The purpose of radio and how it supports older adults' wellbeing

Amanda E. Krause[1]* and Heather Fletcher[2]

[1]Department of Psychology, James Cook University, Townsville, QLD, Australia, [2]Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

In Australia today, radio continues to draw large audiences, with high engagement among older adults. This research investigated how radio personnel and listeners regard the purpose of radio, and further how engaging with radio is perceived to influence listener wellbeing. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with radio personnel ($N = 16$) and focus groups with older adult listeners ($N = 32$) suggest that the purpose of radio is to stay informed (e.g., news and information), for entertainment (e.g., music), and for perceived social purposes (e.g., communion, social connection, company, and companionship). Findings indicate there are implicit and explicit ways in which radio facilitates the wellbeing of their listenership. Explicitly, radio promotes mental health through broadcasts and programming, as well as exploiting the medium of radio as a public service for the community to call and rely on. Participants implicitly indicated that radio acts as a surrogate friend in their home; someone to keep them company and encourage connection to their greater community. Broadly, perceived relationships with radio programs and individual presenters, built and sustained over time through repeating listening, underpin the radio's ability to support listener wellbeing. These findings have implications for broadcasting practices as well as future work concerning how the radio might be used as a widely accessible tool for promoting quality of older life.

KEYWORDS

radio, broadcasting, media, wellbeing, social surrogacy

1. Introduction

Research indicates high engagement in music listening by people of all ages; yet studies have tended to focus understanding the listening behaviors of adolescents and young adults (e.g., Albarran et al., 2007; Ferguson et al., 2007; McClung et al., 2007) and on digital technologies (e.g., Krause and North, 2016). Therefore, less is known about older adults' everyday radio listening practices and how engaging with the radio might have benefits for people's wellbeing (Krause, 2020).

In Australia today, radio continues to draw large audiences—Australian Communications Media Authority (2020) findings indicate that 95% of Australians have a radio and that 78% of folks had listened to FM radio in the past seven days when surveyed. They also reported that Australians 45 and older are more likely to listen to radio than those aged between 18 and 44 (Australian Communications Media Authority, 2020). Additional figures suggest that community radio reaches over 5.1 million Australians weekly (Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, 2022) and that commercial radio reaches 68% of Australians 65 years of age and older (Shepherd, 2022). Average weekly listening hours are 15 and nearly 13 for community and commercial radio, respectively (Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, 2022; Shepherd, 2022). Indeed, radio listening times has been reported to have increased due to COVID-19 (Hasnain et al., 2022); however, even pre-COVID-19 statistics indicated high engagement by older adults (e.g., 29% of ~10.9 million Australians listening to commercial radio are 55 years or older—Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, 2019).

The radio is an important medium of communication in Australia, transcending geographical and social boundaries (Foxwell, 2012; Meadows, 2013; Oliveira, 2013; Watson, 2016), to offer news and information, music programming, and opportunities for social exchange (Bednarek, 2014; Ames, 2016; Ewart and Ames, 2016). In Australia, listeners have many stations to choose from: in addition to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) as public broadcasters, there are more than 300 commercial AM and FM stations and more than 450 community stations (www.infrastructure.gov.au). Via on-air offerings, the radio informs, educates, and empowers listening audiences (Watson, 2013). Moreover, radio stations, and community stations in particular, are able to offer diverse, and tailored content for different communities (Meadows and Foxwell, 2011; Foxwell, 2012; Hasnain et al., 2022). This includes broadcasting targeted to older adults: Golden Days Radio in Melbourne, Australia, for instance, markets itself as a "senior citizens' radio station", playing music from "the 1920s to the 1950s" (Foxwell, 2012, p. 170). It is perhaps the ability for local radio, and especially community radio, to customize their approach to meet the needs of their target community that promotes strong listener engagement. Indeed, stations can reflect the cultural climate of the community, provide easy access to citizen participation (Siemering, 2000), and facilitate community rights (Moffat et al., 2023).

Previous researchers have highlighted that the radio can broadcast health messages, thereby playing a role in health promotion and community wellbeing (Forde et al., 2009; Ewart, 2011; Smith et al., 2011). It assists further during community emergencies, providing crisis communication during natural disasters as well as political crises (North and Dearman, 2010; Hugelius et al., 2019; Rodero, 2020; Laskar and Bhattacharyya, 2021). Moreover, community radio is considered to be a more trustworthy medium than other technologies and mainstream media (Guo, 2015). Additionally, there is some evidence that engaging in the radio supports individual wellbeing (Krause, 2020; Hasnain et al., 2022). Community radio station volunteers, for example, gain a sense of purpose and identity by volunteering (Order and O'Mahony, 2017), are able to express creativity and enable maintenance of language and culture (Krause et al., 2020), and experience a sense of belonging, thereby promoting social relationships and relationships (Vuuren, 2002; Maina, 2013; Vidal, 2019). The radio promotes social connections between listeners, presenters, and the wider community (Meadows and Foxwell, 2011; Oliveira, 2013). For instance, listeners can become more active in their communities (Milan, 2008) and attend social events advertised on air (Keough, 2010). Ewart (2011) suggested that the radio might provide companionship for isolated and disconnected individuals, a finding that Krause (2020) discussed in terms of social surrogacy. Media can function as social surrogates, such that when individuals engage with media such as music listening and the radio, their experiences engender feelings of connection and empathy (Schäfer and Eerola, 2020; Schäfer et al., 2020).

Regarding older adult listeners in particular, Krause (2020) found that engaging with radio was a common everyday activity with strong, individual preferences and practices. Regardless of how older adults engaged with the radio (e.g., listening at specific times vs. constantly having the radio on), participants highlighted positive outcomes to radio listening which appeared to influence mental health and wellbeing, particularly mood regulation, company and comfort, relaxation, passing the time, and reminiscence. Moreover, these benefits mirrored those established in research on music listening (e.g., for a review see Krause et al., 2018), suggesting that the findings concerning the wellbeing benefits of listening to music might also apply to listening to the radio (Krause, 2020, p. 8). Yet, in addition, some participants pointed to the voice as contributing to their listening experiences—that "hearing people speaking" promoted feelings of company and companionship (Krause, 2020). The role of the voice calls into question the role of the presenter regarding how radio engagement might promote listener wellbeing.

While Krause's (2020) findings are useful to begin to consider how radio engagement might promote wellbeing in older age, the study is limited by its small, exploratory scope. Thus, there is a need for a more explicit consideration of the role of radio in promoting wellbeing for older adults. Moreover, given the findings concerning companionship and community amongst listeners and presenters, Krause (2020) suggested that future research might explore the perspectives of both listeners and radio personnel.

Therefore, this research examined the perceived purpose of radio and considered whether (and how) radio stations and radio presenters play a role in promoting the wellbeing of older listeners. The first research question investigated what radio personnel and older adult listeners considered as the purpose of radio. We anticipated that people would suggest various purposes, perhaps underpinned by their own listening preferences and practices. In line with prior work, we predicted that people might elaborate on providing information and educating audiences (Watson, 2013), opportunities for dialogue and social exchange (Bednarek, 2014; Ewart and Ames, 2016), and entertainment (e.g., through preferred programming, such as music—Krause, 2020). We did not know if people would refer to health promotion or wellbeing, although we anticipated that ideas of community and companionship (Krause, 2020) might also arise.

The second research question probed the purpose of the radio with specific regard to the role the radio might play in promoting listener wellbeing. While the presented research was exploratory in nature, we anticipated that people's suggestions may align with previous work on the experiences of individuals, such that some of the outcomes highlighted by Krause's (2020) participants might arise. For instance, while some wellbeing benefits of radio listening mirrored those concerning music listening (e.g., mood regulation, company and comfort, relaxation, passing the time, and reminiscence), the fact that Krause's (2020) participants pointed to the voice as contributing to their listening experiences suggests the possibility for additional benefits to be identified. Additionally, we anticipated that people might mention the capacity radio has for large-scale communication or its role for the community, such as radio's use during crises (North and Dearman, 2010; Rodero, 2020) or health promotion (Smith et al., 2011).

2. Method

2.1. Design

A qualitative enquiry approach was used. Individual, semi-structured interviews with radio personnel and semi-structured focus groups with older radio listeners were conducted. In both the interviews and focus groups, a conversational style was employed to explore the participants' experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). The James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee approved this research (ID: H8022).

2.2. Participants

Individuals volunteered to participate in the study. Recruitment techniques involved direct invitations and snowball sampling.

2.2.1. Radio personnel

Sixteen individuals involved in presenting live, music-based or talk-based radio programming at one of six public and community radio stations broadcasting in Melbourne, Australia aged 30–81 ($M = 60.80$, $Mdn = 61$, $SD = 15.29$) were interviewed. Of these radio personnel, six (37.50%) identified as female and ten (62.50%) as male. We targeted these six radio stations based on previous research in which older adults residing around Melbourne shared their station preferences (Krause, 2020).

2.2.2. Listeners

A total of 32 older adults took part in the listener focus groups. This included 25 (78.10%) individuals who identified as female and seven (21.90%) who identified as males. Of these 32 participants, 28 reported being between 64 and 82 years of age ($M = 72.46$, $Mdn = 72.50$, $SD = 5.73$). The majority (26 of 32) of these older adults reported listening to the radio daily; and, on average, the sample listened to 4.48 h of radio daily ($Mdn = 4$, $SD = 4.81$). When asked about preferred stations, these participants listed between one and five stations ($M/Mdn = 3$). Participants referenced the stations targeted in this study in terms of the radio personnel participants as well as additional local, national, and international stations broadcasting both music-based and talk-based programming. The majority of stations were public and community radio stations (e.g., the local and national news stations and classical music stations were most common), though some commercial stations were also cited.

2.3. Procedure

Participants received the participant information sheet via email and provided written consent prior to the interview or focus group commencing. On the consent form, they were asked to report their gender, age, how often they listened to the radio (1 = *Never*, 5 = *Daily*), the average number of hours listened per day, and which radio station(s) they listen to (free-text response). Consent was reaffirmed verbally at the beginning of each interview and focus group. Interviews were individually scheduled to suit the radio personnel and were conducted online via Zoom (lasting between 11 and 53 min). Listeners were invited to select a focus group that was scheduled at a convenient time for them. Focus groups were done in person and online, lasting between 12 and 45 min.

2.4. Materials

We posed two key questions to both the radio personnel and older adult listeners during the conversations. These were: (1) What do you see as the purpose of radio and (2) (How) Does radio play a role in promoting listener wellbeing? As such, the participants were asked to reflect on their own engagement with the radio—be it presenting or listening. The resulting conversations formed the data collected and analyzed.

2.5. Data analysis

Individuals participated as part of a wider study concerning older adults' radio engagement. The present research details the data concerning the purpose of the radio and its potential role in promoting listener wellbeing. All interviews and focus group conversations were audio-recorded; verbatim transcriptions were created from these recordings. A thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) six steps were followed, such that codes were generated after time was spent becoming familiar with the data. Using a reflexive and recursive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019), initial codes were developed by considering semantically similar content and implicit concepts within participant responses. Themes were then identified and reviewed by considering how related codes clustered together.

We also acknowledge that our experiences and knowledge are brought into the analysis process. The second author, who led the analysis, volunteers for a community radio station. She used her lived experience of presenting on-air "knowingly" when analyzing the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Hemming et al., 2021). The first author served as a critical friend (Sparkes and Smith, 2014), drawing on her research experience when working with the second author to refine the higher-order themes and sub-themes to best represent the data with respect to the guiding research questions. Lastly, the final themes were labeled and reported. To uphold participant confidentiality, data extracts drawn from the corpus are simply labeled as coming from either radio personnel or listeners.

3. Results

In examining the perceived purpose of radio and the role it might play in facilitating listener wellbeing, responses to the latter were more implicit than explicit. In other words, participants' responses regarding their perceptions of the purpose of radio indicated that, in a roundabout way, radio-listening supported their wellbeing. Given this strong evidence of implicit wellbeing support, the results are considered in tandem and focus more on the purpose of radio whilst identifying how these responses speak to wellbeing.

3.1. Radio serves multiple purposes

Both listeners and radio personnel noted that radio has multiple purposes. In separate interviews, one listener succinctly said, "*it's information, entertainment, and connection, and companionship*" and one radio presenter equally stated, it's "*information, entertainment, companionship… I think it's an even mix of those three things, and you have to be ready to provide all of them whenever they're needed*". This multi-purpose aspect of radio appears to be determined by when and why listeners engage with it as they consume radio in various ways at different times of the day. For example, a male listener said, "*I like to hear the news when I get up in the morning… I do it partly for company. I listen to the radio when I'm cooking a meal, sometimes to music and sometimes conversation. I like radio mainly for news and also for music*". Some listeners talked about their complete reliance on radio for their information and entertainment needs, as one woman stated, "*basically I rely on radio for everything and yes, it's my total source of news, music and entertainment. So everything, it's got everything I need*".

Radio presenters identified themselves as responsible for facilitating the diverse medium of radio by delivering informative content in an engaging way or educating listeners about the music they are playing, for example. One executive producer of a radio program said radio's purpose is "*to inform and entertain. It's this duality that exists within a public broadcaster… so we try to create immersive content that people can kind of lose themselves in*". One presenter even highlighted the purpose of radio on a larger scale, believing that radio has an ethical responsibility to inform and connect its listeners: "*Hopefully we are in the business of building a better world and making a better generation for the next part of the world's history than the one that we're involved in at the moment*".

3.1.1. Information

Consuming radio for the purpose of staying informed was a highlighted theme among radio listeners. Some were specific about the information they were interested in, for example as one woman said, "*I like politics. I like listening to the news to understand what about the political events and everything that's going on in the country*", whereas some listened more broadly and regularly to stay informed, "*I do listen to radio to get information, to get more updates and also listening to radio again is so portable and easy…*". One woman spoke about radio's origins as a source information, "*the main purpose in the first place was when it started off was communication and that was for news to tell the people what was going on in the world. I think it's changed over the years*". Both men and women talked about listening for mental stimulation, both from an educative standpoint, "*I like to think that I'm feeding my mind with something that's worthwhile*", but also to maintain focus, such as when driving: "*If I listen to something like Richard Fidler [an Australian radio host] that grabs my attention, then my mind doesn't wander and I don't feel sleepy if I'm driving long distances*". Radio personnel identified the ethical responsibility they have to do rigorous journalism and provide accurate news as a public service. As one presenter acknowledged, "*we need to be able to provide authentic information, not shy away from things,*

but at the same time, acknowledge that life is a big mixture of things. And what's more we're going to do all those things for free". This was also reflected in listener feedback where one woman commented that radio has a responsibility to deliver, "*intelligent, well-based information. If they're communicating effectively with a lot of people… it's so important*".

3.1.2. Entertainment

Listeners also considered radio to be a source of entertainment, as one noted: "*It's more entertainment than just straight-out communication and news*". Another listener simply stated, "*I do listen to radio to get entertainment, music, and trying… to keep myself more entertained*". Music was frequently referred to when discussing entertainment. While listening for news or information was often identified as more active, listening to music was considered both active and passive depending on what the participant was doing. One woman said, "*I do find that music is a good distraction if you are doing something like housework. I listen to the music and I'm entirely listening to that and doing other things at the same time. So, it's good that way, I get things done like ironing - I listen to the radio. So, it gets you through boring tasks*". Some people talked about how music listening influenced their mood, as one woman said, "*I love classical music, it's the music that enhances my mood*". Another woman identified that she listened to music for the sake of changing her mood for the better, "*Sometimes when you're in a low mood, you want to listen to music so that you can pull yourself [up]*". Radio personnel appear to be aware of the impact music has on the mood of their listeners, as one station secretary noted, "*people are feeling a bit down and then you've got some nice piece of music playing, that sort of immediately lifts their spirits which music I think is all about*". A few presenters on music stations highlighted how they take into account their listenership when programming to facilitate not only their entertainment, but also their education of music. One presenter acknowledged the power music has to influence people and create inner-calm as well as promoting comfort:

> Its first purpose is to entertain and to be able to be enjoyed by listeners. In that way, if you draw out from that the notion of that entertainment leading to insight and understanding and depth of awareness, that's what serious music does and so that then has a wider purpose of bringing healthy influences into society and making people feel more at ease with themselves and comfortable in their relationships with other people.

3.1.3. Social support

Radio was also considered to be important for broader social reasons, specifically communion, social connection, company, and companionship. These themes appeared to have significant implications for listener wellbeing as participants frequently referred to them when discussing their "relationship" with presenters, programs, and the radio. With regards to communion, radio personnel, in particular, considered this to be the purpose of community radio, as one station manager stated:

> The purpose of community radio broadly is to provide a voice, a forum, an outlet, a means of communication for those elements of whatever field that you happen to be a part of… being community radio, it's our duty, it's our responsibility to be tied into the local community, and that's what we try to do as much as possible.

Radio presenters also perceived radio as a medium for facilitating social connection, and in that manner the listeners were part of their program. According to one male presenter, "*for our listeners and a lot of listeners, it has always been a place where they can go to feel connected… you almost become part of their show*". This is reflected in listener feedback where being informed about their community and beyond is a strong motivation to tune in. As one man said, "*I think overall, it connects people… I think that connection is something that radio, especially in the early days did, that just broadened people's worlds enormously*". Some female listeners spoke about listening to expand on their views of the world: "*It gives you a wider view because you do become a little narrower as we age on our own, so it keeps us in touch*", while others identified how radio can elicit an almost empathetic response to the community: "*Good radio makes you think. And it makes you think in a social context too, not just in terms of your own little being*". Consideration was also made of the limited mobility of some older adults, and how radio provides a vital service for those "*who can't get out much to connect with other people*". One listener felt connected simply by knowing that other people were listening to the same program she was at any given time, "*it's that common thing that you're not listening to something like a CD which only you are listening to, you're actually receiving the same information or music as a lot of other people are at the same time*". Indeed, real-time engagement with radio was highlighted by several listeners as different from their experience of listening to podcasts or CDs.

Most of the listeners considered the radio to be a form of company. This was evident in how often they listened to the radio and why they would tune in. Some listeners, most of whom were women, have the radio on all day, as one listener stated, "*first thing I do is put the radio on*". In fact, some listeners talked about using multiple radios at home. This facilitated hearing the radio throughout the house ("*I used to have maybe four or five radios in the house all tuned to the same station so if I walked from one room to the other, I could still hear the same music*") as well as tuning into different stations ("*I have it on in three rooms in the house and I'll have it on whenever I'm in a room*"). In this regard, listeners acknowledged the radio as "*background noise*" that could provide both comfort and stimulus. According to one man, "*so that I'm not alone with my thoughts as I'm loading the dishwasher or cooking dinner or doing the housework*".

Further on background sound, multiple listeners also pointed out that they live alone, in some cases due to the bereavement of a partner or pet, and so they found the radio could "*fill the silence*" in their homes. One woman said, "*I listen to the radio for company. My partner died six years ago and we used to listen to the radio together and now it's always very quiet, so the radio is on as my company. Yeah, so I don't feel alone*". Notably, in these comments listeners did not focus on the nature of the radio content, but rather that having the radio on simply was a contrast to the quietude of living alone.

For example, one woman stated, "*if I'm around the house, I like to have it on. It's sort of a bit of noise, nice noise too. It can get a bit quiet otherwise*". This remedy for silence was not just during the day but also overnight, as one woman commented, "*if I'm in bed I'm trying to go to sleep, or I've woken up and can't go back to sleep the radio is the perfect way to go back to sleep… rather than silence, I can't go to sleep in silence*".

Some listeners referred to the radio in a manner congruent with having an actual living being who was in their home. According to one woman, "*I have it on from seven o'clock in the morning until I go out. If I go out, I turn it off so that I don't feel as though there's someone here when I get home*". In contrast, another woman liked to leave the radio on when she went out so that, "*when I come back and go upstairs, it's like a welcome*". The perception that radio provides company was also tied to the presenter who could be perceived as an actual person to engage with: as one listener stated, "*with a lot of very old people it's another voice in the house. It makes them feel that there's somebody else there they can communicate with*". Interestingly, radio personnel seemed to understand how listeners consume radio and perceived it as company. This was either demonstrated through generalized statements: "*People are listening to the radio because they're either traveling or moving about and you're there as company*", or specifically in reference to receiving listener feedback: "*You have the old ladies calling saying, 'I'm all alone and you keep me company'*".

The variety and consistency of presenters and programs also provide a degree of companionship. From a broad perspective, one woman said, "*it's like having a friend come in all throughout the day, a different friend at different times of the day*". Radio personnel share a similar perspective: according to one presenter, "*we have to accept that we are perhaps their best friend for that particular – for the duration of our program. I think we should treat them like that with respect and so on*". With regards to tuning into specific programs at specific times, participants would talk about presenters they liked and the impact of knowing when they would be on the air: "*it's just like a known friend. I know what it's going to be like it if I turn it on. I know what to expect*". Sometimes this is specific to the presenter, where listeners connect with a particular presenter and even feel like they know them. For this reason, changing presenters on radio programs can impact listeners, as one woman stated "*it annoys me when they change their announcers. Because it's like, hey, I like that woman. Why did you get rid of her? She was my friend*". This is also the case with changing or canceling a program, "*I think you get this attachment to those programs too. When they're gone you find it very hard to reconnect with it*". Radio personnel appeared to be aware of the importance of consistency in what they deliver and how it impacts listeners. According to one station manager, during COVID-19 their station endeavored to:

> …keep everybody on air, or keep the voices that people knew on air so that that regularity of people's lives, even that small part of hearing the same person at the same time on the same day was maintained. Because it meant - it really did, the feedback was unequivocal - it really meant so much to people that we were still there in the same format, so that sense of regularity was there in people's lives at a time when so much changing and there was so much uncertainty and fear.

3.1.4. Explicit wellbeing support

As can be seen in the above themes, the influence of radio listening on mental health was often implicit, particularly with regards to eliciting a perceived sense of connection and providing companionship. Indeed, some radio personnel identified that "engaging" radio could facilitate wellbeing in a more roundabout way. According to one station manager, "*I don't know that [wellbeing] is something that we actively think about in terms - I think that's something that I'm stoked our content does and I think is a really great outcome of the radio*". However, as anticipated, participants also acknowledged that radio explicitly supported wellbeing through broadcasting information about the community. This was expressed, for example, with regard to disasters: one listener stated, "*with the Tongan earthquake, it was the AM radio people that got that information first*", and another commented: "*also now in Australia with the fires and floods and so on, the radio is the key*". Some listeners noted that the content of some broadcasts and news events could be challenging for listeners and believed that presenters were delivering this information sensitively while sometimes providing contact details to services such as Lifeline for people who required further support. As one woman said, "*even the way things are sensitively talked about now which address things like family violence and PTSD and those kinds of issues is now - I think it's a regulated requirement that the helplines are mentioned of course*". Some female listeners also indicated a preference for hearing the news rather than watching the news on TV for their own mental health:

> Female 1: I've actually got this thing that I don't want to see the news… I don't want to see the visuals. I find it too distressing. It's probably my age, I think. I just don't want to see what we could all see on TV.
>
> Female 2: That's the thing about the radio. You can actually use your imagination. That's right.

Moreover, radio explicitly supported wellbeing through specific programming such as having psychologists on air doing segments about mental health. As one presenter noted, "*We do lots of reports on wellbeing. For example, we've been doing for the last six, seven weeks a segment with a psychologist and that is for the focus was COVID and Australia being in lockdown… we definitely try to do lots of health-related topics and psychological topics*".

Lastly, some listeners talked about how radio provided a service for people who had problems such as getting access, needing assistance, or seeking clarification, as one listener pointed out: "*it becomes like a community service then for people who are feeling they're just banging their head against a brick wall and they think, right, I'm going to ring the radio station, I might get some action that way*". Another listener commented that some radio programs even reach out either offering this service or generating awareness, "*They say, look, if you've got something that is of concern to you and people around you in your area, please let us know and we'll try and do something on it*". Radio personnel similarly acknowledged that listeners being able to call into a radio station was meaningful for this reason, but also because it provided an opportunity to connect with someone, as one community station volunteer identified, "*I took three calls between 6:15 and 6:35 from a 92-year-old who was obviously on his own and just wanted to talk. You think, well that's wellbeing. So partly it's the music, partly it's the fact that he can ring up and talk to someone*".

4. Discussion

In examining the perceived purpose of radio and its potential to promote wellbeing, the primary purposes that both listeners and radio personnel identified aligned our prediction (RQ1) as well as with prior research categorizing radio's offerings as news and information, entertainment, and social exchange opportunities (e.g., Bednarek, 2014; Ames, 2016). Additionally, however, the present study's top-level themes (information, entertainment, and social support) concerning radio's purpose underpin the discussions of how radio might promote listener wellbeing both explicitly and implicitly (RQ2). Listeners and personnel also had similar answers which indicated a consensus from these two perspectives.

Participants identified that radio is multi-purposed, such that listeners said radio offered different things at different times. Moreover, radio simultaneously achieves these purposes of informing, entertaining, and stimulating one's social needs without them being mutually exclusive. When asked if or how radio supports wellbeing, participants spoke about its role in delivering broadcasts during times of crisis and programs specific to health. While this mirrors prior work illustrating the use of the radio during crises (e.g., North and Dearman, 2010; Rodero, 2020; Hasnain et al., 2022) as well as its ability to assist with health promotion (e.g., Smith et al., 2011); there was additional strong evidence that radio implicitly supports mental and social wellbeing based on how listeners and personnel discussed their relationship with the radio and their perception of its purpose. For example, listeners conveyed multiple positive wellbeing outcomes while acknowledging how important radio was to their daily experience ("*it's a vital part of my day. I'd be lost without it*").

The implicit ways that radio can support wellbeing is especially apparent in the identified sub-themes of radio's perceived social purpose: communion, social connection, company, and companionship. The potential for these outcomes is key to the contribution that this research makes in understanding how engaging with radio can support wellbeing. While previous work has highlighted the potential for radio to develop social connections between listeners, presenters, and the wider community (e.g., Meadows and Foxwell, 2011; Oliveira, 2013), the present findings also indicate that radio listening may go further to offset feelings of isolation. For example, listeners identified using the radio to create company and fill the silence while home alone, demonstrating that solitary listening may have benefits similar to that of social engagement. Further, the present study's sub-theme of companionship highlighted the importance of having consistent presenters and programs. Indeed, our listener-participants often referred to presenters as "friends"—a fact not lost on radio personnel, who aim to create relationships with their listeners, and to present in ways such that listeners "*become part of their show*". Radio's ability to create a sense of company and companionship aligns with the notion that radio can function as a social surrogate (Krause, 2020)—not only for isolated and disconnected

individuals (Ewart, 2011) but for any and all listening. Thus, while researchers have remarked that audience participation is key to radio engagement (e.g., Moffat et al., 2023), radio's ability to create community has benefits beyond promoting engagement, including those related to wellbeing. As Guo (2015) and others have argued, the media landscape has become increasingly individualized. However, radio's perceived social purpose—in its ability to draw people together—underpins its continued relevance as a media technology.

While the present study extends previous work because it included both listener and personnel perspectives, it is not without limitations. For example, we focused on traditional radio broadcasting without a dedicated focus on podcasting. With increasing technologies to access and listen to radio, questions have been raised concerning what is classified as radio (Freire, 2007). Thus, additional research that considers on-demand catch up radio and podcasting will also be beneficial to understanding both how and why people engage with radio as well as the outcomes and benefits from doing so. Moreover, our participants did not overtly speak to commercial radio. Additional work might explicitly compare different radio formats.

While we focused on exploring how the radio might support wellbeing, no overt measures of perceived wellbeing were used. Future research is needed to explicitly measure wellbeing, and longitudinal studies would be well-placed to examine radio engagement and wellbeing patterns over time. Additionally, this convenience sample of older adults was highly engaged in radio listening such that it was interwoven into their daily lives. Therefore, the present study did not include the perspectives of older adults who rarely or never listen to radio. Designing an intervention or randomized control trial to further examine the impact of radio listening on perceived wellbeing is recommended.

Acknowledging these limitations, the present findings that radio explicitly and implicitly supports listener wellbeing have implications for broadcasting practices. For example, when looking at the role of radio during COVID-19, Hasnain et al. (2022) found that while radio stations sought to air accurate health messaging, presenters were also conscious to avoid "information fatigue". They recognized the importance of maintaining radio as a source of entertainment and not just news. Further, the continued regularity of broadcasting notably assisted people in a time of much uncertainty (Hasnain et al., 2022). These elements are congruent with findings in this present study that listeners identify radio as being multi-purposed and they develop attachments to certain presenters and programs. Indeed, our findings indicate that the regularity of programming must certainly assist with its ability to provide company and companionship, underpinning social surrogacy.

The findings also have implications concerning non-pharmacological and arts-based ways to support wellbeing and quality of later life. Alongside the increasing evidence for how music and the arts can facilitate wellbeing (e.g., Fraser et al., 2015; Cann, 2017), the present study adds evidence that radio also

provides that support as a source of stimulation, entertainment, and social connection. The low-cost, accessibility of the radio as well as the variety of content means that it is well-placed to contribute to the promotion of wellbeing. Though not considered a "new" technology, people can use both analog and digital technology to listen to the radio. In fact, older adults report using all manner of digital devices including mobile telephones, tablets, and the television (Krause, 2020) to explore AM, FM, and internet radio possibilities. Comments from participants in our study confirmed the use of varied technology to listen to the radio ("*I have an app on my phone… there are so many different ways you can listen these days*").

This versatility in technological access may very well underpin why the radio is still so popular and relevant as a listening technology with older adults. Moreover, this versatility is important to note regarding how it can facilitate wellbeing, because previous research has shown that the provision of music listening technologies does not necessarily equate to their use (e.g., Krause and Davidson, 2021). As Krause and Davidson (2021) found, a barrier to older adults making use of listening technologies can be self-efficacy, or the belief in their capability or confidence in doing something. However, the radio is less likely possess this barrier as people can use technology they have and are familiar with (analog or digital) to tune in. This flexibility coupled with radio's ability to reach people in regional and remote locations, transmit information during crises, and provide feelings of community and connection beyond entertainment mean that the radio offers people a very important medium for supporting wellbeing.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the ethics approval for this project did not permit the sharing of collected data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to AK, amanda.krause1@jcu.edu.au.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the James Cook University Human Ethics Research Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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