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Intimate listening

*Exploring audience's podcast experiences through
the case of Ångestpodden*

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Abstract

Anxiety is increasingly present in contemporary media cultures. In Sweden, *Ångestpodden*, freely translated as “The Anxiety Podcast”, can be seen as a part of this development. *Ångestpodden* is the focus of this thesis, which sees the podcast as an interesting case for investigating how anxiety saturates contemporary media experiences. The aim of this study is to investigate the podcast listening experience as it is lived by the podcast listeners. The listeners’ experiences are treated as engagement of media audiences, specifically examining the affective and emotional aspects of podcast listening. Of particular focus in the investigation is the intimacy of the podcast experience. The discussion of this study also seeks to provide more general insights into the podcast genre. For these purposes, the study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the audience members’ own meaning-making of their experiences. The main empirical material is generated with audience interviews and they are complemented with additional findings of sensory-ethnographic observations. The findings of this study show that listening to *Ångestpodden* is a meaningful experience to its audience. It enhances the listeners’ sense of empowerment as human beings and citizens, and their mixed motivations for listening emphasize a drive for knowledge, a sense of solidarity, and longing for belonging. The listeners’ engagement is characterized by intimacy. The study shows that the podcast talk creates a sense of human proximity and connectivity through affective engagement, enhanced with the emotional, personal podcast storytelling. This study also argues that the podcast experience is, however, not only created by the podcast talk and storytelling, but also by the active audiences who craft their own listening practices and routines in different places and spaces of listening. Furthermore, the craft of the podcast experience connects the listeners to the ordinary and extraordinary, and in these experiences, anxiety becomes something shared, connective, and understandable.

Keywords: podcast; media; engagement; audience; listening; intimacy; affect; emotion; anxiety; mental illness; Ångestpodden

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INTRODUCTION

How would you imagine an introduction to a mental illness podcast? Now, examine this transcript:

- *Hello everyone! A warm welcome to the 323th episode of Ångestpoddeeen!*
 - *Hello everybody...*
 - *Welcome to my house* [singing]
 - *What was that now again?* [laughing]
 - *I don't know... good old Flo Rida!*
 - *Ah yes, right! Welcome to my house* [singing with a lowered voice]
 - [laughing]
 - *How are you, my dear?*
 - *Yeah, well...*
 - *So you don't like when I call you that?*
 - *No, I hate it!*
 - *How are you, my fine friend?*
 - *You can just say "my friend".*
 - [laughing]
 - *Why can't I call you "fine"?*
 - *I don't know.*
 - *How are you, my friend?*
 - [laughing] *Yeah, well, it's good. And you? My friend?*
- (*Ångestpodden*, "Att försöka sluta med antidepp!", 2021)

Is it similar to what you imagined? This introduction could perhaps be derived from any feel-good podcast, however, this podcast is specifically about *not* feeling good. At the time of writing, this excerpt is from the latest episode of the Swedish podcast *Ångestpodden*, freely translated as "The Anxiety Podcast." Anxiety is something that we would often consider as dark and negative, and *Ångestpodden* does not avoid that darkness, at least in the topics it covers. Rather, its two hosts, Ida Höckerstrand and Sofie Hallberg, want to "lift these heavy and difficult questions and conversations" in a way that is approachable for many¹.

Let us take a step back. Why would Ida and Sofie think that there is a need for a podcast like this? After all, *Ångestpodden* is produced in Sweden, which is known as one of the happiest countries in the world. On the podcast's website, Ida and Sofie discuss having been on a train between Stockholm and Karlshamn when the idea of *Ångestpodden* came: "Since we have felt this kind of anxiety, there must be many others who have felt the same. What would

¹ See <https://www.angestpodden.com/>

happen if we would talk about it?”. The two friends decided to start their own podcast and now, several years and over 300 episodes later, Ångestpodden has approximately 150,000 monthly listeners² and it has won several awards in Sweden.³

The Swedes, it appears, do have anxiety. This is because the Swedes are human beings. All human beings, as Søren Kirkegaard (2014) discusses, have anxiety. Nonetheless, there exists a misconception that people in welfare states experience less mental suffering than those in less economically wealthy countries. Roland Paulsen (2020) addresses this misconception in his book “Tänk om: En studie i oro.” He argues that, on the contrary, anxiety in welfare states like Sweden is actually increasing. The name of the book expresses the key issue: the question of “tänk om,” or “what if?”. This question, Paulsen writes, is so dominant in the world of our minds that we become trapped in our own labyrinths of “what if?” We end up in these labyrinths because we are not effective at tolerating the uncertainty of the contemporary Western world, which has perhaps even increased since the onset of the global pandemic. (Paulsen, 2020.) Kirkegaard might say that the uncertainty demonstrated in the question of “what if?” represents the essence of anxiety. To Kirkegaard (2014), anxiety is about our awareness as human beings — the possibilities and limitations of our own being. He sees anxiety as the “dizziness of freedom” in the face of its possibility (Kirkegaard, 2014: 75).

Anxiety is thus crucial to human experience, but it is also a phenomenon specific to our current time. This is evident in our media sphere. Fredrika Thelandersson (2020) shows that representations of mental suffering are increasingly present in media cultures. This development has been intensifying since 2015 (Thelandersson, 2020: ii), the same year that Ångestpodden first aired. As a part of this phenomenon, then, Ångestpodden, is an interesting case study for exploring how anxiety saturates contemporary media experiences and media cultures.⁴ This case study is sparked by the question of whether something good could come out of a podcast about anxiety. If Kirkegaard is to be believed, something could:

Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate.

(Kirkegaard, 2014: 187)

² I received the number of monthly listeners via email from the podcast hosts. As a reference, *Poddindex* placed Ångestpodden as the 90th most popular, commercial Swedish podcast in its weekly rating (week 18). See https://www.poddindex.se/commercial_podcasts?page=5

³ The information presented about the podcast, excluding the number of monthly listeners, is derived from the Ångestpodden webpage. See <https://www.angestpodden.com/vilka>

⁴ Moreover, Ångestpodden can be considered part of a small universe of anxiety podcasts. For example, see <https://www.healthline.com/health/anxiety/podcasts-for-anxiety>

Approaching Ångestpodden

What, then, is the right way to approach Ångestpodden? What is required to learn “the ultimate” of the podcast phenomenon? This study seeks to understand Ångestpodden as a media experience, and moreover, as a podcast experience offering its listeners affective, personal audio storytelling (see Lindgren, 2016), so it explores the experiences of the people who listen to the podcast. In her study about the “sad affect” in contemporary media, Thelandersson (2020) investigated mental illness discourses in women’s media culture by examining representations and performances. However, to truly understand the affective media phenomenon in the realm of human experiences, one needs to understand people’s lived experiences in relation to that media. It is crucial for one to listen to how these people themselves make sense of their own experiences. The intention is not to neglect the importance of representations in our understanding of media cultures; however, while Thelandersson (2020) reveals mental health discourses and defined the “feeling-rules of neoliberalism in the performances of and contests made by the “sad girls” of internet, her study does not necessarily inform about how representations and performances matter in people’s lives. This is where this study contributes.

Similar to the findings of Thelandersson (2020), this study acknowledges Ångestpodden as predominantly a women’s phenomenon.⁵ Thelandersson (2020) discusses the sad media affect particularly against neoliberalist power structures. The “sad girl” phenomenon is indeed argued to bring forth “the decisive saying no to capitalism’s hailing of the happy and productive neoliberal subject” (Fournier, 2018: 655). However, this study does not discuss feminist theory. This is not to disregard the dimensions of the phenomenon relating to structural inequalities, but this approach would likely shift the study’s focus away from crucial aspects of the listener’s experiences. Simply put, this study primarily considers the listeners of Ångestpodden as human beings, exploring their lived, subjective, and shared experiences with the podcast.⁶

Aim and research questions

This study aims to investigate the listeners’ experiences with Ångestpodden. To understand the podcast listening experience as it is lived by the listeners, the study uses a qualitative

⁵ Listening demographics presented to me by the podcast hosts via email confirm this.

⁶ However, the aspect of femininity is not completely ignored in this study and will be addressed at times.

approach to analyze the audience members' own meaning-making of their experiences. These experiences are treated as engagement of media audiences, specifically examining the affective and emotional aspects of podcast listening. Of particular focus in the investigation is the intimacy of the podcast experience. The discussion of this study also seeks to provide greater general insights into the podcast genre.

The thesis asks the following three research questions:

1. *How do the audiences of Ångestpodden make meaning of their engagement with the podcast?*
2. *How is intimacy experienced in the listeners' engagement?*
3. *What can this case study tell us about how podcasts matter as a meaningful media genre?*

Following this introduction, the next chapter discusses the theoretical approaches employed in the study. The first part of the literature review situates the study within scholarly discussions about the podcast genre. Then, the theoretical concept and approach of media engagement is explored in the context of media audiences, particularly discussing the role of affect and emotion in media experiences. Following this, the properties of sound are discussed as a preparation for exploring the listeners' experiences with the podcast talk and storytelling. In the final section of the literature review, the concept of intimacy is explored in its variable understandings and situated within the podcast experience. The chapter is concluded by connecting the main theoretical strands of the study. The following chapter provides the design of and reflections on the methods and methodology of the study, emphasizing how the qualitative audience interviews combined with sensory ethnographic observations represent an appropriate approach to studying the listeners' podcast experiences. After this, the main analysis is divided into three main themes named as follows: *empowered in anxiety*, *Ångestpodden as the voice of the friend*, and *connecting ordinary and extraordinary*. The first theme explores the listeners' reflection on the consequences of and their own motivations for their engagement with Ångestpodden. The second theme addresses the listener's intimate experiences with the podcast, highlighting the friendly proximity of podcast talk. The last theme broadens the understanding of podcast intimacy in this case, first discussing the role of personal and disclosive podcast storytelling. Second, the elements of the intimate podcast experience are explored in the context of the listening process itself. As the theme's title implies, it also argues that the podcast experience comprises experiences of ordinary and extraordinary.

THEORETICALLY APPROACHING THE CASE

Because this study seeks to provide insights into how experiences of the podcast matter to its listeners, the literature review first explores what has already been written about podcasts as a media genre. Next, the theoretical approach of media engagement is introduced. This provides perspective on active media audiences and the meaningful role of media in both the individual and collective human experiences (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). The concepts of affect and emotion are also explored as central, modal elements of engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). Following this, the chapter overviews sound studies, highlighting a particular perspective on listening. The discussion focuses particularly on talk, as it is a central constructive element of the podcast experience. The rest of the literature review explores intimacy theories, reviewing several different perspectives from which scholars have discussed it. Intimacy is then situated within media experiences of the current time. The literature review also addresses the elements of podcast intimacy and the centrality of intimacy in listening to podcasts, especially the ones devoted to personal and emotional storytelling (e.g., Lindgren, 2016). This chapter concludes by combining the main theoretical strands that comprise this study's approach.

PODCAST: A GENRE OF ITS OWN

Why study podcasts? Podcasts are certainly a conspicuous media phenomenon in our current time, but so are many other media genres of the digital era. Moreover, it bears similarities to radio: talk delivered to our (mostly) mobile devices. Andrew Bottomley (2015: 165) notes that the cultural aspects of podcasting have not been studied in great depth, however several scholars have addressed the question of what makes the podcast a genre of its own (see e.g., Berry, 2015; Llinares et al., 2018; Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Expressions such as “audio media revolution” (Spinelli & Dann, 2019) and “golden age of podcasting” (Berry, 2015) clearly imply that the podcast is worth studying as a significant media genre of our time. The intimacy of podcasts is especially distinctive (eg. Berry, 2016; Lindgren, 2016; Swiatek, 2018) and this is addressed in subsequent sections. Prior to that, however, I briefly discuss the podcast genre in the cultural context of the current media sphere.

There are two specific contexts on which to focus: digital and audio media. Several scholars have highlighted the interactive, digital media sphere as a breeding ground for podcasts (e.g., Bottomley, 2015; McHugh, 2016; Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Podcasts demonstrate the

democratizing potential of digital media (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2013), often seen as an open “platform” for broadcasting (Bottomley, 2015). This is because a podcaster can arguably be almost anyone from an amateur storyteller to an experienced journalist (McHugh, 2016), whereas radio as a medium is more firmly situated within media industry conventions (Berry, 2016). Furthermore, digital and mobile affordances also enable podcasts listening to occur at any time and in any place (Bottomley, 2015: 166). In addition, the same devices are often used for social media practices, and these uses easily interlace (Spinelli & Dann, 2019: 30).

However, focusing on the aural elements of podcasts makes it more difficult to see (or rather hear) how they differ from radio. Although some early writers (Berry, 2006; Madsen, 2009; Menduni, 2007) have addressed podcasts as an extension of radio, there are several reasons to consider the podcast as a genre of its own. This is not only because radio and podcasts are distinguished by their different methods of distribution (Spinelli & Dann, 2019: 18). As mentioned, there is the liberating aspect of the digital, as podcasting is free from restrictive broadcast conventions (Lindgren, 2016: 2). This relates to the sound worlds of podcasts as well, because podcasts are often free from traditional rules of language in broadcasting, yet not free from commercial advertising and its obvious boundaries (Llinares et al., 2018: 4). This may also allow for more openness and flexibility in oral expression (Llinares, 2018), as podcasts enable the creation of an audio experience in an often free and dialectic form. According to Dario Llinares, Neil Fox and Rickhard Berry (2018: 1-2), there is “something fundamental about oral communication” in its tension between the subjective and objective. Additionally, podcasts may indeed be “talkier” than radio, as Siobhan McHugh (2016) expresses it.

Furthermore, while radio listeners are traditionally offered a more random and often surprising selection of programs, podcast audiences tend to make more active choices about what they want to hear (Berry, 2016). Podcasts may also promote new ways of listening, as they are often listened to through mobile applications that allow for more personalized engagement (Morris & Patterson, 2015). However, as the podcast genre has strengthened its place in the media ecology over time, it can also be seen as having become less experimental, more professional, and more similar to radio (Cwynar, 2015: 191). Radio, moreover, is no longer excluded from the digital ecology and, much like podcast listening, has been shaped by digital affordances (Berry, 2016). Bottomley (2015: 5) suggests that the relationship between podcast and radio should be considered a convergence; in light of the history of radio, it is not

meaningful to see podcasts as a truly new, independent format. Radio and radio research are rooted in media history, and podcast research should not ignore it. Indeed, one might even learn from studying it.

As Bottomley (2015: 165) has noted, more research has examined the educative possibilities of podcasting and its incorporation into mass media than the cultural aspects of podcasting and podcast audiences. The latter approach could shed light on the particularities of the podcast genre. This study seeks to perform an in-depth investigation of podcast listeners' experiences using a case study. The intention is to discuss the meaningful aspects of the listeners' engagement with *Ångestpodden* and to thoroughly investigate the elements of intimacy in the listening experience. With this case, it is also possible to gain insight into the podcast genre in a cultural context.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

To understand the phenomenon of *Ångestpodden* against broader media ecology and cultures, the listeners' experiences are explored through cultural lenses. More precisely, this study investigates the listeners' engagement as media audiences. When audience engagement has more traditionally and commercially been viewed as the key indicator of media industries' economic success (Evans, 2019: 2), this study employs a broader, more nuanced notion of audience engagement that aligns with Peter Dahlgren and Annette Hill (2020). Their broader notion of engagement helps to understand podcast listeners' experiences because it attunes the researcher to the subjectivity of media experiences, grounded in affect (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 2). As argued in later sections, sound is strongly affective, and listeners' engagement should thus be seen as a particularly affective experience. This notion highlights audiences' agency, offering a more sophisticated take on how people live with media compared to the notion of engagement as a "fundamentally positive experience" (Evans, 2019: 10). This approach examines how people encounter and experience media in their personal lives and in personal ways, but also in a socio-cultural context (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). Engagement can be considered a subjective "energizing internal force" (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 2) and a "resource for living" (Corner, 2017: 4). Media can serve as a resource for pleasure, knowledge, culture, and collective action. It is a powerful experience with the potential to connect people and empower them in a way that may even lead to civic potential (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 20).

Media engagement as a resource for living emphasizes the importance of media in people's lives and the relevance of studying how people live with media and how media lives in people's lives. Through his phenomenological approach to broadcast media in Britain, Paddy Scannell (1996) emphasizes the importance of media in the context of ordinary, everyday life. He writes about *care structures* of broadcast media, denoting "the care (the concern) that goes into making programmes in the production process," which "is there-to-be-found in the programmes themselves" (Scannell, 1991: 146). From different care structures of different programmes — for instance, how the talk of the broadcasters generates a certain "mood" for the program — the care flows into people's daily lives. The "dailiness" of the media experience could, according to Scannell, actually itself be seen as a care structure of broadcast media. The word ordinary is crucial here, as it is largely in the ordinariness and regularity of the engagement⁷ that audiences may add structure, routine, and eventfulness to their daily lives. (Scannell, 1996: 146-178.) Thus, as media brings meaning to the daily and the ordinary, it can also bring some ordinary to the daily.

No engagement without affect and emotion

Engagement may embody "moral passion, resentment, pleasure, curiosity, fear, anxiety..." (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 5). Thus, engagement is an experience in which affective, emotional and cognitive work intersect (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). Even involvement commonly seen as highly rational is often sparked and maintained by emotional investment and the "energizing force" of affect (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 9-10). This thesis places itself within the "affective turn," which has increased the focus on affectivity and emotionality in approaches to social and cultural studies in recent decades (see e.g., Clough, 2008). This turn to affect implies the acknowledgement of affect as embodied experiences that should be included in our understandings of the social (Clough, 2008: 1). It is later elaborated how this study treats affect and emotion analytically.

Generally, affect as something that moves people both physically and mentally (Hardt, 2007: xi) is an appropriate basis for studying media engagement as entangled emotional and cognitive experiences and cultural resonance. Anu Koivunen (2001) concluded that affect "poses questions about the links between the subjective and the cultural, individual and social,

⁷ particularly with traditional broadcast media

self and other, inside and outside.” The term “affect” is closely related to emotion. It is often used as an umbrella term for impulses, attitudes and emotions (Greenwald Smith, 2011: 423). However, affect is perhaps seen more as a precondition for emotion, relating to the process of coming to an emotional state (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 6). Emotion, however, is perhaps more easily categorized, as it is something that one can more easily be conscious of (Clough, 2007: 2). Affect is generally highly subjective because it includes embodied sensations and reactions that are *prepersonal*, as Shouse (2005) states when referring to Brian Massumi’s definition of affect. Such embodied affect could, for example, be a sensation of chills when hearing symphonic music. Affect can also be a shared experience (Greenwald Smith, 2011: 432), as the example of feeling chills when hearing beautiful music implies. It is an experience shared by many. However, this study does not clearly distinguish between affect and emotion, and they are often referred to as a pair of “affect and emotion.” This is to encompass their interrelatedness in the situation (Shouse, 2005). Feeling is conceivably an even more ambiguous term, and this study only uses it to describe certain affective or emotional experiences, such as “feeling low.”

APPROACHING SOUND AND LISTENING

Having discussed the approach of media engagement with a focus on affect and emotion, let us discuss the form of engagement this study addresses, namely podcast listening. The podcast is essentially an aural media, so the listening experience thus deserves a special focus (e.g., Llinares et al., 2018). The power of sound must be understood in order to understand podcasts. However, the often-claimed objectivity and rationality of the visual could have hindered the scholarly attention to sound (Hilmes, 2005: 249). Lacey (2013: 12) also notes the lack of studies addressing radio audiences as listeners, although the interest in sound has increased recently (18). For Dahlgren and Hill (2020: 17), being attuned to the different modes of media engagement is important, and it is clear that the aurality in the podcast listening experience matters as a focus of study.

There are many examples of the power of sound, from the use of sounds in healing (Gershon, 2013: 258) to the commonly acknowledged negative health effects of noise (Lacey, 2013: 82). Even when sound is delivering text, there is more to the listening experience than the mere interpretation of text. Scannell (1996: 147) demonstrates how analysis of broadcast talk should not only account for *what is said*, but also *how it is said*, which may often be

something one can only hear. Intonations, tone, and other voice properties set the mood for talk and reveal attitudes and dispositions (Scannell, 1996: 147). Thus, when talk is treated as text, there is a danger of a crucial detail becoming lost in transcription.

Sound as affect

Treating sound as affect may naturally extend the understanding of talk from a way to express text to a sound that goes beyond text. Sound affects us emotionally. In talk, sound “vivificates”, bringing the text alive in a way that may evoke emotions (Llinares, 2018: 132-133). When sounds affect the listener directly and even physiologically, as the example of noise demonstrates, they can also add value to meaning (Scannell, 1996: 147). When approaching sound as affect, it may be useful to first treat it as *embodied vibration* (Gallagher, 2016: 43). According to Michael Gallagher (2016: 44), one should begin from this notion and then move forward from there towards emotions, meanings, and actions. Walter Gershon (2013: 257-258) extends the notion of sound resonance to emotional and cognitive resonance. Acknowledging that one cannot separate the levels of resonance — the embodied, emotional, and cultural — from each other in the listening experience engages the “paradox of human experience” as both subjective and inevitably socio-cultural (Gershon, 2013: 258). Listening can bridge public discussions of common concern with embodied and subjective resonance (Lacey, 2013: 23).

Power of voice and listening

The socio-cultural dimension of listening is especially evident in the context of broadcast media. As Berland (2012: 41) writes, radio “joins people together and reaches them when they are lonely.” However, listening has been considered merely private or even passive act (Lacey, 2013: 11-12). Scannell (1986, 1989), however, has already long ago written about the radio’s ability to connect private and public spheres, though his notion is largely situated in the context of national, public broadcasting, and thus perhaps in the more “obvious” domain of public listening. Generally, radio brings sound messages to people at close range regardless of their original sending location and time (Berland, 2012: 41-42). Thus, it also brings those messages into the reach of the broader public. Lacey (2013) believes that radio listening connects listeners to a shared social reality of being a radio listener, a *listening public*. How, then, is listening a specifically connective and public experience? On the one hand, the *immediacy* of the sensory experience of listening has been celebrated as bringing public

communication into everyone's reach (Lacey, 2013: 15). Scannell (1991: 2) on the other hand addresses the *mundanity* of broadcast talk, which, in the history of radio, created a public space for authorities to reach the ears of ordinary people. However, the public connectivity brought by podcast talk is not so often tied to institutional authorities, as podcasts are not necessarily produced within media industries (Lindgren, 2016: 2). Podcasts can indeed create more mundanity and give a platform to marginalized voices (Llinares, 2018: 139).

In addition, the emotional resonance of the human voice may enhance the connective affect of broadcast talk. Scannell (2019: 2-6) discusses talk as a more fundamental form of human communication than even language. When children learn to speak, they first hear, recognize, and understand something about this fundamental communication. What is apparent in this complex process is the child's attraction to that human voice, their view of talk as *the voice of the friend* (7-8). Scannell (2019: 28) sees broadcast talk as the voice of the friend in its fundamental humanness, arguing that it "minimally presupposes a non-threatening, non-hostile disposition" (31). This could represent a fundamental connecting element in the listeners' experiences with broadcast talk. Furthermore, as broadcast media has brought more non-institutional and repressed voices into both the public domain and the private spaces of listeners (and not as anonymous voices but as *persons*), it certainly breaks boundaries between the public and private (Scannell, 2019: 43-45). This situated space of persons creates "temporal connectivity" between the broadcasters and listeners as the presence of the broadcast persons enters the private spaces of listeners with its certain realness (Scannell, 2019: 46-56), with the voice of the friend.

INTIMACY AS PERSONAL AND INTERPERSONAL PROXIMITY

Intimacy is commonly considered a central element of the podcast experience, and one expects a sense of intimacy to be present in the listener's engagement with *Ångestpodden*. One reason for this is that the topic of anxiety invites discussions of deeply emotional experiences. Indeed, the word "intimacy" is derived from Latin, pertaining to "the inmost," which implies our deepest emotions and feelings (Plummer, 2003: 12). In his classical social theoretical account, Georg Simmel (1950: 126) has described the intimate character of relationships as "the individual's inclination to consider that which distinguishes him from others, that which is individual in a qualitative sense, as the core, value, and chief matter of his existence." However, there is a temptation to take the concept of intimacy for granted. In

addition to the common understanding of intimacy as romantic and sexual relations, close friendships, or parent-child relationships (Register & Henley, 1992: 467), this paper extends the understanding of the concept to more individual, subjective experiences of proximity to the inmost of oneself and others.

Intimacy is more traditionally considered an interpersonal connection (Register & Henley, 1992). Simmel (1950: 126-127) discusses intimacy as an affective structure of a private and exclusive exchange, a confidential bond between “intimates.” He emphasizes that intimacy is not based on the content of these exchanges but should be viewed as a bond with a limited number of participants. The intimate participants communicate with each other about issues that they do not share with others. Simmel writes about intimacy in the context of social interactions and relationships in their different forms and hierarchies. To him, an intimate relationship characterizes one particular form of human relation. (Simmel, 1950: 126-127.) Thus, as he restricts his account of intimacy to consider a form of social relation, he does so in the context of a broader sociological theorization of social structures rather than with the aim to explain the content of intimate communication.

More recent scholars have attempted to theorize the key ingredients of intimate connection. In his review on sociological approaches to intimacy, Lynn Jamieson (2005) concludes that self-disclosure, or at least aiming for it, is an ideal for intimate relationships. Despite the sense of proximity that disclosive communication may produce, intimacy, however, also needs a recognition of *irreducibility* (Obert, 2016). Julia Obert (2016: 26) emphasizes this as a balancing element in all the closeness of intimacy because, in reality, “the other is fundamentally inaccessible.” Without irreducibility, knowing the deep core of oneself as separate to “the other,” intimacy cannot occur (Obert, 2016: 26). Jamieson (1999: 154) even considers intimacy with oneself as a precondition for intimate relationships. Plummer (2003: 13), furthermore, summarizes intimacy as a “complex sphere of ‘inmost’ relationships with self and others.” People “do intimacies” when connecting with their feelings, emotions, bodies, and identities (Plummer, 2003: 13), that which touches “the inmost”. Thus, these three scholars describe intimacy as a connection that requires depth and disclosure; to be intimate, one must nurture openness with oneself.

Transformations of intimacy

People's intimate experiences have changed over time. For instance, intimacy has transformed into a more individual but also a more public experience. When intimacy has traditionally been thought to belong to the domestic sphere (Andreassen et al., 2017: 4), modernization, as discussed by Anthony Giddens (1991; 1992), is as a set of developments that has led to transformations in many traditional ties. Plummer (2003: 9) saw modern intimacy as shaped by "a search for authenticity, meaning and freedom." Giddens' and Plummer's writings primarily concern the dynamics of interpersonal intimacy. However, Plummer's (2003: 5-7) notion of modern *intimate troubles*, such as questions of identities, personality types, and issues of body, discusses the content of intimate ponderings in late modernity. While Simmel (1950: 126-127) avoided defining any specific content of intimacy, more recent scholars like Plummer (2003) have stretched the concept from the outlines of intimate forms of interaction and discussed intimacy as shared experiences and narratives.

Lauren Berlant (1998) approached intimacy from the perspective of cultural studies, discussing how narratives of intimacy travel between public and private spheres, as public and private ideas feed each other (3-4). Using her *intimate public sphere*, Berlant (2011: 182) emphasized how intimate narratives brought to the public sphere serve as spaces for "imagining and cobbling together alternative construals about how life has appeared," thus challenging normative life narratives. Intimate public spheres also connect people, creating a sense of belonging between individuals who share "a common lived history" (Berlant, 2008: viii). Media plays a central role in today's public domain and also in the intimate public sphere. Media distributes public narratives of intimacy, giving resources for people's personal intimacies. Deborah Chambers (2013), for example, discussed both the dynamics and narratives of intimacy in the digital age. She investigated how social media diversifies public expressions of affective disclosure (Chambers, 2013). Thus, digital media can democratize public intimacies (Chambers, 2013). This highlights how media has given space for different expressions of intimacy and how it can be seen as an arena for both public intimacies. Media also enables more individual ways of experiencing interpersonal intimacy, as it enables people to intimately connect with each other outside of conventional relationships (Chambers, 2013). Media may bring people closer to each other with *mediated proximity* (Andreassen et al., 2017: 6).

Podcast intimacy

Now, let us return to podcasts. Though podcast and radio are both essentially broadcasted talk, it has been suggested that podcasts may often belong to a more democratic and digitally facilitated media ecology. Podcasts may also allow for more diversity of voices and expressions (Llinares, 2018), feeding the increasing flow of personal narratives of intimacy into the public sphere. Indeed, the audio storytelling of podcasts is well-suited for exploring lived, personal experiences (Lindgren, 2016: 1). Lukasz Swiatek (2018) even calls the podcast an *intimate bridging medium* in the way it crosses boundaries between people by delivering personal insights enhanced with emotional storytelling. Podcasts may therefore connect people because of the affective properties of sound (e.g., Gallagher, 2016) and with its self-disclosive storytelling style (Meserko, 2014). Comedian and podcaster Paul Gilmartin has remarked that “There’s no other medium where you can take your soul out and put it on the table and say: This is me” (Taylor, 2011 in Meserko, 2014: 475). Moreover, the experience of the “unseen voice” (Corner, 2011: 96), denoting the absence of the visual element, along with the presence of informal podcast talk, may urge the listeners to create their own images (Crisell, 1994). Podcast listening can even be experienced as a *cinema for the ears* (Llinares, 2020). One should neither forget about the embodied resonance of sound. Sounds resonate in our bodies, and broadcast voices can even be felt “inside the head” (Corner, 2011: 96). As a mobile medium, podcasts also “move with the human body” (Spinelli & Dann, 2019: 23), and headphones create a personal listening space (Lindgren, 2016: 24), an *auditory bubble* (Bull, 2006: 133) that can be felt as intimate and private even when in public spaces.

The intention of this discussion is to elaborate the different dimensions of podcast intimacy: personal and disclosive storytelling, aural resonance and proximity, and personalized, intimate ways of listening. It highlights that when exploring podcast experiences, it is important to be attuned to not only the cognitive, but also the affective and emotional, and thus embodied, aspects of engagement. Moreover, Berry (2016) argues that podcasts generate *hyper intimacy*, denoting that podcast listeners may deeply engage with “both the process of listening and the material to which they listen.” Using his notion, Berry (2016) highlights the complexity and depth of intimacy in the podcast listening experience, and, indeed, encouraged one to investigate how intimacy is experienced in the context-dependent podcast experience. Thus, to understand podcast intimacy, one needs to understand podcast experiences as they are lived by the listeners.

BRINGING TOGETHER THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

What unites the theoretical strands explored in this chapter? They are selected for investigating the listeners' experiences with *Ångestpodden*. They are joined to establish the basis for exploring the podcast phenomenon from the perspective of the listeners rather than, for instance, to investigate the podcast as a representation or performance. The framework, which now is developed further, comprises theories concerning engagement, affect and emotion, sound, listening, and intimacy, and is set to investigate a phenomenon of podcast listening that is experiential (Soltani, 2018: 195). It is formulated to elaborate how the listeners' experiences are subjectively meaningful to each listener personally and how they also construct socially shared experiences and meanings. With this said, this study acknowledges the nature of the lived reality as socially constructed, which implies that knowledge and meaning of the "reality" are socially constructed by human beings jointly and rather than existing in advance (see e.g., Amineh & Asl, 2015). The chosen theoretical framework emphasizes how cultural practices and subjective media experiences have broader societal significance (e.g., Dahlgren & Hill, 2020), and is linked to the methodology chosen to investigate this case, which I develop in the next chapter. Let me now bring together the main perspectives from the literature review and explain how they construct the theoretical outlines of the case study.

Audience engagement

This study approaches the listeners of *Ångestpodden* as an active audience rather than as passive receivers of messages. The listeners are treated as media audiences however, they are addressed as listeners because it is the listening experience of the podcast that this study investigates. They are not treated as media users because the audience implies the collective experiences in media engagement (Livingstone, 2003) and aligns more closely to the practice of listening. This study neither views the listeners as consumers because, following the approach of Dahlgren and Hill (2020), the purpose is to investigate how and why media experiences matter to people in the socio-cultural context. This notion understands media engagement as "something more than attention, user interaction, or brand loyalty," and therefore breaks from the typical media industry view of audiences, which often treats people who engage with media as consumers (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 2).

Taking a qualitative approach to understanding engagement as human experience (see Dahlgren and Hill, 2020), this study strives to investigate the potential of engagement to create valuable experiences that spark audiences' agency. This approach also emphasizes affect and emotion in engagement, highlighting on one hand the subjectivity of media experiences and, on the other hand, its connective potential (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). Affect can also act as a driving force for audience agency. People's involvement is often sparked and maintained by affect and emotional investment (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 10). The "energizing force" of media engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 2) implies its potential to nurture *civic cultures* (see Dahlgren, 2013) and spark *civic agency* (e.g., Dahlgren, 2006; Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). *Civic* refers to people's enactment as citizens: engagement with public matters and promotion of democracy (e.g., Dahlgren, 2009: 59). Dahlgren (2006)'s notion of civic agency denotes that citizenship is fostered by cultural and communicative practices and constructed by people themselves as they "self-create themselves into citizens" (272). These cultural and communicative practices are enhanced by civic cultures, to which media and media engagement provides resources (Dahlgren, 2013: 24). Citizenship is not something purely rational but has its origins in the private, daily lives of people in which they make sense of the world and themselves in both rational and emotional modes (Dahlgren, 2006: 275-276).

This study seeks to grasp the variety of the ways in which the listeners find their experiences with Ångestpodden meaningful, and to discuss the connective aspects of these experiences. Hill (2019)'s notion of engagement as *cultural resonance* discusses how audiences indeed may resonate together with each other, with shared media experiences, and with shared social and cultural backgrounds shaping their engagement. However, in addition to the civic potential of engagement, this study also centers its subjective importance to the audiences. Having exemplified this with Scannell (1996: 146)'s concept of the care structures of broadcast media, this study seeks similar meaning in the personal experiences of the podcast's listeners. While Scannell (1996) investigates care structures by relying much on his own perspective on what constitutes this sense of care in broadcast media, this case study seeks to understand the experiences of the podcast audience.

Affective, emotional listening

Engagement involves affect and emotion, and this applies to listeners' engagement with the podcast's sound. Following the affective turn (e.g., Clough, 2008), this study examines the podcast listening as an affective experience involving embodied sensations that spark emotion

and audience agency. To summarize, the main take from the affective turn is that, to understand social and cultural phenomena, one needs to understand affective processes instead of only examining how people think and act rationally (Clough, 2008). As previously discussed, this also implies that affect and emotion are subjectively lived and collectively shared experiences. Rather than categorizing different affective and emotional states in the listening experiences, they are considered a part of the entangled process of engagement. The focus is on what the affect and emotion *do* in the podcast experience, how they make the listeners resonate and how the listeners themselves make sense of them (Jansen, 2016: 69-71). Treating sound as affect enables one to understand it as both physical resonance of sound and as cognitive and emotional resonance with the meanings derived from it (Gallagher, 2016: 43-44; Gershon, 2013: 257-258). Therefore, instead of examining affect and emotion as the end product of engagement, the purpose of this approach is to analyze how they are a crucial part of the meaning-making processes in the listeners' podcast experiences as well as how they serve as the energizing force of engagement (see Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). This approach underlines how listening, sometimes neglected as a passive mode of engagement (Hilmes, 2005), can be an active, powerful and connective experience.

Intimate, meaningful podcast experiences

One way to understand listening as a connective experience is to explore its intimate elements. As has been argued above, intimacy can be a closely proximate, interpersonal exchange, but this study extends the traditional meaning of the concept to how audiences can experience intimacy through and with media as a sort of mediated proximity (Andreassen et al., 2017: 6). The analysis of this study is enhanced with different perspectives on intimacy provided by scholars from different traditions. As discussed in the literature review, these perspectives describe how intimacy, more traditionally seen as more exclusive, interpersonal exchange, can also be understood as a more individual and public experience. For instance, the sociological writings of Simmel (1950) and Plummer (2003), highlight intimacy as a particular form of interpersonal communication. Furthermore, Plummer (2003), among other scholars (Jamieson, 1999; Obert, 2016), extends the notion of intimacy to also concern one's proximity to the self. Another level of understanding intimacy is addressed by Berlant (1998, 2008, 2011) using the approach of cultural studies, and by several scholars from media studies (see e.g., Chambers, 2013; Swiatek, 2018). They emphasize the role that intimate narratives play in constructing experiences on the individual level and in the public sphere.

Against the theoretical background of providing a nuanced approach for exploring the intimacy of podcasts and, moreover, of how intimate podcast experiences can be meaningful to the listeners, this study analyzes the intimate podcast experiences by also drawing from podcast studies. Addressing how sound elements (e.g., Llinares, 2018), personal narratives (e.g., Lindgren, 2016; Swiatek, 2018) and the context of listening (Berry, 2016) contribute to the intimacy of podcast experiences, these studies offer insights into how to approach intimacy in the particular context of podcast listening.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This study approaches the phenomenon of Ångestpodden from the perspective of its listeners. To understand their lived experiences, the study aligns with the phenomenological approach as “the study of human experience” (e.g., Sokolowski, 2000: 2). This approach is particularly suited for studying affective and emotional experiences, such as listening to a podcast about anxiety, because it seeks to grasp “what its likeness” of the experience (Montague, 2009: 174). Moreover, the aim is to avoid pre-conceptions as the podcast listening is experiential in its nature (Soltani, 2018: 195). Such pre-conceptions could be the frameworks of neo-liberalism and feminist theory, as employed by Thelandersson (2020) in her study of sad affect and women’s media. In contrast, this study seeks to paint a picture of the podcast listeners’ first-person experiences. This reflects the first research question of the study, which asks how the listeners themselves give meaning to their experiences. However, the findings of the study are based on interpretations of these experiences, and my task as the researcher was to remain reflexive when interrogating my own understandings (Finlay, 2008: 27-29).

Thus, putting aside the positivist aim to explain reality, this study seeks to understand “how we experience things” (Gallagher, 2012: 2). However, even as a case study of one single podcast, this study can provide more general insights about the podcast genre, and moreover, about the meaning of media in people’s lives. Qualitative data, as Matthew Miles, Michael Huberman and Johnny Saldaña put it, “are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes“ (2014: 1). The findings of a qualitative case study such as this builds our understanding by adding to the accumulated knowledge of social phenomena (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 76). Even though the approach of this study offers subjective descriptions of the experiences of individual listeners, it also shows how these experiences are social. These experiences are *inter-subjective*, as they are not only subjective to each participant but also experiences of “other selves and of society,” reflecting broader social intentions (Husserl, 1946, cited in Wagner, 1970: 7).

The main method for studying the audience's experiences was the qualitative interview, meant to bring out rich detail in conversations with participants (e.g., Hill, 2018). This method gives voice to the audience members, acknowledging them as active instead of passive receivers, and it attunes the researcher to listen to the participants and understand their multi-modal and context-dependent experiences (Hill, 2018: 7). However, as the focus of this study is their

listening experiences and not the podcast as a cross-media product, the focus of the audience interviews was primarily on the audio storytelling of the podcast. Moreover, the aim of the study is to understand podcast listening experiences as lived, affective and emotional and, thus, embodied (e.g., Shouse, 2005). As such, the primary interview findings were supported by additional auto-ethnographic findings on the podcast listening experience, particularly focused on *sensory embodied experiences* (see Pink, 2015). This offers “accounts of personal experience to complement, or fill gaps” of the study (Adams, Ellis & Jones, 2017: 3). Allowing the researcher to auto-ethnographically listen and experience the podcast enriches the understanding of the embodied experiences with podcast listening as these “inner” experiences are highly subjective (Hokkanen, 2017; Pink, 2015: 97-98).

Interviewing audiences

10 one-on-one qualitative interviews (see Appendix 1) were conducted with regular listeners of Ångestpodden. However, no heavy sampling criteria was introduced. In order to understand listeners’ experiences, participants were selected based on whether they had been regularly listening to the podcast for a minimum of one year, so they could provide rich detail for analysis. This would most often mean weekly listening. Additionally, they were all Swedish.⁸ This light criteria was seen to fit the approach of this study because the aim was to understand the experiential aspects of the phenomenon without predefined theories, and thus all experiences among listeners were considered as valuable. The ten participants were recruited by distributing an invitation form (see Appendix 2) on social media, particularly through the Instagram profile of the podcast and a private Facebook group for its listeners. It became quickly clear that it was easier to find female listeners for the interviews and, in fact, all of the people who contacted me via the invitation form were women. Thus, all ten participants of the study ended up being women as it was not considered purposeful to force men listeners into the sample. This sample was seen to demonstrate what can be considered as *typical* (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) listeners of the podcast as they seem to be predominantly women, as observed during the recruitment process.

The interviews were conducted in a conversational form, encouraging the listeners to talk about their own experiences with their own words (Byrne, 2012: 219). The conversations were constructed with an interview guide (see Appendix 3) in order to keep the interview

⁸ This was simply because Ångestpodden is a Swedish podcast spoken in Swedish, and the typical cultural context and environment for the listening was expected to be Sweden.

within the topics of interest but to also allow the participants to talk about experiences that they find relevant and to even explore unexpected themes (Byrne, 2012: 219). The semi-constructed interview form, with its emphasis on open-ended questions, left room for different perspectives and topics to emerge and encouraged the participant to talk at length (Byrne, 2012: 219-220). The predefined interview questions were aimed at investigating how the listeners make sense of the podcast as a meaningful media experience, as well as the different cognitive, affective and emotional aspects of their engagement. Careful listening was needed in the formulation of suitable follow-up questions, providing further details of the listeners' experiences. The interview guide was constructed with the help of two pilot interviews which shed light on possibly fruitful areas of investigation.

Even though the subject of the podcast easily invites personal and intimate stories about mental health struggles, the participants were not asked personal questions or encouraged to talk about such issues if they did not initiate it themselves. Moreover, all interview materials were anonymized and the names of the interviewees were changed in the analysis of the paper to protect their identities. All participants signed and received a copy of a consent form (see Appendix 4) which informed them about the outline of the research, the anonymization of the interview material and asked for their permission to record the conversation. The consent form was also read out loud to each participant at the beginning of the interview, signifying the voluntary nature of their participation (Christians, 2005: 144).

As the global COVID-19 pandemic was going on during this study, all interviews were conducted over video call instead of in person. This set some limitations on observing the interviewees' facial expressions because of the sometimes low quality of the video call. This perhaps created an additional challenge to the intent of establishing a good connection with each participant. However, other measures were taken to create a relaxed, informal and undisturbed atmosphere (Byrne, 2012: 218). In scheduling the interviews, I asked the participants to prepare for the meeting by finding a quiet place with a good internet connection and, if possible, somewhere comfortable to sit like a couch. However, when doing interviews at a distance, the important aspects of space and place in sensory ethnography are lost (Pink, 2015: 32-43). Instead, I encouraged participants to describe their everyday surroundings and sensory experiences as a part of their listening experiences. However, those descriptions are quite different from experiencing it there with them. I will return to this question below.

Another issue in the interview process was language. I proposed that each interviewee use either Swedish or English; but that I would prefer to speak English. Even though I understand Swedish, I am not fluent in spoken Swedish, which might have affected my ability to formulate follow-up questions. Six out of ten interviewees chose to speak Swedish as it felt more comfortable to them and they did not regard themselves as fluent English speakers. I also proposed to each interviewee that they could change the language anytime in order to express themselves better. Indeed, the six interviewees who spoke Swedish generally gave longer answers than the ones who spoke English. Thus, they may have felt more free in their expression. However, it should be noted that the length of the answers does not necessarily reflect the quality of the material.

Experiencing as a researcher

Additional data was collected through sensory ethnography in order to better understand the sensory aspects of podcast listening. This observation focused on embodied affect and physical spaces of listening as a part of the sensory experience (Pink, 2015: 25). In practice, this meant that I, as a researcher, listened to the podcast, observed my own sensory experiences and noted my reflections using fieldnotes. Seven episodes of *Ångestpodden* were selected systematically so that the sample would include one episode from each year (see Appendix 5). This resulted in seven approximately one-page documents of ethnographic fieldnotes. Excerpts from three of these documents were also analyzed as a part of this study, as these were seen to enhance the interpretation of the listeners' experiences.

Sensory ethnography acknowledges the "body as a site of knowing" (Pink, 2016: 27). This implies that embodied experiences are relevant not only to knowledge about oneself but also to an understanding of these experiences as social (Hokkanen, 2017: 26; Pink, 2015: 26). However, as sensory knowing is intimately tied to the researchers' individual experience (Pink, 2015: 43), the sensory observations were only used for complementing the interview material. Reflexivity was needed to acknowledge how analyses of both interview and ethnographic findings inform one another (Pink, 2015: 160). The audience interviews formed the primary material for analysis in this study, and the sensory observations further supported and exemplified those findings. This shows, for instance, in the design of the sensory observations as they were conducted in similar listening situations that were described by

participants (see Appendix 5). This design, thus, took into account the importance of “specific socialities and materialities” in sensory experiences of the participants (Pink, 2015: 43); and aimed to compensate, to some extent, for the limitations of the interviews over video call. Moreover, as auto-ethnographers “puts a mirror on themselves” (Werner, 2019: 561), this approach called for me to be reflexive about my own role as both the observer and the subject of observations.

Analysing data

Each interview was recorded, transcribed and analyzed systematically with an iterative coding process. The initial analysis of the interview data was carried out inductively (Miles et al., 2014), looking for recurring words, phrases and patterns emerging progressively from the conversations. As the analysis proceeded, the *parameters of media engagement*, formulated by Dahlgren and Hill (2020), were introduced as initial structuring themes. The five parameters of *context*, *motivations*, *modalities*, *intensities* and *consequences* informed the analysis of the listeners’ engagement as a model for mapping media engagement as “a nexus of relationships, highlighting the various elements it embodies” (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 2). Moreover, the concept of intimacy was evaluated against the initial findings of the inductive coding and then recognized as a relevant theme to further analysis, encompassing the listeners’ experiences with Ångestpodden.

The coding software NVivo was used to help in the organization of coding categories (see Appendix 6). However, as analysis proceeded, coding memos became perhaps the most important domain for identifying the three main themes.⁹ In line with the principles of qualitative data analysis (Miles et al., 2014), the analysis process was cyclical, in that the initial interview data was revisited in the later stages of analysis. The recordings from the video interviews enabled me to listen to and watch them over and over again, allowing me to pay further attention to facial and bodily expressions and get a sense of the emotional states of participants. Returning to the original data also ensured that the quotes I selected for my paper were not taken out of their context and that they were treated as real human expressions, not just anonymous words on the paper.

⁹ The remaining categories that did not fit neatly under the three main themes were kept as contextual and additional information under the five structural categories constructed according to the five parameters of engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020).

As the fieldnotes of the sensory ethnography served as additional data, they were used to enhance the findings of the audience interviews. However, it should be noted that sensory ethnographic listening was carried out before the analytical coding of the interview material. This was not done so that my observations could inform the thematic findings of the interviews, but in order to not have the thematic findings leading my observation too much. As the fieldwork consisted of seven different listening sessions, they eventually provided a broad selection of material that enhanced the findings of the study.

ANALYSING LISTENERS' EXPERIENCES WITH ÅNGESTPODDEN

This chapter analyzes the elements comprising listeners' experiences with Ångestpodden. These experiences are based on the discussions I had with 10 of the podcast's listeners. Adding to these experiences, I attach examples of my own experiences as they exemplify some of the affective listening experiences. The analysis is begun, in the first section "Empowerer in anxiety," by drawing the outline of the listeners' engagement. This section discusses especially what is known as the consequences of engagement. It also addresses the listeners' motivations regarding what drives their engagement. This section facilitates further discussion about the affective and emotional elements of the experience. The next section, "Ångestpodden as the voice of the friend", discusses the listeners' intimate experiences with the podcast talk, created by its humane proximity. Last, "Connecting ordinary and extraordinary" discusses the podcast experience more broadly, extending the notion of podcast intimacy from the sound elements of podcast talk to the narrative aspects of intimacy as well as to the different listening practices that enhance the intimacy of listening. This section also argues that the podcast experience brings ordinary and extraordinary experiences together in complex ways, and that they play a central role in how the podcast creates meaningful media experiences.

EMPOWERED IN ANXIETY

Anxiety often makes people turn inwards, perhaps trapping them in their inner labyrinths of "what if?" (see Paulsen, 2020). Some may even see it as a weakness. However, in my conversations with the listeners of Ångestpodden, my respondents continually mentioned a sense of empowerment. Simply put, empowerment is about coming from outside of power to inside of power and, thus, coming to power to make decisions (Rowlands, 1995: 102). This understanding should also be extended to highlighting people's sense of agency and knowledge of their opportunities (Rowlands, 1995: 102). To be empowered is to be active and able rather than being passive; moreover, it means to *feel* active and able instead of *feeling* passive (Mäkinen, 2006).

The empowerment of the listeners could be sensed. They did not appear to be turned inwards. They looked outwards with passion and a sense of purpose, seeking understanding of themselves and the people around them. More concretely, this was present in how they spoke

of the message of *Ångestpodden* or, more accurately, how they interpreted it. They resonated with the discussion of *Ångestpodden* concerning anxiety. All emphasized the importance of talking about anxiety and mental illness. Maria did not hesitate when I asked her to tell me her version of the message of *Ångestpodden*:

That anxiety is difficult but not dangerous. That if we talk about it, it can become not easier but at least more understandable. To dare to get close to the difficult. (Maria)

Sara pondered the same question:

I think the biggest one is that everyone should be open about anxiety. So that everyone would feel safe about talking about it, in every age, and every gender and every time in your life. (Sara)

Talking, in this context, is active. It is about turning outwards, making oneself and one's ideas heard and known. Talking about anxiety is daring, as Maria remarked. When emphasizing the importance of talking, the listeners emphasized the importance of daring and sharing difficult experiences, telling others about them. There is an implication of power in the way the listeners spoke of this, an implication that one can make a difference by talking. The importance of talking connects to, as Maria and Sara mentioned, the need for understanding and feeling more comfortable around anxiety for everyone equally.

All 10 of the listeners emphasized how the way *Ångestpodden* addresses anxiety makes anxiety and mental illness appear or feel somehow less dramatic, "normalizing" it. Openly discussing anxiety and mental illness can make it feel or seem more "normal," as some of the listeners expressed it, and less dramatic. "Normal" as a cultural construction means not being *deviant* or too deviant from the average (Davis, 2013: 1-2). While the sense of anxiety as something dramatic implies a state that is drastically deviant from what is normal, perhaps even frightening, normalizing it makes it more understandable and brings it closer to the individual's own experience of human life. Nearly all the listeners told me that listening to *Ångestpodden* has made them feel less alone, both in the sense of having the podcast as company in the moment of listening and in the sense that it offers stories one can relate to. Hanna expressed believing that many listeners like herself experience the feeling that "we are not alone in this," that there are others with similar struggles. In this connectedness in anxiety, there is also a sense of acceptance. Amalia told me that *Ångestpodden* gives her a sense of comfort. When I asked her to elaborate this, she answered thoughtfully:

I really think it is the way they're able to talk about hard subjects. It all comes to the way they talk about it. Because that makes me feel accepted. That makes me feel seen. (Amalia)

This way of talking was often described by the listeners as “relaxed” or “everyday.” Maja explained how she thinks that *Ångestpodden* speaks of anxiety differently from the common way: “It is not so clinical,” but it comes from the hosts themselves, from “normal people.” That normal people are responsible for this talk rather than experts behind clinical facades may create a feeling that one is accepted as a member of society, as “everyone else”. The sense of empowerment is certainly a connective experience. In addition to the sense of power from *within* as a sense of self as able (Rowlands, 1995: 102), there is a sense of power *with* as a sense of unity (Drury, Evripidou, & Van Zomeren, 2015), a sense of not being alone. This sense of belonging can help the listeners feel better when they themselves experience difficult days. It can make one feel less deviant, less afraid, and more powerful. This sense of belonging was not just a consequence of the listeners’ engagement; it also proved to be what motivates their listening. They long for belonging, for not being alone, and for hearing talk about anxiety. Maja concluded that “It feels like we come together in anxiety.” There is thus a motivation of *socialites* (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 15) as an audience member, as a member of a group brought together in anxiety. One can certainly see engagement as an “energizing internal force” (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) that may transform into something shared and even more powerful, an energizing force of shared experiences.

Civic listening

Talking is active, but it is the people in the podcast who talk. Are the listeners of *Ångestpodden* then, just passive audience members who do not contribute to the important act of talking about anxiety? Although listening has been commonly seen as something passive and private (Lacey, 2013: 11-12), *Ångestpodden* can create listening experiences that are private and personal but also connect the listener to a broader public sphere, a *listening public* (Lacey, 2013). This was evident in the way the listeners, like Maria, Sara, and Alice resonated with the message of the podcast. They referred to a common good, a shared goal, and the collective power of talking. These experiences of an empowered audience show how audiences are not passive. The listeners reflect on and draw from their own life experiences and their “responses to media are connected to their awareness of themselves and their relations with others” (Hill, 2012: 303). They show how, even when perhaps being in the

auditory bubble (Bull, 2006: 133) of podcast listening, media engagement is cultural resonance (Hill, 2019). The listeners' reflections resonated with the messages of *Ångestpodden*. This was especially evident in the way they expressed seeing the podcast as challenging cultural norms. This resonance creates a sense of a shared aspiration, a collective, empowering force.

Moreover, the listeners actively choose to listen to *Ångestpodden*. They demonstrate an audience with "agency to fit their favorite shows into personalised schedules" (Hill, 2019: 4). They choose to listen to *Ångestpodden* week by week from the supermarket-like selection of podcasts. Among the listeners I talked to, some even mentioned that *Ångestpodden* is one of the very few podcasts they listen to regularly. The listeners expressed mixed motivations for their listening, but nearly all of them emphasized a drive for knowledge about mental health and understanding of themselves and others. As previously discussed, there was also a sense of importance in how the podcast facilitates the important act of talking about anxiety. The listeners can be seen as engaging with "a sense of obligation or solidarity, some kind of social value that resides beyond the self" (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 16). It could be said that the listeners have *civic* motivations, motivations with democratic potential. Without necessarily leading to actual political participation, such as activism, listening to *Ångestpodden* could still be an act of citizenship, an engagement with public matters (Dahlgren, 2009: 59). This is perhaps most evident in how Amalia formulated her listening motivation as wanting to become a "better citizen." To her, listening to the podcast is about being part of something important:

When they started, it was like no one talked about that, not what I knew, at least. So for me, it was like, "oh, my god, how can you be so brave and talk about this?" For me, it really feels like *Ångestpodden*, and Ida and Sofie, have been a big part of the opening up and talking about mental illnesses and that stuff. (Amalia)

Hanna elaborated how her motivation is a mix of a drive for knowledge and a desire to follow-up with Ida and Sofie:

What makes me come back is that I want to hear about them [Ida and Sofie]. One gets a personal connection to them and one wants to come back to them. Knowledge comes as a side product. (Hanna)

However, she also later expressed a feeling of responsibility to listen to *Ångestpodden* in order to better understand society and the people around her. This kind of mixed motivation

for listening shows how the engagement with *Ångestpodden* is affective, personal, and often private — but also public and civic. Dahlgren (2006: 275-276) writes about how civic agency and competences “have many origins in the private sphere” and everyday lives, in which “we make sense of our experiences, ourselves and the world around us largely through an ‘arational’ mode, a combination of using our head and heart.” Listening to *Ångestpodden* with mixed civic and personal motivations can create an experience that helps the listeners to make sense of anxiety and mental illness, and this experience involves both the head and heart. One can see that both head and heart drive Hanna’s engagement, and as a “side product,” she gains understanding of people and the world around her. Though the podcast listening may not always lead to evident political participation, such as political mobilization, it may nurture civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2013) as a communicative space in the listeners’ daily lives that empowers them to seek resources for reflection and helps them to make sense of their own experiences as well as those of others. As a resource of civic cultures, preconditions for civic agency, and participation (Dahlgren, 2013), *Ångestpodden* can strengthen the listener’s sense of civic agency.

The civic motivations of the listeners showed shared social meanings in the listening experience (Lacey, 2013: 100) such as the importance of the topic and the way the podcast addresses it. Moreover, the shared social horizon of the listeners included the knowledge that they are a part of the podcast audience. All of the listeners assumed the podcast audience to consist of younger adults who experience anxiety in their lives. One shared aspect of the listeners’ image of the audience was its femininity. Every listener to whom I spoke, all women, said that they believe the majority of the listeners are women. When I asked them to expand on this, they made uniform arguments: the podcast hosts are women, the topics tend to skew toward women’s issues, and the podcast talk has a slightly feminine tone. Some, like Julia, also pointed to societal norms. She explained that there remains a difference in how kids are raised: how boys are raised to “get up” when they fall, while girls are more often asked, “are you ok?”. Changing these norms is also something to which *Ångestpodden* could contribute. Hanna expressed worry about the dominance of women seeking help for mental health issues, hoping that men would also listen to *Ångestpodden*:

It is important for the men who listen that they [Ida and Sofie] say it out loud that mental health issues are often seen more as a women’s problem. Those guys, they get more excluded from help. I think there are more women listening to the podcast but I also think that for those men who listen to it, it is very important that it exists. (Hanna)

This is what most of the 10 of the listeners hope, that as many people as possible, both men and women, begin to listen to the podcast. Some are skeptical about how approachable its youthful and at times feminine tone would be to older people or men. However, their message is clear: the main topic of *Ångestpodden* is something that brings all humans together. Elsa remarked that could be better acknowledged in Sweden, explaining her conception of the Swedish mentality: “You should always just fix your problems, you shouldn’t talk about them”. Maja had a similar experience:

I have noticed that when I have talked about it [*Ångestpodden*] at my workplace, with colleagues who I am not so close with, they have been like “Ah, what is it about?” and then, that I just say that they talk about anxiety and the fact that I can easily say it, it has made others feel a bit uncomfortable. And I have needed to explain that no, it’s not so dangerous to talk about it. (Maja)

Ångestpodden perhaps creates a listening public (Lacey, 2013), an audience united by shared civic aspirations and shared resonance with the message, or messages, of *Ångestpodden*. To *Ångestpodden* listeners, the thought of anxiety as a shared human experience appears to be nearly self-evident. However, sometimes this bubble breaks, as Maja discussed experiencing with her colleagues, and one realizes that those around them may not share the same attitude.

In line with Kirkegaard, the listeners appeared to maintain that people should not escape from anxiety, and not hiding from it could create a positive effect. This study does not investigate the entirety of the meaning behind Kirkegaard (2014: 187)’s statement that one could “learn to be anxious in the right way.” However, he writes about anxiety as the dizzying, paralyzing effect of freedom and people’s possibilities as human beings. Being in anxiety and not escaping from it allows people to keep their freedom as human beings and to utilize their possibilities. When anxious, people may achieve “spiritual fulfillment”. (Kirkegaard, 2014.) *Ångestpodden* does not appear to be a spiritual experience for its listeners, but it does evoke existential reflections and an empowered sense of sharing something with others, of being a human with others. To Maja, anxiety confirms that “one is a living human with feelings.” Olivia also saw anxiety as inevitable, elaborating this poetically:

Ångestpodden is about life in general but with the hard parts. Life is not supposed to be a walk in the park. You have to live in ups and downs. (Olivia)

Ångestpodden is not a cure for anxiety. However, it can provide its listeners with a positive feeling of empowerment while acknowledging anxiety as a part of human life. Though anxiety can hardly be seen as a positive emotion, one's attitudes toward it can be positive. The podcast may empower its listeners to talk about anxiety, which in itself can further spark a sense of empowerment in unity and belonging. As discussed in the next chapter, Ångestpodden creates a sense of belonging particularly through intimate listening experiences that are affective and emotional in nature. This emphasizes how media engagement, and even engagement in the political sphere, is inevitably shaped by affect and intimacy (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 8). In this way, listening to Ångestpodden can be seen as a "resource for living" (Corner, 2017: 4), a resource for empowerment, civic agency, and a resource for living with anxiety.

ÅNGESTPODDEN AS THE VOICE OF THE FRIEND

In this section, the Ångestpodden experience is examined in greater depth. For instance, what kind of elements construct it and drive the listeners' engagement? As promised, special focus is paid to the affective and emotional modes of listening in part because the concept of anxiety invites us to the affective and emotional world of human experience. The focus of this chapter is the intimate elements of the podcast talk. The hyper intimacy in podcast listening denotes intimacy of both podcast content and the listening process (Berry, 2016). Both these aspects are entwined in the podcast listening experience, as the case of Ångestpodden shows, and they thus can not be discussed as completely separate entities. However, this chapter concentrates on how the listeners intimately resonate with the podcast talk, establishing a basis for exploring further elements of podcast intimacy later in the analysis.

Realness

The realness of the human voice comes across as something "vivificates" spoken text, giving it an emotional layer and bringing it to life (Llinares, 2018: 132-133). In my conversations with the listeners, the realness of podcast talk was mentioned in their reflections in several ways. One aspect is directness. At times, Ida and Sofie "reach out," addressing the listeners directly. Some of the listeners also remarked how it almost feels like they are having a conversation with Ida and Sofie even when they do not reach out. Some imagine themselves at the podcast studio or "sitting around the kitchen table with them," as Julia mentioned. Perhaps the sense of directness is strengthened by the physical resonance, as the sound

resonates “inside the head” (Corner, 2011: 96) when it is delivered straight to the ears of the listener through headphones¹⁰. The auditory bubble created by headphones (Bull, 2006: 133) creates an intimate space of listening wherein the sound’s resonance creates a sense of proximity, a temporal connectivity (Scannell, 2019: 46) between the listener and the podcast hosts that is enhanced by the absence of the visual, the “unseen voice” (Corner, 2011: 96) of the podcast talk. This allows the listener to create their own images (Crisell, 1994) of being a participant in the podcast.

Realness is also felt in the mundanity (Scannell, 1991) and the sense of liveness (Scannell, 2019: 94) engendered by the talk of *Ångestpodden*. Elsa explained the way Ida and Sofie talk as follows: “they tell you bluntly how things have been to them, without a script.” Their talk is not polished. “They can sound quite silly and whimsy sometimes,” Maja even noted. Liveness, according to Scannell (2019: 94), is a central characteristic in the human voice, “the revelation of the living soul (the being) of whoever speaks.” He notes that it is not just immediacy that creates this liveness in broadcast talk, but “the sounds of life” that are brought to listeners in their unscripted form, capturing real moments of human interaction (Scannell, 2019: 94-95). Therefore, even lacking the visual element, or perhaps due to its absence, Ida and Sofie feel real to the listeners. Alice elaborated how she feels the realness of Ida and Sofie in their podcast talk:

I just feel that they are very real. It doesn't feel too, it feels like we are having a conversation. It's not like two doctors having a conversation. So that's it, they make it a bit more accessible. (...) Ida and Sofie are always just very genuine. (Alice)

The podcast voices are not institutional like the voices of doctors or others behind anonymous professions: they are voices of real persons. As Alice stated, this sense of realness makes the voices of Ida and Sofie accessible. Through directness, immediacy, and liveness, there is a sense of proximity to the talk of *Ångestpodden*. The podcast talk may be felt as the voice of the friend (Scannell, 2019), implying its fundamental, humane proximity (31). As Scannell (2019: 33) argues, human talk is “an innate human capacity and predisposition that must be activated in every individual (...) and it is activated by the voice of others.” It is not just a “bearer of speech” but also “the expressive register of a disposition toward others displayed in the grain of voice” (Scannell, 2019: 33). In its fundamental humane proximity as the voice of

¹⁰ Indeed, nearly all of the listeners I talked with most often use earphones when listening to the podcast, and when not, the listeners are often alone.

the friend, the podcast talk can evoke familiar and pleasurable experiences in the podcast listeners. The talk of *Ångestpodden* as the voice of the friend could be an important awakener of intimacy in the podcast experience.

Friendship and care

What kind of intimate experiences does the voice of the friend experience of *Ångestpodden*, then, evoke in its listeners? First of all, some listeners cited feeling a sense of warmth when they hear the voices of Ida and Sofie. As Corner (2011: 96) states, there is a sense of an “intimate, humanitarian warmth” in the talk of radio, and *Ångestpodden* appears to evoke a similar experience. Maja mentioned having begun to associate the bare voices of Ida and Sofie with feeling good. She said this with a slightly doubtful smile on her face, but it did not sound strange to me, particularly as I had already conversed with six listeners before her who all shared similar experiences. Several expressed that hearing the voices of Ida and Sofie felt “comforting” or “cozy.” The metaphor of the voice of the friend is especially fitting here because several listeners explained to me that it feels like Ida and Sofie are their friends. Hanna explained this through the regularity of listening: “If one listens to them once a week for many years, they become like friends.” Indeed, like with friends, the listeners are motivated to hear about Ida and Sofie and to follow the events of their lives.

The friendship present in *Ångestpodden*, the intimate proximity of the voice of the friend, is felt without physical proximity. The notion of mediated proximity challenges the assumption that physical distance and anonymity hinder intimacy, as these at times may even enhance the sense of intimacy (Andreassen et al., 2017: 6). Andreassen (2017: 53) notes that “To individuals who have difficulty expressing themselves in the physical presence of people, the internet’s lack of physicality and its potential for anonymity might provide comfort.” Though this may be more apparent in online practices and interpersonal relationships, anonymity and physical distance and, furthermore, the sense of distance created by different listening practices certainly impact the listening experience. When asked her to describe her relationship to *Ångestpodden*, Julie pondered over her feelings of proximity to the podcast:

I do feel very close to it, I would want to say. It feels like they [Ida and Sofie] are my friends. I know that they aren’t but they still feel close. (...) Maybe it is even because one can relate to them but still doesn’t really know them that makes it easier to feel close to them and their issues. (Julia)

She expressed feeling close to Ida and Sofie, and, at the same time she knows that she does not truly know them. She feels closeness to their podcast personalities from a distance that provides her space to imagine a relationship that feels good to her. Perhaps this imagining is enhanced by her anonymity as a listener, not really knowing the podcast hosts, which gives her space in her mind to create a sense of an appropriate proximity. Moreover, Ida and Sofie's friendship may remind the listeners of their own real friendships. They do not know Ida and Sofie, but they can imagine a friendship that is familiar to them. Sara explained this as follows:

I think it's really like a healthy friendship. I think that's because I can feel them, the way they are with each other. I can feel that way with my friends. (Sara)

Sara was then quiet for a moment and continued: "And I think that's really beautiful, the way they talk to each other and care for each other."

The intimate, friendly proximity of the podcast talk can also be experienced as care by the listeners. This was explained well by Amalia, who described to me the atmosphere of the podcast as follows:

The atmosphere is comforting. And it's welcoming. It really is like how I'm sitting now with the candles next to my computer. A little bit in between group therapy and when you sit with your friends. Like, it's really in between those two. (Amalia)

When talking, Amalia drew an imaginary circle around her with her hands. This circle, I suppose, symbolized the people around her, such as friends or peers in group therapy. She is alone when she listens to the podcast, but in her mind, she is not alone. If Elsa were to describe *Ångestpodden* to someone who did not know the podcast, she would call it a "positive place" and a "safety blanket." This sense of care could arise from the care structures crafted in the production practices of the podcast. However, contrasted to Scannell (1996: 146)'s notion of care structures as professional production practices, the care of *Ångestpodden* is felt more as friendship. Scannell (1996: 146) writes about care structures as "the care (the concern) that goes into making programmes," which "is there-to-be-found in the programmes themselves." What is "there-to-be-found" for the listeners of *Ångestpodden* is Ida and Sofie's real friendship. However, there is also a sense of professionalism in the care of friendship. Several listeners described the tone of *Ångestpodden* as "personal" but also "professional." Indeed, Ida and Sofie are friends in professional ways. They also know how to interview their

podcast guests in a professional and friendly way, as several of the listeners elaborated. As Emma elaborated, “it’s just like listening to a conversation between friends.” Later, she added, “And they ask good questions, they are sophisticated and interested in their guests.”

There is, then, a sense that Ida and Sofie do indeed instill care and concern into the podcast production. To Alice, it “feels like they [Ida and Sofie] are concerned about us listeners and that we need to keep listening to them.” The care that is established in the podcast production is showcased in how the podcast is structured. The podcast has a recognizable beginning prior to the guest interview during which the hosts Ida and Sofie chat. An excerpt of this kind is located at the beginning of this paper. This beginning chat often “recaps” the lives of Ida and Sofie. To Amalia, it creates a warm, humane feeling. She explained this to me with a warm smile on her face:

To me, it's like when you meet a person and you say “hello” or “hi”. And that's really the “hi” for me in the podcast, that they talk a little bit. (Amalia)

Amalia concluded her thought by explaining the opening chat as a “warm up” to the episode. It is a part in which the listeners are invited into Ida and Sofie’s friendship. The listener is present during these moments between friends before they meet their guest, giving them a sense of participation in an intimate and exclusive moment. This structure of *Ångestpodden* ensures that there is this moment of friendship in each episode.

These intimate moments between friends demonstrate the more traditional ideal of intimacy as a close friendship. The sense of friendship the listeners of *Ångestpodden* feel shows that intimate proximity can be experienced as mediated proximity without the physical presence of others. It further shows that at least some elements of the form of intimacy described by Simmel (1950) are present in the podcast. There is a sense of exclusivity in how the listeners are allowed to witness the moments of in-between-friends. Simmel (1950: 127) writes that “The larger the group is, the more easily does it form an objective unit up and above its members, and the less intimate does it become.” These are not moments shared with many, and some of the listeners did discuss feeling as if they had exclusive conversations with Ida and Sofie. However, to Simmel (1950), intimacy is characterized by this form of interpersonal exchange that is exclusive and, crucially, confidential. Even in cases of this feeling of exclusivity in the between-friends moments of *Ångestpodden*, it is impossible to claim that “its participants contribute to it [that relation] alone and to no other” (Simmel, 1950: 126).

Rather, these intimate moments invite anyone to listen to them. To understand the complex, intimate podcast experiences, the notion of intimacy must be broadened from what Simmel rigidly views as a form of interpersonal exchange. How intimacy can be transmitted through narratives and experienced not only as interpersonal proximity, but as proximity with the self and with something more public must be examined.

CONNECTING ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY

Ångestpodden is not a cure for anxiety; however, as discussed in the previous chapter, the listeners' experience the podcast talk as friendly and proximate, even as care. This chapter explores the role of the podcast storytelling in creating intimate experiences that connect the listeners to both the ordinary and the extraordinary, arguing that the podcast has the potential to connect people through intimate narratives. Thus, the intimacy of Ångestpodden is not only considered as proximity of sound, although the different aspects of intimacy do overlap in listeners' experiences. Moreover, the listeners' intimate experiences are explored within the situational aspects of their listening practices, places, and spaces. What comprises the discussion in this chapter is how podcast listening in this case entwines ordinary and extraordinary in different ways.

Bridging through intimacy

The storytelling of Ångestpodden consists of intimate narratives. Indeed, podcasts as a genre can be seen as particularly suited for personal, disclosive storytelling (Lindgren, 2016). As podcaster Paul Gilmartin explains "There's no other medium where you can take your soul out and put it on the table and say: This is me" (Taylor, 2011, cited in Meserko, 2014: 475). Julia described how she perceives disclosivity in the podcast:

They [Ida and Sofie] dare to tell about their inner fears and they are very honest in the way that they show their negative sides as well as positive sides. And one gets a stronger respect for them and it makes one feel that one can open up self. (...) They want that we listeners could open up about these issues as well. And I don't think one would feel so strong trust in them if they only showed their perfect self. (Julia)

Self-disclosure as a particular form of openness is often seen as ideal in intimate communication (Jamieson, 2005: 1). This was true in Julia's experience; she expressed that Ida and Sofie's openness allows her to feel like being able to open up as well and to feel more intimate in the listening experience. Ida and Sofie discuss their inner fears and vulnerabilities.

The sharing of one's vulnerabilities can particularly be seen as a "generous orientation towards the other," enhancing openness and balance in interpersonal intimacy (Obert, 2016: 26). In addition to the moments between the podcast hosts Ida and Sofie, they also invite guests to tell their own personal stories. There is a balance to the sharing of vulnerabilities when Ida and Sofie interview the guests who have experienced anxiety and mental illness. Alice noted that Ida and Sofie's genuineness appears to help the guests share openly as well. This genuineness, then, could be understood as vulnerability and mutuality. Obert (2016: 31) emphasizes intimacy as mutuality: being open about one's own vulnerability with curiosity for the other. The listeners of *Ångestpodden* celebrate the disclosive storytelling in the podcast, citing the generosity shown by those in the podcast in sharing their personal stories. The telling of personal, disclosive stories is mutual for the podcast hosts and their guests.

There is also a sense of mutuality in the listeners' experiences. Mia Lindgren (2016: 5) explains: "By listening to detailed personal experiences of 'others', listeners become connected to the people whose stories they share." In other words, listeners resonate with the stories they find relatable. Many of the vulnerabilities disclosed in the podcast storytelling could perhaps be the intimate troubles of late modernity, which Plummer (2003: 5-7) elaborates as individual ponderings with, for example, questions of identity, sexuality, or personality types. These intimate troubles are not solely the ponderings of individuals but are commonly shared in modern society (Plummer, 2003: 9). Such shared and relatable intimate troubles in *Ångestpodden* are, as exemplified by the listeners, questions of body image, relationship issues, and self-esteem. Through sharing stories of intimate troubles, *Ångestpodden* connects its listeners to the people telling their personal stories in the podcast.

However, the stories can also connect the listeners with experiences that they do not find relatable. Maja described such an experience with the podcast:

They had a special short series about assault against women they did and it taught me a lot. It made me more interested and I feel that I understand it better now. Before, I thought, "god, how can someone be with a man like that?". I have really tried to understand it before but now it got so easy to understand. Those [series] touched me in a whole different way. (Maja)

The podcast may evoke a feeling of "I had no idea," and its stories may touch a person in an unexpected way. The podcast also offers stories of the extraordinary to its listeners. Swiatek (2018) writes about podcasts as an *intimate bridging medium*, describing how they cross

knowledge boundaries between people and “enable connectivity for diverse publics.” Regarding knowledge boundaries, he writes: “The medium helps individuals and groups access new insights, from both inside and outside their areas of expertise and interest.” In addition, podcasts can connect people from different social and cultural backgrounds. (Swiatek, 2018: 173-174.)

The intimate bridging aspects of the podcast shows how mediated intimacy has the democratizing potential to create intimate public spheres (Berlant, 2008, 2011). With the disclosive storytelling and connective potential, *Ångestpodden* can create an intimate public sphere for “imagining and cobbling together alternative construals about how life has appeared” (Berlant, 2011: 182). Through intimate narratives, intimate public spheres may affect people’s subjective ideas and experiences of intimacy — even as people’s subjective intimacies narrate public intimacies (Berlant, 1998). Therefore, there is democratic potential in the way that *Ångestpodden* offers its listeners disclosive, personal stories of people’s lives, stories that might be left unheard without the intimate and public contribution of the podcast. This shows how *Ångestpodden* contributes to the transformation of public intimacies. Indeed, intimacy itself can have a transformative power in public normative narratives (Berlant, 2008, 2011). The disclosive talk of Ida and Sofie, for instance, their openness about their vulnerabilities, is also felt as a transformative act. Several listeners, like Emma, even called the podcast hosts “pioneers” in their approach to talking about anxiety. Maja explained to me how she thinks the podcast stands out from others:

Ångestpodden is not superficial. they [Ida and Sofie] dare to open up their inner self. And they really burn for what they talk about. It is not like, if I would compare to *Skäringer & Mannheimer*, even though they also talk about important issues they do it in a superficial way. They have to be funny and sweet in that certain way. And it feels like Ida and Sofie don’t care too much about how they appear but they are more plain and they don’t have to be so sweet. Even though I think they are, I don’t think that’s what drives them. (Maja)

Alongside the importance of talking about anxiety, listeners also celebrated the transformative power of intimacy. In addition to the topic of anxiety itself, the podcast brings more disclosive, “real” talk into the public sphere, creating a platform for more marginalized voices and narratives (Llinares, 2018).

What, then, is the connective element of extraordinary storytelling? What do the listeners resonate with if not the relatability of the narratives? Swiatek (2018) refers to the intimate

properties of sound and the often emotional mode of podcast storytelling. As previously discussed, human talk brings text emotionally alive (e.g., Llinares, 2018). The affect of sound can be “dynamic, collective emotionality that connects with people’s shared social experiences” (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020: 6). Maja realized that she could unexpectedly understand women who stay in abusive relationships, showing the bridging power of affect and emotion. Expressions such as “moving” and “touching” denote an affective experience as a kind of “push” to emotion that may even present as an embodied reaction (Shouse, 2005). As the case of *Ångestpodden* shows, there is a sense of realness in podcast talk that enhances the listeners’ affective and emotional resonance.

Now, I elaborate the embodied affect using an excerpt from my own sensory ethnographic observations when listening to *Ångestpodden*:

When Lizette tells about her time with anxiety syndrome, I can hear that she is almost crying. This is also when I start listening more carefully. The story fills my head and I feel like I focus less on what I am doing (I was doing the dishes and I think I had to slow down so that I could hear better). I almost get a tear in my own eye, too. I get a slight anxious feeling, a slight squeezing sense in my throat which makes it feel a bit thinner. I can relate to the feeling I sense in the voice of Lizette. Even though I am not particularly thinking about my own experiences, Lizette’s story and her emotional voice bring up a hint of familiar anxiety.¹¹

During my listening experience, I could feel the embodied affect of the “squeezing” sensation in my throat, and the emotion of anxiety that Lizette was describing. Her emotional voice *affected* me as well. The power of *Ångestpodden* as an intimate bridging medium is demonstrated in how it bridges the public storytelling of strangers with the “realm of sensory, embodied experience” (Lacey, 2013: 23). In other words, when the podcast storytelling evokes an embodied affect, it is felt as resonance through shared affect and emotion. Despite being subjectively felt, the embodied affect is also something shared, as it is evoked by the emotional voice of the storyteller.

At times, the emotional experiences of *Ångestpodden* relate to the listener’s own memories, as Elsa reflected: “They can remind you of something and it can make you feel sad or anxious.” She added that *Ångestpodden* has helped her to realize that anxiety is shared. *Ångestpodden* thus also bridges and crosses the boundaries of light and dark emotions. In addition to evoking the positive affect of talk as the voice of the friend, it can also connect the

¹¹ Listening diary, 26.03.2021, episode 59. “Generaliserat ångestsyndrom med Lizette,” listening situation: no headphones, alone in the kitchen in the evening, doing dishes and other chores

listener with difficult emotions. Offering a spectrum of affective and emotional experiences, intimate storytelling may help the listeners reach intimate proximity to oneself, to “do intimacy,” as Plummer (2003: 13) describes it — a deep connection to one’s own emotions. The listeners explained how the podcast has led them to reflect on their own emotional lives and existential questions. Though he wrote about interpersonal intimacy, these reflections could bring the listener to what Simmel (1950: 126) calls the basis of intimacy: “that which is individual in a qualitative sense, as the core, value, and chief matter of his existence”.

However, Berlant (2008: viii) notes that the participants of an intimate public sphere are “marked by a common lived history; its narratives and things are expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging.” The potential of the podcast as an intimate bridging medium may not necessarily cross all boundaries. Gender could be such a boundary. As all of the listeners mentioned, they believe that most people listening to *Ångestpodden* are women. In addition to the perhaps feminine tone and topics covered by the podcast, gender may also set cultural boundaries for intimate experiences (Jamieson, 2005). The more intimate and caring work, for example, has been widely considered women’s area as set by normative and traditional roles (e.g., Armstrong & Armstrong, 2004), and these roles may have culturally shaped women’s abilities and attitudes as more natural for “doing intimacy.” Despite some listeners hoping that anyone could listen to *Ångestpodden*, this is not likely to happen, even in a theoretical sense, and *Ångestpodden* is perhaps more likely to be the voice of the *female friend*. The voice of the friend of *Ångestpodden* may, then, be more familiar, more ordinary, to female listeners.

Shifting proximity in spaces of ordinary

The hyper intimacy (Berry, 2016) of podcast listening is not only about the proximity created by intimate storytelling and the affect of sound; it also denotes ways of listening. To really understand the listeners’ experiences with *Ångestpodden*, one must also understand their different listening situations. These situations comprise practices, places, and spaces of listening. Six of the ten listeners stated that they often listen to *Ångestpodden* on their regular walks, and eight also while they do daily chores at home. In addition to the resonance of sound, this shows that podcast listening can comprise many different sensory experiences. Danielle Barrios-O’Neill (2018: 154), for instance, writes about how podcast listeners in urban spaces receive “at any given moment, a vast amount of information,” and how the

patterns of information create complex spatial experiences in which “any place becomes more than one place.” Podcast listening frees other senses to focus on other tasks, or perhaps to freely drift in between imagined worlds of the podcast storytelling and one’s actual surroundings. Indeed, Barrios-O’Neill (2018: 154) adds: “For the mobile listener, incoming information from either world can be included in the train of thought.” The listener is able to move freely, to feel the cold of the wind or the warmth of the sun, to observe the shapes and details of landscapes. These other senses are stronger in the possession of a podcast listener than they are of a viewer of, for example, audiovisual media. The podcast listener is not at all “glued to the box.”

This excerpt from my listening diary elaborates on this:

There is something for all my senses: the warmth of the sun on my face and the constant movement of walking, the sound in my ears, the light and landscapes of the park for my eyes. When Viktor, the guest, tells about his difficult childhood experience, describing his feelings in the situation in detail and with a slightly trembling voice, my focus is drawn closer and I listen carefully. Then my awareness of my own surroundings seem to blur. I can imagine the boy in the story and I get a stomach feeling I get when I remember something in my own life history that makes me feel uncomfortable. When I get immersed into the story, it almost turns into a cinematic experience and I can really picture the events in front of my eyes. But then my eye suddenly catches the sun and I look at my surroundings again, almost with new eyes, remembering the spring afternoon around me. I move forward and the landscape changes, sometimes I pass a dog walker. Sometimes I don’t pay attention to my walking and notice that I have already walked to the furthest end of the park.¹²

Podcasts have been described as a *cinema for the ears*, as “the possibility of an audio-only experience that evokes intensity, scope and figurative power, such that the experience is deemed cinematic,” Llinares (2020: 342) writes. The imaginative space of listening “created by this posited lack of an image, playing on a listener’s memories, interpretations and emotions” may enhance this imagining, and Llinares (2020: 343) argues that the different properties of the podcast voice, including different tones and sound effects, evokes our cinematic imagination. The emotional properties of talk in the storytelling of *Ångestpodden*, as exemplified in the listening diary above, may play a role in evoking the cinematic experience. If *Ångestpodden* evokes cinematic experiences for its listeners, it creates a listening space in which the imagined worlds of podcast storytelling meet the listening surroundings and practices, such as a walk or daily chores. In this listening space, ordinary

¹² Listening diary, 29.03. 2021, episode 115. “ADHD som superkraft med Viktor Frisk”, listening situation: listening with headphones on, on a walk in the park in a sunny afternoon

and extraordinary intertwine, and “any place becomes more than one place” (Danielle Barrios-O’Neill, 2018: 154).

Alice described her experience of a shifting focus when listening to the podcast while working:

I am a product photographer, so it’s very, I think you can say mechanical. You don’t have to think so much. So, it’s easy to be able to focus on what they are saying. Sometimes I get spaced out, then I jump back. That’s it. (Alice)

In addition to becoming immersed in the storytelling, there are also those moments of spacing out. These moments appear to give a moment of distance, a reminder of one’s separateness from the story and the people in the podcast. Obert argues that irreducibility (2016: 26-27) as a recognition of not being one with the other is crucial to intimacy. Without irreducibility, one can lose the balance in intimacy and one’s proximity to the self (Obert, 2016: 26). The intimate modes of listening carry distractions that remind the listener of their separateness. Maria, for instance, explained that she often likes to do something fun and simple, like “a silly puzzle,” while listening. This calms her, perhaps making her less puzzled with the negative emotions that the podcast might evoke. Hanna, similarly, described a sense of relaxation in doing a task that is “down to earth” while listening to *Ångestpodden*. “Down to earth” refers to that which is practical, humble, calm, and pleasant. It is something quite ordinary and it can perhaps ground one in the present moment.

Two excerpts from my diary elaborate on this sense of being grounded:

When doing my dishes alone in the kitchen, I can immerse myself in the story and sometimes even almost forget my own surroundings. When Lizette tells about her childhood, I picture in my mind the landscapes of her hometown she mentions (even though I have know idea about the place). It feels like the repetitive movement when I wash the dishes enhances my focus on the story but at the same time I don’t lose the sense of my own surroundings, me being in the kitchen, hands grounded in the sink. It feels good to do something repetitive with my hands while listening.¹³

I am in my own moment here on the floor, doing my workout, but also in the podcast world. I get these two worlds at the same time. The podcast world meets the heaviness of my workout. The topic of this episode is suicide and there are, again, quite a lot of emotions going on in the podcas. I find it somehow helpful to move my body when listening to the story, as if I could

¹³ Listening diary, 26.03.2021, episode 59. “Generaliserat ångestsyndrom med Lizette,” listening situation: no headphones, alone at home while doing dishes and other kitchen chores

put some of the emotion into my movement. Doing my workout also distances me from the story because I also need to focus on my own exercise. All the time, I feel grounded to the floor and in my own being. I am constantly feeling the movement and my breathing, and it is harder to immerse myself deep in the story when I feel physical exhaustion from the workout.

¹⁴

This experience of feeling grounded in a repetitive, practical task or literally being on the ground may add balance to the podcast listening experience. It can feel cozy and create a sense of comfort and pleasure, and a way to keep the listener within a safe distance in the mediated proximity of listening.

The expressions of being grounded or performing a task that is down to earth also literally carries an aspect of spaces and places in the listening experience. Although podcasts can be listened to almost “anytime, anywhere” (Bottomley, 2015: 166), the listeners of *Ångestpodden* also have patterns of places and spaces in their listening situations. Some prefer to listen to the podcast when in motion, when on relaxing walks or when commuting to and from work, and others in the comfort of their homes. What unites these places is their ordinariness. The listening spaces can also be perceived as intimate. As almost all of the listeners emphasized, *Ångestpodden* means taking time for themselves. Hanna explained that she sometimes listens to the podcast while taking a bath, and Emma remarked that she listens to it while in bed. The listeners create their own intimate spaces of listening with personal listening practices and places of the ordinary.

Thus, it is not only the podcast talk that makes the podcast experience intimate, caring and easier to manage. When the listeners discuss how *Ångestpodden* normalizes anxiety and mental illness, one should not only be attuned to the podcast content itself but to the podcast experience more holistically. The spaces and practices of listening may play a role in this process of normalization, or at least in the sense of normal in the listening situation. In these spaces of the ordinary, the listeners encounter stories of the extraordinary. In some ways, this experience makes the extraordinary feel more ordinary. Though life is perhaps not easy as a walk in the park, as Olivia stated, one can *take a walk in the park* when listening to *Ångestpodden*.

¹⁴ Listening diary, 05.04.2021, episode 228. “Janice gästar,” listening situation: listening with headphones on while doing a light workout at home

Crafting the podcast experience

Swiatek (2018: 184) argues that, in comparison to many other media, podcasts' uniqueness lies in their ability to intimately bridge boundaries between people. He writes that “few [media types] provide audiences with the nearness, directness, flexibility, portability and accessibility of the podcast” (Swiatek, 2018: 184). This study provides insight into the proximity to the human voice as the voice of the friend and how the listeners of *Ångespodden* experience podcast talk as particularly friendly. Moreover, intimate narratives shared in the podcast showed potential to bridge people's experiences, making diverse voices heard in the public sphere. The intimate, personal storytelling delivers the narratives in a relatable and understandable form. However, Swiatek implies that it is not only the intimate properties of podcast storytelling but also the flexibility and mobility of podcasts that allows the audience to choose their own listening practices and spaces. This case study of *Ångespodden* shows that the podcast experience does not only comprise what the podcast provides its audiences but also how they themselves craft their listening experiences, which connect the ordinary to the extraordinary in entangled ways.

This study has explored how practices, places, and spaces of listening play an important role in the experience. In addition, the active role of the listeners in crafting their own listening experiences is discussed. Studies have argued audiences are not passive receivers but have agency to engage and disengage (e.g., Hill, 2019: 61–62); in particular, podcasts, offer more listener control and demand more selection and active engagement from the listener (Spinelli & Dann, 2019: 30). Several listeners described having attempted to match their mood to the podcast episode, listening to episodes with a lighter topic when they feel less anxious and the more difficult episodes when they feel down. This is, for instance, so that they do not risk their good moods. They told me of how they attempt to find the right time particularly for the more difficult episodes. Some, like Amalia, also prepare to make the experience more bearable by, for example, reflecting on the topic in advance. She actually did the opposite of matching her mood with the episode:

I would say that the most important thing for me when it comes to the episodes that I think will be overwhelming and very emotional is to not listen to them when I'm feeling down or anxious. Before I'm pressing the play, I also make sure that I don't have anything planned for the rest of the day in case the episode triggers my emotions. I can pause an episode without hesitation if I feel like it's not the right time for me to listen to it. Or skip a sequence and continue listening to the rest of the episode. (Amalia)

There also proved to be a notion of care in the Ångestpodden experience. However, this is present in a different perspective than what was discussed as the care of friendship; rather, it is care crafted by the listeners themselves. The listeners may craft their listening practices in a way that is experienced as care. Scannell (1996: 149) sees what he calls “dailiness” as a kind of an ultimate care structure in broadcast media. This dailiness comprises the actual daily service of traditional programming, such as daily news, enhancing the rhythm of everyday with the routines they provide (Scannell, 1996: 149). As can be seen in the listener’s engagement with Ångestpodden, similar to this dailiness are the routines created by the active listeners themselves. The ways of listening may foster a sense of dailiness and, in turn, ordinariness. As the listeners remarked when describing their listening routines, they indeed often seem to occur as similarly from week to week. The weekly listening moments perhaps become a caring structure and a part of the ordinary in the listener’s daily life. The listeners themselves play an active role in constructing this care structure, creating their own routines, and shaping the podcast experience.

Let me exemplify how the listeners of Ångestpodden craft the listening experience as care. The entire period during which Maja has been a listener of Ångestpodden, she has been living in an extraordinary period in her life. She began listening to the podcast during the global COVID-19 pandemic. When working from home and spending an unusual amount of time alone, she began taking walks during her lunch time, often having Ångestpodden keep her company. Listening to the podcast during periods of more acute loneliness made her life feel more ordinary:

When it has felt difficult and I haven’t been feeling so well, I have had a strategy to listen to it a lot. Then I have it in the background and I have listened to it so much that it’s almost like their [Ida’s and Sofie’s] voices automatically make me feel a little bit better in some way. It may sound a bit silly, but then I have those two friends with me and it gets easier. It’s like having them as company. (Maja)

Podcast audiences can, as exemplified by Maja, create their own strategies for listening when they long for belonging. Moreover, the listeners craft their podcast experiences in ways that may enhance their intimacy. They prepare for their listening to ensure that they are in their mood and atmosphere. They do not only become attuned to proximity with the podcast talk and storytelling, but to intimate proximity with themselves. Their podcast experiences involve

intimate reflections on their own emotional states, both when preparing for listening and when listening to the intimate stories of others.

One can certainly see that podcast listening is intimate in different, complex ways that involve podcast talk as voice, the narrative aspects of storytelling, and the variety of ways that the podcast audience crafts their own intimate listening experiences. Podcast intimacy has public significance and democratizing potential in the (mediated) public sphere (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2013; Swiatek, 2018). This concerns the liberating aspect of the digital, as podcasting is free from restrictive broadcast conventions (Lindgren, 2016: 2), such as traditional rules of language in broadcasting (Llinares et al., 2018: 4). Moreover, podcasts create space for marginalized voices (Llinares, 2018: 139). Podcasts, like *Ångestpodden*, provide platforms for intimate narratives that would perhaps otherwise be left unheard. They also enable a freeness of the podcast talk that creates a sense of realness in the listening experience. In addition to the democratic potential of podcasts, they can also provide meaningful, subjective experiences for listeners. Podcast audiences are active, and their mixed listening motivations drive the meaningfulness of their engagement. Podcast experiences may connect the ordinary and the extraordinary, the self and others, the private and the public, and the subjective and the shared in ways that evoke intimate and cultural resonance and — perhaps most of all — sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

As Thelandersson (2020) has shown, anxiety is increasingly present in media representations and *Ångestpodden* could be seen as a part of this development, as it is a podcast that creates and distributes narratives of anxiety. This study acknowledges that the podcast saturates the public sphere with narratives about anxiety and mental illness, but it has not focused on investigating those narratives themselves. Instead, the thesis has discussed how podcast talk and storytelling in *Ångestpodden* matters to its audiences. These meaningful experiences are not only subjective but also shared. This study argues that listening should be treated as a meaningful media experience when studying media audiences and contemporary media cultures. The transcript in the introduction of this study already offers a hint of why listening matters: *Ångestpodden* is about *not* feeling good, yet the talk of its hosts creates a sense of friendship and warmth. One can imagine the present of the friendly warmth when reading the transcript, but one can only truly sense it by listening.

Three research questions guided the analysis of this paper. The first question asked: How do the audiences of *Ångestpodden* make meaning of their engagement with the podcast? This broad question led the investigation of the listeners' engagement with the podcast and what they considered to be meaningful in their experiences. The second question asked: How is intimacy experienced in the listeners' engagement? This question focused on the particular ways in which the listeners experience intimacy with *Ångestpodden* and, furthermore, how these experiences create particular affective and emotional connectivity with the podcast talk and storytelling. The last research question asked: What can this case study tell us about how podcasts matter as a meaningful media genre? Examining how listening to *Ångestpodden* is a meaningful media experience did not only offer insight into this specific case study, but could broaden understanding of what the podcast genre has to offer media cultures. Let us discuss the findings of this study in more detail.

The podcast experience

This case study investigated how the listeners of *Ångestpodden* engage with the podcast and find meaning in their listener experiences. It also sheds light on how podcasts, more generally, create particular kinds of listening experiences. Podcasts, perhaps, come closest to radio as a medium, and this study has borrowed insights from radio studies in its analysis. However, the study has remained critical about the contextual differences of podcast and radio as a media

experience. Radio is a more traditional form of broadcasting and, thus, more firmly situated within the conventions of media industries, whereas podcasts are often produced in a more “free” digital media ecology (e.g., Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Podcasts also have the potential to democratize the media landscape (e.g., Swiatek, 2018). In addition to enabling more diversity among intimate voices in the public sphere, podcasts are more flexible in their oral expression as they are free from the restrictions of traditional broadcast media conventions (e.g., Llinares et al., 2018). One can, perhaps, see this freedom of expression shaping the listening experience of *Ångestpodden*, demonstrated by how *real* the listeners find the conversations and friendship between its hosts. Moreover, this study argues that podcast experience is not only crafted by the hosts but active listeners who have the freedom to establish their own listening habits and routines. It could be said that the podcast experience is a dual craft. Still, radio and podcasts can be seen as having similarities in both storytelling and the digital and mobile affordances that shape listener engagement (Bottomley, 2015). This study did not investigate the differences between podcasts and radio in detail. Instead, it provides a detailed account on how the podcast is experienced by its audience.

Intimacy as the red thread

The notion of hyper intimacy (Berry, 2016) has offered particular insight about the podcast experience, suggesting that it is a dual craft. This case study shows how the listeners’ intimate experiences with *Ångestpodden* have to do with how the podcast is produced, in terms of its talk and storytelling, and how the listeners craft their own listening practices. Intimacy has run through the analysis of this study, bringing together different aspects of the podcast experience. Intimate listening experiences with *Ångestpodden* are enhanced by the sense of proximity with human voice. Scannell (2019: 28-31)’s notion of broadcast talk being experienced as the voice of the friend highlights the intimate properties of talk and it is particularly fitting for this case study as the listeners expressed how they feel as if Ida and Sofie were their friends. The perceived realness of how they talk enhances the listeners’ sense of proximity to the hosts. The friendly proximity of *Ångestpodden* can even be experienced as care. The podcast’s intimacy can, on the one hand, be experienced as an intimate relationship, as some of the listeners describe how they can imagine themselves having a conversation with the podcast hosts, despite the lack of physical proximity.

On the other hand, intimacy can be understood as more than interpersonal exchange and proximity. This study has taken a more nuanced approach to intimacy as something that is

also individual and public. Following Berlant's notion of intimate public spheres (2008, 2011), podcasts create and distribute narratives of intimacy into the public, demonstrating the democratizing potential of podcasts. Furthermore, podcasts may enable audiences to connect with a diverse range of intimate narratives as evidenced in the findings of this study. *Ångestpodden* can, indeed, be seen as an intimate bridging medium (see Swiatek, 2018). The issues that *Ångestpodden* covers are often intimate troubles that are commonly shared in modern society (see Plummer, 2003). However, intimate storytelling may also connect listeners to stories of the extraordinary. These stories are not necessarily common but they may, nevertheless, enable the listeners to connect to the storytellers affectively and emotionally. These experiences can also be extraordinary when it comes to emotions, awakening latent memories and opening the door for both light and dark emotions. Yet, even encounters with the extraordinary may nurture listeners' intimate connection and openness with oneself. As the analysis has shown, the podcast experience may involve intimate contemplations of one's own emotional state and wellbeing. Thus, intimacy is not only crafted in the podcast studio. It does not only connect the listener to intimate storytelling but also to intimate listening situations, crafted by listeners themselves. The different listening practices, in different places and spaces of listening, shapes and balances the mediated proximity. Listeners can simultaneously experience the world of podcast storytelling and, for example, take a walk in the park.

While all podcast listening cannot be generalized as intimate, intimacy can be seen as a potentially crucial element of podcasts, particularly of those with personal storytelling. One can argue that podcasts with intimate elements have the potential to connect listeners with the ordinary and extraordinary in powerful ways. It could be summed up that podcast listening may connect the ordinary and extraordinary, and private and public in different, intimate ways. Moreover, this case study has shown that podcasts contribute to transforming human experiences of intimacy.

Powerful audience engagement

This study has approached listeners' experiences through the notion of media engagement (see Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). This approach considers how people encounter and experience media in personal, meaningful ways but also collectively in a socio-cultural context (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). It has sought to gain a nuanced understanding of the ways in which listeners experience *Ångestpodden* subjectively and how it is interconnected with socio-cultural

environments. The method of qualitative audience interviews gave voice to audiences of Ångestpodden, addressing them as listeners with agency. The methodology of this study was crafted to give participants space to discuss their lived experiences.

This approach to Ångestpodden has certainly shed light on an active podcast audience with mixed motivations and ways of listening. The listeners are driven to learn about anxiety and mental illness and they relate to the message — or messages — of Ångestpodden, reflecting on what it means to them personally. This shows how engagement can be seen as cultural resonance (Hill, 2019) and as nurturing civic cultures and civic agency (Dahlgren, 2006, 2013). It is through engagement that listeners connect with and relate to shared concerns and civic aspirations. The listeners also long for a sense of belonging, to feel like they are not alone. This, particularly, highlights how engagement is a highly affective and emotional experience and an “energizing, internal force” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2020). If one sees engagement merely as cognitive reasoning, it would not be possible to understand the importance of intimacy in how the podcast and its listeners establish affective and emotional proximity. Moreover, how podcast talk and storytelling resonates with listeners shows their longing for more public intimacy and disclosive storytelling about anxiety. By investigating the intimate, affective and emotional aspects of the podcast experience, one can understand how listeners connect and find meaning in their engagement.

The case of Ångestpodden shows how engagement connects listeners with ordinary and extraordinary experiences in complex ways. This is a powerful finding. Ångestpodden is a podcast about anxiety, but this negative emotion is what creates a sense of connectivity. The listeners reflect on anxiety, both as a subjective but also shared human experience. Their reflections show how they regard anxiety in the podcast storytelling as both ordinary and extraordinary. The listeners relate to being anxious and also connect with others in their drive for knowledge, seeking to understand other peoples’ experiences with anxiety and mental illness. Their sense of connection is empowering as the listeners of Ångestpodden find belonging in anxiety. They come together as a listening public (Lacey, 2013) in their shared, civic aspirations and, crucially, in acknowledging anxiety as a shared human experience. Even though anxiety may entail negative emotion, the listeners’ attitudes toward it are not necessarily negative themselves. The shared message goes: *we should talk about it*.

Ångestpodden does this: it talks about anxiety. It is not a cure but a resource for living (Corner, 2017: 4) with anxiety. It brings the dark of anxiety into the light, offering a sense of friendly human proximity. Furthermore, its talk and storytelling normalizes the listeners' experiences of anxiety. It reminds them that they are not alone and makes extraordinary experiences with anxiety relatable and a bit less “extra.” Again, it is not only the podcast itself that creates this experience. The listeners, crafting their own ways of listening, experience the podcast in ordinary places, carrying out regular, everyday tasks such as household chores. The listening experience, including how the podcast talks about anxiety and how listeners engage with it, shapes experiences of it as ordinary. When longing for belonging, listeners can utilize Ångestpodden as a resource in their daily lives. They may strategically listen to the podcast in order to have it as company and as a friend in extraordinary circumstances, such as a global pandemic. Listeners themselves create experiences of care with the podcast, both in establishing routines of listening and in utilizing Ångestpodden as the voice of the friend in their daily lives.

The power of listening

Ångestpodden, like many other podcasts, has its own social media channels. This cross-media aspect of the podcast was left unexplored in this study. Yet, podcast listening does not happen in a social vacuum. One could, perhaps, even argue that in order to understand the podcast phenomenon, one should investigate how it converges with social media. Thus, there was a sense of anxiety when conducting this study. During the project, I asked myself “*What if?*”, most often in relation to the last research question. I wondered: *What if studying the cross-media elements of Ångestpodden could have revealed something even more interesting regarding the podcast genre?* Nevertheless, this study does offer insight into podcasts generally. Understanding listening as something that goes beyond the mere interpretation of text, and moreover, as engagement that frees the other senses, certainly demonstrates the power of podcast listening. Podcast listening is not *just* about listening or, perhaps, we should say that it is about more than making sense of what one hears. The different sensory experiences in podcast listening do not only include hearing but also the embodied and visual elements of the surroundings and listening practices. Furthermore, affective and emotional connectivity to podcast storytelling may even create a cinematic experience, enhancing the listener’s imagination.

The focus on listening also freed me, as a researcher, from the visual and textual material of other forms of digital media and allowed me to explore the intimate, affective and emotional audio elements of podcast engagement in depth. The methodological approach of this study explored a possible way to investigate the experiences and practices related to podcast listening, something that Bottomley (2015) calls for in his discussion about podcast research. This study exemplifies the power of listening, also as a methodological approach to studying the podcast experience. It shows how sensory ethnography enhances understanding of podcast listeners' experiences. The experiential is a useful, empirical resource when studying podcast listening as it is, undoubtedly, a sensory experience. As this study shows, it can enrich and give more detailed descriptions of how podcast listening is embodied.

All in all, this study demonstrates that taking a cultural approach to investigate podcasts from the perspective of audiences can show how podcast listening is a meaningful media experience. In order to explore the experience, one does not necessarily need to look at the cross-media elements of its digital ecology. This study underlines the powerful potential of podcast listening to create intimate experiences with podcast talk and personal storytelling. Moreover, by hearing listeners talk about their experiences, I recognized that a podcast about anxiety does not have to be negative or dark. Rather, it can surface intimate, human warmth and connectivity.

Going forward, such research could further investigate the production side of podcast intimacy. For example, future studies could examine whether the hosts of *Ångestpodden* are aware of the intimate possibilities of the podcast; and whether and how they *intend* to create intimate experiences for their listeners. This would broaden the understanding of the podcast experience to also consider the role of podcast producers in media engagement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interviews

- “Amalia”, 22, F, Swedish, student. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 25.1.2021
- “Hanna”, 21, F, Swedish, student. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 26.1..2021
- “Maja”, 31, F, Swedish, full-time worker. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 27.1.2021
- “Emma”, 26, F, Swedish, student. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 28.1.2021
- “Julia”, 24, F, Swedish, teacher. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 28.1.2021
- “Sara”, 25, F, Swedish, student. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 29.1.2021
- “Maria”, 51, F, Swedish, deacon. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 29.1.2021
- “Alice”, 27, F, Swedish, product photographer. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 1.2.2021
- “Elsa”, 25, F, Swedish, food inspector. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 2.2..2021
- “Olivia”, 25, F, Swedish, nurse. Interviewed by Anna Jaakonaho, 8.2.2021

Appendix 2: Invitation message

Hej,

I am glad that you are interested in participating in my study about the listeners' experiences with Ångestpodden. I would like to have an approximately one hour long, conversational interview with you via video call.

You can choose if you wish to speak English or Swedish. I understand both but I am more fluent in English. You can also change the language at any time in order to express yourself better.

Regarding your privacy:

- This research will not publish your name.
- This research may include information about your age, nationality, and gender.
- What you talk about during the interview will be used in my master thesis (course MKVM13, Media and Communication, Lund University).

Please fill in your contact information below. I will return back to you as soon as possible to schedule our meeting. Please don't hesitate to ask me any questions. You can reach me via email: anna.jaakonaho@gmail.com

All the best,

Anna Jaakonaho

Appendix 3: Interview guide

Topic 1: Context & warmup

How do you listen to Ångestpodden?

- technology, platform, subscription
- when, where (while doing something?), how often
- habits, routines (walking, doing chores etc.)
- other podcasts
- alone/in company

How did you start listening/find out about the podcast?

Can you remember a memorable moment you have had with Ångestpodden?

How come?

- episodes, topics, themes?

Topic 2: Themes and topics

How would you describe Ångestpodden?

What is it about?

What kind of topics and episodes can you remember?

- preferences (positive, negative and disengagement)
- close/distant, relating to
- curiosity
- difficult/easy

Do you think Ångestpodden stands out from other podcasts?

How come?

Topic 3: Meanings and preferences

Do you think Ångestpodden has some kind of a message or messages?

- personally, generally

Is that important to you?

Is there something that continuously appeals to you in Ångestpodden, in all episodes?

- hosts, presence, tone, sounds, dialogue, structure, being able to relate to
- habits of listening, routines

What makes you feel like this?

How do you feel like you are treated as a listener?

Topic 4: Dialogue and structure

What do you think about the hosts Ida and Sofie?

- presence, empathy, opinions, genuinity, relatability
- the way they talk, approach the topics
- dialogue, dynamics, how they talk to the guests
- sound, voices

Have you learned something about them?

Is this important to you?

What do you think about the structure of the podcast?

- beginning, ending, interviews, length, tempo
- structure and atmosphere, tone

Topic 5: Tone and atmosphere

How would you describe the atmosphere of Ångestpodden?

- tone, messages, dialogue
- sounds and voices
 - pleasant/unpleasant
 - volume, rhythm, pitch, tempo

Is this important to you?

How does Ångestpodden talk about anxiety?

- tone, messages, dialogue
- perspectives

How does it talk about mental health and illness generally?

How does it make you think/reflect?

Topic 6: Modes and moods of listening

Are there any particular kinds of situations when you like listening to Ångestpodden?

- mood, place, space
- life situations
- time spent
- emotions

Are there situations when you don't like to listen to it?

What does it give you in these situations?

How would you describe your personal relationship to the podcast?

How do you experience this?

- habits, routines
- relationship to the hosts?

How would you describe the meaning of it in your daily life?

How does the podcast/Ida and Sofie "speak to" you?

Topic 7: Broader context

How do you see Ångestpodden in the broader context of talk about mental health?

Does it stand out from other media?

- trust
- tone, atmosphere
- diversity, approach

Does it stand out from the ways in which healthcare institutions talk about anxiety?

Do you discuss Ångestpodden with other people? How?

Do you know about their Facebook group?

Would you recommend it to others?

To whom/what kinds of people?

How do you figure the audience of Ångestpodden?

What kinds of people do you imagine listening to it?
- gender, age, education, experiences of anxiety
Do you see gender playing a role?
Who do you think Ida and Sofie address, gender-wise?

Would you like to add anything that we did not discuss?

Appendix 4: Consent form

Research project: A case study of listener's experiences with Ångestpodden

Researcher: Anna Jaakonaho

This interview is conducted as a part of my master's thesis (course MKVM13, Media and Communication, Lund University). The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the listeners' experiences with Ångestpodden. Each interview is conducted digitally and lasts around one hour. I would like to record the interview and use the dialogue to present my findings. I will record the interview only with your consent. During the interview, please feel free to say as much or as little as you want. You can decide not to answer any question, or to stop the interview any time you want.

I ensure that your identity will remain anonymous. The process of anonymization involves removing the name and any personal data that may be revealed during the interview, except your age, gender and nationality.

If you agree to join this study, please print your name below.

Full name:

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

Nationality:

Date:

Signature:

Appendix 5: Sample of podcast episodes for sensory ethnography

The podcast episodes for sensory ethnographic listening were systematically selected to include one episode from each year the podcast has been airing. From each year, the episode was selected from different months in a chronological order, starting from February. From the episodes published within each month, the first episode was selected for the sample.

Below are the episodes included in the sample, including information of the dates when the listening of each episode took place and the place and practices of each listening session.

Session 1 25.3.2021

Episode: 3. Sofia Sjöström (“PT-Fia”) gästar (published 4 February 2015)

Listening situation: with headphones, alone at home while cleaning

Session 2 26.3.2021

Episode: 59. Generaliserat Ångestsyndrom Med Lizette (published 3 March 2016)

Listening situation: no headphones, alone at home while doing dishes and other kitchen chores

Session 3 29.3.2021,

Episode: 115. ADHD som superkraft med Viktor Frisk (published 5 April 2017)

Listening situation: with headphones, on a walk in the park in a sunny afternoon

Session 4 2.4.2021

Episode: 171. Albert Hobohm, om sorgbearbetning och meditation (published 3 May 2018)

Listening situation: with headphones, while on a bus

Session 5 5.4.2021

Episode: 228. Janice gästar (published 6 June 2019)

Listening situation: with headphones, at home while doing a calm workout

Session 6 7.4.2021

Episode: 284. Relationer och avslut gör så j’vla ont (published 2 July 2020)

Listening situation: with headphones, on a walk to the supermarket

Session 7 8.4.2021

Episode: 331. Peg & Penny: mom-shaming, USA och självhat (published 7 January 2021)

Listening situation: no headphones, alone at home while relaxing on the couch

Appendix 6: Coding example

The excerpts below demonstrate the early stage of structural and analytical coding with the coding software NVivo. At this stage of coding, five parameters of engagement from Dahlgren and Hill (2020) were used as initial categories for mapping the listeners engagement.

- ▼ ● CONTEXT
 - Imagined anxious audience
 - Imagined female audience
 - Private spaces and places of listening
 - ▼ ● Ways of listening and listenign situations
 - Active, personalized
 - ▼ ● Listening alone
 - Intimate and personal technology
 - Personal spaces and alone time
 - Podcas as company
 - ▼ ● Listening habits
 - Listening on a way to or off work
 - Listening when relaxing
 - Listening when working
 - Listening when working out
 - Listening while doing chores
 - Listening while on a walk
 - Regular listening

- ▼ ● MOTIVATIONS
 - Drive for knowledge and insights
 - Following up, keeping up
 - Getting help, feeling better
 - Longing for belonging, company
 - Relaxation and pleasure
 - Sense of importancy, solidarity

▼ ● MODALITIES

▼ ● Affective

▼ ● Aural proximity

- Podcast voices as company
- Sense of directedness and liveness
- Sense of realness
- Sense of warmth
- Emotional investments with personal storytelling

▼ ● General atmosphere and mood

- Accepting
- Comforting
- Light
- Serious

▼ ● Cognitive

- Engaging as citizens
- Engaging as human beings

▼ ● INTENSITIES

- Intimately crafted listening
- Podcasts as a friend
- Weekly listening habits and routines

▼ ● CONSEQUENCES

▼ ● Connectivity

- Connecting to the personal storytelling through emotions
- Feeling less alone, a sense of belonging

▼ ● Possible negative consequences

- Assumed negative impact on some listeners
- Negative affect and emotion

▼ ● Realizations and understanding

- Anxiety as normal
- Anxiety as inevitable
- Anxiety as subjective and diverse but shared
- Learning about mental illness diagnoses
- Learning how to be there for others

▼ ● Sense of empowerment

- Strengthened sense of citizenship