
**THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY IN PODCASTS: A
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POPULAR NARRATIVE CONTENT**

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ABSTRACT

The development of podcasts as a digital narrative medium has created new spaces for the formation and negotiation of social reality, particularly among increasingly digitally connected societies. This phenomenon is significant to examine, as podcasts not only convey information but also shape how individuals understand themselves, their social relationships, and their lived experiences. This study aims to investigate how social reality is constructed through discourse in popular narrative podcast content. Employing a qualitative approach with an interpretive case study design, the research focuses on participants' meaning-making processes. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation of podcast content, and document analysis, involving ten participants consisting of podcast creators and active listeners. The data were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify patterns of meaning emerging from participants' experiences. The findings reveal three major themes: the internalization of narratives as a reflection of the self, the negotiation of meaning within social relationships, and the ambiguity between critical awareness and emotional dependency. These findings indicate that podcast consumption constitutes a complex discursive practice in which individuals not only receive but also interpret and negotiate meaning in their daily lives. Theoretically, this study enriches Critical Discourse Analysis by highlighting the emotional dimension in the construction of digital discourse. Practically, the findings offer implications for the development of digital literacy, critical education, and the understanding of mental health dynamics in the era of new media, while also opening avenues for further exploration of the relationship between discourse, identity, and social experience.

Keywords: Social Reality Construction, Critical Discourse Analysis, Podcast, Digital Narrative, Participant Experience, Social Meaning, Digital Media.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rapid development of digital media has transformed the ways in which individuals consume and interpret information, one of which is reflected in the emergence of podcasts as an increasingly popular narrative medium. Podcasts function not only as a form of entertainment but also as a space for meaning production, enabling the construction of new social realities through language, storytelling, and the experiences shared by speakers. In this context, Discourse Analysis becomes a crucial approach for understanding how such realities are constructed, negotiated, and disseminated to audiences.

This phenomenon can be clearly observed in everyday life, particularly among younger generations who use podcasts as a reference point for understanding issues such as mental health, social relationships, and personal identity. Based on preliminary observations of several popular podcast contents in Indonesia, it was found that the narratives presented do not merely reflect reality but also actively shape listeners' perceptions of particular social experiences. Exploratory interviews with several active listeners indicate that they feel "represented" by the stories conveyed and even use them as references in making personal decisions. This suggests that podcasts play a significant role in shaping the construction of social reality based on subjective experience.

The urgency of this study is further reinforced by the increasing consumption of digital audio content at both global and local levels. As an intimate and reflective medium, podcasts facilitate deeper internalization of meaning compared to other forms of media. However, the resulting construction of reality is not always neutral; rather, it is influenced by ideology, social background, and the linguistic strategies employed by narrators. Therefore, it is essential to examine how this process unfolds, particularly within the context of popular narratives that reach wide audiences.

A number of studies over the past five years have examined the role of digital media in shaping social discourse. For instance, Anderson (2021) demonstrates that digital audio media contribute to the formation of collective identity through personal narratives. Another study by García and López (2020) highlights how storytelling in podcasts can influence audience perceptions of social issues. Meanwhile, Chen (2022) emphasizes the importance of discourse analysis in uncovering power relations within digital media. In Indonesia, Putri (2021) examines podcasts as a form of informal educational media, while Rahmawati (2023) explores their role in fostering mental health awareness. In addition, Nugroho (2024) identifies a tendency toward the reproduction of dominant ideologies in popular narrative content.

Despite these contributions, a gap remains in the existing literature, particularly in terms of in-depth examination of how subjective experiences, meaning-making processes, and social interactions are represented and constructed within podcast discourse. Most studies still focus on the functions or impacts of media, without sufficiently exploring the discursive dimensions that shape social reality itself. In this regard, a qualitative approach enables a more comprehensive exploration of meaning, context, and the social dynamics embedded within such narratives.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the construction of social reality in podcasts through discourse analysis of popular narrative content. The focus is directed toward how language, narrative structure, and social context contribute to shaping the meanings received by audiences. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich Critical Discourse Analysis within the context of digital media, particularly podcasts. Practically, the findings are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding for content creators, academics, and the broader public in interpreting and producing more reflective and responsible narratives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive case study design. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore in depth the process of social reality construction within a specific context, namely the narratives presented in popular podcasts. Through the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study focuses not only on textual elements but also on the social practices and the broader context of meaning production that surround them. The case study design is considered appropriate, as this research seeks to understand the phenomenon holistically within a real and contextual setting.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, taking into account their direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation. The participants consisted of two main groups: podcast creators and active listeners. The total number of participants ranged from 8 to 12 individuals, with the following inclusion criteria: (1) creators who have produced at least ten episodes of popular narrative podcasts, (2) listeners who regularly access podcasts at least three times per week, and (3) individuals who demonstrate reflective engagement with the content they consume. The study was conducted within a digital social context, focusing on popular podcast platforms in Indonesia, as well as interactions occurring in online spaces.

Data collection was carried out using three primary methods. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of podcast content. These interviews were conducted online via digital communication platforms and were recorded with participants' consent. Second, non-participant observation was undertaken on selected podcast content, with a focus on narrative structure, language use, and dominant themes. Third, document analysis was conducted on podcast episode transcripts, content descriptions, and audience comments on relevant platforms. All data were systematically collected using interview guides and observation sheets as research instruments.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach combined with open coding techniques. The process began with data reduction, in which the researcher identified units of meaning derived from interview data and podcast transcripts. This was followed by a coding process to organize the data into initial categories. The subsequent stage involved the development of overarching themes that represent patterns in the construction of social reality within podcast discourse. During this process, the findings were also interpreted through the lens of discourse analysis to examine the relationship between language, meaning, and social context. To enhance the accuracy and organization of the analysis, qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo was utilized.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through several strategies. Credibility was achieved through triangulation of sources and methods, by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. Transferability was strengthened by providing a detailed description of the research context, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail that systematically documents the entire research process. Meanwhile, confirmability was ensured by maintaining researcher objectivity through reflexivity and grounding interpretations in empirical data.

Ethical considerations were a primary concern in this study. Each participant was provided with a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives and was asked to give informed consent prior to data collection. Participants' identities were kept confidential through the use of codes or pseudonyms in reporting the findings. Furthermore, all collected data were used solely for academic purposes and were securely stored to protect

participants' privacy. In this way, the study is expected not only to meet methodological standards but also to uphold ethical principles in qualitative research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The phenomenon of the construction of social reality in podcasts cannot be separated from how individuals interpret experiences, internalize narratives, and reproduce meaning in their everyday lives. In the context of this study, ten participants consisting of podcast creators and active listeners demonstrate that the act of listening is not passive; rather, it involves complex interpretative processes. Some participants, for instance, expressed that they felt their "lives were represented" in particular podcast stories, while others reported changes in their perspectives on social relationships after repeated exposure to certain narratives. To understand these dynamics, this study draws upon three main theoretical approaches: the theory of social construction of reality, Critical Discourse Analysis, and narrative theory.

The theory of social construction of reality, rooted in the work of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, emphasizes that reality is not objective but is formed through social interaction and the institutionalization of meaning. In the context of podcasts, narratives delivered by creators can be understood as forms of externalization of experience, which are subsequently internalized by listeners as part of their subjective reality. A recent study by Nguyen (2023) in the *Journal of Digital Culture* demonstrates that audio media such as podcasts have the capacity to build "intimate publics," in which audiences feel emotionally connected to narrators. This is further supported by findings from Sari and Prasetyo (2024) in a SINTA 2-indexed journal, indicating that podcast listeners in Indonesia tend to adopt values and perspectives conveyed through personal and narrative forms.

However, this theory alone does not fully explain how language, as the primary medium, plays a role in shaping such realities. Therefore, a discourse analysis approach particularly Critical Discourse Analysis is employed to uncover the dimensions of power, ideology, and linguistic strategies embedded in podcast narratives. Norman Fairclough conceptualizes discourse as a social practice that is not neutral but is inherently embedded with interests and relations of dominance. In this context, the language used in podcasts does not merely convey stories but also shapes the cognitive frameworks of audiences. Research by López and García (2022) in *Discourse & Society* shows that popular podcasts often subtly reproduce particular ideologies through diction and narrative structure. Meanwhile, Rahmawati (2023), in a nationally indexed journal, finds that mental health discourse in Indonesian podcasts tends to frame individuals as the primary agents of recovery, implicitly shifting responsibility from social structures to individuals.

On the other hand, narrative theory offers a deeper understanding of how stories are structured and interpreted by individuals. Paul Ricoeur argues that narrative is a fundamental means through which humans understand time, experience, and identity. In podcasts, the personal and reflective narrative structure enables listeners to connect stories with their own lived experiences. A study by Kim (2022) in *New Media & Society* demonstrates that personal narratives in podcasts can trigger strong processes of self-identification among audiences. This is consistent with findings by Dewi (2025) in a Scopus Q1-indexed journal, which reveal that podcast listeners tend to construct new "self-narratives" based on the stories they repeatedly consume.

Although these three approaches complement one another, this study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis as the primary analytical lens. This decision is based on the consideration that the focus of the research extends beyond how reality is constructed or how stories are structured, to how power, ideology, and social structures operate through language in shaping that reality. Thus, Critical Discourse Analysis enables a more critical

examination of how podcast narratives not only reflect experiences but also guide the ways audiences think and act.

As an illustration, one participant reported that after listening to a podcast discussing “toxic relationships,” they began to perceive their own personal relationship as problematic, even though they had not previously interpreted it in such a way. From the perspective of social construction theory, this reflects a process of meaning internalization. From the standpoint of narrative theory, it represents a reconstruction of self-identity. However, through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, this phenomenon can be interpreted as the effect of dominant discourse that frames certain relationships using specific terms and categories, which are subsequently adopted by individuals.

The conceptual framework of this study positions podcast discourse as a social practice that mediates between subjective experience and social structure. The researcher views the data not merely as representations of experience, but as discursive products embedded with meaning and ideology. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis, the study interprets how language, narrative structure, and social context within podcasts interact to construct social realities that are internalized by participants. Participants’ voices are not understood as direct reflections of reality, but rather as outcomes of meaning-making processes shaped by the discourses they consume. Accordingly, the analysis is directed toward uncovering how social reality is constructed, maintained, and potentially transformed through discursive practices in podcast media.

FINDINGS

The data analysis in this study employed a thematic approach focusing on the subjective experiences of ten participants in consuming and interpreting popular narrative podcast content. Through a process of coding and in-depth interpretation, three interrelated themes were identified:

(1) the internalization of narratives as self-reflection, (2) the negotiation of meaning within social relationships, and (3) the ambiguity between critical awareness and emotional dependency. These themes do not stand independently; rather, they form a dynamic and often contradictory landscape of lived experience.

Theme 1: Internalization of Narratives as Self-Reflection

Many participants described the experience of listening to podcasts as a process of “encountering oneself” through the stories of others. This situation typically emerged when participants were in reflective states such as being alone at night or when facing unresolved personal issues. One participant (P3), an active listener, stated: “Sometimes I listen to their stories and feel like... this is so me. Even though it’s not my life, it feels very close. It makes me think, maybe I’m like that too.” This expression illustrates how podcast narratives are not merely heard but are absorbed as part of one’s own lived experience. However, this process is not always stable. Another participant (P7) expressed a sense of uncertainty: “I started to overthink. I used to be relaxed, but after listening to that podcast, I began to think about everything too deeply.” The meaning emerging from this theme suggests that podcasts function as powerful reflective media, yet they simultaneously open spaces of vulnerability. The internalization of narratives creates emotional proximity, but it may also blur the boundaries between personal experience and constructed representation.

Theme 2: Negotiation of Meaning in Social Relationships

Participants’ experiences extended beyond the individual level and influenced how they interpreted and navigated social relationships. Narratives in podcasts often served as a “new framework” for understanding relationships with others whether in friendships, family contexts, or romantic partnerships. For example, participant P1 described a shift in perspective: “After listening to a podcast about toxic relationships, I started to see my friend

differently. I used to think it was normal, but now I feel it's not healthy." However, such changes were not always smoothly integrated into participants' social realities. Participant P5 revealed a sense of tension: "I feel like I have new standards now, but people around me don't understand. Sometimes I'm confused am I the one who's changed, or are they just unaware?" This theme demonstrates that meanings constructed through podcast discourse are not automatically harmonized within existing social contexts. Instead, they often generate friction between newly acquired perspectives and established norms. It is within this tension that the continuous process of meaning negotiation unfolds never fully resolved.

Theme 3: Ambiguity Between Critical Awareness and Emotional Dependency

The final theme highlights a strong paradox within participants' experiences. On the one hand, participants reported becoming more aware, more reflective, and more open-minded after engaging with podcast content. On the other hand, they also developed a form of emotional dependency on such content. Participant P9 explained: "I feel like podcasts help me understand a lot of things. But honestly, if I don't listen for a day, it feels like something is missing." Meanwhile, participant P2 expressed a deeper sense of ambivalence: "I know not everything they say fits me, but I keep listening anyway. It feels like I need it, even though sometimes it exhausts me mentally." These experiences indicate that the development of critical awareness does not necessarily free individuals from the influence of discourse. Rather, it coexists with emotional needs that continuously seek validation, understanding, or even escape through the narratives consumed.

Table 1. Summary of Thematic Findings

Main Theme	Subthemes	Core Meaning
Internalization of Narratives	Self-identification, personal reflection	Narratives function as emotional mirrors of the self
Negotiation of	Shifts in relational perception, social conflict	New meanings are negotiated within social contexts
Emotional Ambiguity	Awareness vs. dependency	Tension between critical reflection and emotional needs

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that participants' experiences in consuming podcasts are neither linear nor singular. Rather, these experiences unfold within a nuanced space situated between reflection and doubt, between understanding and confusion, and between intellectual autonomy and emotional attachment. The transitions across themes demonstrate that the construction of social reality through podcasts is not a stable process; instead, it is continuously evolving through the interaction between the narratives encountered and the lived experiences of the listeners.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals three main findings: (1) the internalization of podcast narratives as self-reflection, (2) the negotiation of meaning within social relationships, and (3) the ambiguity between critical awareness and emotional dependency. These three themes indicate that podcast consumption is not merely an act of listening, but rather a discursive process that shapes how individuals understand themselves, others, and the social realities surrounding them.

Internalization of Narratives: Between Self-Reflection and Vulnerability

The first finding demonstrates that participants internalize podcast narratives as part of their own lived experiences. From the perspective of the social construction of reality, this reflects a strong process of internalization, in which reality that was initially external becomes embedded within individuals' subjective consciousness. However, this finding also reveals another dimension: internalization does not always produce clarity; instead, it may trigger vulnerability and excessive self-reflection.

Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, this phenomenon can be understood as the effect of discourse operating subtly through personal and emotional language. Podcast narratives that appear “authentic” in fact carry specific structures of meaning that guide how individuals interpret their experiences. This finding is consistent with Kim (2022) in *New Media & Society*, who demonstrates that digital narratives can create intense emotional closeness while also amplifying tendencies toward excessive self-reflection. Similarly, Sari and Prasetyo (2024), in a SINTA-indexed journal, found that podcast listeners in Indonesia tend to perceive personal narratives as “relevant truths,” thereby reinforcing the process of internalization.

However, this study extends these findings by highlighting the inner tension that has received limited attention in previous research. Internalization not only leads to self-identification but also opens spaces for anxiety and doubt. Thus, the reality constructed through podcasts is inherently ambivalent it provides meaning while simultaneously destabilizing that very meaning.

Negotiation of Meaning: New Realities within Social Tension

The second theme indicates that meanings constructed through podcasts do not remain at the individual level, but are continuously negotiated within social relationships. Participants begin to reinterpret their relationships through new lenses derived from podcast narratives. However, this process often generates tension with established social norms.

From a discourse analysis perspective, this suggests that discourse not only shapes cognition but also influences social practices. This finding aligns with López and García (2022) in *Discourse & Society*, who argue that digital media play a role in both reproducing and transforming social meanings through language. Furthermore, Rahmawati (2023), in a nationally indexed SINTA journal, found that mental health discourse in podcasts often shifts how individuals understand interpersonal relationships.

Nevertheless, this study reveals a more complex dimension: the negotiation of meaning does not always result in stable or socially accepted change. Instead, individuals frequently occupy a liminal position caught between newly acquired understandings and a social reality that has not yet adapted. In this context, podcasts function not only as sources of knowledge but also as subtle yet significant catalysts of social tension.

Emotional Ambiguity: Awareness that Does Not Liberate

The third theme exposes the most striking paradox: the increase in critical awareness occurs alongside emotional dependency on podcast content. Participants recognize that not all narratives are relevant or accurate, yet they continue to feel a need to engage with such content.

Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a form of discursive hegemony, in which individuals consciously or unconsciously remain bound to dominant structures of meaning. This finding is consistent with Nguyen (2023) in the *Journal of Digital Culture*, who shows that podcasts create “intimate publics” that foster emotional attachment, making disengagement difficult. Additionally, Dewi (2025), in a Scopus Q1-indexed journal, finds that repeated consumption of digital narratives can generate subtle forms of psychological dependency.

However, this study offers a new perspective by demonstrating that critical awareness is not necessarily emancipatory. Rather than freeing individuals from the influence of discourse, such awareness coexists with emotional needs that continuously seek validation. Consequently, the relationship between individuals and discourse becomes more complex neither purely domination nor resistance, but a combination of both.

Theoretical Reflection and Research Contribution

Overall, the findings of this study both reinforce and extend existing understandings within Critical Discourse Analysis and the theory of social construction of reality. While

previous research tends to view media as an agent of meaning construction, this study demonstrates that such processes occur within a space characterized by ambiguity, negotiation, and emotional tension.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its exploration of deeper experiential dimensions illustrating how individuals are not merely “influenced” by discourse, but actively struggle to interpret, adapt, and even question these meanings within their everyday lives. This perspective offers an alternative view that the construction of social reality in the digital era is not linear, but rather a continuous dialogue between external narratives and internal experiences.

From a reflexive standpoint, the researcher’s position as a member of a society equally exposed to digital media becomes significant in the interpretive process. The socio-cultural background of participants, predominantly young individuals with high access to digital media, also shapes how they interpret podcast narratives. This awareness encourages the researcher to approach the data not as an objective representation, but as the result of interaction between participants’ experiences and the interpretive framework employed.

In conclusion, this discussion underscores that podcasts, as a discursive medium, not only shape social reality but also create a complex reflective space in which individuals continuously engage in processes of becoming, understanding, and questioning themselves within an ever-evolving landscape of meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the construction of social reality in podcasts unfolds through processes that are not linear, but rather characterized by negotiation, ambiguity, and emotional engagement. The three principal patterns identified the internalization of narratives as self- reflection, the negotiation of meaning within social relationships, and the ambiguity between critical awareness and emotional dependency affirm that the experience of listening to podcasts constitutes an active discursive practice. Participants do not merely receive meaning; instead, they actively engage in interpreting, experiencing, and re-evaluating the realities they inhabit.

From these findings, a new understanding emerges that podcasts, as a narrative medium, possess a dual capacity: on the one hand, they expand the space for self-reflection and social awareness, while on the other hand, they may generate inner tension and subtle forms of emotional dependency. Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, this enriches the understanding that digital discourse operates not only through ideological dominance but also through emotional proximity, which sustains individuals’ attachment to the narratives they consume. Accordingly, this study contributes conceptually by proposing that the construction of social reality in the digital era is inherently ambivalent simultaneously emancipatory and constraining.

Practically, these findings carry several important implications. For policymakers, there is a need to pay greater attention to media regulation and literacy initiatives that address not only informational aspects but also the emotional and psychosocial impacts of digital content consumption. In the field of education, these findings can inform the development of more reflective digital literacy curricula, encouraging individuals not only to comprehend message content but also to critically engage with the processes of meaning-making behind it. In the domains of social life and mental health, this study underscores the importance of recognizing the boundary between constructive self-reflection and over-identification that may lead to psychological strain.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. Its focus on a specific social context, combined with a relatively small number of participants (ten individuals), limits the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the participant composition predominantly young

individuals with high levels of digital media consumption may influence the nature of the experiences observed. The limited timeframe of the study also constrains the depth of exploration regarding long-term changes in meaning-making processes.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to expand the contextual scope and diversify participant characteristics, including variations in age groups and social backgrounds, in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding. The use of alternative methodological approaches, such as digital ethnography or longitudinal studies, may also provide deeper insights into the dynamics of social reality construction over extended periods. Furthermore, the exploration of the role of algorithms and digital platforms in shaping exposure to discourse represents an important area that remains underexamined in this study.

In conclusion, this study affirms that social reality in the digital era is not fixed, but is continuously constructed, negotiated, and experienced through the interaction between individuals and discourse. Podcasts, as an intimate and reflective medium, serve as a space in which meaning is not only produced but also questioned making them a significant arena for understanding the dynamics of contemporary human experience.

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