

## **The use of podcasting in political marketing: The case of the Czech Republic**

### **Introduction**

The decline in voters' engagement with politics and the increasing distrust of citizens towards politicians, political parties, and the media has consistently been at the core of political marketing research (Savigny 2008; Scammell 2014). Despite the fact that new media technologies have created new ways for politicians to manage their public image, communicate their messages, and increase interaction with their electorate (Bossetta 2018), this has not necessarily resulted in higher levels of political engagement. Against this backdrop, political marketing theorists have explored ways to harness the democratic aspects of marketing, and to offer more attractive and effective ways for political participation (Scammell 2014; Johansen 2012). A relatively small but important body of studies in political marketing research has explored long-term relationship building with the public (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009; Harris & Harrigan 2015; Dean, Croft & Pich 2015; Abid et al. 2020). These studies have offered valuable insights into the factors that influence relationship building in politics, and how to motivate citizens. Nevertheless, there is a call for more research on the interface between political relationship marketing and the use of digital technologies (Butler & Harris 2009, Dean et al. 2015).

This study provides a novel exploration of political podcasts as a means to enhance relationship building between politicians and the electorate. The reason for our focus on political podcasting is twofold: first, the real boom in podcast listener numbers across Europe; and second, the changes in news consumption habits in tandem with a growing distrust in traditional media, especially among younger audiences. Research has shown that the audience for podcasts is growing steadily as the popularity of podcasts increases, especially across younger age groups (Statista 2021a). Moreover, studies have pointed to news consumption habits undergoing change following the introduction of new media into the news ecosystem. Research has shown a steady decline in people's preference for mainstream media and falling levels of trust amongst younger people (Reuters Institute 2019). Consequently, we argue that in order to explore new opportunities for relationship building between citizens and politicians, the channels of communication that citizens choose for obtaining political information is the key to such an examination. **Despite an extensive**

body of literature on social media and politics (Bossetta 2018; Strömbäck et al. 2014), and the increasing popularity of podcasts, little is known about the use of digital audio podcasts in politics. Despite podcasting bearing many similarities to radio, for younger people the latter falls within the traditional media that no longer seem as relevant (Gallan et al. 2020). Podcasts allow for greater flexibility in choice of audio formats and listening activity that better addresses young consumers' needs for freedom in finding relevant information in their own time and way, and "cherry picking" what suits them (Gallan et al. 2020). As Andersen et al. (2021, 99) argue: "The use of digital media for consuming news and political information has added a new layer to the question of generational differences in the effects of news on political participation."

A podcast can be defined as "a digital audio or video file that is episodic, automatic or manually downloadable, program-driven, and conveniently accessible, usually via an automated feed, such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed" (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2010, 47). Research into podcasting has demonstrated a variety of affordances, such as the affective potential to develop long-term relationships of trust between the podcast hosts and listeners. The consumption of this medium is argued to be an intimate and private process during which the podcast listener becomes a silent participant in the lives, conversations, and experiences of other people, namely the podcast presenters (Berry 2016a; Heshmat & Neustaedter 2018). Drawing on studies of the podcast's affordances and discussions surrounding the need for effective ways to enhance political engagement (Scammell 2014), our research employs political relationship marketing theory (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009; Parsons & Rowling 2018) to suggest that podcasts present new opportunities for relationship building and emotional engagement with audiences.

Finally, as Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2007, 15) have argued, there is an immediate need for more empirical studies, such that "any concept or theory of political marketing needs to be constantly juxtaposed with political experiences". By adopting an exploratory approach, this study addresses this lacuna by conducting qualitative research based on focus groups with young people in the Czech Republic in order to explore their perceptions of and attitudes towards political podcasting. With most research focusing on the USA and Western Europe (Johansen 2012; Veneti, Lilleker, and Jackson, 2020), our research offers an in-depth examination of young people's perceptions, motivations, and practices in the under-researched region of Central Europe. We

argue that these perspectives are significant for the purpose of theory building beyond the USA and Western Europe.

### **Political marketing: Opportunities and threats**

Political marketing research has seen a significant growth in recent years, as evidenced by the multiple studies presented at academic conferences and published in leading journals, as well as by having its own dedicated journal (Butler & Harris 2009). Nevertheless, experts in the field have called for the need to more comprehensively address critiques of political marketing's negative effects on democracy (Scammell 2014), to further develop political marketing theory (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2007), and to do so by adopting a broader conceptualisation of political marketing that goes beyond election campaigns (Joathan & Lilleker 2020), one that also embraces new media technologies (Williams 2017). Among the most severe critiques of political marketing are those related to declining public engagement and participation. Such critiques draw on studies that claim a correlation between diminishing voter turnout and the heightened adoption of manipulating marketing techniques (Lilleker 2005; Savigny 2008). Consequently, despite the efforts of political parties to reverse the increasing decline in party membership and in citizens' engagement with politics (Mair & van Biezen 2001) through the employment of more sophisticated communication strategies and political marketing practices, these activities have had the opposite effect. Although the reasons behind this failure are numerous and quite complex, several studies have concentrated attention on certain limitations rather than others.

One such area of discussion focuses on the need for constant communication between politicians and citizens and the integration of political marketing activities on a permanent basis in the political communication matrix. It is within this context that Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2007) as well as Butler and Harris (2009) support previous arguments (Klein and Ahluwalia 2005) for the need for permanent campaigning (Joathan and Lilleker 2020). As Butler and Harris (2009, 151) argue, focusing on election campaigns alone further intensifies the contestations surrounding the negative effects of political marketing on democracy by placing "the sale negotiation as the core of marketing". Within such a context, the deluge of negative political advertising, extreme spin, propagandistic media coverage, and fake news have exacerbated citizens' distrust in

politicians and the media. As Brissenden and Moloney argue (2005, 1006), the nature and scale of political reporting is such that Public Relations is “as much a defensive activity by parties against critical journalism as an offensive of self-serving publicity”. At the same time, a new generation of marketing-savvy citizens demand a more honest and authentic approach in communication practices, similarly for commercial marketing as for political marketing strategies (Butler & Harris 2009). In addition, the affordances of the new media technologies, as the prime communication channels in contemporary society, should be more closely scrutinised in political marketing theory and practice (Williams 2017; Parsons & Rowling 2018). Historically, traditional media have all been extensively utilised in political strategies. New information communication technologies have brought about new challenges and opportunities that ask for further examination. As Butler and Harris (2009) suggest, we need “a more nuanced – even postmodern – angle” to explore the “changed emphasis” of the public’s interest in political activity (151).

Furthering their arguments, Butler and Harris (2009, 152) propose a new paradigm for marketing research that focuses on “rebuilding marketing on the foundations of human knowledge and skill, information and connectivity, [co-creation of value], and relationships”, and it is exactly this positioning on which this study draws. Such an approach also resonates with many other contemporary academic arguments and research propositions in political marketing. In her seminal study *Consumer Democracy*, Scammell (2014, 181) reflects on the positive and negative aspects of political marketing and highlights the need to revive the politics-citizen relationship by providing “a fair marketplace with sufficient choice, reliable information, opportunities for active engagement, and mutual respect between buyers and sellers”. To broaden our understanding of such phenomena and to further develop political marketing theory, Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy (2007, 9) stress the need to “link political marketing research to fundamental marketing concepts”. In doing so, they point towards contemporary orientations such as relational marketing approaches, explaining that “having multiple conceptual lenses can increase the understanding of different facets relevant to the research phenomenon” (10).

*Political relationship marketing*

Political marketing concepts and theories depend to a great extent on the conceptual loci of different disciplines such as marketing and political science (Scammell 1999; 2014). The concept of political relationship marketing is directly adopted from commercial relationship marketing. Relationship marketing theory (Berry 1983) examines the dominant paradigm of the marketing mix and its need for attracting as many customers as possible towards customer relationship marketing management. Grönroos (1994) further developed the relationship marketing theory and acknowledged the observation that a long-term relationship between organisations and customers produces a tighter relationship, resulting in repetitive product or service purchases. Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000) argued that relationship marketing has significant potential value not only for gaining new customers but in particular for maintaining the existing relationship. For these reasons, relationship marketing theory offers a useful framework for our examination of the use of podcasts as a means to enhance the citizens-politicians relationship. The focus on the co-creation of value, including through customer care involving processes such as agent interaction and direct dialogue, is given more attention in relationship marketing and is fundamental to enhancing deeper connections with the stakeholders (Grönroos 1994, Bannon 2005). Political marketing literature offers useful research in this regard (Scammell 1999; Bannon 2005; Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009).

Using this approach, researchers have been able to study whether a political relationship marketing model can build up effective relationships between politicians and citizens (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009; Harris & Harrigan 2015; Parsons & Rowling 2018; Abid et al. 2020). There is, however, still little academic literature focusing on politicians and relationship marketing despite the need for higher political engagement via a deeper connection between electorate and politicians (Jackson & Lilleker 2009; Johansen 2012; Abid et al. 2020). According to the political relationship marketing model, the important aspects of the relationship between potential voters and political representatives consist of trust, commitment, shared values, and public expectations that are satisfied by political representatives (Egan 2011; Strömbäck et al. 2014). Therefore, to cultivate highly engaged, long-term connections between publics and politicians, the electorate must first share values with the political candidates and public expectations must then be met in order to gain their trust (Egan 2011; Grow & Ward 2013). A number of studies related to the political marketing relationship approach imply the crucial role of building customer loyalty

(Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009; Bannon 2005). The transformation of existing and potential customers into a loyal base seems to be at the centre of forming strong relationships based on the fulfilment of promises (Johansen 2012).

Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2009, 13) suggested that the ambitions of political relationship marketing could be to “stabilise a party’s core support, reduce the number of swing voters, i.e. the volatility of the party system, make politics less overtly cynical and manipulative and deepen democracy by increasing the plebiscitary element”. The application of the political relationship marketing model might, at least in theory, be the solution for the de-attachment of citizens from politics (Scammell 1999; Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009). In addition, Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2009) indicated that the relationship marketing approach also helps political parties to establish an in-depth understanding of potential voters and to communicate with them in ways that would rebuild trust and loyalty, ultimately resulting in gaining votes. Hence, politicians should strive for a deeper connection with this recognised group of constituents in order to achieve their political goals (Scammell 1999; Harris & Harrigan 2015; Abid et al. 2020).

The possibilities of social media tools that are encompassed in Web 2.0 (i.e. the participative internet, a depiction also highlighting its interoperability) have opened up new opportunities for political relationship marketing, especially with younger audiences whom research suggests are the most disconnected from politics. Against the backdrop of growing distrust of traditional media, younger people’s preference for new media technologies and the affordances of these platforms provide political marketing with opportunities to build and maintain relationships with these key publics (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009; Harris & Harrigan 2015).

### **Political relationship marketing and podcasting**

Web 2.0 applications have indeed offered new opportunities to politicians to shape their own image (Rahat & Zamir 2018), to craft and communicate their own messages, and to obtain a more personalised, permanent, informal and interactive type of communication with citizens (Strömbäck et al. 2014; Harris & Harrigan 2015). A considerable body of literature has examined the strategic use of social media platforms, taking account of the specific affordances, cultures, and audiences (Bossetta 2018; Štětka et al. 2019). At its core, online campaign strategies include aspects such as

providing information to voters, encouraging supporters to get involved, connecting users with political representatives, and voters' mobilisation (Štětka et al. 2019).

Given the concerning low levels of public engagement with politics, such new media tools have been confirmed as a means to reconnect citizens to their political representatives (Jackson & Lilleker 2009). However, despite the optimistic view that public engagement with politicians has indeed been re-established thanks to Web 2.0 platforms (Bakker & de Vreese 2011), such positive effects are a point of dispute and constant scrutiny in academic circles (Harris & Harrigan 2015). It is the avowedly persistent decline of the public's engagement with formal politics that justifies political marketing scholars' calls for the continuing need for deeper emotional engagement with the electorate (among others: Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009; Lees-Marshment 2014; Abid et al. 2020). While the online presentation of politicians has been highly influenced by a personality-driven communication style (Stanyer 2013; Metz et al. 2019) that builds on authenticity, it is still challenging to build a long-term relationship with constituents (Jackson & Lilleker 2009; Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009; Lilleker & Jackson 2014). What this paper explores is the potential of podcasting to alleviate some of these identified burdens.

Despite the extensive research on Web 2.0 applications, little is known about the use of podcasts in political communication. So far, no academic research has focused specifically on politicians and podcasting, despite the increasing importance of this digital media platform to a growing audience of users. Where studies do exist, they tend to focus on political participation (Chadha et al. 2012; Diehl et al. 2019). For instance, Chadha et al. (2012) suggest that the use of podcasts can be a strong predictor of online and offline political participation and even of political partisanship.

No doubt, podcasting is worth examining as it offers interesting advantages in comparison to other social networking platforms. Podcast users have complete authority over the selection of specific content that is of interest to them; only information that is of interest to the audience is offered on the podcast platform, enabling a more personalised and individual listening experience (McHugh 2016; Berry 2016a). These advantages are related to the key feature of podcasting, which is the ability to consume it on demand, and is what appeals to the younger generation. Berry (2016b) found that podcast listeners are generally younger and more proactive than radio listeners; they search for the content they listen to and choose whenever and wherever they play podcasts. He

also assumed that podcast listeners, unlike radio listeners, were more focused on listening, with 93% of listeners paying full attention to podcasts (Berry 2016b). Users also listen to podcasts in parallel to other activities such as cooking, taking notes, driving, running, walking a dog, or travel to and from work (Heshmat & Neustaedter 2018). Moreover, the length of time of podcasts is not limited by the medium, varying from tens of minutes to hours (Lindgren 2016). This aspect is another specific feature that is distinct to social media, and while concern has previously been expressed with regard to short-time formats, the continued interest in longer formats is observable in the number of followers and subscriptions to online podcast platforms (Berry 2016a,b).

Heshmat and Neustaedter (2018) found that the development of an emotional connection between podcast audiences and hosts is a crucial benefit of podcasting. As regards the causes, the relationship building can be developed through the closeness that podcast listeners feel while consuming audio content (Heshmat & Neustaedter 2018). Additionally, Lindgren (2016) assumed that followers' perception of authenticity could also gradually develop a relationship with the presenter. Heshmat and Neustaedter (2018) indicated that the authentic style of the podcast host is a strong predictor of the relationship engagement between the podcasters and their subscribers. Gilpin et al. (2010) identified four dimensions of authenticity as important in political processes, namely: authority, transparency, engagement, and impression. *Authority* is related to the perceived credibility and expertise of politicians, and is established through a combination of meeting voters' expectations and projections and via mastering persuasive communication. *Transparency* is achieved when politicians are open to discussion with the electorate, revealing the structure within party political organising, and is important for relationship cultivation. *Engagement* is related to the politicians' "willingness to engage directly with constituents, or to provide places where these may interact with each other with minimal restrictions" (Gilpin et al. 2010, 267). Lastly, *impression* is concerned with the electorate's response to the image of the politician, such that studies show a more personal style of political communication strongly influences voter behaviour (Stanyer 2013; Rahat & Zamir 2018).

Podcasting facilitates the crafting of a politician's personal style thanks to the diverse range of its formatting – podcasts can be monologues, interview discussions, co-hosted talk shows, panel debates with more than two guests, storytelling, among other compositions (McHugh 2016). Such a diversity of formatting can be detected in most political podcasts. *Business Insider* (Ralph 2018),



the USA-focused financial and business news website, listed its most popular political podcasts at the time, which included *The Daily* launched by The New York Times, *FiveThirtyEight Politics*, *Pod Save America*, *Political Gabfest*, *The Argument*, *NPR Politics Podcast*, *Trump, Inc.*, *The Weeds* by Vox, *Women Rule*, *Can He Do That?*, and *Up First*. These were usually hosted by non-politicians, such as journalists, political commentators, or political insiders (both former and current). The politicians, on the other hand, were usually guest hosts or guests in the political podcasts, and rarely ran their own.

The majority of politicians' hosted podcasts can be found in the USA and the UK: the US Republican Senator Ted Cruz (*Verdict*), the current US President Joe Biden (*Here's the Deal* and *Biden's Briefing*), the Democrat Senator Bernie Sanders (*The Bernie Sanders Show*), and the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (*With Her*). UK politicians' podcasts included *Reasons To Be Cheerful* by the former Labour leader Ed Miliband, *The Moggcast* hosted by the Conservative politician Jacob-Rees Mogg, *Anger Management* by the former Liberal Democrats leader Nick Clegg, and *The Nigel Farage Show* by the former MEP.

These podcasts shared various similar features, such as audio-only format, being episodic, having political content, and a possibility of automatic or manual downloading. All the podcasts except for *Biden's Briefing* also had the interview discussion form in common. There were differences too, mainly in the role of the podcast host and the type of content discussed. With the exception of Clinton's personal confessions, most podcasts focused on tackling policy issues and sharing political views. Moreover, some politicians' podcasts had a feature of co-hosting with like-minded people or personnel who work closely with the political figure but are not politicians. Such is the case of Senator Cruz co-hosting his *Verdict* podcast show with conservative political commentator Michael Knowles (Levine 2020). A modified co-host format was adopted by Hillary Clinton's *With Her* podcast partnered by Max Linsky who claimed to be her "huge supporter". Clinton's role was to share her thoughts (Karni 2016) though did not appear in each podcast episode, rather, co-host Max Linsky had a different guest on each session, these included Hillary Clinton's Vice President candidate Tim Kaine, her husband Bill Clinton and their daughter Chelsea Clinton, as well as her closest team workers (indicatively Clinton 2016a, 2016b).

Another format strategy seen used is podcast self-management. The politicians are the hosts of the podcast and invite special guests to their show. Questions are given to their special guests and the

politician's role is to moderate the discussion. This type of podcast is exemplified by *The Bernie Sanders Show* and *Here's the Deal* by Joe Biden. *The Nigel Farage Show* took a different approach from other podcasts, using the interactions of live phone calls with the public during his sessions (Farage 2020). For example, Nigel Farage hosted a podcast episode where he talked about the UK government's policies responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and let the public call him (Farage 2020). Such podcast examples illustrate the different approaches politicians adopt towards the electorate to communicate their ideas. However, to do so, the electorate should be able to discern the value in this kind of communication. Drawing on such research considerations, this study examines whether podcasting can indeed enhance relationship building in politics. This project's ambition is to lay the foundations for discussions about the potential of podcasting in political relationship marketing.

### **The context: The Czech Republic**

The Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic became the successor states of former Czechoslovakia on January 1, 1993. The Czech multi-party system then consolidated, with two dominant political parties emerging: the right-wing conservative party, the Civic Democratic Party; and the left-wing pro-labour party, the Social Democratic Party. These two parties regularly switched dominant positions until the significant fragmentation of this more stable distribution in 2010 with the accompanying rise of new populist parties. At the time of writing, the populist movement ANO 2011 is in government with its leader, the controversial billionaire entrepreneur and media owner Andrej Babiš, as Prime Minister, while the established political parties are contending with electoral dealignment.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) observed that due to different media and political traditions in the states of the former Eastern Bloc, media were centrally controlled by the state and therefore no independent media market discernibly existed at that point in time. Therefore, the media model that best corresponds to the Czech media system has been a question of many debates (Herrero et al. 2017), and despite the fact that the Czech media system shares considerable common features with the German or Austrian media systems, it cannot easily be included in the Northern / Central European media model (also known as the democratic-corporatist model) (Hallin & Mancini 2004).

Over the last decade, different social media networks have shaped the Czech political communication landscape, including websites, blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram (Švelch & Vochocová 2015). The majority of Czech political parties first utilised online political campaigning during the 2010 legislative election, and the use of social media adopted by political parties and candidates has been intensified since (Macková & Štětka 2016; Štětka et al. 2019).

The first podcast in the Czech Republic was established in 2005 and interest in their use has particularly been on the rise in recent years. The digital marketing company *MediaGuru* (2019) argued that 2019 was considered to be the year of podcasts on account of the growing number of new podcasts and the increasing number of new users. It is estimated that there are around two thousand active Czech podcasts, with the largest increase in popularity being in 2019 (Šanda 2019). Research shows that the number of podcasts followers increased fourfold between November 2018 and August 2019, and that they are particularly popular among the youth (Kalodová 2019). Compared to English-speaking countries, where podcasts were established from the beginning of the 2000s, podcasting in Central Europe seems like an emerging practice but with a great dynamic. Podcasting is on the rise in Europe and the USA but penetration varies across countries (Statista 2021). Moreover, as research has shown, listening habits vary across gender, age, education, and different socioeconomic groups (Chadha et al. 2012; Samuel-Azran et al. 2019).

Drawing on this literature, there were two research questions that emerged as follows:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of politician-hosted podcasts among young people in the Czech Republic?

RQ2: How can podcasts hosted by politicians influence the relationship between politicians and young voters?

## **Method**

To address these questions, our research drew upon empirical material from a series of semi-structured focus group discussions. The use of focus groups is considered an effective method for exploring under-researched areas and is based on the premise that it is through the interaction of

such discussions that experiences and opinions are more vividly articulated and negotiated (Guest et al. 2016). For the purposes of this study, we conducted four focus groups which included 20 participants in total, and who varied in terms of gender (equal numbers of males and females), educational background, and occupation. With that being said, the majority had a university degree, which is in line with studies that assume podcasts as a digital medium are mostly consumed by young and more educated audiences (Chadha et al. 2012; McClung & Johnson 2010). The respondents were students, employees in the private sector, and civil servants. As regards their age, our participants were between 18 and 30 years old as this age group represents the largest segment of the Czech podcast listening population (MediaGuru 2019). Existing party-political affiliations or levels of political engagement were not important factors for consideration, as this research aimed to explore the wider context of podcast experience. Purposive sampling was employed and discussants were recruited through the snowballing method with participants based in Prague, Czech Republic. The technique of purposive sampling is used when the researchers' aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon from the perspective of particular groups of individuals (Gorman & Clayton 2005).

Each focus group consisted of five participants. We considered this to be the ideal size as smaller focus groups allow each participant adequate space and time to share in detail their beliefs and experiences with others in the group, which allows researchers to gain more in-depth insights – research shows that smaller groups make participants feel more comfortable speaking (Guest et al. 2016). Data was collected between 16 - 23 July, 2020. The duration of each group discussion was approximately 2 hours. All discussions were recorded and transcribed in both Czech and English for the purposes of coding. The six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013) were then implemented in order to analyse the data. Participants were anonymised and then identified according to numbers (see Table 1 below).

<b>Group No</b>	<b>Identifier</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Education</b>
Group A					Higher education (HE)
	51	27	female	Employee	
	52	21	male	student	HE
	53	26	female	Employee	HE
	54	27	male	Employee	HE
	55	29	female	Employee	HE
Group B	56	27	male	Employee	HE

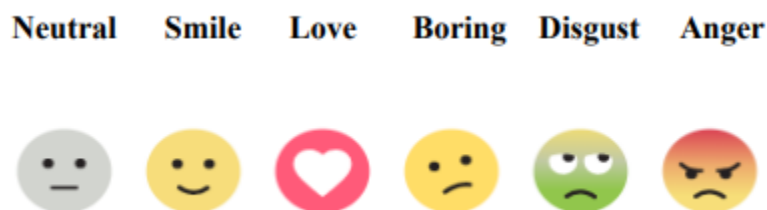
	57	27	male	Employee	HE
	58	25	female	Student	HE
	59	30	male	Employee	HE
	60	30	female	Employee	HE
Group C	61	25	male	Employee	HE
	62	23	female	student	HE
	63	24	female	Employee	HE
	64	25	female	Employee	HE
	65	25	male	Employee	HE
Group D					Secondary education (SE)
	66	18	female	student	SE
	67	18	female	student	SE
	68	28	male	Employee	HE
	69	28	male	Employee	HE
	70	26	male	Employee	HE

Table 1: Focus groups structure

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions and experiences of podcast use amongst young Czechs. The discussions revolved around three main themes, namely: (a) motivations and preferences regarding podcast listening; (b) perceptions of the role of the podcast host; (c) feelings, opinions, and experiences associated with podcasts hosted by politicians. Some interactive practices were also included in the discussion format. Colucci (2007) suggested that in order to increase the engagement of focus group interviews, interactive techniques could be utilised to achieve this goal. Thereupon, our participants listened to and asked to discuss audio clips of selected Czech politicians. Participants listened to three audio segments in total drawn from Senator Pavel Fischer’s (Independent) podcast “Téma Pavla Fischera”; “Modrý podcast Petra Fialy” by Petr Fiala the leader of the largest opposition political party in the Czech Republic, the Civic Society Democratic Party (ODS); and “TOPcast” by Markéta Pekarová Adamová, the woman leader of the political party TOP 09. These clips were selected because they were the only podcasts hosted and launched by Czech politicians at the time that this study was conducted.

Each audio example was two-minute long. Audio clips were also carefully selected so that the names of the hosts and those of their political parties were not mentioned. However, the participants were then asked to guess the politician’s name, if they could recognise their voices. Following each clip, the groups had 5 minutes to complete the task which involved recording their spontaneous reaction and their emotional response towards the clip. Emotional reactions were illustrated by way of a set of emojis which could be used by participants to describe their feelings

elicited by the audio clips. The methodology of the use of emojis in research was adopted by BEHAVIO, a Czech opinion research company. According to BEHAVIO, people struggle to fully verbalise their emotions whereas the use of emojis can facilitate a more accurate description of public feelings. Figure 1 below shows the display of emoji emotions and their descriptions used for this study. Five emojis were presented in order to capture the emotional response of the focus group participants, these included “Neutral”, “Smile”, “Love”, “Boring”, “Anger”, “Disgust”.



[Figure 1 Scale of emoji emotions here]

### **Youth, listening habits, and the podcasting experience**

To understand youth perceptions of listening to politicians’ podcasts, we initially attempted to map the participants’ general listening habits and podcast experience.

When questioned how frequently they listen to podcasts, the majority of respondents considered themselves to be “heavy users” who consume podcasts intensively. This means, according to the participants, several times per week or every day. Participants repeatedly referred to their preference for podcasting’s audio form. The sound completely envelops the listener, especially when listening with headphones, which is typical for the consumption of podcasts (Heshmat & Neustaedter 2018). In terms of the potential for creating an atmosphere of authenticity and intimacy, this feeling of being surrounded by sound can be decisive for this particular listening experience (Jarrett 2009; McHugh 2016). Among the main motivations for the participants’ podcast listening was to relax, to keep up with current affairs, and to deepen personal knowledge of issues related to their interests. Our findings concur with similar studies, such as that by McClung and Johnson (2010) who found that the main incentives for listening to podcasts were

for entertainment, seeking information, education, relaxing, and convenience (listening to them anytime and anywhere). The factor of convenience was frequently commented on by our study participants with regard to productivity and the effective use of time associated with podcast listening. The possibility of listening to podcasts while travelling and commuting was often highlighted. In the majority of cases, the podcast listening behaviour of the participants was linked to another activity:

*“[I listen to podcasts] when I do chores or some activities that do not require my full attention.” (57)*

Listening to the content of their choice at their own time of choosing was highly commented on by all:

*“I can play [podcasts] whenever I want. And especially what I want. For example, sometimes I do not have time to listen to all an episode, so I can continue playing it later.” (51)*

*“I can download the podcast and I don’t have to listen to it online. When I know I’m going somewhere, maybe on a walk, I’ll download it to my phone and play it later.” (68)*

The on-demand feature enables the podcast audience to consume the content they want, allowing for a more personalised listening (Berry 2016a). Some participants also highlighted the importance of independent production and the possibility of unlimited length.

As regards the most preferred topics, participants were largely interested in news. Talk shows with special (celebrity) guests was the second preference, which was followed by entertainment. Other topics that participants were interested in included education, mystery stories, science fiction, and history audio books.

### **Young people’s perceptions of political podcasting**

Most of the participants found the idea of listening to politicians potentially interesting, though most of them did not know of existing podcasts of this kind. Only two out of the 20 participants had previously listened to politicians’ podcasts, naming the Czech politician Petr Fiala and his

podcast show *Modrý podcast Petra Fialy*, and *The Bernie Sanders Show* by the US politician Bernie Sanders.

Agreement with or a general interest in politics were the main motivations for why our podcast listeners would listen to podcasts created and hosted by politicians. Some participants admitted that they would listen to politicians' podcasts out of curiosity without any strong political alignment. To demonstrate this, participant 57 provided an example of a controversial Czech politician that has a negative reputation among some Czechs.

*"I would like to listen to a politician like Tomio Okamura.<sup>1</sup> I am no fan of him but I would definitely listen to his show. It could be a good bizarre."* (57)

This idea of curiosity was shared by other participants:

*"[The podcast hosted by] Jiří Paroubek<sup>2</sup> would be fun. Even though I do not know what the topic of his show would be."* (52)

The participants were then encouraged to discuss the possible motives behind politicians' decision to launch a podcast. Self-presentation was the most frequent answer. In particular, many participants suggested that politicians would use the podcast as another political marketing tool to communicate with their electorate. Moreover, as participant 68 argued, politicians can use this platform to present and explain their political views without being limited by time. Participants were, nevertheless, aware of the possibility that, in light of the nature of politics, ideas and opinions presented by politicians can be biased.

*"I would assume that it is a part of their [politicians'] permanent campaign and their efforts to persuade voters."* (51)

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<sup>1</sup> Tomio Okamura is a member of populist political party SPD. His ongoing relationship with a number of media outlets has been controversial, as Okamura has repeatedly accused the media of writing lies about him. He often criticises Czech journalists replete with threats. Okamura's party ideology conveys Islamophobia and their political representatives call for a ban on Islam. In addition, SPD opposes the migration quotas proposed by the European Commission as the joint reaction to the migration crisis of the last few years.

<sup>2</sup> Jiří Paroubek is the former Prime Minister of the Czech Republic. He is politically affiliated to the Czech Social Democratic Party. During his presidency Jiří Paroubek faced several controversial scandals including bribery allegations related to the privatisation of the Czech oil and gas giant Unipetrol. Furthermore, Paroubek's closest senior political advisors were powerful lobbyists or people with Czech mafia connections.



*“Whatever the topic would be, I would be cautious about what the politician is saying... whether he or she is telling the truth.”(55)*

Suspicion and distrust of political messages is a common finding among many studies (Savigny 2008; Scammell 2014). When asked about the topic of politicians’ podcasts, most participants pointed to politicians’ self-presentation, promotion of political activities, and presentation of their political views. Participant 55 mentioned that it would be interesting to listen to behind-the-scenes politics and sneak peaks from meetings or agreements that are not public. Some participants argued that they liked the personal traits of podcast presenters, identifying in them the presenter’s personal delivery style.

*“I feel like I am part of their conversation and that they share all this intimate stuff with me as if I were their friend.” (66)*

Nevertheless, other participants opposed this view and asked for more discussion of their political views on certain policies.

Having listened to the three extracts of the Czech politicians’ podcasts, the participants were then asked to record their spontaneous reactions and emotional responses using the series of emojis provided by the researcher before the audio listening exercise started. The first audio example’s topic concerned Senator Pavel Fischer’s criticism of the Czech Prime Minister over his stance on the security policy of the Czech Republic. The second clip represented the political views of Petr Fiala, the leader of the largest opposition political party, the Civic Democratic Party. The third audio example included an interview discussion with Markéta Pekarová Adamová, the leader of political party TOP 09.

The spontaneous response to Fischer’s podcast was mostly “boring”, “slow” and “it feels like he was reading it”, or that it more resembles an “audio book” than a political discussion (see Table 3). Indeed, many people argued that the audio clip shared some characteristics of a bedtime story as regards the host’s delivery style. However, while some participants revealed a negative view, suggesting that Fischer’s monologue was not really engaging because of the way he was talking, other participants appreciated his calm voice and professional formal language.

*“It was so boring and I also did not like his delivery style. He was acting like a drama queen.” (51)*

*“It sounds like he was reading the text.” (56)*

With regard to the participants’ emotions towards the audio recording of Senator Pavel Fischer, thirteen participants declared their emoji to be “Neutral”, meaning they neither liked nor disliked the episode, six participants did like the podcast, and one listener was angry with it.

<b>Pavel Fischer podcast</b>	
<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Calm voice Pleasant voice Radio broadcast voice I like his formal language Interesting	Boring Long Slow It sounds like he is reading the text.
<b>Emotions:</b> 11 Neutral; 7 Smile; 1 Anger; 1 Boring	

[Table 2 Perception of Pavel Fischer’s podcast show. Verbatim comments [here](#)]

The second audio clip was an excerpt from the interview podcast show *Modrý podcast* by Petr Fiala who had invited his party colleague and Vice Chairman Martin Kupka to join him. Many participants had positive spontaneous reactions to it and declared having a positive emotional experience (see Table 3). Participants found the podcast clip to be “pleasant to listen to” and perceived the discussion to be “dynamic”. Some participants pointed out the podcast host Petr Fiala’s appealing tone in highlighting the alarming political situation.

Nonetheless, some participants were suspicious of the arguments made:

*“I have the impression that [particular statement] is an example of propaganda. Something like a pre-election promise.” (63)*

Others suggested that it reminded them of “manifesto propaganda” (Participant 69) and that “the clip was about convincing us about their beliefs” (Participant 70). Interestingly, although such arguments are quite negative, the overall emotion related to the audio was fairly positive.

<b>Petr Fiala podcast</b>	
<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Informative Good discussion Good communication Both politicians are competent I do trust them They are trustworthy I like the formal language More pleasant experience than the first audio clip Pleasant to listen to Sensible They get to the point They know the topic well Dynamic The guest is authentic	Unnecessary “aggression“ in the beginning The complainer and the chiller A bit propoganda Manifesto and propoganda Politicians Promises Pre-election promises Right-wing party Complaining The host has some speech problems
<b>Emotions:</b> 7 Neutral; 13 Smile	

[Table 3 Perception of Petr Fiala’s podcast show. Verbatim comments here]

With regard to the third audio clip, the overall emotional response was rather positive and the majority of participants highlighted the dynamic discussion between the podcast presenter and the politician (see Table 4). The participants pointed out that this was mainly due to the host’s and the party leader’s young voices. Almost all the participants positively emphasised the informal language used in the interview discussion between the leader and the interviewer. Jarrett (2009) highlighted the importance of informal expression, in that it is perceived more personably by podcast listeners. By employing a simple rhetoric style, politicians seek to present themselves as ordinary people (Stanyer 2013). In a similar manner to the second audio clip, the participants questioned the trustworthiness of the politician:

*“The questions by the moderator were biased so I am not sure whether she was saying the truth.” (69)*

<b>Markéta Adamová Pekarová podcast</b>	
<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Young voice Enthusiastic Dynamic Interesting Intriguing Nice discussion The issue was explained so everyone can understand it She is true to her beliefs I trust to what they say Authentic I can relate to this I like the informal language Appealing	The communication style was not confident Corruption Too many words Hard to concentrate on the topic Uninterestingly explained topic I did not like her communication style Unconvincing Boring Repeating words
<b>Emotions:</b> 8 Neutral; 10 Smile; 2 Anger	

[Table 4 Perceptions of Markéta Pekarová Adamová’s podcast show. Verbatim comments here]

**Relationship building between politicians and podcast listeners**

To further our understanding of the influence of listening to politicians’ podcasts on the relationship between politicians and our participants, we asked a series of questions drawing on the conceptual frameworks of political relationship marketing theory (Bannon 2005) and socially-mediated authenticity (Gilpin et al. 2010). Such questions included among others: (1) “*How trustworthy do you find this politician?*”, (2) “*How transparent was the politician’s opinions?*”, (3) “*To what extent did you feel engaged by this politician?*”, (4) “*What is your impression from the politician’s delivery style?*”.

The results show that perceptions of the politicians’ authenticity were quite divided. While some were quite suspicious of the politicians’ intentions, others identified some kind of authenticity:

*“I think that the politicians [Petr Fiala and Martin Kupka] were authentic. I like the dynamics of the discussion and the way they communicated. I found it credible.” (68)*

*“She [Markéta Pekarová Adamová] was authentic in her presentation. I could relate to this.” (70)*

Interestingly, a large number of participants recognised the hosts’ voices, mostly from the second example that was with Petr Fiala. A reason for this may be that those participants follow current political affairs or support that political party, hence, they were more familiar with the politicians. More specifically, the participants considered Senator Pavel Fischer to be credible and trustworthy in his podcast show, with fifteen participants agreeing that he appeared competent and had provided evidence that backed-up his political opinions. However, though some of the participants acknowledged the Senator’s good presentation skills (the *impression* dimension of authenticity), they also stated that his formal communication style sounded unnatural, and as such did not find it engaging. These findings are further supported by studies that show that a more personal style of political communication strongly influences voter interests and subsequently their behaviour (Stanyer 2013; Rahat & Zamir 2018).

Petr Fiala’s podcast received overall positive feedback, with participants positively commenting on his communication style: they found him trustworthy and engaging. They argued that the interview discussion format enabled the host to be more dynamic. According to the political relationship marketing model, trust and shared values constitute vital components in relationship building between potential voters and political representatives (Egan 2011; Strömbäck et al. 2014). Drawing on our findings, listening to the specific podcast triggered such attributes which could offer the possibility of cultivating a more meaningful relationship between publics and politicians. As studies have demonstrated a meaningful communication of public expectations allows for gaining people’s trust (Egan 2011; Grow & Ward 2013).

The final podcast by Markéta Pekarová Adamová was mostly described as being young and enthusiastic. Thirteen of the participants had a very positive overall impression of her podcast show. The expertise of this politician was also acknowledged, although the podcast did not resonate with all participants in this study. Seven participants did not like her communication style indicating that Pekarová Adamová was speaking too fast and that her communication was unstructured and chaotic. Nonetheless, many participants argued that they could relate to this podcast show in regard to the podcast format and to the politician as well. Such findings

corroborate with studies supporting that the online presentation of politicians has been highly influenced by a personality-driven communication style (Stanyer 2013; Metz et al. 2019).

Overall, two out of the three podcasts (Petr Fiala and Markéta Pekarová Adamová) were characterised as coming across as authentic by the participants. Since an authentic host is a strong predictor of creating a personal connection between podcast presenters and listeners (Heshmat & Neustaedter 2018; Lindgren, 2016), the two politicians mentioned are likely to have the potential to develop a closer relationship with their listeners via podcasts, conceivably leading to creating or strengthening their support with these listeners:

*“I choose shows where I already know the hosts, so I know some background about them, and I believe in their choice of topics and the choice of guests.” (54)*

However, the participants displayed a variety of responses and emotions. Despite the fact that at the onset of discussions they seemed rather eager to listen to the politicians’ podcasts, a considerable number expressed their hesitations towards the end. The main reason behind this was that they found them quite boring. Nevertheless, the participants recognised that different listening experiences arising from the delivery style of each politician would possibly change their opinion. In this regard, the majority of participants would prefer to listen to the podcast interview and discussion format:

*“The most important aspect of podcasting is the role of the podcast presenter. The hosts and their presentation give the overall impression of the show and the delivery style can be decisive for me to continue listening.” (59)*

As Parvatiyar (2000) argued relationship marketing has significant potential value both for gaining new customers and for maintaining an existing relationship. Our findings suggest that podcast has the potential to create such relationship and trigger voters’ interest as long as it is delivered in suitable formats. The findings show that the delivery style matters, and in that podcast affordances facilitate the crafting of a politician’s personal style thanks to the diverse range of its formatting (McHugh 2016).

## **Concluding remarks**

Alongside other authors in this field (Williams 2017; Parsons & Rowling 2018) that recognise that new media technologies should be central in political marketing research, we explored young people's perceptions of political podcasting by combining insights from political marketing theory and political communication studies regarding social media. More specifically, political relationship marketing theory was the most useful in this regard, because its conceptualisation of a long-term connection between the public and politicians is as a multi-layered and dynamic process that is predicated on trust, commitment, shared value, and public expectations (Bannon 2005; Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2009; Dean et al. 2015).

Our findings demonstrate that podcasts present opportunities for relationship building between citizens and their political representatives. Although the politicians' communication styles and individuals' perceptions about politics impact on the efficacy of the use of podcasts (as with other social media, see Lilleker & Jackson 2014; Abid et al. 2020), there are still various features of this platform that permit the creation of a more substantial relationship between the electorate and politicians. Participants positively commented on the dynamic discussions that took place in podcasts, as well as on the broadcasting of topical and easy to understand messages on political issues. Drawing on the observations of Heshmat and Neustaedter (2018) regarding the significance of the lack of length limitations to podcasts, we argue that this ability to have deeper discussions helps to develop a more meaningful connection with the listeners; something that is not as feasible through the mainstream media or other social media platforms.

Within this context, politicians have the liberty to shape both the content and the delivery style of their messages. If this is done appropriately, it can also then enhance the authenticity of the message and the presenter, which, as our findings showed, does matter for the listeners. Our findings concur with those of studies suggesting that a personal and private style of communication affects listeners' perceptions of authenticity (Stanyer 2013; Metz et al. 2019; Grow & Ward 2013). Authenticity, conversational dynamism, and a carefully curated personalisation of communication seem to be able to create the feeling of the listener being part of a conversation, which can subsequently create a sense of attachment and belonging – that is, when the listeners feel like the podcast presenters are having a congenial conversation with them (Heshmat & Neustaedter 2018).

For political podcasting to be an effective political marketing tool, podcasts should be part of a carefully designed communication plan. That is, podcasts should be advertised through other social

media platforms to raise awareness of them, and the messages and the politician's profile should be consistent amongst all communication channels. Most importantly, there is no fit-all format; the political culture and the politicians' own profiles should define the practice. Amongst other things, political podcasting offers the opportunity to address specific audiences by carefully selecting the topics of discussion as well as those involved in them – from the general audience to experts or celebrities – and to subsequently get the preferred political message across to this intended public, potentially creating enduring relationships with them.

Responding to calls for more empirical research (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy 2007), this study offers an initial empirical grounding of the use of podcasts in politics in the Czech Republic. Our findings can inform and update existing political relationship marketing studies that seek to explore new forms of permanent campaigning and new ways for the engagement of diverse audiences. Future research can provide insights into further national contexts and segments of society in order to examine and theorise the expansion of political (relationship) marketing activities within the under-explored terrain of political podcasting. Moreover, comparative studies on podcasting and political marketing can further our theoretical and practical understanding of political marketing in different cultural and political contexts.

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