



Original Article

From Mic to Multi-Platform: The Rise of Gen Z in Podcasting

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Abstract

There is a big revolution happening in the global podcast sector right now. It's changing from a small, audio-only medium to a strong, human-centered media ecosystem. This change in strategy is mostly based on the ideals and habits of Generation Z (Gen Z), which is the group of people born between 1997 and 2012 and is known as the generation that was first to be truly digital-native. Gen Z's media involvement is changing the way audio material is made, shared, and made money from. The business is shifting its focus from getting the most people to see it to building deep, trusted relationships. Attitudes, actions, and digital proficiency have transformed the contemporary media scene. It looks closely at how their habits for consuming material have changed over time and how they are changing traditional ways of delivering oral histories, foremost through podcasts. The article investigates the swiftly evolving landscape of audio podcasting and the innovative trajectory spearheaded by Gen Z, utilizing diverse sources such as market reports, academic studies, and content analysis. A big focus is on how the younger set not only consumes material but also makes it in methods that show their need for realness, interaction, and being able to engage with content on multiple platforms. The results show how Gen Z has changed the podcast presentation into a bigger content ecosystem by adding music, images, and interactive components to make it more interesting. These young creators stand out because they use cutting-edge sound design tools to make stories that are both immersive and emotionally powerful. The report says that their new ideas are changing the way individuals connect and talk to each other through media. What used to be a passive way to listen has recently evolved into an active, individualized way to convey stories that fits with how young people today think about technology.

Keywords: Generation Z, Podcasting, Digital Storytelling, Media Innovation, Interactive Content, Creation Ecosystem

Introduction

Podcasting's rise proves that it is a big business and cultural force. A closer look at the financial data, on the other hand, demonstrates that the market's actual strength isn't in traditional advertising, but in making more money from devoted listeners.

The Scale of Sound: Checking the Market's Path

The podcast industry is making a lot of money and growing quickly. By 2025, the global podcasting industry is anticipated to be worth between \$32.48 billion and \$39.63 billion. This is a big jump from last year. Long-term forecasts suggest that this growth will continue and be strong, with projections showing that the market size could reach \$362.99 billion by 2035, growing at a significant 27.3% Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) from 2026 onward. This trend shows that investors still believe in the medium's future earning potential.

At the same time, the number of people who listen to podcasts around the world has grown a lot and is expected to stabilise at around 584.1 million by 2025.3 Even though this is a huge audience, global advertising spending is expected to reach about \$4.46 billion in 2025. This important information shows that the modern podcast economy has a major structural characteristic: the overall market value (almost \$40 billion) is much higher than the revenue generated by traditional ad spending alone (\$4.46 billion). This discrepancy illustrates that the industry's economic value must come largely from income sources that are high-margin and community-driven, such as live events, retail, premium content, and direct fan support. Traditional Cost Per Mille (CPM) statistics can't fully show how valuable the superfan ecosystem is. This is why creators and investors should keep an eye on the ecosystem's stability and engagement metrics.

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Gen Z customers are largely responsible for this high-value consumption. Gen Z, who are digital natives and spend more than six hours a day on their phones, expects technology to work together perfectly.¹ This generation spends almost \$97.70 a month on media services, which shows that they are willing to pay for content that matches their values and gives them a real, personalised experience.⁵ Their preference for user-generated content (UGC) and genuine relatability over polished, traditional advertising is what drives the new economic models of audio.

The Fragmentation of Attention - Examining the Dual-Focus Listener

Gen Z has impacted how individuals get information in a big manner by not liking targeted, time-block media interaction. They can easily do a lot of activities at once, like listen to a podcast as they work out, cook, or do research. This means that individuals usually listen to audio while doing other things. This gives content makers a unique strategic mandate known as the "dual-focus" strategy.

The goal for producers is to provide material that people can remember even when they are busy. The podcast should be a great background activity until a story hook or an emotionally impactful revelation happens. At that point, the content must be so good that you can't help but pay attention.

But the psychological reality of media multitasking (MMT) is a very hard problem. Research indicates that chronic MMT does not constitute genuine simultaneous processing but rather rapid context switching. Studies contrasting heavy and light multitaskers reveal that heavy multitaskers significantly underperform on tasks necessitating sustained, goal-directed attention. The prevalence of MMT signifies that the primary challenge for the long-form audio industry is not competition from alternative media sources, but rather competition for the listener's finite cognitive resources.

To get beyond this mental obstacle, the content needs to have good audio production and a story that retains people's attention. Authenticity is what makes background noise into focused, purposeful participation. A listener must discern a strong emotional or narrative rationale—a "gripping story or moving discovery"—substantial enough to justify the disruption of the cognitive loop inherent in multitasking. The podcast is better than synchronous or fragmented visual media because it may swing between background noise and a concentrated story. It gives Gen Z a way to get very involved that may change with their lifestyle.

The Significance of Emotional Resonance: Genuineness, Psychotherapy, and Confidence

The media tastes of Generation Z are intrinsically linked to their emotional and psychological needs. They listen to audio not just for entertainment, but also as a way to better themselves, thus they need to trust the people they choose to follow.

1. The Therapeutic Shift: Using Content to Get Better

This generation cares a lot about their mental health. Compared to previous generations, Gen Z cohorts show far higher levels of psychological distress, such as anxiety, stress, and depression. This is likely due to increased pressures from society and the internet. This issue immediately impacts consumer behaviour: Generation Z not only prioritises mental health but also invests significant financial resources in wellness, exceeding older generations in spending on mindfulness applications, meditation equipment, and therapy sessions.

Podcasts are an inexpensive, easy-to-find, and beneficial way to improve yourself and get therapy. They assist people deal with stress and worry and encourage them to learn more about themselves.¹⁰ For Gen Z, audio content is a way to grow and feel better about themselves. The medium's inherent intimacy, which goes straight into the listener's ear, produces a deep parasocial attachment based on perceived vulnerability and empathy.

Because of this, trusting the host is now the most important element for content to be successful. Gen Z doesn't perceive the speakers they choose as distant superstars. Instead, they see them as "wellness instructors" who talk honestly about their own issues, failures, and how to improve. This openness brings people together to build communities instead of just audiences. The podcast's personal, voice-only format allows listeners a "safe place" to reflect about their feelings. This makes the connection between the presenter and the listener stronger. This generation has a lot of pressure to do well on social media. Because the host is trustworthy, marketers that are connected to the material may be able to make a lot of money from this deep trust.

2. The Authenticity Paradox: Vulnerability as an Aesthetic

Gen Z's media intake is driven by their need for "realness." They consciously reject the "glossy perfection" of earlier digital periods in favour of raw, unfiltered, and intentionally untidy video. Sixteen-minute flaws—a real laugh, an unedited pause, or a minor hiccup in thought—are considered as proof of credibility.

But this rejection of perfection has led to a complicated cultural tension known as the "vulnerability-as-aesthetic." The quest for a "raw, messy aesthetic" has rapidly evolved into a defining content genre of its generation—the impeccable portrayal of imperfection. This trend manifests as curated extreme overshares or public displays of distress, transforming emotional vulnerability into a controlled performance. Creators and, increasingly, organisations are perpetually transforming this vulnerability into a commodity, potentially compromising the authentic nature of the work. If this prepared performance replaces genuine emotional transparency, the fundamental trust that supports the therapeutic transition and the entire monetisation framework is jeopardised.

So, makers' strategic goal is to figure out how to work in this small ethical area. Vulnerability should be founded on the veracity of the narrative, rather than the

performance. This search for authenticity doesn't mean that technical quality isn't important; rather, flawless sound engineering is used to make the human voice clearer and more intimate, making the honest conversation more relevant and powerful. Technical excellence keeps the host's emotional openness alive, which is what generates the deep loyalty that is essential for long-term growth.

The Hybrid Creator Model: How to Get Through the Cross-Platform Funnel

Because Gen Z acts differently, generating good audio content needs to adopt a "Hybrid Creator Model," where the first point of discovery is visual and the point of long-term depth and devotion is long-form audio.

1. The Video Gateway: How to Find Things in the Picture Age

Most people imagine that young people start listening to podcasts right away, but they actually start with visual media. TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels are all short-form video sites that act as the major gateway, letting users communicate with each other right away through short, engaging films.

This trend is supported by platform preferences: 46% of Gen Z (ages 15 to 29) prefer YouTube for podcast listening, which is much more than traditional audio platforms like Spotify (35%) and Apple Podcasts (9%).¹⁷ This statistical fact shows that audio content is often found and consumed in mostly visual environments. The best way to get the word out about things is through social media. Research showed that 80% of young TikTok users found new podcasts right in their feeds.¹⁸ Gen Z finds podcasts at more than twice the rate of older age groups, illustrating how rapidly they can pick up new things.

People frequently find items through short, viral videos that are 30 to 60 seconds long. These movies show a moment that has a big emotional effect, such as a comedy, a true reaction, or an interesting soundbite. They immediately build a little trust and turn a passive viewer into a potential long-term listener.

2. Modular Content Architecture and Execution

The current podcast is not just a set show anymore; it's a "living ecosystem". The first long-form recording should be seen as the main substance. This means that the material needs to be modular so that it can be swiftly and strategically reused across platforms.²⁰ This is the only method to reach the Gen Z audience, who are spread out over multiple channels.

So, visual storytelling should be a part of planning content from the beginning. You need to think carefully about the quality of the video production, even for conversational formats. This includes things like the lighting, the background design, and the host's body language.¹⁸ The goal is to make the most of the recorded content by making sure it fits the needs of each platform while still keeping the brand and story consistent.

This technique works like a reverse funnel: short-form video is the broad, top-of-funnel acquisition layer that doesn't require much viewer commitment and gets a lot of views. The long-form podcast, whether it's audio or video, is what keeps people interested and makes money. The goal is not only to get as many people as possible to watch the video, but also to get as many people as possible to switch from the video to the deep, long-form audio experience. So, paying for high-quality video production is not a luxury; it's a vital marketing cost that helps people find audio and grow their audience.

Platform/Format	Primary Gen Z Use	Funnel Stage	Creative Mandate
TikTok/Instagram Reels (Short-Form Video)	Discovery, Entertainment, Virality	Awareness/Acquisition	Visual Hook (first 3s), Authentic chaos (Vulnerability-as-Aesthetic)
Platform/Format	Primary Gen Z Use	Funnel Stage	Creative Mandate
YouTube (Video Podcast/Shorts)	Consumption, Search, Discovery	Acquisition/Retention	SEO optimization, Full video availability, Modular repurposing
Dedicated Audio Apps (Spotify/Apple)	Dual-Focus Listening, Subscription	Deep Retention/Loyalty	High audio quality, Structured narrative, Emotional connection
Community Platforms (Patreon/Substack)	Co-Creation, Direct Support	Monetization (CVM)	Tiered exclusive content, Direct host interaction, Ownership feeling

The Hybrid Creator Model: How to Get Through the Cross-Platform Funnel

The CVM, Loyalty, and Community: The New Economics of Audio

Old economic models that are centred on scale and reach are no longer useful since Gen Z customers have changed. This makes the industry utilise measurements that show how much intimate relationships are worth.

1. The End of Impression-Based Advertising (CPM)

The most common way to make money from audio is through impressions, which are measured by Cost every Mille (CPM), which tracks the cost every 1,000 listens. To work with a show, most ad networks expect at least 10,000 to 15,000 downloads a month.

The CPM approach is not working as well as it used to because it just counts how many times an ad is aired. It doesn't take into account the real currency of the Gen Z

market: attention and relationship quality. In a world where listeners are typically doing more than one thing at once (dual-focus listening), impression counting doesn't really demonstrate how engaged they are. So, niche content has become a strategic advantage; shows with fewer than a thousand downloads can be very profitable if their audience is very interested in a specific topic. These niche markets justify higher rates because advertisers are paying for access to a high-value group of pre-qualified users who trust the host a lot. In this scenario, relationship-based advertising is very important. This includes host-read ads and brand collaborations that are embedded into the content. Listeners trust their hosts a lot, and this personal connection creates a halo effect, where trust in the host passes to the sponsored brand. This makes people remember the brand better and buy more than generic ads.

2. The Community Value Metric (CVM) and the Superfan Economy

The future of podcasts hinges on being able to get "superfans" who continuously bring recurring cash. We need to use the Community Value Metric (CVM) to measure this loyalty because it looks at emotional participation, engagement rates, and money contributions directly.

Monetization Model	Cost Per Mile (CPM)	Community Value Metric (CVM)
Primary Focus	Scale and Wide Reach (Impression-based)	Depth, Relationship Strength, and Lifetime Value
Key Metrics	25 Downloads (per 1,000), Ad Impressions, Geographic Reach	Direct Financial Contribution, Engagement Rate, Conversion to 30 Superfan
Gen Z Relevance	Low trust; easily ignored; only for broad brand awareness	High trust; necessary for personal recommendation 15; drives premium spending (105% uplift)
Host Role	Ad Reader/Media Outlet	Wellness Instructor/Trusted Collaborator
Strategic Advantage	Simplicity in scale negotiation	Niche defensibility and sustainable revenue stream ³²
Monetization Example	Automated Programmatic Ads (\$15-\$30 CPM) ²⁶	Paid Subscriptions (Patreon/Substack), Merchandise, Live Event Ticket Sales ²⁹

3. Strategic Monetization Pathways

The CVM model relies on robust strategies for direct audience support and ancillary revenue generation:

- Direct Audience Support Platforms:** Platforms specializing in subscription models allow creators to monetize their loyalty directly. Patreon is ideal for multimedia creators, offering tiered rewards and centralized community management. Substack operates as a hybrid platform, excellent for writers who also want to publish newsletters, host group chats, and offer paid, direct subscriptions, ensuring the creator owns the mailing list and payment information.
- High-Value Ancillary Revenue:** Direct financial support also manifests through the sale of high-margin items and experiences. This includes minor brand sponsorships based on shared values and deep audience fit. Selling tickets to live events and community meetups capitalizes on the superfans' desire for real-world connection and community growth.²⁹ Furthermore, the podcast serves as a powerful credibility-building tool that can lead to lucrative

There is a lot of proof that this transition is happening. Only around 20% of the creator economy's total audience are superfans, who are very attached listeners who interact with the artist or creator in numerous ways. But they make a lot of money; they spend 66% more on live events and 105% more on physical goods than casual listeners.³⁰ In some cases, a small 2% of listeners account for 18% of all streams.³¹ The estimated market value of superfan monetisation is growing and is expected to reach \$4.5 billion.

The CVM approach looks at things like the lifetime value of a subscriber, the conversion rates from free to premium content, and the amount of people who are actively engaged in community forums. This kind of revenue that comes from connections is considerably more stable and safe than traffic that comes from algorithms. When revenue comes from direct-to-creator relationships instead of major platform algorithms, it lowers platform risk and increases the long-term value and sustainability of the creator's intellectual property.³² The fact that Gen Z's deeply personalised relationship with hosts drives high purchase behaviour shows that aggressive niche specialisation, which favours depth over breadth, is now the best economic strategy.

indirect monetization through consulting services, course sales, or affiliate marketing partnerships.

Co-Creation and Narrative Evolution

Gen Z's participatory nature mandates a strategic shift from podcasting as a one-way broadcast to an engaging, interactive conversation. This co-creation paradigm transforms listeners into active collaborators (often called "prosumers") and is essential for achieving unparalleled loyalty.

1. The Prosumer Paradigm and Participatory Media

Gen Z blurs the lines between entertainer and audience; nearly half of young listeners actively engage as producers, remixing, reusing, and reinterpreting content. This is a fundamental aspect of their media interaction, often associated with the "prosumer" concept where the roles of consumer and producer are inextricably intertwined. This generation demands a sense of belonging and ownership over the narrative, gravitating toward content ecosystems that invite co-creation and discussion.

They feel a stronger commitment to the story when they have had a hand in shaping it.

For creators, the core strategic challenge of the therapeutic model—how to scale genuine intimacy—is solved through co-creation. By distributing the emotional labor of content creation to the community, the host can maintain perceived proximity and authenticity while managing a large, engaged audience. This requires friction-free interaction, meaning creators must avoid overly complicated mechanisms (such as lengthy sign-ups or complex forms) when soliciting feedback.

2. Interactive Storytelling Formats for Loyalty

Successful podcasts actively integrate listener input into their formal structure, shifting from a monologue to a dialogue. This strategy generates loyalty that cannot be replicated through traditional broadcast models. Key techniques for audience integration include:

Direct Listener Submissions: Incorporating audience voice recordings, call-ins, or written stories directly into the episode narrative, giving listeners a literal voice in the final product.

Interactive Polling and Feedback: Using polls, Q&A sessions, or short surveys to allow the audience to vote on future topics, submit questions for live response, or provide feedback on content direction.

Community Cultivation: Establishing dedicated forums, social media groups, or comment threads (such as those integrated into platforms like Substack) where listeners can connect with the host and, crucially, with each other, fostering a sense of shared community and belonging.

Increased audience involvement through these interactive formats leads to a deeper emotional connection, higher listener retention rates, and stronger word-of-mouth promotion, which are essential drivers of long-term growth and high CVM yield. When audiences co-create, they invest their own emotional and creative capital, reinforcing the value of the original Intellectual Property (IP) and strengthening its defensibility.

The Future of Sound: AI, Morality, and the Trust Crisis

Modern technology, notably Artificial Intelligence (AI), promises to make things work better, but it also brings up severe moral issues that go against Gen Z's need for realness. The purpose of the strategy is to leverage AI as a strong partner while strictly obeying rules about being open. Smart use of AI tools helps speed up post-production and make the Hybrid Creator Model work as effectively as possible:

1. **Audio Enhancement and Polish:** AI tools such as Adobe Podcast's Enhance Speech and Descript's Studio Sound automatically perform essential technical labor, including noise removal, echo reduction, and vocal enhancement, providing professional sound quality with minimal effort.⁴⁴ This pristine sound engineering is used to enhance the clarity of the human conversation, not to mask its imperfections.
2. **Editing Efficiency:** Text-based editing platforms like Descript automate transcription, allowing creators to edit audio and video "like a doc".⁴⁵ AI also detects and

removes filler words ("um," "uh") automatically, dramatically cutting down post-production time.

3. **Distribution and Marketing:** AI assists in essential marketing functions, such as generating show notes, titles, summaries, and optimized social media content, effectively acting as a creative collaborator that handles repetitive data tasks (e.g., Listener.fm).
4. The overwhelming consensus, particularly among Gen Z, is that AI must enhance human creativity, not replace it. The most effective implementation uses AI to handle the technical lifting, freeing up creators to concentrate on the high-empathy tasks that Gen Z values: emotional integrity, narrative importance, and authentic connection. Utilizing AI as a "cerebral prosthetic," which discourages intellectual struggle and creative autonomy, is viewed as a significant threat to long-term creative development.

Conclusion and Roadmap for the New Era of Audio

The rise of podcasting is a clear symptom of a wider change in society: we're going from passive, impression-based consumption to active, relationship-based engagement. Generation Z has completely transformed the rules of the media. They've proved that you can get people to pay attention to you with a performance, but you have to create trust through actual, two-way connections. The lines that used to separate audio, video, and social media have almost completely vanished. Now there is one media ecosystem that is focused on people. People stay engaged in it because it is real, they care about others, and they can participate. The future of sound is more than just being heard; it is also about how it makes people feel.

Roadmap to Future

1. **Switch the focus of the economy from CPM to CVM:** Old-fashioned ways of measuring advertising don't work well for figuring out how much the Gen Z audience is worth. When you invest strategically, you should focus on cultivating superfans through direct-to-fan channels (like Patreon and Substack) and high-value extras (like apparel and live events). For long-term, high-margin revenue, niche specialisation is preferable than broad reach. It generates a strong CVM.
2. **The Hybrid Creator Model.** Video is no longer just an extra; it's become the most critical aspect of your marketing funnel. You should start with a modular architecture when you make content. This entails making the anchor recording for a visual presentation and then cutting it up into short clips that work best on multiple platforms, such as TikTok and Shorts, so that people can access the long-form audio/video experience. Making videos should be seen as an expense of marketing.
3. **Include the Therapeutic Content in the system.** Content should place emotional honesty and vulnerability first, because that's what the audience has said they want: to be more self-aware and grow as a person. The Authenticity Paradox is a problem that strategic management has to cope with. This means

that vulnerability must be based on the reality of the story and not on how it looks.

4. **Use Co-Creation to Protect Your IP:** Get your audience engaged by asking them to record their voices and using interactive forums to help create the story. This method of participation creates a powerful, self-sustaining community that can't be easily changed by algorithms and makes the audience feel like they own it. It also makes the IP worth more.
5. **Make AI tools clear:** AI tools should only be used to assist people be more creative and do better work (for example, by making sound better or speeding up editing). It is morally wrong not to openly and conspicuously disclose the usage of AI. If you don't provide people access to information, they'll assume you're lying right away. This will ruin the confidence that is needed for any monetisation efforts. The preservation of human texture and authentic imperfection constitutes the most significant competitive advantage over AI perfection.

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