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A Study on the Impact of Podcast Culture on the Academic and Career Decision-Making of Higher Education Students

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Abstract

The rapid adoption of digital media has reshaped how higher education students access information and make academic and career decisions. Among emerging formats, podcasts provide flexible, personalized, and contextually rich learning experiences, yet their influence on decision-making remains underexplored in India. This study examines the impact of podcast engagement on academic and career decision-making among higher education students in the Jammu Division of Jammu and Kashmir. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 250 survey participants and 50 semi-structured interviews to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights. Survey constructs assessed podcast engagement, motivational gratifications (Uses and Gratifications Theory), knowledge gain, self-efficacy, and decision-making outcomes. Findings indicated that podcast engagement directly and indirectly through knowledge gain and self-efficacy enhances academic and career decision-making, confirming the hypothesized mediation effects. Qualitative findings highlighted factors such as host relatability, content accessibility, and peer discussion as moderators of podcast effectiveness. These results show the potential of podcasts as student-centered educational tools that complement traditional guidance, foster confidence, and support informed academic and career choices.

Keywords: Podcast; Higher Education; Academic Decision-Making; Career Decision-Making

1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital media has transformed how students access information, acquire knowledge, and make academic and career decisions. Among emerging formats, podcasts audio-based series accessible on-demand via mobile devices have gained prominence as a flexible, learner-driven medium for informal education. They extend learning beyond formal classrooms by offering expert insights, motivational narratives, and practical guidance on skill development and career planning (Hew, 2009; McGarr, 2021).

Podcasts are characterized by portability, conversational style, and learner-centered design, allowing students to integrate learning into daily routines. By combining theoretical knowledge with real-world experiences, educational and career-oriented podcasts support self-directed learning, reflection, and motivation (Fernández et al., 2015). Despite their growing adoption, research examining how podcast engagement translates into concrete academic and career decision-making remains limited.

Theoretically, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) explains the motivations behind podcast engagement, suggesting that individuals select media to satisfy cognitive, affective, and social needs (Katz et al., 1973). In higher education, podcasts may fulfill needs for knowledge acquisition, career awareness, personal growth, and identity formation. Complementing this, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) emphasizes observational learning and the development of

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confidence through modelling, highlighting how podcasts featuring success stories and career guidance can enhance students' self-efficacy and decision-making capacity (Bandura, 1997).

Most prior research has focused on learning engagement, course-specific knowledge, or satisfaction, with few studies linking podcast consumption to actionable decisions about academic pathways and career planning. This gap is particularly salient in India, where students navigate complex educational systems and labor market uncertainties with limited access to formal career guidance. Moreover, prior studies rarely integrate motivational, cognitive, and decision-making constructs within a single framework, limiting understanding of how podcasts function as informal educational technology.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating the impact of podcast culture on the academic and career decision-making ability of Indian youth. Specifically, the study examines: patterns of podcast engagement, motivations for listening, perceived knowledge gain, self-efficacy, and their combined influence on decision-making outcomes. By employing a mixed-methods research design, the study provides empirical evidence on how podcasts contribute to learning and decision-making processes among higher education students in the Jammu Division of Jammu and Kashmir, India.

2. Literature review

2.1. Podcasts as Emerging Educational Technology

Digital audio platforms, particularly podcasts, have increasingly been recognized as innovative tools in higher education. Podcasts are often defined as episodic digital audio files that learners can access asynchronously, providing flexibility, portability, and self-paced learning opportunities (Hew, 2009). In recent years, their adoption has grown worldwide among university students, primarily as supplementary learning resources, career guidance aids, or motivational media (McGarr, 2021). Unlike traditional media, podcasts often blend informational, experiential, and affective content, making them conducive to informal learning. The conversational style and narrative structure facilitate reflection, engagement, and knowledge retention (Lindquist et al., 2020). In particular, studies have highlighted that students frequently use podcasts to reinforce lecture material, explore emerging topics, and gain exposure to professional experiences, thereby extending learning beyond formal curriculum structures (Copley, 2007; Fernandez et al., 2015). Their narrative and conversational formats facilitate reflective thinking and contextual learning, particularly when content integrates real-world applications, expert insights, and experiential narratives. However, much of the existing literature has primarily examined podcasts in relation to course reinforcement, student satisfaction, or short-term knowledge retention, with comparatively limited attention to their broader developmental outcomes, such as academic planning or career decision-making.

2.2. Podcast Culture and Engagement Patterns

The concept of podcast culture encompasses frequency of listening, subscription behaviors, content sharing, and reflective engagement. Engagement with podcasts varies according to personal interest, availability, and perceived usefulness (Baepler et al., 2014). For example, students who actively subscribe to educational podcasts, complete episodes, and share insights with peers are more likely to internalize knowledge and integrate it into learning strategies (Domizi, 2007). Research has shown that podcast engagement is often driven by both intrinsic motivation and contextual factors, such as accessibility and digital literacy (Vollmer and Rieger, 2020). Moreover, the emergence of specialized platforms such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube has facilitated the proliferation of niche podcasts tailored to educational and career guidance needs, increasing both exposure and relevance for students (Agarwal et al., 2021). Despite growing engagement, existing studies largely conceptualize podcast use as a passive consumption activity, often neglecting how sustained engagement patterns translate into concrete academic and career-related decisions.

2.3. Uses and Gratifications of Podcast Listening

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provide a robust framework for understanding why students engage with podcasts. According to Katz et al. (1973), media consumption is purposive and goal-directed; individuals seek content that satisfies specific cognitive, affective, and social needs. In the context of higher education, students report using podcasts for:

- Information seeking – acquiring knowledge on academic topics, skill development, or emerging careers (Vollmer and Rieger, 2020).

- Career guidance – understanding professional pathways, labor market trends, and skill requirements (Bond et al., 2020).
- Personal development – motivational content fostering self-reflection, confidence, and learning strategies (McGarr, 2021).
- Entertainment and stress relief – providing a balance between academic demands and relaxation (Domizi, 2007).

Studies indicate that students increasingly rely on podcasts for career-related information, exposure to professional narratives, and understanding emerging labor market trends (Bond et al., 2020). Motivational gratifications are critical, as content perceived as relevant, credible, and relatable is more likely to influence attitudes, learning outcomes, and behavioral intentions. However, while UGT-based research has effectively explained why students consume podcasts, fewer studies have empirically examined how these motivations interact with cognitive and psychological mechanisms to shape academic and career decision-making outcomes.

2.4. Knowledge Gain and Learning Outcomes

Podcasts have been demonstrated to enhance knowledge acquisition, awareness of academic opportunities, and skill development among students. Lindquist et al. (2020) found that learners reported improved understanding of course concepts and emerging career fields through podcast exposure. Similarly, Fernandez et al. (2015) noted that podcasts facilitate reflection, critical thinking, and long-term retention, especially when learners take notes, discuss content with peers, or integrate insights into academic planning. Knowledge gain is often intertwined with self-efficacy, a key component of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997). Students exposed to narratives of success, problem-solving, or career progression via podcasts tend to exhibit increased confidence in their ability to make informed academic and career choices. Thus, learning outcomes from podcasts extend beyond factual knowledge to include affective and metacognitive benefits. Despite this, prior studies have often treated knowledge gain as an end outcome rather than examining its mediating role in higher-order processes such as decision-making. This represents a significant gap, particularly in contexts where students lack structured academic or career guidance.

2.5. Podcasts and Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, or one's belief in the ability to perform specific tasks successfully, is a critical determinant of decision-making in educational contexts (Bandura, 1997). Studies indicate that exposure to podcast content can enhance students' confidence in evaluating courses, selecting career paths, and applying skills in real-world contexts. For instance, narratives of peer experiences, career trajectories, or expert advice provide vicarious learning opportunities, enabling students to model behaviors and strategies effectively (Bond et al., 2020). High self-efficacy has been linked to greater persistence in pursuing academic goals, more proactive career planning, and enhanced problem-solving in unfamiliar situations. Podcasts can act as informal interventions, strengthening students' belief in their abilities while fostering reflective decision-making.

2.6. Impact on Academic and Career Decision-Making

Although the educational benefits of podcasts are well-documented, relatively few studies have explored their direct impact on academic and career decision-making. Decision-making ability encompasses knowledge-based choices (e.g., course selection), attitudinal dimensions (e.g., interest in careers), and behavioral actions (e.g., enrollment in skill programs or internships). Recent research in educational technology suggests that media engagement, when mediated by knowledge gain and self-efficacy, can significantly influence such outcomes (McGarr, 2021; Bond et al., 2020). Podcasts provide contextualized, actionable information that supports students in evaluating academic opportunities, exploring career paths, and planning steps toward goal achievement. In the Indian context, where formal career counselling is limited, podcasts may serve as a supplementary resource to reduce informational gaps and enhance confidence in decision-making.

The literature supports the potential of podcasts as informal educational technology that can enhance learning, motivation, and decision-making among higher education students. However, gaps remain in empirically linking podcast culture, engagement, motivational factors, knowledge gain, self-efficacy, and academic/career decisions, especially in the Indian higher education context. Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates the impact of podcast culture on academic and career decision-making ability of Indian youth, offering new insights into the pedagogical and developmental implications of digital audio media.

3. Research gap and rationale of the present study

The reviewed literature highlights the educational potential of podcasts but reveals several gaps. First, most studies focus on learning engagement or satisfaction rather than decision-making outcomes. Second, motivational, cognitive, and psychological mechanisms are rarely examined together, limiting theoretical integration. Third, empirical evidence from the Indian higher education context remains limited, particularly concerning how informal digital media influences students' academic and career choices. Addressing these gaps, the present study integrates Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Cognitive Theory to examine how podcast engagement influences academic and career decision-making through motivational gratifications, knowledge gain, and self-efficacy. By employing a mixed-methods approach among higher education students in the Jammu Division of Jammu and Kashmir, the study offers a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of podcasts as an informal educational and developmental resource.

Research questions

- What are the patterns of podcast engagement and motivations for podcast use among higher education students?
- How does podcast engagement relate to perceived knowledge gain and self-efficacy?
- To what extent do podcast engagement, motivations, knowledge gain, and self-efficacy predict academic and career decision-making ability?

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Podcast engagement is positively associated with students perceived knowledge gain and self-efficacy.
- **H2:** Uses and gratifications of podcast listening positively predict academic and career decision-making ability.
- **H3:** Knowledge gain and self-efficacy mediate the relationship between podcast engagement and academic and career decision-making ability.

4. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the impact of podcast culture on the academic and career decision-making ability of higher education students in the Jammu Division of Jammu and Kashmir. Integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study used a structured survey to capture patterns of podcast engagement, motivational gratifications, knowledge gain, self-efficacy, and decision-making outcomes, while semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into participants' perceptions, contextual factors, and personal experiences, enabling triangulation of findings and robust interpretations of the relationships among the studied constructs. The target population consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in recognized higher education institutions in the region, with inclusion criteria requiring participants to be above 16 years of age. A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across educational levels, types of institutions (government, private, autonomous), and geographic locations (urban, semi-urban, rural). A total of 250 students participated in the survey, and 50 students were selected for follow-up interviews to capture diverse experiences in podcast engagement and academic/career decision-making.

The survey instrument was developed based on theoretical frameworks, including Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Cognitive Theory, and consisted of multiple sections measuring podcast engagement, motivational gratifications, knowledge gain, self-efficacy, and academic and career decision-making ability, using five-point Likert scales. Additional items captured moderators such as digital literacy, internet access, peer/family support, and perceived credibility of podcast hosts. The reliability of the scales was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.80$), and validity was established through expert review and pilot testing. The semi-structured interviews explored students' media habits, motivations for listening, learning outcomes, influence on academic and career choices, and contextual barriers or facilitators. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns that complemented the quantitative findings.

Data collection was conducted online for the survey, with participants providing informed consent before participation, and interviews were conducted either via Zoom or in-person, lasting approximately 25–30 minutes each. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the corresponding university, and all procedures adhered to APA ethical standards, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies), reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha), Pearson correlations, and multiple regression to identify predictors of academic and career decision-making ability. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was also employed to test the hypothesized pathways from podcast

engagement to motivational gratifications, knowledge gain, and self-efficacy, ultimately influencing academic and career decision-making outcomes, with model fit evaluated using CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR indices. Qualitative data from interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, and emergent themes were triangulated with survey results to validate patterns and provide contextual depth. Overall, this methodology ensured theoretical grounding, empirical rigor, and methodological transparency, providing a robust foundation for examining the influence of podcast culture on higher education students' academic and career decision-making in the Jammu Division.

5. Results

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of podcast engagement on the academic and career decision-making ability of higher education students in the Jammu Division of Jammu and Kashmir. A total of 250 students participated in the survey, with 50 students selected for follow-up interviews to provide contextual insights. All survey constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.80, indicating high reliability (see Table 1).

Table 1 Reliability of Survey Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
Podcast Engagement	6	0.87
Uses and Gratifications (Motivation)	7	0.85
Knowledge Gain	4	0.82
Self-Efficacy	4	0.84
Academic and Career Decision-Making	4	0.88

Descriptive statistics indicated that students reported moderate to high podcast engagement (M = 3.92, SD = 0.68) and perceived podcasts as a useful medium for knowledge acquisition (M = 4.01, SD = 0.71), self-efficacy enhancement (M = 3.89, SD = 0.74), and improving decision-making ability (M = 3.87, SD = 0.70). Motivational constructs aligned with the Uses and Gratifications framework, with students reporting listening for career guidance (M = 4.05, SD = 0.72), information seeking (M = 4.10, SD = 0.69), and personal development (M = 3.95, SD = 0.74).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Constructs (N = 250)

Construct	Mean	SD
Podcast Engagement	3.92	0.68
Uses and Gratifications (Motivation)	4.03	0.71
Knowledge Gain	4.01	0.71
Self-Efficacy	3.89	0.74
Academic and Career Decision-Making	3.87	0.70

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among the key constructs (see Table 3). Podcast engagement was strongly correlated with Uses and Gratifications (r = 0.62, p < .001), Knowledge Gain (r = 0.58, p < .001), and Self-Efficacy (r = 0.55, p < .001). Notably, Knowledge Gain and Self-Efficacy were significantly correlated with Academic and Career Decision-Making (r = 0.61 and r = 0.59, respectively; p < .001), suggesting that podcasts influence decision-making both directly and indirectly via motivational and cognitive processes.

Table 3 Correlation Matrix of Key Constructs

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
Podcast Engagement	-				
Uses and Gratifications (Motivation)	0.62	-			
Knowledge Gain	0.58	0.66	-		
Self-Efficacy	0.55	0.60	0.59	-	
Academic and Career Decision-Making	0.57	0.61	0.61	0.59	-

Note. $p < .001$.

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that Podcast Engagement ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), Knowledge Gain ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .001$), and Self-Efficacy ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of Academic and Career Decision-Making Ability ($R^2 = 0.54$, $F(3,246) = 95.12$, $p < .001$), indicating that approximately 54% of the variance in decision-making ability could be explained by these constructs.

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was conducted to test the hypothesized paths of the conceptual framework. The model demonstrated a good fit: CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.048, SRMR = 0.045. The results confirmed that Podcast Engagement positively influenced Uses and Gratifications, which, in turn, affected Knowledge Gain and Self-Efficacy, ultimately enhancing Academic and Career Decision-Making Ability. Direct paths from Podcast Engagement to Knowledge Gain and Self-Efficacy were also significant, highlighting both mediated and direct effects of podcast exposure.

Qualitative analysis of interview data supported the quantitative findings. Participants reported that podcasts provided timely guidance on course selection, emerging career paths, and practical skills, which enhanced their confidence and informed their academic and career decisions. Themes such as "relatability of hosts," "accessibility of content," and "peer discussion" emerged as key factors moderating the influence of podcasts on decision-making. Triangulation with survey results validated the robustness of the observed patterns and underscored the role of podcasts as an influential educational and career resource.

6. Discussion

The present study investigated the impact of podcast engagement on the academic and career decision-making ability of higher education students in the Jammu Division of Jammu and Kashmir. Consistent with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the findings indicate that students actively seek podcasts for information, career guidance, and personal development. High engagement levels, as reflected in frequency, episode completion, and sharing behavior, were associated with enhanced Knowledge Gain and Self-Efficacy, supporting previous research that positions podcasts as an effective tool for informal learning and skill acquisition (Hew, 2009; Fernandez et al., 2009).

Podcast engagement emerged as a significant predictor of Academic and Career Decision-Making Ability, both directly and indirectly via motivational and cognitive constructs. These results align with prior findings that suggest podcasts contribute to improved decision-making by providing access to curated knowledge and relatable role models (Copley, 2007; Domizi, 2007). Students reported that exposure to episodes on emerging fields, entrance exams, and career paths increased their awareness of opportunities they had previously overlooked, confirming the role of podcasts in knowledge scaffolding and informed choice-making.

The mediating effects of Knowledge Gain and Self-Efficacy underscore the importance of cognitive and motivational mechanisms in translating podcast engagement into tangible outcomes. Structural Equation Modelling indicated that motivational gratifications derived from podcast listening foster confidence and competence, which in turn strengthen students' ability to make rational, well-informed academic and career decisions. These findings reinforce the tenets of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997), emphasizing observational learning, vicarious experiences, and the enhancement of self-efficacy through exposure to credible and relatable content.

Qualitative insights further enriched the understanding of these processes. Participants highlighted that podcasts were valued not only for informational content but also for their accessibility, flexibility, and peer-related discussions, which enhanced engagement and reinforced learning. The relatability of podcast hosts and the authenticity of their

experiences contributed to increased identification and motivation, mirroring findings in prior educational podcast research (McGarr, 2021; Lindquist et al., 2020). Additionally, contextual factors such as digital literacy, internet access, and family/peer support moderated the impact of podcasts, suggesting that environmental and infrastructural considerations shape the efficacy of podcast-based interventions in higher education.

The study contributes theoretically by integrating Uses and Gratifications and Social Cognitive perspectives within a unified framework, demonstrating how motivational, cognitive, and behavioral constructs interact to influence academic and career outcomes. Practically, the findings provide evidence for educators, policymakers, and content creators regarding the potential of podcasts as an adjunct educational tool. Designing podcasts with clear learning objectives, practical relevance, and engaging delivery can enhance students' preparedness for academic and professional pathways. Furthermore, institutions could integrate podcasts into career counselling and skill-building programs to complement traditional guidance mechanisms.

Despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations. The sample was geographically limited to the Jammu Division of Jammu and Kashmir, which may affect generalizability to other regions. Data were self-reported, which could introduce bias. Future research could explore longitudinal effects of podcast engagement, incorporate objective behavioral measures, and examine cross-regional differences to strengthen the generalizability of findings. Additionally, experimental designs could test causal mechanisms more rigorously and inform the development of evidence-based educational podcast interventions.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that podcasts are a significant and practical resource for higher education students, fostering knowledge acquisition, self-efficacy, and enhanced academic and career decision-making. By leveraging motivational and cognitive mechanisms, podcasts can support students in navigating increasingly complex educational and professional landscapes, highlighting their growing relevance in contemporary higher education.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the influence of podcast culture on the academic and career decision-making ability of higher education students in the Jammu Division of Jammu and Kashmir, employing a mixed-methods approach that integrated survey and interview data. The findings reveal that podcast engagement significantly enhances students' knowledge acquisition, self-efficacy, and decision-making competence, confirming that podcasts serve as an effective medium for informal learning and career guidance. Both direct and indirect pathways were identified, with Knowledge Gain and Self-Efficacy mediating the relationship between podcast engagement and academic/career decision-making, consistent with the theoretical predictions of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997; Katz et al., 1973).

Qualitative insights complemented the quantitative results, highlighting the importance of host relatability, content relevance, and accessibility in facilitating learning and motivation. Environmental and contextual factors, including digital literacy, internet connectivity, and family or peer support, emerged as moderators influencing the effectiveness of podcasts. These findings underscore the potential of podcasts as a practical, student-centered educational tool that can enhance preparedness for academic and professional pathways.

The study carries important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it provides a unified framework linking motivational, cognitive, and behavioral constructs, demonstrating how podcast engagement translates into enhanced decision-making ability. Practically, the results suggest that educators and institutions can leverage podcasts to supplement traditional academic guidance, career counselling, and skill development programs. Designing podcasts with clear learning objectives, engaging content, and actionable insights can maximize their impact on students' academic and career trajectories.

While the study contributes significantly to understanding the role of podcasts in higher education, it is not without limitations. The sample was confined to students from the Jammu Division, which may limit generalizability, and data relied on self-reports, which could introduce response bias. Future research should consider longitudinal designs, experimental interventions, and cross-regional comparisons to explore causal relationships and broader applicability. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of podcasts in combination with other digital learning resources could provide a more holistic understanding of media-based learning in higher education.

So, this research demonstrates that podcasts are a valuable, accessible, and motivating tool for higher education students, enhancing both academic knowledge and career decision-making capabilities. By fostering confidence,

awareness, and practical action, podcasts can play a transformative role in supporting students' educational and professional development, highlighting their growing relevance in the contemporary higher education landscape.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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