

Designing for Political Podcast Consumption Among Gen Z

INFO/COMM 4400/INFO 5400/INFO 6400

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1. Abstract:

In an era of fragmented media and declining trust in traditional journalism, podcasts have become a major news source for Gen Z particularly for political information. Our project investigates how young adults (ages 18–25) engage with political podcasts, focusing on how trust, skepticism, and misinformation shape their civic understanding. Through a diary study and a cultural probe, we captured participants' real-time reactions, emotional responses, and reflections on credibility across diverse listening environments. We also found that multitasking environments and parasocial relationships can make listeners more vulnerable to accepting misinformation. Based on the insights, we propose a design that supports critical engagement with political content, aiming to promote media literacy and informed civic participation within decentralized digital ecosystems.

2. Introduction:

In today's digital media environment, traditional news gatekeepers have been displaced by a decentralized network of platforms, personalities, and content creators. Among young adults, particularly Gen Z, podcasts have emerged as a powerful channel for political news and commentary. The intimate, accessible nature of podcasts makes them especially appealing to listeners navigating an increasingly polarized and fragmented information landscape. However, the same qualities that are important to build trust: conversational tone, emotional storytelling, perceived authenticity, can also enable the spread of misinformation. (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2017)

Our project responds to this challenge by investigating how Gen Z listeners engage with political podcasts, how they assess credibility, and how emotional and environmental factors influence their susceptibility to misinformation. We aim to understand not only what political content resonates with young listeners, but also how they process, question, or internalize the messages they encounter.

Through a human-centered design (HCD) approach, we conducted a diary study and a cultural probe to capture participants' real-time reactions, emotional experiences, and trust assessments across different listening contexts. These insights informed the creation of the *Credibility Companion*, a podcast app that introduces post-listening fact-checking summaries and community-based credibility notes to support critical reflection without interrupting the immersive listening experience. Our goal is to surface actionable insights that can inform the design of interventions supporting critical podcast engagement and promote healthier civic discourse in the age of decentralized media.

3. Background:

The transformation of news consumption in the digital age has significantly changed how individuals interact with political information, especially among Gen Z (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). While this shift includes many forms of digital media, podcasts have emerged as a major source of political news and commentary, often consumed through platforms that also distribute social media content. The personalization, accessibility, and intimate format of podcasts make them especially appealing to young audiences navigating a fragmented and ideologically

polarized media environment (Pew Research Center, 2023; Harrison & Archer-Boyd, 2023; Reuters Institute, 2023).

Research shows that selective exposure plays a crucial role in shaping political knowledge among digital natives. According to Pew Research (2021), 86 percent of U.S. adults access news on digital devices such as phones. Podcasts, like social media platforms and digital news aggregators, use personalized content to engage listeners and reinforce ideological leanings. While digital access has broadened availability, it also fosters ideological echo chambers, where individuals primarily engage with content that aligns with their preexisting views (Prior, 2005). These effects are amplified by engagement-driven algorithms that curate content based on past behavior and preferences (Tang & Oh, 2019), including through podcast recommendations and platform rankings. Studies show that individuals are more likely to engage with politically aligned content, deepening partisan divides and contributing to information bubbles (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Sunstein, 2017).

The spread of misinformation and disinformation is an increasing concern across all digital platforms, including podcasts. While traditional news outlets follow established editorial standards, podcasts often lack the same level of oversight. Content shared through long-form audio can blend facts with opinion in ways that are difficult for listeners to parse, especially when delivered by charismatic or influential hosts. Research shows that misinformation tends to spread more rapidly than factual content, particularly when it triggers emotional reactions such as fear or outrage (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Although this research is grounded in social media dynamics, its insights apply to podcasting environments where virality is replaced by perceived intimacy and trust.

Trust in traditional journalism has declined among Gen Z, with many turning instead to influencers and podcasters for political news and analysis (Pew Research Center, 2021). Podcasts often feature personalities who are not professional journalists but are perceived as more authentic or relatable. This raises concerns about media literacy and source credibility in podcast consumption, echoing similar concerns across social and streaming platforms (Alfred & Wong, 2022; Bolger et al., 2003).

Despite the growing use of podcasts for political engagement, most existing interventions have focused on visual media. Fact-checking services, educational campaigns, and platform moderation strategies have made more headway on platforms like Facebook or YouTube than within the podcast ecosystem, where content is harder to monitor and correct in real time (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019). This gap points to the need for better understanding of how podcast listeners process political information and how they might respond to interventions tailored to audio-based media.

To better understand these behaviors, this study uses diary methodologies to capture podcast consumption in real time. Diary studies offer participants the opportunity to record their media experiences as they happen, reducing the recall bias present in surveys and interviews (Bolger et al., 2003; Iida et al., 2012). This method allows researchers to observe patterns of podcast engagement, emotional reactions, and shifts in political perception over time (Tang & Oh, 2019). Although self-reporting introduces some limitations, diary studies are well-suited to exploring how users reflect on and internalize the often-subtle influence of political messaging in podcasts.

While podcast consumption is a growing medium for political engagement, few studies have examined how young adults interact with political content in real time through this format. (Tang & Oh, 2019; Harrison & Archer-Boyd, 2023)

Most existing research relies on retrospective surveys, overlooking the moment-to-moment decisions and reactions that influence political belief formation. Although some recent work, such as Karimi et al. (2023), has investigated visual platforms like TikTok, audio-based political engagement remains underexplored. One notable exception is the *NewsPod* system introduced by Laban et al. (2022), which used AI-generated, interactive news podcasts to evaluate how conversational formats affect user engagement and information retention. However, their study focused primarily on usability and engagement with synthesized news content, rather than misinformation or belief formation. Our diary study builds on this underdeveloped area by capturing real-time cognitive and emotional responses to podcast-based political content among Gen Z listeners, with particular attention to how credibility is assessed and misinformation may spread through this medium.

Although podcasts are just one part of the digital political media ecosystem, they offer a unique combination of intimacy, repetition, and long-form narrative that distinguishes them from other formats. Understanding how Gen Z engages with podcasts is essential for grasping the broader dynamics of political polarization and digital misinformation. By incorporating diary methodologies and cultural probes, this research aims to capture the nuances of podcast consumption and support future interventions in media literacy and civic education.

4. Design Objectives / Research Questions:

Our project aims to understand how young adults, particularly members of Gen Z, engage with political podcasts, assess credibility, and process political information in an environment increasingly shaped by misinformation and fragmented media sources. Drawing on theories of selective exposure (Prior, 2005), parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002), and media trust (Reuters Institute, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024), our research focuses on the cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors that influence how political podcast content is internalized.

Our design objectives were:

- To surface the real-time cognitive and emotional responses of Gen Z listeners to political podcasts.
- To identify how environmental and emotional factors shape trust, skepticism, or uncritical acceptance of political messaging.
- To uncover design opportunities for interventions that promote critical media engagement and resistance to misinformation within podcast ecosystems.

Based on these objectives, we developed the following research questions:

1. How do Gen Z listeners assess the credibility of political podcast content in real time?
2. What emotional and cognitive patterns emerge when Gen Z audiences engage with political podcast content?
3. How do listening environments and multitasking behaviors affect podcast engagement and credibility evaluation?

4. What opportunities exist for designing interventions that foster more reflective and critical podcast engagement among Gen Z listeners?

Motivation:

These research questions are motivated by the growing role of emotionally resonant, low-regulation platforms like podcasts in shaping civic understanding. As trust in traditional media declines and influencers gain credibility (Pew Research Center, 2024; Morning Consult, 2023), real-time podcast consumption deserves deeper study. Our methods extend prior HCI research (Laban et al., 2022) by focusing on misinformation vulnerability in an audio context.

5. Process & Methods:

We followed a human-centered design (HCD) approach to explore how Gen Z listeners engage with political podcasts, assess credibility, and respond emotionally and cognitively to political messaging. Our research process unfolded in two main phases: a diary study and a cultural probe study. Both methods were selected to capture real-time user experiences and reflective insights, minimizing the retrospective bias often associated with traditional survey-based research (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Iida et al., 2012).

Research Process Overview

Our research process involved the following stages:

1. **Contextual Interviews (Appendix F & G):**

Conducted initial informal interviews to better understand Gen Z's podcast listening habits, preferences, and perceptions of political credibility.

2. **Diary Study (Method I) (Appendix B):**

Collected real-time emotional and cognitive reactions to political podcast listening experiences over a 5-day period.

3. **Cultural Probe (Method II) (Appendix A):**

Engaged participants in reflective and creative activities to elicit deeper insights into trust formation, emotional engagement, and media habits. Took place over a 7 day period.

Each method was selected to support our primary research objectives: uncovering real-time patterns of credibility assessment, emotional reaction, and engagement context among Gen Z podcast consumers.

Participants and Recruitment

We recruited participants through word of mouth asking people if they listen to podcasts or know anyone who listens to podcasts for political news. For the diary study, we recruited eight participants (ages 18–25) who regularly listened to political podcasts, defined as a couple times per week. For the cultural probe, we recruited four participants with the same criteria. We chose these groups to get a diverse set of individuals while staying small enough to focus on each person. All participants provided informed consent.

The participant group was majority male (75%), with a range of podcast consumption frequencies and preferred genres. They were aged 18-22, centering around the ages of 21/22, and

most participants were from the United States, with one from Serbia. Although we aimed for more balanced gender representation, challenges in recruiting regular female political podcast listeners limited the final sample.

Method I: Diary Study

Purpose and Rationale:

The diary study method was chosen to capture participants' immediate reactions to political podcasts, minimizing recall bias and allowing us to observe emotional, cognitive, and credibility assessments as they occurred. This method revealed how participants discovered and reacted to content, supporting our goal of designing interventions that promote media literacy. Follow-up exit interviews provided deeper context on how users engaged with and interpreted political news through podcasts. We chose a feedback diary format, ensuring participants provide comprehensive entries to gain a complete picture of their experiences. Although more demanding, this approach ensured data richness and detail critical to understanding user motivations and emotional responses. We had one end of day entry, which was quick to fill out by only including short questions, and a longer exit interview to better understand their full weekly interactions.

Procedure:

Participants completed a structured diary entry each day for five consecutive days, covering both weekdays and weekends to reflect diverse podcast listening habits. Participants submitted entries at the end of the day. Each entry asked them to report:

- Which podcast they listened to.
- Notable quotes or moments.
- Emotional reactions.
- Perceived credibility of the content.
- Any follow-up actions (e.g., fact-checking, further research).

Reminders were sent daily to encourage completion. At the end of the diary period, participants completed an exit interview to provide additional context and reflection.

Instruments:

- Recruitment emails and informed consent forms (See Appendix J)
- Google Form diary entry template (See Appendix B)
- Initial demographic survey (See Appendix K)
- Exit interview script (See Appendix L)
- Reminder messages (See Appendix M)

Analysis:

Qualitative data from diary entries and interviews underwent thematic analysis, revealing key patterns related to emotional engagement, skepticism, and trust formation. Affinity diagramming was used to organize these patterns, themes, and insights (See Appendix P). This structured approach allowed us to capture the core of our participants' experiences and further help us decide on our second method to follow.

Method II: Cultural Probe

Purpose and Rationale:

Insights from the diary study revealed that the participants' emotional responses, credibility assessments and political engagement behaviors were deeply personal, context-dependent, and sometimes difficult to capture through structured prompts. We recognized a need to explore the why behind these reactions in greater depth and decided to implement a cultural probe for more reflective, and emotionally resonant insights into participants' podcast experiences. Cultural probes were designed to uncover participants' subjective realities through creative and symbolic responses rather than structured questions. They provided valuable insight into how participants conceptualize political podcast consumption, encouraging more creative, open-ended responses. Given the personal and emotional nature of political podcast listening, this method was well-suited to capture nuances not easily observed through diary reporting.

Procedure

Participants were offered a digital or physical cultural probe kit so they had the most flexibility in completing the tasks. The probe consisted of five reflective tasks (see appendix A):

- **Stick With Me** (quote reflection)
- **Mood Check** (emotional reaction tracker)
- **Where You Listen** (context snapshot)
- **The Civic Puzzle** (source mapping)
- **Dear Future Me** (civic identity letter)

Participants completed at least one or two tasks per day over a 7-day period on days they listened to podcasts. Each task invited creative expression through writing, drawing, or photography.

Afterward, participants completed a semi-structured exit interview discussing their probe responses.

Instruments

- Digital/Physical cultural probe kit (Appendix A)
- Exit interview (Appendix P)

Analysis

Affinity diagramming was used to identify key patterns in trust, emotional reactions, media rituals, and information gaps (See Appendix P). This structured approach allowed us to pinpoint participants' experiences more effectively. By organizing the data in a concise and visual format, we were able to draw clear insights that directly informed our design decisions.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent before participating. Participants were informed they could skip any tasks they felt uncomfortable completing and that their data would be anonymized and stored securely. Only minimal demographic information was collected, and all submissions were anonymized before analysis.

6. Findings:

1. Political Podcasts Support Perspective-Taking and Civic Curiosity

Participants consistently described podcasts as spaces that allowed them to engage with political viewpoints different from their own, often fostering deeper civic awareness. This theme was prominent across both methods.

- In the diary study, Participant I noted,

“I learned more about how conservative thinkers view recent events... even if I don’t always agree,”

while Participant A commented,

“It’s interesting to see how left-leaning shows break down current events differently.”

- In the cultural probe, Participant C wrote,

“Everyone’s talking about the culture war, but no one’s talking about who profits from it,”

leading to a reflection on media bias and monetized outrage. Similarly, Participant B noted,

“It’s refreshing to hear people who actually think critically about dogma.”

Interpretation:

Podcasts served as a gateway for participants to explore unfamiliar political perspectives. These findings counter the assumption that Gen Z listeners only engage in ideological echo chambers (Flaxman et al., 2016), and suggest that political podcasts can cultivate curiosity and balanced political thinking when designed for civil, cross-ideological discourse.

2. Emotional Engagement Drives Critical Thinking and Reflection

Emotionally resonant podcast moments often triggered skepticism, deeper inquiry, or post-listening research. Participants did not passively consume content but responded with curiosity and critical evaluation. This theme was prominent across both methods.

- In the diary study, Participant B wrote,
“It sparked a debate that made me want to look more into the actual numbers,”
 after listening to *The Joe Rogan Experience*.
 Participant V added,
“I usually end up looking things up afterward, especially if something sounds off.”
- From the cultural probes, Participant D reflected on the quote,
“Freedom isn’t inherited... every generation has to earn it,”
 while Participant C shared,
“Just because something sounds right or feels urgent doesn’t mean it’s true.”

Interpretation:

Echoing Vosoughi et al. (2018), emotionally arousing content prompted critical thinking rather than blind agreement. Podcasts that blended fact and emotional narrative engaged listeners more deeply, prompting fact-checking and post-episode reflection—behaviors aligned with healthy media literacy.

3. Trust is Shaped by Transparency, Not Neutrality

Participants valued transparency and source behavior over perceived objectivity. They expressed trust in podcasts that acknowledged bias and cited evidence, while expressing skepticism toward

traditional media or platforms lacking sourcing. Again, this theme was prominent in both methods.

- Participant M (diary) praised *Breaking Points* for being, “*upfront about their biases.*”
Participant E (Pod Save America) noted, “*They back up their claims with examples and cite sources when needed.*”
- In cultural probes, Participant D trusted *Wall Street Journal editorials* for using “*data and clear citations,*” while criticizing *Instagram reels* for lacking context.
Participant C further supported this perspective, noting its presence on TikTok, “*TikTok is fast and emotional... I realize I’m missing global context.*”

Interpretation:

Trust was not linked to neutrality but to perceived authenticity and accountability. Participants responded positively to transparent framing and source disclosure, reinforcing Tandoc et al. (2017)’s findings that credibility hinges on familiar journalistic cues and honesty about bias.

4. Listening Environments Influence Depth of Engagement

Physical and mental environments had a notable impact on participants’ critical processing. Many reported multitasking during podcast listening, which reduced their ability to question content in real time, though it didn’t prevent post-listening reflection. This theme was seen mostly in Method II.

- In the cultural probe, Participant D listened to podcast while showering, “*In the shower... I absorb the big ideas but can’t pause to fact-check or take notes until*

I'm out," highlighting how multitasking environments often lead to more passive consumption.

Participant A noted listening during workouts or drives, saying,

"I'm always pretty focused on the podcast but always multitasking."

Interpretation:

While multitasking is common, it doesn't prevent thoughtful engagement. Instead, it highlights the importance of post-listening touchpoints (e.g., summaries, credibility prompts) as design opportunities to reinforce reflection and information literacy.

7. Design:

Video Link: [video](#)

Design link: [Design](#)

We propose the Credibility Companion, a podcast app that integrates automated fact-checking and a community-driven note system to support critical engagement with political podcast content among Gen Z listeners. This design directly reflects our first finding that political podcasts support perspective-taking by allowing users to submit credibility notes and upvote useful ones, encouraging thoughtful engagement with different viewpoints. It also applies our second finding that emotional engagement drives critical thinking by providing a Fact Check Summary after each episode, rather than during, matching participants' tendency to reflect once the episode ends. The use of verified, unverified, and disputed labels from fact-checking databases (e.g., Politifact, Reuters, AP Fact Check) was shaped by our third finding that trust depends more on transparency and sourcing than on appearing neutral. By letting users highlight

bias and cite missing context, the system aligns with how participants said they evaluate credibility.

The hands-off feature that plays audio feedback without requiring users to look at their phones directly addresses our fourth finding that listening environments affect engagement. Since many participants multitask, while driving, walking, or working out, this feature allows for real-time information support without disrupting how they already listen. Over time, podcasts build a Credibility Score based on both verified sources and community feedback, reinforcing long-term trust through transparency. This also aligns with participant habits of engaging more deeply after listening, not during. The overall design fits into Gen Z's participatory culture and media behaviors by borrowing from proven models like Community Notes, which build trust through user-led contributions (Pröllochs et al., 2023), and by aligning with data showing that multitasking is the norm during podcast listening (Harrison and Archer-Boyd, 2023).

8. Discussion:

Our project set out to explore how Gen Z engages with political podcasts and to design an intervention that supports more informed, reflective news consumption in a media environment increasingly shaped by content creators rather than traditional journalists. From the outset, our goal was twofold: to understand the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of podcast-based news engagement, and to design a solution that could enhance media literacy and credibility assessment without disrupting user habits.

Through a combination of contextual interviews, diary studies, and cultural probes, we gathered layered insights that ultimately supported our initial assumptions—that political podcasts are powerful tools for shaping awareness and influencing trust, but also present risks related to misinformation, emotional manipulation, and bias. The findings from our user research strongly reinforced the importance of perspective-taking, emotional engagement, and transparency in credibility assessments. These insights provided direct evidence to inform our design decisions, particularly in emphasizing post-listening reflection and credibility cues.

The alignment between our research and design was largely successful. Our evolving understanding of user behavior helped us pivot from abstract concerns about misinformation to more targeted solutions grounded in how users actually engage with content. For example, we realized that interrupting the listening experience with fact-checks would likely fail, but offering reflective tools and audio feedback afterward—when users are already processing what they heard—could be both respectful and effective. This led us to develop a design concept centered on credibility notes, community-based assessments, and audio feedback mechanisms, which we believe aligns well with the values and behaviors observed in our participants.

However, there were also limitations. We had originally hoped to provide a more definitive solution to the problem of political misinformation, but the complexity of emotional and parasocial relationships with podcast hosts made it clear that no single intervention can fully address this issue. Additionally, our sample—though diverse in political orientation—was limited in size and skewed male, which may have constrained the range of perspectives we captured.

Despite these challenges, the research and design process clarified the scope and boundaries of our intervention. We learned that any effective solution must work with, not against, users' habits, and must prioritize transparency and trust over neutral objectivity. Our proposed solution focused on a hypothetical AI-driven intervention, recognizing that such an approach may face feasibility challenges due to concerns around algorithmic bias and ethical implications. While we acknowledge the limitations of our project, we remain optimistic that the design direction we propose can contribute meaningfully to ongoing conversations about media literacy and civic engagement.

9. Conclusion:

In an era where political information is increasingly consumed outside traditional news institutions, our project set out to understand how Gen Z engages with political podcasts, and how that engagement shapes trust, critical thinking, and susceptibility to misinformation. Through a combination of diary studies and cultural probes grounded in human-centered design, we explored what Gen Z is listening to and how they feel, reflect, and respond in the moment. Our findings revealed that podcasts are emotionally resonant environments where perspective taking, parasocial relationships, and trust are cultivated. We found that emotional reactions often prompt critical inquiry, transparency about bias increases perceived credibility, and that listening contexts (like multitasking) shape how political messages are absorbed. These insights informed our proposed design, the *Credibility Companion*, which supports post-listening reflection through community driven credibility notes and fact check summaries.

While we recognize the limitations of our sample and the complexity of designing for deeply personal media experiences, our work offers a foundation for future interventions that aim to

strengthen media literacy without undermining users' sense of agency or connection. We hope this project contributes to broader efforts in HCI and civic media design to support more informed, critically engaged podcast listeners, especially within a generation increasingly navigating decentralized and emotionally charged information landscapes.

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Appendix:

Folder Link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19YP4WfoPS4TcW2KAfqbd8Pj9a2vQTnPM?usp=sharing>

Video Link: [video](#)

Design link: [Design](#)

Appendix A: Cultural probe:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pExSBzatsE3DWi0WRMw4caYxOXhjRFhzCsH4VOau3rA/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.qx8vn2yvj8b0>

Appendix B: Diary Form:

<https://forms.gle/871hq7zrLvBFLtWz9>

Appendix C: Diary Responses:

 Podcast Diary Study (Responses)


Appendix D: Exit Interview Responses:

 Podcast Diary Study Exit Interview (Responses)

Appendix E: Contextual Interviews Plan and protocol:  Plan and Protocol


Appendix F: Notes from 3 contextual interviews:  Notes on contextual interviews

Appendix G: Link to all sources: [Resources Spreadsheet](#)

Appendix H: Link to follow up email (diary):  Follow-Up Email

Appendix I: Link Consent Form: [Consent Form](#)

Appendix J: Demographic survey (diary): [Demographic survey](#)

Appendix K: Exit Interview (diary):  Exit Interview

Appendix L: Reminder messages (diary): [Reminder messages](#)

Appendix M: Recruitment message for Diary Study: [Recruitment message for Diary Study](#)

Appendix N: Cultural Probe Screener Survey: [Screener](#)

Appendix O: Cultural Probe Exit Interview:  Exit Interview

Appendix P: Affinity Diagram for both Methods: [Figma Affinity Diagram](#)

Appendix Q: Cultural Probe Data: [Data](#)

Appendix R: Figma Prototype: [Design](#)