

From Parasocial Interaction to Symbolic Capital: A Study of Podcast Listeners' Emotional Identification and Taste Distinction

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Abstract: Podcasts are reshaping listeners' emotional relationships and cultural practices. Based on semi-structured interviews with 15 podcast listeners, this study finds that parasocial interaction is cultivated through vocal intimacy and emotional identification. Sustained engagement enables listeners to internalize hosts' values and aesthetic orientations, gradually reinforcing shared habitus. As these dispositions gain collective recognition, hosts accumulate symbolic capital and cultural authority, which are ultimately reflected in listeners' identity construction and taste distinction. By revealing the relational process through which emotionally grounded media relationships are transformed into symbolic capital that underpins cultural identities and taste distinction, this study advances understanding of how digital media contribute to cultural differentiation and social distinction.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of rapid digital development, interpersonal communication has evolved from face-to-face exchanges into a multi-channel mode of interaction that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries[1]. Podcasts share similarities with traditional radio; however, they place greater emphasis on high-quality content and participatory listener experiences[2]. Podcast content often focuses on personal growth, social phenomena, psychological issues, and emotional concerns, enabling listeners to seek resonance and meaning within this distinctive media space[3].

Within the podcast field, hosts' distinctive narrative styles, vocal performances, and value expressions foster emotional attachment and sustained engagement among listeners. Through repeated exposure and ongoing interaction, listeners gradually develop parasocial interaction with hosts and begin to internalize their knowledge, values, and aesthetic orientations. This process contributes to the formation of habitus, shaping listeners' perceptions, preferences, and cultural dispositions. As these dispositions become increasingly shared and recognized within podcast communities, hosts acquire symbolic capital through collective recognition and legitimacy. This

symbolic capital reinforces listeners' identification with particular cultural preferences and social groups, contributing to the construction of taste distinctions. From this perspective, parasocial interaction is not merely an affective connection but a relational mechanism through which cultural dispositions, symbolic capital, and social differentiation are produced and reproduced in digital media environments. In this context, podcasts display features of socialization and re-centering[4].

Therefore, parasocial interaction and taste distinction in the podcast field require deeper attention. Accordingly, this study focuses on the following questions that have not yet been fully answered in current scholarship: (1) How do listeners construct parasocial interaction during podcast listening? (2) How is parasocial interaction transformed into symbolic identification with hosts? (3) How does this symbolic identification further form circle boundaries and taste distinctions?

This study examines the interactive practices between podcast listeners and creators, advancing understanding of how emotional relationships in digital media are transformed into cultural recognition and mechanisms of social differentiation. Rather than treating audience engagement as a purely affective process, it reveals how listeners gradually internalize creators' knowledge, values, and aesthetic preferences, leading to the formation of shared cultural orientations, the accumulation of symbolic authority, and the construction of taste distinction. By uncovering this relational transformation process, the study provides a new perspective on the interplay between audience participation, cultural legitimacy, and social stratification in digital media environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Podcasts

In the early twenty-first century, "podcast" was generally understood as a method of distributing audio information, originating from the combination of "iPod " and " broadcast ". Currently, it has developed into a broad term for audio programs[5]. Early podcasts were devoted to providing listeners with a better auditory experience[6]. Contemporary podcasts are presented in audio form, grouped into series, and usually have no fixed duration or release schedule[7]. Listeners can listen to content they like anytime and anywhere on the same platform[8].

Contemporary podcasts are characterized by ongoing technological innovation, content diversity, and audience recognition. At the technical level, podcasts continue the communicative form of traditional radio while integrating new media technologies to make content distribution more flexible. Some scholars emphasize that listeners can do other things while listening to podcasts, thereby saving a great deal of time[9]. At the same time, platforms support real-time interaction, a technology that greatly enhances interactivity[10]. In addition, platform sound quality enhances listeners' immersion. In terms of content, podcasts provide comprehensive and professionally curated information, thereby gaining listeners' attention and encouraging continued listening[11]. On the other hand, professional content promotes in-depth communication among like-minded listeners.

In terms of listener recognition, the reliability of podcasts encourages continued use. Research has found that podcasts can satisfy listeners' social information and emotional needs[12], and listeners also use them to broaden their knowledge in professional fields. Beyond these points, creators' high-quality narrative forms establish an audience base for the steady development of podcasts, while rich expressive forms capture listeners' attention and exploratory desire[13]. These findings all demonstrate that podcasts have important value for improving public cognition and influencing individual preferences[14]. In summary, podcasts have developed from traditional audio tools into media platforms that combine knowledge and intimacy. Their distinctive immersive intimacy attracts many listeners to use them continuously, making them a scarce resource in the attention economy.

2.2. Research on Parasocial Interaction under Symbolic Capital

Early scholars argued that elite groups construct distinctive social identities through shared lifestyles and educational backgrounds[15]. Bourdieu conceptualized the social prestige arising from these processes as symbolic capital, which refers to forms of economic, cultural, and social capital that become socially recognized and legitimized, thereby acquiring symbolic value and prestige[16]. However, a number of scholars have criticized this perspective for its tendency toward class determinism and for underestimating individual agency[17]. Some scholars argue that social resources such as knowledge, social networks, and wealth are maintained through emotional ties[18].

Other scholars argue that symbolic capital is not only a form of social resource generated through affective connections, but also a capacity for emotional perception that emerges through processes of role identification and role-taking[19]. Symbolic capital is therefore not merely a product of symbolic power and classificatory struggles[20]; it also serves as a mechanism through which various forms of social resources can be converted and mobilized. In the present study, symbolic capital refers to the forms of capital manifested by podcast hosts through their taste, intellectual cultivation, and social influence within the podcasting field.

Technological development has changed traditional modes of interpersonal interaction. Interpersonal communication can now take place directly through media. Scholars define this as parasocial interaction, meaning the emotional transmission that audiences experience during media interaction, such as imagining that characters seen on television are people around them[21]. In new media, multi-channel communication between creators and audiences strengthens both parties' perception of intimacy, and audiences may regard creators as close friends, forming parasocial interaction[22].

As an audio medium, podcasts possess a strong sense of intimacy[23]. Empirical studies show that podcasts can satisfy emotional needs more effectively than visual media. Some scholars point out that when a host's voice enters listeners' ears, it creates an intimacy similar to private conversation. Others have found that when podcast creators narrate personal experiences or growth stories to listeners, they can strengthen listeners' trust in them[24], and these forms all reinforce the emotional connection between hosts and listeners[25]. Most existing literature shows how parasocial interaction in podcasts reshapes platform technological logic and commercial conversion, but discussion of listeners' psychological mechanisms remains limited. Current studies almost assume that listeners receive intimate signals homogeneously, neglect individual emotional heterogeneity, and pay insufficient attention to listeners' psychological agency in the interaction process.

2.3. Research on Taste Distinction

In his theory of distinction, Bourdieu argues that society constitutes a multidimensional social space structured by different forms of capital. He further maintains that social distinction is expressed through individuals' aesthetic preferences. Such preferences are not merely matters of personal taste; rather, they possess social significance and are shaped by social class, educational background, and symbolic power, thereby producing what is often referred to as taste distinction [26]. Meanwhile, taste is generated through habitus, namely durable dispositions acquired through long-term socialization[27]. Habitus shapes individuals' perceptions, preferences, and judgments, thereby influencing how symbolic boundaries are constructed. Consequently, taste distinction is not merely a matter of group membership but reflects deeper processes of cultural internalization and classification.

In traditional media environments, elite and non-elite groups were often exposed to different

forms of cultural content. As a result, significant differences in aesthetic preferences emerged across social classes, creating relatively clear boundaries of distinction. However, as mediated forms of social interaction continue to expand, some scholars argue that the formation of personal taste is a subjective and complex process influenced by emotional experiences, aesthetic perception, and other individual factors[28].

Today, more and more cultural content has moved to the digital cloud, making culture that once circulated only among elites familiar to the general public and, to some extent, expanding channels through which the public constructs taste[29]. Individuals from different social backgrounds may share similar interests. Studies show that in podcasts, listeners from different social backgrounds can gain emotional support and a sense of group belonging from the same program[30], establish their own communities on this basis, and thereby redefine taste distinction[31].

In this study, taste distinction refers to the process in which listeners choose podcasts according to their aesthetic preferences, construct new social circles during listening, and form distinctions from users with other preferences. Existing studies have mostly discussed the mechanisms underlying taste distinction from cognitive, technical, and institutional dimensions. In digital media, hosts' emotional labor and listeners' psychological belonging are important variables affecting the construction of listener distinction, yet most literature neglects the driving role of emotional mechanisms.

2.4. Literature Review Commentary

In summary, podcasts have developed from a simple form of audio communication into a gathering place for professional knowledge, breaking the temporal and spatial barriers of traditional radio and providing listeners with more listening options. In this environment, in addition to hosts' distinctive presentation styles that attract listeners in vertical fields, listeners can actively search for the knowledge content they seek, develop parasocial interaction during listening, and form new communication communities driven by intimacy. Frequent interactions within these communities may enhance listeners' well-being and, to some extent, challenge the class-based mechanisms underlying taste distinction.

Although a growing body of research has examined podcasts, most existing studies have been conducted in Western societies, and their findings may not be fully applicable to the Chinese social and cultural context[32]. Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to how symbolic capital is constructed and recognized within podcast communities, as well as how processes of taste distinction emerge through podcast consumption. Existing studies also tend to conceptualize emotion primarily as an outcome of interaction, overlooking its potential role as a mediating mechanism. Therefore, it is necessary to further investigate the formation mechanisms of parasocial interaction among podcast listeners, examine how emotional identification is transformed into symbolic capital, and explore how this process contributes to the development of taste distinction. Existing research has paid limited attention to the dynamic relationships among these concepts. This study seeks to reveal the evolutionary pathway from emotional connection to taste distinction within the podcast field, thereby deepening our understanding of audience practices and their broader sociocultural implications in digital audio media environments.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Method

Considering that this study does not seek to generate theory entirely from empirical data but rather examines the mechanisms linking parasocial interaction, symbolic capital, and taste

distinction within the podcast field based on existing theoretical perspectives, a theoretical thematic analysis approach was adopted[33]. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. While interviews followed a predefined guide, follow-up questions were asked when necessary to explore participants' experiences in greater depth.

All participants were informed of the research purpose and provided consent before the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, generating approximately 140,000 Chinese characters of textual data. Data analysis followed the six-step procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke. First, the researchers repeatedly reviewed the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful statements related to listeners' emotional experiences, trust formation, value recognition, community participation, and taste expression. Third, conceptually related codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, these categories were compared and refined through constant comparison to identify broader themes. Fifth, themes were reviewed against both the empirical data and the theoretical framework to ensure internal coherence and theoretical relevance. Finally, themes were defined, named, and organized into an explanatory pathway linking parasocial interaction, habitus formation, symbolic capital accumulation, and taste distinction.

To enhance analytical credibility, interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed throughout the coding process. Codes and themes were continuously compared across participants until no substantially new themes emerged. In addition, representative quotations were retained throughout the analysis to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' original narratives.

3.2. Definition of Research Subjects and Sampling Strategy

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the interview data, all participants were regular podcast listeners with at least one year of listening experience. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit respondents from diverse occupational and educational backgrounds, as well as with different listening preferences. According to industry reports, the dominant demographic group of podcast listeners in Chinese mainland is between 21 and 35 years old[34]; accordingly, all participants were recruited from this age group.

To facilitate rich and meaningful discussions, participants were also required to demonstrate clear listening preferences, familiarity with podcast content and host characteristics, and prior experience engaging with podcast-related communities or interactions. A semi-structured interview guide was developed before data collection. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of podcast listening, including the formation of intimacy with hosts, emotional responses, trust-related behaviors, attitudes toward hosts, participation in listener communities, and perceptions of social distinction in podcast-based interactions.

This study employed two sampling strategies: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants whose experiences were relevant to the process through which podcast listeners develop parasocial interaction, emotional identification with symbolic capital, and ultimately taste distinction. Participants meeting these criteria were recruited for the interviews to ensure the relevance of the collected data.

Snowball sampling is characterized by a network-based referral process[35]. After each interview, participants were invited to recommend acquaintances who met the selection criteria as potential respondents. Following data collection, the interview materials were systematically analyzed to identify the mechanisms through which listeners' relationships with podcast hosts evolve from parasocial interaction to emotional identification with symbolic capital, thereby contributing to the formation of taste distinction.

3.3. Data Collection and Interview Procedures

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

ID	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education	Listening frequency	Platform	Preferred content type
M1	21	Male	Student	Bachelor's degree	Almost every day	Himalaya	Fiction, interviews
M2	30	Male	Engineer	Master's degree	Every day	Nebula	News
M3	26	Male	Lawyer	Master's degree	Almost every day	NetEase Cloud Music	Food, history, interviews
F1	24	Female	Teacher	Bachelor's degree	Three times a week	Nebula	Women's growth
F2	25	Female	Student	Master's degree	Almost every day	Nebula	Talk shows
F3	32	Female	Teacher	Doctoral degree	Every day	Himalaya	Culture
M4	31	Male	Finance	Master's degree	Almost every day	Himalaya	International politics, history
F4	30	Female	Engineer	Bachelor's degree	Every day	Nebula	Interviews
F5	25	Female	Entrepreneur	Bachelor's degree	Every day	Nebula	Economics
M5	29	Male	Self-media blogger	Master's degree	Almost every day	Nebula	Culture
F6	30	Female	Finance	Master's degree	Every day	Nebula	Entertainment news
M6	35	Male	Entrepreneur	Junior college	Almost every day	Himalaya	Military affairs
F7	22	Female	Student	Bachelor's degree	Every day	Himalaya	Stories
F8	28	Female	Psychological counselor	Bachelor's degree	Once a week	Nebula	Psychology
M7	35	Male	Civil servant	Bachelor's degree	Almost every day	Nebula	Interviews

The interview protocol for this study was designed to address the central research questions and covered the following dimensions: podcast listening habits and motivations, the construction of parasocial interaction, listeners' emotional identification and trust toward podcast hosts, the formation and reinforcement of symbolic capital, and community belonging and taste distinction.

The interviews were conducted between January 10 and May 13, 2026. During the data collection process, individual online interviews were conducted via Tencent Meeting, and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, with supplementary field notes taken to preserve the

authenticity and richness of participants' accounts. The demographic characteristics of the interview participants are presented in Table 1.

3.4. Thematic Analysis of Interview Materials

3.4.1. Initial Meaning Unit Analysis

Analysis of the initial meaning units (Table 2) revealed that respondents' narratives primarily involved knowledge acquisition, daily companionship, perceptions of authenticity, professional recognition, emotional resonance, community belonging, and value judgments. Listeners not only focused on the quality of podcast content but also valued hosts' personality traits and authentic self-expression, developing trust and a sense of closeness through repeated listening and parasocial interaction. Furthermore, shared language, community affiliation, and shared values formed crucial foundations for participation in podcast communities, while evaluations of different viewpoints and cultural preferences demonstrated a clear awareness of taste-based and identity-related distinctions.

Table 2: Initial Meaning Unit Analysis

Initial meaning unit	Original statement
Using fragmented time for listening	M2: "I want to use fragmented time to expand my cognition intellectually."
Companionship in everyday-life scenes	M3: "You do not need to stare at a screen; it relies purely on sound description, so in this situation it is quite suitable to listen while running."
Sharing by friends	F2: "Many people around me are listening, and they shared it with me."
Cognitive improvement	M7: "I can learn about history that I normally cannot access."
Perception of authenticity	M5: "It must be based on real experiences; only then do I think the program is meaningful."
Consistency of interests	F1: "I personally prefer listening to women's reflections and thoughts on their personal growth journeys."
Attractiveness of the host's voice	M3: "The host's voice is very intellectual; I even use her voice for my navigation voice pack."
Host's personal charisma	F5: "I prefer hosts who use precise wording, have a distinctive personal style, and are highly logical."
Refined program production	M2: "Some programs are rich in content and mark the main points along the timeline, which reflects a very good attitude on the part of the host."
Host as a real-life friend	F1: "He is like a friend in a parallel time and space, although we have never met."
Resonance with program content	F3: "When the host shares personal experiences in the program, I feel my relationship with the host becomes closer."
Emotional perception	F6: "I feel valued in the program, so I am more willing to get closer to the host."

Emotional synchronization	M1: "I am highly empathetic. When others cry, I cry too; when others laugh, I laugh too."
Host's genuine feelings	F1: "When he shares this, it comes from his inner desire to share with us, which makes me feel more companionship and authenticity."
Recognition of professionalism	M2: "It is because I recognize his professionalism and knowledge that I develop a stronger sense of intimacy with him."
Admiration of the host's personal value	F5: "Liking him triggers another kind of admiration, and then I feel that he may be excellent in every respect."
Trust and dependence	F2: "After listening a lot, psychologically I feel he is already very familiar with this industry, and then I trust his judgment."
Judgment of the authenticity of the host's voice	M4: "I can tell whether a host's voice is authentic, and I am more willing to listen to programs with hosts who sound authentic."
Host replies to messages	F1: "I can feel that some hosts really like replying to listeners' comments."
Investment in content production	M7: "Every special topic and every subject he discusses has an opening statement, and he prepares very fully."
Integration into a shared-interest community	M3: "He expressed the real situation of the nation, and I felt more identification in the fan group."
Shared language	M7: "We have that small circle, and people inside use special expressions that only we can understand."
Emotional belonging	F1: "There is a sense of belonging in this circle; the circle I am in is the most suitable and best for me."
Distancing from groups with different values	F6: "One host teaches girls how to depend on others in life, which does not match my values of independence and confidence."
Depth of program content	M7: "If it is only reading mechanically from a script, I will think you have no depth."
Differences in ideas and cognition	M3: "I reject people who still support old ideas; I think they lack the ability to think."
Continuous and priority listening	F2: "When he updates, I listen immediately."
Paid support	F6: "I will pay to become a member and also buy his books."
Active sharing and dissemination	M3: "I will share clips of the content with more people."
Core circles supporting personal development	F8: "By paying, I can join a more core circle, which helps my future career development."

3.4.2. Thematic Aggregation Process

A theory-oriented thematic analysis was employed to code and analyze the interview data (Table

3), resulting in five core themes: intimacy perception in audio media, self-projection and emotional resonance, the transition from emotional identification to trust, the formation and reinforcement of symbolic capital, and community belonging and taste distinction. The findings indicate that listeners' experiences primarily center on companionship experiences, perceptions of authenticity, emotional resonance, professional recognition, value congruence, and community belonging.

Listeners not only attend to podcast content itself but also evaluate hosts' personal qualities, professional competence, and value articulation, expressing their identification through sustained listening, active dissemination, and paid support. Moreover, shared interests and value orientations foster a sense of community belonging and provide an important basis for identity construction and the expression of taste. Overall, these themes capture the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of podcast listeners' identification practices.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis

Focused theme	Initial meaning unit	Thematic meaning
Perceived Intimacy in Audio Media	Using fragmented time for listening; companionship in everyday-life scenes; attractiveness of the host's voice; host as a real-life friend; judgment of vocal authenticity; host's genuine feelings	In long-term listening, listeners form experiences of presence and companionship through the host's vocal texture, expressive rhythm, and emotional state, and gradually perceive an intimacy similar to real-life relationships.
Self-Projection and Emotional Resonance	Resonance with program content; emotional perception; emotional synchronization; consistency of interests; perception of authenticity; host's personal charisma	The host's real experiences highly correspond to listeners' personal experiences, and listeners project their own emotions into them, deepening emotional resonance.
From Emotional Identification to Trust Transfer	Recognition of professionalism; cognitive improvement; trust and dependence; continuous and priority listening; host replies to messages; refined program production	On the basis of emotional identification, listeners rationally evaluate the host's professional competence and program quality, transferring trust from the emotional level to the rational level; listeners tend to continuously and preferentially listen to programs they highly trust.
Formation and Reinforcement of Symbolic Capital	Admiration of the host's personal value; paid support; active program dissemination; investment in content production; sharing by friends; depth of program content	Listeners internalize hosts' knowledge, values, and aesthetic orientations. Through collective recognition and participation, hosts gain symbolic capital, which is continuously reinforced and expanded.

Community Belonging and Taste Distinction	Integration into a shared-interest community; emotional belonging; distancing from groups with different values; differences in ideas and cognition; shared language; core circles supporting personal development	Listeners with shared interests and values gather in the same listening circle, gain identity recognition and belonging within the circle, and gradually distance themselves from circles with inconsistent views, thereby forming taste distinction.
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4. Core Theme Relationships

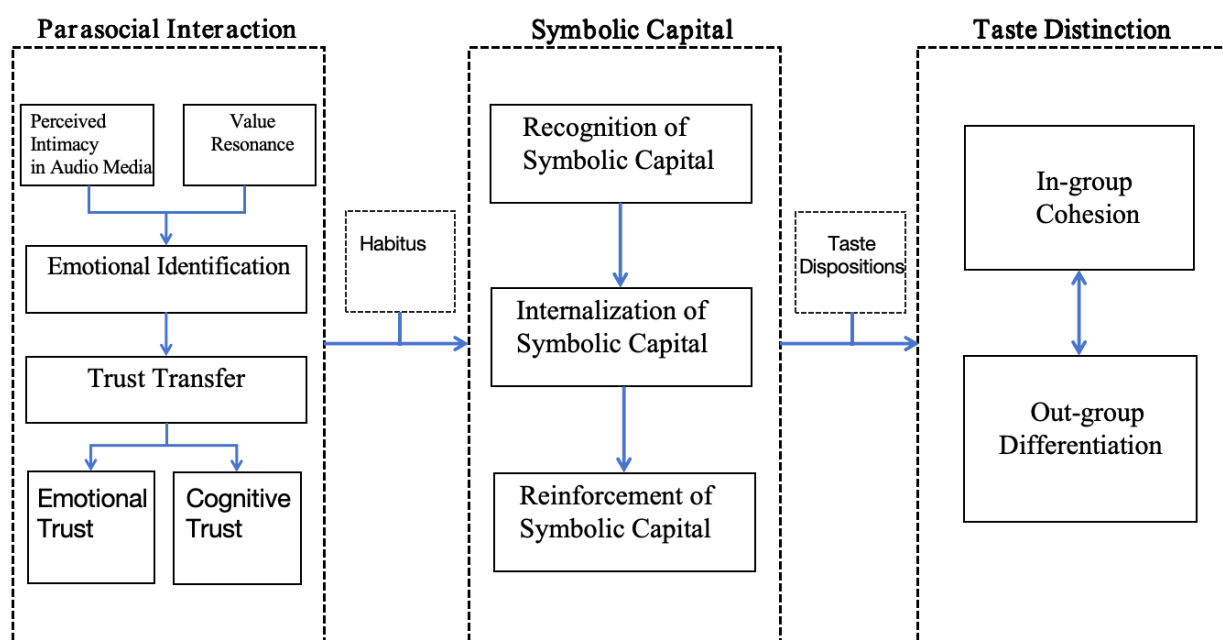


Figure 1: Relationships among Core Themes

The interview data reveal a clear thematic pathway (Figure 1): parasocial interaction facilitates the formation of symbolic capital and subsequently contributes to taste distinction.

Specifically, listeners develop intimacy and trust toward podcast hosts through sustained listening and emotional resonance. As this relationship deepens, listeners gradually internalize hosts' knowledge, values, ways of thinking, and aesthetic preferences, forming a shared habitus. Through sharing, discussion, and community participation, these cultural resources gain collective recognition among listeners, granting hosts symbolic capital and cultural authority. As symbolic capital accumulates, listeners increasingly develop similar value orientations and taste preferences, strengthening group identity and symbolic boundaries. Ultimately, they distinguish themselves from other groups through evaluations of cultural content, media consumption practices, and aesthetic choices, leading to the construction of taste distinction.

This process indicates that parasocial interaction is not only an emotional relationship but also an important mechanism that facilitates the formation of symbolic capital and the production of taste distinction.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Vocal Perception: The Foundation of Parasocial Interaction

During the interviews, many participants consistently used keywords such as "warm," "lively," and "natural" to describe their preferred vocal characteristics. Respondent M1 stated, "I feel that the warmth of the host's voice has a great influence on me when listening to a program. I am unconsciously drawn into the story." Respondent F2 noted, "The aesthetic quality of the voice is an important factor that moves me, but changes in the host's emotions allow me to quickly immerse myself in those feelings."

Almost all participants expressed resistance to voices that appeared deliberately performed. F1 explained, "Whenever I listen to a program and sense that a segment is intentionally performed, I immediately want to switch to another program." F2 stated more directly, "Whenever I hear an artificial voice, I feel that the host is not authentic. I do not like that kind of host."

When listeners perceive a host's voice as a natural expression, feelings of intimacy are strengthened. M4 remarked, "I can tell whether a host is expressing themselves genuinely, and I am more willing to listen to hosts who sound authentic. I choose to continue listening and interacting with them." F2 added, "I can detect emotional changes in the host's expression. There are pauses, moments of reflection, and even sighs. This kind of expression feels very natural and does not sound like someone reading from a script."

5.2. Emotional Resonance: Self-Projection Deepens Emotional Identification

Several participants mentioned that when hosts shared personal setbacks and challenges during their programs, listeners engaged in psychological self-projection and perceived the hosts as people similar to themselves. F3 recalled: "During a low point in my life, I happened to discover an emotional-content creator who shared stories about how she dealt with setbacks and adjusted her mindset. At that time, I liked her so much. I listened every day and felt that she was like my benefactor." This suggests that hosts' personal experiences can evoke strong emotional resonance among listeners.

F5 stated: "Some hosts share amusing stories from their own learning experiences while explaining professional knowledge. I realized that I had similar experiences and even used the same methods as the host. This made me feel closer to them." Behavioral similarity further strengthened listeners' emotional identification with hosts.

F8 noted: "The host of a program I listen to regularly responds to listeners' letters. I really agree with the solutions provided in those responses because they are practical." These responses made listeners feel recognized and valued. As emotional resonance accumulated, listeners' emotional investment in hosts increased accordingly. M4 explained: "If a host whom I have followed for a long time does not update their program for a while, I even worry that something may have happened to them. I start wondering whether they have moved to another platform." This sentiment has led viewers to perceive the streamer as a close friend, thereby transcending the traditional paradigm of instrumental attention.

5.3. Trust Transfer: From Emotional Identification to Cognitive Trust

Respondent M4 stated: "When I first started listening to podcasts, the host's explanation of certain issues differed from what I had previously learned. However, I liked his style so much that I did not want to stop listening. So I began searching for related information myself. Later, I found that the host was correct. After this happened twice, whenever I encountered content that differed

from my existing understanding, I no longer checked it and chose to trust the host directly."

After prolonged listening and repeated verification of information veracity, the audience's affective recognition evolves into rational recognition.

F5 explained: "I know that this host possesses substantial expertise and authority in the field. I naturally develop a sense of admiration. During the listening process, I discovered that the host excels in many aspects, so I trust many of the views they express." Podcasters' authoritative endorsement bolsters listeners' perceived trust.

M7 remarked: "I could never personally experience the historical events discussed by the host, but through listening I can learn about histories that I would not normally encounter."

By consistently delivering valuable intellectual content, podcasters satisfy listeners' demands for cognitive value, which further strengthens their perceived trust.

5.4. Collective Recognition: The Formation and Reinforcement of Symbolic Capital

Respondent M3 stated: "Through long-term listening to history podcasts, the host's interpretations of history and perspectives on national identity have gradually been internalized into my own value stance. When discussing certain historical events with friends, I often refer to the host's viewpoints, and I also recommend this host to my friends." Listeners' active recommendation behaviors indicate that symbolic capital has already begun to emerge.

Respondent F8 further articulated the cyclical process through which identification with symbolic capital is reinforced. F8 noted: "During the program, the host shares many professional cases and offers practical solutions. When I encounter similar problems in my work, I often think of using the methods recommended by the host." Listeners' behavioral practices and cognitive habits unintentionally strengthen their recognition of the host's symbolic capital.

5.5. Identity Belonging: The Construction of Taste Distinction

Participant F2 explained: "When I hear other people sharing their stories, I suddenly realize that many people are just like me." Through recognizing shared experiences with others, listeners develop a sense of identity and belonging. Participant F4 stated directly: "Listening to podcasts makes me feel that my views are aligned with those of others."

Similarly, F5 noted: "People who listen to the same programs for a long time naturally form small circles." F7 remarked: "I often interact with other listeners in the comment section." Likewise, F3 stated: "I specifically read the comments because I find that many people have experiences similar to mine."

At the same time, the study found that listeners tend to distinguish their own podcast communities from other podcast circles and attach different evaluations to them. M3 stated: "I think other programs are not worth listening to." F4 commented: "It feels like other circles are not as high-quality as mine." F5 further explained the underlying reason: "I unconsciously evaluate other hosts according to the standards of the host I like. When other people listen to different hosts or content, I tend to feel that their side is not as good as mine and that they are somehow inferior."

When differences in taste become salient, listeners may actively distance themselves from groups whose preferences and values differ from their own. F3 explained: "The values promoted in the programs my best friend listens to are very different from those in the programs I follow, so eventually I distanced myself from her."

By forming friendships with others who share similar tastes, listeners affirm their own aesthetic preferences and draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and other social circles.

6. Discussion

6.1. The Generative Logic of Parasocial Interaction in the Podcast Field

As the core mode of podcast communication, sound provides a unique environment for the development of parasocial interaction through its rich auditory experience[36]. The interviews revealed that most listeners take advantage of the highly companionable and mobile nature of podcasts, listening during fragmented moments of everyday life. Within private spaces, audio content is delivered directly into listeners' ears, reducing the perceived distance between hosts and audiences and fostering a sense of intimacy[37]. At the same time, hosts often adopt a relaxed and conversational communication style, which lowers listeners' psychological defenses.

High-quality content serves as the foundation for long-term podcast consumption. Hosts' accessible narrative styles enhance the authenticity of stories and shorten the psychological distance between listeners and hosts, making emotional resonance more likely. In addition, the values, knowledge orientations, and aesthetic preferences expressed by hosts often align with listeners' existing cognitive structures and cultural preferences. Through continuous exposure, listeners not only identify with the content itself but also gradually come to identify with the cultural positions and systems of meaning represented by the hosts. In this process, parasocial interaction develops from emotional closeness into cognitive identification.

Therefore, parasocial interaction in podcasts can be understood as a relationship jointly constructed through auditory intimacy and value resonance. The audio medium creates the conditions for emotional proximity, while value identification provides continuity and stability to the relationship. Compared with traditional studies of parasocial interaction, which primarily emphasize emotional attachment, this study further highlights the crucial role of cognitive identification in relationship formation. It suggests that parasocial interaction in podcast contexts is not merely a media relationship but also an identification-based relationship grounded in shared values and aesthetic tastes.

6.2. The Formation and Accumulation of Symbolic Capital in Media Relationships

Bourdieu argues that symbolic capital is derived not only from economic resources or social status but also from the continuous recognition of legitimate resources by social actors[38]. Within the podcast field, hosts' symbolic capital is gradually constructed through listeners' long-term recognition and endorsement.

The interviews indicate that listeners actively select podcast content based on their personal interests and preferences. During the listening process, the hosts' knowledge, values, and aesthetic orientations are perceived as meaningful cultural resources that provide guidance and interpretive frameworks. Through repeated exposure, some listeners move beyond simple agreement and gradually incorporate these perspectives into their own ways of thinking and acting, developing relatively stable cognitive dispositions and cultural preferences. At the same time, the interactive mechanisms of digital platforms further facilitate the accumulation of symbolic capital. As listeners continuously cite, share, and endorse hosts' viewpoints through social interactions and community communication, individual recognition evolves into collective recognition. In this process, hosts are endowed with intellectual authority and cultural influence, while the values and cultural positions they represent acquire broader legitimacy, enabling the accumulation of symbolic capital that extends beyond their role as content producers.

This study finds that symbolic capital in mediated relationships is not a direct outcome of parasocial interaction. Rather, it emerges through the processes of value internalization and habitus formation. As listeners continuously absorb hosts' knowledge, values, and aesthetic standards, they

gradually develop durable dispositions that shape their perceptions and practices. These processes not only reinforce the hosts' cultural authority but also provide the cognitive and practical foundation for subsequent taste distinction. This finding reveals the underlying mechanism through which emotional identification in mediated relationships is transformed into cultural authority and symbolic differentiation.

6.3. The Construction of Taste Distinction on Digital Platforms

In Bourdieu's theory of distinction, elite groups are characterized by refined and exclusive aesthetic tastes. Subsequent research has explored whether new forms of social distinction have emerged in contemporary society[39]. Within the podcast field, listeners can easily access diverse sources of information and actively choose programs hosted by individuals who match their interests and preferences[40].

The interview findings suggest that many listeners view podcasts as more than a channel for information acquisition; they regard podcast consumption as a media practice through which cultural taste and identity can be expressed and affirmed. Several participants perceived podcasts as offering greater cultural value than fragmented forms of entertainment because of their emphasis on in-depth discussion, knowledge sharing, and rational expression. Such evaluations implicitly establish a hierarchy among different forms of media consumption. By endorsing particular forms of knowledge, aesthetic preferences, and communicative styles, listeners position themselves as individuals possessing a distinctive cultural taste, while simultaneously developing a sense of aesthetic and cultural superiority that differentiates them from other groups.

Digital platforms further facilitate the public expression of taste through interactive practices such as commenting, community participation, and content sharing. Through ongoing interaction, listeners continuously reaffirm shared cultural understandings and aesthetic standards, gradually forming relatively stable taste-based communities. Within these communities, members construct a collective identity through common discourses, knowledge repertoires, and value judgments, while those who do not share these orientations are implicitly excluded from the cultural community. Consequently, taste evolves from an individual preference into a cultural practice with social differentiating functions. In this context, distinction is expressed less through traditional class boundaries than through differences in symbolic capital and cultural legitimacy.

These findings suggest that taste distinction on digital platforms emerges through the social diffusion of symbolic capital. By continuously endorsing hosts and the cultural values they represent, listeners transform individual preferences into collective identities and develop a sense of aesthetic distinction. Through repeated interaction and community participation, symbolic boundaries are reinforced and group memberships become increasingly salient. This process demonstrates that digital audio media not only foster emotional connections and cultural identification but also contribute to the construction of new mechanisms of cultural classification and social distinction in contemporary digital environments.

7. Conclusion

In summary, this study reveals how podcast listeners develop value identification through parasocial interaction and how, through processes of value internalization and habitus formation, they contribute to the accumulation of hosts' symbolic capital, ultimately leading to taste distinction. The findings show that vocal intimacy and value resonance facilitate the development of parasocial interaction. Through sustained listening, audiences gradually accept and internalize hosts' knowledge, values, and aesthetic orientations, forming relatively stable cognitive dispositions and cultural preferences. Supported by platform interaction mechanisms and collective communication,

these culturally valued resources become collectively recognized and are transformed into symbolic capital, which is further reinforced and diffused. As shared values and aesthetic standards continue to be reproduced, listeners gradually develop a sense of identity and taste-based superiority, giving rise to taste distinction.

These findings suggest that emotional relationships in digital media extend beyond the psychological level of individual attachment and can be transformed into cultural resources with social differentiating functions. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of distinction, this study further demonstrates that the formation of podcast communities and aesthetic preferences is no longer primarily grounded in fixed class positions. Instead, it is shaped through fluid, voluntary, and continually evolving social relations. Therefore, this study not only extends the understanding of emotional connection within parasocial interaction research but also provides a new explanatory framework for understanding how symbolic capital and taste distinction are generated in digital media environments.

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Author Contributions

ChenYan Jin: conceptualization, methodology, resources, investigation, writing-original draft preparation, writing-review and editing; YiXuan Liu: validation, writing-review and editing.

Ethical Approval

The procedures used in this study adhere to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The corresponding author obtained permission to conduct the study. The research was carried out in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration guidelines and had been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Chongqing Jiaotong University (Approval number: cju20260110 Approval date: 2026-01-10).

Informed Consent

The interviews were conducted upon informed consent previously gained from participants, who agreed to provide information for this study. We informed each participant of their rights and to safeguard their personal information. It should be noted that this study did not involve minors. Because this study adopted the interview method, a brief informed consent statement was presented before the interview without providing an informed written consent form. The study had been approved by the Ethics Committee of Chongqing Jiaotong University. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity were assured, as this study did not collect identifying details such as names and email addresses.

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