

Understanding the Passive Listeners of Fm Radio Stations In South India

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Abstract

Radio Listeners could be grouped into two types: active and passive ones. The active listeners show a high level of involvement with the radio station. They demonstrate their loyalty towards the station by actively engaging themselves with the station's activities. Besides listening to the station's shows regularly, the active listener keeps in touch with the On-air talents by calling and messaging them quite frequently on radio shows. The active listeners are considered to be an asset to any radio station. The radio programmers place a lot of importance to the programming needs of the active listeners. On the other hand, the passive listeners are the ones who tune in to any station on and off. They do not stick to any one station in particular. Their level of engagement with the station is also very less when compared to the active listeners. They may or may not listen to the station on a daily basis. Previous studies have indicated that Station and Frequency recall ability seems to be very abysmal among the passive listeners.

With the much-touted and much delayed Indian Government's deadline for the third phase of FM radio bidding fast approaching and with market report warnings of declining radio listenership, it becomes imperative to understand the needs and aspirations of the listeners. In this context, the FM Radio programmers face the mammoth task of converting the passive listeners to active listeners, which is crucial for the survival of FM Radio industry in general. While there are listenership and audience reception studies in abundance, there were hardly any scholarly works on passive listeners. Considering the dearth of empirical evidence in this area, this paper using the Uses and Gratifications theory attempts to understand why the once active listeners have turned passive over the years and to examine the reasons for their low/no involvement with the radio stations.

Keywords: Passive listeners, FM Radio listenership, Audience Receptivity

The rapid technological advancements that have taken place off late in the Indian media industry have changed the way we consume media. Radio, being one of the oldest medium is constantly re-inventing itself to stay relevant in these times. Facing severe competition from its glamorous cousin Television, Radio continues to evolve and it thrives amidst speculation that the new media might sound the death-knell for terrestrial radio.

Radio Listeners can be classified into two types: Active Listeners and Passive Listeners. Active Listeners have a very high engagement with the radio station. They listen to the FM radio station for a longer duration on a daily basis. They would be aware of the shows and the Radio Jockeys of the shows. They keep in touch with the station constantly. They would keep in touch with the station by calling and texting the station frequently. They would keep track of all the events and contests conducted by the radio stations and keenly participate in those events. Active listeners would also connect with their fellow listeners and dedicate songs to them. The fellow listeners could also be unknown to them. They may or may not have seen each other. They would've connected with them just by hearing their voices and names over radio. While the passive listeners are the ones who may not take the initiative to call or text the radio stations. They would not also be regular listeners of the shows. Their time spent listening to radio station would be very minimal. Previous studies have indicated that Station and Frequency recall ability seems to be very abysmal among the passive listeners.

Most of the active listeners would also be part of Radio lovers clubs. Radio Lovers Club would consist of FM Radio fans that would gather and conduct monthly meetings regularly, wherein the listeners discuss various radio shows, about their favourite RJ s, and the music content of the stations. Radio Lovers Club meetings would also be attended by the Programming Directors (PD s) of radio stations. PD attaches importance to such meetings as they can get direct feedback from the listeners. It helps them to evaluate their shows and the performance of the RJ s to a greater extent.

The producers work tirelessly every day to create show promos to catch the attention of the listeners. The listeners also wait eagerly for the refreshed show promos just as they wait for the shows. The creative promos tempt the listener to an extent that the listener would never want to miss the show. Spikes are designed by stations in order to build the TSL and generate buzz and excitement among the listeners. The listeners also receive vouchers and other gift

items as gratification from these stations. Much of these contests also take place in the social media platform. Stations were also contented with the instant response that they received from their listeners on the social media platform. FM radio stations were quick to use the social media to their advantage.

With the much-touted and much delayed Indian Government's deadline for the third phase of FM radio bidding fast approaching and with market report warnings of declining radio listenership, it becomes imperative to understand the needs and aspirations of the listeners. In this context, the FM Radio programmers face the mammoth task of converting the passive listeners to active listeners, which is crucial for the survival of FM Radio industry in general. While there are listenership and audience reception studies in abundance, there was hardly any scholarly work on passive listeners. Considering the dearth of empirical evidence in this area, this paper uses the Uses and Gratifications approach to understanding passive listeners. The study attempts to understand why the once active listeners have turned passive over the years and to examine the reasons for their low/ no involvement with the radio stations. Radio Stations in India are showing an increased inclination towards social media like Face book and Twitter to promote their content and build connect with its listeners. This paper also seeks to understand why FM radio listenership is on the decline despite its heavy reliance on Social Media.

Fm Radio and Social Media

The way Social media is connected to conventional radio is also an interesting phenomenon that is under studied in the Indian context. This integration of new media into the conventional radio is largely seen as a way to “create new forms of audience engagement” and understood by programme managers as a “key strategy for survival.” (Stiernstedt 2015). The technological innovations in Radio are also changing the nature of its audiences. Audiences are not mere listeners but are “no longer invisible, silent, and disconnected” (Bonini, 2015). The technological innovations and the integration of social media into radio are encouraging them to become active. Monclus etal (2015) argued that through social media, the radio listeners have discovered a “communication space” and it “serves as a megaphone for listeners.” The medium that was erstwhile known only as a local medium, today, transcends the boundaries to become a ‘glocal’ medium. The social media led to a

scenario where the content receivers also emerged as content producers. The stations post their best links and other promos/ contests on their social media pages on a daily basis.

As Bonini (2015, 2) puts it “ Listeners post comments on social media, where their feelings and opinions are public, searchable, accessible and measurable.” The level of interaction among the listeners and the station increased. The stations could elicit instant feedback from their listeners. Tracking the number of listeners who are following the stations becomes an easy task and Social Media also assists in strengthening their brands. The exposure the links received also increased manifold. This led to some links of RJ s going viral on the social media sites and some local on-air talents shot to fame overnight. The advantages of this local medium metamorphosing into a ‘glocal’ medium have its own merits.

Pinsler (2015) in his study of Radio listeners and Participation observed that most often the voices that are heard on radio are tamed. The programme managers present the voices of the listeners in a pre-defined manner and the selection of the voices to be aired are at their discretion. Voices of the listeners are pre-recorded, edited and tailored to suit the editorial requirements of the show. He calls it “orchestrated impression of listeners speaking their mind on radio programme.” He also adds that social networking sites simplify it by “selectively quoting posts.” Only selective posts posted by the listeners on social networking sites are aired.

Moyo (2012) as cited in Monclus et al (2015) in his study of radio audience concluded that the infusion of internet and other new media technologies into radio has not increased the audience participation to a significant level inspite of integrating audience content into the shows of the radio stations. Further confirming Moyo’s observations, Willens(2013) argued that the integration of internet and mobile phones by radio stations is not “inherently participatory.” The Author adds that the new media technologies while providing opportunities also restrict the “involvement of audiences in content production.”

In their views on audience participation, Monclus et al (2015) observed that gender plays a key role in “understanding the behaviour “ and finds male listeners to be “more participative” when compared with the female listeners. The male listeners actively use social networking sites like Face book to post their views “whether or not solicited by the broadcaster.”

Stiernstedt (2015) in his study of the new working conditions of DJ s in automated setup, points out that the listeners who interact with the radio stations on new media are mostly seen as “informants” and warns that “ information gathering was done without the informants knowledge.” He further notes that the Automated On-air software supports more of ‘format radio’ types that in turn lead to “De-skilling.”

In his research on Media and Participation, Carpentier (2011) as cited in Monclus etal (2015) argues that achieving “ideal participatory model is not so easy.” He classified participation into two types “content –related participation” and “decision making participation.” He argues that the User Generated Content is an essential element that provides the “possibility of participation” and it should not be “equated with participation itself.” Based on the literature review, the researcher set out to explore the study with the following objectives

Objectives

To examine the nature of FM radio listenership among passive listeners.

To understand the reasons for passive FM Radio listenership.

To understand the attitude of passive FM radio listeners towards radio & social networking sites.

Methodology

A combination of Quantitative and Qualitative techniques (Triangulation Method) was used for this study. Qualitative technique involved the use of personal interviews. 5 FM Radio professionals and 10 passive listeners of commercial radio stations in Mangalore (South India) were interviewed during December 2014. The Professionals interviewed were On-air talents and Show producers. Only the On-Air talents and Show producers were chosen mainly because of their constant interaction with the station’s listeners. The Quantitative Approach involved the use of a survey with the help of a questionnaire. The inputs gathered from the qualitative interviews among the listeners and radio professionals were used to form the survey questionnaire only and are not analysed in this paper.

Purposive Sampling was used to select the sample. Passive listeners were only selected as respondents for the study. These passive listeners also had to be active listeners before. This criterion was set for the respondents. Acquaintances at FM Radio stations helped the

researcher to locate the active turned passive listeners, from their databases. 230 such respondents who fulfilled the set criteria were selected as respondents for the survey. The questionnaire was administered to the passive listeners of FM Radio stations in Mangalore (South India) during the month of January and February 2015. Among the collected filled-up questionnaires, only 200 questionnaires were complete and used for this study.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

Table 1 Showing distribution of passive listeners by Age and Gender

	AGE GROUP	PERCENTAGE
AGE GROUP(yrs)	15- 25	18.5
	26- 35	19
	36- 45	33.98
	46- 55	28.52
GENDER	MALES	62
	FEMALES	38

Table 1 indicates that the majority of the passive listeners 33.98% belong to the age group of 36 to 45 followed by 28.52% in the age group of 46-55 of which 62% of the respondents were males and 38% were female respondents.

Table 2 Showing Passive Listeners’ Time Spent on Radio Listenership

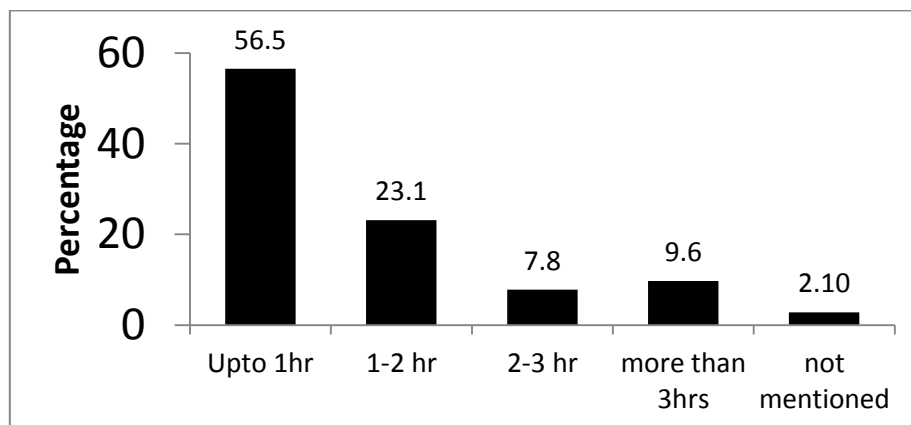


Table 2 indicates the time spent listening to radio of the passive listeners. A majority 56.5% of the respondents listen to radio only up to an hour. 23.1% of the respondents listen to radio for 1-2 hours.

Table 3 Showing Passive Listeners’ Content Preference for Radio Listenership

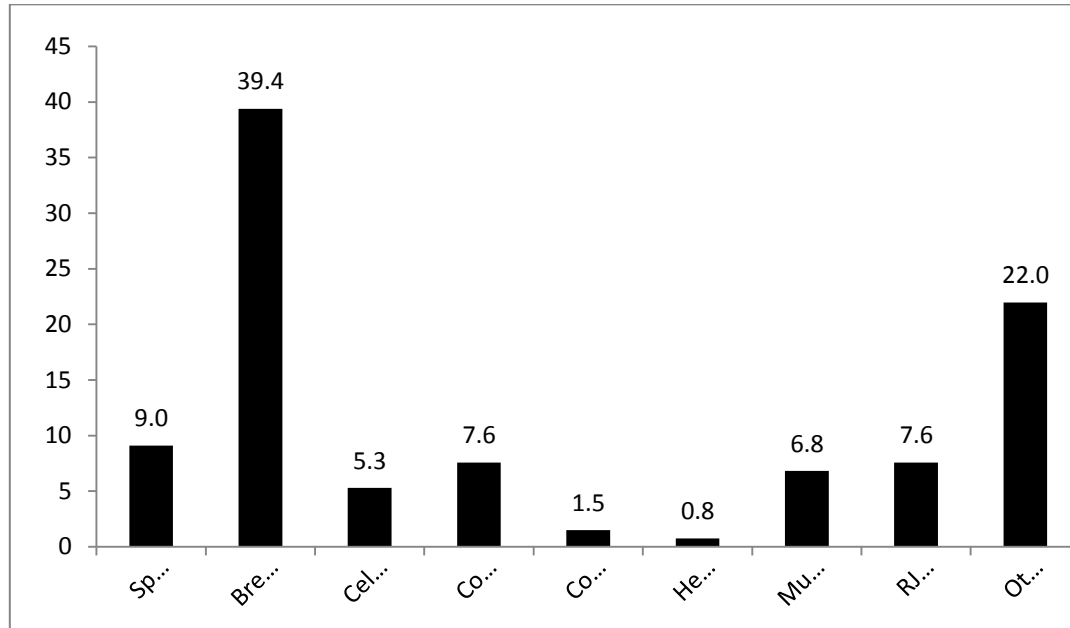


Table 3 shows the content that the passive listeners would want to listen to on FM Radio stations. 39.4% of the respondents prefer to listen to news. Unfortunately, in India, commercial FM radio stations are currently not being permitted to broadcast news by the Government.

Table 4 Showing Passive Listeners’ Attitude towards FM Radio Stations

	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
I feel the show formats of all the FM Radio stations are alike	47.35	35.23	13.28	2.25	1.89
I prefer to listen to FM radio promos / Shows on Facebook / Twitter	3.80	3.80	12.55	28.52	51.33
I follow the Facebook and Twitter page of my favorite FM Radio Station regularly	5.32	12.55	31.18	33.84	17.11
I believe Social media page of FM radio	39.30	13.23	28.79	15.56	3.12

stations are created only for the station's publicity					
I prefer to interact with my favorite RJ on Facebook / Twitter	12.05	8.85	28.85	48.04	2.30
I prefer listening to my favorite radio station on the internet	8.84	14.62	28.85	20.00	27.69
I prefer to listen to brand mentions during songs	13.57	12.79	23.64	24.03	25.97
I prefer to have live telephonic calls with the RJ s during shows	23.63	38.58	11.81	23.62	2.36
I feel the callers views are edited before being aired	21.09	43.75	22.66	9.77	2.73
I feel Jock Talks should have a connection to the tracks that the RJ plays	49.61	27.52	17.05	4.65	1.17
Radio Jockeys of FM Radio are friendly and informal	27.63	46.69	17.12	8.17	0.39
I prefer to form my own image of my favorite RJ (RJ s should remain anonymous)	30.20	44.71	18.43	5.49	1.17
There is a lot of repetition of songs in FM Radio these days	37.36	28.30	20.75	9.06	4.53
I prefer RJ s to talk after every song	36.26	30.53	22.14	8.40	2.67
FM Radio makes possible communication between people at different levels	30.30	41.67	20.08	5.68	2.27

Table 4 shows the passive listeners attitude towards FM radio stations. A majority of 47.35% of the respondents feel that the shows of all the stations are alike. This indicates that there is lack of content differentiation among stations. 49.61% of the respondents prefer their favourite RJ talk should be connected with the songs that they play. It can be inferred that the on-air automation software selection of songs could also be a reason for this as songs scheduling is done prior to broadcast by Music Managers and not the concerned RJs. Only 3.80% of the respondents prefer to to listen to FM radio promos / Shows on Facebook /

Twitter. While only 8.84% of respondents prefer listening to my favorite radio station on the internet. A majority 30.20% of the respondents prefer to form their own image of their favorite RJs'. Until recently, Radio stations never use to expose their RJs to the public and they used to remain anonymous. The listeners form their own images of their favorite RJ and would enjoy that association with voice. The need for generating alternative sources of income by radio stations has forced the RJ s to visit malls to conduct events and conduct games where the anonymity of an RJ is lost. A majority 37.36% of the respondents feel that there is a lot of repetition of songs in radio stations. 43.75% of the respondents 'agreed' that the callers views are edited before being aired and are being played out of context according to the editorial needs of the station. Among the passive listeners only 12.05% of the respondents prefer to interact with their favorite RJ on Facebook / Twitter.

Findings and Discussion

The study reveals that audience expect much more than the current entertainment format. The Breakfast show, which is considered to be the flagship show of the station and which largely, determines the success of any station also seems to be having the same format in all the private FM radio stations. It clearly indicates the lack of willingness among the radio programme managers, to take initiatives for show innovations.

Since its inception, all the private FM radio stations followed more or less the same pattern of programming. An active listener of private radio stations in India would not be able to differentiate the content between the radio stations. Most of them follow the 4 hour show format barring a few i.e. Suryan FM in Tamil Nadu, India which has a 1 hour show format. However, the slight variation that one experiences in one hour/ one RJ show format even gets blurred with its content.

Although there is a dearth of innovation in On-air programming, the on-ground content or the activations have evolved very significantly. The increasing number of off-air events conducted by these radio stations in association with several clients stands a testimony to this. One of the reasons for this could be the way the Radio audience measurements are being carried out in India. The IRS (Indian Readership Survey) and also some in-house audience measurements in India are mostly seen as brand recall measurements. The sample size of these rating agencies is also a matter of concern considering the huge Indian populace. The

other reason could be commercial interests that these stations have explored over the years as earlier they only had the option of ads for revenue generation.

The commercial consideration of the private FM radio stations in India today has reached a new level. The ads that were once relegated to their space are now peeping into the content of the shows directly as well as indirectly. The so called ‘Content Integrations’/ ‘RJ Mentions’ and Sales led contests can be heard even on prime-time shows. The programming space, which was once considered sacrosanct, is now being adulterated with innumerable mentions of brands. It is made to sound so subtly, which the listener considers it part of the show.

The recent trend of personnel unrelated to programming donning the hats of programming directors could also be one of the reasons for commercialisation. The programme or content policy is mostly over-looked or are re-aligned keeping commercial considerations in mind. Marketing and Sales have taken precedence over programming. The major chunk of the programming content of any radio station forms the music. The music is also being adulterated by brands in recent times. Song tagging is a new phenomenon where the programming managers are not willing to free even the songs of brands. Branding has also touched the songs in the form of ‘Power Intros’ even to the extent of killing the songs, which used to be a crime in radio until recently.

The selection of songs, which once used to be a time consuming process with AMT (Auditorium Music Testing) is hardly being conducted by radio stations these days in India owing to resource crunch. With the arrival of the air-check mechanism, upon subscription, it lists out the name and the number of spins a particular song gets in other stations. This process helps many stations to blindly follow the same music format of the No 1 station without any effort.

The real strength of the radio once was the unpredictability factor when it came to songs. The listener gets surprised all the time with the line-up of songs that the RJ plays. The radio stations were known for their music and their RJ s. The Jock Talk also always had a connection with the song that the RJ is about to play. The involvement of the listener to such shows was also high, with the ‘theatre of the mind’ at play. The thrilled and excited listener responded to such shows trying to guess the song, that is about to be aired by the RJ. The

variety of songs that was played by the radio stations was also a reason for this high listener involvement. The importance that radio stations assign to activations / on-ground activities requires the RJs to be present at various malls / high footfall places to host such shows. This practice breaks the anonymity that the RJ of yester years enjoyed. The listener and the RJ used to experience the thrill knowing each other only through each other's voice. The nature of the aural medium is such that it encourages the listener to form an image in his mind of an RJ through his voice on radio. The listeners are no more entitled to such experiences as they just get to see their RJs at every other event conducted by the radio stations.

The competition for reach among the radio stations has reached an extent where some programming managers are resorting to setting targets for RJs for the sms es they earn during their shows. This unhealthy practice pressurises the RJ to keep reminding the listeners in every link about the sms es. This repetition about the sms es becomes monotonous, sets in boredom for the listener, and in turn affects the image of the RJ as well as the radio station.

The interviews with the radio professionals reveal that they believe strongly in social media integrations into the traditional radio format. Fan Pages of RJs are assessed for its likes and comments. However, the findings of the survey with the listeners indicate that social media integration has not done enough to radio stations in terms of converting passive listeners to active ones. SNS integrations into radio has attracted a new generation of young radio listeners. However, for these young radio listeners, faced with a variety of entertainment options, listening to radio is treated as just another leisure activity.

Today, the automated on-air software decides the kind of songs that are played by the radio stations. The RJ has no control over the kind of song that gets aired in his show. This disconnects the listener. The listener is unable to experience the real charm of the aural medium, which he cherished once. Basic music knowledge about the song, the name of the composer, the name of the singer, lyricist's name, and name of the movie/ album were considered essential for an RJ until a few years back. It was also a quality that the RJs were once too proud to flaunt it on air. The automated on-air software's no longer necessitates the RJs to possess such special skills today as the details of the songs are displayed on the linkers of the automated on-air software. The findings of the study indicate that Repetition of songs on FM Radio stations is yet another concern for their passive listening. In order to

attract many new listeners and for converting passive listeners into active ones, FM radio stations will have to take a re-look at their music policy and avoid repetition of songs.

Conclusion

The study conducted among the passive listeners of FM radio stations in South India who were all active listeners until a few years ago reveals that the FM radio show managers would have to reflect upon the current format of shows. It may be noted from the findings of the study that boredom has set in among the listeners especially among the once active listeners, who have turned passive now. The content that one gets to hear irrespective of any FM radio station in India is almost the same. The language, dialect changes from one city to another but the format of the shows largely remains the same. There is very little or no content differentiation at all among the various FM radio stations in South India.

The FM Radio show managers will have to consider the needs and wants of once active turned passive listeners (middle aged and senior listeners) along with a new generation of listeners. There seems to be a tendency to focus only on the needs of new generation listeners who are connected to social networking sites. With the multitude of entertainment options available before the younger generation, radio listening becomes just another leisure activity. While integration of new media technologies like the Social networking sites into radio are inevitable and are a part of the changing dynamics of media, the programme managers should exercise care not to rely on SNS overtly. The needs and aspirations of the listeners who aren't connected to the internet and other SNS should also be considered while promoting their shows in order to build the listenership. The essence of memorable shows and the importance of creating powerful radio with passion are the need of the hour, which is very crucial for the survival of this magical medium in the future.

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