

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Podcasting as a Tool for Health Communication? The Public Health Insight Podcast and Emergent Opportunities

**Leshawn Benedict**, Public Health Insight; **Ben Umakanthan**, Public Health Insight; **Gordon Thane**, Public Health Insight; **William Wang**, Public Health Insight; **Sulaiman Alhalbouni**, Public Health Insight

## ABSTRACT

Health communication plays a critical role in supporting public health and global health practice. Podcasts are increasingly being used as a medium to disseminate health-related information in education, clinical, and non-academic settings. Through this paper, we examine the Public Health Insight Podcast, its potential role as a health communication tool, and opportunities that emerged as a result of its dissemination.

## INTRODUCTION

Health communication serves a wide range of purposes, from supporting health promotion to knowledge translation in communities for public health and global health practice. The United States Department of Health and Human Services defines health communication as “the art and technique of informing, influencing, and motivating individual, institutional, and public audiences about important health issues” [1]. The ability to communicate complex health information through a variety of media is crucial in the domain of public health and global health, where challenging or evolving situations demand the need for clear, effective, and concise messaging.

Podcasts are digital audio files available on the internet for downloading or streaming to a computer or mobile device. Podcasting has been gaining popularity for its potential to disseminate health-related information and research for educational purposes [2]. In educational and clinical

settings, podcasts have been used as additional learning material to supplement required readings, which provides exposure to diverse perspectives, improves the quality of student feedback, and promotes classroom engagement [3]. People who consume podcasts tend to prefer this medium over books, articles, and other written content [4]. A United States (U.S.) survey indicated that podcast consumption has seen steady growth since 2008, with 37% of adults in 2020 reporting listening to a podcast in the last month [5]. In a similar survey of Canadian adults, 20% of the participants indicated they listened to a podcast in the last month [6]. In 2019, there were an estimated 88 million podcast listeners in the U.S., and this number is projected to increase to 164 million by 2024 [7].

In this paper, we will discuss the role of Public Health Insight Podcast (PHIP) as a possible health communication tool for people interested in public health or global health, and some opportunities that emerged during the first twelve months of podcasting.

## METHODOLOGY

The PHIP provides information on a variety of population health issues, focusing on the social determinants of health and the Sustainable Development Goals. The PHIP episodes cover a wide range of topics such as mental health, refugee health, climate change, anti-Black racism, and harm reduction. Published episodes have also featured guests who have provided subject matter expertise on various public health and global health topics. The PHIP is currently co-hosted by a team of public health professionals - all holding Master of Public Health (MPH) degrees.

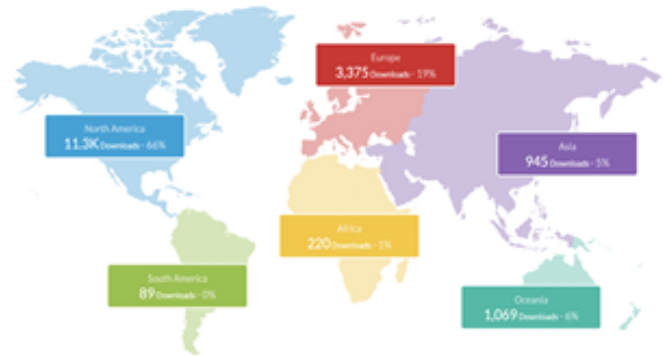
The PHIP was listed under the Education and News/Politics categories in 19 podcast directories including Apple Podcast and Spotify® [8,9]. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter were used to promote episode releases and build a community to foster listener engagement.

Through the Buzzsprout and Podbean podcast hosting platforms, data was analyzed for the number of downloads, apps used to access the podcast, devices used to access the podcast, and geographical locations where the episodes were downloaded or streamed.

## RESULTS

From March 2020 to March 2021, a total of 61 episodes were published. The total number of downloads during this period was 17,845. All episodes were recorded in English, ranging from 1:27 - 57:37 minutes long, with the average episode length of 31:44 minutes. The podcast was accessed on apps such as Spotify (42%), Apple Podcasts (21%), and web browsers (6%) through devices such as Apple iPhones (55%), Android phones (24%), Windows computers (7%), and Apple Computers (6%). Mobile devices were used the most to access the podcasts (82%) followed by computers (14%). The PHIP was downloaded or streamed in 1,552 cities across 100 countries and territories, and in all continents with the exception of Antarctica (Figure

1). The top countries included Canada (33%), the United States (31%), the United Kingdom (12%), Australia (5%), and Germany (2%).



**Figure 1.** Distribution of podcast downloads across continents from the Buzzsprout podcast hosting platform (with the exception of Antarctica).

## DISCUSSION

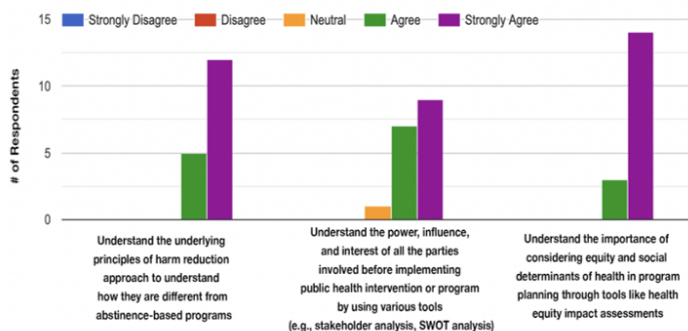
The podcast is currently available only in the English language and was primarily accessed by English-speaking countries in North America and Western Europe, consistent with other health-related podcasts [10]. The numerical analysis indicated that the majority of the audience accessed the podcast through a mobile device (82%), also consistent with other findings (64%) demonstrating a preference over computer access [11]. Moreover, a study on Canadian adult podcast habits showed that smartphones accounted for 82% of devices in the Fall of 2019 and 68% of devices in the Spring of 2020, which is comparable to the cumulative smartphone percentages (79%) seen in our study [12].

### *EMERGENT OPPORTUNITIES WITH THE PHIP*

The dissemination of the PHIP provided opportunities for partnerships and collaborations. One opportunity included in-kind sponsorships using PHIP's platform for two student-organized public and global health conferences. Another opportunity resulted in the creation of a report and related podcast, in collaboration with ETIO Public

Health Consultants, to address anti-Black racism in Ontario, Canada [13].

A professor from the Colorado School of Public Health contacted the PHIP to utilize our harm reduction podcast episodes as part of an MPH classroom assignment. The PHIP co-hosts were later invited to deliver a guest lecture using an innovative case-based pedagogy on harm reduction to a class of 47 MPH students. Following the lecture, an anonymous online feedback survey was distributed to the students, 16 of the 17 (94%) respondents indicated that they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the lecture accomplished the three learning objectives outlined in the class outline and lesson plan (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the three statements following the conclusion of the case-based lecture and class activities (n = 17).

Lastly, two experts from the Canadian Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases (CNNTD) were invited on the PHIP to highlight World NTD Day and to raise awareness about these diseases and disease groups that affect over 1.7 billion people worldwide.

### LIMITATIONS

Although there is a lack of robust evidence of the perceived utility of the information consumed by podcast listeners, positive engagement through social media, email correspondence, and downloads, may support the idea of its perceived utility.

Future studies need to assess knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding health information shared through podcasting. PHIP has adopted standard quality indicators that have been established for health professionals using blogs and podcasts for educational purposes [14].

The global burden of disease is concentrated in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) and access to smartphones and internet connectivity remains a barrier. Although there is limited data characterizing the use of podcasting in LMICs, a study examining medical podcasting highlighted that podcasts covering content more relevant to LMICs are more readily consumed by learners [15]. As such, PHIP intends to place greater emphasis on featuring voices from LMIC communities through podcasting, and by expanding communications to include live webinars, email newsletters, blogs, and providing episode transcripts that can be more easily translated to different languages.

### CONCLUSION

Though further research is required, preliminary data indicates that using podcasts as a health communication tool may expand the reach of population health-related information, facilitate opportunities for collaboration, and introduce public health information to new audiences.

### REFERENCES

1. Healthy People 2010. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: US Dept of Health and Human Services; 2000.
2. Boulos MN, Maramba I, Wheeler S. Wikis, blogs and podcasts: a new generation of Web-based tools for virtual collaborative clinical practice and education. *BMC medical education*. 2006 Dec;6(1):1-8. Available from: <https://bmcmmeduc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1472-6920-6-41>
3. Casares Jr DR. Embracing the Podcast Era: Trends, Opportunities, & Implications for Counselors. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*. 2020 Sep 15:1-6. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15401383.2020.1816865>

4. Ahn J, Inboriboon PC, Bond MC. Podcasts: accessing, choosing, creating, and disseminating content. *Journal of graduate medical education*. 2016 Jul;8(3):435-6. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4936866/>
5. Edison Research, Triton Digital, and Rain News. Share of U.S. population that have listened to an audio podcast in the last month from 2008 to 2020. In *Statista - The Statistics Portal*. 2020 [cited 24 December 2020]. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/270365/audio-podcast-consumption-in-the-us/>
6. NLogic and Media Technology Monitor. Share of adults who listened to a podcast in the last month in Canada from fall 2010 to spring 2020. In *Statista - The Statistics Portal*. 2020 [cited 24 December 2020]. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/788900/canadian-adults-frequency-listening-podcasts/>
7. Activate, Edison Research, & PwC. Number of monthly podcast listeners in the United States from 2014 to 2023. In *Statista - The Statistics Portal*. 2019 [cited 24 December 2020]. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/786826/podcast-listeners-in-the-us/>
8. Public Health Insight Podcast, Apple Podcast. (2021). PHI Media. Retrieved from <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/public-health-insight/id1504006978>
9. Public Health Insight Podcast, Spotify®. (2021). PHI Media. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/show/1BEjtOuOZsNIUw4laTcuLD>
10. Nwosu AC, Monnery D, Reid VL, Chapman L. Use of podcast technology to facilitate education, communication and dissemination in palliative care: the development of the AmiPal podcast. *BMJ supportive & palliative care*. 2017 Jun 1;7(2):212-7. Available from: <https://spcare.bmj.com/content/7/2/212.short>
11. Edison Research and Triton Digital. The Podcast Consumer. 2015 [cited 24 December 2020]. Available from: <http://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/The-Podcast-Consumer-2015-Final.pdf>
12. NLogic & Media Technology Monitor. (2019). Devices used to access podcasts among adults in Canada from 2019 to 2020. In *Statista - The Statistics Portal*. 2019 [cited 24 December 2020]. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1081884/podcast-listening-sources-canada/>
13. Boyd, C. , Nandola, R., Lawal, M., & Oluwayemi, O., ... & Rawlinson, D. The Urgent Need for a System-Thinking Approach to Address Anti-Black Racism in Ontario: A Call to Action for Decision Makers and Policy Makers. Toronto, Ont. : ETIO Public Health Consultants & Public Health Insight. 2020. Available from: <https://www.etio.ca/post/the-urgent-need-for-a-system-thinking-approach-to-address-anti-black-racism-in-ontario>
14. Lin M, Thoma B, Trueger NS, Ankel F, Sherbino J, Chan T. Quality indicators for blogs and podcasts used in medical education: modified Delphi consensus recommendations by an international cohort of health professions educators. *Postgraduate medical journal*. 2015 Oct 1;91(1080):546-50. Available from: <https://pmj.bmj.com/content/91/1080/546.short>
15. Rodman A, Abrams HR, Watto M, Trivedi S, Barbee J, Meraz-Munoz A, Fried MC. Medical Podcasting in Low-and Middle-Income Countries: A needs Assessment and Vision for the Future. *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*. 2021 Jan 25:1-7. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10401334.2021.1875834>