowered barriers to podcast creation could lead to a proliferation of low-quality content that undermines the medium's credibility. Sports organizations committed to thought leadership and meaningful

stakeholder engagement should therefore approach AI tools strategically: using them to enhance efficiency in tasks such as audio editing, transcription, translation, and distribution, while preserving the human expert conversations that constitute the medium's distinctive appeal and educational value.

Strategic Recommendations for Sports Organizations

Based on the Rhine-Ruhr podcast project experience and the theoretical frameworks applied in this study, the following strategic recommendations emerge for sports organizations considering podcast initiatives:

- **Commit to a clear research or communication objective.** Whether educational, marketing-oriented, or both, a clearly defined purpose guides all subsequent decisions about content, format, and audience targeting.
- **Adopt the funnel content strategy.** Provide substantive expert content on themes broader than the specific event. This builds audience trust and parasocial relationships that make indirect marketing influence possible and more durable.
- **Ground content in theoretical frameworks.** Applying uses and gratifications and parasocial interaction principles to content planning helps ensure that episodes meet genuine audience motivations, sustaining engagement across a series.
- **Commit to consistent quality and schedule.** Podcasting success depends on building regular audience relationships through reliable, high-quality content delivered on a consistent schedule.
- **Leverage expert networks strategically.** Identify and engage experts who combine specialized knowledge with communication skills and authentic passion for their topics. International expert networks provide diverse perspectives while building global connections.
- **Implement multi-platform distribution.** Ensure content is accessible across major podcast platforms, particularly Spotify and Apple Podcasts.
- **Measure and assess systematically.** Track audience metrics, engagement patterns, and qualitative feedback. Use these data to refine content strategy and demonstrate value to organizational leadership.
- **Explore AI tools judiciously.** Use AI to enhance efficiency in production and distribution while preserving the human authenticity that makes podcasting effective for building trust.
- **Consider accessibility proactively.** Provide transcripts, show notes, and other accessibility features to ensure inclusive access to content.

Conclusion

This study sets out to examine how podcasting can be strategically employed as both an educational tool and a marketing channel in the context of a major

international sporting event. The central hypothesis, that a funnel-based content strategy achieves measurable international reach while simultaneously fulfilling educational and marketing objectives, is supported by the evidence from the "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast" case.

Four key empirical findings emerge. First, high-quality podcast production requires substantial but manageable resource commitments; approximately five hours per episode for planning, recording, and post-production. Second, international collaboration is feasible using contemporary online recording tools, enabling global expert participation without travel requirements. Third, audience reception data confirm genuine international reach, with listeners spanning multiple continents and demographic segments. Fourth, dual educational and marketing functionality created value for multiple stakeholder groups simultaneously, as evidenced by the demographic spread consistent with both learning-oriented and professionally engaged audiences.

Theoretically, the case validates the explanatory power of parasocial interaction theory, uses and gratifications theory, and content marketing frameworks as applied to sports event communication. The Rhine-Ruhr podcast demonstrates that audiences build trust and engagement with content that provides genuine value and that this trust can be channeled, indirectly, into awareness of and positive association with a specific event. The funnel strategy operationalizes this theoretical insight in a practically viable production format.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The single-case design limits generalizability, and the authors' dual role as producers and researchers introduces observer bias that reflexive practice only partially mitigates. The reliance on Spotify analytics means that listener data from other platforms were not fully captured, leading to conservative audience estimates. Future research should apply comparable case study designs to other major sporting events and explore audience reception through mixed methods that include direct listener surveys or interviews.

Looking forward, artificial intelligence technologies promise to transform podcasting production and distribution while raising important questions about authenticity and trust; the very foundations of parasocial influence. Sports organizations should approach these technologies strategically, using AI to enhance efficiency in production tasks while preserving the human expert conversations that constitute podcasting's distinctive educational and relational value.

As major sporting events face increasing expectations for transparency, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement, sophisticated communication strategies become ever more essential. Podcasting represents a valuable, resource-efficient tool in the contemporary sports communication toolkit; particularly when deployed with clear strategic objectives, theoretical grounding, and genuine orientation toward providing audience value. The Rhine-Ruhr 2025 experience demonstrates that thoughtful podcast initiatives can contribute meaningfully to event success, institutional reputation, and the broader project of responsible sports management.

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