
# Who Gets Heard? How Discovery Systems Shape Podcast Visibility

Author: Sebastian Kaiser

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Advisor: Hugo Boothby

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# Abstract

This thesis investigates how podcast discovery systems shape cultural visibility, listening practices, and the definition of public value within platformised audio environments. Using Podimo, a European podcast-first platform that also offers audiobooks, as a case study, and with comparative reference to Spotify, it explores how recommendation infrastructures that combine algorithmic personalisation and human curation influence which podcasts are surfaced, promoted, or overlooked. The central research question asks how these systems shape what becomes visible to listeners, and what broader cultural and societal dynamics emerge from their underlying platform logics.

Methodologically, the study combines a structured walkthrough of the Podimo and Spotify apps with semi-structured interviews conducted with Podimo employees working in user experience (UX), artificial intelligence (AI), and content curation. Drawing on critical platform theory and the concept of listening as a civic practice, the analysis shows that discovery systems often prioritise content that is easily categorised, gains traction early, and aligns with platform performance goals such as retention and conversion. This can make it more challenging for slower-paced, serialised, or emotionally complex podcasts to gain visibility.

The findings suggest that discovery design plays a significant role in shaping access, listening behaviour, and perceptions of relevance. While platform teams are attentive to questions of diversity and value, discovery systems are influenced by a range of operational and strategic considerations, both internally and externally. By combining internal perspectives with broader theoretical reflection, the thesis offers a situated analysis of how podcast platforms support or limit different forms of audio content and proposes ways of enhancing inclusive and exploratory listening experiences.



**Keywords**: podcasting, platform governance, cultural visibility, formalisation, algorithmic recommendation, civic listening, Podimo, human curation, discovery systems, Spotify

# Disclosure Statement

As AI is now integrated into many digital tools, various AI technologies were used throughout the thesis process as part of a normal, embedded workflow. ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot supported the writing and research phases by helping to restructure sentences, clarify ideas, synthesise sources, and explore alternative framings of key arguments. SciSpace and Google NotebookLM were used to organise and interpret academic literature, while AI-based transcription tools from Google and Samsung assisted in processing interview data.

These tools were used thoughtfully and selectively, with the aim of improving clarity, structure, and efficiency, much like grammar checkers or reference managers. All interpretation, analysis, and core writing decisions were made independently and critically. As academic norms around AI continue to evolve, this disclosure is offered in the spirit of transparency and academic responsibility.

# Preface

This thesis was driven by questions that emerged through my work within a podcast platform. I often found it difficult to match the unique, frequently emotional nature of podcasts with the structured ways content needs to be categorised and recommended.
At the same time, I noticed how recommendation and discovery were recurring concerns in internal discussions. That tension, between the fluidity of podcasting and the rigid systems used to organise it, made me want to better understand how these systems function, how decisions around them are made, and what values guide them.
I was especially interested in whether recommendation systems can still make space for diverse voices and meaningful discovery, rather than simply reinforcing what's already popular.

I'd like to thank the Podimo team members who participated in the interviews. Their openness, honesty, and willingness to reflect critically on their own work added real depth to the project and helped me see the issues from multiple perspectives. I also want to acknowledge my supervisor, Hugo Boothby, whose feedback helped me bring the different parts of the initial draft of this thesis together, and to connect the research data and theoretical sources into a clearer, more coherent line of thought.

# Table of contents

# List of figures and tables

# 1. Introduction

Podcasting has shifted from a decentralised, do-it-yourself to a platform-driven industry shaped by algorithms and commercial priorities. Today, platforms like Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Podimo act as central gateways to podcast consumption.

As podcasting entered proprietary ecosystems, it became embedded in professionalised content networks and business models (Berry, 2016a, pp. 663–665).

This transformation reflects a broader shift across digital media, where user activity is turned into data that feeds systems optimised for monetization (Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 33–34). Thus, podcast discovery moved away from human-led exploration toward automated recommendations that prioritise consistency, scale, and platform-defined performance.

The growth of monetization models around 2012 marked what Bonini (2015, p. 21) calls podcasting's "Second Age." As platforms gained more control over distribution, raising questions about who gets heard and what gets valued.

Despite these shifts, podcasting remains a diverse medium. It includes content ranging from investigative journalism to fictional storytelling, intimate conversations, and educational formats. Many shows resist categorisation and remain rooted in creative autonomy (Berry, 2016b, pp. 22–23; Spinelli & Dann, 2019, p. 229). But as platforms grow more dominant, tensions emerge between optimization and cultural variety (Spinelli & Dann, 2019, pp. 214, 228).

Discovery systems on podcast platforms shape what content listeners encounter and influence engagement and format popularity. Positioned between open creativity and structured platform control, podcasting reveals the politics of platform recommendation.

This thesis explores podcast platforms through a case study Podimo (with some reference to Spotify), and is guided by the following **main research question:**

How do podcast discovery systems on Podimo, with comparative reference to Spotify, shape which content becomes visible to listeners, and what broader cultural and societal consequences emerge from their underlying platform logics?

This is supported by the following **sub-question**:

How do internal perspectives at Podimo, including those of UX researchers, curators, and AI specialists, shape the design of podcast discovery systems and inform how public value is defined within a podcasting platform?

These questions contribute to ongoing debates around the cultural role of platforms and the politics of algorithmic visibility. As Gillespie (2014) notes, algorithms increasingly define what counts as relevant (p. 168). As they become central to how cultural content is ranked and surfaced, platforms like Spotify, Google, and Facebook have taken on the role of what Striphas (2015) calls "the new apostles of culture" (p. 407). Instead of neutrally or randomly surfacing content, these systems are purposefully engineered. They are infrastructures where visibility follows proprietary and commercial logic. These platforms are owned by private companies with specific strategic objectives, often focused on business success. As a result, values such as public discourse or democratic debate may receive less attention or be deprioritised altogether.

This thesis investigates these dynamics through a case study of Podimo, a subscription-based audio platform offering both podcasts and audiobooks. It examines how discovery is built and visibility shaped amid internal trade-offs. Spotify is included as a point of comparison, but Podimo is the central focus.

The study draws on two core methods. First, expert interviews were conducted with Podimo employees working in user experience (UX), artificial intelligence (AI), and content curation. These roles shape how content is discovered and categorised. Second, a walkthrough of the Podimo app (Light et al., 2018, pp. 891–894) traced how discovery is structured.

This research tries to get to the ground of how podcast discovery systems influence which voices are surfaced, how content is valued, and how listening habits take shape. Discovery is shaped by the design of platform interfaces, the logic behind recommendations, and the strategies that organise content. These systems affect how podcasts are categorised and promoted, and how listeners encounter and relate to what they hear. The study draws on internal perspectives from professionals working in curation, AI, and user research to understand how visibility is constructed and how different concerns are balanced. A central aim is to examine how discovery infrastructures shape access, expression, and participation in podcasting, and how these systems are understood and navigated by the people building them.

In this thesis, *discovery systems* refer mainly to algorithmic suggestions and editorial curation. Algorithmic recommendations are based on behavioural data; editorial decisions involve human selection. This distinction helps clarify how different forms of visibility emerge and how platforms influence circulation, value, and access.

# 2. Background and Context

Podcasting originated as a freely accessible medium built on open-RSS[1] feeds, which enabled podcasters to publish audio content directly to listeners without going through centralised platforms. This open infrastructure encouraged a culture of independence and experimentation, allowing a broad spectrum of voices and formats to circulate on their own terms. While podcast production remains open, visibility and discovery have shifted under platform mediation.

One key development is the growing use of "predictable genres" to organise podcast content (Spinelli & Dann, 2019, p. 214). In the early RSS-based era, podcasts often combined personal reflection, improvised dialogue, and niche community topics without fitting into conventional categories. Today, platforms sort content into predefined genres to manage scale and steer discovery. Sullivan (2024) notes, this reflects a broader process of "authorization," where classification becomes a form of control within emerging platform structures (pp. 80–81). These systems help organise large libraries but also shape perceptions of what is valuable or legitimate.

Instead of relying on personal search or word of mouth, listeners are now more guided by pre-defined or automated suggestions and curated feeds. This standardises discovery and narrows the paths through which content circulates. As Sullivan (2024) quotes, this has resulted in "the emergence of new platform gatekeepers in a medium that has been traditionally known for its stubborn independence" (p. 59). Podcasting still offers open access in principle, but the structures that determine reach are increasingly centralised. So, for podcasters, it means that visibility often depends on how well a show fits into existing categories or aligns with centrally governed platform metrics.

This thesis investigates these conditions through a case study of Podimo, a subscription-based platform that combines algorithmic personalisation with human curation. Through interviews with internal team members and a user-facing walkthrough of the Podimo app alongside the Spotify app, the study examines how discovery is built, how competing goals are balanced, and how platform structures influence what becomes visible. Spotify serves as a comparison to situate Podimo within the wider dynamics of platform-driven podcasting.

[1] Short for "Really Simple Syndication"; an XML-based web distribution model, commonly used in podcasting.

# 3. Literature Review

This section brings together key research on podcasting, platform infrastructures, and content visibility to clarify how discovery systems influence what gets heard. It follows four key themes: the first one examines podcasting's shift from open distribution to more formalised production norms. The second examines how *platforms specifically govern discovery* and *shape access*. The third explores how *classification and genre labelling* affect podcast formats and framing, and the fourth outlines the *gap* this thesis responds to.

These perspectives lay the foundation for analysing how platforms like Podimo and Spotify shape visibility and cultural participation in the podcast space.

## 3.1. Podcasting's Shifting Conditions

Early podcasting offered room for experimentation with few formal constraints. Podcasters could shape their content outside institutional structures, contributing to a landscape marked by high levels variety and creative independence (Berry, 2016a, pp. 662–667; Sullivan, 2018, p. 39).

As podcasting has grown, podcasters increasingly work within systems shaped by commercial platforms. Sullivan (2024) describes this as a process of "formalization," where podcasters are expected to maintain consistent release schedules, develop recognizable formats, and align with the expectations built into discovery tools (pp. 53–54). Even independently produced shows are influenced by these pressures as it affects the whole podcasting landscape.

Lindgren and Loviglio (2022) show how podcasting's evolution is tied to its overlap with radio and streaming industries. These influences bring assumptions about what counts as professional or successful, which now affect both production choices and how shows are surfaced to listeners (pp. 1–3). As platforms grow more powerful, these assumptions are built into the systems, that create new industry norms and determine what content gets promoted or sidelined.

As podcasting becomes more embedded in platform systems, visibility is increasingly shaped by how well creators align with platform priorities. Hesmondhalgh (2019) notes that digital platforms often shift economic risk onto individual creators while offering

little long-term stability (pp. 105–106). For podcasters who lack institutional support, this makes sustained visibility and consistent earnings more difficult to achieve. Navigating recommendation systems and classification structures has become essential for reaching listeners. These systems determine which content is surfaced and promoted, often according to metrics or categorisation rules that creators can influence only to a limited extent.

This study critically examines how these dynamics shape creative freedom and cultural access. It does not suggest that podcasting has lost all openness, but shows how discoverability is increasingly tied to scale, consistency, and platform-defined value. The next section explores how these pressures are embedded in the discovery mechanisms that structure what listeners see and hear.

## 3.2. Platform Priorities and Discovery

As podcasting becomes increasingly embedded within platform ecosystems, discovery is no longer open-ended, or listener led, but structured by proprietary systems organizing content via ranking, recommendation, and interface design. Van Dijck et al. (2018) show how platforms even embed commercial priorities into public domains, reshaping how access, participation, and value are structured on a societal level. In the context of education, they describe how platform logics, driven by data extraction and algorithmic governance, undermine long-standing public values such as autonomy, affordability, and equity (pp. 117–118). While they focus on education, a similar pattern appears in podcasting, where platforms track behaviour and use algorithms to promote content, often prioritising engagement popularity, over editorial choice or deeper value. This reflects a broader societal shift towards privately designed systems that prioritise legibility and optimisation.

Sullivan (2019) writes that platformisation in podcasting changes the technical infrastructure. Algorithms, APIs, and software kits are used to structure how content is managed, distributed and ultimately discovered, creating new forms of control over accessibility and creator interaction (pp. 98–99).

Cotter (2019) highlights that this environment encourages producers to adapt their content to fit platform demands. Content and creators that conform to recognizable formats, use tagging strategically and thus play the “visibility game” are more likely to gain traction on digital platforms (pp. 902, 908). Visibility is shaped by behavioural signals, technical

sorting, and strategic placement. As platforms gain control over how audiences encounter podcasts, discovery reflects shifts in how access, attention, and value are structured.
The next section examines how these shifts are reinforced by classification and genre systems that frame podcast legibility within platforms.

## 3.3. Visibility through Classification and Genre

As podcasting becomes more platform-based, podcasters must consider how their shows are labelled and found. This is especially challenging because many podcasts don't fit neatly into traditional categories or genres due to the medium's open and uncontrolled beginnings.
Neale (2000) describes genre as a dynamic phenomenon that is constructed through expectations, naming, and discursive practices rather than fixed rules (p. 23). Podcasting often challenges these conventions.
Rime et al. (2022) point out that podcasts operate between the "universal and the unique," possibly blending modes such as documentary, comedy, fiction, and commentary, often within a single series (p. 1262). While challenges around classification exist across many creative media, podcasting presents specific difficulties due to its fluid and often spontaneous formats and frequent blending of genres.[2]
Sullivan (2024) explains that platforms like Apple Podcasts require podcasters to select a predefined genre and sub-genre when uploading their shows (pp. 47–48). These categories directly affect how content is recommended, surfaced, and placed in search results. As a result, podcasters may feel compelled to adapt elements like their titles, episode structures, or pacing to better fit into these systems. This reflects a broader platform dynamic in which creative presentation is increasingly shaped by the demands of discoverability.
Llinares, Fox, and Berry (2018) note, podcasting's fluid genre form has long been one of its strengths, but within platform infrastructures, this fluidity may become more difficult to sustain (p. 2).
From titles to formats, podcasters might need to adjust their work to better align with how content is categorised and surfaced in podcasting apps.

[2] Similar challenges exist in other media (like music or video platforms that struggle to fit hybrid content into fixed categories), but podcasting often makes these issues more visible. Its conversational tone, unpredictable formats, and informal production background can make it harder for platform systems to categorise and recommend shows accurately.

## 3.4. Research Gap and Contribution

As the previous sections have shown, existing research has explored how podcasting is being re-shaped by platform infrastructures, through classification systems, algorithmic visibility systems, and, on the most visible level, through the interface design. However, there remains a notable gap in understanding how the people working within these platforms actively shape and reflect on the systems behind discovery. Most studies focus on how content is surfaced from the user's perspective, but the internal thinking, design trade-offs, and strategic reasoning behind these mechanisms are rarely examined.

This gap is especially evident in the case of dedicated podcast platforms, where platform logic is tailored specifically to the podcast medium. Podimo, a podcast-first platform with its headquarters in Denmark, offers a unique setting to investigate these dynamics. Founded in 2019, Podimo is still relatively new and has not yet been widely studied, despite its rapid growth and increasing influence in reshaping European podcasting. With a revenue-sharing model for creators and a focus on exclusive content, it offers an important case for examining how newer platforms govern discovery.

Unlike general platforms such as Spotify, Podimo builds its infrastructure, recommendation systems, and content strategy exclusively around podcasts, and some audiobooks. This thesis responds to that gap by presenting a qualitative, insider-focused case study of Podimo, combining expert interviews with employees working with podcast discovery, alongside a user-focused podcast-app walkthrough.

By analysing design practices and internal perspectives, the study aims to provide a closer look at how podcast discovery systems are constructed and justified, and how these practices compare to a broader audio platform like Spotify. It highlights the tensions internal teams must navigate, balancing business goals such as maximizing retention with broader cultural and societal concerns about visibility, diversity, and public value. These tensions are often overlooked in platform research, yet they are central to how discovery infrastructures shape what is heard, by whom, and under what conditions.

More broadly, this thesis contributes to podcast and platform studies by offering a more comprehensive view of podcast discovery. It brings together the medium's distinctive creative affordances with the commercial and technical logics that now structure its circulation. It also raises questions about how these systems influence listening habits and cultural participation.

# 4. Theoretical Framework

This framework is mainly concerned with which voices and stories get seen and heard in podcasting, and how platform systems as a whole shape that visibility, and what cultural implications that entails.

This section views podcasting not as an isolated medium, but as part of a broader shift toward data-driven, commercially governed infrastructures that define relevance through behavioural metrics, user profiling, and optimization (Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 141–144, 172).

These new dynamics of relevance raise questions about the (*public-) value* of podcast platforms. Regarding public value in public service media, Tracey (2014) critiques the increasing pressure to justify cultural contribution through quantifiable outputs, warning that this risks neglecting media's deeper civic role in "nurturing the collective condition" (p. 96). Habermas's (1991) idea of the *public sphere* similarly stresses the importance of inclusive communication infrastructures (p. 37). But as platform systems take on that role, the terms of public discourse are inevitably reshaped by internal design choices, ranking logics, and recommendation models.

This thesis takes a critical, yet open-minded perspective. It does not assume that platforms inherently undermine public discourse, but seeks to understand *how they shape listening culture*, and *under what conditions they might support diversity, reflection, and civic participation*. The concept of *listening as a civic practice* (Lacey, 2013 pp. 3–22, 2023, n.p.) becomes central here, helping to analyse how discovery systems influence what content is available, but more importantly how listeners are encouraged to engage with it.

It's informed by a connected, *three-part-framework*:

The first one examines how *podcast visibility* is structured by platform infrastructures. The second one explores the *tensions* between podcasting's creative openness and the commercial constraints of algorithmic systems. Lastly, the third one turns to *listening as a cultural and civic practice* and asks how discovery systems might either narrow or expand listeners' capacity for active, exploratory listening, possibly with civic implications.

Together, these sections provide a foundation for analysing how podcast platforms shape

visibility and categorisation. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach used to explore these dynamics in practice.

## 4.1. Platform Control and Podcast Visibility

Podcast platforms shape the conditions under which content becomes visible and thus culturally meaningful. This reflects a broader shift, where platforms are structuring circulation and influence what is seen and heard. Drawing on Van Dijck et al. (2018), this thesis uses the concept of platformisation to understand how podcasting is reshaped by platform logics such as algorithmic ordering, user profiling, and data extraction (pp. 141–144). Once tied mainly to social media and search engines, these systems now structure podcast discovery and define cultural relevance (p. 52).

On these platforms, being legible to the algorithm often becomes a requirement for being seen. Nieborg and Poell (2018) describe platform governance as the alignment of technological architectures, economic imperatives, and algorithmic systems that shape access to content (pp. 4285–4286). These mechanisms encode platform priorities into classification and recommendation systems, replacing editorial curation with automated forms of sorting. This shift inherently alters how podcasters and listeners experience value, visibility, and relevance.

Srnicek (2017) describes platforms as "extractive apparatuses," designed to capture and monetise user activity across multiple domains (pp. 30–35). Applied to podcasting, this logic means that recommendation systems optimise for metrics like retention,[3] completion,[4] or subscription conversion.[5] These are all criteria that reflect business goals rather than cultural or creative value. What becomes visible, is less about deeper meaning or cultural richness, but simply what performs well according to platform-specific engagement thresholds.

The move from editorial to algorithmic mediation has consequences for how cultural legitimacy is assigned. Couldry's (2004) concept of "media as practice" emphasises that media are part of organised social activity. Besides being tools for delivering content, they are systems that shape how people create, access, and interpret meaning in everyday life (pp. 123–130). Podcast discovery, under this lens, can be seen as a practice of mediation,

[3] A measure of how many users return to a platform or continue using it over time.
[4] Refers to how much of a podcast episode a listener finishes, measured as a percentage from start to end.
[5] Refers to when a user converts into a paying subscriber of a service.

as it determines which stories enter public discourse, which voices are repeatedly surfaced, and which remain unheard.

Gillespie (2019) complements this by describing platforms as "visibility machines," systems that rank and filter content based on built-in judgments about relevance. These judgments are rarely visible to users but become apparent through what gets surfaced or buried (p. 178). Discovery operates as a form of infrastructural gatekeeping, not only determining what is accessible, but also influencing what is culturally validated through repeated exposure and ranking.

Understanding this platform-mediated visibility is essential for this study. Podimo represents a particularly focused case where such dynamics are concentrated around one specific medium. Because, unlike Spotify, which embeds podcast discovery within a broader music ecosystem, Podimo's infrastructure, business model, and user experience are designed first and foremost for podcasts. This makes it possible to investigate how internal decisions (by cross-functional global teams that directly influence podcast surfacing systems) shape the visibility of content through a combination of algorithmic logic, interface design, and strategic framing. By looking closer at these dynamics, it's possible to examine how platform power is exercised and governed through discovery systems.

## 4.2. Podcasting's Tensions with Platform Structures

As podcasting becomes increasingly integrated into platform infrastructures, its experimental, emotional and creative qualities are reshaped by systems driven by metrics, classification, and commercial optimization.

As Gillespie (2014) explains, platforms use "public relevance algorithms" to decide what counts as valuable or meaningful, by embedding platform-specific assumptions into recommendation design. These algorithms favour content that is consistent, repeatable, and easy to classify, which are qualities that many podcasts resist, if production is not strategically standardised. Unmeasurable things like irregular episode schedules, mixed genres, or unclear storylines can become disadvantages for a platform that defines "relevance" based on user predicted behaviour (p. 168).

This reflects the broader logic of *platform capitalism*, where discovery is shaped by systems designed to "optimise processes" (Srnicek, 2017, p. 58). For example, towards engagement, conversion, and retention over more nuanced factors. In podcasting, this

means content is more likely to be promoted if it supports platform goals like maximizing user engagement or driving subscription growth, rather than promoting emotional nuance, creative experimentation, or underrepresented perspectives.

This creates structural pressure for podcasters to "optimise" as well. As Sullivan (2024) notes, podcasts are increasingly influenced by industry norms, shaped by expectations around production values, sound quality, genre conventions, and distribution practices now embedded into platform infrastructures (pp. 90, 112). In this environment, algorithmic legibility might become a precondition for visibility.

Striphas (2015) describes this as the "privatization of process," a shift where decisions about cultural relevance, once subject to public deliberation or editorial curation, are absorbed into opaque technical infrastructures (p. 406). This framing highlights a key issue for podcasting: if mainly algorithms decide who gets heard, we need to look closely at how they make that decision.

Rettberg's (2020) concept of *situated platform analysis* offers a useful critical lens. By examining how interface design and platform strategy influence user behaviour and content circulation, her approach highlights what she calls the "environmental power" of the infrastructures and technologies that surround us (p. 2). For instance, metrics such as listens, skips, or completions don't necessarily reflect the depth of listener engagement. If not registered in the system, a podcast episode that makes people think or talk about certain issues might seem less successful than one that's just easy to listen to, even if it's quickly forgotten.

On top of this, it's also a political concern. Noble (2018) warns that recommendation systems often replicate structural inequalities. Because they draw on behavioural data shaped by dominant norms, they "favour corporate elites and the powerful" while excluding voices that deviate from the mainstream (p. 29). In podcasting, this means that shows with unconventional formats, marginalised perspectives, or slower forms of storytelling may be less likely to surface, even when they represent vital contributions to public discourse.

Gillespie (2019) reflects on how early hopes for digital culture imagined the internet as an "unmediated public sphere" (p. 15). "Platforms" now play a curatorial role, controlling relevance through automation, and he argues that they now "can no longer duck the responsibility of being custodians to the massive, heterogeneous, and contested public realm they have brought into being" (p. 211). In podcasting, this custodianship manifests

in what platforms promote, how they define discovery, and what types of listening they encourage.

In short, podcasting's unique traits, like nonlinearity, intimate resonance, or genre fluidity, often clash with platform systems designed for scale, consistency, and clear categories. These tensions lead into the next section, which shifts focus from infrastructure to experience, asking how platforms actually shape how we listen.

## 4.3. Listening as a Civic Practice

While discovery systems influence which podcasts get surfaced and become audible, they also shape how listeners engage with what they hear. In this section, listening becomes more than a private or passive act. It's seen as a social and civic practice. It can be a way of relating to others, encountering unfamiliar perspectives, and participating in shared cultural life.

This idea draws on Kate Lacey's (2013, p. 3) rethinking of the public sphere. Rather than centring on speech and debate, as in Habermas's (1991, pp. 246–247) model, Lacey emphasises the political importance of listening. She critiques the tendency to treat listening as secondary or private and argues that this view has obscured its role in public engagement.

Lacey introduces a distinction between *listening in* and *listening out* (2013, pp. 3–22). *Listening in* refers to everyday, often solitary listening shaped by habit or convenience. *Listening out* is more deliberate and active. It involves a readiness to be surprised, to hear unfamiliar voices, and to feel addressed by others. This mode of attention, which she calls "listening adventurously" (2013, p. 197), involves openness and a willingness to engage (pp. 195–199).

According to Lacey, this kind of listening is vital for public life. It can create space for empathy, reflection, and mutual recognition. However, being able to listen out depends on conditions that are not always available, such as time, safety, and mental capacity (Lacey, 2023, n.p.). Readings (1999) refers to this as "the ethical obligation to be addressed," a call to make oneself available to others even when it is uncomfortable or uncertain (p. 162).

In platform environments, these conditions can be difficult to sustain. Lacey (2023, n.p.) notes that listening increasingly takes the form of labour. It requires attention, energy, and emotional investment, yet platform systems are designed to minimise friction and

discourage more effortful engagement. Recommendation systems tend to guide listeners toward familiar content, often reinforcing existing habits rather than inviting deeper reflection, because it's a safter way of maintaining customers.

By framing *listening as a civic practice*, this thesis asks whether podcast platforms can support more thoughtful, outward-facing engagement, or whether they primarily reinforce habitual and private use. This question builds on earlier discussions of infrastructure in Section 4.1, where platform design governs what becomes visible and valued, and the tensions in Section 4.2, where creative and affective qualities often clash with systems built for scale and standardisation. Together, these perspectives shape the empirical focus that follows in the next chapter on methodology.

Lacey's concept offers more than a critical lens, as it also provides a way to articulate what is at stake in how platforms shape listening. The issue is not only what becomes visible or popular, but how discovery systems shape listening itself, with potential consequences for public engagement. Her work invites us to consider whether platform design can support podcasting's civic potential or simply reinforce passive, individualised use.

# 5. Methodology

This chapter explains how the research was carried out to explore how podcast platforms influence which content becomes visible and discoverable. The study combines two core methods: (1) *semi-structured interviews* with professionals working globally at Podimo, and (2) *a structured app walkthrough* of Podimo and Spotify.

The research examines how podcast discovery systems are shaped through a combination of platform design decisions and the cultural assumptions that guide what content becomes visible or valued.

Podimo is a subscription-based podcast and audiobook streaming platform operating in seven markets: six in Europe (Denmark, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Finland) and one in Latin America (Mexico). Founded in 2019 and headquartered in Denmark, Podimo is a fast-growing actor in the European audio market, with its main focus on podcasting. With over 300 employees and a platform strategy that combines human curation with algorithmic personalisation, it offers a unique opportunity to study how podcast visibility is structured through platform design. Its relatively recent emergence also means it has not yet been widely studied, making it a valuable case for exploring how discovery infrastructures shape cultural access within podcasting.

## 5.1. Research Design

This study is grounded primarily in an *interpretivist paradigm*, which assumes that social reality is constructed through shared meanings and everyday practices (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, p. 170).

At the same time, it draws on *critical theory* to examine how Podimo's discovery systems are shaped by broader power dynamics (p. 172), such as business priorities and platform design choices, which influence what content is surfaced or sidelined. This perspective helps reveal how cultural hierarchies and institutional values are embedded within the structure of podcast recommendations.

The aim is not to critique individual actors or assign fault to specific organisational decisions, but to examine the wider structures, tensions, and trade-offs that shape how podcast discovery systems are developed within a broader neoliberal media landscape.

In addition, the study adopts a *pragmatic perspective*. It's not used as a full theoretical foundation, but rather to remain attentive to practical outcomes. For example, it considers how podcast platforms might evolve to better support content diversity, public value, and more equitable discovery systems. Blaikie and Priest (2017, pp. 37–38) note that pragmatism is often used in research that considers both real-world consequences and philosophical reflection, which suits the aims of this project.

To connect these different paradigms, the study uses an *abductive logic*, which is a reasoning process that moves back and forth between data and theory. Blaikie and Priest (2019, p. 158) describe abduction as especially useful for understanding how people make sense of their own actions and routines, which aligns with the interview and app-based methods used here. This approach also reflects Giddens' point that researchers need to start from how people already understand their own actions and environment (what he calls "mutual knowledge"), instead of simply applying abstract theories from outside (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, p. 159). In this project, abduction supported the iterative process of connecting interview insights and platform walkthroughs to broader reflections on how podcast discovery functions both technically and culturally.

Though based in different traditions, combining interpretivism, critical theory, and pragmatism suits the topic's complexity. Podcast discovery is shaped by personal experience, platform strategy, technological design, and cultural value systems. Interpretivism helps explore how Podimo employees understand and explain their roles. Critical theory uncovers how platforms influence visibility and cultural legitimacy. Pragmatism introduces a future-oriented perspective that asks how discovery systems might practically be improved or reimagined.

This layered approach aligns with Layder's (2013) concept of adaptive research, which rejects the idea of inquiry as a fixed sequence of stages. Instead, it sees research as "a continuously unfolding process" where different phases "merge into one another as an adaptive response to changes in research circumstances or priorities" (p. 25). This supports the study's flexible use of overlapping paradigms and methods, which evolved in response to both empirical findings and the complexity of platform dynamics. It also reflects Blaikie and Priest's (2019, pp. 38, 172) argument that studying complex social systems often requires drawing from more than one perspective.

This methodological approach is closely aligned with the theoretical framework in Chapter 4. Concepts like platformisation, algorithmic governance, classification, and

civic listening inform how podcast discovery's cultural impact is conceptualised. The semi-structured interviews provided situated insights into how Podimo employees shape discovery systems in practice, supporting the study's interpretivist and critical paradigms (Gillespie, 2010; Striphas, 2015, p. 396; Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 33–34). The app walkthroughs, informed by Light et al. (2018, pp. 893–894) and Rettberg (2020, p.3), enabled a close analysis of visibility and interface design as expressions of embedded platform logics.

## 5.2. Data Collection

This section explains how the interviews and platform walkthrough were carried out. They capture both internal perspectives and external design features of podcast discovery, offering complementary insights into platform infrastructure and cultural visibility.

### 5.2.1. Interviews with Professionals in Podcast Discovery

The first stage of data collection involved three in-depth, semi-structured interviews (plus one additional slightly shorter complementary interview) with professionals at Podimo whose work directly shapes how podcast content is recommended, surfaced, and curated. These interviews were designed to explore internal perspectives on podcast discovery by drawing on expertise across algorithmic, editorial, and user-experience domains.

Though limited in number, the interviews were carefully selected for their strategic relevance and depth. Each participant holds a central role in Podimo's global teams overseeing podcast discovery.

The participants were chosen based on their long length of employment, deep institutional knowledge, and active involvement in shaping the systems and strategies that govern content visibility. For example, the Curation Manager has been with Podimo since its earliest days and brings insight from years of structural and editorial evolution. Two interviews (with the UX Researcher and Director of AI) were conducted in person at the Copenhagen office. One (with the Curation Manager) was conducted online, and the follow-up interview with the Lead Data Scientist was also held in person. Each core interview lasted over 70 minutes and was fully transcribed, leading to a lot of data and on overage around 20–30 A4-pages of transcription text. The transcripts were not provided in the appendix due to their lengths.

Beyond their individual expertise, these participants reflected the broader knowledge of their respective teams. In the case of UX, the participant also shared internal team research reports on podcast recommendation, enabling additional triangulation through embedded user insight. This added a further layer of insight into user behaviour and discovery logic. Taken together, the interviews offered a uniquely informed, multifaceted view of Podimo's discovery system, prioritizing deep, reflective engagement over breadth. This was a deliberate trade-off to capture the structural, strategic, and cultural tensions at the heart of the research question.

Because of their long-standing roles and involvement in platform-wide decision-making, the interviewees were able to share insights both from their own work, but also from the broader practices of their global teams. This made it possible to access broader company-wide practices through a small but well-chosen set of interviews. All interviews were conducted in English to ensure maximum clarity and avoid potential loss of meaning through translation. Each participant had worked at Podimo for several years and had a clear role in podcast discovery. They also knew me (the researcher) as a fairly well-known colleague, which encouraged openness during the interviews.

This organisational setup made it a valuable case for exploring how discovery systems are understood and developed internally.

Together, the participants represent a triangulated set of perspectives across:

- **UX research** (user needs, engagement, qualitative testing),
- **AI systems** (recommendation algorithms and personalisation logic), and
- **Editorial curation** (human decision-making around visibility and promotion).

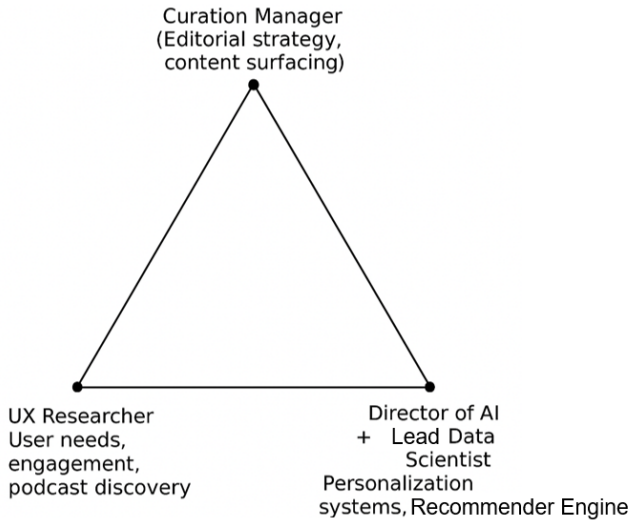

*Figure 1. Visualization of the "interview-triangulation"*

The participants' roles and backgrounds are further summarised in the following table:

| Participant Role | Area of Expertise | Relevant Context |
|---|---|---|
| UX Researcher | User needs, engagement, podcast discovery | Mid-level role, four+ years at Podimo |
| Director of AI + Lead Data Scientist | Personalisation systems, recommendation design | Senior leadership, ~ five years at Podimo; Data Scientist: mid-level role, three+ years at Podimo |
| Curation Manager | Editorial curation, content surfacing strategy | Experienced role, six years at Podimo |

*Table 1. Interview Participant Overview*

This triangulated design supports a layered understanding of how podcast discovery operates in practice. As Layder (2013) notes, integrating multiple sources and perspectives enhances the validity of qualitative research, as each can illuminate different facets of complex socio-technical systems (pp. 98–99).

All core interviews followed a semi-structured format. Each included a shared set of 15 core questions, along with five tailored questions aligned with the interviewee's specific role. This structure balanced comparability across cases with space for deeper domain-specific reflection. A full list of interview questions is provided in *Appendix A*.

Following Seidman's (2019, p. 31) emphasis on capturing the meaning of participants' experiences, and Kvale's (1996, pp. 15–16) view of interviews as sites of co-constructed knowledge, the interviews invited participants to reflect both strategically and emotionally on how discovery systems function.

Participants signed consent forms agreeing to be identified by name and role. However, the final thesis refers to them only by job title to help maintain workplace confidentiality. Ethical considerations around it are discussed in Section 5.3.

### 5.2.2. Platform Walkthrough

The second data source consisted of a structured walkthrough analysis of two podcast platforms: *Podimo (v2.90.0)* and *Spotify (v9.0.34.593)*.

Spotify was chosen as a comparative case because of its dominant market position and its emphasis on algorithmic personalisation, which contrasts with Podimo's hybrid approach combining editorial curation and algorithmic recommendation. Its content structure, which includes, besides music, podcasts and audiobooks (like Podimo) makes it a relevant match.

The walkthrough examined how each app presents podcast content, including what is shown, how it is categorised, and how recommendations are made. It was conducted without being shaped by the researcher's prior use and merely focused on uncovering the underlying logic and design choices behind the recommendation system by moving through the apps step by step.

This method followed the framework by Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2018, p. 891), who argue that apps mediate user experience by embedding institutional values and configuring interactions through their design. Their walkthrough method makes a systematic observation of apps' technical functions and symbolic cues possible, which helps reveal how platforms shape behaviour and cultural meaning.

The walkthrough was carried out by the researcher over multiple sessions, using the same structured framework for each platform. Observations were recorded as detailed field notes and annotated screenshots, serving as empirical material and visual documentation. Particular attention was paid to content curation, editorial labelling, personalisation cues, and the visibility of exclusive content.

This structured process moves beyond listing interface elements or simple user testing and instead examines the app as a sociotechnical artefact embedded in broader cultural and economic logics. As Light et al. (2018) explain, the walkthrough method is to "illuminate the material traces of those intentions, and thereby to critically examine the workings of an app as a sociotechnical artefact." Grounded in a combined framework of science and technology studies (STS) and cultural studies, the method helps identify how app features reflect and shape "cultural, social, political and economic" dynamics (p. 886).

Five *core areas*, adapted from Light et al. (2018, pp. 891–892), guided the walkthrough, as summarised in this table:

| Focus Area | Guiding Questions |
|---|---|
| **Home Screen** | What content is surfaced first? Are recommendations personalised or editorial? |
| **Search Functionality** | How are search results ranked? What kinds of filters or categorizations are offered? |
| **Explore/Discovery Tab** | How is new content organised, labelled, or curated? |
| **Categories and Genre Framing** | Which genres are prioritised, and how are categories structured or named? |
| **Personalisation Features** | How does the app represent user preferences or offer algorithmic recommendations? |

*Table 2. Key focus areas and guiding questions for the platform walkthrough.*

Using these guiding questions, the walkthrough provided a structured comparison between Podimo and Spotify, aligning with the study's aim to explore how platform designs shape podcast discovery.

The walkthrough was conducted reflexively and critically, drawing on Rettberg's (2020) method of *situated data analysis*. This approach highlights how platform features and recommendation systems shape how content is categorised, made visible, and understood by users (p. 10). The analysis following this principle thus viewed platforms as systems shaped by business goals, cultural assumptions, and strategic design choices.

Because I work at Podimo, and use both Podimo and Spotify, I drew on that experience to help interpret how each platform's design reflects its goals and priorities.

The walkthrough observations, alongside the interview data, helped show how platform design decisions shape what users see and how they interact with podcasts.

To give an overview of these findings, *Appendix D* (Table 3) includes a table comparing key discovery features on Podimo and Spotify.

## 5.3. Positionality and Ethics

In qualitative research, ethics are closely tied to how knowledge is produced and interpreted. In interview-based studies, the researcher plays an active role in shaping both the process and the findings. As Kvale (1996) notes, “the position of the researcher is critical for the quality of the scientific knowledge and for the soundness of ethical decisions in any research project” (p. 117). This matters especially in interpretive research, where knowledge is shaped through conversations with participants. This section explains the ethical steps I took and reflects on my role as both a Podimo employee and a researcher.

### 5.3.1. Ethical Considerations and Practices

This study followed core ethical principles of transparency, informed consent, and care for participants. This is particularly important given that all interviewees at Podimo were current colleagues of mine. Participants were informed about the study’s goals, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and how their data would be handled.

Although participants gave written consent to be identified by name and role, the final thesis refers to them only by job title, including when quoting their statements. This decision was made to minimise visibility and uphold privacy in a shared workplace, where reflections on internal practices may still be sensitive. Even when names are not directly mentioned, colleagues familiar with team structures could potentially infer identities. As Kvale (1996) argues, ethical decisions should be made with contextual awareness and care, rather than relying solely on formal procedures (pp. 110–112).

All participants signed written consent forms (see *Appendix C* for transparency), and the interviews were recorded on a secure mobile device, transcribed by the researcher, and stored privately. Access was limited to the researcher and, if requested, to participants or university staff. The interview design emphasised openness and respect, encouraging reflection rather than formal reporting. Questions were semi-structured, partially the same questions for everyone and partially tailored to each participant’s role, aligning with Seidman’s (2019, pp. 34–35) emphasis on valuing lived experience and Kvale’s (1996, pp. 147–149) principles of situational sensitivity and researcher responsibility.

### 5.3.2. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In interpretive research, the researcher cannot be a fully neutral, detached observer, but an active participant whose background, assumptions, and interactions shape the knowledge produced. As Blaikie and Priest (2019) argue, reflexivity is essential because researchers must remain aware of how their social position and values influence the research process. Drawing on Giddens' notion of "reflexive monitoring," they emphasise the need for ongoing awareness of how assumptions and decisions influence both data collection and interpretation. (pp. 82–84).

This study takes my dual role into account. As both a Podimo employee and a master's student, I had access to colleagues with relevant expertise, insight into how the platform works in practice, and a better understanding of the everyday workflows. This position also helped shape the questions I asked and the focus of the research.

Being part of the organisation myself made it possible to access insights that external researchers might not easily reach, such as how discovery systems are shaped by everyday routines, design processes, and informal decision-making. The participants worked in clearly defined roles and were not part of my own team or reporting line, which helped reduce the risk of bias from internal hierarchies. Still, being close to the organisation required ongoing self-awareness to avoid taking platform assumptions for granted or overlooking internal power dynamics.

One small but telling instance of positional influence was in language use. At Podimo, *podcast creator* is more common than *podcaster*, and I initially used it without reflection. But as I engaged more with academic and independent podcast literature, I saw that *podcaster* is the more medium-specific term (at least in non-platform related literature). The distinction matters: *creator*[6] implies someone shaped by platform logics and algorithmic visibility, while *podcaster* suggests a more autonomous role. As Cunningham and Craig (2021, p. 1) note, *creator* reflects the rise of "[…] commercializing and professionalizing native social media users who generate and circulate original content in close interaction and engagement with their communities on the major social media platforms […]." This realization made me reflect on how my work environment had

[6] For further discussion of how the term *creator* reflects platform-based content economies and the professionalization of user-generated media, see Cunningham & Craig (2021).

shaped my framing. I therefore use *podcaster* throughout the thesis to avoid reinforcing a platform-centred view.

That attentiveness connects to Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledges, which holds that all knowledge is partial, embodied, and produced from specific standpoints. She calls for accountable, reflexive research that acknowledges its own position, because detached objectivity is not possible (p. 579). In this study, that commitment was expressed through self-reflection, transparency with participants, and critical engagement with institutional context.

Layder (2013) makes a related point, noting that while insider knowledge can offer valuable insight, it may also bias interpretation if not carefully examined (p. 14). He stresses the need to remain alert to inconsistencies or overly polished narratives, especially within familiar settings (pp. 114–117). In this light, researcher positionality becomes a key part of the research process.

Throughout the interviews, I aimed to balance trust and collegial familiarity with a readiness to ask critical questions. As Seidman (2019) puts it, qualitative interviewing involves "a delicate balance between respecting what the participant is saying and taking advantage of opportunities to ask difficult questions" (p. 116).

The findings presented in this thesis are therefore understood as *situated interpretations*, being shaped by institutional familiarity, theoretical grounding, and a continuous effort toward reflexive accountability.

## 5.4. Data Analysis

The analysis looked at how podcast discovery works in both everyday practice and how it is talked about. Interview transcripts were coded to identify important patterns and tensions, while the app walkthroughs focused on how podcast recommendations are built into the platform's design. Together, these methods helped show how discovery is both understood and put into action.

### 5.4.1. Thematic Analysis of Interviews

The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, pp. 4–16) approach. This method was chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data and its alignment with an interpretive research paradigm.

After full transcription, each interview was read multiple times to build familiarity with the material (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 17–18). I then started identifying patterns in what participants said, including both direct points and underlying ideas. These observations were then grouped into broader themes linked to the research questions, such as tensions between personalisation and business goals, how visibility is framed, and how platforms define cultural value.

A summary of the final themes is included in *Appendix B*. Rather than relying on frequency counts, themes were developed by interpreting how participants emphasised or problematised certain ideas. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, acknowledging my partial embeddedness at Podimo. Interview accounts were treated as situated narratives, shaped by each participant's role and professional context (Seidman, 2019, p. 116).

### 5.4.2. Walkthrough Analysis

I conducted a structured (situated) walkthrough of the Podimo and Spotify apps, following the method by Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2018, pp. 891–892). This involved going through the apps step by step to observe how content is presented across sections of discovery and recommendations. The process aimed to slow down and reflect on what they describe as the "mundane actions and interactions" of app use (p. 882) to better notice how design choices and app logic shape what users see and engage with. By pausing on these small details, the walkthrough helped reveal how each app steers user attention and frames certain types of content as more visible or valuable.

I analysed the app design and screens to understand how they reflect each platform's strategic goals. Then, to support the analysis, I created several composite figures with side-by-side screenshots, showing Podimo on the left (purple background) and Spotify on the right (green), reflecting their brand colours (shown later in chapter 6).

I approached this analysis using Rettberg's (2020) method of situated data analysis, which emphasises that even seemingly objective or neutral design elements can carry implicit meaning (p. 10). As she writes, "situated data analysis […] emphasises the situatedness of data even when it is presented as immense, all-encompassing and objective" (p. 7). Just as Strava's heatmap visuals reproduce certain worldviews, podcast platforms also frame content through design choices that reflect business priorities and shape what becomes visible to users.

Finally, I brought these walkthrough observations into conversation with the expert interviews. This allowed for a triangulated perspective, comparing what team members described with what I could directly observe in the app interfaces. Throughout the process, I also reflected on my own position as a Podimo employee and how that might shape how I interpret what I saw.

## 5.5. Limitations

This qualitative case study is shaped by several limitations, particularly related to potential bias, the limited empirical sample, and the fast-evolving nature of app and platform infrastructures.

My role as a Podimo employee gave me valuable access to internal perspectives and everyday workflows. However, being so closely involved with the organisation also made it harder to remain fully neutral. Knowing the app's logic, user flows, and internal goals meant that many aspects of the platform felt familiar to me, which may have shaped what I noticed, prioritised, or overlooked during the research. For instance, certain platform decisions, app flow or language terms, that seemed routine to me might appear more surprising or questionable to an outside observer. To reduce the risk of bias, I made a conscious effort to question these assumptions during analysis and remain attentive to moments where my insider perspective could influence interpretation. As Blaikie and Priest (2019, p. 83) notes that researchers cannot fully separate themselves from the research process, as their background and position inevitably shape the knowledge they produce. While I tried to stay aware of these influences throughout, some degree of subjectivity is unavoidable in a project like this, even when it may go unnoticed.

Second, the empirical scope is necessarily limited. The study draws on three core semi-structured interviews (plus one shorter additional interview) with representatives from UX research, algorithmic personalisation, and editorial curation. These roles offer triangulated insight into key areas of the recommendation system but do not represent the full spectrum of voices or strategic priorities within the company.

Third, the platform walkthroughs capture only a specific moment in time, as they are based on *Podimo version 2.90.0* and *Spotify version 9.0.34.593*. The analysis was conducted using the Android versions of the apps, which may differ slightly from iOS. Since app interfaces and recommendation systems are frequently updated, the observations offer a temporal snapshot rather than a definitive representation.

Additionally, due to account access constraints on the researcher's personal accounts, the walkthroughs were based on the Danish version of Podimo and the Austrian version of Spotify. Therefore, the findings are shaped by local content visibility and may not fully represent platform dynamics or user experiences in other regions.

Finally, although the thesis includes comparisons with Spotify, the main focus is on Podimo. The findings should therefore be understood as specific to Podimo’s case and shaped by its features, strategies, and organisational context. Yet, quite a few general patterns might just as relevant to Spotify or other similar platforms, as they reflect broader economic trends. However, the main goal is not to make broad claims. Instead, the focus is on gaining a deeper understanding of how discovery works inside one platform, while also considering how audio content is increasingly shaped by algorithms and platform design within podcasting.

# 6. Presentation and Analysis of Results

This chapter presents a *four-layer* analysis of my findings on how podcast discovery is structured at Podimo, with observed comparisons to Spotify. It draws on the results from expert interviews and app walkthroughs to show how internal systems and design choices shape visibility, classification, and user attention.

## 6.1. What Drives Recommendation?

The *first layer* of podcast visibility is shaped by how platforms design their recommendation systems to serve internal business objectives. At Podimo, both algorithmic and editorial systems are built to increase listening time, retain users, and encourage predictable engagement, as clearly noticeable in my gathered research data. While the interface presents discovery as open-ended, most users don't seem explore new shows. "Most people for sure come to the app to listen to something they already know," the UX Researcher explained. "It's not often that they are in a full-on discovery mindset" (interview, 2025). As a result, recommendation features tend to reinforce existing habits rather than introduce unfamiliar voices, aligning discovery with platform strategy rather than open exploration.

The platform walkthrough revealed that this pattern is most visible on the home screen, where users are first met with the recently played or followed shows (Podimo, 2025). Referred to as the "recall section," this design acts as a shortcut to familiar content and drives most of the listening activity. This was confirmed in an interview: "So many people are just pressing play on the first thing they see at the top of the screen because that is well known to them," the Curation Manager explained (interview, 2025). He added that this topmost row alone accounts for nearly 87% of total listening sessions on Podimo, based on recent internal data (interview, 2025). The interface design thus seems to promote quicker engagement and individualised consumption. While these features support ease and routine, they may also reduce exposure to diverse perspectives or discourage more reflective listening.

Below that, Podimo's home screen features a mix of curated cards, algorithmic rows, and top charts. However, these sections often promote many of the same titles. As noted during the walkthrough and echoed by several interviewees, Podimo tends to highlight certain exclusive top shows repeatedly. The walkthrough revealed that these exclusive

shows (often the same few) appear prominently across multiple categories such as “Toplists,” “We Think You’d Like,” and “Trending” (Podimo, 2025; see Figure 2). These slots change infrequently and tend to feature content that is already performing well, creating a feedback loop. Once a show is promoted, it becomes more visible, and once visible, it is more likely to be listened to and promoted again (interview, 2025).

“The system is optimised to get users to listen to around 3.5 episodes a week,” the Director of AI explained (interview, 2025). Success thus is defined by listening consistency. He further explained that Podimo’s recommendation system uses mainly metrics like listening history, repeat plays, and transcript-level metadata to build a layered ranking model (interview, 2025). This ties into what Striphas (2015, p. 396) calls “algorithmic culture,” where relevance decisions are outsourced to automated systems analysing user behaviour.

“The algorithm doesn’t care what the content is, it just wants users to listen more often,” he added (interview, 2025). As the UX Researcher further emphasised, even podcasts with potential may remain hidden if they fail to gain early traction: “If you don't get your first 1,000 or 10,000 streams in, then it's difficult to beat the algorithm” (interview, 2025).

Curation follows a similar pattern, as the interviews showed. While the curation team have some freedom to advocate for specific shows, they operate under space and economic performance constraints. Podimo’s homepage only allows the curators to fill three curated cards per day. Each big highlight card features a single image and a 135-character caption, sent to the entire user base without further algorithmic personalisation. “You can’t explain emotional depth or complex storytelling in 135 characters,” the Curation Manager said. He drew the conclusion by saying that they often end up picking exclusive shows that are already very popular, and where they just know they work, because “that helps meet [their] targets” (interview, 2025).

*Figure 2* illustrates this structure. On Podimo’s home screen, the top rows display exclusives in large horizontal tiles. Some of the same shows repeat across the Discovery tab and genre sections. On Spotify, recommendations are also shaped by exclusivity and popularity, but the interface appears more neutral overall. The system surfaces content based more on user behaviour and automated personalisation than on manual editorial selection, as observed in the platform walkthrough (Podimo, 2025; Spotify, 2025).

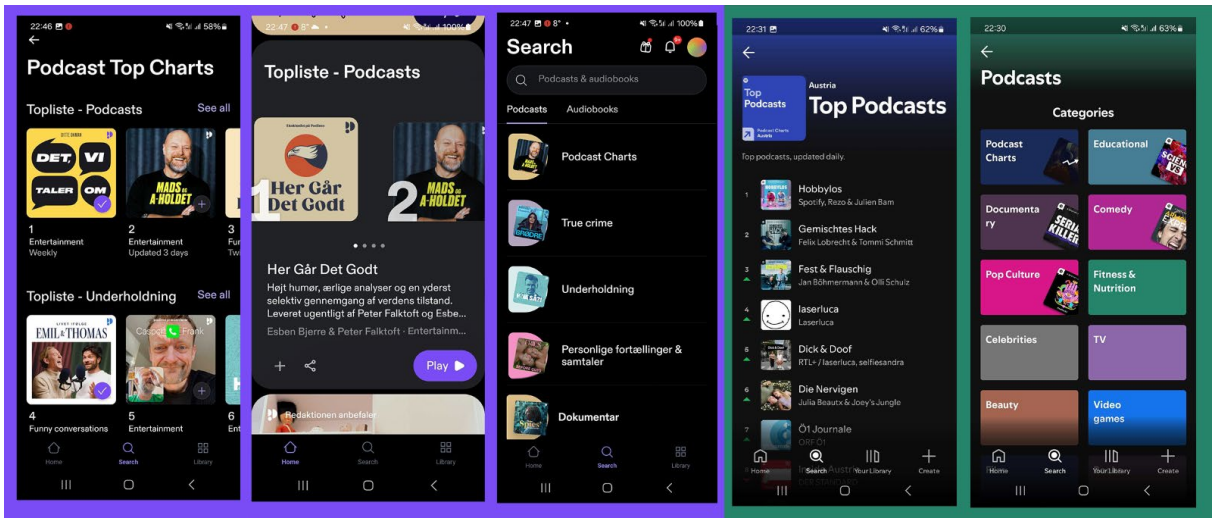


*Figure 2. Discovery layout in Podimo (left, purple) and Spotify (right, green).*

As confirmed in the platform walkthrough (Podimo, 2025; Spotify, 2025), both platforms are designed to favour repeated, habitual listening. On Podimo, this tends to promote broadly popular shows (especially exclusives) while Spotify leans more heavily on personalised filtering based on prior user behaviour. Across both platforms, genre sections featuring high-performing content are surfaced most visibly on discovery screens. This reflects Sullivan's (2019, p. 6) concept of the "walled garden," where discovery seems open but is shaped by commercial filtering.

Overall, the interviews and walkthrough reveal that discovery systems prioritise content that already performs well, either in general platform metrics or in relation to individual user preferences.

## 6.2. How is Visibility Structured?

The *second layer* of podcast visibility is shaped by how platforms structure genre categories, surface content across app sections, and visually foreground shows. These design choices guide users' discovery paths and reflect assumptions about what types of content are prioritised. As shown in the platform walkthrough (Podimo, 2025) and confirmed in interviews, Podimo's interface consistently pushes shows with broad appeal, easily recognizable formats, visual familiarity, and financial relevance to the platform. One striking example is the prominence of podcast covers featuring the faces of well-known hosts, which are frequently promoted, as noted by the Curation Manager (interview, 2025) and observed in the platform walkthrough (Podimo, 2025).

Another clear example of platform influence appears in the “explore genres” category layout. Both Spotify and Podimo use a cover image on the side of each category section to visually anchor it. On both platforms, this image is almost always a platform-exclusive show, unless no exclusives exist in that category. This design choice shapes how users understand each genre. When a category is consistently framed by a platform-owned title, it associates the genre with that specific tone or style, even if a broader range of podcasts exists within it. This pattern was observed during the platform walkthrough (Podimo, 2025; Spotify, 2025) and is illustrated in *Figure 2*.

*Figure 3* illustrates how genre sections get structured. At the top of each page, large horizontal content cards prominently promoting exclusive shows on Podimo. In contrast, niche or lower-priority categories are placed further down, with fewer visual elements and limited editorial emphasis, often because they lack exclusive content. By comparison, Spotify uses a flatter, vertical grid layout that appears more neutral. A similar layout is only visible on Podimo when navigating deeper into sub-categories (Podimo, 2025; Spotify, 2025).

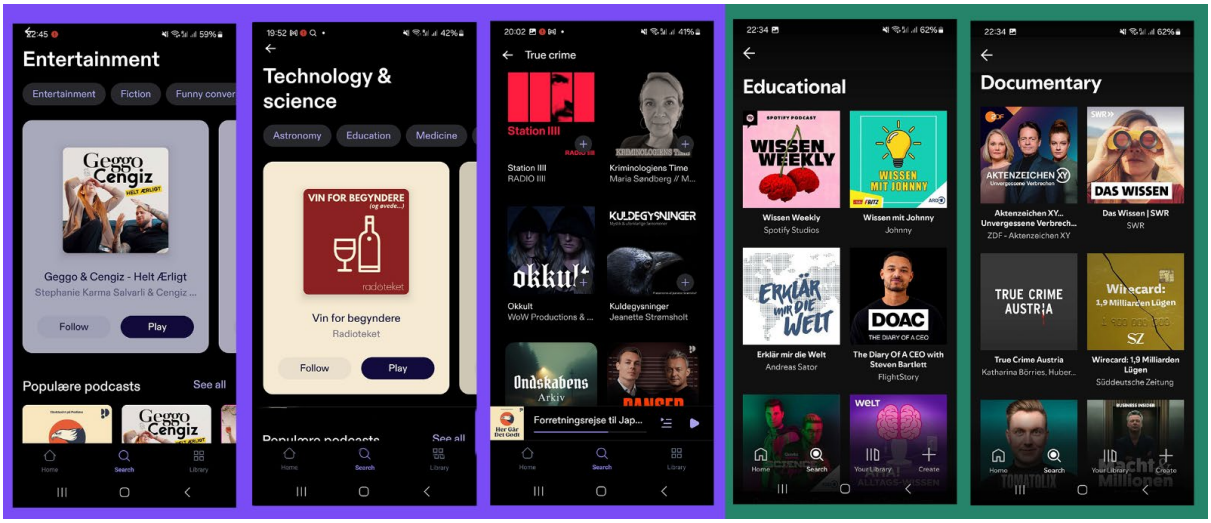


*Figure 3. Categorization and content surfacing in Podimo (left, purple) and Spotify (right, green).*

This hierarchy of visibility echoes priorities discussed in interviews. The Curation Manager explained that shows without a strong hook or clear concept are harder to promote: “If you don’t have a strong visual or something that could be [almost like] a tabloid headline, it’s hard to sell it” (interview, 2025). In this context, even high-quality

productions may remain invisible if their themes are subtle or their titles lack instant clarity.

Podimo's UX research supports this emphasis on clarity. While users expressed interest in more varied content and personal recommendations, they also reported skipping shows that failed to communicate their intent quickly. As one participant put it, "If I don't know what I'm getting in five seconds, I move on" (Podimo UX Research, 2025). This preference for immediate recognition limits the visibility of more nuanced or unique podcasts.

Curation practices further reinforce this trend. As the Curation Manager explained, his team is evaluated based on user engagement with the shows they promote. If a title performs poorly for two weeks in a row, "it's getting downgraded in terms of visibility" (interview, 2025). Once a show drops out of rotation, it tends to receive even less attention. He shared the example of a Danish podcast about "how to write a diary," which failed to attract listener interest and was removed from promotion after two attempts.

For users, these curatorial surfacing processes are often invisible. "I wish that people knew that my curation is made by a human and not a machine," the Curation Manager said. "It's not very clearly expressed in the app" (interview, 2025). He suggested that clearer curatorial space could help communicate the human judgment behind recommendations. As Lacey (2013, p. 194) reminds us, the design of algorithmic personalization systems affects how we listen, and whether listening becomes a civic act or just a habit shaped by invisible logics.

In practice, visibility on Podimo is shaped by a mix of human curation, algorithmic systems, and interface design. These are all influenced by business goals and practical constraints such as team capacity and technical resources. The result is a discovery system where content is surfaced largely based on how well it aligns with the platform's strategic priorities and once promoted tends to remain visible through a popularity-driven feedback loop.

## 6.3. Which Podcasts Get Prioritised?

The *third layer* of podcast visibility reflects how internal teams prioritise content that aligns with platform goals. Both Podimo's algorithmic and curatorial systems have to favour measurable engagement, especially for content with broad appeal or strategic

value. The Curation Manager explained that when performance data is unavailable, he initially places content based on instinct and experience but adjusts quickly once early results appear: “After a single day, I already know quite a lot about how it’s going to perform” (interview, 2025). Underperforming titles are quickly removed from rotation. While all owned productions receive a launch push, their long-term visibility depends on data, making slower-growing or unconventional shows harder to maintain.

When a show receives internal backing, such as through content partnerships or executive pressure, it may be promoted more heavily even if its performance is weak. “Sometimes there are shows I wouldn’t personally promote again, but I do it anyway because a lot of money has been spent on them,” the Curation Manager explained (interview, 2025). This reveals a tension between curatorial judgment and commercial priorities.

Algorithmic recommendation follows a similarly pragmatic logic. As the Director of AI explained, Podimo’s system is primarily optimised for consistent listening: “We mainly optimise towards conversion [...] with some constraints on diversity” (interview, 2025). The Lead Data Scientist elaborated that the algorithm currently operates on a 90–10 weighting model, where relevance[7] (measured by conversion) significantly outweighs diversity. In this context, diversity refers to a serendipity factor in the recommendation engine that favours less familiar or open-RSS shows (interview, 2025).

In this setup, “popularity becomes a proxy for quality,” as the Director of AI put it (interview, 2025). To “avoid penalising new shows,” he noted that some features are manually adjusted: “When we launch a new podcast, [we] artificially change some of these features to promote and surface the new, but commercially important content. So, we kind of give them a chance […] to be recommended.” (interview, 2025). Still, underperforming shows are cycled out quickly, which limits the visibility of formats that fall outside the platform’s often rather mainstream preferences.

As the Lead Data Scientist explained, Podimo’s algorithm mainly relies on past listening. “That’s our strongest signal” (interview, 2025). It also uses a broad range of user data to build personalised profiles. Curators can manually select several shows to highlight, but these are often re-ranked algorithmically: “We re-rank [their selections] based on user

[7] What counts as “relevant” depends on how any system is designed. At Podimo, relevance is tied to predicted user engagement, but it could also be defined by other criteria, like editorial value, sound quality, or cultural significance. Each definition highlights different priorities and reflects specific design choices.

preferences," he said. Content on the home screen is then surfaced according to this logic and the constraints of the interface layout (interview, 2025).

Repeated exposure also plays a central role. The same titles often appear across Podimo's toplists, curated rows, and personalised recommendations. "We promote the same stuff that the algorithm is promoting," said the Curation Manager, describing a cycle in which high-converting shows dominate multiple sections. "Some of our most popular shows are just the ones that work every week" (interview, 2025). These shows are then promoted across different teams, as each department aims to meet its business targets.

However, user feedback reflects some fatigue with this repetition. "Why do you constantly recommend me the same ones?" one participant asked during UX testing. "I suppose it's because you make more money, but it's an irritation for sure." The same participant added, "Why recommend something to me when you don't know me?" (Podimo UX Research, 2023). These comments highlight a disconnect between optimisation logic and some users' desire for meaningful discovery.

*Figure 4* illustrates how Spotify's surfacing strategy differs from Podimo's in both structure and tone. Podimo prominently features larger visual cards, curated playlists, and editorially highlighted exclusives, that often combine human selection with algorithmic automation (Podimo, 2025). Spotify, by contrast, presents a more neutral interface design that relies more on list-based formats and behaviour-driven personalisation. As shown in the platform walkthrough (Spotify, 2025), Spotify's recommendations are largely driven by collaborative filtering[8] and past listening behaviour. While the surfaced content is not necessarily more diverse, the interface feels more tailored to individual users. In contrast, Podimo's layout places greater emphasis on editorial control and exclusive content, highlighting the platform's commercial priorities more visibly.

[8] A recommendation technique that predicts a user's preferences for content based on the preferences of similar users.

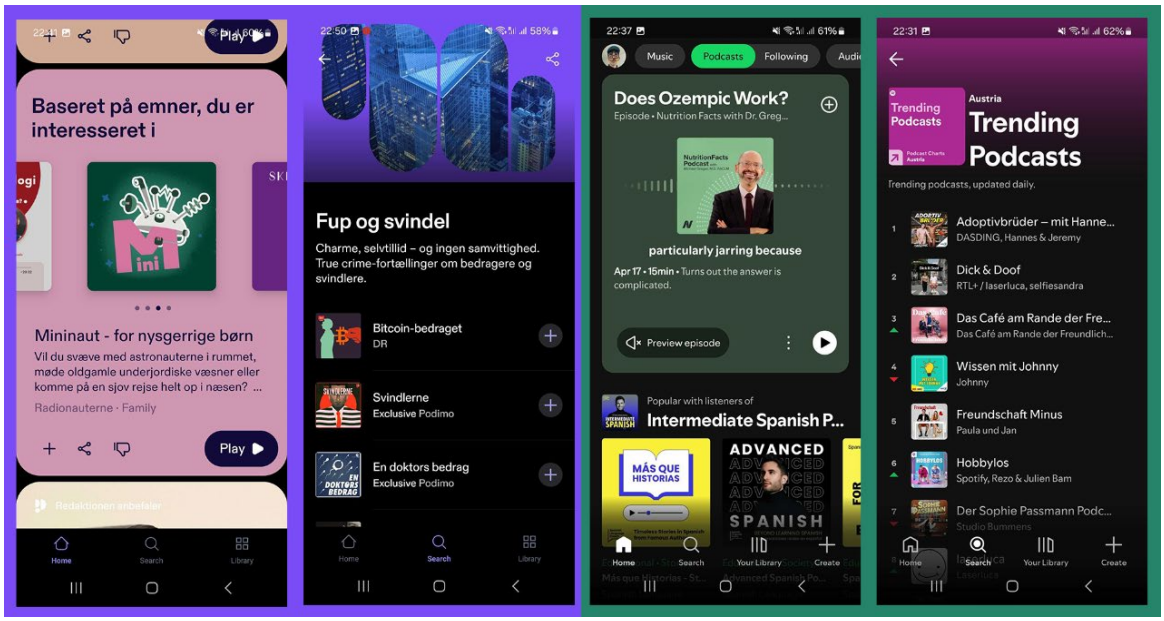


*Figure 4. Recommendation logic in Podimo (left, purple) and Spotify (right, green).*

On both platforms, what gets surfaced seems to be closely tied to internal performance goals and strategic interests. Especially on Podimo it becomes clear, that podcasts that show engagement or align with platform priorities are prioritised, while others are overlooked. Discovery works as a sorting mechanism that promotes familiar, efficient formats. Podcast visibility in that sense tends to flatten because content is shaped to fit platform-friendly formats, limiting diversity in tone, style, and structure.

## 6.4. What Discovery Leaves Out?

This *final layer* of the analysis looks at the kinds of podcasts that remain difficult to recommend within current discovery systems.

As confirmed in the platform walkthrough (Podimo, 2025), Podimo's homepage is dominated by recall-based rows and exclusive titles. Algorithmic suggestions tend to further repeat prior listening habits. Curated space is limited and often geared toward already popular content. These patterns seem to reinforce familiarity and making it harder for new creators or unconventional formats to gain visibility.

The Curation Manager confirmed that slower, more demanding shows often fall through. "If the stories you tell require more time and more effort, it's a lot harder to get through on Podimo" (interview, 2025).

Genre tagging also plays a role. In Podimo's backend, shows are labelled using fixed categories like "crime" or "comedy," but these often fail to reflect what actually makes

people engage. “What makes people engage with a show is not the category but vibe of the hosts, storytelling etc., which is not conveyed by the category itself,” the Curation Manager explained (interview, 2025).

The Curation Manager also noted that tone and emotional rhythm are especially hard to represent visually. “It’s more about conveying the tone/vibe of the episode than what the actual content is. That is very hard to convey with just a podcast cover” (interview, 2025). These challenges make it difficult to promote episodes that reflect some of podcasting’s distinctive qualities, as discussed in Sections 3.3 and 4.2.

He further explained that serialised podcasts face additional limits. “It’s a lot harder to promote, e.g., episode six [of a serialised show], because there’s a lot of context that you’re not able to give,” the Curation Manager said (interview, 2025). Without a clear entry point or overview, individual episodes from serialised formats often remain overlooked. Older shows also lose visibility if systems aren’t fully optimised for repackaging content properly, he noted. “Definitely older content that's still worth-while listening to, is hard to promote.” (interview, 2025).

The platform walkthrough further confirms that niche genres and less conventional formats are harder to access. Tabs such as “Society” or “Science” are harder to find in the app’s interface, while the homepage mainly features familiar formats, recognisable hosts, and Podimo-exclusive shows (Podimo, 2025). This reflects a discovery system that defines visibility by prioritising content with broad appeal, strong performance, and commercial value.

Reflecting on this, the Curation Manager acknowledged the broader tension: “We have our company values ‘Enrich Life Through Listening’, but we’re also a highly commercial business that needs to do what gets listeners in” (interview, 2025). His team aims to promote a diverse selection, but they often face internal pressure to push exclusives. He noted tensions within the platform, observing that other departments, like product, often have more flexibility to surface non-exclusive shows. Describing the situation as “a difficult balance,” he pointed to the challenge of offering a rich listening experience while meeting business targets tied to exclusive content visibility (interview, 2025).

*Figure 5*, visually compares discovery on the search and home screens on Podimo vs. Spotify. Both rely on personalised content and recall logic, but Spotify separates these into a dedicated tab and also organises search results more clearly by theme. This setup gives users a slightly more flexible and organised way to discover new content (Podimo, 2025; Spotify, 2025).

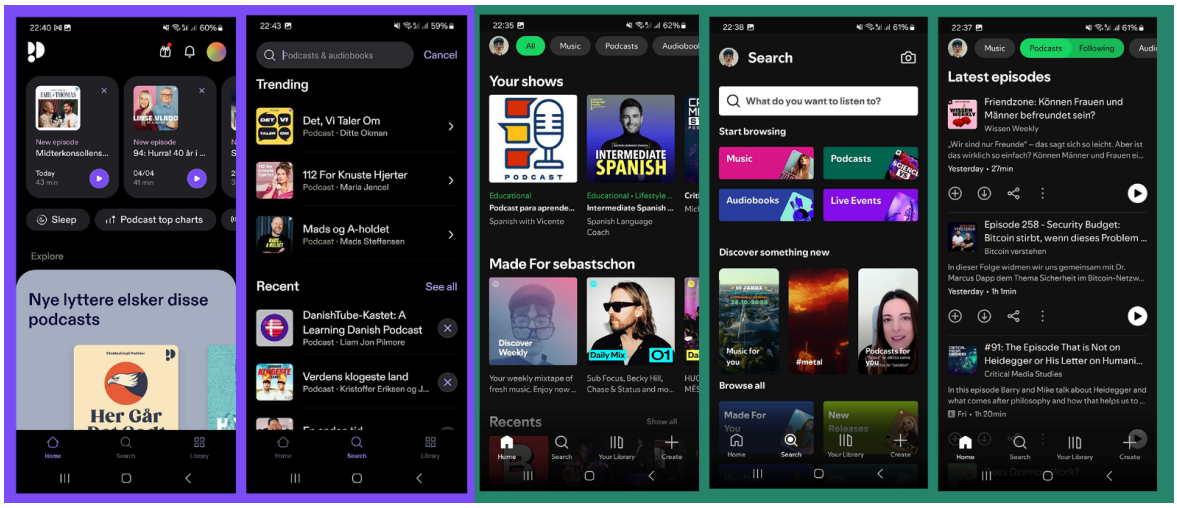


*Figure 5. Recall, search, and personalisation features in Podimo (left, purple) and Spotify (right, green).*

Ultimately, discovery on Podimo is shaped by overlapping systems of control: interface design, performance-based promotion, and content categorization.

As shown through interviews and the platform walkthrough (Podimo, 2025), podcasts that rely on serialised storytelling, slower pacing, or emotional nuance often struggle to gain visibility. Podimo's discovery system tends to prioritise familiar, easily framed content that performs well under metric-driven conditions. Shows that are harder to categorise or take longer to connect with audiences receive less support, limiting the reach of formats that don't fit dominant patterns.

This reflects Van Dijck et al.'s (2018, pp. 141–144) point that platforms embed commercial priorities into how their systems operate, and supports Gillespie's (2014, p. 181) view of algorithmic infrastructures as filters of cultural visibility. The interviews and walkthroughs confirmed that unconventional or emotionally complex shows often receive limited promotion (interviews, 2025; Podimo, 2025; Spotify, 2025).

This also aligns with Sullivan's (2024, pp. 53–54) observation that podcasting's original formal fluidity is increasingly replaced by standardised categories optimised for scalability.

Lacey's (2013, pp. 195–199) concept of *listening out as civic obligation* adds an ethical dimension to this concern. It highlights the importance of remaining open to unfamiliar or challenging perspectives, especially in public media environments. If platform design limits what listeners are exposed to, it also narrows the range of voices that can shape shared understanding. What gets left out thus represents a reduced space for cultural and democratic participation. These tensions are discussed further in the final chapter.

# 7. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter synthesises the findings and reflects on what they reveal about podcast discovery systems, cultural visibility, and listening practices on podcast platforms.

## 7.1. From Civic Depth to Comfort Habits

Podcast discovery systems on Podimo and Spotify are shaped by platform architectures that increasingly centre comfort, consistency, and performance over civic and affective depth. While the original promise of podcasting emphasised openness, intimacy, and participatory diversity (Berry, 2016a, pp. 662–668), the platformisation of the medium increasingly limits the conditions under which such practices can thrive (Sullivan, 2024, pp. 47, 106–107). Empirical findings from Podimo's app walkthrough and interviews support this, showing that discovery is structured around ease and performance, sidelining content that fosters openness, emotional resonance, or diversity.

The concept of *listening out*, as described by Lacey (2013, pp. 195–199), refers to a civic mode of listening that stays open to unfamiliar voices, alternative viewpoints, and the possibility of dialogue. This thesis finds that such practices are inherently discouraged within Podimo's discovery system. Both the walkthrough and interview data show that the platform's architecture favours short-term engagement over open-ended curiosity. Popularity and retention rates function as key indicators of value, reflecting an "algorithmic culture" rooted in behavioural data, measurement, and optimisation (Striphas, 2015, p. 406).

By comparison, Spotify's system (based on the walkthrough) appears slightly less driven by popularity metrics, offering more opportunities to surface lower profile shows, even if the underlying logic remains similar.

Podimo's emphasis on "habitual use," as noted by both the UX Researcher and the Curation Manager (interviews, 2025), closely aligns with Lacey's (2013, pp. 8–9) idea of *listening in,* a more passive, comfort-driven mode of listening that revolves around familiar formats and predictable experiences. While not inherently negative, the dominance of this pattern across the app may limit the civic and emotional range of discovery. Podcasts that fall outside standardised or widely appealing formats are rarely

surfaced unless they happen to convert well under performance metrics (Sullivan, 2024, p. 107).

This platform logic affects not just what is produced (Cotter, 2019, p. 900), but how listening itself is shaped. As Lacey's (2013, pp. 3–8) vision of *listening out*, defined by attentiveness, openness, and the willingness to be surprised, is difficult to realise in an interface organised around recall, repetition, and visual simplicity. Instead, *listening in* becomes the default, reinforcing private, frictionless use.

While Podimo employees expressed genuine interest in promoting emotional and cultural diversity, such values rarely shape the platform's discovery systems due to broader business targets. This mirrors wider tensions in *platform capitalism*. As Srnicek (2017, pp. 27–32) argues, platforms are primarily designed to maximise engagement and extract data value, rather than to support public dialogue or cultural richness. For podcasting, a medium historically associated with independent voices and experimental formats (Bonini, 2015, pp. 23–24; Berry, 2016a, pp. 663–664), these pressures present particular challenges. When discovery is guided by convenience and consistency, it risks sidelining the very qualities that made podcasting unique in the first place. As a result, listening becomes more commercialised and individualised, potentially weakening its role in building social connection and civic participation.

This flattening of discovery systems shapes which kinds of podcasts people encounter. The Spotify walkthrough revealed similar patterns. Although Spotify offers a broader content-catalogue, its recommendation design still tends to highlight popular and exclusive formats. These patterns were clearly visible in the app (Podimo, 2025), even if less dominant than on Podimo. Both platforms illustrate how system design prioritises comfort-driven, habitual listening by promoting content based on repetition, retention, and performance. Without more intentional support for slower, more diverse, or reflective modes of listening, podcasting may risk losing the openness and creative range that have defined the medium since its early days.

## 7.2. From Human Decisions to System Rules

The interviews at Podimo suggest a general internal desire to support broader forms of listening and storytelling. For example, curators wish to promote more culturally or civically valuable content. However, they still operate within systems designed for short-term engagement. This mode of surfacing podcasts creates a feedback loop, embedding

business logic based on performance and optimisation into systems that prioritise ease and scale.

Both the UX Researcher and the Curation Manager (interviews, 2025) confirmed that titles failing to gain quick traction are typically downgraded or removed from prominent positions. Although these outcomes may appear technically fixed, they reflect broader strategic design choices and commercial pressures. As the Director of AI (interview, 2025) pointed out, "any system can be re-engineered," indicating that platforms could, in theory, prioritise other values if those aims were structurally embedded. In practice, however, even with some moves toward more human-curated content and playlists (as noted in interviews and the walkthrough), Podimo's discovery system still largely prioritises performance metrics. This reflects a structural tendency to favour quick engagement over deeper curation or civic-minded content.

Spotify follows a similar logic but relies more heavily on algorithmic rules than human curation. While engagement metrics still shape discovery, exclusives are less prominently featured, and the interface appears more neutral and automation-driven compared to Podimo (Spotify, 2025).

The shift from a discovery model based on human editorial decisions, such as in the early open-RSS era, to one governed by internal system rules affects podcasting at a deeper level. As Sullivan (2024, pp. 53–54) notes, the formalisation of podcasting increasingly standardises creative practices, narrows affective range, and transforms open-ended content into data units optimised for comparison and sorting within privatised systems.

This leads to a kind of cultural filtering. Shows that perform well early are treated as inherently more valuable, potentially reshaping how value is defined in podcasting. Content that falls outside conventional formats or cannot be easily measured in terms of engagement may be excluded from visibility by the system's logic.

Under the lens of Couldry (2004, pp. 123–130), this process of mediation actively shapes listening culture. While many studies focus on the user side of discovery, this thesis highlights how platform infrastructure and internal decisions function as cultural gatekeeping. By embedding performance indicators into the architecture of discovery, platforms help determine who gets heard.

This study contributes to understanding how gatekeeping operates in the age of algorithms, by examining how discovery is shaped not just by users, but by systems and priorities built into platforms. It shows that platform infrastructures actively help shaping

taste, and in doing so, raise important questions about cultural diversity, editorial responsibility, and the civic potential of podcasting in commercial contexts.

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## 7.3. From Relevance to Repetition

As Striphas (2015, p. 396) notes, relevance decisions are increasingly outsourced to automated systems. This logic is embedded holistically into podcast platforms, which now tend to prioritise performance and predictability over diversity or civic meaning.
Gillespie's (2014, p. 181) notion of platforms as "custodians of visibility" helps frame how Podimo's recommendation system repeatedly pushes shows that have already performed well, making it harder for new or unconventional content to gain visibility.

Spotify, by contrast, reinforces personalised patterns through collaborative filtering, yet both platforms favour behavioural performance over public service ideals (Spotify, 2025). These tendencies reflect how decision-making becomes infrastructural. Striphas (2015, p. 406) calls this the "privatization of process," where cultural judgments are encoded into automated systems that optimise for repetition. Han (2015, p. 8) similarly critiques the dominance of visibility and measurability, arguing that platforms flatten complexity by promoting what is easily quantifiable.
This logic also affects representation and inclusion. Noble (2018, p. 29) warns that algorithmic systems tend to repeatedly push dominant norms. When discovery is based on quick results, shows with slower pacing, marginal perspectives, or unconventional formats struggle to surface. As the Curation Manager explained, even socially important or emotionally rich content may be downgraded if it fails to engage quickly (interview, 2025).
This stands in contrast to early hopes for podcasting as a "long tail" medium that would support niche and independent creators (Anderson, 2006, pp. 132–133). Instead, discovery systems today often replicate mainstream media cycles. Misener's (2021, n.p.) research on *Apple Podcasts* supports this shift, showing how some genre categories become so saturated that niche shows struggle to gain visibility, while others benefit simply from being placed in less crowded categories. Rettberg (2020, p. 2) refers to this dynamic as the "environmental power" of platforms, where infrastructural design subtly shapes what listeners come to perceive as valuable by repeatedly surfacing certain types of content.

Drawing from internal perspectives, this research highlights how public value often takes a backseat to business metrics. At the same time, public service media is frequently criticised for being elitist or disconnected from popular demand, with audiences required to fund content they may not personally value (Hutchinson, 2013, p. 227). In contrast, and on the surface, data-driven platforms like Podimo may appear more neutral and responsive to audience preferences. However, they are ultimately shaped by neoliberal ideals of optimisation and popularity, which introduces their own forms of bias. (Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 163–166)

Interviews with Podimo's AI, UX, and curation teams show that success is assessed based on play rates, rather than on social or cultural significance. Discovery systems, in turn, shape how podcasting is culturally understood.

Ultimately, discovery becomes a framework that actively defines what podcasting is and what it is perceived to be.

## 7.4. From Metrics to Meaning

While earlier sections have shown how Podimo and Spotify prioritise content that performs quickly and predictably, this final section turns to what might be possible if different values were built into discovery systems from the start.

Several interviewees, including Podimo's UX Researcher and Director of AI (interviews, 2025), pointed to potential future directions, such as goal-based discovery, context-aware recommendations, and interfaces that make users' listening intentions more visible. These strategies could move beyond short-term metrics and allow more space for emotionally nuanced, reflective, exploratory, or civically engaged listening.

Existing research supports this direction. Liang et al. (2023, p. 153) argue that systems oriented toward user goals like learning, comfort, or curiosity can expand discovery and deepen cultural participation. Similarly, Lacey (2023, n.p.) emphasises that civic listening requires time, attention, and supportive structures. These are not accidental outcomes of design but must be intentionally built into platform infrastructure.

Patreon's *State of Create* report (2025) echoes these insights. As a large-scale UX study on digital creators and communities, it highlights a growing preference among audiences for long-form audio (pp. 9–50), sustained engagement, and emotionally resonant content, especially within trusted creator communities. Many users also express a willingness to support this kind of content financially. While the report does not address Podimo directly,

it points to a broader shift away from short-form, performance-driven content and suggests that audiences may be experiencing algorithmic fatigue, now valuing deeper connection over quick consumption.

To move from metrics to meaning, podcast platforms need to support more open-ended forms of listening and cultural expression. If popularity continues to stand in as a proxy for quality, visibility will remain shaped by what is familiar and measurable. As Rettberg (2020, p. 2) points out, the way platforms are built affects not just what we see, but also what kinds of ideas and content we can think about or share.

Rebuilding discovery around civic and cultural value is essential for ensuring that podcasting continues to support democratic participation, cultural inclusion, and diverse public expression in the face of growing commercial pressures.

## 7.5. Synthesis and Conclusion

The following synthesis brings together the findings and perspectives explored in the previous sections, without introducing new data or sources.

Overall, this thesis set out to understand how podcast discovery systems shape who gets heard, and what that means for culture, diversity, and public value. By focusing on Podimo, with comparison to Spotify, it showed how recommendation systems affect visibility. These systems are designed to prioritise content that performs well, related to what is popular, quick to engage with, and easy to categorise.

In its earlier days, podcasting was more open, diverse, and built on personal connection. It supported niche voices, emotional storytelling, and community-driven content. But as platforms have taken over discovery, this openness has started to fade. Discovery is now structured around business goals. The aim is to keep users listening, because that drives growth. As a result, platforms reward content that fits their system and downgrade content that does not.

This changes how podcasting works. Listening becomes focused on comfort, routine, and repetition. Platforms push shows that are familiar, short, or already successful. This limits the space for slower, more meaningful podcasts. It also affects how people listen. Civic and adventurous forms of listening, which Lacey calls *listening out*, become harder to sustain. People are nudged toward *listening in*, where the goal is comfort and habit. The same shows are promoted again and again. Diversity gets lost in the background.

The problem goes deeper than just popularity. This thesis highlights how decisions are driven by what can be measured. Performance data and metrics, like play rates, retention, and conversions, are used to define what is valuable. But things like emotional depth, cultural significance, or public value are not easily measured. As a result, what is meaningful for society often gets overlooked by platform systems shaped by neoliberal ideas of what can be measured and monetised.

Additionally, there is a form of privatisation happening. Platforms now control who gets heard. Content sits behind logins, paywalls, and recommendation systems. At the same time, listeners are pulled into personal content bubbles. It becomes easier to hear more of the same, and harder to discover what is unfamiliar. This limits exposure to new ideas, perspectives, and voices. The intimacy of podcasting becomes isolated. People connect with shows, but often only within their comfort zone.

The interview data confirms these issues. Employees at Podimo care about diversity and meaningful content, but their work is shaped by platform goals. Even human curators must meet specific performance targets. This shows that the problem is structural and draws from wider socio-economic capitalist tendencies. As the Director of AI noted, systems can be changed, but only if companies decide that other values matter. This can be difficult in a context of constant competitive pressure.

The thesis also draws a contrast between two value systems. On one side are platform metrics built on optimisation and efficiency. These reflect a commercial model based on growth and data. On the other side are values linked to public service, like inclusion, emotional connection, and cultural depth. Right now, platforms prioritise what they can track and scale. This means data has become more important than public value.

Still, there are signs of possibility. Interviews and recent research suggest new ways of thinking about discovery. These include letting users search by mood or intention and designing systems that support slower or more reflective listening. But these changes will only matter if platforms are willing to shift their focus. Better systems will not come from better algorithms alone. They require rethinking what discovery is for, and what kinds of listening it should support.

Podcasting is still fundamentally in a transition period. Contrary to Music and TV streaming, it has not yet been fully shaped by platform standards. That means there is still room to act. The findings in this thesis show that discovery is not just about surfacing content but. It is a form of power that decides what becomes visible and what does not.

Platforms actively shape culture through their embedded logic of what gets recommended to users.

Ultimately, platforms are here to stay, but if podcasting is to remain open, diverse, and meaningful, then discovery needs to be redesigned. It should not just reward what performs well according to basic data but also support what matters on a cultural and civic level. Listening is more than a passive habit. As Lacey suggests, it can be a way of relating to others, of learning, and of being part of a shared world. The systems that guide listening should reflect that. Who gets heard will continue to depend on how we choose to design the systems that guide our attention.

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# 9. Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview Guide – All Questions

**Core Questions (All Participants – 15 Total)**

1. From your experience, which types of content or podcasters tend to be shown more often on Podimo, and which ones feel harder to surface or promote? Why do you think that is?

2. What do you think current podcast recommendation systems are mainly optimizing toward: What's best for the listener, or what's best for the platform? Or both?

3. Do you think current podcast personalisation really captures, what makes a podcast meaningful, or does it miss certain deeper elements, like emotional tone or long-form structure? And do you think people connect to podcasts in different ways compared to other media like music or video?

4. Are there kinds of shows (formats, voices, or styles) that just don't seem to fit easily into the current discovery set-up at Podimo? Why do you think that is?

5. How do you see the different teams here at Podimo (UX, Product, AI and curation) shape discovery in different ways? Do their goals mostly align?

6. Since podcasts & audiobooks offer such different listening experiences (unstructured, raw and authentic medium vs. structured and polished), do you think they should have separate discovery systems, or is it valuable to recommend them through the same logic/algorithm (like what it's doing now, just develop that further)?

7. Do you think platforms like Podimo should actively promote diverse voices, even if it's not what the algorithm would suggest?

8. Have you noticed any patterns in what users don't find or engage with? If so, what do you think is missing in the discovery flow?

9. How do you think discovery systems affect what people value, like whether something feels relevant, serious, or even worth listening to?

10. What do you wish users understood about how podcast recommendations work behind the scenes?

11. Have you seen podcasters change how they promote their content just to be more visible and reach more people? If so, does/did that affect their creative freedom or artistic expression?

12. Do you think there's enough room for people to stumble across something totally new or niche, or does it feel like the current recommendation system mostly plays it safe?

13. What kinds of voices, topics, or communities do you personally think deserve more space or visibility on the platform?

14. Do you see a tension between what performs well on paper (metrics-based and short-term) vs. what feels meaningful or valuable in the long run?

15. Looking at the discovery system (at Podimo) as a whole, what do you think it's doing well already, and what needs more attention or change in your opinion?

**UX-Specific Questions for the user researcher (5 Total)**

1. Can you think of anything a user told you that really changed how you understood podcast discovery?

2. Are there, based on your experience, parts of the podcast listening experience (like connection, identity, or trust) that are hard to capture through standard UX methods?

3. Have you ever had to advocate for a user need that didn't fit into KPIs or business goals? How was that received?

4. Is there something you'd love to explore in UX research around podcasts (potentially discovery), but haven't had the chance to yet?

5. When you think about podcast discovery mainly as a social or cultural experience (not just
a technical one), what do you think gets often missed?

**AI-Specific Questions for the AI Manager and Data Scientist that is focussed on the recommender engine (5 Total)**

1. What kind of data does the current recommendation system mostly depend on, and why is that especially tricky when recommending podcasts which don't always fit into clear categories or formats? (Could that be related to why certain embeddings might take long to be "filled")

2. Do you think algorithmic logic can fairly represent content that is niche, emotional, or harder to categorise?

3. What do you see as the biggest challenges in building a podcast recommendation system that balances personalisation with diversity?

4. How do you approach tuning the algorithm when the goals of business, user engagement, and content variety don't fully align?

5. What's something you wish more non-technical team members understood about the limitations or potential of the algorithm?

**Curation-Specific Questions for the Curation Manager (5 Total)**

1. How do you approach curating content for the platform, what mainly guides your decisions when surfacing or promoting shows?

2. Do you ever feel like your curation work complements or clashes with what the algorithm recommends? Can you name instances when it happened?

3. Are there kinds of content you want to promote more but feel limited by how the platform is structured?

4. How do you decide which voices, genres, or themes to highlight, especially when they don’t yet have a strong audience or performance data behind them?

5. What role do you think human curation should play in a platform that also relies heavily on algorithmic discovery? Especially regarding podcasts, an inherently “human,“ “raw” and “real” type of medium.

# Appendix B: Overview of Interview Themes

The following themes were developed through reflexive analysis of the interviews with Podimo staff. Each theme reflects recurring ideas or tensions in how participants described podcast discovery and recommendation systems.

**1. Personalisation vs. Platform Goals**

- Struggle to balance user relevance with business goals
- "Best" recommendations not always the ones that perform
- Engagement metrics drive visibility decisions

**2. Defining Quality and Value**

- Different views on what makes content worth recommending
- Completion rates vs. emotional depth or originality
- Visibility shaped by what is easily measurable

**3. Limits of Platform Space and Structure**

- Limited curatorial slots and homepage real estate
- Predictability and scale prioritised over experimentation
- Frustration with rigid recommendation formats

**4. Categorisation Challenges**

- Tagging feels necessary but restrictive
- Surface challenges with mixed-format or niche shows
- Genre labels don't always capture specificities of podcasts, like vibe or tone, which makes people connect to a show on a deeper level

**5. Discovery as Emotional and Contextual**

- Listening shaped by mood, context, or personal moments
- Algorithms don't capture emotional tone or intent
- Desire for more human or community-driven discovery

These points came up across all three interviews, with each person bringing a different perspective from user research, AI development, and content curation.

# Appendix C: Participant Information and Consent Form

*The following is a sample of the participant information and consent form used in the study. It outlines the purpose, procedures, and confidentiality terms provided to interview participants prior to data collection:*

**Study Title:** Who Gets Heard? Podcast Discovery in the Age of Algorithms
**Researcher:** Sebastian Kaiser, master's student, Media and Communication Studies, Malmö University

**Information Letter**

Dear participant,

I am conducting a qualitative interview study as part of my master's thesis at Malmö University. This research investigates how podcast platforms' efforts to categorise and recommend content shape how podcasts are discovered, understood, and valued—particularly in relation to diversity, affective depth, and user agency.

The study critically explores the tension between algorithmic personalisation and the unique qualities of podcasting, such as intimacy, ambiguity, and niche appeal. Your perspective will help provide insight into how discovery systems impact which voices and formats gain visibility.

Participation involves a 45-minute semi-structured interview, which will be audio recorded and transcribed. You will be asked about your professional role, platform strategies, and ideas for improving podcast discovery. All data will be handled confidentially. You may request anonymization, and you will have the opportunity to review any attributed quotes before inclusion in the thesis.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

If you have questions, please contact the researcher or supervisor.

**Informed Consent Form**

I hereby confirm that:

- I have received information about the study and understand its purpose.

- I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed.
- I understand that the data will be treated confidentially and used only for academic purposes.
- I am aware that I may request anonymization and review quoted material before it is published.
- I understand that participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time without consequence.

**Name:**

**Signature:**

**Date**

# Appendix D: Walkthrough Summary–Podimo vs. Spotify

**This table** summarises key findings from the platform walkthroughs of Podimo (v2.90.0) and Spotify (v9.0.34.593), based on the five core areas outlined in Section 5.2.2 and adapted from Light et al. (2018). It presents a structured comparison of how podcast discovery is organised through each app's design, recommendation logic, and curatorial affordances.

| Focus Area | Podimo | Spotify |
|---|---|---|
| **Home Screen** | Highly curated and platform-driven; exclusive shows dominate multiple sections (e.g., 'Top Charts', 'We Think You'd Like'). Repetition of the same titles is common; limited visible personalisation. | Music prioritised on main home tab. Podcast section shows 'Your Shows' and personalised rows based on behaviour. Podcast recall features are embedded deeper in the app but feel tailored. |
| **Search Functionality** | Highlights trending and exclusive content first. Mixed media results (podcasts, audiobooks) shown together. Filtering options available post-search input. Curatorial influence shapes top results. | No promoted shows in default search. Results adapt to prior searches and listening behaviour. Lacks advanced filtering but offers more organic, algorithm-driven ranking. |
| **Explore / Discovery Tab** | Emphasises platform exclusives across charts and genre sections. Discovery is structured around visibility of promoted shows. Curated lists exist but reinforce top-performing content. | Mixed content in Discovery tab, often favouring music. Podcast discovery relies more on genre tabs and swipable video previews. Feels less manually curated, more algorithmic and genre focused. |
| **Categories & Genre Framing** | Broad emotional or mood-based labels like 'Feel Good' and 'Inspiring' used; blends | Structured using industry-standard genres and sub-genres (e.g., 'Comedy', 'News', 'True |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | tone and theme. Prioritises marketable and familiar categories (e.g. True Crime, Entertainment). | Crime'). Some genre labels are broken down into more precise categories than Podimo. |
| **Personalisation Features** | Personalisation is limited; repetition of exclusive content remains even after user interaction. Algorithmic logic favours conversions over user diversity. 'Similar shows' often highlight exclusives first. | Highly personalised; suggestions are behaviourally reactive. Even in 'More like this', Spotify shows open and non-exclusive content. Algorithm less biased toward owned content, shows more relevance-based discovery. |

*Table 3. Comparative Walkthrough Observations: Podimo vs. Spotify*