

Young people's engagement with podcasts in 2021

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The podcast market continues to grow, with 40% of UK adults aged 26-35 listening to podcasts at least once a week and listenership in the UK predicted to grow from 9 million in 2017 to 28 million by 2026 (Statista, 2022). Production of new and varied podcasts and podcast services also remains on the rise, with Amazon, Spotify and Apple all growing their services and investment in the podcast space during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ofcom, Media Nations, 2021).

Younger generations are leading the way with podcast listening and, in 2021, the Infinite Dial report found that 73% of people in the UK aged 16-34 were familiar with podcasts compared with 72% of those aged 35-54 and 67% of those aged 55 and above (Beniamini, 2021). Furthermore, 63% of those aged 16-34 had listened to a podcast compared with 62% of those aged 35-54 and 54% of those aged 55 and above.

However, while there are many reports readily available on adult podcasts consumer behaviour, little is known about the engagement with podcasts in younger people. In 2020 we found that 1 in 4 children and young people aged 8-18 listened to podcasts more during the COVID-19 lockdowns than they had done before, and also that more young people aged 14 and above listened than younger children (30.8% of young people aged 14-16 and 38.7% of young people aged 16-18 vs 9.1% of children aged 8-11 and 19.0% of children aged 11-14). We also found links between podcast listening and reading, with more children and young people who said that they listened to podcasts also enjoying reading (47.8% vs 40.8%) and reading daily (30.4% vs 27.0%) than their peers who did not listen to podcasts (Best and Clark, 2020).

Following this, in 2021, we decided to dig a little deeper into the attitudes and behaviours of young people's engagement with podcasts by conducting a survey in which 1,606 young people aged 11-18 from 13 schools participated.

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Key Findings

- 1 in 5 (22.3%, n = 358) young people said that they listened to podcasts in their free time
- Of these, 1 in 2 (50.3%) said that they had a favourite podcast
- 1 in 2 (55.1%) of those who said that they listened to podcasts said that they listened more while schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asking about their listening behaviour when returning to school in the autumn, roughly the same number (50.4%) said they listened less now that schools were open again
- Roughly the same percentage of boys and girls said that they listened to podcasts (23.2% of boys vs 21.4% of girls)
- The percentage of pupils who listened to podcasts increased with age, with 1 in 5 (18.4%) young people aged 11-14 listening compared with 1 in 3 (29.9%) aged 14-16 and almost 1 in 2 (44.4%) aged 16-18

Why young people listened to podcasts in 2021

- Of those who listened to podcasts, nearly 3 in 5 (58.7%) said that they listened because they could also carry out other activities, such as homework or exercise, closely followed by 1 in 2 (53.9%) saying that they found the subject interesting.
 - For those aged 14-16 and those aged 16-18, the most popular reason for listening to podcasts was finding the subject interesting (69.8% of 14- to 16-year-olds and 65.4% of 16- to 18-year-olds).
 - For boys, the most common response was that they listened because a podcast related to something else that they enjoyed. 53.2% of boys who listened to podcasts agreed with this, compared with 37.8% of girls.

Benefits of listening to podcasts

- 1 in 2 listeners (54.2%) felt that one of the benefits of listening to podcasts was that they got to hear different people's opinions and ideas.
- 3 in 4 (74.6%) agreed that listening to podcasts helped them understand a subject, and 3 in 10 (30.7%) agreed that it helped them understand what they had learned at school. A focus learning new things was much more of an appeal for older respondents, with 2 in 3 (67.3%) people aged 16-18 agreeing with this compared with just 2 in 5 (43.2%) aged 11-14.
- 1 in 2 (51.1%) young people said that listening to podcasts made them feel better when they were anxious or sad.
 - More girls (57.2%) than boys (42.9%) said this.

Benefits in other areas

- 2 in 3 (66.2%) listeners agreed that listening to a podcast made them want to discuss ideas with friends and/or family, and that listening to podcasts helped them feel more confident about a subject (63.7%).
- 2 in 5 (44.7%) listeners agreed that listening to a podcast made them want to read more about a subject.
- 1 in 3 (34.1%) listeners agreed that listening to a podcast made them want to write more.

Podcasts in the classroom

- 2 in 5 (38%) of all young people, including those who did not listen in their free time, agreed that listening to podcasts would help with their learning if they listened in the classroom.
- 1 in 10 (9.7%) said that they listened to podcasts in the classroom.

Barriers to listening

- Of those who did not listen to podcasts, 3 in 5 (62.4%) said that podcasts did not interest them.
 - Some open-ended comments suggested that many young people simply weren't aware of podcasts, which implies that there is potentially a larger receptive audience:

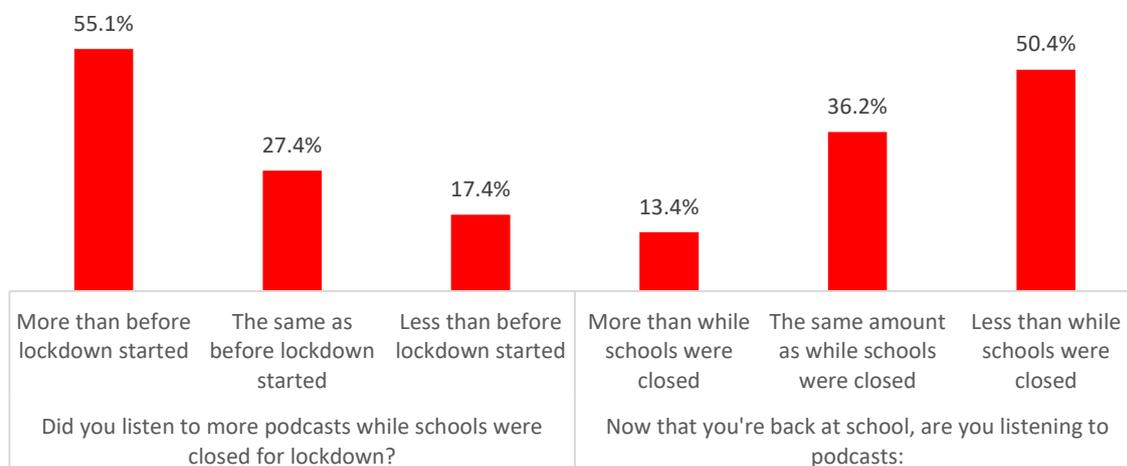
"I thought they were for adults."

Podcast listening in 2021

In January 2021, we conducted a survey of 1,606 young people aged 11-18. Of these, 1 in 5 (22.3%) said that they listened to podcasts in their free time. While this is a narrower age range and smaller sample size than our previous research, which was based on data from our Annual Literacy Survey, the percentage is comparable: in our previous survey, 19.3% of children and young people aged 8-18 said that they listened to podcasts (Best and Clark, 2020).

We also asked young people whether their listening behaviour had changed during the pandemic. Indeed, for many young people school closures had been an opportunity to listen to podcasts more than before. As shown in Figure 1, of the young people who said they listened to podcasts, more than 1 in 2 said that they listened more during lockdown than before. However, 1 in 2 also said that they listened less when they returned to school in autumn 2020.

Figure 1: Podcast listening habits in relation to COVID-19-related school closures



Young people engaged with podcasts in a variety of ways and for different reasons. Of those who listened to podcasts, 1 in 2 (50.3%) said that they had a favourite podcast, with young people submitting over 100 different podcast titles. These titles covered a range of topics including issues related to young people, such as relationships and puberty, alongside sports, music and history. Presenters included scientists, actors and YouTubers. Podcast titles were often repeated across age groups, suggesting that many were accessible for young people of different ages. Many young people also noted more than one title as their favourite, or noted a theme rather than an individual title such as 'true crime' or 'history'. Figure 2 shows some of the most popular titles and themes, including any that were mentioned more than once.

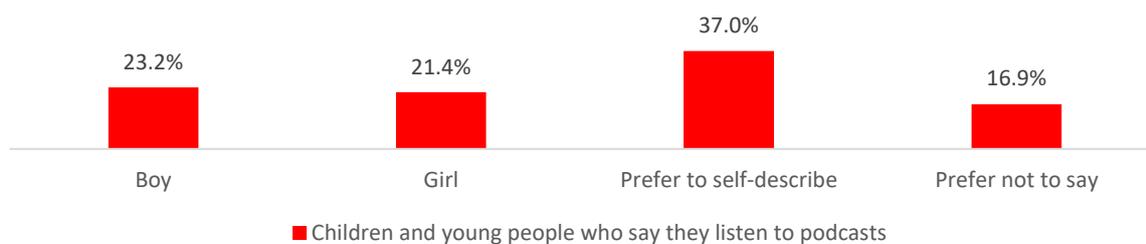
Figure 2: The most popular podcasts listed as favourites



Who listened to podcasts in 2021

Roughly the same percentage of boys and girls said that they listened to podcasts (see Figure 3). Additionally, 37% of pupils who self-described their gender and 16.9% of those who preferred not to disclose their gender identity listened to podcasts.¹

Figure 3: Young people who listen to podcasts by gender

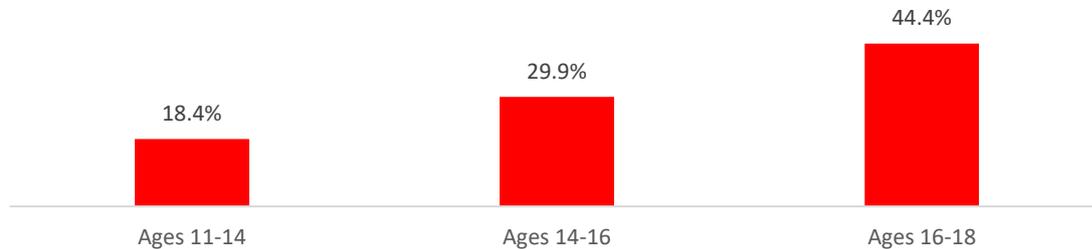


The percentage of young people who listened to podcasts increased with age, with 1 in 5 young people aged 11-14 listening compared with 1 in 3 aged 14-16 and almost 1 in 2 aged 16-18 (see Figure 4).²

¹ The sample size of those who “prefer to self-describe” and who “prefer not to say” are very small (n = 10 and 11 respectively), so any conclusions ought to be drawn with caution.

² We asked respondents to tell us their school year group and from this translated it into Key Stage, then expressed it here as age. So English school Years 7 to 9 are Key Stage 3 and aged 11-14, Years 10 and 11 are Key Stage 4 and aged 14-16, and Years 12 and 13 (or Sixth Form) are Key Stage 5 and aged 16-18.

Figure 4: Young people who listen to podcasts by age group



As shown in Figure 5 there was very little difference in listening between young people receiving Free School Meals (FSM) (20.3%) and not receiving FSM (22.7%).

Figure 5: Young people who listen to podcasts by receipt of Free School Meals



Why young people listened to podcasts in 2021

When we asked young people why they listened to podcasts (see Figure 6), nearly 3 in 5 said that they listened because they allowed them to multitask, carrying out other activities such as homework or exercise, closely followed by 1 in 2 saying that they found the subject interesting. Two in 5 young people also said that they listened because the podcasts related to something else they enjoyed, while a further 2 in 5 listened because someone they know has made one. Only 1 in 4 said that they listened to fill time, which may indicate that more young people actively choose to listen to podcasts for their positive outcomes rather than for lack of other things to do.

Figure 6: Reasons why young people listened to podcasts in 2021



Many young people also provided their own reasons for listening to podcasts. One common theme related to wellbeing. While we would go on to ask about this more specifically (and will explore further in the next section), there were some examples, both general and specific, of how podcasts might appeal from a wellbeing perspective:

“They are calming and help me zone out.”

“Hearing more about my favourite celebrities and how their roles may have affected them [...] makes me happy because it’s almost as though you’re speaking to them yourself.”

Similarly, some young people said that they listened to podcasts to help them get to sleep. This has been a common motivator for adult podcast listeners: in 2019, Infinite Dial reported that 51% of podcast listeners in the US listened to relax before going to sleep (Beniamini, 2020, p. 25). Indeed, there is a growing industry for podcasts designed specifically for listening to at bedtime, perhaps following the ‘Book at Bedtime’ format on Radio 4.³ In our survey of 5- to 8-year-olds in 2021, we found that over 9 out of 10 (95.6%) children enjoyed hearing stories read to them (Best, 2021) and it is encouraging to see that older children and young people, as well as adults, continue to enjoy listening to voices as a calming influence.

“They calm me down and help me fall asleep.”

“To help me get to sleep.”

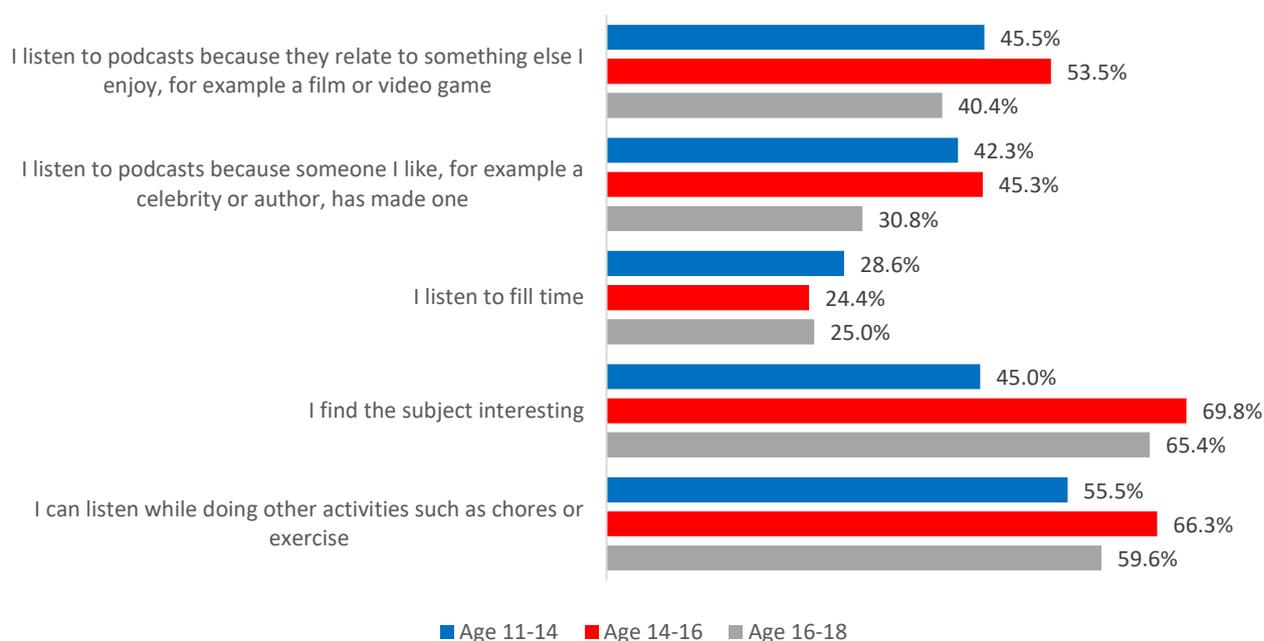
Differences by age

There were differences by age in the reasons why young people listened to podcasts. For pupils aged 11-14, the most popular reason for listening to podcasts was ‘I can listen while doing other activities such as chores or exercise’ (see Figure 7). But for those aged 14-16 and

³ See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/nov/02/five-of-the-best-podcasts-sleep-inducing-sounds-and-stories>

those aged 16-18, the most popular reason for listening to podcasts was finding the subject interesting. This statement also had the biggest gap between age groups, with just 45% of those aged 11-14 agreeing compared with 69.8% of those aged 14-16 and 65.4% of those aged 16-18.

Figure 7: Motivations for listening to podcasts by age

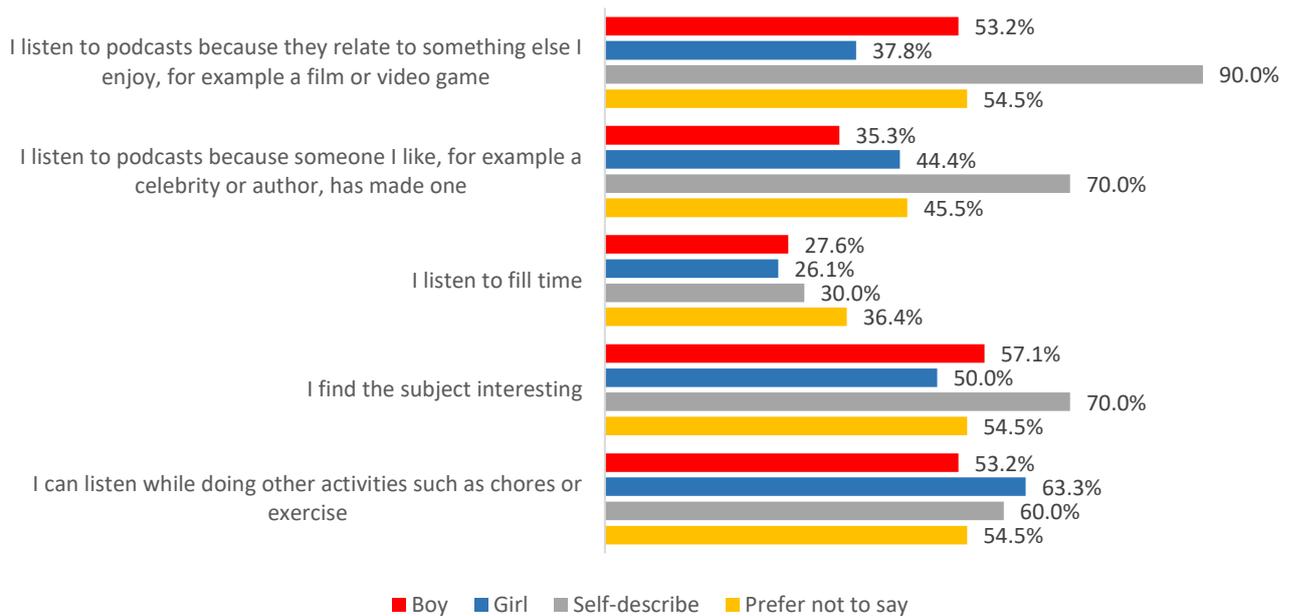


Differences by gender

While the overall gender gap in listening to podcasts is small (23.2% of boys vs. 21.4% of girls), there appear to be differences in terms of their motivations. As shown in Figure 8, more boys than girls said that they listened to podcasts because they found the subject interesting or because the podcasts related to something else they enjoyed. We know from our work elsewhere that using existing interests, such as gaming or film, can help motivate children and young people to read more, and these responses suggest that the same is true here.⁴ These reasons also had a much higher response rate from young people who identified another way, as did the statement that they listened to podcasts because someone they like has made one.

Figure 8: Motivations for listening to podcasts, across gender identities

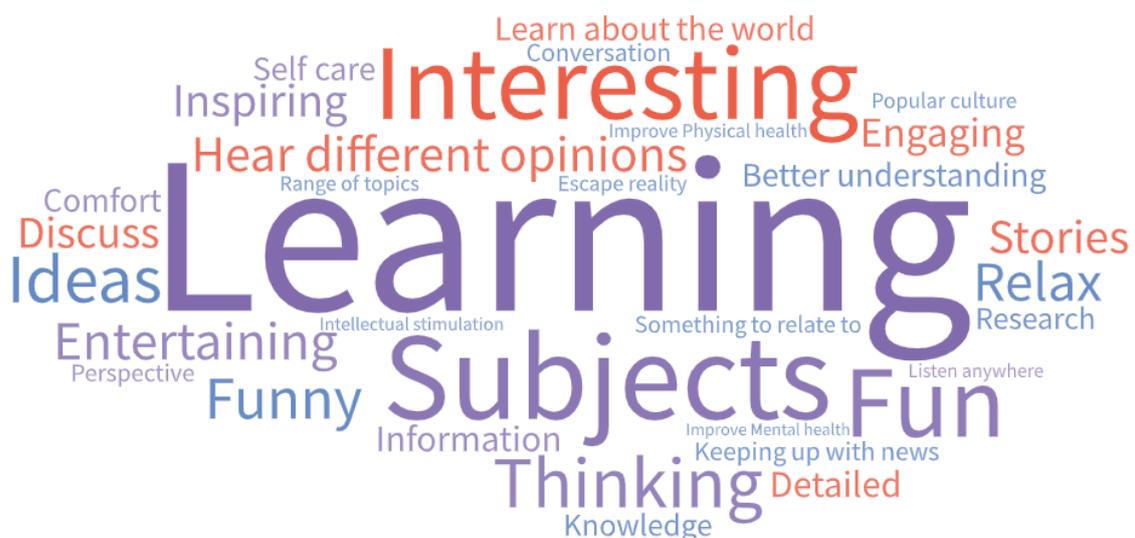
⁴ See, for example, Picton, I and Clark, C. (2021). Children and young people’s video game playing and literacy in 2021. London: National Literacy Trust. <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-video-game-playing-and-literacy-in-2021/>



Benefits of listening to podcasts

We also explored the various benefits that young people found in listening to podcasts. Indeed, their responses to several open-ended comments showed that learning about different subjects and ideas, considering viewpoints and exploring ideas were all at the forefront of the attraction for many. Some of the most common terms used to describe these benefits are shown as a word cloud in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Word cloud representing the most commonly used words and phrases in comments about podcasts



Young people were also asked what they enjoyed most about listening to podcasts. Most young people told us that they liked to listen to podcasts because they got to hear different people's opinions and ideas (see Figure 10). This is encouraging as it suggests a curiosity that is also reflected in our reading research: when asked why they read, 3 in 10 (31%) children and young people said that reading helps them learn about other people and cultures (Clark and Picton, 2021). It also reflects a recognition of the importance of hearing about different ideas: in 2020 we found that more than 3 in 5 children and young people in our research agreed with the statement that it is important to read books from a range of backgrounds, and nearly half said that they liked to read stories with characters who are different from them (Best, Clark and Picton, 2020).

Agreement with all statements was relatively high but the second most common was that podcasts made young people laugh (51.4%). It is also encouraging to see that almost 1 in 2 (48.3%) agreed that they learned new things when listening to podcasts, which again underscores a link between podcast listening and curiosity and suggests a potential for podcasts to be used in educational settings (as discussed later). Almost 1 in 2 agreed that podcasts enabled them to hear exciting stories. While more fiction podcasts are emerging, the majority mentioned in this survey were non-fiction, so this highlights the power and appeal of non-fiction storytelling. Lastly, 2 in 5 agreed that listening to podcasts helped them relax, which corresponds to some of the open-ended comments about listening before going to sleep.

Figure 10: What young people enjoy most about listening to podcasts



In addition to the benefits listed above, young people also volunteered their own examples of what they enjoyed most about listening to podcasts. Some suggested that the content of a podcast can actually complement content from other areas, which links to the idea that listeners are motivated because a podcast relates to an area that, or is hosted by a presenter who, the listener already knows. This also underscores the point that podcasts can play into a transmedia narrative that builds on existing interests, which might both increase podcast listenership and translate into other formats such as reading.

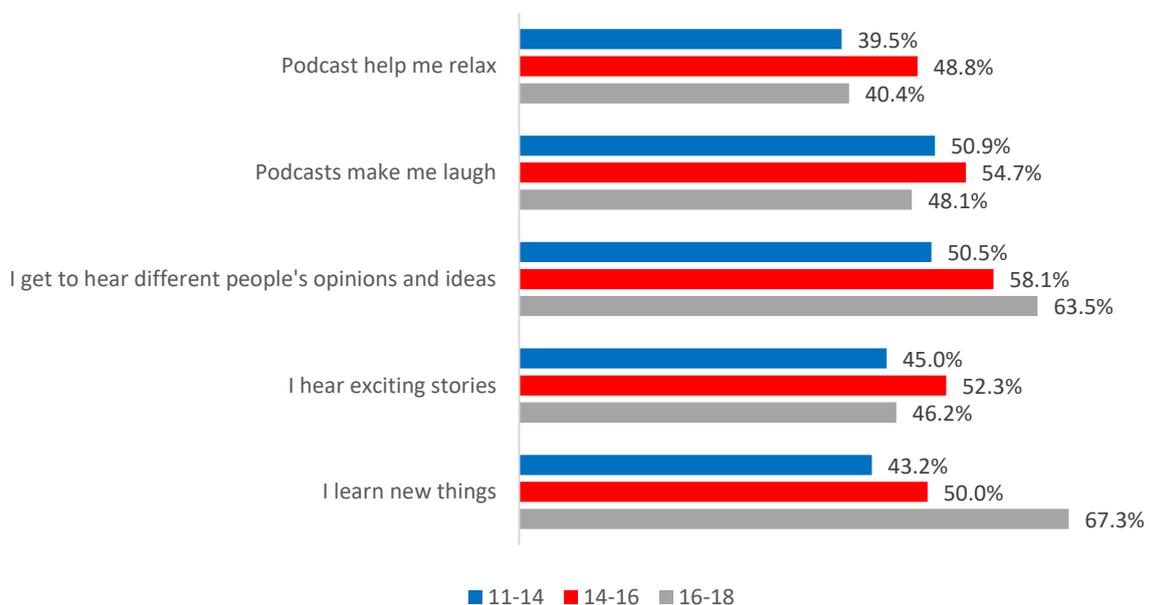
“They also explain things in games and movies much [...] better so I know that I’m on the same page as other people.”

“They add more to existing stories.”

Benefits by age

As shown in Figure 11, the focus on learning new things was much more of an appeal for older young people, with 2 in 3 of those aged 16-18 agreeing with this compared with just 2 in 5 of those aged 11-14. More of those aged 14-16 and those aged 16-18 also said that they enjoyed hearing different people’s opinions and ideas. Meanwhile, those in the youngest age group most frequently said that podcasts made them laugh. Overall, the relatively high level of enthusiasm among 16- to 18-year-olds for learning new things and hearing different opinions could be an opportunity to promote these benefits in 16+ settings.

Figure 11: What young people enjoy most about listening to podcasts, by age



Further reasons why young people listened to podcasts

As shown in Figure 12, 3 in 4 (74.6%) listeners told us that podcasts helped them to understand a subject, with 2 in 3 (68.4%) telling us that listening to podcasts made them want to find out more about a subject. However, far fewer said that listening to a podcast helped them understand what they had learned at school (30.7%). Alongside this, just over half (51.1%) said that podcasts made them feel better when they were worried or sad, which corresponds with the similar proportion saying that podcasts helped them relax.

Figure 12: Agreement with statements about additional benefits of podcasts

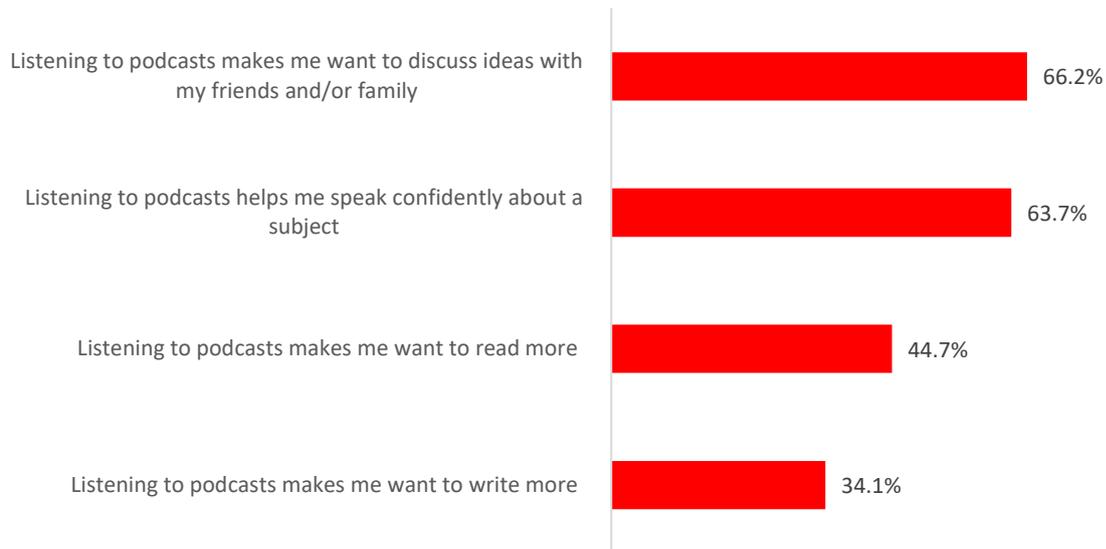


Influence on other behaviours

We also asked young people how listening to podcasts impacted on behaviours in other areas. As shown in Figure 13, most said that podcasts made them want to discuss ideas with their friends and family, and that listening to podcasts helped them speak confidently about a subject. This is an encouraging finding as it shows the potential of podcasts to promote the development of speaking skills. Oracy, or speaking and listening, is a crucial part of the learning journey for secondary students, and hearing effective talk modelled by teachers is often recommended to build such skills (see, for example, Millard and Gaunt, 2018). Podcasts, mostly, are either edited or scripted to a high quality so listeners will hear speakers discussing things in a more formal register than they might in more casual settings. Further, if young people are accessing interesting content that they are able to reproduce in their own conversations, then they have more opportunities to develop their own speaking skills in these registers. Thus, podcasts could have potential as a vital tool for developing oracy in young people.

Furthermore, 2 in 5 said that listening to podcasts made them want to read more, and 1 in 3 said that listening made them want to write more. It is therefore encouraging to see that for some, podcasts could potentially be a way into reading and writing.

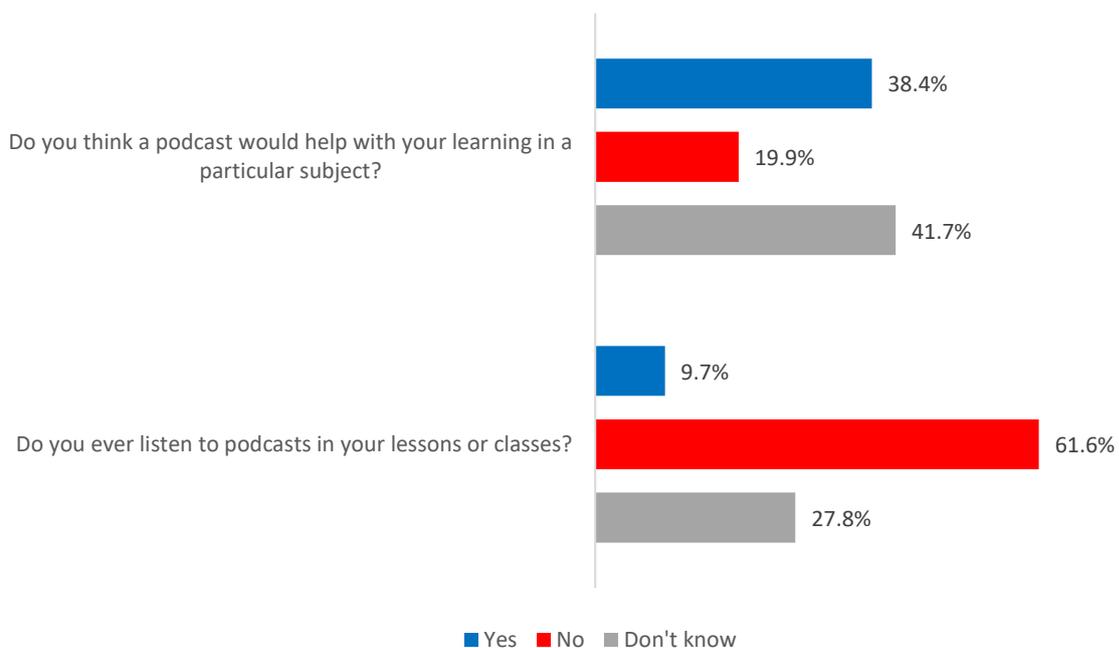
Figure 13: Wider benefits of listening to podcasts



Podcasts in the classroom

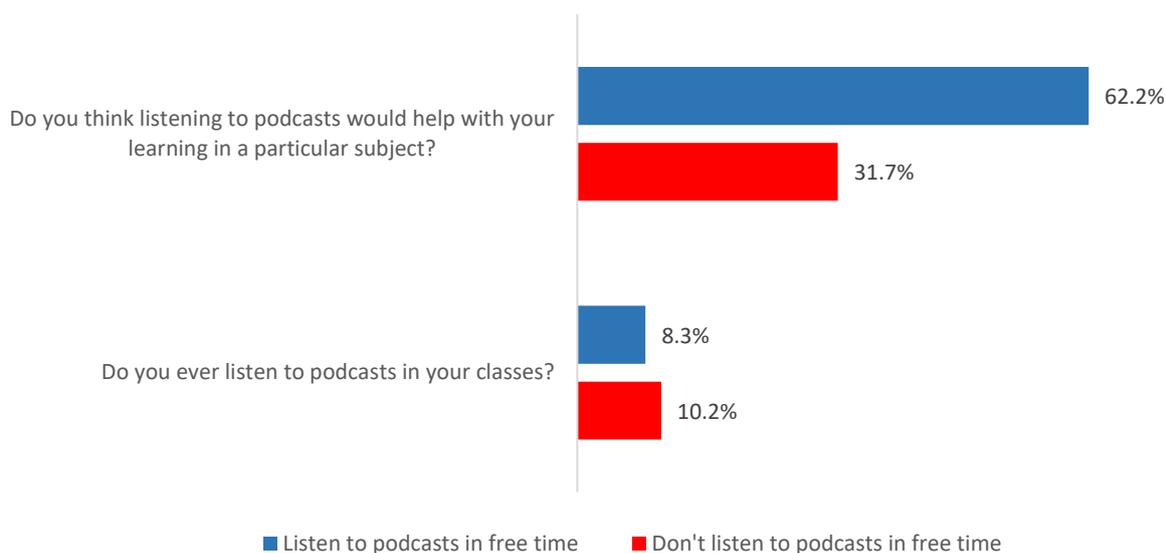
We asked all young people, regardless of whether or not they listened to podcasts in their free time, how they might feel about listening to podcasts in the classroom. As shown in Figure 14, 2 in 5 (38%) agreed that they thought listening to a podcast in the classroom would help with their learning in a particular subject. Meanwhile, just 1 in 10 (9.7%) stated that they already listened to podcasts in classes, suggesting that this is not common practice.

Figure 14: Young people's views about podcasts in the classroom



We also wanted to know how views on the use of podcasts in schools was associated with whether young people listened to podcasts in their spare time or not. As shown in Figure 15, almost twice as many podcast listeners thought that a podcast would help with learning a particular subject compared with those who didn't listen to podcasts (62.2% vs 31.7%). It is perhaps not surprising that those who listen to podcasts in their spare time would be more optimistic about the potential of podcasts to help in this way. Nevertheless, it is striking that 3 in 10 of the young people who do not listen to podcasts in their free time also recognise this potential.

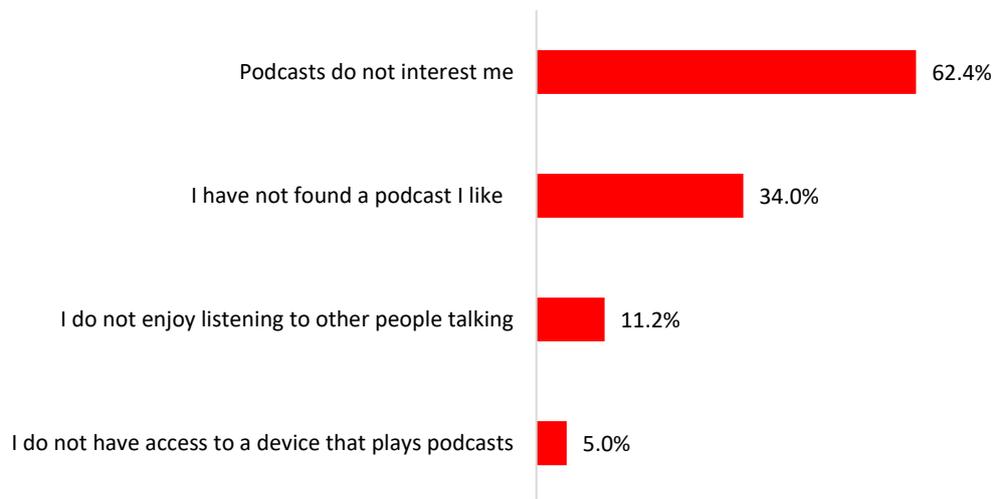
Figure 15: Thoughts on the use of podcasts in the classroom, by those who listen to podcasts in their spare time:



Barriers to listening

Lastly, we also wanted to know why young people who did not listen to podcasts (n = 1,248) said they did not listen to them. As shown in Figure 16, most young people said that they were not interested, while many said that they had not found a podcast that interested them.

Figure 16: Reasons given for why young people do not listen to podcasts



Open-ended responses also suggested that many of the young people said they did not listen because of time – perhaps even acknowledging that while they didn’t currently listen, they may have done previously. As noted earlier, many listeners said that they listened more when schools were closed. Indeed, in 2020 we found that the additional time afforded to young people during lockdown led to increased reading (Clark and Picton, 2020) and the same might be true here.

“I don't have time to waste for podcasts when I have so many other things I can do instead of listening to random people talking.”

“Don’t have much time to listen to them.”

Perhaps encouragingly, others suggested that they simply had not thought to listen to one, so there may also be a wider audience among current non-listeners if the opportunity and ideas were made available to them:

“I haven't really thought about listening to a podcast.”

“One: I didn’t know it is free, is it? Two: I just never thought I would listen to one; I would just play video games on my phone if I bored and, three, I thought they were for adults, not for young gamers.”

Conclusion

The findings from this survey give an encouraging picture of podcast listening habits and attitudes among young people. While listenership increases by age, there is little other differentiation across gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status. The 1 in 5 young people who listen to podcasts in their free time identified a range of benefits, most commonly that podcasts helped them understand a subject, that they made them feel better, and that they

got to hear different ideas and opinions. There were also benefits that played into what we know about using other interests to build interest, excitement and curiosity, whether that's through humour in some titles, the use of role models or building independent curiosity about a subject.

It is also very encouraging to see young people wanting to discuss ideas with friends and family, and feeling more confident in doing so as a result of listening to podcasts, which could encourage them to develop and practise their oracy skills. Many also acknowledged that it might make them want to read or write more. Schools are now experimenting with creating their own podcasts, which could be used to build writing for audience and purpose across different subjects.⁵

The above suggests that many young people already recognise outcomes from, and the benefits of, listening to podcasts that would support this, such as practising speaking about a subject and listening to further their understanding. At the National Literacy Trust we have a strong focus on literacy within the curriculum in secondary schools, recognising the importance of reading, writing, speaking and listening well in different subjects to build skills and interest in those areas. Our approach follows the Education Endowment Foundation recommendation that reading, writing, speaking and listening all need to be taught explicitly in all subjects for students to develop these skills, an approach known as disciplinary literacy (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019). We believe that the inclusion of podcasts in a young person's reading repertoire, whether at home or in the classroom, might support this.⁶

Previous research into listening rates among younger people is limited so it is difficult to compare growth in listeners. However, considering the current rate of listenership among UK adults aged 26-35 is 40%, it is encouraging to see that while the overall figure for young people is 22.3%, this increases to over 50% for the eldest respondents in our survey. It is also encouraging that of those who don't listen to podcasts, more than 1 in 3 (34%) attribute this to not having found a podcast that they like, suggesting that if more titles were made visible to them they may choose to listen. Further, even the children and young people who don't listen regularly believe that podcasts might help them understand subjects at school, so there may well be an audience receptive to podcasts in the secondary classroom moving forward.

⁵ See, for example, the work of school librarian Lucas Maxwell: <http://glenthornelrc.blogspot.com> and Maxwell, L., *Podcasting With Youth: A Quick Guide for Librarians and Educators* (Libraries Unlimited, 2020)

⁶ Our resource for teachers, [Using podcasts in the classroom](https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/podcasts-and-literacy-resources/), provides tips on how to embed this approach: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/podcasts-and-literacy-resources/>

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With thanks to the young people who took part in this survey, and the schools that helped us facilitate it.

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