

Characteristics of the Spanish podcast sphere: between democratization and commercial logic

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Abstract

After an initial period characterized by experimentation, amateurism, small audiences, technological difficulties, and scarce funding, podcasting is now fully consolidated. The aim of this paper is to analyze the characteristics of the Spanish podcast sphere: its structural, personal, thematic, formal, economic, and dissemination aspects. To this end, a content analysis of 21 variables was applied to the 206 programs that attained the highest popularity in the general rankings of *Spotify*, *Apple Podcasts*, and *iVoox* during the first quarter of 2021. Along the structural dimension, the results reveal the preponderance of digital-native podcasts in comparison with previously broadcast podcasts, and of podcasts promoted by radio stations or those associated with networks over independent ones. Regarding the personnel involved, programs produced by professionals from the media or other cultural industries are more popular than those produced by amateurs, while those presented by men are more popular than those presented by women. Regarding their themes, content related to mystery and/or crime, history, entertainment, and emotional well-being predominates. In the formal sphere, the majority of programs are exclusively audio programs, produced weekly and in Spanish, with a limited presence of the other co-official languages in Spain. In terms of funding, the most common situation is production by media groups or podcast networks, followed by monetization on *YouTube* and offering additional services. Based on all this, the main conclusion of this study is that podcasting in Spain has abandoned the democratizing potential attributed to it by some theorists and researchers in its beginnings to become embedded in a largely commercial logic.

Keywords

Podcasts; Podcasting; Online radio; On-demand radio; Digital media; User-generated content; UGC; Audio communication; *Spotify*; *Apple Podcasts*; *iVoox*; Content analysis; Spain.

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1. Introduction

In 1927, seven years after the start of the first regular commercial radio broadcast (Stiegler, 2008), the playwright **Bertolt Brecht** (2003) suggested several measures to achieve a truly democratic medium. These included the involvement of the audience in the creation of content as well as transparency regarding income and expenses. Six years later, in 1933, the psychologist of perception **Rudolf Arnheim** (1980) advocated the creation of authentic radio art, exclusively articulated around sound, without evocation of the image and clearly differentiated from other preexisting media, in what he called a “praise of blindness.” When these authors raised their concerns, radio was still building its discourse (Fernández, 2008), which finally followed paths far from their postulates (Gavaldà, 1999), being based on the commercial concepts of program and programming.

For decades, the semiotics of communication described radio discourse as a continuous and incessant flow of content, formed by different closed and independent textual units, the programs, which were related to each other and which, as a whole, constituted the programming as a global macrotext (Cebrián-Herrerros, 1999) whose coherence, as in the case of generalist television (González-Requena, 1995), was provided by the advertising logic. This characterization was linked to the synchronous consumption model of analog broadcasting, which began to enter a crisis when radio started to converge with the Internet. Even at the initial stage of that process, when only the simultaneous broadcasting of content in both media and the storage of content from the former in the latter for subsequent asynchronous consumption was practiced (Franquet, 2003), on-demand radio transformed continuous programming into programming stored on the Internet (Pérez-Alaejos; López-Merayo, 2013). This enabled listeners to develop new consumption strategies detached from the time factor (Cebrián-Herrerros, 2008). This rupture of synchronism thus resulted in the fragmentation of the macrotextual discursive flow; the content, however, remained the same as in traditional radio and thus continued to be produced by podcast networks and broadcasters with an eminently commercial logic.

Conceptualized in its beginnings as an automated audio file distribution system through syndication and prior subscription (Berry, 2006), the emergence of podcasting in 2004 inaugurated the next stage of convergence and opened the doors to personalized and on-demand consumption (Crofts *et al.*, 2005) by allowing users to program the downloading of audio content of their choice, which was generally produced independently. Like Brecht in 1927 with respect to radio, some authors saw the democratizing potential of this new format (Gallego-Pérez, 2006), since by decoupling distribution from the conventional radio networks and broadcasters, users could disseminate content of their own creation without relying on them (Dearman; Galloway, 2005). Thus, in line with the mass self-communication described by Castells (2009), audiences could also become producers (Berry, 2006), which in turn would contribute to the deinstitutionalization of the radio system (Bonini, 2006).

However, as in the case of radio, such observations were typical of the first stage of podcasting development, characterized by experimentation, amateurism, technical difficulties, and small audiences (García-Marín, 2019), with hardly any presence of traditional radio networks and no mechanisms for monetization. It was not until 2012, with the launch of the first business models in the United States, that podcasting began a second age, during which it has been transforming into “a commercial productive practice and a medium for mass consumption” (Bonini, 2015, p. 23). In fact, only two years later, the most prominent podcasts in that country were being promoted by services, brands, and individuals with an established public presence (Berry, 2015). In practice, the podcast sphere was dominated by the media establishment (Berry, 2016), despite the multitude of programs created by nonprofessional users, which has led some authors to conceptualize it as a long-tail communicative space (Sullivan, 2018).

In Spain, meanwhile, broadcasters used the format exclusively as an on-demand radio service (Sellas, 2012) but did not exploit it commercially (Gallego-Pérez, 2012). While in the United States podcasting had reached maturity in 2014, with the widespread diffusion of podcasts such as *Serial* (Berry, 2015; 2016), in Spain the beginning of consolidation had to wait until mid-2016, with the creation of *Podium Podcast* by *Prisa Group* (García-Marín, 2019; Sellas; Solà, 2019).

Since the tipping point pointed out by Bonini, podcast consumption has grown remarkably. In the United States, monthly listening increased from 12% in 2012 to 41% in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021). According to data from the *Digital News Report* global survey (Newman *et al.*, 2021) conducted in January 2021, 31% of the population in the 20 countries where it is a known term had accessed a podcast in the past month. Among these, Spain was the territory with the second highest penetration (38%), only behind Ireland (41%). The percentage of the Spanish Internet population that listened to podcasts increased from 41.5% in 2019 to 47.1% in 2020 (SEIM, 2020); moreover, demand for audio content in podcast format was higher among people under 35 years old (Amoedo; Moreno, 2021).

Podcasting has already led to a reconfiguration of the relationships established between those who create and produce content and those who consume it (Morris; Patterson, 2015). While some authors conceptualized it in its beginnings as an extension of radio (Sterne *et al.*, 2008) or cyberradio (Cebrián-Herrerros, 2009), others have observed more recently the development of diffe-

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rential characteristics, such as hyperintimacy and greater proximity with the audience (Berry, 2016) or, even, “self-identity” (García-Marín, 2019, p. 190), as a consequence of factors such as:

- the digitization of recording, editing, hosting, and broadcasting;
- the modular nature of the content;
- the automation of distribution processes;
- the variability of the content according to conditions in which it is consumed by users;
- the propagability of the programs; and
- interactivity.

Its identity would derive, in short, from the combination of the language of radio, the serialization of blogs, the staging of theater, and the avatarization of social media (García-Marín, 2020a).

In full consolidation of the format in Spain, it is worthwhile to ask whether the democratizing potential initially proposed from an eminently European perspective has been fulfilled or whether, on the contrary, as happened in the case of radio with respect to Brecht’s egalitarian proposals (Brecht, 2003) and Arnheim’s artistic arguments (Arnheim, 1980), the new format has embraced the same, eminently commercial and intermediate logic as in other countries, where podcasting is dominated by conventional radio networks (Berry, 2016), with a proliferation of hybrid audio and audiovisual formats (Johansson, 2021).

The objective of this study is to analyze the main characteristics of the current age of podcasting in Spain. The starting hypothesis is:

H: Having become established, the Spanish podcasting scene (understood as the communicative space constituted by audio programs distributed outside conventional radio and consumable asynchronously, regardless of the nature of their production) has abandoned its democratizing potential to become immersed in a mostly commercial logic.

To verify this, the study examines the structural, personal, thematic, formal, economic, and dissemination dimensions of the most prominent Spanish podcasts, and in the case of independent podcasts, the differences in access to funding depending on the program’s theme and the gender and professionalism of the podcaster.

2. Literature review

Although podcasting is now consolidated after a decade of exploration and experimentation (Berry, 2016; García-Marín, 2019), academic research on this format was scarce until a few years ago (Galán-Arribas *et al.*, 2018). The following is a review of its main findings, articulated around the six dimensions analyzed in this paper.

Structure

Regarding the structural dimension, referring to the media group support from which the content is developed, the Spanish media initially used the Internet as a mere repository for previously broadcast programs (Gallego-Pérez, 2012; Sellas, 2012). In fact, only 8.7% of the podcasts broadcast in 2011 by the then five main Spanish generalist radio networks (*SER*, *COPE*, *Onda Cero*, *RNE1*, and *Punto Radio*) were digital natives (Pérez-Alaejos; López-Merayo, 2013), with *SER* being the conventional radio network that developed the most native formats, while it was not until 2019 that Spanish public radio (*RNE*) produced its first digital-native podcast (Müller; Martínez-Costa; Villar, 2020). *Prisa Radio*’s leadership in the development of audio content for the Internet intensified in 2016 with the creation of *Podium Podcast*, the first Spanish podcast platform driven by a communication group. This marked the beginning of the commercialization and economic exploitation of the format (Sellas; Solà, 2019) and constituted the tipping point toward the maturity of Spanish podcasting (García-Marín, 2019), similar to the evolution from DIY production to a massive and professional approach that was initiated two years previously in the United States (Bonini; 2015). More recent studies on the Spanish podcasting scene show that most programs are produced independently and by amateur users (Antunes; Salaverría, 2018; García-Marín; Aparici, 2018), and that the most prominent among those promoted by well-established media groups are developed by *Podium Podcast* (Antunes; Salaverría, 2018).

Authorship

Regarding the personnel active in the podcast sphere, referring to the characteristics of those who host programs, national (Fernández-Sande, 2015) and international (Sullivan, 2018) research has detected the creation of independent podcasts by conventional radio professionals, in competition with those produced by amateurs, but without establishing their relative proportion. In Danish independent podcasting, for example, content creators are not usually communication professionals (Adler-Berg, 2021). On the other hand, in terms of gender, the majority of independent Spanish podcasters are men (Antunes; Salaverría, 2018), as also found in other environments internationally (Werner *et al.*, 2020).

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Topics

In terms of the thematic dimension, differences emerge depending on the type of production. On the one hand, podcasts produced by public media (**Müller; Martínez-Costa; Villar, 2020**) or regional media (**Martínez-Costa et al., 2021**) are linked to news, dissemination, and entertainment, like traditional radio formats. On the other hand, digital-native programs produced by private media groups mostly focus on fiction or entertainment, in particular those promoted by *Podium Podcast* (**Antunes; Salaverría, 2018**). In this sense, studies on the content developed by *Prisa Radio's* podcasting platform argue that its production is based on journalistic content (from current affairs to biographies of prominent figures, or events) (**Legorburu; Edo; García-González, 2021**), entertainment, and fiction, although it also includes cultural affairs and programs considered to be niche (**Moreno-Cazalla, 2017; Sellas; Solà, 2019**). Finally, most independent Spanish podcasts address issues related to science and technology, fiction, entertainment, and culture (**Antunes; Salaverría, 2018**), in contrast to the situation in other countries such as Denmark, where most of their content is based on conversations with personalities of interest or deals with hobbies (**Adler-Berg, 2021**). The presence of non-news genres from traditional radio in the Spanish podcast sphere has been corroborated recently (**Gallardo-Camacho; Pulido-Núñez, 2022**).

Formats

The formal dimension has undergone significant evolution since the beginnings of podcasting. At the beginning of the last decade, generalist Spanish channels used this format to enable on-demand consumption of previously broadcast content (which they uploaded in its entirety, including advertising space), while only a minority of the content offered was native (**Pérez-Alaejos; López-Merayo, 2013**). Subsequently, the channels modified the publication format of the previously broadcast content so that, as in the case of the magazine programs of generalist channels, they could be consumed in full, by hour, by section, or as highlights, thus satisfying both traditional and digital audiences (**Rodríguez-Luque; Alonso-Fernández; Legorburu, 2020**). In recent years, podcasts have begun to make narrative extensions and diversify their format according to the characteristics of the media in which they are broadcast, such as video or social media (**García-Marín, 2019**). Sometimes, video is used not only as a narrative extension but even as a hybrid format that uses images to complement the audio distributed on other platforms in what **Johansson (2021)** calls *YouTube Podcasts*. This narrative expansion of the programs also occurs in a transmedia way (**García-Marín; Aparici, 2018; 2020; García-Marín, 2020b**), so that, in addition to the multiple repositories from which the audio of a podcast can be listened to, such as *iVoox*, *Apple Podcasts*, or *Spotify*, up to six additional media that can complement its contents have been identified: their own websites, social media, conventional radio, live face-to-face shows, online video channels, and newsletters (**García-Marín; Aparici, 2018**).

Funding

The funding dimension has traditionally been the most complex to analyze because of the lack of information on costs and income provided by producers, distributors, and advertisers (**Moreno-Cazalla, 2017**). According to the study by **Banqueri-Barra (2020)**, almost 80% of independent podcasts in Spain have two or three sources of income; of the 13 forms of financing identified, the most frequent are subscriptions (40%), exclusivity on a platform (38%), and sponsorship (17%). In the same sense, **Antunes and Salaverría (2018)** found that the most widely used formula is crowdfunding, followed by merchandising. In fact, according to **Bonini (2015)**, the second age of podcasting began in the USA when successful programs achieved economic independence through digital sponsorship.

In addition to these formulas, the so-called corporate podcast or branded podcast is booming, being promoted by large companies (**Barbeito-Veloso; Perona-Páez, 2019**) as an element of audio branding (**Piñeiro-Otero, 2015**) that they use to promote themselves as a direct way to reach their audience of interest (**Lögdberg; Wahlqvist, 2020**). Such programs are also being introduced in Spain, as evidenced by the pioneering cases of *Aerolínea Momentos*, co-produced by *Podium Podcast* and *Iberia* (**Sellas, 2018**), or *Blink*, produced by the BBVA bank (**Barbeito-Veloso; Perona-Páez, 2019**). In Latin America and considering only journalistic podcasts belonging to communication groups, **Rojas-Torrijos, Caro-González, and González-Alba (2020)** identified as many as 16 financing formulas, the most widely used being the creation of content for brands.

However, attracting funding for independent podcasts is not an easy task. Not only does the monetization of content depend on the functionalities of the podcasting platforms on which they are broadcast, but various studies have pointed to the tendency/need to diversify income sources, with the main one always being the listeners (**Banqueri-Barra, 2020; Rojas-Torrijos; Caro-González; González-Alba, 2020**). Research conducted in Australia found that most independent productions do not generate profits, but that the diversification of their funding sources gives them creative freedom by granting an autonomy that allows them to experiment (**Jorgensen, 2021**).

Dissemination

Finally, in terms of dissemination, podcasts have gone from being listened to through the syndication of their content through any RSS application (podcatcher) to having to adapt to the rules of the platform chosen as the main vehicle for their distribution. This platformization of the podcast sphere is being accelerated by the international rise of major distributors such as *Apple*, *Spotify*, or *Google*, but also by the consumption and discovery of programs through social media

platforms such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, or *Twitter* (Sullivan, 2019). According to data from *SEIM* (2020), *Spotify* is the most widely used application in Spain (48.2%), followed by *iVoox* (25.5%), *Google Podcasts* (21.9%), and *Apple Podcasts* (15.4%). However, another relevant report in the sector, the *Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2021), lists *YouTube* (27%), *iVoox* (20%), *Spotify* (18%), and *Google Podcast* (16%) as the most widely used in the country. These data reveal that, while *YouTube* is the preeminent audiovisual content consumption platform, there is no clear hegemony in the dissemination of audio content (Banqueri-Barra, 2020).

3. Materials and method

In this study, content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002) was applied to a sample formed by the most outstanding podcasts in Spain during the first quarter of 2021. The corpus was composed of the 206 original content programs that, at some point during the period between January 1 and March 31 of that year, were among the top 50 positions in the general daily rankings of *Spotify* and *Apple Podcasts* for Spain or in the weekly rankings of *iVoox*, a pioneering platform for the storage, distribution, and monetization of programs in the country. The data corresponding to the former two were obtained through *Chartable*, a podcast analysis tool certified by the *Interactive Advertising Bureau* (IAB), while those corresponding to the latter were obtained through *iVoox*'s own website. According to a survey of Internet users conducted in October 2020, these three selected platforms are, together with *Google Podcasts*, whose ranking was not territorialized by *Chartable* at the time of data collection, the most widely used by Spanish consumers to listen to audio content (SEIM, 2021). A lack of originality led to the exclusion from the sample of five podcasts previously broadcast on radio or television that met the popularity criterion but had been uploaded by users who were not involved in their production.

The analysis included the categorization of 21 variables based on the previous literature review and distributed along six study dimensions (Table 1): structural, personal, thematic, formal, non-discursive funding, and dissemination. The information used to code the variables was obtained through a proactive and intensive manual search on the Internet, which allowed the consultation of the program files on the podcasting platforms analyzed and on the websites of conventional radio networks as well as, if available, the websites and *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* accounts of the podcasts. In addition, the variables corresponding to theme, funding, language, and gender were coded after listening to at least one episode of each program.

Table 1. Analysis variables and categories

Dimension	Variable	Category
Structural	Origin	Conventional radio / Conventional television / Digital native associated with a podcast network / Independent digital native
	Radio network	[only if origin = conventional radio]
	Group	[only if origin = conventional radio]
	Territorial scope	[only if origin = conventional radio] Local / Regional / Spanish / Global
	Podcast network	[only if origin = digital native associated with a podcast network]
Authorship	Professionalism	Yes / No / Without host
	Gender	Men / Women / Men and women
Thematic	Subject matter	General news / Politics or economics / Business or marketing / Sports news / Entertainment / Music only / Fiction / Mystery or crime / History / Science and technology / Culture / Fandom / Fitness / Emotional wellness / Childhood and parenting / Language learning / Conversational / Other
Formal	Format	Podcast only / Podcast and video
	Periodicity	Daily / Several times a week / Weekly / Every two weeks / Monthly / Irregular
	Language	Spanish / Catalan / English / Only music
Funding	Audience	Yes / No
	Services	Yes / No
	Brands	Yes / No
	Media	Yes / No
	YouTube	Yes / No
	Others	Yes / No
Dissemination	<i>Spotify</i>	Present / Absent
	<i>iVoox</i>	Present / Absent
	<i>Google</i>	Present / Absent
	<i>Apple</i>	Present / Absent

The coding was carried out by the authors after a test on a random sample of 26.2% of the corpus ($n = 54$). The Krippendorff alpha coefficients obtained, always above $\alpha = 0.8$, confirmed the reliability of the results (Igartua, 2006).

4. Results

4.1. Structural dimension

The analysis of the structural dimension of the most prominent podcasts in Spain during the first quarter of 2021 showed that 72.3% of them were digital natives ($n = 149$), with a similar presence of independent ones (35.9%, $n = 74$) and those associated with a podcast network or promoted by a production company (36.4%, $n = 75$). Programs previously broadcast via conventional media were in the minority (27.7%, $n = 57$), with an absolute predominance of those coming from conventional radio (26.7%, $n = 55$) over those from conventional television (1%, $n = 2$).

Of the podcasts from conventional radio:

- 20 were broadcast on *Cadena SER*;
- 8 on *Onda Cero*;
- 6 on *COPE*;
- 5 on *esRadio*;
- 4 on *RAC1*;
- 3 on *Catalunya Ràdio*;
- 1 on *Radio Nacional*, *Los40*, *Rock FM*, and *Radio Marca*; and
- 5 on independent stations.

Thus:

- the *Prisa Group* produced 38.2% ($n = 21$) of the radio programs that were among the most outstanding podcasts;
- *Atresmedia*, 14.5% ($n = 8$);
- *COPE*, 12.7% ($n = 7$);
- *Libertad Digital*, 9.1% ($n = 5$);
- *Grupo Godó*, 7.3% ($n = 4$);
- *Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals*, 5.5% ($n = 3$);
- *Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española*, 1.8% ($n = 1$); and
- *Unidad Editorial*, 1.8% ($n = 1$).

In turn, 76.4% of them had been broadcast nationally ($n = 42$), while 16.4% came from regional coverage ($n = 9$); 5.5% local ($n = 3$); while only 1.8% were global ($n = 1$).

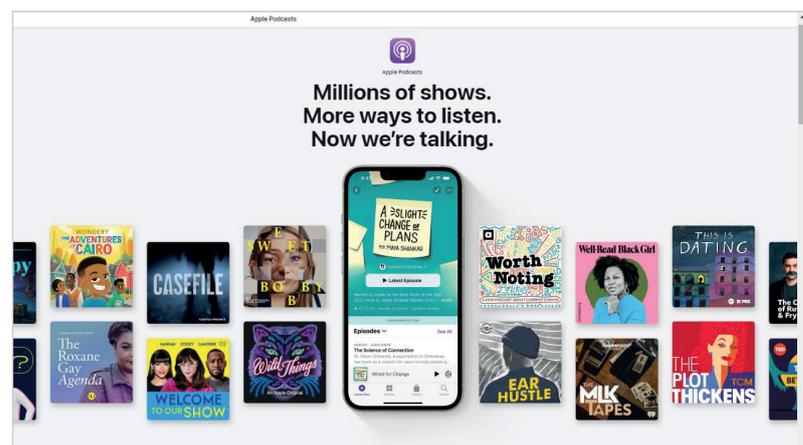
Among the digital-native podcasts that were not fully independent:

- 48% ($n = 36$) were linked to *iVoox Originals*, an exclusive partnership network created by *iVoox* at the beginning of 2019 that facilitates the monetization of programs at the listener's expense;
- 16% ($n = 12$) had been produced by *Podium Podcast*, belonging to *Prisa Radio*;
- 2.7% ($n = 2$), by *Spotify*;
- 1.3% ($n = 1$), by *Cuonda*;
- 1.3% ($n = 1$), by *Subterfuge Radio*;
- 1.3% ($n = 1$), by *Radio Primavera Sound*;
- and the remaining 29.3% ($n = 22$), by international or national communication companies not exclusively linked to audio communication, none of which promoted more than one program included in the corpus.

4.2. Personal dimension

The analysis of the authorship of the podcasts revealed the predominance of professional podcasters (72.8%, $n = 150$) over amateurs (25.7%, $n = 53$), and of men (63.6%, $n = 131$) over women (23.3%, $n = 46$) or the presence of both genders (11.6%, $n = 24$). Authorship was considered to be professional when the persons presenting the programs were journalists or had a consolidated public presence owing to their activity in other fields of communication and culture. Meanwhile, authorship was considered to be amateur when the main professional activity of the podcasters was not related to this field or when they do not have such an established public presence.

Cross-sectional analysis of the professionalism and gender variables with the variable describing the origin of the programs (Table 2) revealed that the



<https://www.apple.com/apple-podcasts>

predominance of professional hosts was common to all the types of podcasts analyzed, but decreased according to the resources available to them, being 98.2% in the case of programs from conventional radio, 69.3% for digital-native programs associated with a network, and 56.8% for independent digital-native programs (56.8%). Similarly, presentation by men was also found to be in the majority for all three cases (68.4%, 62.7%, and 60.8%, respectively), with exclusive authorship by women increasing according to the degree of independence of the programs, being 15.8% for conventional programs, 21.3% for natives associated with podcast networks, and 31.1% for natives not linked to any podcast network.

The results reveal the preponderance of digital-native podcasts in comparison with previously broadcast podcasts, and of podcasts promoted by radio stations or those associated with networks over independent ones

Table 2. Professionalism and gender in the authorship of the most outstanding podcasts, according to their origin

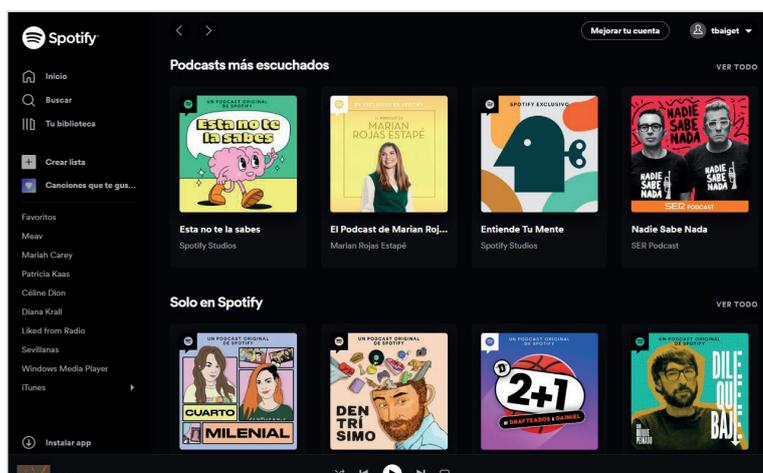
	Conventional		Associated digital natives		Independent digital natives		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Professional	56	98.2	52	69.3	42	56.8	150	72.8
Men	38	66.7	32	42.7	26	35.1	96	46.6
Women	9	15.8	13	17.3	13	17.6	35	17.0
Both genders	9	15.8	7	9.3	3	4.1	19	9.2
Nonprofessional	1	1.8	23	30.7	29	39.2	53	25.7
Men	1	1.8	15	20.0	19	25.7	35	17.0
Women	0	0.0	3	4.0	10	13.5	13	6.3
Both genders	0	0.0	5	6.7	0	0.0	5	2.4
Without host	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	4.1	3	1.5
Total	57	100.0	75	100.0	74	100.0	206	100.0

4.3. Thematic dimension

The predominant themes were:

- mystery and/or crime (14.1%, n = 29);
- history (12.6%, n = 26);
- entertainment (12.1%, n = 25), regardless of whether the subject matter was political, cultural, or social;
- emotional well-being (10.2%, n = 21), which includes psychology as well as self-help, relaxation, and personal growth;
- general current affairs (9.7%, n = 20), in both news and magazine format; and
- science and/or technology outreach (7.8%, n = 16).

The cross-sectional analysis of the subject matter and origin of the programs (Table 3) shows, however, relevant differences depending on the nature of the podcasts. Among the programs previously broadcast on conventional radio, general current affairs (26.3%), entertainment (24.6%), and sports current affairs (14%) predominate. Among the digital natives associated with a podcast network, mystery and crime (25.3%), historical information (18.7%), and science and/or technology information (10.7%) are most important. Among the independent digital natives, whose topics are more diversified, emotional well-being (20.3%), science and/or technology (10.8%), and business and/or marketing (8.1%) come first.



<https://open.spotify.com/genre/podcasts-web>

Table 3. Subject matter of the most outstanding podcasts, according to their origin

	Conventional		Associated digital natives		Independent digital natives		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
General news	15	26.3	4	5.3	1	1.4	20	9.7
Politics or economics	1	1.8	5	6.7	1	1.4	7	3.4
Business or marketing	0	0.0	0	0.0	6	8.1	6	2.9
Sports news	8	14.0	0	0.0	2	2.7	10	4.9
Entertainment	14	24.6	6	8.0	5	6.8	25	12.1
Music only	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	2.7	2	1.0
Fiction	0	0.0	1	1.3	2	2.7	3	1.5
Mystery or crime	6	10.5	19	25.3	4	5.4	29	14.1
History	7	12.3	14	18.7	5	6.8	26	12.6
Science and technology	0	0.0	8	10.7	8	10.8	16	7.8
Culture	3	5.3	5	6.7	3	4.1	9	4.4
Fandom	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4	1	0.5
Fitness	1	1.8	1	1.3	6	8.1	8	3.9
Emotional wellness	1	1.8	5	6.7	15	20.3	21	10.2
Childhood and parenting	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	4.1	3	1.5
Language learning	0	0.0	2	2.7	5	6.8	7	3.4
Conversational	0	0.0	5	6.7	4	5.4	9	4.4
Other	1	1.8	0	0.0	1	1.4	2	1.0
Total	57	100.0	75	100.0	74	100.0	206	100.0

4.4. Formal dimension

The most common format (Table 4) was exclusively audio, both for programs broadcast via conventional media (70.2%) and for digital-native programs promoted by a podcast network or production company (81.3%) as well as independent digital-native programs (74.3%). The distribution of the podcast in hybrid format, in which the sound is accompanied by a full video of its recording, without fragmentation, had a greater presence in the podcasts linked to conventional media (29.8%) and in the independent digital natives (25.7%).

Table 4. Format of the most outstanding podcasts, according to their origin

	Conventional		Associated digital natives		Independent digital natives		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Podcast only	40	70.2	61	81.3	55	74.3	156	75.7
Podcast and video	17	29.8	14	18.7	19	25.7	50	24.3
Total	57	100.0	75	100.0	74	100.0	206	100.0

The predominant broadcasting frequency among the programs studied was weekly (41.7%), followed by daily (20.4%). According to their origin (Table 5), podcasts linked to traditional media showed a greater fraction of daily (49.1%) than weekly production (36.8%). However, the digital natives, both independent and produced by a podcast network, offered mostly weekly updates (45.9% and 41.3%, respectively).

Table 5. Periodicity of the most outstanding podcasts, according to their origin

	Conventional		Associated digital natives		Independent digital natives		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Daily	28	49.1	8	10.7	6	8.1	42	20.4
Several times a week	5	8.8	15	20.0	6	8.1	26	12.6
Weekly	21	36.8	31	41.3	34	45.9	86	41.7
Every two weeks	0	0.0	7	9.3	5	6.8	12	5.8
Monthly	1	1.8	4	5.3	3	4.1	8	3.9
Irregular	2	3.5	10	13.3	20	27.0	32	15.5
Total	57	100.0	75	100.0	74	100.0	206	100.0

The preferred vehicular language in the set of podcasts studied was Spanish (87.9%, $n = 181$), followed by English (6.3%, $n = 13$) and Catalan (4.9%, $n = 10$). Within this selection of outstanding podcasts, there was also a minority of nonspoken programs consisting exclusively of a musical background (1%, $n = 2$).

4.5. Funding dimension

Regarding nondiscursive financing sources (not based on the spoken formulation of advertising references by the presenters):

- 46.1% of the programs studied resorted to the monetization of videos on *YouTube*;
- 44.7%, to production by the media or podcast networks;
- 32.5%, to additional services such as courses, books, or live shows;
- 29.6%, to contributions from listeners, through donations or subscriptions; and
- 8.7%, to sponsorship by commercial brands not related to the media sector.

In the case of podcasts previously broadcast via traditional media, the most frequent source was, as might be expected, production by the corresponding media, followed by monetization on *YouTube* (42.1%), with little presence of other formulas. Regarding programs broadcast by podcast networks, monetization through the listeners (49.3%) was the most common source, followed by advertising on *YouTube* (41.3%) and production by the podcast network itself (41.3%) (on many occasions, association with a network, such as *iVoxx Originals*, implies the possibility of receiving funding from users but not direct receipt of resources from this association). Finally, the most common source of financing among independent podcasts was add-on services (59.5%), followed by the monetization of videos on *YouTube* (54.1%) and contributions from listeners (28.4%). The sources of funding studied are not mutually exclusive, so as seen in Table 6, the same program may, and in general does, resort to more than one method.

Table 6. Nondiscursive funding sources of the most outstanding podcasts, according to their origin

	Conventional ($N = 57$)		Associated digital natives ($N = 75$)		Independent digital natives ($N = 74$)		Total ($N = 206$)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Audience	3	5.3	37	49.3	21	28.4	61	29.6
Additional services	5	8.8	18	24.0	44	59.5	67	32.5
Brands	1	1.8	8	10.7	9	12.2	18	8.7
Media and/or networks	57	100.0	31	41.3	4	5.4	92	44.7
<i>YouTube</i>	24	42.1	31	41.3	40	54.1	95	46.1
Others	1	1.8	1	1.3	4	5.4	6	2.9

In the case of independent podcasting, we also studied the differences in access to funding depending on the professionalism and gender of the podcaster. As noted from Table 7, while the majority of independent programs that are financed through brand sponsorship (88.9%), additional services (63.6%), and monetization on *YouTube* (60%) are made by communication or cultural professionals, most of those that resort to subscriptions or donations are driven by nonprofessionals (52.4%). In terms of gender, programs presented by men represent the majority in the distribution of all funding sources, except for access to sponsorship by commercial brands, which is concentrated in independent podcasts presented by women (55.5%).

Table 7. Nondiscursive funding sources of the most outstanding independent podcasts, according to the gender and professionalism of their authors

	Audience ($N = 21$)		Services ($N = 44$)		Brands ($N = 9$)		Media ($N = 4$)		<i>YouTube</i> ($N = 40$)		Others ($N = 4$)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Professional	9	42.9	28	63.6	8	88.9	4	100	24	60.0	3	75
Men	8	38.1	15	34.1	3	33.3	4	100	15	37.5	1	25
Women	0	0.0	10	22.7	4	44.4	0	0	9	22.5	2	50
Both genders	1	4.8	3	6.8	1	11.1	0	0	0	0.0	0	0
Nonprofessional	11	52.4	16	36.4	1	11.1	0	0	16	40.0	1	25
Men	8	38.1	9	20.5	0	0.0	0	0	11	27.5	1	25
Women	3	14.3	7	15.9	1	11.1	0	0	5	12.5	0	0
Both genders	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0
Without host	1	4.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0

Similarly, cross-sectional analysis of the financial and thematic variables in the independent podcast sphere (Table 8) reveals that access to the most widely used source, i.e., additional services, was higher for programs related to emotional well-being (20.5%), physical well-being (13.6%), language learning (11.4%), entertainment (11.4%), and entrepre-

neurship (11.4%). Monetization on *YouTube*, the second most widely used source of funding, was also led by programs on those topics (22.5%), followed by those dedicated to fitness (15%) and business or marketing (12.5%). Meanwhile, subscriptions or listener donations, the third most important source of funding for independent podcasters, were led by programs dedicated to mystery or crime (19%), with those focused on psychology or self-help in second place (14.3%). Finally, access to brand sponsorship was again led by programs dedicated to personal growth (22.2%), along with those dedicated to entrepreneurship and business (22.2%).

Table 8. Nondiscursive funding sources of the most outstanding independent podcasts, according to their subject matter

	Audience (N = 21)		Services (N = 44)		Brands (N = 9)		Media (N = 4)		YouTube (N = 40)		Others (N = 4)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
General news	1	4.8	1	2.3	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	0	0
Politics or economics	1	4.8	1	2.3	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	0	0
Business or marketing	0	0	5	11.1	2	22.2	0	0	5	12.5	0	0
Sports news	1	4.8	1	2.3	1	11.1	0	0	1	2.5	0	0
Entertainment	2	9.5	5	11.4	0	0	0	0	2	5	0	0
Music only	1	4.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fiction	1	4.8	1	2.3	1	11.1	0	0	0	0	1	25
Mystery or crime	4	19	1	2.3	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	0	0
History	2	9.5	1	2.3	1	11.1	0	0	2	5	1	25
Science and technology	0	0	3	6.8	0	0	4	100	4	10	1	25
Culture	1	4.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	0	0
Fandom	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	25
Fitness	0	0	6	13.6	0	0	0	0	6	15	0	0
Emotional wellness	3	14.3	9	20.5	2	22.2	0	0	9	22.5	0	0
Childhood and parenting	0	0	3	6.8	1	11.1	0	0	3	7.5	0	0
Language learning	2	9.5	5	11.4	1	11.1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Conversational	2	9.5	2	4.5	0	0	0	0	3	7.5	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	0	0

4.6. Dissemination dimension

The platforms that led the diffusion of the analyzed podcasts were *iVoox* (97.6%, *n* = 201), *Google Podcasts* (97.1%, *n* = 200), and *Apple Podcasts* (94.7%, *n* = 195), while *Spotify* (85.4%, *n* = 176) recorded a lower presence among the highlighted programs studied.

Half of the analyzed podcasts had a specific channel on *YouTube* that is regularly updated with their episodes, regardless of whether their format was hybrid or exclusively audio, or whether they were broadcast in full or fragmented form. As shown in Table 9, this percentage was slightly higher for independent digital-native podcasts (54.1%), but the range of percentages among the different modalities according to their origin does not reveal a distinct difference in this regard.

Table 9. The presence of *YouTube* among the most outstanding podcasts, according to their origin

	Conventional		Associated digital natives		Independent digital natives		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
With <i>YouTube</i> channel	24	42.1	31	41.3	40	54.1	95	46.1
Without <i>YouTube</i> channel	33	57.9	44	58.7	34	45.9	111	53.9
Total	57	100.0	75	100.0	74	100.0	206	100.0

5. Discussion and conclusions

This work analyzed the characteristics of the Spanish podcasting sphere by studying its structural, personal, thematic, formal, funding, and dissemination aspects on the basis of a content analysis applied to the 206 most popular programs in the first quarter of 2021.

The results regarding the structural dimension of the Spanish podcasting scene reveal its expansion and professionalization, with a clear majority of digital-native programs among the most popular ones on the most widely used platforms. Although, according to previous

Regarding their themes, content related to mystery and/or crime, history, entertainment, and emotional well-being predominates

studies (Antunes; Salaverría, 2018; García-Marín; Aparici, 2018), most Spanish podcasts are produced independently, this study also found that those produced by media or those associated with podcast networks predominate among the most outstanding ones. *Prisa Radio* continues to be (Antunes; Salaverría, 2018; Pérez-Alaejos; López-Merayo, 2013) the group with most programs rated among the most popular, either previously broadcast on *SER* or produced natively by *Podium Podcast*. In turn, *iVoox Originals* is the podcast network with the most podcasts. Although the podcast sphere is a long-tail space (Sullivan, 2018), its head in Spain is promoted by a few actors, mostly coming from the same media field. As noted previously by Berry (2016), the traditional establishment of audio communication is thus repeated in this field.

Podcasters are mainly men and professionals from the media or others cultural industries, in both previously broadcast and digital-native programs, whether they are independent or associated with a podcast network. Differences with respect to gender were previously detected both nationally (Antunes; Salaverría, 2018) and internationally (Werner *et al.*, 2020). The fact that, among independent podcasts, there is also a majority of professional and male presenters is in accord with the findings of Fernández-Sande (2015) and Sullivan (2018), since it is (mainly male) media professionals who start independent productions, although this is totally different in international scenarios such as the Danish one (Adler-Berg, 2021). The absolute predominance of professional and male podcasters distances the most popular podcasts from the democratization forecast at the format's beginnings, according to which audiences would become producers (Berry, 2006; Dearman; Galloway, 2005) and would have an impact on the public sphere. Indeed, if it exists, the deinstitutionalization of the radio system (Bonini, 2006) is not identified in this research.

In general, the predominant themes of the most outstanding podcasts were mystery and/or crime, history, entertainment, and emotional well-being. However, differences were found depending on their structure. The media-driven podcasts highlight general current affairs, entertainment, and sports news, following a pattern more similar to that found previously in public and regional media (Müller; Martínez-Costa; Villar, 2020; Martínez-Costa *et al.*, 2021) than that detected in other studies on private media groups (Antunes; Salaverría, 2018). While the podcasts associated with or produced by networks address more niche topics, such as mystery and crime or historical disclosure or about science and technology, the most prominent independent ones address more diverse issues related to personal growth, whether from mental health (such as emotional well-being), training (such as science and technology), or business learning (such as entrepreneurship and marketing). In this sense, it appears that podcasting in Spain has recovered a thematic diversity that was more typical of the radio discourse in the past, structured in a mosaic with numerous and varied programs, in comparison with the current situation that is structured in blocks, consisting of few shows that are moreover generally magazine, news, or sports programs (Martí-Martí, 2004). Mosaic programming is thus limited to some public broadcasters to comply with the mission of their owners.

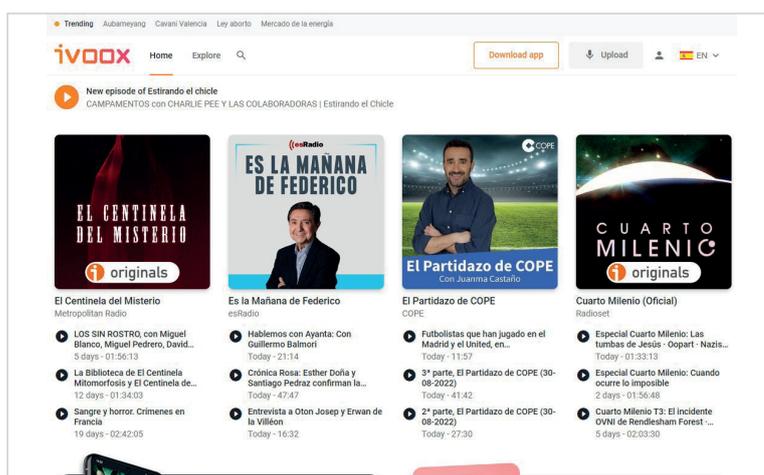
From the formal perspective, the exclusively audio format is predominant, while *YouTube* podcasts (Johansson, 2021) consisting of hybrids of audio and video remain in the minority, notwithstanding who produces them. The transmedia expansion of narrative universes (García-Marín; Aparici, 2018; 2020; García-Marín, 2020b) is not, therefore, a generalized trend as far as audiovisual content is concerned. The majority of the studied podcasts are in Spanish and with weekly periodicity, except in the case of those previously broadcast by conventional radios, which generally have a daily frequency. In terms of language, there are more podcasts in English (13) than in Catalan (10), which is also the only co-official language, apart from Spanish, present among the most popular Spanish podcasts.

The most commonly used financing sources are production by media groups or podcast networks, monetization of audios or videos on *YouTube*, and marketing of additional services (courses, shows, books, etc.). Independent podcasts, which depend on their financial strategy to continue their production, resort to diversified financing sources (Banqueri-Barra, 2020) and opt (in this order) for the sale of additional services, monetization on *YouTube*, and contributions from listeners. Micro-sponsorship or subscription are formulas used by a minority of the independent podcasts analyzed, which represents an evolution with respect to the findings of previous studies (Antunes; Salaverría, 2018; Banqueri-Barra, 2020; Rojas-Torrijos; Caro-González; González-Alba, 2020). This source, which involves direct payment for the content of the podcast as enabled by *iVoox* without the need to rely on external tools to receive donations, is only used in the majority of some niche programs, such as those specialized in mystery or crime. It is also interesting to note that income through additional services is more frequent in programs on emotional wellness, fitness, and learning, revealing that podcasts are in themselves an advertising resource (Lögdberg; Wahlqvist, 2020). The financing of the most popular podcasts does not depend on listeners but on other resources, which implies the transposition of the commercial logic that underlies traditional radio programming to this format (Cebrián-Herreros, 1999).

“ The most commonly used financing sources are production by media groups or podcast networks, monetization of audios or videos on *YouTube*, and marketing of additional services (courses, shows, books, etc.) ”

“ Programs produced by professionals from the media or other cultural industries are more popular than those produced by amateurs, while those presented by men are more popular than those presented by women ”

The data related to broadcasting corroborate the platformization (Sullivan, 2019) and adaptation of podcasts to the most widely used applications. Although the most frequent are *iVoox* and *Google Podcasts*, most of the programs have a multiplatform presence, which facilitates consumption using the tools habitually used by each listener, including the possibility to watch or listen to the podcast on *YouTube* in almost half of cases (Johansson, 2021). The most popular podcast sphere thus offers different types of access to the same content, allowing it to adapt to different modes of consumption and audience profiles (Rodríguez-Luque; Alonso-Fernández; Legorburu, 2020).



<https://www.ivoox.com>

Based on the study of the six dimensions herein, the initial hypothesis of this work is confirmed. Despite the thematic diversification and the multiplicity of funding and dissemination channels, the consolidation of podcasting in Spain has abandoned the democratizing potential that some theorists and researchers attributed to the format in its beginnings (Berry, 2006; Bonini, 2006; Crofts *et al.*, 2005; Dearman; Galloway, 2005; Gallego-Pérez, 2006). As in other countries (Berry, 2016; Bonini, 2015), the most popular Spanish podcast sphere is thus embedded in an eminently commercial logic.

The main limitation of this work derives from the composition of the research corpus, formed by the most prominent podcasts in the rankings of the broadcasting platforms, which as pointed out previously by other researchers (Berry, 2016) may reflect the popularity of the programs but not exclusively the volume of listeners. However, we believe that, in the absence of public audience measurements, collecting the sample on three different platforms over three months helps to address this limitation. Moreover, as podcasting is in continuous evolution, future research should analyze the variation in such results at later stages of its development. Similarly, as a result of the rise and consolidation of *Twitch*, especially among the younger population, future work should also study the presence of programs on this platform, which in fact already has a category called *Talk Shows & Podcasts*.

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