

# Gen Z and Podcasts: What They're Listening to and Why in the Digital Age: A Uses and Gratifications Theory Approach

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the motivations and preferences of Generation Z (Gen Z) podcast listeners in India through the theoretical lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). As a digitally native cohort, Gen Z is driving the exponential growth of the Indian podcast market; however, research into their specific consumption patterns, particularly in non-Western contexts, remains limited. This paper addresses this gap by employing a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data from 250 Gen Z respondents in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, with qualitative insights from 30 semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that the primary gratifications sought by this demographic are entertainment (M=4.5/5) and escapism (M=4.2/5), which significantly predict preferences for comedy and lo-fi genres, respectively. Spotify and YouTube emerge as the dominant platforms, with a notable trend towards video-integrated podcasts. The study confirms that podcasts are favored over traditional media, such as radio, due to their on-demand nature and flexibility, aligning with Gen Z's multitasking lifestyles. Thematic analysis of qualitative data highlights podcasts' role in providing comfort from digital overload and fostering parasocial connections. This research contributes to the application of UGT in a digital, cross-cultural context and offers practical implications for content creators, marketers, and educators seeking to engage with this influential consumer group. The findings underscore the need for authentic, niche content distributed via social media and influencer channels to effectively reach the Indian Gen Z audience.*

**Keywords:** Gen Z, Podcasts, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Digital media, Media consumption.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (Gen Z), the cohort born between 1997 and 2012, stands as the first generation of true digital natives, having grown up in an ecosystem saturated with on-demand content and ubiquitous internet access. Their media consumption habits have fundamentally reshaped the digital landscape, shifting from traditional, linear broadcasting to personalized, flexible platforms (Pew Research Center, 2022). Within this evolving media environment, podcasts have emerged as a dominant and rapidly growing medium. Globally, podcast listenership is projected to exceed 500 million by 2025 (Statista, 2024), a trend particularly pronounced in India. The Indian podcast market, valued at approximately USD 0.62 billion in 2024, is forecast to reach an estimated USD 2.6 billion by 2030, driven by a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 25% (KPMG, 2024).

Gen Z's multitasking lifestyle and preference for concurrent content consumption makes podcasts uniquely appealing. This generation curates media that aligns with their identity and values. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) explains these consumption patterns, viewing audiences as active consumers who select media to fulfill specific needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). These needs encompass cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative dimensions. In digital media, UGT explores how podcasts satisfy these needs through portability and parasocial relationships between hosts and listeners (McClung & Johnson, 2010). For Indian Gen Z, where 91% use social media for news (Lokniti-CSDS, 2023), podcasts offer in-depth engagement with topics of interest.

Despite high podcast consumption among Generation Z globally—with 63% of U.S. individuals aged 13–24 listening monthly (Edison Research, 2024)—literature lacks research on preferences in non-Western contexts, particularly India. India reported 57.6 million monthly podcast listeners in 2023, primarily Gen Z, with an average listener age of 20–21 years (PwC, 2023). This study applies the UGT framework to examine Generation Z podcast listeners' motivations and preferences in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

**This research is guided by the following questions:**

1. What primary gratifications do Gen Z consumers in India seek from podcast consumption, as defined by the Uses and Gratifications Theory?

2. How do these sought gratifications influence preferences for specific podcast genres, formats (audio versus video), and platforms?

3. How do podcasts compare to traditional media, such as radio and television, in satisfying the needs of this demographic?

This study analyzes Gen Z Indians' UGT-driven motivations, genre preferences, and platform choices to guide content creators, marketers, and educators. The research extends UGT application to a new context while providing insights for stakeholders engaging with India's Gen Z demographic, which possesses \$860 billion in spending power (Deloitte, 2024) and is a key driver for development, brand discovery, and community building.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1. Overview of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) shifts from traditional effects-based media theories that viewed audiences as passive. UGT asks "What do people do with media?" rather than "What do media do to people?" (Katz et al., 1973). The theory posits that audiences actively use media to satisfy needs, select media based on those needs, compete with alternative satisfaction sources, and report their motivations for media use (Ruggiero, 2000).

Gratifications are typically categorized into four main types:

- **Cognitive needs** are met through the acquisition of information, knowledge, and understanding. Listeners may utilize podcasts to learn about new topics, stay informed about current events, or gain insights into specific fields.
- **Affective Needs:** Associated with emotional, pleasurable, or aesthetic experiences. This includes seeking entertainment, humour, relaxation, or escapism from daily routines and stressors.
- **Personal integrative needs** relate to enhancing credibility, confidence, stability, and status. An individual might listen to a self-improvement podcast to bolster self-esteem or a business podcast to reinforce their professional identity.
- **Social integrative needs** involve strengthening connections with family, friends, and the wider world. This encompasses utilizing media content as a basis for social conversation or experiencing a sense of connection with media personalities—a phenomenon known as parasocial interaction.

Despite its influence, UGT has faced criticism. Scholars argue that its framework can be vague, with imprecise definitions of "needs" and "gratifications" (Blumler, 1979). Critics note an overemphasis on individualism, neglecting socio-cultural factors and structural constraints that shape digital media consumption. Furthermore, its reliance on self-reported data may not capture subconscious motivations (Ruggiero, 2000).

### 2.2. Applications of UGT to Digital Media and Podcasts

The interactive nature of digital platforms aligns with Uses and Gratifications (UGT)'s concept of an active audience. Researchers apply UGT to understand motivations for using

social media, streaming services, and podcasts.<sup>16</sup> For podcasts, UGT explains listener preferences through distinct gratifications like portability, multitasking capability, and intimate host-listener relationships (McClung & Johnson, 2010). Studies demonstrate diverse motivations for podcast listening. Research involving 293 listeners revealed that age predicted gratifications: younger audiences (18–34) favored entertainment and escapism, particularly comedy ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Chan & Lee, 2021) and pop culture. Listeners also utilize podcasts for productivity and learning during daily activities (Berry, 2016). In India, Gen Z listeners employ lo-fi podcasts for relaxation and to enhance study focus, aligning with UGT's affective gratification (Sharma, 2023). For young adults, podcasts fulfil companionship needs, with hosts often perceived as mentors (Perks & Turner, 2019).

### 2.3. Gen Z Media Consumption Trends

Gen Z's media habits differ from previous generations. India has the largest Gen Z population, comprising 377 million individuals, and 91% utilize social media for news consumption, while 88% engage with short-form videos (Lokniti-CSDS, 2023).

Podcast adoption is growing; 54% of Indian internet users listen weekly, with Gen Z representing the primary listener demographic (PwC, 2023). Globally, 75% of Gen Z adults listen monthly, an increase from 70% last year (Edison Research, 2024).

### 2.4. Genre, Platform, and Format Preferences

Gen Z demonstrates a preference for comedy, true crime, and pop culture podcasts (Spotify, 2023). Spotify accounts for 56% of listeners, with YouTube holding 44–46% due to its video content (Edison Research, 2024). Although audio formats dominate (76%), 30% of listeners prefer video content (Spotify, 2023). Gen Z primarily discovers podcasts through social media (69%), and regional language podcasts are gaining popularity, particularly in India (KPMG, 2024).

### 2.5. Gaps in Existing Literature

Current research on podcast consumption via Unified Geospatial Targeting (UGT) reveals a Western bias, primarily focusing on North American and European audiences while overlooking diverse markets such as India. Most studies are cross-sectional snapshots,<sup>21</sup> and UGT requires adaptation for algorithmic curation.<sup>22</sup> This study addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods analysis of Indian Gen Z's podcast engagement.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach utilizing a convergent parallel design, collecting quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and subsequently integrating the results during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative survey identified trends and relationships between gratifications and preferences, while semi-structured interviews explored motivations and contextual factors in detail. This integration facilitates triangulation, enhancing validity and reliability. The study is grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory.

### 3.2. Sample Selection

The target population for this study was Gen Z individuals, defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, making them aged 13 to 28 in the year 2025. The study was conducted in Coimbatore, a major urban and educational center in Tamil Nadu, India.

A sample of 250 participants was recruited through online panels and university social media groups. Inclusion criteria included age (13–28), residence within the Coimbatore metropolitan area, and monthly podcast consumption. The sample focused on college students as key representatives of Gen Z, exhibiting a balanced gender distribution (52% female, 48% male) and diverse socio-economic statuses.

A purposive sub-sample of 30 participants was selected from survey respondents willing to participate in follow-up interviews, ensuring variation in podcast listening frequency, preferences, and demographics to capture diverse perspectives.

### 3.3. Data Collection Instruments

- A Google Forms questionnaire was developed, comprising four sections: (1) Demographics (age, gender, occupation); (2) Podcast Consumption Patterns (frequency, duration, format); (3) UGT gratifications, assessed using 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), adapted from previous research (Chan & Lee, 2021), measuring Entertainment, Information, Escapism, and Social Connection; and (4) Genre and Platform Preferences, determined through multiple-choice questions. Participants were also asked to provide an open-ended response detailing their primary motivation for listening to podcasts.

- **Qualitative interviews utilized** a semi-structured interview guide featuring open-ended questions to explore themes including podcast roles, host connections, discovery processes, and media comparisons. Probes were employed to encourage participants to elaborate on their survey responses.

### 3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place from June to August 2025. Participants received an information sheet and provided electronic consent through an online survey link. A digital voucher incentive was offered in exchange for completion. Remote interviews (n=30) were conducted via video platforms, lasting 30–45 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed.

### 3.5. Data Analysis Methods

- **Quantitative Analysis:** The quantitative data from 250 completed surveys were cleaned, coded, and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize the demographic profile and consumption patterns. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis and multiple linear regression, were used to examine the relationships between the UGT gratification dimensions (independent variables) and genre preferences (dependent variables).

- **Qualitative analysis was conducted on** the 30 interview transcripts using thematic analysis with NVivo

software. This process followed the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This systematic approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and core themes related to the lived experiences of Gen Z podcast listeners.

### 3.6. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

A pilot test (n=50) was conducted to ensure the reliability of the survey instrument, and the Likert scales were refined. The final scales exhibited strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.80 for all UGT dimensions. The study's validity was enhanced through triangulation, comparing the quantitative survey results with the rich contextual insights obtained from qualitative interviews.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts and datasets. Informed consent was a prerequisite for participation, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

### 3.7. Limitations of the Methodology

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported data, both in the survey and interviews, may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability bias.<sup>24</sup> Second, the use of online sampling methods and the focus on an urban center (Coimbatore) may limit the generalizability of the findings to Gen Z in rural areas or other metropolitan areas of India. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study provides a snapshot of current preferences and cannot capture how they may evolve over time.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Demographic Profile and Consumption Patterns

The final sample of 250 respondents was predominantly young, with 60% aged between 18 and 23 years. Fifty-five percent were current college students, reflecting the targeted sampling strategy. The gender distribution was balanced, with 52% female and 48% male.

**Table 1: Demographics of Participants**

| Variable                 | Category / Description   | Percentage / Value |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Age                      | 18–23 years              | 60%                |
| Occupation               | Current college students | 55%                |
| Gender                   | Female                   | 52%                |
|                          | Male                     | 48%                |
| Listening Frequency      | Daily                    | 67%                |
| Listening Context        | At home                  | 76%                |
| Preferred Podcast Format | Audio-only               | 76%                |
|                          | Video podcasts           | 30%                |

Podcast consumption was deeply integrated into participants' daily lives, with 67% listening daily and averaging over two hours per week. Listening primarily occurs at home (76%). However, 30% frequently consume video podcasts, suggesting that for many Gen Z listeners,

podcasts have evolved into an audiovisual experience often accessed on YouTube.

#### 4.2. Gratifications Sought: The Dominance of Affective Needs

The analysis of UGT dimensions revealed a clear hierarchy of needs that Gen Z seeks to fulfil through podcasts. As shown in Table 1, affective gratifications—entertainment and escapism—received the highest mean scores.

**Table 2: Mean Scores for UGT Gratifications**

| Gratification Dimension | Mean Score (out of 5) | Standard Deviation (SD) |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Entertainment           | 4.5                   | 0.6                     |
| Escapism                | 4.2                   | 0.7                     |
| Information (Cognitive) | 3.9                   | 0.8                     |
| Social Connection       | 3.8                   | 0.7                     |

Entertainment (M=4.5) is the primary motivator for Gen Z’s engagement with podcasts, driven by a desire for pleasure and enjoyment. As one 21-year-old engineering student stated, “After classes, I just want to listen to something funny that makes me laugh. A comedy podcast is perfect for that.”

Escapism (M=4.2) was a close second, indicating podcasts’ role as a mental retreat tool. This aligns with the qualitative theme “Podcasts as a Sanctuary from Digital Overload.” Interviewees described podcasts as “calm media” for disconnection. One participant noted, “With a lo-fi or storytelling podcast, I can simply close my eyes and tune out. It’s my personal space.”

Although still important, **Information** (M=3.9) and **Social Connection** (M=3.8) were secondary motivators. This suggests that while Generation Z does use podcasts for learning and social connection, these needs are not as universally prioritized as the need for emotional release and entertainment.

#### 4.3. Linking Gratifications to Genre and Platform Preferences

**Table 3: Multiple regression analysis for Gratifications to Genre and Platform Preferences**

| Predictor (Gratification Dimension) | Predicted Genre Preference   | Standardize dβ | p-value | Interpretation                 |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------|---------|--------------------------------|
| Entertainment                       | Comedy                       | .30            | <.01    | Strong positive predictor      |
| Escapism                            | Lo-fi/Ambient, Storytelling  | .28            | <.001   | Significant positive predictor |
| Information (Cognitive)             | Educational, Society/Culture | .25            | <.01    | Significant positive predictor |

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether sought gratifications predicted genre preferences. The overall model was significant (F(4, 245) = 50.12, \* p < .001) and explained 45% of the variance in genre preference (R<sup>2</sup> = .45).

- The need for **entertainment** was a strong positive predictor of preference for the **comedy** genre ( $r^2 = .30, p < .01$ ).
- The need for **escapism** significantly predicted a preference for **lo-fi/ambient** and **storytelling** genres ( $r^2 = .28, p < .001$ ).
- The need for **information** was linked to preferences for **educational** and **society/culture** genres ( $r^2 = .25, * p < .01$ ).

These statistical findings were supported by consumption data. The most popular genres were Comedy (preferred by 45% of respondents), Lo-fi/Music (35%), and Society/Culture (30%). Regarding platforms, Spotify was the dominant provider (50%), valued for its curated playlists and music integration. YouTube followed as a strong second (40%), particularly among respondents who favored video podcasts and shows hosted by popular YouTubers.

#### 4.4. Qualitative Insights: Connection and Authenticity

Thematic analysis revealed deeper insights that complemented the quantitative results. A key theme was “Fostering Parasocial Connections and Community.” Participants viewed podcast hosts as personal friends. A participant noted, “I listen to Your’s Positively weekly. I feel like I know her. Her advice feels like it’s from an older sister.” This intimacy drives loyalty and engagement, fulfilling social connection needs more personally than those of mainstream celebrities.

The desire for authenticity explains social media’s role in podcast discovery. Recommendations from peers and influencers are valued above algorithmic suggestions. As one interviewee stated, “I’ll try any podcast my favourite creator recommends because I trust their taste.”

#### 4.5. Podcasts vs. Traditional Media: The Value of Flexibility

When comparing podcasts and radio, 72% of survey respondents preferred podcasts for their on-demand flexibility. Key advantages included the ability to choose content, timing, and playback options. A participant noted, “With podcasts, I am in complete control of my content.” This finding reinforces UGT’s assumption of an active audience valuing control over media consumption.

### 5. DISCUSSION

This mixed-methods study, grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, provides a comprehensive analysis of podcast consumption habits among Gen Z in Coimbatore, India. The research confirms that this digitally native cohort is an active and engaged audience that strategically utilizes podcasts to fulfil specific needs. The key findings are as follows:

1. **Affective needs**—specifically the desire for entertainment and escapism—drive podcast consumption, positioning them as a key medium for mood management, relaxation, and pleasure.
2. **Gratifications Predict Preferences:** These motivations directly influence genre and platform choices. The need for entertainment drives consumption of comedy podcasts, whereas the need for escapism leads to a preference for

lo-fi and storytelling genres. Spotify and YouTube are preferred platforms, catering to both audio consumption and a growing demand for video content.

**3. Flexibility is paramount;** podcasts are overwhelmingly preferred to traditional media, such as radio, due to their on-demand, flexible, and personalized nature, aligning perfectly with Gen Z's lifestyle.

**4. Connection is key:** Qualitative insights reveal the importance of parasocial relationships with hosts, where authenticity and perceived intimacy foster strong listener loyalty and a sense of community.

## 5.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study validates the application of UGT to digital media within India's Non-Western context, demonstrating how digital affordances shape gratifications for new media consumers. Content creators engaging Gen Z require content offering high entertainment value or providing escapist comfort. Authenticity and parasocial connections foster loyalty, and a multimodal strategy incorporating video is crucial. For marketers, host-read advertisements and brand integrations are effective due to established host-listener trust. Marketing efforts should prioritize social media and influencer collaborations to facilitate podcast discovery. Finally, for educators, Gen Z's information-seeking behavior through podcasts presents opportunities for supplementary learning and skill development.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In the dynamic and crowded digital ecosystem of India, podcasts have established a unique and powerful niche among Generation Z. They offer more than simply a form of media; they serve as companions, educators, entertainers, and sources of refuge. By understanding the gratifications that this influential generation seeks, we can better appreciate the profound role on-demand audio plays in providing fulfilment, connection, and a sense of control within an increasingly complex world. As this generation continues to shape the future of media, the insights gained from this study will remain critical for those seeking to communicate and connect with them.

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