

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Radio relationships: Perceptions on listenership and well-being

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**Abstract**

**Objective:** As Australia boasts large radio listening audiences with high engagement among older adults, we examined Australian radio personnel's perceptions of their role in delivering radio and how it facilitates listener well-being.

**Method:** Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 16 radio personnel affiliated with music- and talk-based community and public stations broadcasting in Melbourne, Victoria.

**Results:** Thematic analysis indicated two main themes: communication style (e.g. making listeners a part of the conversation, speaking to one person and strong listening skills) and authenticity. Presenters focused on both creating and maintaining relationships as well as promoting community through their on-air actions and programming. This inherently fostered connection and facilitated listener well-being.

**Conclusions:** The findings have implications for considering how the radio can be used as a tool for enhancing quality of life and for how radio stations manage presenter training and programming changes to support listener connection.

**KEYWORDS**

broadcast media, community healthcare, psychological well-being, radio, social relationships

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

While there are positive opportunities associated with an ageing population, such as long-term productivity and intergenerational nurturance, there are also many challenges that people can face. For instance, loneliness and depression are common challenges amongst older adults as they cope with changes in physical and cognitive capabilities and the loss of family and loved ones.<sup>1</sup> Such experiences put strain on individuals, families and communities regarding managing the burden of care. In

response, researchers have begun to consider how the arts (including engaging in music listening specifically) might support the quality of older life.<sup>2,3</sup> While evidence as to how engaging in the arts promotes psychological well-being is growing,<sup>4,5</sup> less is known about how engaging with radio specifically might do so. Yet, radio programming frequently includes music, and listening to the radio does not present some of the noted barriers of participating in other arts activities (such as accessibility and availability).<sup>6</sup> Thus, radio listening may support well-being in similar ways to music listening.<sup>7</sup>

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Australia boasts a rich history of broadcasting and some of the largest listening audiences globally.<sup>8</sup> Australians spend an average of 13–15 h per week listening to the radio,<sup>9</sup> and, in a 2020 survey, 78% of respondents had listened to FM radio in the past 7 days.<sup>10</sup> Such figures may be even higher for older adults, as the Australian Communications and Media Authority (2020) reported that Australians aged 45 years and older are more likely to listen to radio than those aged between 18 and 44.

Radio transcends geographical and social boundaries,<sup>11,12</sup> offering listeners music programming, news, information and opportunities for social exchange.<sup>13,14</sup> Through broadcasted programs, the radio educates, informs, entertains and empowers listening audiences.<sup>15,16</sup> The large number of radio stations (including commercial, community and public) in Australia means that listening audiences have many choices. Radio programs can offer tailored content for their targeted communities<sup>11,17</sup>: For instance, Melbourne's Golden Days Radio can be described as a station targeting older adults, playing music from 'the 1920s to the 1950s'.<sup>11, p. 170</sup>

Social connections are developed amongst radio presenters and the wider community.<sup>8,12</sup> For example, volunteering in radio assists in gaining a sense of purpose and identity,<sup>18</sup> affords opportunities to be creative<sup>19</sup> and promotes maintenance of cultures and languages.<sup>19</sup> Presenters experience a sense of belonging through the relationships developed.<sup>20,21</sup> Through on-air broadcasting, listeners attend advertised social events<sup>22</sup> and take an active role in their communities.<sup>23</sup>

Additional research suggests that, for listeners, the radio might provide companionship—for those who feel isolated and disconnected<sup>24</sup> as well as for older adults.<sup>7</sup> The ability for radio to act as a companion and build community has further been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Krause (2020) discussed radio's potential, like music, to provide company for listeners in terms of social surrogacy—the concept that solitary listening can engender feelings of sociality and empathy.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, while the outcomes noted in Krause's<sup>7</sup> research on older radio listeners overlap with well-being benefits associated with music listening such as companionship, relaxation, mood regulation, reminiscence and passing the time,<sup>26</sup> participants also explicitly referenced how the voices heard on the radio provide company and comfort. This suggests that it is not only the music presented on the radio that should be considered in terms of well-being benefit as presenters themselves may facilitate listener well-being. Indeed, people's continued radio engagement is influenced by presenters,<sup>27,28</sup> a finding that is in line with past work and theory on parasocial interactions and relationships.<sup>29</sup>

Parasocial relationships refer to friend-like relationships people have with media person as celebrities.<sup>28</sup>

### Policy impact

This study has found that radio engagement can support older adult well-being, primarily through promoting social connection. This suggests opportunities for the radio industry to partner with aged care providers.

### Practice impact

There is an opportunity for those working in radio and aged care to collaborate in supporting community members' well-being via championing radio engagement. Please see <https://bit.ly/Radio-WB> for a flyer co-designed with members of the community sharing findings from this program of research.

Although research on parasocial relationships hardly focuses on older adults, parasocial relationships can mitigate isolation and loneliness in older age,<sup>30</sup> with previous research focusing on television characters.<sup>31</sup> Although studies have not considered the radio, presenters often directly address listeners, and listening to preferred presenter voices often becomes routine,<sup>28</sup> making it possible for parasocial relationships to develop. Given presenters are important to radio engagement and there exists the potential for parasocial relationships, which may have positive well-being benefits, it is worthwhile examining radio presenters' perspectives regarding the impact they have on their listenership. Thus, this exploratory research aimed to investigate radio personnel and their perceptions of how presenters foster listener engagement, relationships and psychological well-being.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Participants

A convenience sample of 16 radio personnel (six [38%] females and 10 males [63%]) voluntarily participated in the research. Aged between 30 and 81 ( $M = 60.80$ ,  $Mdn = 61$ ) at the time of the study, these presenters were involved in presenting live, music-based or talk-based programming at one of six public and community radio stations broadcasting in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia (noting that two participants also had experience as station managers).

Recruitment techniques involved direct email invitations and snowball sampling (a response rate could not be

calculated as no records were kept). The six radio stations were targeted based on findings from a previous study in which older adults shared their Melbourne-based radio station preferences.<sup>7</sup> The study received ethics approval from the James Cook University's Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: H8022).

## 2.2 | Design and procedure

We used a qualitative enquiry methodology. In particular, we adopted a conversational style when conducting semi-structured, individual interviews to permit a detailed exploration of the participants' lived experiences. Single interviews ( $Mdn_{length} = 36.50$  min) were individually scheduled, and these were conducted online via Zoom with one of the two authors. All participants were emailed the participant information sheet and provided written consent prior to the interview. To report on the demographic details of the sample, we asked participants to state their age and gender on the consent form.

While the interviews were part of a larger program of research concerning radio engagement and well-being, this study employed relevant data specific to the perceptions and perspectives of radio personnel. We provided the research aims to participants on the information sheet and began the interviews by introducing ourselves to the participants. The interview schedule included key questions, framed openly to probe participants' reflections of their own involvement in radio presenting. Prepared questions included who they understand to be their listening audience; how they develop relationships with their audience; and how radio might play a role in promoting listener well-being (Appendix S1). The participants' responses to these questions and follow-up questions formed the data analysed.

## 2.3 | Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim (no member checking was done) and saved as Microsoft Word files. Following Braun and Clarke's<sup>32</sup> procedure, we conducted a thematic analysis. Their six steps start with familiarisation with the data, which is followed by the generation of codes and the identification and review of themes, and concludes with labelling and reporting the themes. We adopted a reflexive and recursive approach to consider the data without a particular theoretical framework; however, we acknowledge that we brought implicit knowledge from our experiences to the analysis. The first author is woman, has a PhD in psychology and works as an academic researching in the social psychology

of music. The second author is woman, has a PhD in music psychology and presents radio programming as a volunteer at a community station. Our lived experience was used 'knowingly' when analysing the data.<sup>32</sup> Using Microsoft Word, our generation of initial codes drew on semantically similar interview content; and, additionally, we explored coding implicit concepts within participant responses. We then clustered related codes to formulate broader themes. We refined the resulting themes and sub-themes (our recursive approach permitted for renaming and/or combining themes) to best represent the data relative to our guiding research questions. The second author led the analysis, and the first author acted as a 'critical friend' by contributing to the review and refinement of the themes and sub-themes. Data extracts were drawn from the whole corpus to reflect the sample and appear without participant details to uphold participant confidentiality.

## 3 | RESULTS

Radio personnel identified that engaging listeners ('the sense of being able to engage people, in the way in which you talk to them') is central to their programming and presenting. Presenters sought to foster relationships with listeners through creating quality content, both through what they present and how they present it. Two higher order themes addressed how radio presenters develop presenter-listener relationships: communication style (e.g. making listeners feel like they are a part of the conversation taking place, speaking to 'one' person, and strong listening skills) and authenticity.

Participants identified that the radio provides companionship, particularly for the older adults within the community. As one presenter remarked, to 'the older people, I think we are basically one of their best friends... I think we should treat them like that with respect'. As such, presenters were highly focused on listener engagement and talked about their audience as though they were part of the conversation taking place on the air. One station manager identified that 'the really successful ones make people feel as though they're being invited into a conversation'.

One way presenters achieved this, despite speaking to an unknown audience of potentially thousands of listeners, was to focus on presenting to just *one person*. This was the same for commercial and community presenters alike, with an Australian Broadcasting Corporation presenter saying, '... you are only ever talking to one person. There's only ever one person listening', as well as a 3-Music Broadcasting Society community presenter saying, 'I get the shackles up a little bit when I hear people referring to 'listeners'...you're talking to one person'. However, that *one person* being spoken to

differed by presenter. While some presenters put up a photograph of their spouse, partner or friend in the studio, others thought of different people they knew with varying degrees of familiarity to speak more broadly to on a topic (because when speaking with your neighbour or mother-in-law, 'you communicate with them quite differently...how would you talk with them about the story? What do you reckon they'd be interested in?').

Participants also took into consideration how and why their *one listener* tunes into the radio. For example, one presenter thought about what their listener was doing when they tune in: 'there's someone sitting in their car, or somebody's in the kitchen cooking... I'd change up the activities, but that's my listener'. If they were listening while driving, one presenter perceived radio to be more like 'wallpaper'. However, in an aged care facility, the radio might serve a different purpose; as one participant stated, 'I can see a lot of people would feel like they had a friend coming to visit chatting' because, as another presenter acknowledged, the radio is like 'live company to a lot of people'. Regardless of their listener's circumstances, perhaps presenters target *one person* because radio engagement is perceived to be a personal experience:

So, people tend to listen to radio alone. I'm sure you know this. People watch television together: a family will sit down and watch a show together or a show might be on with one person watching it, but other people are aware of it [so Television is] more communal. Whereas people turn the radio off when someone else – it's very intimate. Radio's very intimate, so there's only ever one listener.

Demonstrating a strong listening ability was also considered essential to presenting, especially when interviewing guests and taking listener calls on and off the air: 'you've got to be a really good listener. I mean that's the main skill'. Because programming and scripting content that engages listeners required, 'good ears, as they say, where you get to go 'This is compelling stuff!' You've got to be able to pick what it is that is going to connect with people'. Another presenter identified that things that pique their own interest were likely to overlap with listeners: 'Whatever interests you will, nine times out of ten, interest a lot of people... something you're passionate about or you're fascinated with, there's people out there who will feel the same'.

This ability to 'listen' also extended to participants' perceptions of their listeners' needs. This consideration included trying to identify what listeners wanted when curating content or asking questions during interviews

that were of perceived interest to listeners ('so being conscious of [the audience] and being able to ask the questions of the talent that they would want answered'). They indicated that establishing and nurturing their connection with listeners was a privilege that was both ongoing and interactive:

I think the relationship that listeners have particularly over a long period of time, like multiple years, you become a part of their family... you're conscious of the fact that you can potentially have that deep connection to people, and they feel like they know you. And you have to respect that. That's a very privileged position to be in.

In order to connect with listeners in a meaningful way that promotes connection, presenters talked about being authentic when on the air. They sought to be personable and even personal in their delivery, as one station manager noted:

People react to people's personalities and if they feel like they're hearing from someone that they'd like to know, rather than somebody who's 'Well, now, I'm going to tell you about classical music', or 'This is my on-air persona'. People hear that.

Rather than trying and creating an 'on-air persona', some spoke of allowing their personalities to come through in their presentations because 'your personality comes through anyway!'. Ultimately, a personal approach was perceived to facilitate rapport with listeners.

One of the ways in which presenters strived to be more authentic in their presenting was through telling stories about themselves. All the participants talked about the boundaries involved when discussing themselves, so as to not 'waffle on' or share 'too much' because, 'it's not about me, it's about the listener. Sharing personal experiences is one way you could do it, like one's personal experience of the music or of a particular concert, which I do. But, as I say, sparingly, so it doesn't become too self-serving'. Here, it was acknowledged that sharing stories was also a way of building a connection with listeners, but that the content must be balanced.

Further, participants were aware that an inauthentic broadcast could turn people off. For example, presenters indicated that listeners could tell when a presenter was not speaking for themselves, as one participant stated:

There are some announcers out there who I know are on-air getting paid a lot of money.

When I hear them and I know them, they're not selling what they believe, they're selling a product for the station... Because if you're playing a part and it's not really you and you're not being your authentic self. I feel like that's just selling out on what you truly can do on-air.

Another participant said they could hear when a host would manipulate an interview to get an emotional response from an interviewee to shock or impress listeners. Rather, authenticity was demonstrated by just trying to be oneself, by 'just talking to people, in a relaxed sort of way'. This was also relevant to conducting interviews and delivering content such as current affairs: 'You need to be able to provide authentic information, not shy away from things'. One acknowledged the positive and important impact an authentic presenter has: 'if the host gets that right, we all can connect. There's always somebody that's going to connect, and there's always somebody that's going to hold it'.

Collectively, these behaviours indicated that radio presenters care about their listeners, because 'the audience really sits at the centre of everything that we do'.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

In examining radio personnel's perceptions regarding how presenters foster engagement and relationships with their listeners, and how this may facilitate their psychological well-being in older age, we identified the themes of communication style and authenticity. Communication style included making listeners feel like they were a part of the conversation taking place, presenting as though they were speaking to one person and demonstrating good listening skills. Further, having an authentic personality on-air was considered essential to listener engagement and included telling personal stories and allowing their personality to come through.

Presenters acknowledged that delivering engaging radio underpinned facilitating connection with and among their audience (e.g. 'if the host gets that right, we all can connect'), developing perceived relationships with listeners (e.g. 'I think the relationship that listeners have particularly over a long period of time, like multiple years, you become a part of their family') and building community (e.g. 'there's a strong connection with community radio, my job and well-being'). In this regard, participants perceived that quality radio content and delivery facilitates the psychological well-being of their listeners.

### 4.1 | Radio facilitating listener well-being

It has been previously noted that radio presenters develop connections within the wider community<sup>8,12</sup> and they themselves experience a sense of belonging through presenting<sup>20,21</sup>; however, it is clear that engaging broadcasting is an interactive relationship between the presenter, the content and the listener. Our findings demonstrated that there is a synergy between listeners' experiences of felt connections found in previous research<sup>7,24</sup> and the presenters' explicit objectives: Presenters intentionally acted in ways to engage their listeners, make listeners feel included or heard in their program and promote connections and relationships.

Based on the present findings, it is perhaps this emphasis on promoting connection that permits the radio to function as a social surrogate for listeners, particularly as the presenter behaviors identified here help to explain how even solitary radio listening can engender feelings of community.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the present findings extend those of Krause (2020): It is not only the preferred content, but the presenters themselves who play a large role in how and why engaging in the radio can support listener well-being. The presenters focussed on creating relationships and promoting community through their on-air actions, and broader programming decisions provided a way for listeners to participate in their communities and feel connected to others. Radio's potential to provide companionship, then, is not only for the isolated and disconnected<sup>24</sup> or for those separated by distance in a pandemic,<sup>17</sup> but all listeners at any time.

This explicit objective of radio personnel to build relationships helps to create a sense of belonging for everyone involved, bolstering social capital, and, in turn, well-being. Social connection as a key mechanism for the promotion of listener well-being is aligned with broader music and arts engagement.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there are parallels between the role of a radio presenter facilitating listener well-being and the role of a music facilitator leading a group activity, such as singing, regarding the mechanism of social connection. Engaging in both offers opportunities for developing a sense of belonging and community.<sup>33</sup> Yet, importantly, listening to the radio does not have barriers often associated with group music-making activities<sup>6</sup>—rather, it is far more accessible and versatile.

Importantly, presenters acknowledged that creating relationships with their listenership is not immediate nor simple. Interviewees expressed how such connections develop over time through consideration, patience, feedback and reflection. These findings have implications for radio stations regarding hiring and training, as well as changes

in broadcasters or programming. The latter should be managed with care so that they are not received as abrupt conclusions to (often long-standing) radio relationships that presenters have worked to develop.

## 4.2 | Limitations and future directions

This study included the perspectives of a convenience sample of radio personnel connected to Melbourne-based public and community radio. It would be fruitful for future research to consider any differences in radio station type (e.g. public versus community versus commercial) as well as programming formats and production techniques. While this study adds to qualitative research that suggests that radio listening can support listener well-being,<sup>16</sup> future work would also benefit from overtly measuring perceived connections and perceived well-being with both radio personnel and listeners as participants. Such work will assist in creating evidence concerning the contribution of radio listening beyond any presumed effects.

Moreover, the present study did not include the perspectives of people who do not engage with the radio, nor did it compare radio relative to other types of media (e.g. podcasting). Digital technologies provide many ways to access and listen to broadcasted content (both live and recorded), such that more work is needed to consider both what is defined as radio<sup>34</sup> and whether the different ways of engaging with broadcasted content influence perceived well-being outcomes.

Nonetheless, the present study illustrates that nurturing relationships amongst presenters and listeners underpins how engaging with the radio might promote well-being. Given the statistics indicating how embedded radio listening is in everyday life, such findings have implications for considering how the radio can be used as a tool for enhancing the quality of later life.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflicts of interest declared.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The ethics approval for this project did not permit sharing the collected data.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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