

Trend Snapshot: Clubhouse and the emergence of social audio

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Looks at how app Clubhouse has become the poster-boy for social audio after launching in March 2020 and following the arrival of celebrity participants like Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg.

- Most commentators expected radio and audio listening to slump as a result of COVID-19, but digital formats like podcasts have continued to grow audience numbers, while new habits have been formed in radio listening.
- Clubhouse's early success was driven by its role as a virtual meeting place for like-minded business folk.
- Its continued popularity will be fuelled by the fact that it provides ordinary users with a voice to share their opinions alongside those of more vaunted experts, and tools to make their content sound every bit as slick as that of the professionals.
- As well as facilitating brand sponsorships for budding audio creators, Clubhouse is also exploring methods by which influencers can earn revenue more directly from audiences.

Trend overview

The social media landscape is dominated by visual content. Leading platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat are defined by written posts, photos and videos. However, a new generation of audio-orientated apps like Clubhouse threaten that visual hegemony.

After a steady start, Clubhouse has become the poster-boy for social audio. The app, launched in March 2020, has become hot property following the arrival of celebrity participants like Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg. According to [App Annie](#), Clubhouse reached nearly 13 million downloads in its first 12 months of operating, and its growth continues to accelerate. This is despite its availability being limited to iOS devices, and the requirement for new users to be invited to join the platform.

Once downloaded, Clubhouse will scan contacts stored in the user's phone to help them establish a network. Users arrive in a 'hallway', from where they can join 'rooms' featuring discussions led by a moderator. Much like

Netflix and TikTok, the app's algorithm recommends relevant rooms based on previous activity. The most active users are able to establish 'clubs', private groups tailored to specific interests. All content is live, and cannot be replayed – helping to create a sense of FOMO.

(For more on the Clubhouse user experience, read: [Clubhouse is a new place for brands to play, but it may not be the future of social audio.](#))

At the time of writing, there are no formal advertising opportunities within Clubhouse. However, brands can contribute in other ways, including partnering with popular users and sponsoring rooms. Executives can also promote their company's products, values and perspective through active participation – an approach taken by [Zuckerberg in his attack on Apple's data privacy policies.](#)

Clubhouse is at the vanguard of social audio, but is by no means the only game in town. Where Clubhouse has a strong following in tech, VC and marketing circles, Discord – launched in 2015, and with over 250 million users – is especially popular with gamers. Twitter recently announced the launch of [Spaces](#), which gives users the opportunity to create Clubhouse-like rooms where they can host audio discussions. [Facebook is also reportedly working on its own social audio products](#), while [Spotify has announced plans to acquire Betty Labs](#), the developer behind a live audio app called Locker Room.

Clubhouse's rapid growth has been hindered by a succession of controversies around user safety and data privacy. Just months after launch, the app had to respond to accusations that its platform enables bullying. In one instance, [a New York Times journalist discovered a room dedicated to a negative conversation about herself](#), and found there was no way to report the alleged harassment.

More recently, in February, a user was able to stream Clubhouse audio feeds from multiple rooms [into a third-party website](#), further raising concerns that [user data is not being sufficiently protected](#). Following a complaint, France's data protection authority has [opened an investigation into the app](#), to assess whether Clubhouse is fully compliant with GDPR.

Brands ahead of the curve

IKEA 'House': In February 2021, [IKEA Italy created a "house" within Clubhouse](#) by setting up a trio of rooms dedicated to different spaces within the home (living room; kitchen; bedroom and bathroom). The campaign, developed with We Are Social and Studio Re, explored home environments and shared advice on how consumers can live their best lives at home – an especially pertinent subject during the pandemic. The Swedish retailer recruited influencers and experts including psychologists and culinary creatives to help attract listeners.

Martell / Black History Month: Cognac brand Martell partnered with influencer Karen Civil for a celebration of black female entrepreneurs during Black History Month in February. The spirits brand, owned by Pernod Ricard, hosted weekly conversations on Clubhouse with guest panellists including Supa Cent, a beauty brand owner, and Jennifer Lyle, chief executive of Lush Yummies Pie. Martell senior brand manager Izzy Hussein [told Digiday](#) that the use of influencers help the brand to "participate authentically" in an emotive and challenging discussion.

What it means for brands

1. Audio media is helping consumers to overcome screen fatigue

Most commentators expected radio and audio listening to slump as a result of COVID-19, with many consumers no longer commuting to and from workplaces. Instead, digital formats like podcasts have continued to grow audience numbers, while **new habits have been formed in radio listening**. The pandemic has also given rise to viral voice memes, with Zoom-weary consumers seeking out audio content formats as a respite from the requirement to spend additional time looking at screens.

“Interest in the audio space has been increasing hugely over the past number years, and I do think that this interest has played a big part in the acceleration and growth [of Clubhouse] in recent months,” said Charlotte Taylor, Head of Publishing & Audio at Spark Foundry.

2. This is the beginning of the ‘democratisation’ of audio creative

Clubhouse’s early success was driven by its role as a virtual meeting place for like-minded business folk. Its continued popularity will be fuelled by the fact that it provides ordinary users with a voice to share their opinions alongside those of more vaunted experts, and tools to make their content sound every bit as slick as that of the professionals – just as TikTok has achieved with video clips.

“The app is very easy to use. It is a big step in the democratisation of audio creative,” said Stefano Maggi, CEO of We Are Social Italy and Spain. “It creates a sense of intimacy. The only way to take part is to be there. It offers discovery and serendipity.”

3. Brand safety is a concern, but censorship is equally risky

Having been scalded by offensive comments by creators on other platforms, advertisers set stringent parameters for brand safety in influencer marketing, and social audio will be no different.

The non-anonymous nature of Clubhouse (users are not allowed to give pseudonyms) risks a more personal form of bullying. However, brands should be “mindful” before adopting a heavy-handed approach to moderation, argues Taylor. “It’s a really unique consideration when it comes to brand safety on Clubhouse, because the whole platform is built on conversations and giving people a voice,” she said.

“Once you bring brands into that environment, you can’t control the conversation, and it could lead to negative sentiment. That will be a huge concern for brands, and I think it will be a big hurdle [for many marketers] to consider.”

4. Social audio is forging a new type of influencer

The skills used by influencers to gain audiences on visual social platforms like Instagram and TikTok are less replicable in an audio space. This has provided an opportunity for **a new breed of creator** – often individuals with credibility in a niche or sub-culture. Podcasters and broadcasters are prominent among a **list of the most-followed profiles on Clubhouse**.

“It is important to be able to manage conversations, and keep the room engaged. These are technical skills, so it suits people who, for instance, might be a podcast host or a Twitch streamer,” said Maggi.

With influencers so vital to its most popular clubs and rooms, Clubhouse has launched a **'Creator First'** accelerator programme offering “support and equipment”. Clubhouse has also pledged to promote influencer content on and off the app, to provide a “monthly stipend”, and to match them with brands to help transform their ideas into a “profitable creative endeavour”.

Those influencers are now organising themselves with initiatives like **Audio Collective**, which offers event planning and brand consulting services for creators – with more third-party businesses likely to muscle in on the Clubhouse growth story in the months to come.

5. Social audio is a B2B marketing opportunity, but content must be credible

For much of Clubhouse's first year of operation, the most talked-about content has come from comments by senior executives. Elon Musk has used Clubhouse to advocate for the disruption of financial markets with statements about cryptocurrencies and online brokerages like Robinhood. Mark Zuckerberg took to the app to maintain his crusade against Apple's data privacy policies.

Social audio platforms like Clubhouse provide an opportunity for businesses to take part in discussions of all kinds and, given the audience skew towards professionals in areas like marketing, technology and finance, there are major opportunities for B2B communications. However, according to Maggi, any content must be “credible” and chime with what the listener expects the brand to represent.

6. Marketers can use Clubhouse to listen and learn

Clubhouse has become a hub for discussion about media, marketing and advertising. As well as taking part, marketers might benefit from listening to the advice of experts, claims David Berkowitz, the founder of Serial Marketing.

He cited the example of **Burger King's much-maligned International Women's Day campaign**: “Not surprisingly, during International Women's Day, Burger King was a very hot topic among marketers. Brands can get a sense of what folks who've served on the brand and agency side are saying about what's going on, and can at least pass on some of those point of views and maybe save themselves some of that embarrassment and hassle that for their next event,” said Berkowitz.

What comes next

1. Social audio apps will become more sophisticated and more popular

As it stands, the only way to share information and URLs on Clubhouse is via user bios; participants speaking in a room have to use DM facilities on other social apps to communicate with one another during an event. These are the kinds of issues that Clubhouse's developers will be looking to iron out before it lowers the velvet rope preventing ease of access, and rolls out versions of the app to other operating systems.

With Twitter Spaces in test mode, Facebook working on its own social audio functionality, **Microsoft reportedly plotting an acquisition of Discord**, and US entrepreneur Mark Cuban planning the launch of **a new app called Fireside**, competition in social audio is set to become fiercer in the coming years – in defiance of those

who predict it to be a fad driven by necessity during the pandemic.

Berkowitz, however, is “bullish” about the long-term prospects for Clubhouse after COVID-19 fades from view: “People will be on flexible work schedules going forward, even if they’re at their desks. If they can keep creating this form of behaviour, then I don’t think the pandemic ending as we know it is going to have a general negative impact.”

2. New monetisation possibilities for influencers

As well as facilitating brand sponsorships for budding audio creators, Clubhouse is also exploring methods by which influencers can earn revenue more directly from audiences.

Berkowitz advises Rally.io, a cryptocurrency provider whose lead investor Andreessen Horowitz was also an early backer of Clubhouse. Rally’s ‘Creator Coins’ use blockchain technology to enable influencers to launch their own digital currencies. This type of monetisation may prevent the need for more overt advertising formats, he believes.

“I don’t think [monetisation options] will be akin to what marketers are used to working with [on other social platforms]. The most active members want to monetise this thing really quickly, because people are fickle, and most new platforms don’t succeed,” Berkowitz said.

“How exactly they let creators go and charge for sponsorship, or admission to their rooms, or if it’s more an Only Fans-type subscription model [remains to be seen]. But I think Clubhouse will get there a lot faster than a lot of other platforms have in the past, like Twitter and Pinterest, especially once they get that audience on board.”

3. Marketers need to think clearly about their audio brands

Sonic branding is by no means a new concept, but may become a more pressing requirement in the age of social audio.

While podcasts have prompted a few advertisers to reconsider audio, many have remained absent from the channel. Yet any marketers looking to establish a presence on Clubhouse, Spaces or anything social audio platform will need to identify influencers and voice actors that reflect their brands, to help them achieve distinctiveness in an environment with no visual support.

“This isn’t going to be an easy one for our clients to navigate. There are still brands and advertisers out there that don’t have a voice in the more traditional audio space, even in traditional linear radio,” said Spark Foundry’s Taylor. “It’s a big question – what does your brand sound like?”

4. The rise of audio viewing parties

In the early days of Clubhouse, any user with minimal interest in marketing and technology will have been hard-pushed to find relevant content. This is rapidly changing: rooms have been set up dedicated to topics as varied as TV shows, cooking and meditation.

Another rising trend is that of the audio viewing party, where users can congregate in a room to discuss content they are watching on other devices. Though on the most part spontaneous gatherings of fans, it is not hard to imagine a scenario in which brands can act as curators and bring expert voices and talent to rooms to interpret

events unfolding on-screen.

“You have rooms popping up with people discussing the [Disney+ drama serial] WandaVision finale as a watch party, or the NBA Draft, or the Oprah interview [with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex]. Clubhouse then becomes this added channel,” said Berkowitz. “I imagine by next year it’ll be a very big deal during the Super Bowl – but also with a lot of smaller moments along the way.”

Next steps

- **Clubhouse provides an ideal platform for business executives wishing to engage in discussion and debate.** Marketers can identify topics and rooms that may help the brand to put across its point-of-view and grow awareness of its brand purpose.
- **Marketers ought to reassess their brand’s audio identity.** What should their brand sound like on a social audio platform? This includes sonic branding assets and the ‘voices’ they speak with, including voice actors and influencers.
- **Platforms like Clubhouse can help advertisers to engage with sub-cultures and niche audiences.** Marketers can consider whether they are able to meaningfully contribute to those groups, for instance through bringing experts and talent to discussions.
- **It is better to test-and-learn now.** Clubhouse will eventually be released to Android device users, while Twitter, Facebook and others are preparing their own platforms and tools, meaning social audio audiences are likely to grow considerably.

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