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Filtering women's identity through podcast storytelling: the case of Desert Island Discs

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Abstract

The present research aims to explore how narrative storytelling shapes women's identity by examining two women's portraits in the podcast Desert Island Discs by BBC Radio 4. The study uses a combination of conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis and sound semiotics to study the interconnection among narrative storytelling, music and sound in podcasting, as well as the degree to which these elements interconnect and the ultimate impact that they have on the representation of the guest's identity. Results show that the Desert Island Discs podcast incorporates all the features of narrative storytelling such as the character and the voice of the interviewee, the voice of the singers, the dialogues etc. and this has a marked impact on the identity of the podcast and the woman presented.

Keywords

identity, women, social semiotics, storytelling podcasting, radio

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Podcasting and the art of narration

Podcasting is closely linked to narrative storytelling and has become widely popular due to this potential. Podcasts have deepened how listeners engage with narrative, raising non-fictional storytelling to new heights. The medium has unique strengths for storytelling, such as the serialised, unscripted stories whose style is dictated by the audio-only format and whose direction is informed by ongoing discovery (Wyld, 2020).

This article examines the role of audio storytelling in building women's identity in a BBC Radio 4 production called *Desert Island Discs (DID)*, which started in the mid-1940s as a radio show and moved into the 2020s as a podcast. In doing so, the study uses a multidimensional qualitative methodology to evaluate the narrative storytelling genre, which has expanded over almost a century. More specifically, it takes two women profile interviewees as case studies and explores how the music and words of the interview represent their identity.

DID (BBC Radio 4)[1] was chosen because it is a radio programme that has shaped British radio history since 1942 and became a model for early radio interviews (McDonald, 2020). As one of Britain's longest-running radio programmes it has developed a strong and clear profile. The 1,500 digital editions of the *DID* released as podcasts by the BBC on the online catalogue are a rich cultural resource (ibid.).[2] Even if *DID* is not an audio programme that was made for podcasting but a radio programme that embodied the podcast format, most probably in search of a wider audience, for the purpose of this article we follow the definition of its producers and name it a podcast. Moreover, following Berry's definition, 'one can argue that podcasts can be radio, made by radio stations or former radio producers but at the same time they may counter many professional approaches of broadcasting' (Berry, 2016, 11). Berry argues that maybe the term 'radio' is not sufficient to describe podcasting, as podcasting is a platform and 'a collection of practices that can be both part of radio and part of a wider ecology of digital participatory practices' (ibid.). In the case of *DID* we have a radio programme that borrows the podcast platform, and the labelling of this audio content balances between the rich history of this established radio programme and the podcast format of its latest versions. The

[1] That first *Desert Island Discs* was recorded in the BBC's bomb-damaged Maida Vale studio on 27th January 1942 and aired in the Forces Programme at 8 p.m. two days later. It was introduced to the listening public as 'a programme in which a well-known person is asked the question, if you were to be cast away alone on a desert island, which eight gramophone records would you choose to have with you, assuming, of course, that you had a gramophone and an inexhaustible supply of needles' (BBC Radio 4, n.d.). During wartime Britain, censorship demanded carefully scripted broadcasts and professional moderation (McDonald, 2020). As the show evolved over time the format was enriched beyond the discs, with a book and a luxury item that guests choose to take with them as they are cast away on a mythical desert island. During the interview they explain their choices and discuss key moments in their lives, people and events that have influenced and inspired them, and brought them to where they are today. (BBC Radio 4, n.d.-a).

[2] Today there are more than 2,500 episodes of the show available on the *DID* website (Desert Island Discs, 2021).

podcast format, in essence, evolves from a long-standing tradition of radio broadcasting, drawing heavily upon structural and stylistic conventions that were first established in early radio programming. Specifically, the podcast is simply an archive, and the difference between the two is that the podcast version is relatively shorter due to music or other copyright reasons, or, in other cases, it is a longer version of the broadcast show. As such, in the longer form of the podcast there is an opportunity for the listener to savour a more extended version of the story (e.g. Bruce Springsteen's show in 2016). It is worth noting that the programme's presenters were men until the late 80s: the legendary Roy Plomley, the programme's creator who was the show presenter for 43 years; Sir Michael Parkinson who took over for a few years; and, until today, three women hosts have followed: Sue Lawley, Kirsty Young and Lauren Laverne who has been the host for the two episodes that are analysed.

Broadcasting had burst onto the world stage in the 1920s, and women were an intrinsic part of this new media industry, predominantly linked to output aimed at the large daytime female audience (Murphy, 2016). The BBC offers a salient example of women's integration into broadcast media as a professional field. Even following the 1932 marriage bar, many women retained roles across production and editorial functions. Crucially, female producers shaped women-focused programming, drawing on their own professional experiences and networks to influence broadcast content (Murphy, 2023). Thus, by the mid-1950s, BBC programming such as *Woman's Hour* (1946) reflected a broader cultural shift in which women's professional employment—once seen as exceptional—was becoming normalised, marking a transition in discourse from the celebration of pioneers to a growing concern with systemic gender-based discrimination in the workplace (Murphy, 2023).

Alongside this, as competition for jobs grew fiercer, the BBC's Appointment Boards—established in 1934—tended to prefer male candidates. While the BBC had once embraced a progressive image, its expansion brought a shift toward institutional conformity. It increasingly identified itself with the Civil Service, but ironically, as the Civil Service moved toward greater gender equality, the BBC became less supportive of women in its ranks (Murphy, 2016).

The emergence of female identity through music and words

In terms of radio and female identity, the marginalisation of women in mainstream radio in Britain—both at the BBC and within the commercial and independent stations in the UK—has been highlighted by previous research (Mitchell, 2016). Approximately four decades ago in Britain, the field of women and radio was put on the academic and political agenda when Mileva Ross, through a publication, critiqued the British radio industry's attitude to both female listeners and programme-

makers (Mitchell, 2014). According to Copeland (2018), the view of the woman's voice as unauthoritative, impotent, and lacking power, often limited the amplified voice of women to telephone operators and popular entertainment radio, such as singing and radio dramas rather than positions of influence within talk formats (Copeland, 2018). In recent years, through Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio's growing diversity in radio talent, the voices heard through local Canadian and transnational programming are beginning to reflect the multiplicity of gender, race, and culture in the sprawling multicultural country. Out of CBC's top 20 most popular radio programmes available both on traditional radio and in digital on-demand format through iTunes, women currently host 8 of the 20 programs (iTunes, 2018, in Copeland, 2018).

Music was woven into the presentation of a guest. The music choices of the show's guest highlight the qualities of their personality and the cultural influences. Music is an important cultural product and contributes to a society's identity (Barradas & Sakka, 2022). People regard their musical preferences as a social badge of group membership that is likely to contribute to their sense of social identity (Clark & Lonsdale, 2023). According to Peck & Grealey (2020) the ability of music to mobilise social and self-orientation meanings, not only interacts with our self-identity but actively transforms it. Frith (1996) argues that identity is a process, and, in that respect, our experience of music is an experience of this self in process (Frith in Hess, 2019). The theme of identity is connected with where someone comes from and the geographical space one feels attached to (Ruud, 1997). Music may serve as a way of positioning the person within the culture in terms of ethnicity, gender and class (ibid.).

The BBC's 1947 *Handbook* described radio as a medium suited to nostalgia, a quality exemplified by *DID*. The programme blended celebrity culture with themes of memory, sentimentality, and escapism. Its consistent format encouraged guests to reflect on their pasts, fostering both personal insight and a shared sense of cultural identity (McDonald, 2020). It thoroughly maintained a more traditional and gentler format of celebrity interview, softened by its integration of music (McDonald, 2020). It was long expected to maintain emotional restraint due to factors beyond the producers' control: guest self-censorship shaped by middle-class norms, audience expectations of Radio 4's decorum, and the programme's role as a reassuring cultural constant amid social change (Hendy, 2017). Moreover, it centred conversation around musical choices, and Roy Plomley intended the music to reveal personal insights, using it as a route to emotional depth rather than a simple record list. While early scripted episodes limited spontaneity, the post-1954 shift to unscripted interviews allowed castaways greater freedom to reflect on personal or

difficult experiences through their chosen music (McDonald, 2014). In essence, music in *DID* celebrity interviews depicted the personal heritage of each guest and illustrated the cultural or social influences passed down through generations, particularly those that shape a person's identity or life path. Beyond that, the role of music in *DID* was to nurture a sense of what it is to be a good citizen—something the BBC has historically regarded as its core mission (Hendy, 2017). Radio 4 did not merely serve the 'all-round' cultured individual but actively contributed to shaping such a listener. Music on Radio 4 helped in this direction by steadily cultivating cultural awareness (ibid.). For listeners of *DID*, then, the music was not just incidental or marginal to the talk: it spoke emotional truths of its own. The degree to which the music influenced the listeners was because of the programme's format and not despite it (ibid.). When a *DID* guest is notably reflective and articulate, their life narrative becomes more clearly expressed through their musical choices and accompanying commentary (ibid.). In that respect, female identity can be well illuminated by the music choices that women guests make on air, as gender exerts significant influence on a person's music choices (LeBlanc et al., 1999).

Beyond that, it is significant to recognise that the current host is female, and this shapes both the content and the style of questions, as well as the encompassing elements of the programme. As Ytreberg has found, 'the host in many ways *is* the format' for they embody 'the formats' norms of performance and interaction' (2004: 685). Embodying an informal format requires the host to simulate everyday conversational behaviour, using real-life communicative skills to convey a sense of naturalness and ease (Ytreberg, 2004). As Drew and Heritage (1992) note, institutional interactions grant the host control over key aspects, including interactional framing, topic selection, the right to ask questions, topic shifts, and termination of the interaction. In this context, female identity is strongly mirrored through the lens of a female host as the female host exerts significant influence on the structure and the content of the podcast.

Conversation Analysis (CA) and sound semiotics as tools for the analysis of podcasts

This research is part of a broader research project (Theodosiadou, 2023) that included the analysis of five podcasts from the *DID* show, aiming at a variety of interviewees, among which Yousafzai Malala, an activist (2021) and Helen Oxenbury, a children's illustrator (2020). A combination of conversation analysis (CA) and sound semiotics was considered valuable for the analysis of the multimodality of the podcast talk, both because this model has been previously used successfully in the analysis of radio talk (Theodosiadou, 2020) and because the research explored extensively the multi-level interrelation between speech, sounds, and music. To be

more precise, at the heart of CA lies the investigation of ordinary talk as the vehicle for interpersonal social actions: utterances are examined as activities people do to each other. Second, CA examines the highly patterned nature of these verbal activities in interaction. It seeks to identify and analyse the properties of recurrent sequences of interaction (Wooffitt, 2005). CA has been applied to institutional talk (Heritage, 1997; Schegloff et al., 2002) and intersects with applied linguistics. In media studies, it has informed research on triadic radio talk show formats in Hong Kong (Li & Lee Fung, 2013) and on online interactions, particularly in interactive journalism (Steensen, 2014).

This show is based on a clear-cut interview structure incorporating words and music. The producer has limited time for the guest profile, with the music, book and luxury item. The music was prioritised for study excluding books and luxury item, as it was the initial concept of this show, but it was also well spread throughout the whole show unlike the book and the luxury item, on which the presenter devoted a couple of questions. Data selection lasted from July to August 2022 and all the podcasts were fully transcribed. Podcasts featuring women interviewees, which are the focus of the present study generated seven thematic codes, and each code included several sub-codes. The dominant codes were childhood, adulthood, present self, and desert island profile. The analysis of the sound included the analysis of the voice quality and timbre of the voice of the singer, and the relationship it builds with the surrounding music (Van Leeuwen, 1999).

As a consequence, the present research aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How is female identity depicted in the *Desert Island* podcast?

RQ2: How do the structure and the overall concept of the podcast influence the representation of the female identity?

Yousafzai Malala: results from CA and sound semiotics

The podcast starts with an introduction to the profile of the guest of the show, the current affairs regarding Malala's graduation from Oxford University, and the traditions following the graduation. The second part of the interview is richer in information and feelings focuses on her childhood years and the birth of activism, the 'incident'[3] that marked her childhood and the transition to the present day. The

[3] On October 9, 2012, Yousafzai was shot in the head by a terrorist organisation, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) gunman, while she was en route home from school. Fazlullah and the TTP took responsibility for the attempt on her life. She survived the attack and was flown from Peshawar to Birmingham, England, for surgery. The incident elicited protests, and her cause was taken up around the world, including by the UN Special Envoy for global education, Gordon Brown, who introduced a petition that called for all children around the world to be back in school by 2015. That petition led to the ratification of Pakistan's first Right to Education bill. In December 2012, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari announced the launch of a $10 million education fund in Yousafzai's

podcast concludes with the final part of the structure of the show which involves the feeling of being away on a desert island, the book choice, the luxury item, and the top track to save.

In the CA analysis, the dominant pattern of activism in her public and private life is evident. As a consequence, her activist identity takes shape in her public persona with 'the incident', the trauma that followed, and the misinformation and disinformation of the Taliban years. In the following extract, she has a rising intonational shift in her voice as she begins to talk about 'the incident', and both the micropause before the word 'misinformation' and the underlining of the word 'a fake thing' is a depiction of the emphasis that Malala desires to put on the false information:

> ↑Initially when when this started> and it started back in 2012, when the incident happened< within(.), I think a month or so, people started(.) spreading this this(.) misinformation that this attack(.) was ↑all planned or that, you know, blaming my father for it, or then soon this narrative started that this incident had never even happened. And it's all,>you know<, sort of a fake thing.! (00:06:42.530)

As the following extract demonstrates, Malala puts emphasis on the dangerous situation that they all lived through during the Taliban years, both by the micropause of tenths of a second before and by the underlining of the phrase 'in clear danger', which is followed by an audible inward breath. She marks the word 'alive' as she raises her voice so that the word is more distinct and intonated; she puts a sign of optimism on her struggle:

> [And given all that you've been through, do you feel safe today?] I have s:een(0,5) worse scenarios↓ than this and I have s:een(.) the time when,˚ you know˚, we were(0,5) in clear danger.hh, there were people walking around in the streets and you could hear their footsteps and you knew that they could just get into your house(0,5) and target you. So, when you see sort of so much and you: are still ALIVE and you are still fighting for the cause that you believe in,.hh and you realize that, you know,> if it has to happen<, then it will↑. (00:29:22.870)

In terms of her private life, her family helps very profoundly to build this identity. To be more specific, Malala's activist identity is shaped by her father, who was himself an activist. Additionally, the values and the perception of the world that her father passed to her and most crucially the importance of education that he cultivated for her. A good example of the description of her feminist father is in these extracts that follow, where she puts emphasis on the words 'my father' and 'my name':

> When I was born, my father's cousin, he(.) had been working on our family tree!. And when my father looked at it,! it had(.) the names of ↑all the men who had been in our ↑family, going back, ˚you know˚, to ↑300 or something ↑years. But there was(.) no name of a ↑woman(.) in there. It's not that we didn't have women in our family. Yes, ((we

honour. Around the same time, the Malala Fund was established by the Vital Voices Global Partnership to support education for all girls around the world (Britannica, n.d.-a).

> did)). >There were women. It's just their names are not on the ↑family tree.< (00:13:19.570)
>
> And my father, (.)he took(.) a pen and he wrote down (.)my name. He was (.)not(.) accepting a society where(.) women's names and their identities and their presence is ↑erased. (00:13:43.870)

Malala's present identity is well rooted in the notion of 'changing home' and all the consequences that this has had for her and her life in the UK. As the following extract demonstrates (Line 1), a micropause before and after the article 'a' and the succeeding phrase 'second life for me' highlights the amount of attention that Malala places on her present identity that is a transformational identity, shaped by living in another country and inheriting a different culture, through which she can well establish her activism:

> >To be honest, initially I was I was very strong<(.). I: (.) realize that this was(.) a (.)second life for me(.) and this was given to me for a reason .hh and for me, >like I just did not think too much about the attack. And I'm grateful that I don't remember the incident. So, when people used to, you know, talk about the story of Malala, I sometimes just could not connect to it. I was like, are they talking about sort of exactly who this person is right now? Or is she somebody else?< (00:27:46.680)

In the music pieces that Malala chooses for the show, two identities are expressed: the Pakistani identity and the British identity. The Pakistani identity is stronger and openly connected to activism, whereas the British identity is more light-hearted and joyful, and connected to her identity as a young woman. Evidently, Malala's identity as an activist is formed through her homeland, and this is clearly depicted in the music that she chooses to play, that is to say, folk music, but also censored music from Pakistan that is encouraging and supportive of resistance, giving the impression of a campaigner for political and social change, which Malala stands for. Her British identity is framed through pop music, opera, and animated film music, which illustrate a more international figure. There is a balance between the two identities and a harmonious representation of them in the show.

More specifically, this almost 12-minute song *Rang* by Rahat Fateh Ali Khan & Amjad Sabri is characteristic of Sufi music[4] and is a spiritual song that Malala describes as 'very powerful', adding that 'there's just something about is that touches your soul' even if you don't understand the lyrics or the poetry in them. As her first music choice, it certainly makes an impression and illustrates a portrait that is deeply rooted in Sufi culture. This piece of Sufi music carries a sense of values that Malala represents.

[4] It is the devotional music of Sufism, inspired by the work of Sufi poets like Rumi, Hafiz, Bulleh Shah, etc. (BBC Radio 4, n.d.-b).

The male voice of the singer that dominates the song is rough, low, and loud, and features open vowels in 'a', which makes it sound like a statement throughout the whole song. After the first minute, when the singer performs a capella, the drums enter and change the style of the song making it more joyful. The supportive male voices that enrich the sound as a choir make the whole song sound like a religious ritual, with a very overwhelming atmosphere. Even if the lyrics are happy, the overall sensation of the song is a nostalgic remark, possibly full of grievance. As the different musical instruments enter the song to accompany the singing voice, a balance is built among the two, and a very vibrant and celebratory atmosphere is released. The drums and the two main male voices are the most characteristic features of the Sufi song. This open vowel 'a' fills the song with its presence and makes it a very characteristic feature of the whole piece.

Hum Dekhen Ge by Iqbal Bano ('Our day will come! Assuredly our day will come', Hum Dekhenge, 2022) is a popular Urdu poem[5] written by the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, who was awarded a Nobel prize. It was composed as a medium of protest against Zia- ul-Haq's dictatorship. Malala speaks with great awe and admiration about *Hum Dekhen Ge,* and she emphasises how encouraging this song is to her life and how it empowers her faith and her belief that 'truth shall prevail'.

This is a lax, smooth, soft, nasal, vibrato female voice that is enriched by the stringed musical instrument and the drums that accompany the voice during the whole song. This high female voice is a sign of strong resistance, and the music—so sweet and tender—that surrounds the voice underlines its breathiness. The melody is nostalgic, and it suits the voice. Even if the lyrics are on protest and revolution, the song sustains its gentle and delicate aura. It is a song of optimism and hope and has a religious layer to its lyrics. This song carries pieces of history with it and it is an open path to the history of Pakistan, but also the culture and the temperament of Pakistani people. It is an authentic piece of the Pakistani identity and serves as a vital part of Malala's identity too.

As a closing song Malala chooses *Bibi Sherina* (Sweet Lady), which was performed at the ceremony celebrating her Nobel Prize Award[6]. It holds a sentimental value for her and once again stresses the issues of women's education. The male singing voice is low, smooth, soft, and lax, and leaves a mellow auditory impression on the listener. The song is supported by a range of musical instruments

[5] The poem was sung by Iqbal Bano, 'The Queen of Ghazal', a 'brave woman' in Malala's words, because she had the courage to sing this anthem of protest and revolution in 1986, in a concert in Lahore in front of 50,000 people, during the military dictatorship of Zia-UI-Haq (Grewal, 2020). Faiz's poetry was, of course, banned by the military government, but Bano, by bringing it to the ears of the illiterate but poetry-loving masses, educated them and made them politically and socially aware (Massey, 2009).

[6] Malala Yousafzai was the youngest person to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 for her fight for the right of every child to receive an education and her struggle against the suppression of children and young people (The Nobel Prize, 2014). Prior to Malala's speech, renowned Pashtun singer-songwriter Sardar Ali Takkar performed his own composition, a tribute song to Malala called *Bibi Shirini* (*Sardar Ali Takkar Sings Bibi Shirina to Malal Yousufzai as a Tribute, n.d.).*

that underline Pakistani culture and affirm the authenticity of the music tradition of Pakistan.

Helen Oxenbury: results from CA and sound semiotics[7]

The Oxenbury episode starts with an introduction to the profile of the guest of the show, as well as a number of characteristics of her work routine, her actual work as an illustrator, and the beginning of her career in the 1960s. The second part of the interview, on her childhood years, unravels in faithful alignment with her path in the arts, an element that runs through the whole podcast. The actual formation of Oxenbury's identity is built through the milestones of her work during all phases of her life: childhood, adulthood, and present self. The podcast concludes with the final part of the structure of the show, which involves the feeling of being away on a desert island, the book choice, the luxury item, and the top track to save.

The selected songs mirror and reinforce Oxenbury's personality and, at the same time, form an identity that resembles the characteristics of her illustrations: soft, simple, powerful, romantic, a bit old fashioned, nostalgic, embodying a different epoch but at the same time featuring a range of epochs in the children's books. Oxenbury talks rather slowly, taking quite a lot pauses within sentences and incorporating a relaxed rhythm of discussion, a very authentic way of narrating her story. An honest confession of her life story, told with brevity, sensitivity and sometimes humor. Two main patterns emerge in the analysis of her interview. The first pattern is the milestones of her career as an illustrator, presented in chronological order but also in relation to what the host considered to be milestones in her career. As Laurene Laverne notes, the landscape of Felixstowe in Suffolk, where Oxenbury moved when she was eight years old, was a hint of inspiration later to her illustrations. Oxenbury agrees and emphasizes by underlining the name 'Felix Stowe Ferry' and by stretching the word 'breath' and indicating a small rise in the pitch at the letter 'a' (Line 6), expressing how the feeling of freedom found her every time she faced the landscape of estuaries, mudflats, and the endless horizon. She says on this theme:

> Yes! that was in=a place a little further up the coast, caught the ferry, Felix Stowe Ferry. I used to go there and pla:y (.) a lot up there on my bicycle. It was on an estuary right on the estuary, and when the tide went out, a lot of mudflats were revealed and the ↑sky used to be reflected into the mudflats. There's something about that landscape now. >It sort of got under my skin<. And when I go there now(.) and° I do

[7] Helen Oxenbury is one of the world's most popular and acclaimed illustrators of many classic children's picture books, including *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen and *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* by Eugene Trivizas. She has been multi-awarded and is a two-time winner of the Kate Greenaway Medal (Oxenbury, 2025).

> because I've got a we've got a boathouse there°, it's absolutely I sort of could feel I can brea:the again.
>
> And looking out to sea and the sky is it, it refreshes me. (H_O_00:11:33.160 to 00:12:13.000)

In the following extract, Oxenbury highlights with the words 'hope', 'energy', and 'life', and with the micropause between these words, that her time in Israel was also an apocalypse for her, as it served as an inspiration and fueled her optimism about life and music:

> It was full of full of hope(.) and energy(.) and li:fe(.) °Tel Aviv I'm talking about°. You'd walk down the street(.) and from every house there would be (.) a piano being practiced or a violin being played. Very, very inspiring. I LOVED it.
>
> […]
>
> While I was in Israel, I stayed in a flat (.) and I was introduced(.) to the music of Eric Garner(.). I was absolutely (.)enthralled(.). (H_O_00:16:32.820 to 00:16:56.010)

In 1981, Oxenbury debuted with baby board books that were described as revolutionary by critics, and she highlights in the subsequent extract, with an overall rise in pitch in the word 'excited' and across the whole phrase, that her baby daughter Emily was thrilled with the board books, and Oxenbury realised that probably that would probably be the case for other babies as well:

> Emily used to(.) get very, very↑ excited when she looked at the pictures and there was something there that she recognized. And I thought, well, if if if ↓Emily recognizes it, it's over, said ↑all babies. (H_O_00:23:31.420 to 00:23:43.510)

In 1994, she illustrated a book that turned out to be a modern classic[8] by celebrating diversity. In the next extract, through the overall rise in pitch in the word 'loved', the stretching of the letter 'o' in the same word, and the overall rise in pitch in the word 'instantly', she underscores her enthusiasm about the book:

> […]I ↑lo:ved the text ↑instantly. There's the expectation. There's excitement. What's you know, what's going on? Who's coming next? Why are they all gathering in this room? I a:lso decided (.)that instead of doing p:age after p:age of f:ull color, which can ↑actually be a bit b:oring, that that page is where(.) the v:isitors are waiting for the next (.)person(.) to arrive is in a sort of se:pia color. And: then >you turn the page< and they've arrived and they're >in color<. It's just very↓ joyous. (H_O_00:24:35.290 to 00:25:17.490)

[8] The book was *So Much* (Walker, 1994) by Trish Cooke, which was a winner of the Kurt Maschler Award and the Smarties Prize (ages 0–5 years) and Greenaway runner-up (Oxenbury, 2025).

The second sequential pattern that emerges in the interview is the obstacles, difficulties in her character, and failures that have shaped Oxenbury's career in illustration. She humbly talks about her failure of being a good tennis player when she went to junior Wimbledon and realized that she was not. She also mentions her dislike of secondary school, as well as her trouble in sketching lorries—confessions that make the interview more authentic. Furthermore, Oxenbury describes in the extract below how her baby daughter Emily's eczema became an opportunity to find inspiration for creating the revolutionary baby board book series. She also talks about problems in her relationship with authors, underlining that authors should have faith in the illustrator, and that being self-critical is an element of her character that exhausts her.

These two patterns in the interview reveal the identity of Helen Oxenbury as a children's book illustrator, mainly through her professional path, not only its successes, but also the difficulties in her career, her personality, and her childhood.

In terms of sound semiotics, a range of music builds up to the construction of Oxenbury's personality. Specifically, *West Side Story*[9], a 1960's American musical, is the music piece that Oxenbury identifies with her teenage years, when her love for musicals was immense. Oxenbury possibly connects her youthful identity with this song because it is festive, innovative within the genre, and was also popular during her era as a young girl.

The musical starts with castanets, followed by maracas, and then piano music that is accompanied by the voice of Marilyn Cooper. The voice of the singer is a high-pitched, loud, rough, and tensed, full of nasality that corelates with sexual repression, vibrato quality that carries emotions, and breathiness that is associated with intimacy (Van Leeuwen, 1999). After the first minute, the choir of supporting women voices enters, and the song takes on a different perspective. The clapping of hands, together with the women's choir, convey a happy and celebratory atmosphere. At 2:26, the rhythm changes and more instruments, such as vibraphone, xylophone, tambourine, and timbales, enter the song, making it even more festive. The female voice expresses irony, imitates Latino accent, and places emphasis on pronouncing the consonants 'r' in 'America', 'j' in 'San Juan', 'c' in 'machine', and the vowel 'e' in 'clean'. The consonant 'r' involves a degree of constriction. The vowel 'e' is heavy, big, and round, pronounced with the mouth comparatively open. So, while the song *America* is festive, it also delivers a social

[9] *West Side Story* is not only a classical Broadway musical; it is a show that fundamentally changed the form of musicals, especially in the theatricality of its presentation and the integration of script, song, dance and set (Bernstein et al., 2008). For an extensive overview of the *West Side Story* musical, Library of Congress at https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/westsidestory/westsidestory-exhibit.html offers a rich account of information.

commentary on poverty, discrimination, and persecution. This combination of tragedy and comedy is very well depicted in the song of this legendary Broadway musical.

The eccentric Scottish musician and poet, Ivor Cutler[10], has a rich biography that influenced his most famous sequence of songs *Life in* a *Scotch Sitting Room*. Cutler's songs are all about simplicity, beauty, and joyfulness, and his work takes the listener to another place[11]—qualities that we encounter in Oxenbury's illustrations too. A very strong Scottish accent and a richly imaginative children's story characterise the piece. The male voice of the narrator, Ivor Cutler, is tense, rough, loud, low, vibrato, and nasal, and the consonants 'f', 'r', 'g', and 'j' are emphasized in several different words during the narration. The narration is backed by a flute background, which adds more atmosphere to the story.

The aria of *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, Act 1, performed by Beniamino Gigli[12], was chosen by Oxenbury as her final and most special piece of music, one she would take with her to her desert island. This is a very nostalgic piece, where you feel the longing in every note, and Oxenbury also relates the piece to memories of their farmhouse in France, where her husband would play a 78RPM disc on their horn gramophone, and she would enjoy that music while working on her balcony. She chooses this particular performance that is full of lyricism and emotion, and has a natural, effortless, dreamy, and gentle fragility and sweetness, due in part to the 78 RPM recording. The 'environment' in which Gigli sings the aria is dominated by the soft and soothing melody of the violin strings. Gigli embraces the words he sings, and his voice, full of breathiness, softness, laxity, low pitch, vibrato, and nasality, addresses the theme in the most smooth and careful way. This is a tender voice that sings of a mythical love story: 'I think I still hear, hidden under palm trees, her voice soft and strong like a cooing of doves'. The lyricism of the music and the voice is also reflected in the lyrics of the aria: 'Oh, enchanting night, divine rapture, oh delightful memory, mad euphoria, sweet dream! Delightful memory!'. Gigli addresses this loving woman with a lot of tenderness in his voice and an intimacy that it is well built into the aria, through the lyrics and his voice.

Discussion

In Malala's and Oxenbury's interviews, the structure and flow of the show form an initial pattern that characterizes the podcast. There is a well-formed puzzle made from words and music in the interviews, which together illustrate a portrait of Malala

[10] More specifically, he was born into a middle-class Jewish family in 1923. Antisemitism and the Great Depression loomed large in his childhood, the latter influencing later works such as *Life in a Scotch Sitting Room*, which Oxenbury mentions (Rogers, 2014). Oxenbury has a friendly relationship with Cutler and builds on this relationship when she chooses this song.

[11] ibid.

[12] One of the greatest Italian operatic tenors of the first quarter of the 20th century, his lyric tenor voice was remarkable for its power, mellowness, and smoothness of production (Britannica, n.d.).

and Oxenbury. Every song is a comment, a political or personal statement on the identity of the interviewee. Songs are carefully selected to send their own message and interact with the words in the interview and the story being told as the it unfolds. Furthermore, the songs reinforce and underline the standpoint of the interviewee and the blueprints in their life that they consider important and refers to (Theodosiadou, 2023). In line with Cohen & Duberley (2013) for the interviewees of *DID*, discussing their musical preferences and tastes enabled them to touch on more personal and emotional issues and formed an important statement of their core values and attitudes, enabling them to express their distinctive views of the world.

One of the core results that appears in both CA and sound semiotics analysis of Malala's interview is the identity of the activist for gender quality and female education, which Malala genuinely shares with the audience of *DID*. CA results show that Malala, both as a public figure and as a person in her private life, holds a powerful activist identity that is embodied in her present identity in the UK. In the *DID* podcast, this serves as a culmination process that begins with her life in Pakistan and continues through the Taliban years, the incident of the gunshot on the bus, and her move to the UK, which she found to be a place of shelter.

The sound semiotics analysis uncovers the deeper meaning of the music pieces and the impact of the times in which they were performed. The specific music that Malala chooses is a footprint of her personality as a passionate activist and also a marker of unforgettable moments in her life (e.g. the Nobel Prize award). Music in this podcast shapes her courage, her activism, and her values. It is used to reinforce the messages that her answers convey. Music forms an essential aspect of the programme's emotional impact and shows that this programme has been carried along by the emotional currents of modern life (Hendy, 2017). Most of the songs aired are from her homeland, Pakistan, and the way she comments on them is a sign that she places emphasis on and underlines the importance of the singers, who are all legendary in the musical tradition of Pakistan, and the fact that these songs mark a moment in time not only in the musical history and culture of Pakistan, but also in Malala's life. There is an atmosphere of spirituality transmitted through the songs; the language is emotive, and Malala appears fully engaged when she talks about the music of her homeland. The results of the sound semiotic analysis clearly show how closely Malala's activist identity is rooted in her Pakistani identity and her connection to her homeland.

In Oxenbury's interview, the portrait is somewhat different, rooted in the professional identity of the illustrator and balancing the successes and failures of personal and professional life. Furthermore, the internal music identity of Oxenbury is shaped by American musicals of the 1950s, solo piano concerts by one of the

most prominent musicians of that era, opera, and children's musical tales. This is a rich sound autobiography of Oxenbury that reflects the multiple ways she has been influenced by the music trends of her times (e.g. Broadway musicals), her personal taste in classical music (opera, piano music), and her preferences for children's musical tales (*Tubby the Tuba* and Ivor Cutler story). So, this identity is rooted not only in her professional identity as a children's illustrator, but also in her personality tastes. It is a more versatile and more multilayered identity compared to the CA results, which present an identity focused solely on the story of professional successes and failures. It is also a reflection of the musical trends of the epoch in which the illustrator lived. According to Hendy (2017), the programme's role lies in probing the inner lives of its castaways—not merely outlining biography but encouraging a self-conscious performance of the 'authentic' self that, to varying degrees depending on host and guest, reflects prevailing emotional norms of British society at the time.

Conclusion

Regarding the first research questions of this study, which refers to the way the female identity is depicted in the *DID* podcast, it is portrayed in a very unique way, as every guest of the show has a distinct personality, and special features of their life come to light. Even if the axis of identity shaping is different for Malala and Oxenbury, the basic storytelling elements of the audio documentary, such as immersive storytelling, authenticity, and voice quality, cultivate a very similar atmosphere for the guests of this podcast and reinforce an impactful female identity. What is more, the role of music in the two guest portraits on the *DID* podcast is noteworthy. For Malala, music is fundamental to her identity, symbolising the essence of activism. In contrast, for Oxenbury music is external, framing her identity through various life experiences, both favourable and challenging. This dual role of music, as both an intrinsic part of one's identity and as a societal phenomenon, provides insight into its influence on both the personal and public sphere.

As far as the second research question is concerned, which addresses the way the structure and the overall concept of the podcast influence the representation of female identity, it is clear that this influence is significant. It is important to recognise as a starting point that the current host is female and, in this context, female identity is more strongly reflected through the perspective of a female host, whose influence significantly shapes both the structure and content of the podcast. To be more specific, the concrete structure of the podcast, evident in both interviews, delves into a deep profile of the interviewees, almost like an audio diary, based on childhood, adulthood, important events of their lives, and an internal musical biography that is based on the eight discs the interviewees select for the host. The storytelling and the

musical biography are well combined, complementing one another and offering a full view of the female identity presented in each episode. Consequently, the concept and structure of the podcast influence the final depiction of the female guest in a very intimate and very sentimental way, eliciting confessions of favourite songs, luxury items, and books that have had a lasting impact on them.

This study has certain limitations, as it was based on two episodes of the *DID* podcast and used only one out of six major domains of semiotic resources discussed by Van Leeuween (1999). Not to mention that the findings of this research may have been affected by the author's preconceived notions and biases. Further research could aim to apply this multimethod approach to a wider range of podcasts over a longer period of study, perhaps analysing two episodes from each decade of the *DID* programme, and could also use more domains of semiotic resources, which may provide useful insights. Future studies could additionally explore male guests of the show. As a final note, future research should attempt to shed light on different podcast genres and how identity is depicted within them. This is a demonstration study, but more work is needed.

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